

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CASE CONFERENCE COMMITTEE MEETINGS: A  
NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF PARENT/GUARDIANS' AND SPECIFIC LEARNING  
DISABILITY STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, Matthew and Rhonda, for their support, encouragement to pursue my academic passions, and instilling upon me to advocate for people in need.

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Megan Elizabeth Le

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In recent years, there has been an increase in special education complaints filed against school corporations for noncompliance with the terms of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) established in a Case Conference Committee meeting. Case Conference Committees include parents/guardians, Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) students, and educators. Parents/guardians are equal partners to the school corporation when developing the IEP. Disagreements within Case Conference Committee (CCC) meetings can lead to strained relationships. During Case Conference Committee Meetings, parents/guardians may disagree with educators related to managing the student's IEP (Indiana Department of Education, 2021). Consequently, a parent/guardian of a SLD student may file a complaint or due process hearing resulting from poor communication between parties during or after a Case Conference Meeting (McQuerrey, 2019). The Critical Organizational Communication Theory was applied in exploring if parents/guardians experienced the Indiana IEP Resource Center's common issues in CCC meetings including: the lack of (1) Communication, (2) Preparation, (3) Clarity, (4) Respect, and (5) Transparency. A narrative approach was used to tell the stories of parents/guardians and SLD students' experience in CCC meetings.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CCC: Case Conference Committee  
IEP: Individualized Education Plan  
SLD: Specific Learning Disabilities

## **Chapter One Introduction**

According to the Indiana Department of Education, in 2019 there were fifty-nine “Complaint Investigation Reports” involving students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) for not receiving their Individualized Education Program (IEP) accommodations from school systems (I-Champ). This indicates parents/guardians of SLD students filed complaints against school systems because school systems were not fulfilling the agreed upon IEP accommodations in the classroom setting. An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a specialized educational plan or program that legally requires educators and/or education administrators to provide a “level playing field” for students with specific learning disabilities with their peers to ensure their success within the education system (University of Washington, 2021). Even though educational systems are required by the state to provide Students with Specific Learning Disability an IEP, there have been some cases of educational systems not fulfilling the student’s accommodations. This action can cause the parents or guardians of the student to take further legal action against the school.

The issue of K-12 educators not fulfilling SLD students' IEP accommodations warrants research because of the substantial number of complaints filed by parents/guardians against school corporations (Gonen, 2019). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that makes available free and appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children. After the evaluation of an SLD student, the school administrators will form a Case Conference Committee (CCC) which is a group of people including the student, parents or guardians, and educators that includes but is not limited to a school administrator, a teacher of record, and special

education faculty (Center Grove Community School Corporation, 2021). According to the Indiana Department of Education Notice of Procedural Safeguards (2019), in addition to annual meetings, other reasons for Case Conference Committee Meetings include:

- Initial referral or parent’s request for evaluation
- Filing of the first complaint during the school year.
- Filing of the first due process hearing during the school year.
- The date the school administrators decide to take disciplinary action that constitutes a change of placement
- including removal to an interim alternative educational setting for weapons, drugs, or serious
- bodily injury
- Parent’s request.

Often during Case Conference Committee Meetings, parents or guardians may disagree with the school personnel on how they are managing the student’s IEP or other related issues (Indiana Department of Education, 2021). These conflicts within Case Conference Committee Meetings can lead to a strained relationship between the parents or guardians and the school personnel. According to Cheatham, “Education professionals and parents need to be able to understand federal requirements for individualized education program (IEP) meetings, both to ensure compliance and also so that they are able to recognize potential violations” (2012). Even though school corporations are required by state and federal laws to provide Students with a Specific Learning Disability (SLD) an IEP, there have been some cases of educational systems not fulfilling the student’s accommodations or modifications.

This thesis aims to explore the IEP Case Conference experiences of parents, guardians, and SLD students with the educators responsible for fulfilling their IEP accommodations. Using Critical Organizational Communication Theory will assist the researcher in exploring the concept of uneven power structures within CCC meetings that may lead to conflict. Butina's (2015) narrative thematic analysis approach is used as a method of collecting stories of parents/guardians and SLD students to explore their experiences in CCC meetings and to analyze the stories.

## **Chapter Two Literature Review**

### **The IEP Process**

An important factor in understanding the communication structure within an IEP case conference meeting is understanding the IEP process. When it comes to the school evaluating a student, there are tedious processes to determine what specific disability the student possesses and how the school will accommodate the student based upon those “Specific Learning Disabilities” (SLD). According to Meghashree, “Learning Disability is a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities” (2011). Students who have difficulty within the academic areas such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematics may be evaluated to determine what specific learning disabilities the student may process. A parent/guardian or school educator can request a “referral” for evaluation to determine if special education services are appropriate. School staff is trained to identify students with learning disabilities as early as preschool. However, many students with special education needs may be identified and assessed later in their academic career such as high school or even in higher education (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). If a parent/guardian requests a verbal or written “referral” to a licensed professional such as a teacher, principal, or head of special education, the school must evaluate the student. If a school rejects the evaluation of a child, then the school personal and the parents/guardians may set up a meeting to come to an agreement on the evaluation of a student. (I-champ, 2019). An IEP is a legal binding document. It is important for all CCC members to understand the state and federal laws so

there are no misunderstandings of what each parties' responsibilities include. According to Turnbull (1998), the six key principles of disability laws are listed below:

- Zero Rejection: all students who have physical, mental, or learning disabilities have the right to have a free and appropriate public education.
- Nondiscriminatory evaluation: A fair assessment of students who have or may have a disability.
- Individualized and appropriate education: To benefit students with disabilities, these students must receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Least restrictive environment (LRE): to benefit students with disabilities, these students will be educated in the normal education setting with students without disabilities whenever possible.
- Procedural due process (safeguards): Schools and parents/guardians hold each other responsible when it comes to the student's education and in dispute resolution procedures.
- Parent participation: Parents/guardians and students with disabilities work together with educators in decisions regarding students' education.

Once the student is evaluated and determined to have a learning disability, a Case Conference Committee (CCC) is formed. The Case Conference Committee is a group of people including the student, parents or guardians, and school personnel including but not limited to a school administrator, a teacher of record, and special education faculty (Center Grove Community School Corporation, 2021). The Case Conference Committee reviews the evaluation results and drafts the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) including special education accommodations, and other related services the SLD student may receive

(Diliberto, 2014). For example, an SLD student may receive speech therapy from the school due to the student having a speech impairment (Gavin, 2018). Parents/guardians work with educational personnel to determine what is best for the SLD student within the educational environment.

### **Case Conference Meeting**

The Case Conference Committee will meet at least once during the school year to discuss their child's performance in school (Special Education Rights & Responsibilities, 2021). Every organization aims to have a successful conference meeting where all parties within the meeting come to an agreement and there are no imbalanced power structures. In 2016, The Indiana Department of Education created a PowerPoint concerning how to prevent a negative CCC meeting and provided problem-solving strategies for an educational faculty who are CCC members. Indiana IEP Resource Center stated multiple strategies for educators to have an ‘Effective Case Conference Meeting.’” The purpose of the Indiana IEP Resource Center in creating a PowerPoint was to train educators in the case conference committee (CCC) to ensure the outcome of the Case Conference Meeting is positive. (2021).

### **Common Issues in Case Conference Meetings**

Indiana IEP Resource Center defined five major issues that lead to negative case conference meetings which include: (1) Communication, (2) Preparation, (3) Clarity, (4) Respect, and (5) Transparency. Lack of communication can lead to misunderstanding and negative experiences for parents/guardians of SLD students in CCC meetings with the educators (McQuerrey, 2019). Indiana IEP Resource Center suggests that if there is clear communication between the parties attending the case conference meeting, the results of



the meeting will be positive (2021). The lack of preparation in a meeting can increase anxiety and decrease problem-solving abilities (Meninger, 2020). Students are expected to be prepared for class; therefore, educators should be held to the same level of preparation in case conference meetings and fulfilling the terms of the IEP. Indiana IEP Resource Center suggests that when educators prepare for a case conference meeting, the educators will be prepared to answer any questions and face challenges effectively which will result in a positive meeting (2021). The lack of Clarity can lead to misunderstanding and unsatisfactory meeting results. Communication and Clarity go hand in hand when it comes to successfully creating a clear message people can understand. (Souza, 2003). The educator may be very knowledgeable on subjects such as the IEP process however if they are not able to clearly write or verbally deliver information, the meeting can have a negative result (Sidelinger, 2003). Indiana IEP Resource Center suggests if educators can clearly explain information to other parties in the case conference meeting, the result will be a more satisfactory meeting. Lack of respect can lead to a strained relationship between the educators, parents/guardians, and SLD students. When it comes to meetings in an organization, there might be differing opinions which could be frustrating and can lead to people disrespecting each other. Respect goes both ways; educators should respect the parents/guardians and vice versa. Regardless, all parties should find common ground and be open to others' opinions (Diliberto, 2014). Finally, the lack of Transparency can create a decrease in trust between all the parties in the meeting. Common issues such as these can be resolved with the proper application of strategies and techniques outlined in the Indiana IEP Resource Center

## **Parents/Guardians and SLD Students' Participation**

Even though educators have the responsibility to organize Case Conference Committee meetings, the Parents/Guardians are equal partners in their child's educational planning (Turnbull, 1998). Parents/Guardians are a key component of the Case Conference Committee (CCC) so they should be knowledgeable about the IEP process and be able to clearly express their concerns regarding their children's education and if an educator has failed to comply with their child's accommodations (Indiana Department of Education, 2021). One of the major issues many education facilities have mentioned is the parent/guardian's participation in their child's education. There are some cases where the parents/guardians are present however, they are not participating in the CCC meeting (Indiana IEP Resource Center, 2021). Parents/guardians have the responsibility to attend Case Conference Meetings regarding IEP accommodations and should have input on their child's education. Additionally, parents/guardians' participation may be affected due to the parent/guardian's education level and the Family's socioeconomic status (Jones, 2010). Additionally, if the SLD student is not attending the meeting, the parents/guardians can speak about the student's education experience (Kurth, 2020). Parents/guardians are important CCC members because they can advocate for their children and participate in the IEP process.

When SLD students are in high school, special education facilities encourage the student to attend case conference meetings so the SLD student can understand their disability fully and be able to provide input on their education. The SLD student needs to attend case conference meetings at an older age so the SLD student will be able to advocate for themselves if they decided to pursue higher education (Kozik, 2018). Including SLD

students in meetings is beneficial to the IEP process and CCC meeting because the meeting is regarding their education. SLD students can provide first-hand experience of how they feel about their education and how to improve it. Additionally, previous research has indicated that SLD students who attended CCC meetings and understand the IEP process are more motivated and goal-driven than other SLD students who do not attend the meetings (Barnard-Brak, 2009). SLD students should attend CCC meetings, so they learn to self-advocate and to speak on their educational experience in the classroom.

### **Before the Meeting**

There are multiple steps in preparing for a case conference meeting. The educators must determine the reason for calling a case conference meeting such as the annual CCC meeting, revising the IEP, an issue concerning the SLD student not receiving their IEP accommodations, or ordering a new IEP evaluation (Klang, 2016). Indiana IEP Resource Center advises educators to be welcoming to the parents/guardians and SLD students at the front office and the front desk attendant should be aware there is going to be a meeting. There should be clear communication regarding the people who will be attending the CCC meeting such as lawyers, family friends, or interpreters. The seating arrangements should be set up where everyone can see each other which promotes positive communication. Seating and room arrangements are important in meetings because seating and room arrangement may unconsciously create a power structure within a meeting. Indiana IEP Resource Center also suggests the room should be a comfortable size for all people who will be attending the meeting. (Mueller, 2009). CCC's meeting structure should reflect equal status and encourage eye contact between all CCC members. Educators should be prepared for the parents/guardians and SLD students with charts, graphs, and other data

that was requested to be collected before and during the meeting. If the CCC meeting is about an IEP, then educators should prepare a draft of an IEP, and effectively communicate with parents/guardians and students that the IEP draft is not predetermined but is a work in progress. Educators need to be prepared and knowledgeable regarding the IEP process for the CCC meeting.

### **During the Meeting**

During the meeting, all parties should introduce themselves and state their role in the Case Conference Committee. This gives the opportunity for CCC members to understand who is attending the meeting and understand their purpose for being in the meeting (Diliberto,2014). The educators should present or develop an agenda for the meeting. The purpose of an agenda is to make sure the meeting covers all required aspects and to make sure the meeting stays on track. It is important that all CCC members agree with the agenda and make adjustments if necessary (Mueller, 2009). The educators should communicate short, clear, and positive ground rules for the meeting. Of course, educators cannot demand the ground rules however, the CCC members can come to an agreement upon the ground rules. Some ground rules Indiana IEP Resource Center recommended for CCC meetings include listening respectfully, sharing information openly, asking questions, sticking to the agenda, and one person talking at a time (2021). Educators should respect the time and input of all CCC members. CCC members can present different opinions on topics, so it is important for all CCC members to respect each other's input and to make sure people display appropriate nonverbal communications. Some respectful nonverbal communication in meetings may include eye contact, active listening, and staying off electronic devices (Hinz, 2021). To help with trust and transparency, Indiana IEP Resource

Center recommends educators verbally communicate the “Notice of Procedural Safeguards.” According to the Indiana Department of Education, SLD students have rights under federal and state laws that the education system must comply with (2021). The educators should verbally cover these rights for parents/guardians and the SLD student because there are cases where parents/guardians and the SLD student are not informed of these rights leading to misunderstandings. It is required by state law for educators to give the parents/guardians and the SLD student a copy of their safeguards and it is recommended to verbally explain their safeguards in the CCC meeting to create trust and transparency.

CCC meetings are very important to the SLD student’s education because CCC meetings determine what accommodations and/or modifications the student should receive and what accommodations are not being met. Indiana IEP Resource Center highly recommends the CCC meeting work on the IEP during the meeting rather than after or before. This way, the parents/guardians of the SLD student can verbally express their concerns regarding the IEP and their child’s accommodations. The educators should note any small or large concerns the parents/guardians of the SLD student may have for their child. Some complaints parents/guardians of SLD students have of CCC meetings is the IEP does not reflect what was discussed during the meeting and the CCC member’s agreements (Feinberg, 2010). Educators need to write word for word what was stated in the CCC meeting to avoid any misinformation on the IEP.

There is always a chance for disagreements in CCC meetings because CCC members may have different opinions regarding the IEP and accommodations. According to Indiana IEP Resource Center, there are multiple strategies to resolve differences in CCC

meetings and to have productive conversations. Indiana IEP Resource Center provided some strategies to handle differences such as “Red-Yellow-Green, Timed Talk, Walk-and-Talk, Columbo, Brainstorming, Advantages, and Limitation, Restating Verbatim, Reflecting, and Accept/Legitimize/Deal With/Defer” (2021). Indiana IEP Resource Center did not provide in-depth descriptions of these techniques. The techniques for continuing a productive conversation are staying on track, following the agenda, and re-acknowledging the ground rules of the meeting. If there is tension or roadblocks in the CCC meeting, it is beneficial to acknowledge the issue and try to come to an agreement. If the conversation is still not going anywhere, educators can use humor (that does not offend or belittle the other CCC members) or recommunicate the idea or concern. If the meeting is too “heated”, it is beneficial to take breaks so the CCC members can “cool off” or collect their thoughts (Feinberg, 2010). Educators should provide an alternative option to the CCC members and provide the advantages and limitations of each option. However, Indiana IEP Resource Center advises not to mention any options that they are not willing to implement in the IEP. Each option should be provided with supported data the educator collected based upon the SLD student’s evaluation, grades, or tests (2021). Using data provides evidence of where the SLD student is in the present and the goal of the SLD student for the future. Educators and parents/guardians must keep control of the CCC meetings and try to come to an agreement.

Indiana IEP Resource Center is not the only source of how to resolve disagreements in CCC meetings. Education scholar, Cheatham (2012) listed six “disagreement” scenarios for the common disagreements parents/guardians and educators may face in CCC meetings. Cheatham created these scenarios to serve as an example of how to respond to

these disagreements. Cheatham's (2012) scenarios include: "(1) The Time Saver, (2) The LRE Plea, (3) Who's in Charge? (4) The Search Ain't Over Until It's Over, (5) Pass the Buck, and (6) The Old Standby. Cheatham's scenarios were used to give examples of how educators should properly respond to these disagreements. For example, for The LRE Plea, the scenario was a teacher suggesting an SLD kindergarten student should be placed in a resource room before going to a classroom with her peers, but the parents disagree. Cheatham (2012) suggests that the proper way for the educator to respond to disagreements similar to this scenario is: "I do not doubt that if we put our heads together about ideas for strategies to support her, we'll feel confident in providing the student the opportunity to start in the kindergarten classroom" (pp.52. This research can help educators understand the proper way to respond to common disagreements.

### **After the Meeting**

At the end of the meeting, educators review the work that has been done according to the agenda and complete any paperwork that needs CCC members' signatures. Most of the information discussed in the CCC meeting should be reflected in the IEP. If there are further actions completed after the CCC meeting, the members need to develop an "action plan" and identify who is responsible for completing each task. An action plan is an outline strategy of actions or activities that must be completed to fulfill goals (Feinberg, 2010). It is beneficial for the CCC member to have a copy of the action plan. After communicating further actions that need completion, the educators should thank all CCC members for their time and input in the meeting and walk the parents/guardians of the SLD student out. The educators should communicate with parents/guardians of the SLD student concerning the next steps that need to be done and when they expect to complete those tasks. The educators

will also tell the parents/guardians of the SLD student they expect to complete the IEP within ten business days and how they will give the completed IEP to the parents/guardians of the SLD student such as email, fax, or give the IEP to the SLD student to give to their parents/guardians. If the IEP is incorrect, the IEP must be changed right away. The complete IEP process after the CCC meeting can last up to four weeks due to adding additional information or editing the IEP based upon CCC member request. It is recommended the CCC members provide feedback on the CCC meetings and if there are any recommended improvements.

### **Possible Consequences of Case Conference Meetings**

Disagreements in CCC meetings can have consequences when there is a lack of communication between parents/guardians of the SLD student and the educators which can lead to a strained relationship within the CCC. There are many cases of parents/guardians of SLD students feeling as though they were excluded from their child's IEP process and education. Parents/guardians of SLD students feel as though there is a lack of communication and collaboration with educators even though they are CCC members (Williams-Diehm, 2014). Due to the educator's lack of collaboration with parents/guardians of SLD students, the parents/guardians feel as though they have no power or contribution to their child's education. For example, some parents/guardians of SLD students noticed details of the IEP do not assist the child to be successful in the educational environment (Childre, 2005). Educators not allowing parents/guardians of SLD students and SLD students participation or providing input into the IEP can lead to miscommunication of the applications of the student's accommodations or modifications. This can lead to parents/guardians of SLD students filing a formal special education



complaint against the school. A formal special education complaint is a written claim by parents or guardians against a school system due to the school system not implementing federal or state special education laws or the failure in complying with agreed-upon terms in the IEP. A complaint investigator will be assigned to investigate the allegations against the school system to understand what led to the complaint and if there is any evidence to support the allegations (Indiana Department of Education, 2021). The CCC members may call for a resolution meeting to resolve any issues. The resolution meeting is required to be held within 15 days of the formal complaint being filed. The purpose of the resolution meeting is to resolve the issue described in the complaint alleged by the parents/guardians concerning their child's special education (Mueller, 2009). Due to the likelihood of conflict within CCC meetings, researchers are starting to seek efficient dispute resolution procedures and strategies to resolve conflict that will benefit all CCC members.

### **Critical Organizational Communication**

The theoretical concept guiding this research is Critical Organizational Communication Theory. Previous research dealing with organizational communication found that Critical Theory of Communication in Organizations is a helpful tool in understanding how uneven power structures can lead to conflict within an organization. The purpose of critical theorists using Critical Organizational Communication Theory is to transform organizational practices that may hinder other members of an organization (Trethewey, 1999). Some previous critical organizational research focused on and drew attention to work concepts such as power, politics, and ideology (Mumby, 1993). Mumby also advised critical researchers to investigate the correlation between everyday communication practices and organizational power structures by analyzing “micro-

practices.”Mumby implies that ““micro-practices” are how power is reflected in the daily interaction between people in an organization. The most common organizational concept previous critical theorists have covered is the usage of power in an organization. Deetz (1987) explained the usage of power in an organization as “Adequate descriptions of the exercise of power in organizations must both demonstrate how A influences B decision-making within structured contexts and how actions of A and structural configurations disqualify B from decision-making by the absence of debatable or contestable issues” (p. 37). Critical Organizational Communication Theory helps critical researchers investigate communication failures and how to improve communication in organizations.

Some researchers view organizational communication as critical theorists focusing on individuals in organizations rather than analyzing organizational communication practices (Ganesh, 2017). However, researchers focusing on individuals in an organization can highlight the disagreements within an organization due to organizational communication practices and how the organization resolves disagreements (Morley, 1986). Previous research by Kyle-Rudick used a critical organizational communication framework to investigate individuals’ experience of racism in institutions which may influence “resistance,” consciously and unconsciously, against the institutions due to the individuals’ experience of racism in the institutions. Kyle-Rudick used a narrative approach to showcase racism in institutions. They interviewed fourteen higher education students to determine if there is a correlation between conscious and unconscious “resistance” with racial discrimination. Kyle-Rudick’s use of critical organizational framework inspires the use of narrative approach to explore if there is a relationship

between uneven power structure in the CCC meeting and parents and guardians feeling the meeting was negative.

## **Chapter Three Methodology**

Narrative analysis allows researchers to investigate and analyze participants' own storytelling to explore the participants' experiences and events (Birch, 2011). Narrative analysis also helped interpret data collected from the interview process. As Alvarez (2002) observes, "A story is an embedded and fragmented process where the teller and audience fill in gaps" (p. 40). Butina's (2015) explanation of the Narrative approach guided this research in analyzing the data. Butina (2015) explains the narrative, thematic analysis process which contained five stages (1) data organization and preparation, (2) obtaining a general sense of information, (3) coding, (4) categorizing themes, and (5) interpreting data.

### **Sample**

The study consists of 20 participants, including 11 parents/guardians (age range 40-75) and nine students (age range 18-40) with Specific Learning Disabilities, regarding their experience in CCC meetings in the State of Indiana. Participants were recruited through social media and asking friends, co-workers, and family to spread the word about the research. At the beginning of the interview, participants were told that the interviews were for research purposes, therefore, the interviews were confidential.

### **Procedures**

Using a narrative approach, each participants' narrative was coded after reading the transcript multiple times to determine if there were prominent reoccurring ideas and words/messages. The prominent ideas and reoccurring words/messages were highlighted then assigned to themes. Once the themes were established, meaning was applied to the themes. Quotes from the interviews were added to the themes to provide more details. In this research, multiple participants were contacted during the analysis to confirm that their

experiences in the IEP process and CCC meetings were accurate. Due to COVID-19 precautions, a possible disadvantage was that most interviews were conducted via *Zoom*, *Facetime*, or phone calls rather than in-person. Not being able to meet face-to-face created some challenges when analyzing and transcribing the nonverbal aspects of communication, which adds to storytelling analysis.

### **Interviews**

The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide to encourage the participants to share narratives without interruption or restraint. A narrative is an effective form of storytelling that gives meaning to personal experience rather than attempting to discern if the participants' accounts were truthful (Esin, 2011). During the interview, the participants were asked a regarding the IEP process including their experience in CCC meetings. Parents/Guardians and SLD students will be encouraged to express their own self-narrative; however, parents/guardians were also asked about the level of their child's participation in the CCC meetings.

## Chapter Four Analysis

After interviewing 20 parents/guardians and SLD students, Butina’s (2015) narrative thematic approach assisted in interpreting the data collection and using the participants’ narrative to expand on the themes listed within this research. The interviews were transcribed for identifying initial codes, which were common ideas or words. If four or more participants mentioned similar words and shared ideas or phrases, these were considered codes (Butina, 2015). Once the initial codes were determined, they were assigned to a theme. The purpose of the initial code is to help apply meaning to the theme to explain the participants' narratives (see Table 1). The themes discovered include: (1) Experience in the IEP Process and (2) Experience in the CCC meeting Conflict. Each theme will explore sub-themes which include: (1.1) Determining Eligibility for Special Education Services, (1.2) Negotiation of Accommodations, (2.1) Lack of Clarity, (2.2) Lack of Communication, and (2.3) Lack of Relevant Attendees. The sub-themes listed expand upon parents/guardians and SLD students’ experience with CCC meeting conflict and how they expressed feeling they were not considered equal partners within the CCC.

**TABLE 1:** Themes from Parent/Guardian's Narrative Regarding CCC Meetings

Transcript message	Initial Code	Corresponding Theme
Michelle: Tell me a time when you did not understand the topic at hand? How did it make you feel?		
I think it was really the word choices they used when telling me the test results. <b>I felt like they were talking like they were talking to another colleague.</b> For example, I didn't know what they meant by deviation, and they kept repeating deviation. The scoring was very different to me. I have never seen the test before so I couldn't understand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test results confusion</li> <li>• Feeling frustrated</li> <li>• Lack of explanation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of Clarity</li> </ul>

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if he was one deviation away from having a better grade or was, he 10 questions away from having a good score. **I did not understand that.** When she was talking to me about it, she was like "oh he was just one deviation away" and I spoke up and said, "what do you mean by deviation". Then she said to me it's just testing him to see how far away he is from the average. But is it like one question or is it 10 questions and she'll be like it's just one deviation away from the average? I'm like you just said that. You know I could understand if they graded it like a normal test like if you guys 70% or 90%, **I can understand that. I just don't understand what one deviation away from that average mean?**

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Michelle: How were you treated when you brought up concerns regarding the IEP or other educational concerns in the CCC meeting? (Communication)

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I would say **I was more on the defensive rather than that we're all working here together.** Because John was such a good kid and he really tried hard to be respectful, he always had his homework done every day. He tried his best. **I always felt like his speech issues were overlooked or like a second thought.** When he became better at his speech it gave him confidence. He was becoming a better kid to his school. **I felt like that I always had to remind the teachers that he does need speech help.** I really felt discouraged because of his workload when he got home. He will come home for school around 3:00 o'clock or about 4 o'clock to one or two in the morning, we were doing homework. We would take an hour to eat lunch and take a break but every night he was doing homework. Throughout middle school and high school.

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- Feeling unheard
- Defensive
- Excluded from meeting
- Lack of Relevant Attendees

The quotations included were taken from the personal narratives and captured the participants' perspectives as they reflected on their experience in CCC meetings.

The narrative analysis uncovered two themes, and five sub-themes (see Table 2). The general/overarching themes and sub-themes illustrated the experiences of parents/guardians and SLD students in the IEP process and CCC meetings. This highlighted the participants' perspective regarding the conflict they experienced in the IEP process and CCC meetings. The sub-themes listed in Table 2 added more information about parents/guardians' personal narratives and SLD students' experiences in CCC meetings. Quotes displayed in the themes were taken from the participants' firsthand accounts as they reflected upon their experience in the IEP process and CCC meetings throughout K-12.

**TABLE 2:** Themes from Parents/Guardians and SLD students' Narratives about CCC Meeting

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
<b>1. Experience in the IEP Process</b>	1.1: Determining Eligibility for Special Education Services 1.2: Negotiation of Accommodations
<b>2. Experience in the CCC meeting Conflict</b>	2.1: Lack of Clarity 2.2: Lack of Communication 2.3: Lack of Relevant Attendees

**Theme 1: Experience in IEP Process**

All twenty participants mentioned how they discovered the SLD student needed accommodations. This is important because the SLD students discovered when they received additional help from the special education department, their academics improved. Theme 1 revolved around the discourse which included two sub-themes: (1) Determining Eligibility for Special Education Services and (2) Negotiation of Accommodations. During this process the parents/guardians expressed feeling as though the school corporation was



in full control of the IEP process and did not consider the parents/guardians to be equal partners.

### ***Determining Eligibility for Special Education Services***

Eighteen participants' narrative records recalled having a teacher and student conference. The teacher would ask the parents/guardians to have their students evaluated for specific learning disabilities (between kindergarten to third grade). One parent/guardian, stated:

"With my son, I approached the school about his difficulties, and with my daughter, it was discussed during a parents/teacher conference. I said that I think she needs to be tested, and they said that we were going to talk to you about that so. It was kind of a joint effort. And my youngest son was the same way."

The parents/guardians agreed to the child being tested to determine if their child had a specific learning disability, then the CCC members proceed to format an IEP. The SLD students acknowledged that when they received additional help it helped them academically. An SLD student explained:

"I cannot fully remember that because I was so young. When I was in 3rd grade, I remember the teacher giving me extra time, So the teachers were the first ones who really noticed that I needed additional help. Then I got an IEP or 504 stating that I get extra time and notes, and the other one helped me with my speech. This helped me be more successful."

Eighteen participants also mentioned the accommodations they received, including extra time on tests, a silent room to take tests, tests and quizzes being read aloud, and additional help in math or English. There were cases when students received additional help due to physical, social, or mental disorders, including hearing aid assistance, physical therapy, occupational therapy, social learning skills, and speech therapy. Only two participants were diagnosed later during high school and college, but once the participants were diagnosed, they were able to receive accommodations. The participants acknowledged that the

educators and special education faculty wanted to help the child and wanted to record that they have specific learning disabilities so they would be on a level playing field with their peers.

### ***Negotiation On Accommodations***

Many participants expressed feeling they had to actively insert themselves in the negotiation process of determining their child's accommodation because the school administrators asserted control over the negotiation process. Due to the parents/guardians' experiences of the meeting being rushed, participants reported feeling like the educators did not explain their parental or student rights. Some parents/guardians tried to be included by asking questions or requesting that the educators go over the steps of the IEP so they could negotiate the terms. One parent/guardian explained:

"I was given a packet like the other meetings that says here are your rights can you please sign down here. I never really read them because I understand there is a grievance process if I disagree. I could go through the process of arguing that he needs more help, but it could come up to a year to get a resolution. That was a year's services taken away due to being in grievance. So, you complained and stalled the process, and you're not helping the child. So, I understand that this is how we speak to these people in the hours that we have available to understand what the state is willing to get you. This is what we are willing to give him. That is my understanding of it."

Most of the participants agreed with the educator or chose to find common ground rather than going through the tedious process of disagreement in the CCC meeting. Theme 1 highlights how the parents/guardians expressed feeling as though they were not equal partners when negotiating for IEP accommodations and felt pressured to defer to the judgement of the educators regarding major decisions related to their child's education.

## **Theme 2: Experience in CCC Meeting Conflict**

After the testing and the IEP were established, parents/guardians and SLD students still struggled in CCC meetings. The sub-themes that emerged from participants' discussion of conflict within the CCC meeting included: (1) Lack of Clarity, (2) Lack of Communication and (3) Lack of Relevant Attendees. Given the lack of research about parents/guardians and SLD students in CCC meetings, this study provides valuable information about the conflict in CCC meetings. Most of the conflict within CCC meetings revolved around the parents/guardians expressing the belief that the school system did not want the parents/guardians' input in their child's education. The participants used words such as frustration and feeling "stupid." and disrespected when interacting with the educators. This influenced parents/guardians and the SLD students to feel as though they were not equal partners with the school corporation because the educators made them feel like the school is in control of the SLD student's education rather than the parents/guardians or the SLD students themselves. The parents/guardians generally explained that they did not feel like equal partners in the CCC meetings.

### ***Lack of Clarity***

Both parents/guardians and SLD students' narrative reflected a lack of clarity of parental and student rights. The parents/guardians knew they were responsible for helping their child with homework and would often seek out third-party help such as tutoring. The students understood that they had to fulfill student responsibilities such as finishing homework and attending class. However, the purpose of parents/guardians being in the CCC meeting is to be the child's advocate and most parents/guardians explained their lack

of understanding of their rights was due to educators failing to clearly explain their rights.

Another parent/guardian stated:

"Initially, when you're in the case conference committee, they give you a stack of papers printed out front and back that you are supposed to sign that you received your rights. Which when you're in a Case Conference Committee scheduled for 20 minutes, it would take you ten minutes to read through those. So, the first couple you're not aware of what they say. You get to take them home and read them after the fact. But in the first couple of meetings, you're not aware of those rights. There are no bullet points on the rights where they go over the few important things you should know before the meeting. I felt they should be sent to you before that initial meeting, so you have a chance to look through those."

Parents/Guardians thought it would be helpful had the educators explained their rights orally or sent the information to them before the meeting. This indicates parents/guardians did not receive their rights before the CCC meeting which violates the Indiana State Law in the Procedural Safeguards which states the parental rights must be sent to the parents when the student is referred for testing or when the parents request an evaluation.

Many parents/guardians acknowledged that they gained understanding of their parental rights by trial and error. Parents/Guardians explained that they mostly trusted the educators to know what was best for their children since they were trained in education. However, they learned that they had to advocate for their children. A parent/guardian stated:

"I did have parental rights over my children so I could call the school and occasionally I would, and they would talk to me but again I was a young parent so I wasn't doing the most I could do like I would do now. But whenever I call, they would answer my questions, but they weren't physically reaching out to me. Now, I will get phone calls about her not being focused again so; they will let us know. I would say what do you want us (parents) to do or how can we help. They were in constant communication"

Once the parents/guardians understood their parental rights, they regularly communicated and were not afraid to speak their opinions in CCC meetings. During the interview process,

a student spoke about conflicts in CCC meetings indicating his mother knows more about the conflicts than him. The student's parent was also interviewed in this research and she explained the conflicts. This indicates the parents/guardians were also managing the conflicts within the CCC meeting on the student's behalf. A student stated:

"There was a time when we were in a meeting, my mom and a math teacher in high school, and he basically said that he did everything he could, but I felt like he didn't. My mom was angry because I didn't get the proper help, and I was upset more because I couldn't figure it out, and...I couldn't learn this, and I was upset with myself because I couldn't figure out why this wasn't working, and I felt like he was kind of snippy and rude with my mom and just had a terrible attitude about it."

Based upon the analysis of the transcripts, the students and parents/guardians' narratives indicated they felt frustrated because they were not receiving the help they needed to be successful in the academic setting, which caused a strain on the relationships between the CCC members. The parents/guardians and SLD students reported feeling there was an imbalance of power.

Most participants communicated with the other CCC members to help improve their child's education and in hopes of building a successful relationship between CCC members. Participants remarked that they sought to have a solid and respectful relationship with the Case Conference Committee. However, there were times when students noticed their parents/guardians and the other CCC members were in a heated disagreement. A student stated:

"They (special education faculty) walked me into the meeting and to sit at the head of the table, which was ironic because I felt like I wasn't head of this meeting even though it was about me. I just felt the tension in the air. I saw my father placing a recorded device in the middle of the conference table. Then I saw the head of the special education department chuckle and smiled and placed a recording device on the table, along with the other CCC members working for the school. I just remember thinking, what the heck did I do! I got okay grades in all my classes, and I am not a troublemaker, so I did not know the issue. And I still do not know."

The strain in the relationships between the CCC members did not help the student succeed and caused each party to feel defensive and have a lack of respect between CCC members. The students also explained they did not know their student rights until they attended college. The students interviewed understood that they had to take control of their education. One student stated that they had to set aside their pride to receive accommodations in higher education:

"It was my responsibility to help myself and let it be known that I need accommodations. They cannot help you if you don't let them know that you need help. I feel like, at the college level that is fair because at that point you are a legal adult and typically you are taking charge of your own education. Students normally pay for their own education, from a loan or from a job or through scholarship or the mix of all of the above. I think socially I felt like a lot of things were my responsibility. I know that I was mentally different from my other peers and me trying to figure out how I can manage myself in their world."

Once the students gained independence and control of their education, they started to understand how to advocate for themselves.

Six participants mentioned confusion regarding the evaluation test. Parents/guardians would ask the educators in the CCC meetings about who created the test or how they determined the results. The parents/guardians felt frustrated because the educators could not effectively communicate the results to them. A parent/guardian stated:

"They kept bringing out those tests, and they said (deep mimic voice) "This is the SCAR test and yadda yadda yadda" and what does this mean, you know. And the results sometimes meant nothing compared to what you would in a common-sense viewpoint. I felt very frustrated but then again, some of them would hand me something like that and say (mimic in a higher "nicer" voice) when you look at this, it's not what you think. That made a huge difference when they educated me about that."

When the educator effectively explained the test and the results, the parents/guardians would have less confusion. One parent mentioned the CCC members sent her a survey before and after the meeting to ensure there was no confusions of the topics in the CCC

meeting and asked if she had any questions. This parent appreciated the extra effort of the educators using the survey to understand the parent/guardians and SLD students' accounts of the meeting.

### ***Lack of Communication***

Nine parents/guardians were the sole person who attended the CCC meeting to advocate for the student; however, some participants would have their parent or grandparent attend to offer moral support. Two fathers who identified themselves as divorced, with joint custody, experienced a lack of communication with the school regarding the CCC meeting. This indicates the lack of communication between the educators and the divorced father. It is the school's responsibility to notify both parents and a failure to do so tips the balance of power towards the educators. One divorced father stated:

"Well, before the divorce it was much easier because I would know about them ahead of time (laugh). The last couple years haven't been too bad. There was a time period for several years where I would be very last minute. You know, I would be at work or something and have to stop whatever was going on to attend because I was told twenty minutes ahead of time. That to me was the biggest challenge regarding any of them because my kids live a thousand miles away from me now. Through just you know, probably just you know, lack of foresight. You know, I could have asked, someone could have told me, you know it just typically I would find out when someone would be like, "Well where's his Dad?" Oh crap, phone call. You know. And that's how I would end up involved in these. So, it's ya know it would be a lot of catch up on my part. Because I would have to listen closely to what they were saying, as they give the synopsis of what's going ya know I have to pay extra close attention. Because nobody will have really informed me ahead of time. Which that's greatly improved now."

The lack of communication made the participants feel unprepared for the CCC meeting which made the parents/guardians feel the educators had more power in the CCC meeting.

### *Lack of Relevant Attendees*

Multiple parents/guardians mentioned frustration concerning relevant attendees not being included in the CCC meetings, especially between elementary school and middle school. Parents/guardians believed that it would be beneficial for all teachers and relevant administrative personnel to attend one or more CCC meetings. This would contribute to the understanding of the SLD Student's IEP and the accommodations the student must receive. The parents/guardians expressed the belief that teachers need to be in the meetings rather than simply filling out a form as a way of contributing to the CCC meeting. A parent/guardian stated:

"I have been disappointed for the last couple of years because my son now being in middle school and high school has multiple teachers not just one or two like he was in elementary school and a lot of the time the teachers did not participate in the CCC meetings. A lot of the times, they will not actually attend, but send a written evaluation especially when he got into high school. That has really ticked me off, so I have been really disappointed for not having the feedback from his teachers."

The participants also discussed that their child or themselves had to request the required accommodations from high school teachers. The participants thought it was inappropriate that their child or themselves had to ask for each of their accommodations repeatedly. Some parents/guardians mentioned the special education faculty recommended to add a self-advocacy component to the IEP so the SLD student would have to request their accommodations daily. This appeared to make the parents/guardians disappointed with the special education faculty because the accommodations are required and not subject to request. A parent/guardian explained:

"I think there is a big problem with accommodations, especially since we had a case conference committee meeting. We would agree on accommodations, and they often were not given to the student. The student had to go to the teacher and request these specific accommodations that were legally given to them in a case conference committee meeting. They had to ask for them every time. Whether it was time and



a half, or the use of a calculator, or whatever their accommodation was, they often had to ask for it. It wasn't just because it was agreed with and signed on a legal document. It wasn't given automatically without the student's request, which was very frustrating because you make an agreement with the school and the teachers, and you expect them to follow through. When I asked one of the teachers about this issue, she said that the student could ask, but sometimes the answer is no"

The primary purpose of the CCC meeting is to develop the IEP, communicate the terms of the IEP to its members and monitor the progress of the student. The teachers understood that they are obligated by law to provide the SLD student with their accommodations without asking for them. One teacher-of-record is required by state law to attend the CCC meeting, multiple participants suggested if more of the high school teachers attended the CCC meetings; this may help the teachers to understand and comply with the terms of the IEP. One participant even filed a complaint against a school system because multiple teachers refused their child's accommodations even though the accommodations were established in the IEP. By requiring SLD students to request their accommodations, educators shift the balance of power away from the SLD student and parents/guardians.

## Chapter Five Discussion

Twenty parents/guardians' and SLD students' experiences in CCC meetings were collected to examine their perspectives on conflict in the IEP process and CCC meeting. Narrative thematic analysis was used to interpret parents/guardians and SLD students' experiences in discovering their child or themselves needing additional help due to learning disabilities, the IEP process of accommodation negotiation, and their experiences of conflict in CCC meetings. Critical Organizational Communication Theory was used as a lens to view the narrative of parents/guardians and SLD students to uncover if there was an uneven balance of power between educators and parents/guardians or SLD students in the CCC meeting. The analysis of the narratives was methodical, focusing on the commonality within different narratives and connecting the narratives into overall themes and sub-themes.

The first finding was that all parents/guardians discovered their child needed to be evaluated for specific learning disabilities in elementary school due to the challenges they faced in the classroom. Once the child was assessed and determined to have specific learning disabilities, a case conference committee was formed to negotiate IEP terms. During the CCC meeting, the parents/guardians reported feeling excluded from the IEP negotiations because the educators completed the IEP without any input from the parents/guardians, and the CCC meeting was rushed because of the educator's schedule. There is a lack of clarity between educators and parents/guardians regarding the evaluation and test results. The parents/guardians expressed that they felt like the educators were explaining the test results to them like they were colleagues. The parents/guardians wished educators would explain the test more effectively so the parents/guardians could better

understand the test results and explain why a particular test is utilized and how the results were evaluated. Using Critical Organizational Communication Theory as a lens, the parents/guardians expressed feeling as though the school corporation was in full control of the IEP process and were not considering the parents/guardians to be equal partners. Theme 1 highlights how the parents/guardians felt they were not an equal partner when negotiating for IEP accommodations and felt pressured to defer to the judgement of the educators regarding major decisions related to their child's education.

The second finding is that parents/guardians and SLD students felt a lack of clarity concerning parental and student rights because the educators did not explain their rights to them. According to Critical Organizational Communication Theory, power is not dispersed equally within an organization. Parents/Guardians and the SLD students were influenced to feel inferior to the school corporation because the educators made them feel as though the school was in control of the SLD student's education rather than the parents/guardians or the SLD students themselves. The participants trusted the educators to know what was best for their children. Parents/Guardians grew to understand parental and student rights after conducting their own research. The parents/guardians learned that they were in charge of their child's educational opportunities and must advocate for the well-being of their child. After understanding their parental rights, they had consistent communication with the educators, and were not afraid to speak their opinions in CCC meetings to advocate for their children. SLD students started to understand their student rights once they attended college because they were in control of their education and had to advocate for themselves.

There was a lack of communication in the CCC meeting. There were instances when divorced parent/guardians would be notified of a CCC meeting last minute, which

made the parent/guardians feel unprepared. Regardless of relational status, both parties should be contacted and allowed to provide input on their child's education. In relation to Critical Organizational Communication Theory, the school is responsible for notifying both parents and a failure to do so tips the balanced of power towards the educators. Parent/Guardians often brought their parent (the student's grandparent) to the CCC meeting for moral support. Communication is an essential factor in making sure everyone is on the same page during the meeting and supports safe and open discussion.

There was often a lack of relevant attendees in the CCC meetings. The parent/guardians expressed the importance of all the relevant teachers in middle school and Highschool to attend at least one CCC meeting to confirm that teachers understand the terms of the IEP. If they had any questions regarding the IEP, teachers could ask for clarification in the CCC meeting. There were cases where educators added a requirement in the IEP for the SLD student to request accommodations from the teachers which is a violation of the State Special Education Laws. By requiring SLD students to request their accommodations, educators shift the balance of power away from the SLD student and parents/guardians in connection with Critical Organizational Communication Theory. When teachers do not understand the conditions of the IEP, the result is often arguments within the CCC meeting which may lead to the filing of a formal complaint with the State on behalf of the student. Most importantly, if the IEP was not adhered to, the SLD student does not receive the legally required accommodations to level the academic playing field.

The lack of Clarity, communication, and missing relevant attendees highlights the importance of the findings of this research to improve the IEP and CCC meeting experience. Critical Organizational Communication Theory provides insight into how

organizations can create an imbalance of power for the purpose of holding full control over their employees or partners. By analyzing the parent/guardians and SLD students' narratives regarding their experience in CCC meetings, both the parent/guardians and SLD students indicate a sense of being inferior in the IEP process and in CCC meeting conflicts. Parent/Guardians and SLD students' narratives provided a unique perspective on what they experienced in CCC meeting conflicts and how it made them feel as though they were not an equal partner in the CCC meeting. There is not enough research on the parent/guardians and SLD students' accounts of their experience. Parent/Guardians and SLD students' accounts of the outcome of the CCC meeting are essential because they are equal partners of the Case Conference Committee. The findings reinforced the Indiana IEP Resource Center's defined five major issues that lead to negative case conference meetings. This research has demonstrated that parent/guardians and SLD students should be approached regarding concerns in CCC meetings and how CCC meetings can improve because parent/guardians and SLD students are equal members of the CCC. Since the parents/guardians are equal members of the CCC, there should be no imbalance of power within the committee.

This research suggests the Indiana IEP Resource Center needs to consider the parent/guardians and SLD students' experiences and consider their suggestions on how to make CCC meetings more productive. Parent/Guardians and SLD students' narratives suggest they want their opinions regarding the challenges they faced in the CCC meeting and in the negotiation of accommodations to be heard. Listening to stories of parents/guardians and SLD students can help educators improve future practices in CCC

meetings resulting in a positive outcome and an equal partnership for the education of the SLD student

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## Curriculum Vitae

Megan Elizabeth Le

### PERSONAL STATEMENT

A passionate graduate from Indiana University-Purdue University who was a successful candidate for the accelerated Communication Studies B.A./Applied Communication M.A. Program. Making the Dean's List throughout the undergraduate career as well as balancing graduate level course work during the senior year. This committed and thorough research reflects a year's worth of experience in graduate-level communication studies research. An excellent and detailed speaker who explains complex communication concepts in an understandable manner so a person with any education level can comprehend.

### EDUCATION

#### **MA in Communication Studies**

July 2022

*Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN*

- GPA: 4.0

#### **BA in Communication Studies**

May 2021

*Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN*

- GPA: 3.910

#### **AAS in General Studies**

July 2019

*Ivy Tech Community College, Indianapolis, IN*

- GPA: 3.68

#### **AAS in Liberal Arts**

July 2019

*Ivy Tech Community College, Indianapolis, IN*

- GPA: 3.68

## **HONORS**

**Lambda Pi Eta Honor Society**

May 2020

*Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, IN*

**Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society**

May 2019

*Ivy Tech Community College, Indianapolis, IN*