

**HOW DO PARENTAL EXPERIENCES DURING THE IEP PROCESS IMPACT OR INFORM
EDUCATION PLANS FOR THEIR CHILDREN AND EDUCATION LEADERS
TO IMPROVE IEP PROCESSES?**

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus in this study was to capture the experiences of parents who have participated in the IEP process. Specifically, the research expounded on how parental experiences during the IEP process impacted or informed education plans for their children and informed education leaders seeking to improve the IEP process experience. This study seeks to better understand the interactions of parents, educators and school leaders in the collective effort to focus on who should be at the center of the concern: the “student.” Using a transformative qualitative methodology, this study drew upon interview data from parents and school leaders to examine how parents felt in IEP meetings and became empowered as active change agents as they advocated for their children. Five major concerns that could pose challenges to the practice and implementation of special education programming in varying schools were identified. The goal of this research was to assist school leaders in their efforts to improve the IEP process by establishing a process that welcomes fruitful input from parents while supporting them in understanding the process, educational language, timelines of actions, and legal notices that outline their rights and responsibilities. The purpose of the study was to help cultivate a relationship that both the school community and parents could engage in, in support of the child that is at the center of the process.

DEDICATION

This journey was long and the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. But what made this journey so unbearable is that I lost my heart along the way. I didn't know what the future held, but I did know that I had to continue this journey for you because you couldn't.

In memory of

Barry L. Ransom III

&

Nanie, your love, faith, hope, and joy is the legacy you leave behind. Through your example, I learned hard-work, grit, and perseverance. Thank you for always believing in me. I appreciate your unconditional love and support.

Mildred A. Ferebee

I love and miss you both dearly!

Thank you for shining your light, love, and protection down on me.

I also dedicate this work to my family: my husband Barry, my daughters Ashley and Bria, and my sons Barry and Brice. To my husband, thank you for being you. Thank you for your unconditional love and support. Thank you for the endless sacrifices. Being on this journey was not easy. You were there every step of the way. You watched me struggle, you watched me cry, and you watched at times when I wanted to give up. Your words of encouragement, the wiping of my tears, and all the financial sacrifices you made in order for me to make my dreams come true is an example of the selfless love you have for us by putting your family first.

To my children, the legacy I want to leave with each of you is, you can do all things through Christ: Philippians 4:13. Keep God first and he'll do the rest. Secondly, dream the impossible, think big and do not let anyone get in the way of your goals. Do not dim your light to make others feel comfortable. The road to success may not be easy, but through my example, never give up and stay the course. Just know it is because of each of you that I am who I am today. Thank you for being uniquely you. Thank you for pushing me to do my best. Thank you for being supportive and for your love.

To the new matriarch (Mom, here is your shout out), my biggest cheerleader, and my best friend, thank you for your unconditional love and support. You guide this family with your loving spirit. You taught us to be peaceful, to walk in humility and to never forget God's grace. You are example of hard-work and dedication. From those qualities you taught me to think big. She said "she could," so she did.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks about becoming a parent, they may think about the arduous responsibilities that come along with raising a child in this society. Perhaps, they wonder if they're enough or if they will make the right decisions to ensure that their child will grow up and live out the American dream. Will they become a productive, educated, lawful citizen who will make an impact in life or within the communities that they are attached to? The thought becomes overwhelming, and questions begin to emerge. How are they going to help their child obtain those attributes? What type of educational experience will they have or what school should they attend? Far too often, the question of educational opportunity dominates dialogue among parents across socioeconomic groups.

Striving for the school system that will yield the greatest educational experience for their children is a ubiquitous aspiration for parents across socioeconomic groups. But what does that conversation sound like when you're not well versed in the education system, if you are not native to this country and/or you are not amongst those socioeconomic classes that can forward their child with a lifestyle of access and opportunity? Regardless of a family's socioeconomic status, the aspirations of parents are universal. What opportunities are available for their children to succeed in America's institutions? The plight of a parent is still the same: trusting in a school system that helps them achieve educational success for their children.

A school system's responsibility is to educate children and to make educational decisions to develop them in ways that ensure learning is taking place. At the same time, schools must support families through the learning experience and welcome them as partners in the engagement. Practices should not be contingent upon race, religion, educational background or socioeconomic status. Schools funded by tax dollars should provide all students with meaningful learning opportunities and a challenging, relevant curriculum. The institution simply needs to embody pedagogical practices that provide a rigorous curriculum and institute best practices that can educate students in a capacity that would be edifying for all learners. It should be able to provide support and services and operate in a just manner that disseminates equity to all.

In order to achieve this, school-based personnel, which include both teachers and school administrators, should invoke ethical practices where explicit or implicit biases should be absent from practice. Leaders should promote and develop academic and personal growth, welcome family input, increase educational performance, and eliminate caustic or hostile learning experiences. As stated by Giroux (2010),

Too many classrooms at all levels of schooling now resemble a “dead zone” where any vestige of critical thinking, self-reflection, and imagination quickly migrates to sites outside of the school only to be mediated and corrupted by a corporate-driven media culture. The major issue now driving public schooling is how to teach for the test while disciplining those students who because of their class and race undermine a school district’s ranking in the ethically sterile and bloodless world of high stakes testing and empirical score cards. (pp. 715–716).

The charge for leadership is to implement an effective framework that produces evidence of thriving institutions that educate all students with honor, integrity, and by ethical practices. It should be a place where children love to learn and pride themselves that their institutions are responsible for helping them to become their future selves.

The commitment of educating and providing children with the tools necessary to ensure that they are learning, making educational gains, and becoming proficient in the skills that would eventually make them college and career ready doesn’t just rest on schools; indeed, it is a partnership among family, community, and the institution. Resources, access, and technical support are the essential activators that can inform good decision-making for families, helping them make decisions like determining school choice, learning how to monitor their child’s academic growth, and advocating for them on their behalf. All are factors in which can become very complex, especially when incorporating personal life experiences coupled with the microcosm of inequities that can contribute barriers to the lifelong commitment to ensuring that children receive a quality, equitable education. Racial discrimination and institutional racism create conflict between cultural values and norms, language barriers, and socioeconomic status, versus the educational system’s processes, experiences, and school district culture and climate, complicating how parents understand rights and responsibilities and navigate the systems of resources. Thus, complex external forces potentially impose challenges in the process of parental decision making. With the onset of any of these possibilities, academic planning becomes more

trivial in education. It becomes even more complicated when families have to advocate for children that have learning differences that require additional support to meet their needs and increase academic growth.

When a parent has a child with a disability, how do they champion an already complex educational system? How will their child's learning be supported? How do they navigate the systems that are already in place? Who do they trust? Parents need to understand that they have rights. Legislation provides a hedge of protection for eligible children and mandates regulate how schools provide resources and services as their child journeys through their educational experiences. Furthermore, parents must understand that they are navigating an educational system that already faces challenges (examples of these challenges will follow) regarding racism, prejudices, stereotypes that beget cultural biases, poor quality programming in certain districts, and educational shortages. All of these challenges are additional barriers that families might face simultaneously as they fight for their children's rights. In spite of these challenges, our educational system has created legislation that can assist families when they navigate an already convoluted system.

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act, 2017 statute, is comprised of four parts: Part A: General Provisions, Part B: Assistance for All Children with Disabilities, Part C: Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Part D: National Activities to Improve Education of Children with Disabilities (ASK Resource Center, 2018). Specifically, the provision in part B outlines the law of the special education processes and in is based on six principals. First, the provision promises a free, appropriate education that "ensures that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living" (U.S. Department of Education., n.d.). Second, the provision guarantees the facilitation of an appropriate evaluation (ASK Resource Center, 2018). Third, the provision mandates an individual education program (IEP) that suites the need of the students (ASK Resource Center, 2018). Fourth, the provision requires services to be made available within the least restrictive environment (LRE; ASK Resource Center, 2018). The most essential part of

the provision ensures the participation of parents and students in the decision-making process; the institution is to provide procedural safeguards (ASK Resource Center, 2018). While IDEA purports to protect students with disabilities, the disparities between knowledge, access and support vary among groups. The extent to which parents have access to information language skills and the ability to negotiate school could be a significant factor related to successful outcomes within special education.

In addition, the function of these laws provides governance for the states, local districts, and educational agencies that provide educational services for students with disabilities eligible to receive special education programming. These doctrines, coupled with the American with Disabilities Act (1990), Title II, and the Rehabilitation Act (1973), Section 504, provide a more cohesive legislature that can guide and inform parents on how to navigate educational systems when they are advocating for their children (U.S. Department of Education., n.d.). The establishment of the Assistive Technologies Act (1998) and the Handicap for Protection Act (1986) additionally provided the opportunity for equitability as children journey throughout educational systems (U.S. Department of Education., n.d.).

Keeping this legislation in mind, the legal formalities schools must adhere to coupled with the abundance of resources available to eligible candidates, help to illustrate why it is imperative for schools to be the empowering force for families, assisting them with understanding educational jargon and law as they transition through the IEP proceedings. Additionally, partnerships between schools and families should yield acceptance of and respect for family insight, placing value on fostering a positive working relationship as they jointly support the common goal of the child's learning.

In contrast with these formalities, parents have a long history of expressing disappointment and dissatisfaction with how they were perceived and treated by school personnel as they participated in the special education process. Parents have acknowledged how disconnected they felt from the process and how decisions seemed final before the engagement begins. Capturing the experience of parents of children with disabilities that have gone through the IEP process is needed to affirm the need for reformation of the IEP process. To do this, it is

necessary to determine the efficacy of the existing policies, procedures, and practice an internal exploration to determine where there is a breakdown within the process.

Hence, this study seeks to illuminate the experiences of families as they navigate and partner with educational agencies in an attempt to make informed educational decisions for their children. Specifically, I seek to explore and document the experiences and interactions of parents and school personnel who have participated in the IEP meeting process.

Purpose

My passion for improving this process and honoring parents' rights more fully drives me to research the systemic challenges that institutions face when they are confronted with the charge or responsibility in educating students who are eligible for special education programming that attend their schools and how their actions impact families. In short, the environment within schools is supposed to promote inclusivity while providing a free appropriate public education for all. The primary focus of this study was to capture the experiences of parents who have participated in the IEP process. Specifically, the research investigated the following question: how do parental experiences during the IEP process impact or inform education plans for their children and inform education leaders to improve the IEP process experience? This research is not to single out any race, and the focus is solely on parents. Their testimony about their experiences can involve elements such as race, racial bias, and cultural disconnects that are already challenging for our society and are complicating factors for non-majority parents.

The extenuating variables that are potential barriers can inhibit a positive process and could be attributed to the educational level of parents, cultural awareness, language acquisition, immigration, customs, and socioeconomic status. All of these factors could impose hindrances for families based on perceptions, stereotypes, racism, and cultural biases that could potentially contaminate the possibility to foster collaborative partnerships. Woo Jung (2011) and Kayama (2010) noted that prior work has shown that parents have described uncomfortable interactions they have experienced with school personnel at different instances, especially during the IEP meeting. This necessitates the need to understand barriers and how those barriers can help leadership establish a process that is welcoming to families.

Reconceptualizing the idea of having parents as active partners where their insight, realistic will, and advocacy on their child's behalf should pose an advantage for school personnel. Parents know their child best and their influence should hold some weight when educational decisions are made regarding their children's educational plans, progress and/or success. As Delpit (2006) eloquently stated, "The worldviews of those with privileged positions are taken as the only reality, while the worldviews of those less powerful are dismissed as inconsequential" (p. xxv). This resembles the "silenced dialogue" Delpit (2006) discussed when she referenced the experiences of minority educators (providing input on educational approaches that could be considered when educating students of color), and the plight of the inclusivity of professional perspectives, ideas and recommendations that are readily not heard in education. The culture within some educational circles is most often dismissive; people listen to their voices but never hear the message. This is a perfect parallel to the experiences of parents when they must contend with school personnel. Parents often find themselves coming to an IEP meeting prepared to provide their thoughts and ideas and to provide any information that would be useful as they advocate for their child, only to be welcomed with final conclusions and recommendations from the perspective of the school without their parental input.

Prior work has provided evidence that some parents do not feel like they have an opportunity to provide insightful input that is valued by school practitioners. For example,

Parents from *culturally linguistically backgrounds* (CLD), not only is there a conceptual discrepancy between the special education system and the ideal of equity guaranteed by law, but there are also prevalent mainstream values imbedded in the IEP process which may intrinsically and adversely affect their meaningful participation in the IEP. (Woo Jung, 2011 p. 22)

In some instances, parents have encountered a demeaning experience where they felt judged, looked down upon by school personnel and have strong feelings of isolation (Woo Jung, 2011). Some families have felt that the school professional suggestions are final from the beginning of the process to the end (Woo Jung, 2011). In some cultures, education is highly regarded, and it is customary to accept the guidance or recommendation of school officials without questioning the thought processes (Kayama, 2010). In other instances, parents have felt pressured to agree with prescriptions made by schools that they did not truly understand (Woo

Jung, 2011). In other cases, families felt a sense of powerlessness because the language used was extremely technical and they lacked understanding (Kayama, 2010).

Other practices schools hesitate to reconcile with involve cultural biases. Cultural incompetence is one of the leading discussions in the present day and has been a historic practice in this country since the establishment of the first public school in 1635 in the United States. The principles and practices that established our education system continue to be enacted from a Eurocentric perspective. It was designed to benefit the privileged and not the minoritized. As evidenced by slavery, Jim Crow laws, the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and so forth, these designs, along with our institutions, have contributed to the disenfranchisement of people of color. As noted in the original works of Carter Godwin Woodson, (1933):

When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. The same educational process which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that he is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, depresses and crushes at the same time the spark of genius in the Negro by making him feel that his race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples. (p. 31)

As a result, the education system's systematic construct has yielded a convoluted ideology and has fostered the idealism of institutional racism since its inception. Is it possible that our history, policy, and practice has created disjointed perspectives when culture converges with personal realities, potentially giving rise to explicit or implicit actions of disenfranchisement in a manner that continues this vicious cycle of tiered access to learning? Our country is described by some leaders as a place that has yet to become the United States for all, a place where unification has yet to proliferate within any institution. Until these concerns are addressed, there will always be challenges of equality and equity in our practices.

In a study conducted at the University of Auckland, Peterson et al. (2016) explored differences in teacher expectation and how that expectation can influence the efficacy of practice as related to support, engagement, grades, and academic performance. A teacher is the master evaluator that makes decisions evolving achievement, academic progress, and the distribution of

tailored support. Consequently, their worldview and expectations for their students become the basis of their judgement. Their judgement can influence their interactions with students and affect how they support students and vary instruction based on their original expectations (Peterson et al., 2016). When there is a collision of professional actions, the responsibility surrounding teacher expectations and the execution of their behaviors (positive or negative) based on stereotypes and or prejudices, fuse with cultural backgrounds of students (which encompasses parental beliefs, socioeconomic status, education etc.). Collectively, these factors create an achievement gap between the majority and minority groups. Likewise, Peterson et al. (2016) acknowledged “that students from low-economic groups and students from ethnic minorities may be particularly susceptible to teachers’ expectation effect through process like stereotype threats” (p. 124).

Furthermore, there is and has been existing systemic issues involving racism in the United States. W.E.B. DuBois believed that our educational institutions “...played a central role in preserving a caste society...” (Peirce, 2017) p. 24s). The racial undercurrents effected people of color socially, politically, academically, and economically leaving them in internal bondage. DuBois’s activism provided a solution through the charge of the talented tenth. A cultural responsibility where the intellectual elites within the Afro-American community were the answer to urging the importance of higher education as a guiding means to liberation. DuBois foreshadowing of the impending progression for the people of color transcended well into the twentieth century history. “DuBois’s work on caste formation through schooling underscores the dynamic and adaptive nature of caste control in U.S. society, which continues today in school, prison, hyper-policed communities, court, housing, and health systems” Pierce, (2017, p. 24s). These crises have produced tragedies and notable events both before and after the period of the civil rights movement that prove that education was and still is in turmoil. There have been major litigations following legislation for equal rights for people of color to be educated. The most notable case was *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, “a landmark 1954 Supreme Court case in which the justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional” (History.com Editors, 2009).

Another example is within the practices of school organizations, where racism and the acts of prejudiced behavior are often cloaked behind policies and procedures. For example, grouping elementary students by level for mathematics may seem like a reasonable approach for instruction, but when these early groups become permanent, there are many instances where being in the “low math group” have negative attributes (sometimes the instruction is subpar based on the expectations and limits access to higher level high school math) which could have negative effects on state assessments and college entry criteria (Spielhagen, 2006). Spielhagen (2006) asked whether all students should study algebra in eighth grade, focusing on “the unrepresented populations by examining the study of algebra in 8th grade and its impact on student performance, achievement and attainment” (p. 29) and exploring prior research suggesting that tracked learning, even when students can move between tracks, may perpetuate demographic inequalities. Yet, it is hard to prove if placement decisions are made based on true academic abilities or are due to the propensity to accelerate the learning of particular groups based on cultural stereotypes. In these instances, it is hard to fight these policies when you are a part of the disadvantaged or minoritized group. As a parent, it is hard to gauge if placements are valid based on merit, biases or determined by ethical practices.

In urban schools staffed by many or mostly white middle class professionals, where there can be a conflict between internal beliefs and societal indifferences, the conflict has the potential influence unfavorable actions consciously or unconsciously. When a parent enters a room for an IEP meeting and is faced with preconceived notions of judgement, biases, stereotypes, prejudices, or racist ideology, often the parent’s ideals are ignored due to a lack of cultural awareness or competence by the school staff professionals. In those situations, how is the parent supposed to have a sense of acceptance or feel included as an equal member of a decision-making team? The devaluing practice supports the argument about what could potentially be imposed on families as they attempt to advocate for their children. That is not to say that this is the case all of the time, but it is another barrier that families face when they feel that there was no evidence of acceptance, respect or appreciation, whether that is due to their unmet ideal or because school officials want to impose plans that override parents.

This study will seek to better understand the interactions of parents, educators, and school leaders in the collective effort to focus on who should be at the center of the concern: the student. The goal of this research is to assist school leaders in their efforts to improve the IEP process by establishing a process that welcomes fruitful input from parents. While supporting them in understanding the process, educational language, timelines of actions and legal notices that outline their rights and responsibility in language that parents will understand. The purpose is to help cultivate a relationship that both the school community and parents can engage in, in support of the child that is at the center of debate.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, there will be a detailed analysis validated by scholarly research on the roles and responsibilities of school leaders and how their roles impact special education programming in their schools. Additionally, this chapter will examine prior research on how leadership and the school community support parents of students that are eligible to receive special education services. There will also be an explanation of the evolution of schools, how the role of school leaders have changed, and the challenges educational institutions have faced as related to the law, policy, and procedural process in special education programming.

This chapter will discuss perceptions of parents that have participated in the IEP meeting process, making potential connections between their personal history, economic status, and cultural awareness, which may play an active role in how they are perceived by school personnel. This chapter will also discuss cultural proficiency, which is a framework that involves addressing your own personal assumptions (Lindsey et al., 2019). These assumptions could include ideologies that may invade a person's perceptions, stereotypes, biases, and or prejudices that can impinge on the rights and respect of families. Unpacking these assumptions is key to understanding the mindset of school leaders, as it can reveal how they allow these perceptions to inform their support toward parents of students that are eligible to receive special education services.

School Leadership

Principals of schools face multiple demands and challenges. They are required to develop school plans that outline their priority goals based on the school's performance. They are responsible for evaluating and developing educators, school management that involves progress monitoring of instruction (special education programming), academic achievement, attendance, and the climate and culture of the school. They also, must build partnership with stakeholders, school personnel, students, and families. In addition to these responsibilities, leaders must create a culture that is inclusive and welcoming for all students. Therefore, professional experiences, education, certifications, and cultural awareness are characteristic attributes that afford leaders

with tools to engineer successful institutions. If a leader is ill equipped and not professionally prepared for the charge of running a school, it can have lasting effects on school programming. When there is a compromise such as ethical professional practice within the school system, this is a breach of trust which usually has a negative effect. This could impact, school, student learning, quality of academic programming, the climate and culture, morale, teacher quality, attainment, effectiveness, and even the opportunity work collaboratively with parents. All of these are variables that determine how effective a school leader can be within his or her school community.

Marzano et al. (2005), prominent researchers on school leadership, identified 21 areas (*affirmation, change agent, contingent reward, communication, culture, discipline, flexibility, focus, ideals/ beliefs, input, intellectual stimulation, involvement in curriculum, instruction and assessment, responsibility, knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment, monitoring/ evaluation, optimizer, order, outreach, relationships, resources, situational awareness and visibility*) that are directly correlated to student achievement. With these discrete responsibilities, principals must master and manage during the school day and school year. While these areas can pertain to all children, some of these like culture, instruction and assessment, communication and relationships specifically relate to the facilitation of effective special education programming for the children who are eligible to receive services. These areas provide technical support in the delivery of instructional practices and research-based strategies for effective instructional facilitation in special education. Marzano et al.'s framework helps mend the deficiencies in practice to promote best instructional practices among educators and school leaders. Additionally, his work involves understanding and accepting cultural differences, being aware of internal inequities, promoting effective communication, building great relationships, and seeking outreach, which are at the core of successful special education programming in institutions.

Supporting children with disabilities represents a change in the role of today's school leaders. DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) examined key leadership issues related to effective special education, reviewed leaderships knowledge and skill for effective principal performance, discussed how the role of the administrator has evolved from building manager and student

disciplinarian, and outlined principal professional development needs, leadership challenges, etc. All concerns that they explored directly relate to Marzano et al.'s point of view on the qualities principals need to master to increase student achievement, especially within special education programming in their schools.

The change in professional practice of school leaders and the facilitation of special education programming for students eligible to receive special education programming is further validated by Lashley (2007). Lashley outlined historically how special education evolved from an isolated domain to inclusion programming in schools. Through this process, inclusion became the driving catalyst of change behind the change in the leadership roles and responsibilities. In 1975, the federal government established the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), a law created to improve special education programming. Lashley described his experience, as he was hired to implement EAHCA (special education programming) into his employing district. As that was during the era of pre-inclusion when the dual system of general education and special education were separate, Lashley explained that “principals looked after the day-to-day operation of special education classrooms, but they were not expected to contribute to the quality of teaching or learning that occurred within them” (p. 179). According to Lashley, the viewpoint of some school leaders was that “students who had disabilities were seen as bringing a number of problems with them—problems of poverty, discrimination, and behavior—and the new cadre of specialists who served them had a language and educational processes that were unfamiliar” (p. 179). Lashley’s perspective suggests that during this period, the mindset of leaders was to divert or pass on the responsibilities of educating students with disabilities to special education educators; leaving them to deal with the “...risk and suffer the litigious consequences” (p. 179). Through his research, Lashley found the challenges that inhibit the successfulness of the framework was due to the fact that many of the teachers that provided instruction were unlicensed and unprepared to teach, children that were placed in special education programming never exited the program, and compliance overshadowed the quality of education.

In more recent years, the onset of the inclusion movement has occurred, which has intended to better support children with disabilities in general education. Lashley’s (2007) chief

argument was that the laws (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1997, amended 2004; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001) that were established were the catalysts for the transformation of the role of leadership overall. The modern-day leader's role dismantled the duality of both systems (general education and special education) to ensure that educational programming and school environments were inclusive for all students. Inclusivity became the emphasis throughout institutions as they kept students as the center while providing them a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). These changes ensured that accountability for the teaching and learning that took place, coupled with ongoing professional development, equity, ethics, and cultural awareness, became the essential recipe of successful institutions and the programming institutions facilitate.

Far too often, school leadership becomes a convoluted existence based on what leadership should look like versus the reality of practice. Leaders often act from what they know how to do rather than learning to do what needs to be done in the best interest of students. For example, if a school leader has minimal special education experience, and lacks coursework or field experience then they are ill-prepared to support their institutions, teachers and their special education population (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Frost and Kersten, 2011). To demonstrate the importance of principals having quality knowledge and training, Frost and Kersten (2011) conducted a study to "explore, examine and analyze principal's perceptions of their: (a) knowledge of special education, and (b) instructional leadership involvement with special education teachers" within one county in an Illinois school district (p. 6). In this study, the elementary school principals participated in a survey self-assessing their knowledge in categories relative to special education awareness: legal, foundational, and contextual. They rated themselves on a scale of 1 (limited) through 5 (excellent). Findings showed that

The three lowest rated areas were in (a) development of a program improvement plan for special education (3.43), (b) knowledge of state learning standards for students with disabilities (3.55), and (c) knowledge of special education rules and regulations contained in the Illinois Administrative Code (3.57). (p. 8)

Furthermore, it was noted that within this group, principals' who had a certification in special education responded higher in every category as opposed to their colleagues without special education certification.

Frost and Kersten (2011) noted that school leaders should bestow certain professional attributes:

knowledge of federal and state special education rules...create a school-wide culture that accepts and integrates all students and identifies special education services and supports that provides students with access to curriculum...ensures that students receiving special education services participate in state and local assessments. (p. 5)

This necessitate and validates the reasoning for strong, knowledgeable leaders in special education who are needed, valuable and essential to the success of special education programming. Furthermore, Frost and Kersten (2011) noted prior research had found that school principals who are most effective in special education:

(a) possess essential beliefs regarding the education of special education students, (b) access resources to assist in fact finding and decision making, (c) understand the support that special education teachers need to impact academic and behavioral needs of students, (d) support and monitor procedures, (e) maintain records and confidentiality, (f) ensure parental involvement, (g) participate in the employee selection process, (h) assist in the discipline of special education students, (i) understand and are aware of current legal requirements and technological advances, (j) collaborate and build trust with stakeholders, (k) model positive attitudes, (l) engage in effective listening and problem solving skills, (m) support teaching staff, and (n) practice reflective behaviors. (p. 5)

These professional skills develop progressively over time and become a building block of skills that is accumulated through their professional experience.

Research has affirmed that effective principals need to be well versed in the knowledge of special education law, educational programming, and preserving the educational rights and responsibilities of students that receive special education programming (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). This requires school leaders to effectively implement and manage programming, communicate with families, ensure teachers are professionally developed to know how to effectively differentiate and or modify instruction, and provide targeted support as outlined in the IEP to meet legal obligations DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003. Undoubtedly, including parents as active agents in the special education process is key. It is imperative that our school leaders are innovative, qualified, and committed to lead.

As a school leader, principals need to be proficient about special education laws, continue with ongoing professional development, and have experience in special education to

ensure that the culture of the school promotes inclusivity for all. An ethical mindset, democratic leadership style, and cultural competence remain important drivers for this process. This mindset is consistent with the research of Stefkovich and Shapiro (2016), who argued that school leaders need to have a standard for the profession, establish a code of ethics, and promote a sense of community while keeping students at the center of all decisions. These attributes would ensure that leaders are facilitating a scholastic program that meets the needs of all students both culturally and academically in schools.

Leadership development helps individuals make conscious decisions about the philosophical ideologies and/or theoretical frameworks they choose to adopt and use as a methodological strategy for governance. Regardless of their adopted approach, how they govern will have long lasting effects as it relates to school governance and management, climate, efficacy of academic programming and performance. The judgment of success and their effectiveness will be based on the outlined principles of the acts of justice, care, critique and professionalism (Stefkovich & Shapiro, 2016), as reflected in the following questions:

- 1) Are they culturally informed and use current societal problems to inform how you support disenfranchised group within your school buildings?
- 2) Are you driven by popularity or electing to make sacrifices by doing what's right for the community?
- 3) Are they concerned about the staff they govern?
- 4) Do they genuinely self-evaluate their performance, actions and efficacy of their leadership?

These questions reinforce the idea that a leader must manage the internal struggle between who they are as an individual and how they work within the society they aim to serve.

A leader, should be an optimal conductor that can adhere to all the intricacies of managing a school, ensuring teachers are qualified and professionally developed not only on how to facilitate best practices, but also to provide ongoing support of professional development in special education programming. Leaders need to ensure they cultivate a climate and culture that is conducive to learning, implement effective instructional models, deliver rigorous programming,

and monitor academic achievement; at the same time, they must provide an inclusive educational experience that is in alignment with the law for student with disabilities. Finally, they must focus on school improvement with an emphasis on instructional leadership and practice that can provide necessary data to inform their decision making (Lashley, 2007).

Parent Relationship with School

School is often the one place in society where people of different racial, cultural and economic backgrounds are expected to work together toward common goals and outcomes. The microcosm of society such as ones' socioeconomic status, education, culture, language, religion, sex, and environment, coupled with racial ideology and or prejudices that give birth to cultural unawareness, and/ or cultural insensitivity can undermine the effectiveness of parental activism. Experiences and realities become a nexus for how parents gain access to resources, encounter inequalities, challenge practices, or advocate for refined supports from the institutions that are educating their children. Adversely, professional responsibilities can conflict with what is practiced, yielding "reality" or "life" experiences that shape our perceptions. This can taint the ability to foster good relationships, breach trust, and consequently fracture outcomes for children. These social challenges eventually become barriers that impinge on how parents make informed decisions for their children, especially for parents of children with who are eligible to receive special education services.

Understanding the law, their parental rights, how to gain access to resources, and how to navigate the systems of support within school districts may seem trivial for parents, but there are consequences to being underinformed. Parents have no other choice but to rely on the school system with hopes that the system will actively do what it is designed to do, which is educate all children. Thus, relationship building is the impetus in fostering fruitful relations between parents, their children, and the institution.

Kayama (2010), pointed out how "cultural beliefs about disability and related systems of special education affect the experiences of children with disabilities and their parents" (p. 117). In this literature review, she reviews research that captures the perceptions and experiences of parents who have preschool or elementary school-age children with disabilities in the United

States and Japan. Kayama reviewed three cases referencing parental perceptions and relationships with professionals. Kasahara & Turnbull (2005) did a study involving thirty mothers of children ranging from the ages of 3 to 13 with varying disabilities. An earlier study conducted by Blue-Banning et al. (2004) explored family and professional partnerships. In the study, they recruited 137 participants consisting of parents of children with and without disabilities, professionals, service providers and administrators all of whom participated in focus groups or interviews. Building off the work of Blue-Banning et al. (2004), Nelson et al. (2004) conducted a secondary analysis focusing on the boundaries between parents and professionals. All three studies yielded common themes surrounding equity and reciprocity, respect and trust, and systemic services (Kayama, 2010).

The purpose of explicating this literature review is to illuminate how cultural differences could impede parental advocacy, participation, and the receipt of adequate support and services. For example, in Japan, disabilities are viewed as abnormal, families are faced with stigma, and the care for individuals with disabilities becomes the responsibility of the family more so out of fear or shame even though supports are readily available (Kayama, 2010). Kayama noted, "being known to a person with a disability by others could damage a person and his or her family because of the negative images of disability prevalent in the culture" (p. 118). Hierarchism is embedded in the very fabric of Japanese culture and is a major component that contributes to the lack of parental engagement. For a parent to question or challenge a professional's prescription and or recommendations is a rare act and hinders their inability or will to advocate on the behalf of their child. In this culture, educators are highly respected.

In contrast, in the United States, students with disabilities are safeguarded by legal mandates under the IDEA of 2004, which entitles children who are eligible to receive special education programming to receive a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Students will receive academic support as prescribed and outlined in their individualized education plans (IEPs). What parents grapple with is the efficacy of the supports their children receive and establishing collaborative partnerships where they feel valued and included in the decision-making process of the development of the IEP.

To synthesize the ideals of this research, both cultures' desires were the same in wanting to be an influential asset in the discussion of making educational decisions involving their children. Equality and reciprocity were the variables that would provide a sense of authenticity producing the superpower of "empowerment." The variant of opposition was how each culture interprets trust. In the Japanese culture, "empathy" was the binder of trust, whereas confidentiality and the individual rights of children were greater factors of trust for parents of the US.

A further argument on this point is made by Woo Jung (2011):

In spite of theoretical validation and legal mandates in special education or parent participation, many studies have indicated that parents' roles in the IEP process are still not noticeable and influential and that too often they are not being treated as an equal partner with school professional. (p. 21).

Specifically, it was stated in this research that parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are more apt to not be included in the evaluation or decision-making process leading up to the actual IEP meeting (Woo Jung, 2011).

Additionally, Woo Jung noted that in a prior study,

research identified professional educators' attitudes or perceptions which may establish potential barriers to family participation: (a) they stereotype or blame the parent, (b) they deny parental expertise and knowledge of child, (c) they are insensitive to religious beliefs, family traditions, and cultural diversity and (d) they withhold information and use educational jargon and terminology about placement and programming options" (p. 21).

The philosophical discrepancy encompasses the factors of culture—customs, values, norms, acculturation levels, language proficiency, education, and knowing rights and responsibilities—which has the potential to produce internal defense mechanisms not only for the educator, but also for parents of student who are eligible to receive special education services. In some cases, these elements can create insecurities, apprehensions, and anxieties that become the catalyst to these barriers in which impedes advocacy.

When those feelings intersect with the actions of professionals who exercise in a manner that is unjust or unlawful, it creates a negative situation that defies, dismantles and cripples the very principles set in place to deliver ethical and fair educational experiences. Woo Jung (2011) also noted the differentiation in the mindset (related to the concept of fixed or growth mindset) of

both the school leader and parent. A fixed mindset is limited, a restriction to evolve outside of your own views. A

growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others. Although people may differ in their initial talents and attitudes, interests, or temperament, everyone can change and grow through application and experience. (Dweck, 2006, p. 7)

In order for healthy partnerships to form, there needs to be a dual acceptance that people are going to learn from each other as they work together in this forum.

Delpit (2006) addressed the collide of culture versus the classroom. In her book, Delpit describes “the culture of power”.

1. The issues of power are enacted in the classrooms.
2. There are codes and rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power.”
3. The rules of the culture of power are reflective of the rules of the culture of those who have the power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rule of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 24)

Delpit (2006) relates numbers one through three to the sociology of education, identifying the merger of power with different facets of education and bringing notice to “the power behind the teacher over students; the power of the publishers over textbooks; and of the developers of the curriculum to determine the view of the world presented...,” government over society, and most importantly “the power of an individual or group to determine another’s intelligence or normalcy” (pp. 24–25). For the sake of argument, consider number five, as this provides evidence of why racism, prejudices, stereotyping, lack of ethics, and dishonesty are allowed to be cloaked behind laws, policies, and practices, eventually piercing out through actions, words, and treatment of the empowered versus the less powered.

For example, Delpit (2006) explained a scenario of how her 12-year-old friend explained to her,

how there are three kinds of teachers in his middle school: the black teachers, none of whom are afraid of black kids, the white teachers, a few of whom are not afraid of black kids and the largest group of white teachers, who are all afraid of black kids. The last group, according to my young informant, consistently has the

most difficulty with teaching and whose students have the most difficulty with learning” (pp. 167–168).

However, this scenario does give credence to the perception of student observations and questions teacher–student interactions and the use of language by the teacher which could create relational difference amongst all three types of teachers. In the inverse, I have personally witnessed teachers from all types of races mistreat, talk out of term to a specific type of student but will act differently toward students of parents that are consistently present in their child’s educational experience.

These referenced examples draw attention to the fact that regarding the dynamics and diversity of humanity pertaining to immigration, culture, or ethnicity, it shouldn’t matter where someone hails from. For any student with or without a disability within the confines of the United States of America the institution has a moral obligation to educate all children. What matters is the efficacy of those services under the guidance of the law. When a professional chooses to undermine the system, law, or processes guided by law they are committing actions of criminality.

To counter this, there is a need to reform actions, mindsets, and personal growth by first acknowledging and embracing our differences. We can’t be morally conscious if our actions are tiered to specific groups. In summary, philosophical discrepancies are propagated by explicit and implicit biases by the persons who are empowered to uphold the law that was designed for the protection of rights for families of student with disabilities.

Cultural Proficiency in Schools

To address inequities that hinder the quality of support for parents of children with disabilities, the institution can forge new beginnings by implementing cultural proficiency framework models into schools and districts. Cultural proficiency is a framework that involves addressing one’s own personal assumptions (Lindsey et al., 2019):

Cultural Proficiency enables educators, schools, districts, and their communities to respond effectively to people who differ from one another. Cultural Proficiency is a mindset, a way of being, a worldview, and a perspective that are the basis for how one moves about in our diverse society. This model is valued based and shifts the culture to uproot practices of systematic oppression, the presumptions of privilege and entitlement, unawareness of the need to adapt and or resistance to change. (p. 5)

Using this framework can assist schools to step in the direction of change, specifically positive change that will help practitioners be more effective in instruction, build communities in schools, and create relationships with families that are genuine and accepting. This could possibly be a change of approach as opposed to some of the findings in research which illuminates a graver history. Effective relationship could make parents feel more included and influential, creating better collaborative relationships.

Finally, as educators, we cannot act in support of children and families while ignoring that racist or prejudiced ideology permeates in distinctive roles where decisions that impact families and especially students who receive special education services are made. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) outlined the professional norms to promote and support achievement. The one that resonated most is “act accordingly to promote the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning, and continuous improvement” (p. 21). That alone begets a concerted effort and responsibility for professionals to adapt a moral code that is a representation of the profession and declares unity and fairness throughout the community. The Cultural Proficiency framework could provide a restorative exercise that institutions could use to develop and create environments that are open and accepting.

Whether it be within the government, policing, the medical profession, or any professional field, there are remnants of racism. In this argument, it has been pointed out how the microcosm of society in institutions has been detrimental for both families and professionals in the process. In order to make the quality for education enriching for all students, we have to welcome change by changing our perceptions and being open to change. Education, the “institution”, could be the arena where that change begins to educate humanity on how to accept and support each other.

With this in mind, the law presents very clear, detailed guidelines to support special education programming in schools. There is enough evidence to explore the efficacy of practice for each individual state, city, school district and school. There is enough evidence to question the professional practices and determine how the experiences of families can inform change that will breed a culture of inclusivity. Let this research be the foundation to explore the efficacy of existing special education processes and be the catalyst to assist leaders by informing them with data to

make necessary changes where they see fit. Fortifying these partnerships can help parents to better understand the laws by making them more knowledgeable, which will lead to empowering parents to make informed decision as they support their children. Schools may become more proactive and less contentious; parent may feel like valued members by assisting in the designing of optimal plans for their children.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Purpose

In this research, I intend to more deeply understand the experiences of families that have engaged in an IEP meeting process with school personnel and leaders (which include the local education administrator (LEA), teachers, specialists if applicable, and parents). The study is also designed to better understand how parents experience the IEP process in schools where parent and student cultural and racial identity differ from the cultural and racial identity of the majority of the IEP Team. The specific research questions that are intended to be answered in this study are:

1. In what ways do school leaders welcome parents as valued members of the IEP process while considering the racial and cultural identity of the student and family?
 - a. What processes do school administrators have in place when complications develop between school personnel and families?
2. In what ways do parents experience the IEP process and understand their rights in determining what is best for their child?
3. How do parents' perceptions and understanding influence their actions in advocating for their children?

As noted, the process of developing an IEP requires collaboration in order to devise an individualized educational plan that will support children with disabilities who are eligible to receive special education services. The aim of the study is to produce an in-depth report of parental experiences and to learn how parental experiences may inform leadership practice to make this process more collaborative. As such, this research can be used as a meaningful tool to assist school leaders in fortifying and improving the IEP process where parents feel more included in the decision making and to maintain a healthy partnership between school personnel and families. Additionally, the research is intended as an addition to the existing literature by providing rich detail on the perspectives of parents, and the results of this study may be the opening for dialogue on policy and practice in the pursuit of change.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Mertens, 2019). Using a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to capture the experiences of participants that have participated in the IEP meeting process with school personnel by illuminating the lived experiences of parents and school professionals (Mertens, 2019). This study aimed to interpret the phenomena and draw conclusions from the life experiences of both parents and school professionals. Drawing from transformative views, this research was intended to address the impressions of parents feeling powerless or undervalued in an IEP meeting, helping them to become empowered as active change agents as they advocate for their children and to inform the models that school leaders implement to improve this process.

Research Methods

A case study design was the investigative approach utilized to describe the complexities of personal experiences of parents as well as how school leaders influenced and implemented the IEP process in consideration of parent identity and roles. As defined by Mertens (2019), a case study is “an investigative approach used to thoroughly describe complex phenomena, such as recent events, important issues, or programs, in ways to unearth new and deeper understanding of these phenomena” (p. 252). This strategy allowed for consideration of the theory that the outcomes will illuminate the extent to which there may be a breakdown in the IEP process when it comes to parental input. Furthermore, the results of the study were expected to be useful in determining the need for school leadership to institute practices that may foster deeper relationships with parents that will be beneficial to the planning outcomes for children.

The research design includes:

- Identifying participants,
- Recruiting participation,
- Designing the interview questions for each of two groups,
- Implementing the interview protocol,

- Collecting data, and
- Analyzing data.

Each aspect of the research design is explained below.

Identifying Participants

I conducted interviews (a target of 30) with two distinct groups:

- Parents (a target of 15) who have participated in the IEP process for their children
- Principals or LEA Representatives (a target of 15) who have experience administering the process and attending IEP meetings.

Conducting these interviews required strategic planning to ensure that research data is valid. As noted by Creswell (2013), “in a single instrument case study...the researcher focuses on an issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue by” (p. 99). In this study, exclusively conducting interviews provided an opportunity to annotate the experiences of all participants that have participated in the IEP process.

Recruiting Participation

This study used a snowball sampling technique, which started with 2–3 professional contacts. At the end of each interview the respondent was asked to suggest two other potential respondents who then became contacts. Through personal and professional relationships, identified target participants who are parents or school leaders received a formal invitation requesting their participation in this study. Following their initial acceptance of participation, a snowball sampling strategy was used to acquire additional participants for the interview selection process. “A snowball sampling is a nonprobability-sampling method, often employed in field research, whereby each person interviewed may be asked to suggest additional people for interviewing” (Babbie, 2020, p. 193). Through professional contacts, I identified potential subject participants. However, prior to contacting anyone, I emailed the subjects introducing myself and providing a brief statement outlining the research project. The email inquired as to their willingness to participate. For those who agreed to participate, a verbal consent was secured before the interview began. See Appendix C for a sample recruiting email that initial participants received to inform prospective participants’ context for this research.

Once subjects agreed to participate, I asked them for referrals of people they would recommend as potential participants and asked them to send the referral email along with the original email to those prospective individuals. This document can be found in Appendix D. If participants elected to voluntarily participate in this case study, they responded to the email correspondence confirming their participation. Immediately following acceptance of their participation, a follow up email was sent offering dates and times for subjects to choose from based on their individual availability. Using email as a main tool for communication provided evidence for tracking all correspondence. Once a cohort of parents and school administrators were selected, the next step was to schedule a date and time to have the interview. Each participant agreed to two separate interview sessions. The interview would be conducted during the first session, and follow-up questions to responses from the first interview would be solicited in the second session, if applicable. The first session lasted about an hour. The second session lasted about thirty minutes. In total, fifty interviews of parents and school administrators who agreed to participate were conducted.

Interview Design

Interviews were structured both formally and informally. Formally, the interview was hosted on a recorded Zoom, a secured platform used for virtual conferencing. There were specific questions that were determined for both subject groups of parents and school leaders that participated in this study. Informally, the goal was to ensure that each session had a relaxed tone emulating a conversational style of interviewing so that participants felt relaxed. This approach was taken to promote optimal and honest responses from participants as they reminisce about the events and experiences of participating in the IEP process.

The most essential element of this design is the line of questioning that was designed for each independent group. According to Mertens (2019), case studies should include

data collection of the following types of information: the nature of the case, its historical background, the physical setting, other contexts, such as economic, political, legal, and aesthetic, other cases through which this case is recognized and those informants through whom the case can be known (p. 252).

The context that was most relevant to this study was how the interview questions connected to the research questions and how the research questions were connected to other case studies surrounding parental perceptions.

Pertaining to the parent subgroup, once participants elected to voluntarily participate in the study, pseudonyms were created to protect the identity of participants. Demographic information was collected at the beginning of each interview. Specific information that was requested included family structure (single household, married household), highest level of education, school district characteristics (e.g., location), and feelings about traditional education. These variables were essential to the case study because they provided insight into implicit bias developed based on history and or personal experience. In addition, this related to how parents responded in situations while advocating for their children. Additional questions revolved around their actual experiences in participating in the IEP process. Their experiences provided some context on the effectiveness of protocols surrounding the special education process.

Pertaining to the school leader group, inquiring about their professional experiences provided important insights for this case study. Limited experience could predict very loose practices and potentially yield unfavorable outcomes for leadership, staff development and the quality of academic achievement. The other questions surrounding professional development for both the leader and staff were relevant to the efficacy of instituting best practices. Lastly, questions surrounding the vision of the leadership provided an opportunity for leaders to evaluate and reflect on the mission and vision of their schools, the drivers for academic achievement for institutions.

Interviewing Protocol

Parents

Once a solid cohort of parent interviewees was identified, each participant agreed to one interview session with knowledge that a second interview might be required for clarification purposes. The first interview session lasted no longer than 60 minutes and was conducted on a recorded Zoom platform. In this session, before the interview questions were asked, demographic information was collected. In some cases, second interviews were requested as an opportunity to

ask follow-up questions based on initial responses from the first interview. When applicable, the second session lasted no longer than thirty minutes (see Appendix A for interview protocol).

Principals

To acquire school leaders to participate in this research, the same recruitment methods used for parents were used for school administrators. The only variable that was considered as an outlier for participation considerations was if the administrator had less than three years of experience as a school administrator. These candidates were not able to participate. This criterion was based on years of service and limited experience as a school administrator. To interview a novice administrator would not have been fair due to limited experience and would not yield the history that would have been suitable for the case study. Once volunteers were vetted, they underwent one interview sessions with the possibility of a second session if clarification was needed based on their previous responses. Pseudonyms were created to protect the school administrator as well as their servicing school district. The first session lasted no longer than 60 minutes. The second interview, when applicable, lasted no longer than 30 minutes ((see Appendix B for interview protocol).

Each participant group was provided with an ample amount of time to respond to the interview questions. After each interview concluded, participants were asked if they had any questions or concerns about their experience. At the end of the session, the recommendation email for recruiting additional participants was sent to the interviewee to forward to the people that they thought would be a prospective candidate for participation in this study.

Data Collection and Security

After each individual interview session was conducted via Zoom, the integrated Otter software application was used to produce a transcript of the recording. This programming had the ability to evaluate the conversations for common themes. In addition to this process, an Excel spread sheet was used to organize the open-ended responses. This provided an opportunity to compare and contrast the differences in participant responses. Information extracted from the study was used to create charts or graphs to illustrate the findings. After all information was organized, all digital transcripts were stored in a file folder on a locked computer.

Analyzing Data

To deeply understand the information collected in the interviews and the insights offered by the participants I took the following actions:

- Created a memo about the experience of the interview and highlighted key insights offered by the participants at the conclusion of each interview.
- Coded the interviews for themes using the research captured (involving cultural awareness, societal influences that attribute to decision making, understanding right and responsibilities of IEP process, technical support received, professional experience, relationship building and efficacy of IEP process)
- Compared the answers to each question to develop an analysis for each participant group.
- Compared and contrasted the views expressed by parents with those expressed by principals.

When analyzing data, it is important devise a definitive plan in evaluating the data in a way that is guided by rules to prevent bias or misinterpretation. According to Creswell (2013), “deciding ‘boundaries’ of a case—how it might be constrained in terms of time, events, and processes—may be challenging” (p.102). In this instance, establishing boundaries before the evaluation were beneficial. First, irrelevant dialogue was eliminated, as discussion about content outside of interview requirements did not need to be analyzed. Only the dialogue that was recorded by the participant that referenced specific interview questions was assessed. This helped to eliminate the influence or bias of the researcher. Data matrices were used to clearly display findings. A written explanation of findings was developed in preparation for devising recommendations, informing decisions, and summarizing conclusions.

Each subgroup's response was categorized into themes. For parents, themes included these categories that outlined their experience based on their responses to the interview questions:

- Knowledgeable about the process, rights, and responsibilities
- Unaware of process, rights, or responsibilities
- Negative perceptions about the education system

- Positive perceptions about the education system
- Feel racially targeted
- Trust institution
- Distrust the institution
- Did the institution provide technical support?
- Advocate methods to address concerns with institution (email, phone, or letter)
- Did their child exit the special education program?

In reviewing the data from the interviews with school administrators I used the following categories to initially analyze responses:

- Years of leadership experience
- Status of Special Education certification
- Role in IEP process
- Use of a special education liaison to serve as LEA
 - Process in place for addressing parent concerns (feedback)
- History of training and professional development in special education
- School-wide professional development in special education

In addition to these predetermined themes, I also looked for emergent themes during the data analysis process.

While the themes that I used in data analysis were unique to each participant role, there were also common themes that I examined for both sets of interviews. These themes (cultural awareness, societal influences that attribute to decision making, understanding right and responsibilities of IEP process, technical support received, education, professional experience, relationship building and efficacy of the IEP process) were outlined in chapter two of the literature review as potential challenges families face. Depending upon the categories they fall in based on their responses, they were compared to other responses of both subgroups (parents and school leaders).

As this research was conducted, commonalities of thought, experiences, practices, or philosophy were captured among the responses of both subject groups. For example, I

anticipated that parental experiences related to understanding the law and their rights and responsibilities may be similar. Independent from that possibility, because special education programs offer an array of services and support but are unique to meet the individual needs of the students, I anticipated that there may be some disconnect amongst parental experiences because of the variance of the degree of support-to-support students and their families coupled with the type of school district the parent resides in.

As for administrators, I anticipated that a common thread might be based on policy, practices, and procedures because they are mandated to follow the law. The law clearly outlines what special education programming is, the intricacies of testing to determine eligibility, developing special education plans (whether it be IEP or 504 plans), and providing special education services to support the needs of students. I expected there might be a disconnect among school leaders in their professional experiences and the efficacy of the implementation of special education programming, which covers practices and continued professional development for themselves and school personnel.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher of this case study, I bring the knowledge of having over seventeen years of educational teaching and leadership experience. My background affords me experience as an educator and school district liaison that provided technical support to school administrators as well as ensured compliance of Title I programming in schools. In addition, I am a parent of four children for whom I needed to advocate to ensure that they received a quality education. One of my children was designated as mentally gifted, another was identified as being born with a disability on the Autism spectrum (high functioning- formerly called Asperger's disorder), and a third child identified as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (receiving a late diagnosis in college).

My professional experiences provided me with both the insight and educational knowledge on how to support and advocate for my children. Clearly not every parent gets the opportunity to engage as an advocate with the knowledge that I have as an educator. My unique position afforded me understanding of educational processes from a parental perspective as well

as through the lens of an educator. In this role as the researcher, I uniquely had an advantage of being a part of both groups: parent and educational leader.

While I have deep convictions about how this process should be handled, I worked to be neutral and to capture the voices of the participants about their experiences with participating in the IEP process. I informed all participants that I had seen and engaged in the IEP process on both sides of the table and offered assurances that I would be respectful and appreciative of the perspectives and information that they shared from their experiences.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, I worked to ensure that there were no ethical breaches that could potentially impact the outcome of this study or expose participants to risk. It was possible that parent participants could have negative feelings toward traditional education and be reluctant to share concerns about the school based on personal educational history or experiences. These feelings could have posed a barrier to objectivity. Since these experiences were told from the participants recollection, it is possible that the study could have been compromised by exaggeration of accounts or the omission of important details. Parents and principals relied on memory, and this could have provided a filtered perspective on actual events. Another thing to consider was the reluctance factor for both subgroups. Participants might have felt uncomfortable about past experiences; hence they may have been hesitant in their responses. Hesitancy to provide full answers could also be attributed to a lack of trust between parents and the school. Confidentiality was also an ethical concern even though security measures were established to protect the privacy of families and school leaders.

Another factor to consider was that school leaders may not have been forthright about actual administrative practices within their schools. In this instance, there was a chance that school leaders may have omitted valuable information. This could have been induced by the fear of being exposed of having loose systems implemented in their institutions or revealing breakdowns in practice. This is not to say, that this was the case for all participants, but this possibility could not be ignored.

Lastly, interpretation of a participant's reaction to a question might have been misinterpreted by the researcher. Body language, facial gestures, sighs, any grunting sounds or change in tone (inflection) could have been interpreted as agitation or perceived as a negative response to the question. This worked both ways from an interviewer and a participant's perspective. For this reason, it was important for the researcher to have a warm, relaxed disposition and facial expressions to allow participants to feel welcomed. The goal was to create a safe space to have a conversation about a serious topic.

Limitations

In this research study, the stories told in the interviews were from the participants' perspectives, so I had no way to ensure the authenticity of answers or the ability to assess any mistakes, omissions, or wrongdoing of the parents or school leaders. In addition, the amount of time that had passed since the experience could have contributed to the participant forgetting important details that occurred. Personal experiences might have distorted conversations. From a school leader perspective, there was a possibility that they might have been defensive even though the space for conversation was framed as a safe, no judgement zone.

Conclusions

From this research, I wanted to learn about perceptions of both parent and school leaders regarding special education process. Specifically I researched how parental experiences during the IEP process impacted or informed education plans for parents' children and education leaders in order to improve IEP processes. My hope was that my findings would enable me to make recommendations that were supported by the evidence from this study. I also wanted to provide school leaders with a better perception of parents who had engaged in the IEP process and how school leaders may circumvent problems by creating practices that would better foster and promote healthy working relationships knowing that academic achievement was paramount when all stakeholders are working effectively and efficiently to make change.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The primary focus of this study was to understand and capture the perceptions of school personnel and leaders including the local education administrator (LEA), teachers, specialists and parents who have engaged in the individual education plan (IEP) meeting process. The study was also designed to better understand how parents experience the IEP process in schools where parent and student cultural and racial identity differ from the cultural and racial identity of the majority of the IEP Team. The specific research questions that are intended to be answered in this study are:

1. In what ways do school leaders welcome parents as valued members of the IEP process while considering the racial and cultural identity of the student and family?
 - a. What processes do school administrators have in place when complications develop between school personnel and families?
2. In what ways do parents experience the IEP process and understand their rights in determining what is best for their child?
3. How do parents' perceptions and understanding influence their actions in advocating for their children?

This study was designed to determine if the personal educational experiences of parents cultivated preconceived notions or biases about the educational institution, policies, or practices or hinderer their ability to make informed decisions for their children.

In this study, a snowball strategy was used to acquire participants to participate in the IEP experience study. This method of recruitment was intended to expand opportunities for acquiring a variety of unknown participants from different backgrounds outside the realm of personal or professional connections. Utilizing this recruitment strategy was somewhat effective, but recruitment quickly became gridlocked due to appointment abandonment. As a result of this phenomenon, the recruitment strategy transitioned to participants providing multiple leads for both parents and school leaders through their personal and professional connection. For

example, a relative (who did not fit the criteria for the study) went to a function and discussed the study being conducted and acquired interest that way. A participant from that same event (a retired school leader) recommended five prospective participants that indicated an interest and their willingness to volunteer in the study. However, this prospective participant never participated. However, two of the four recommendations did participate. Word of mouth was more productive than the attempt to execute an exclusive snowball sampling. This caused an increase in non-participants' (who have a close connection to the researcher) support of recruiting based on their personal and professional connections. Although these actions were helpful and appreciated, this was not the initial desired method for this study.

Another anomaly that was experienced was attributed to my own personal connection to a larger pool of educational leaders and people from executive backgrounds. Additionally, it appeared that parents were very interested in this work but were hesitant for unknown reasons. Given the nature of the questions and the overall topic, my theory is that privacy was a major parental concern and that the emotions that come along with loving, supporting and advocating for children who are eligible to receive special education services made parents more guarded. Parents may have experienced feelings of not knowing what was best, embarrassment, shame, fear, fear of judgement, confusion, uncertainty or opting to be vulnerable in a space to discuss matters with a potential stranger about something that was personal to them. This consideration could have contributed unknown factors that may have resulted in abandoning interest in participating in the study.

Despite these minor setbacks, there was success in obtaining both school leaders and parent participants in support of this work; however, the sample was not as random as had been intended. This presents an unanticipated limitation to the study that could not be avoided.

Parent Participants

Table 1 provides demographic information of the eleven parent participants. It is important to note that of the eleven parent participants four of them are termed parent leaders. Parent-Leaders are participants that are parents who are also school leaders.

Table 1*Parent Participant Demographics*

Demographic Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Participant Group		
Parent	7	64
Parent-Leader	4	36
Gender		
Female	9	82
Male	2	18
Race		
African American	9	82
Latino/a	1	9
Caucasian	1	9
Marital Status		
Married	8	73
Single	3	27
Education Level		
Master's	5	45
Bachelor's	2	18
Some College	3	27
High School Diploma	1	9

Note. Some percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

In this study, eleven participants volunteered to share their experiences in participating in the IEP process. Of the eleven participants, 64% of the participants were classified as parent non-school personnel and 36% consisted of parents that hold leadership positions within their respective districts. Demographically, the gender percentage consisted of 81% of the participants

were female and 18% were male. Racially, this subgroup was a combination of 82% African American, 9% Latina and 9% Caucasian. Academically, 45% obtained an advanced college degree, 18% obtaining a bachelor's degree, 27% had some college experiences, and 10% had received a high school diploma. Although this demographic information does not define any of these participants' intellect or ability to parent, it is necessary to provide some context of their backgrounds. This demographic data does illuminate the lack of representation from other cultural groups such as Asian and other racial demographic communities. This limitation can skew the data of racial biases by representing restricted perspectives. This is not to say that the experiences of these participants were not valid and true, but in this study, it was not possible to conduct a comparative analysis between groups since the majority of the participants identified with being a part of a minority group. Additionally, there was a low representation of male participants. So, this study did primarily yield perceptions from a women's perspective and experience. That is not to say, however, that the women (73% who are married) interviewed in this study did not speak from a collective voice representing both themselves and their husbands.

Educational Experiences of Parents

Each participant in the study was asked about their individual educational experiences to determine if they had some preconceived beliefs toward school leaders, teachers and or academic institutions based on their own personal experiences with the educational systems. Most of the study participants had a satisfactory or positive educational experience as a student. In this section, I have highlighted some of the parental experiences that were problematic and therefore may have influenced their perceptions of school and school leaders when engaging as a parent.

School experiences varied greatly as shown in Table 2.

Out of the parent participants, 55% of the parent participants stated that they had relatively good to great educational experiences and did not experience any major incidents that would taint their perceptions with the school system. One parent (parent B) went to an elementary and high school that were known for rich academic programming. Mid high school experience, parent B moved to Minneapolis to continue their high school career.

Table 2*Parental Education Experiences*

Parent ID	Educational Level	School Type	Overall Experience	Notes
A	Bachelor's	Urban Public	Positive	Admired her mother's hard work and determination. The kitchen table is where all the academic work got done. She wished she took her academics more seriously.
B	Some college	Urban Public to Suburban public	Positive	Home and school association (very strong) really supported students and teachers.
C	High school diploma	Urban Public – Suburban Public back to Urban Charter	Negative and Positive	In the first public school she was involved in an altercation. Once she transitioned into the charter setting had a great experience.
D	Bachelor's	Rural Public	Positive	Went to a rural district in the south. The lunch ladies cooked real food and he was very close to his teachers than his kids are to theirs today.
E	Bachelor's	Suburban Public	Positive	Went to school in New Jersey in a suburban school district in the 80's. Felt nurtured by teachers. Compared to their experience and now, the teachers don't care as much.
F	Master's	Urban Public	Positive	She felt that she learned what she was supposed to learn and received what they were supposed to receive during their experience in their formative years.
G	Bachelor's	Urban Public	Negative (perceived)	ESOL
J	Master's Plus	Suburban Public	Positive	No incident
K	Master's Plus	Urban Public	Positive	Encountered educators that were either supportive or discouraging through their experiences.
L	Doctorate	Rural Public	Negative	Was in special ed programming. Experienced racism at a young age. Later was tested and deemed mentally gifted.
M	Doctorate	Parochial to Urban Public	Positive	When transitioned from a Catholic institution to an urban public school it was a shocking transition; but eventually became a positive experience.

Parent B highlighted that when they were growing up, they remembered the effectiveness of their home and school organization, which played an intricate role in supporting families and students:

I talk to people about like, how the home and school was really a key part of our education back then. Now, the homeschool associations are not as big, but they used to be like a real, partnership with teachers. And so, for sure, I had a really good educational experience.

This provided a frame of reference on what a strong school community looks like and the expectation of school service for the impending future.

Parent G hailed from a Latin background. The depiction from their experience based on their testimony was characterized as solitary. Parent G stated that they grew up in a predominately Spanish urban community most of their life.

I was literally almost the only Hispanic speaking child. So that was a little different for me growing up, I guess I spoke English because I came here at early age but growing up, I didn't have you teachers that I could relate to me or look like me.

Parent G mentioned that they were a part of the English as a second language (ESOL) programming and did have an IEP throughout their own educational experience.

When I got to like high school, not all teachers, you know, teach the same some of them, will make learning you know, rememberable experience some don't, because I had IEP myself. So, I was placed in a classroom. So, it wasn't like, diverse. We just stayed in one classroom, one teacher all day, that was my experience in high school.

Surprisingly, when asked the probing question: "Did you feel like it was a good experience? Did you feel supported? What was your emotion?" Parent G stated, "I felt like, supported...but my teacher realized I wasn't where I should be. That's when they switched me to the other room, which helped me learn a lot better and understand." The interpretation perceived from this testimony, suggested that this young child may have lived in fear and the family may have surrendered to a system of solitude for their child at the hand of cultural differences and language deficits since Parent G was the only English-speaking representative from their family. Consequently, the family followed whatever recommendations were made by the school without any challenges.

Parent-Leader K described her experience as bittersweet. She said,

Thinking back to like elementary years, I had teachers that were very nurturing, loving, caring, and inspire, I also had a few teachers that I can remember that were the ones that I consider people that come and kill your spirit that lets you know, or highlight your areas of growth more so than your areas of strength, and I not do a whole bunch to help you with years of growth...I was given an opportunity to be in an academic Plus program. Part of being in an academic plus program- where people believed in me, challenge me and thought well of me, made me excel, and then open up my opportunities for high school, and then college and beyond. So just like thinking about, my journey, education, the power of beliefs and how we feel and what we pour into children, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses means a lot.

Parent-Leader L came from a very poor family and lived in a rural community. He stated that he was about three to four years below grade level and was placed into a self-contained special education classroom. Per his testimony, he proclaimed that he never received the support from teachers to assist him with his deficiencies in literacy and math. He thought that he was just dumb and stupid, which is an typical response of a frustrated learner. He further discussed his sophomore high school experience when his chemistry teacher gave him an IQ test and the results yielded an outcome deeming him mentally gifted. Prior to that, according to his testimony,

I had a classroom teacher who separated the class, and they called it the smart kids and the dummies, the dummies always sat in the back. I'll never forget one day when they told us to move our desks, I got stuck between the dummies and the smart kids and she said to me, quote, well, you know where you belong. So, I pushed my desk back into the dummies section.

He expressed a change in his teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward him after the chemistry teacher shared his IQ results. This resulted in a significant shift in the grades he received going forward. As evidence, he exclaimed, "I didn't do any more work. But my grades change." From this experience, Parent-Leader L explained, "I learned in this was about building relationship, I built a relationship with this chemistry teacher." He also learned that classism afforded him certain benefits. In this case, the classism was based on intellectual ability. He concluded that he did not have to work hard for his good grades; they were just given to him with limited effort.

In this interview, he was asked a probing question that was based on his testimony, "When you were given the IQ test, and it showed that you were highly intelligent, were there any changes that were made to accommodate and support your performance?" He responded,

No, I just was able to take college prep courses then. You know, as long as I sat in the class, and I didn't say anything they gave me an A. For example, I took a

physics class, I couldn't tell you anything, because all's I know is in physics class. He only gave scores up to 19. I remember taking a test I had no idea what I was doing. I just put any answer and I got the highest score in the classroom, which was an 18 out of 100. So that's when I learned relationship building, I hate to say it, manipulation. Smile. That's how you get ahead. Yeah, and so it was, you know, but of course that came crashing down.

When asked, "Was there any incident that occurred in your educational experience that has affected how you feel about schools, and schooling?" The respondent said,

I believe that, especially for students of colors, or students who are marginalized, that they do not have the educational schooling, or the schools do not provide the rigor, relevance, and relationship building. I believe that no one really takes a good look at it especially the educational leaders, no offense towards any of us. We always engage in implicit bias. So, when we're in our practices, or teachers, then they don't look at kids' cultural differences, and infuse those cultural differences into the instructional practices, because we're too busy looking at the stereotypes that exists. Rather than saying that every kid- what I learned from when I was in elementary, I had the intellectual capacity. But no one taught me the cognitive skills to access that. So, I was always a dependent learner, until I figured out how to become an independent learner through that chemistry teacher.

Parent-Leader M grew up in a very traditional Catholic family. They attended an all-white Catholic school from kindergarten to eighth grade. When the family was faced with divorce, Parent-Leader M could no longer attend the Catholic high school that they were slated to attend but instead transitioned into an inner-city school. As described by the respondent, it was a complete cultural difference. They said,

I sat the first two weeks with my hands folded, and my mouth dropped open. Everybody was cursing and all and it wasn't that that got somebody I went home and said to my mom, I can't believe kids are out of their seats... they're effing this and doing all this, and I'm going, Mom, I can't believe they're out of their seats. So that was a real eye opener from being very sheltered. In an all-white Catholic grade school where everybody was Catholic, everybody was white like it, it just and then I get put into this high school that was big and diverse and differences in culture and religions. And I mean, I absolutely loved it. Once I got the hang of it. Like I would go to school early in the morning. And I was the last one to hand in my cap and gown on graduation day, because I was class officer, school officer cheerleading Captain like played sports, joint everything. So, I would say the only thing is, I hate to even say this, but I would have gotten a better education and a Catholic high school than I did in the public high school...if you weren't pushed, like I was self-motivated, but on some things, I should have definitely taken more advanced courses. I wasn't pushed to do it. So, I didn't do it.

Parent-Leader M didn't state that there was any incident that stood out for them while going through their education experience. However, they stated that it was their environment where they resided. They grew up in a neighborhood that is now being gentrified by developers.

Historically, the neighborhood was plagued with drugs, gangs, and kids drinking alcohol on the corners. Viewing this blight in their community growing up, became the driver and motivation to become successful because they did not want to become a product of their environment.

Parental Experiences with the IEP Process

Table 3 describes the responses of both parent participant groups' responses to questions relating to their IEP meeting experience.

Table 3

Parent Participant IEP Experiences

Question	Parents (<i>n</i> = 7)		Parent-Leaders (<i>n</i> = 4)	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Were you happy with the final outcome of the process?	57	43	75	25
Do you feel that the institution works collaboratively with you and your family?	71	29	75	25
Did you understand your rights and responsibilities during this process?	73	29	75	25
Were you able to follow the conversation?	86	14	100	0
Did you ever hire an advocate?	29	71	0	100
Do you feel the IEP plan is effective?	57	43	75	25

All these parent participants had something in common as each of them committed to the charge of advocating for their children. Each was present and had the responsibility in partnering with, going against, or negotiating with an educational system that is routine in being compliant with statutes. Yet they were very different in their approach to handling IEP meeting processes. Every parent participant was asked to describe their experience participating in an IEP meeting. Each of them shared an explanation that was full and vastly different, but the outcomes were the same (their children were eligible to receive special education services) and expressed their vulnerability. Each evoked an emotion that described that first meeting.

For example, Parent A was concerned about the development of her son. She noticed that he was nonresponsive to her line of questioning about what he learned at school or about his day. When mom inquired about her concerns to his teacher, the teacher said, "if all my kids were like him, I would be happy." Parent A asked her why she said that, and the teacher responded, "because just sits back of the classroom. He doesn't say anything." Parent A asked, "Does he ask any questions?" and the teacher responded, "No." Parent A responded, "Don't you find that to be a problem?" Parent A had to press for her son to be evaluated. Her son's diagnosis was determined later by medical professionals at a children's hospital. She described the meetings as long and her feeling about the actual meeting was that

The IEP meetings really didn't change. I mean, they didn't change. The teachers would change of course, different staff have changed. But the plan itself did not change...I don't think it really did anything for my son and that's just me.

When asked if she felt if the institution did work collaboratively with her, Parent A said, "I think they tried to." She did not hire an advocate to support her family as they navigated this process but did come across someone who was very knowledgeable about special education and played an intricate role in helping the family obtain support, resources and services after his high school graduation. She did mention that she wished she knew him earlier when her son was younger.

When asked if she felt the IEP was effective, she responded,

Well, not really. Not, I guess, I guess because I did not feel that. Like you said the language in the language, maybe it could have been about the language. But I found myself wanting to see us the goals. And I guess that's part of our call, which is wanting to see the goals change along the way.

Parent B, when describing her experience, said,

I can honestly say that I was very much so distraught because after the psychologist, went through a kind of gave me what her evaluation was, things like that, I was just like - I felt like I failed as a parent, you know, with kind of like how behind she was and things like that. So that was my first reaction.

After receiving support and services for her daughter she decided to hire an outside therapist to provide her daughter with the needed supports. Parent B was asked a probing question, "While you were in the meeting, did you feel that the language that was being used? Did they break it down in terms in a way that you understood? Or do you feel like they were talking over your head?" Parent B said,

Initially with my daughter. They were for sure. It's all going over my head... Yeah, for sure. Because it was more like, a lot of language, you know I didn't understand. And I do understand most things... It wasn't like mean, it was just like, maybe speaking in a language, you know, like a lot of terms that the average person wouldn't really know, a lot of like, psychological terms and things like that.

From that meeting, Parent B shared her experience with her aunt who was a principal by profession. The aunt was not in agreement with how her niece felt nor with the resulting plan, so the aunt told her niece to go back to the school. Parent B said,

I basically told them that I didn't understand anything, then we wrote a letter to the principal and the school administrator, and the state, because we felt like it was just more of, you know, just like, oh, yeah, let's just put her in this class, and, you know, kind of sit her in the back that type of thing and we're just like, that's not acceptable. So, when I went back, I had a second evaluation meeting and then that's when everybody kind of got back on the ball.

Parent B was pleased with the second evaluation. From these experiences, Parent B was able to navigate the system quiet well going forward and she knew how to advocate for her son who was later eligible to receive special education services. When asked if she felt the institution worked collaboratively with her, she responded, "Initially it was a little rough. What made the difference was having educators in the family to support me through the process."

Parent E expressed her experience as,

The IEP process brings a lot of anxiety to me typically. I don't usually or haven't really felt supported during these sessions or meeting. Primarily because it's introduced as a team situation, but I have never been in an IEP meeting with all the team members that are a part of the team. I typically don't feel supported during those times because the lack of attendance and participation with the complete team. A lot of times I feel like it's a parent teacher conference rather than an IEP meeting.

She added that she always feels rushed, unheard and unsupported. When asked if she was happy with the final outcome of goals they created for her child, she replied,

There have been times after an IEP meeting at the end of it all. I have felt satisfied especially I have advocated for him. A lot of time I feel the goals they put forth don't apply to what he has really going on. At times I have felt satisfied.

When asked if she felt the institution worked collaboratively with her, she responded, "On some level, no." In this conversation a probing question was asked, "Is it possible can you give me an example?" She described her level of discontent by describing the relationship she and her sons

first-grade teacher had. In this relationship she felt unheard. She describes an interaction with this teacher in an actual IEP meeting:

When she approached me in these meeting, she would say things to me that she felt I should already know. She was really condescending at times and so I think might be more the personality of the teacher than the whole system. So maybe I am just unsatisfied with that than the whole system...I was not offered the grace or space to learn with her.

When asked if she received her rights and responsibilities and did she understand them, Parent E said she did receive the documentation, but stated that it was never fully explained. She said it was just something that you had to read through. A lot of sometimes she felt like she needed support to understand her rights as opposed to her just reading them. When asked whether she would have liked added support to break down that information, she stated, "yes, I actually had to go outside of my team and get an IEP advocate to kind of help me understand those things. I found an organization that volunteers their services." When asked the probing question, "Do you feel that once you added the advocate into the fold that you were being heard?" She said, "Yes, once I brought them to the table with me (they would go to the meetings with me) thing turned around a little bit."

Parent F's situation was a little different. Her daughter was diagnosed through early intervention processes that resulted in her being eligible to receive services and support to meet the needs of her child. This was affirmed after speaking with her support coordinator in her daycare, "who really affirmed us that they weren't coming when they were supposed to come, and they weren't working on what needed to be work on during that time." As a result, they didn't see any progress, so the family elected to stop midway in the process and went private because they did not feel that their daughter was getting the services needed to address her needs.

Parent F shared that she is a social worker and was very familiar about the types of support services offered to her clientele. So, when she was coordinating with these same agencies on a personal level, she said,

It really blew my mind that, you know, the kids aren't getting the services that they need, because my experience, you know, I'm educated, you know, I'm financially stable, and all those things, and I utilize that free service. But if I didn't have, you know what, I have to go private, my daughter probably would still have an IEP, probably, speech will still be delayed in those type of things.

Parent-Leader H naturally had some concerns about her daughters' progress in school.

The school didn't feel that her concerns were valid and attributed her daughter's progress as "she is young". Parent-Leader H tried to get a 504 plan to support her daughter, but it was denied.

Both Parent-Leader H and the school agreed to put something in place for the next year.

Reflecting on when first grade came around, and they put the plan in place to support her daughter's needs, Parent-Leader H said,

I remember the teacher calling me saying, you know, the plan says such and such, but I don't really do that in my class." Mom very agitated at this point responded by saying, "well, why are you calling me, the counselor put together this plan. So, I assumed that the counselor knew what was going on in your class when she put together a plan that someone was going to use in your class. So, if you need to change the plan, I suggest you go speak to the counselor and then come back to me because you guys created this plan and so this is what I'm expecting XYZ, these are my concerns and then you got to you know, come up with a plan. That's your job.

Having these experiences transpire, Parent-Leader H said she felt like "when you go to these meetings, the idea is that when you come to the meeting, everyone around the table has input. But the case manager has already made the decision before you get into this meeting."

It is important to note that Parent-Leader H is a parent who is also a school leader, so she is very informed about the process and knows that she has input and expressed that she really didn't care what the team had already decided. She wanted a meeting where she could freely express her concern and make recommendations with the expectation of being heard. She said they had to make some adjustments based on the results of the meeting, and she really didn't necessarily agree with some things. However, she was willing to go along with some of their recommendations and monitor the effectiveness to see if it met the needs of her daughter.

Parent-Leader H described the process:

It's interesting, because sometimes when you get input it's not real input unless you force it...I feel like a lot of times, you know, the case manager, or the school district has their programming kind of setup, okay, we're going to have this many classes of in class support, we're going to have this many classes of pullout with our this many classes of in class support, we're going to have this many classes of pullout with our listening class. So, if your child doesn't fit into one of those boxes, then, you know, they're going to come in and say, okay, we're going to put her on in-class resource (ICR) with this group of kids.

When asked if she felt that the IEP was effective her response was:

No, if we did not do the work that we did, if I didn't pay for her to get vision therapy every week, when she was younger, and then again, when she was in high school. If I didn't sit down with her and teach her how to study and use flashcards and advocate for herself to get study guides, do all those things, I don't think she would be where she was, because the school alone wouldn't have gotten her there; not at all. You know, they're limited, they're stretched, they only have so many students, they're not putting in the time and the effort necessary to do that. Whereas, you know, I made sure she had, understood, and had everything that she needed. So, I don't think the IEP process—I mean, if people think that that in and of itself is going to make your child better, it's just, no, just no. I don't believe that as, as an educator, and as a parent, I don't believe that. It's more to it than that.

In contrast, Parents C, D, G and Parent-Leaders I and K had experiences that were not as complex in achieving the goal of getting to a resolve. It appeared that their experiences were more emotional but cognizant, even though they had experiences they endorsed.

For example, when Parent C was asked about her meeting experience, she shared that it wasn't a bad experience for her. Observing her daughter's academic performance, she noticed things when she was helping her with her homework. So, she welcomed the opportunity get her evaluated, looked forward to the meeting for understanding and a plan to support her daughter's needs. The difficult part was her husband. She said, "He did not like the labeling; like something is wrong with my child." Her battle appeared to be with her husband battling the stigma. Outside of the she said her experience was good and she has seen growth in her daughter's academic performance.

Parent D exclaimed that the entire student evaluation process was a very long process, and it was a ton of paperwork. He described the actual meeting as,

It was more of on the business side dotting I's crossing t's versus more a personal setting. It seems very formal; in some way I can appreciate the formalness. But in some way, I want you to talk to me as a parent versus you checking off the boxes.

When he was asked if they inquired about his thoughts or concern, he replied,

They did ask for input. But I feel like the input part of it was a box being check off also. It definitely felt like they already had their strategy and plan or actions how they wanted to take whether it involved parents or not. Like, this is what we are going to do we just need you to sign off on it.

The only thing Parent D disclosure that even though he felt that the IEP was effective his displeasure was that his daughter never exited the special education programming. He said, “It almost seem like if you were in it, you were in it.”

Parent G seemed to have a great experience from beginning to end. Her daughter was identified and eligible to receive special education services through an early intervention program in preschool. Later she transitioned into a school in which the IEP followed to a bilingual charter school (where they learn how to read, speak, and write in both English and Spanish). Parent G was relieved that her daughter was getting the needed support and she was learning their native language. Mom described the IEP process as a good experience. She said they worked collaboratively, they explained everything to her, and she felt like the IEP was effective because she saw growth.

Parent-Leader I provided an intense response to the question of describing her experience in the seat as a parent going through the IEP process. She exclaimed,

The first one was very different from being sitting on the other side of many IEP meetings, to now being the person that people are talking to and going through the evaluation. So, it was a hard meeting for me that initial one, because there was, you know, I know that IEP doesn't define, or to me, it's not a label of service. But just sitting on the side, I could feel how other parents have felt and you know listening to how educators talk to parents.

When asked the probing question to clarify her statement about not being happy about her first initial meeting. She affirmed that,

I think, you know, it was just a personal feeling for myself that my child, me being an educator is in need of this level of support. But for me, it was the filling of not necessarily did I let my child down but like what's happening here? I also just thinking about, like, I know what this looks like long term. You know, my son received an IEP in maybe the end of first grade, my son is in 9th grade, my son still has an IEP, so just knowing the longevity. Sometimes what that can be and if they need it, they need it. Like I'm not against it, like you need it. Keep rolling with it. Right. But just knowing that sometimes this is like a life sentence.

After overcoming those initial feelings, Parent-Leader I said that the meetings that followed were dominated by her by fast-tracking the process to discuss the concerns she had. She felt time was essential and she didn't want to waste it on things that were not going to be impactful. She describes the outcome as a blessing because her son was able to receive tailored support. She felt that the school worked collaboratively, and she understood her rights. She

ended her commentary with, “I think its effective when the school or as you know, as organization has the proper resources to support the student’s needs.”

Parent-Leader K expressed that her initial first IEP meeting was very daunting because the process was long and very specific with goals. She really didn’t know how developmentally delayed he was until the process was complete. She constantly questioned if her son would be able to achieve the goals that was outlined. But the IEP was, as she described,

Very detailed, very thorough, the teachers were very thorough. I would have to say, all through his education, even when he was in Catholic school, and they didn't have an official IEP. They taught to his needs with the resource room.

Parent-Leader K expressed that although she felt that her overall IEP experiences was great, and she really felt that the programming met the need of her son her frustration mounted after graduation. She said,

I have to tell you everything he had, once he graduated, I've had to fight for everything. So, I address my concern by you know, talking it to Congress, I was ready to go to the media. I'm because I feel like they're kept very safe for 21 years and then you know, you can't get into the day programs, there's no room. You try to get somebody to help him with teaching him how to do the wash, how to do cooking, and they can't find workers. It's no fault of the company, but nobody wants to work, which amazes me.

Conflicting with this dilemma, for him to receive some of the required supports it would require workers (based on her experience, they are not reliable) to come into her home. When asked the probing question, “The Office of Rehabilitation Service at the Pennsylvania Department of Education—is that not the department that you would receive support for when they age out of the services from the public education system?” Her response was,

So, when they aged out, it's the local school district that we'd have to go in our county for services and deal with a service provider that works for my district, who will say, okay, he's eligible for an autism waiver.

With perseverance, dedication in researching the law and finding resources, she was elated to know that her son was accepted into a college program for people with disabilities, and she thought the IEP was extremely effective.

School Leader Participants

Table 4 provides demographic information for the eleven school leader participants. The most essential information that was collected was whether the school leader attended any

pathway programming, their educational level and how many years' of experience they had as an administrator.

Table 4

School Leader Participant Demographics

Demographic Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Female	8	73
Male	3	27
Race		
African American	7	64
Caucasian	4	36
Pathway Program		
Yes	5	45
No	6	55
Education Level		
Doctoral	5	45
Master's +	6	55
Administrative Experience		
15+ Years	4	36
10–13 Years	5	45
7–8 Years	2	18

Note. $n = 11$. Some percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Attending a pathway program to catapult oneself into leadership is important to note because today's institutions face employment shortages across all levels, so it has become easier to transition into education without having to following all the past traditional requirements of becomes a school leader. Hence, the requirement has been to teach for five years, obtain an

Instructional II Certification, and enter an administration certification program. Additionally, educational experience is something to consider. If a leader is effective, the assumption is that they are coming with great experience and that they had some experiences to validate their in-depth knowledge. Level of education complements educational experience.

In this study, eleven participants volunteered to share their experiences as school leaders participating in the IEP process. Of the eleven participants interviewed, 73% of the participants were women and 27% were males. This subgroup racially consisted of 64% African American and 36% Caucasian leaders. Professionally, 55% obtained administration certification by attending a certification program at a university and 45% obtained their certification through non-traditional programming.

For example, Leader D said,

I've participated in Philly plus program. Philly Plus is an urban leadership program for individuals that are looking to lead in urban schools in Philadelphia, where they give you real time exposure to students, teachers, and the processes to be able to run a district school or charter.

Leader E said,

I was in the aspiring school-based administrators' program prior to me becoming a school leader. It was a program developed in by the district... In which you had to apply for the program, and they develop us in leadership skills, and also prepared us to be leaders in the school district Philadelphia based off of the things that we did here in Philly.

Leader G said that she received a degree in educational leadership program at a local university where she received her master's in education administration. Following the program, she obtained her education administration certificate, later completing a pathway program called Philly Plus through The New Teacher Project (TNT). Her reason was to gain experience and the network that would allow her to hone her craft.

Leader H said,

Well, besides my MSW is in counseling. I also back in the day and tells you how old I am. They had a dual program. So, I also got an administration policy and planning. So, I was lucky enough that I had internships in school, and I also had an internship in City Hall with the mayor. So that really taught me about politics and policy. And yes, yes. In New Jersey, you didn't have to be a teacher to be a director of special ed. 22 years as administrator.

Leader K did mention that education was her second career. Her prior experiences were within the allied health field. She informed me that she was a department head of Technology and business in a parochial institution. It was not clear about the avenues she took to land her into administration.

Out of eleven participants, 45% of the participants obtained their doctoral degrees and 55% acquire a master's degree with some of them accumulating additional credits to give them a master + status. As it pertains to years of service as an administrator, 36 % had 15+ years, 45 % had 10 to 13 years, and 18 % 7 to 8 years of experience in leadership.

Prior to these participants becoming school leaders, one participant had a background in special education. For another, education was their second career. The remaining nine participants held teaching positions and gradually moved up the ranks by completing some form of programing that prepared them to transition into leadership. Four out the eleven are categorized as Parent-Leaders.

Although this demographic information does not define any of these participants' ability to lead effectively, it is necessary to provide some context regarding their backgrounds. This demographic data, however, does illuminate the lack of representation from other cultural groups outside of African American and Caucasian communities. Despite this observation, rich context was still able to be obtained.

School Leaders' Role in the IEP Process

For a child to be eligible to receive special education services. He or she must undergo extensive evaluation that involves a psychologist, possibly other medical professionals, and/or instructional data to make a precise diagnosis. From the accumulated data from all sources, the administrative team, which must include a local education agency representative (LEA), hosts a meeting with families to include their input as they compose an individualized education plan (IEP). Each participant was asked this specific question: "As families go through the IEP process, are you an active participant in the sessions or is this conducted by your special education team?"

From this data collection, it was noted that 100% of participants were informed about IEP cases that occur in their buildings even if they did not participate as an active LEA for the meeting. Some schools were unique in how they handled this process. For example, approximately 36% of the participants were actively involved in IEP meeting for their schools.

Leader A has a background special education. She was a special education teacher, emotional support special education teacher leader, and assistant principal. Now, she has been a principal for 8 years. Leader A was well informed about the law, understood the evaluation process, and knew how to support students. She affirmed,

I'm a participant in all initial eligibility meeting. So, the school psychologists at my school our practice is that she shares the evaluation report. So, if a student is found eligible if or even if they're not, it's still, shared with me and our school-based teacher leader for special education. That evaluation report is then scheduled within like the timeframe with families to go over that information. I have to be a part of all of those meetings where they are given the information of their child's eligibility.

Leader E stated that for the most part, she was an active participant in the sessions unless she was unable to attend the IEP meeting. She stated that more often than not, she was an active participant to ensure that the IEP was completed and met the needs of the students and ensured that the student received the services. She further explained:

I think one of the most important things is just to make sure that there was definitely a parental buy-in in the process. Making sure that they were an active participant in their children's educational plan. So, I think, just making sure that they were included in that process, and if the student even from kindergarten on making sure that they're a part of the process, too. At the end of the day, it's their IEP, and they are the ones that need to know what their plan says, and they need to be a part of the process. The ultimate goal is that they test out of their IEP; it's not that they live in special ed forever.

Leader G said,

I am highly active in all IEP sessions. If I'm not in a building, then my head teacher will attend the IEP's. But anytime that I'm in the building, I attend all IEP's. I think it's really important that the parents know that the principal is there... But I'm always there at the beginning to greet the parents and talk to them about their child and so forth. So, and then I am always the one that signs off on the SE LEA.

Leader J said he was,

Always involved, I review now, some people might call it administrators' interference, which is basically against the law. But I want to make sure that we prevent due process cases and mediation. So, when the parents see that the director of special ed or supervisor of special education or the principal is

involved, they know, that their child is safe and secure in that building. The administrator wants to really make sure that the kid gets FAPE.

Leader K shared that her school was a part of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese and most Catholic school will not honor IEPs. She said that maybe they could get around that practice if they honored 504 plans, but She stated that she honored both at her school. She said that her school did not have a special education team, but she that had a school psychologist. She stated that she was an active participant.

Approximately 45% percent of the school leaders had a shared responsibility where they might be actively involved in the IEP meeting, but they were more so kept abreast throughout the process. For example, Leader B mandated that one of her assistant principals present at the IEP meeting. She explained that in some situations if it was a student that she had been involved with, then she would attend. She added that the assistant principals managed the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) process along with regular education teachers: "They're there every step of the way until we actually get a student being found eligible for services. So, it just makes sense that they stay the course and attend the IEP meeting."

Leader D stated that if some students have clear factors that would lead to them being identified as eligible or ineligible for special education programing, he usually referred to his team to handle the IEP process. He affirmed that in

More complex cases where I want to make sure that all voices and parties are being held. I actually may give more energy and or if the tier one tier two or two skews more to tier two or tier three interventions may be lacking or has specific pieces of information that I want to have highlighted so that it shares their story. I may be the person that shared that information.

Leader F has a very small population of students that received special education programming. She affirmed that in the past she was an active participant, and everybody in terms of administration was part of the team. At the time of the study, she had an assistant principal who has background in special education, so she deferred to him to handle special education cases. She explained that she had been removed from the process for about two to three years.

Leader I expressed that it was a part of her practice to know all of her families whether there were students with IEPs or not. It was important for her to learn the educational needs of the population she was servicing. She stated,

I worked at a school with about a 30% population of IEP's. So therefore, it was not possible for me to attend all of their meetings. But for me, I understood and knew all the students. Somehow, I interacted with the families. But I would say I probably attended probably 40% or 50% of the meetings in some way, some shape, some form, or fashion.

It was of importance that when new families transitioned into her school at varying points, she would sit in those transition meetings or initial IEP meetings so she that could start building that rapport between families. She did state that some issues arose at times where her presence was in demand due to the gravity of "numerous issues that cause for legal cases or for things where, you know, issues that they inherited from families from other schools, and we had to play a little bit of clean up and make sure that students were getting exactly what they needed". In those instances, she made sure she was present even though she had a strong special education compliance monitor. Part of their routine is to check in with each other about upcoming events, issues, or concerns.

When asked the probing question: "Do you know the percentage of special education population compared to the regular ed?" She said,

When I left, we were a little bit over 30%. I think we were like 132. So, we always toggled between, like 95. And like 105 students with IEPs, we had we had six autistic support classrooms. We had an ILS, which is an intensive learning support players from and we had three teachers providing service to our students with specific learning disabilities or other health impairments. Along with you know, of course, we had a speech, we had a full-time speech therapist, occupational therapists, physical therapists, we had quite a few because we had very intensive programs in our school.

When asked about the population of the school, she said, "we were about 325 to 330."

When asked the probing question, "When you lead at that time, was your school, utilized a lot because your school had so many offerings, so students would transfer in and out, or was all that support was just for your neighborhood school?" She stated,

In the area in which my school was, there was a need for autistic support classrooms. So, each year, they would ask, and I had spaces, as the rest of my population went down, I had opened additional classrooms. So that's how I ended up with five self-contained or autistic support classrooms. But the one place that I had that was really sought after was, I started a fully inclusive autistic support classroom. So those babies are now in seventh grade. They started in kindergarten, and they have been with their regular ed peers in the classroom to teachers the whole time they were there. So that was definitely a sought-after program in our city.

She explained that they developed a reputation for the way they supported their families, especially for their program around students with autism.

The remaining school leaders were outliers of this subgroup where they were not necessarily involved in the IEP process but played a role in the background of the process. For example, Leader C's school had a special education team that primarily handled the IEP process. He said,

The teacher of record for that particular student in our district would do the bulk of work along with us, one of the special education supervisors that is assigned to the school and generally the in my capacity as a building administrator, I would kind if come in at the end when it was time for the final IEP review with the parent.

His role was,

More kind of doing some checks and balances at the end of the process and really ensure that whatever we had written in the IEP, we as a school would be able to actually fulfill because we did have some sometimes some overzealous maybe teachers or parents who you know were looking to promise things that we couldn't necessarily provide for particular students.

Leader H was a director of curriculum; she did not readily sit in on IEP meetings. Her expertise became an essential need when special education team needed to understand the curriculum and how the program supports the special education programming in addition to helping the special education team communicate instructional minutes to parents.

In summary, five of the eleven school leaders were not only school leaders, but also were parents of children who were eligible to receive special education programming. Another leader was certified in special education and has held leadership positions in special education. So, while these leaders had a professional obligation, each of them also knew the process intimately. They exhibited a deep understanding of the process, and having this connection, evidence showed that they played a more intricate role in the IEP process in their buildings.

Two out of the five leaders had extensive experience with curriculum and instructional programming, so they played an intricate role in support programming for special education. Another leader's school program had the flexibility to design a program around each individual student. Another was a part of a private religious institution that did not accept IEP plans, yet this leader accepted families with children who were eligible to receive special education services.

Overall, the precedent was revealed that at most schools all leaders knew the charge and the seriousness of understanding and facilitating a special education program. Whether they were physically involved in the meetings or not, they all were informed, and each was driving to improve their practices to make sure they were servicing families and students.

How School Leaders Make an Inclusive Environments

Each school leader was asked the question, "How do you ensure inclusivity in is proliferated through all educational practices?" With this question in mind, and thinking about the entire student, there is great responsibility in ensuring that they are developed academically, emotionally, and socially. With that responsibility comes a need to develop institutions where students see themselves. There is a movement to include all in educational spaces and each of these leaders shared how it was done at their institutions.

Leader A stated, "That's a hard one to do, because you are working with adults who have mindsets of children and mindsets of special education, just in general and perspectives about what services should look like and beliefs around that." She went on to add that they are also "working with students who may have fixed mindsets, or they may have looked at themselves from a deficit perspective." She found that these students tended to want to be around students like themselves or find refuge in being with their special education teachers and use them as their safe space. She admitted, "I think that although I work really hard to be inclusive, I don't think that like, I would say that we're 100% there." So, in spaces like professional learning community meetings and/or professional development, she had an opportunity to create a more inclusive environment where all instructional professionals could "plan to keep the conversation and the collaboration together. We build intentional touchpoints throughout the year, between regular education and special education teachers just to collaborate on caseload like to be able to talk about students."

Leader B said her school tried to be as inclusive as possible. She explained,

Being a parent of a special needs child, obviously, I want to ensure that that's at the forefront. It doesn't always come true. One of the things that I tried to do is ground the teachers and my other administrators in knowing what we can actually do. So, for example, my emotional support class ES, I couldn't really provide inclusivity for them. Last year, given the situation with capital improvement, and it was just a mess. And you know, they had different things in

their goals and in their IEP's, that I just logistically could not do. So, there was a lot of exclusivities with the ES population last year, simply because of dynamics in our school.

This school faced challenges due to reconstruction and the central office of the school district:

was made aware of the school not having a school yard at all, not having a lunchroom, not having an adequate amount of school climate staff, that it was not a good idea to maintaining the three to five ES classroom in the building, for example. But they left them there anyway and after about two or three elopements outside of school... They decided to finally send, additional support staff, because the kids didn't have a recess, or they had to go about three blocks away to a playground.

However, she was restricted from doing this because of safety challenges.

Leader C was trying to implement an impactful co-teaching model within his building:

One of the things that we tried to do was really to work pretty hard on our, our teaching models within the classroom. So, we, we really tried to work with our special education teacher and our regular education teacher in that setting and really have them kind of build better understanding of what a co-teaching model would truly be within our school.

Leader D had a very small population, and in response to how he made the educational practices inclusive he said,

I can actually tailor all programming as if every child qualifies or is in need of IEP. Just due to the way we do staffing and programming every child is consistently participating in a goal setting conference, that's once a month. We meet with the teachers, and their families once a month to go over their progress. So, the things that we do, and we identify not only school goal but real-life goals, so the things that we do kind of support a clear streamline process, once we get around to a child needing, being eligible or actually somebody thinking that a child may need IEP is just all of the practice that we have going on. kind of aligned with the process.

When asked this probing question, "Do you have a special designation for your school that enables you to have such a small student population?" He responded that their school does not have a designation because it was identified as a program, not a school; it was housed under the title of an academy, so it warrants the flexibility.

Leaders H, I, and J have similar approaches to ensuring inclusivity is proliferated through educational practice. Both ensured that PLC and professional developments incorporated both special education and general education teachers. Leader H worked to eliminate a culture that it "is always that whole one size fits all because it's easier for the child study team, well, it's

easier for the teacher or it's easier, but one size doesn't always fit." She is intentional about the conversations about the practices that they're using to ensure that they were meeting the needs of all students and understanding that not all students are going to learn the information the same way. This helped to create an environment where everyone was getting the strategies that they were going to need to ensure that students were successful. Leader J additionally added that it was important to ensure that teachers were equipped with strategies to support students.

Furthermore, Leader I shared,

When I think about, you know, my students, and what we said is we use the word students that learn differently. So, in our building, they were not looked at as our special education students, these are all of our students. So, our students learned from early on, that it's okay if you learn differently than somebody else; was okay. You do things differently than somebody else, but we're all part of X school family, and this is how we take care of one another.

Unity was the movement and became moral fabric of the school, creating an environment where everyone was a part of it.

In summary, each of the leader explained how they create inclusive environments in their schools. Some spoke about the challenges of changing the mindset of both teacher and student. Another described designing programming to meet individual needs of all students. Another tried to improve the efficacy of the co-teaching models. Another understood and learned the law so they could advocate for their programming in order to obtain correct ratios of support. Another used professional development to cross-train all school-based staff so that they knew how to support students. Another not only ensured that parents were inclusive partners, but also allowed students to be a part of their academic journey.

School Leaders' Influence

In this study, I found that the school leader facilitates (directly or indirectly) the IEP process, programming, and efficacy. Embedded in that responsibility was dealing with the outcomes, challenges, legalities, coaching, education, and or professional development. How does the IEP process inform their leadership? Appendix E describes how leaders responded to this question.

Leader A, B, E and H had similar responses; each was concerned about the referral process and how the data illuminates the disproportionality of black and brown students being

overly identified and was reflective on how teachers were implementing interventions, differentiating instruction and reviewing how multi-tier systems of support are updated and managed.

For example, Leader A was reflective about both MTSS and practices involving permission to evaluate how these tools are being managed, asking “Are they working?” and honing in on the ethics behind the practice. Leader B realized that there was a need to discuss the legalities behind supporting special education programming. The actual plan had to be the plan that all parties would follow and abide by to support the needs of students. Leader E focused on the vulnerable group black and brown children, concentrating on the steps teachers took before they got to the referral stage to ensure that the process was firm, fair, and consistent. What Leader H collected from her data was that teachers were referring students to special education for reasons outside of them being eligible for services, such as for classroom management issues or not knowing how to differentiate instruction for struggling students.

Leader D was an anomaly because of how his program was sanctioned. Each student had the flexibility to have a more customized educational experience. So, his foci were on identifying a student’s deficits and providing the correct interventions to aid the needs of students, continuing the collaboration between both the special education and general education teachers through weekly PLC.

In comparison to the leaders above, leaders F and K had low populations of students that had an IEP. Leader F had support staff whose background was in special education, so she relied heavily on that individual to handle the facilitation the operation of the programming. Inspired by a conversation with a parent, she sought to inform herself by taking additional coursework in special education. Leader K was a leader in a parochial setting and learned through her own school experiences as issues arose by a case-by-case basis. Additionally, she met with her school psychologist to discuss matters concerning the needs of students.

Leader C’s district had made some major school mergers, and Leader C’s level of support and responsibilities has shifted more heavily to curriculum to support the programming.

Leader J allowed the IEP process to define how he informed all school-based staff about special education. He ensured that everyone knew how to support students no matter what role they had in the school environment. He stated that he is a transformative leader and that it was important that everyone know how to be culturally responsive to students.

In summary, the leaders shared their deep reflection on how supporting their special education programming influenced their leadership. Quite a few shared that they are scrutinizing the efficacy of the MTSS process and how interventions were being implemented or used and looking at the disproportionality of the referral of black and brown students. These leaders admitted that that they needed additional coursework or professional development to support their understanding. All took steps to professionally re-evaluate how they could be more effective and impactful in their schools programming.

Appendix F includes a listed response of how school leaders responded to the questions: "How often do you inform yourself about issues or policy changes that affect special education?" and, "If you could change anything about the IEP process what it be?"

In response to the question asked regarding how often leaders informed themselves about issues or policy changes that affect special education, Leaders A, B, E, H, and I had a very strategic plan surrounding how they remained informed about current events and policy changes within special education. Individually, each of them was driven by personal connections to special education. Leader A's background was in special education. Leaders B, E, H and I are not only school leaders but each of them was also a parent of child that had been identified to receive special education services. From this group, it is important to note that Leaders B and E are also parents of children who were eligible to receive special education services but did not participate in the parent-leader interviews of this study. These leaders possessed a uniqueness of facilitating and managing the IEP process while being on the receiving end of the process. The question of how they informed themselves was something they took seriously because they understood the gravity of the program and its impact.

Leader A, B, E, H and I both mentioned the importance of relationships with their special education compliance monitor or special education directors. They realized when it came to

plans, laws, policy, procedures curriculum that this partnership was essential. They relied on this department to inform their knowledge and leadership. Leader B understood the law but really was trying to be a trailblazer of ethics regarding the law. Her main premise was to teach school staff about the efficacy of practice.

In contrast, some leaders' planning was not as detailed compared to their colleagues in this study. Leader D mentioned that he did not inform himself outside of what is offered from his district. Leader G stated that he kept himself informed yearly.

Leader C, whose past experience is considerable, focused his administration over magnet school programming. When his district combined three high schools, his new school saw an influx population of special education programming. He affirmed that he was learning a lot about special education programming and practice through meetings previous course work but that he really had some insight to the benefits technology in programming. Leader K was a part of the archdiocese, so she informed herself by meeting with the school psychologist monthly. In addition, Leader K was also a parent of a child with a disability, so she educated herself on laws, policies, and practice. This subgroup (except Leader K) had a special education team that predominately facilitated and managed the process of students who were a part of the special education programming in their buildings.

All leaders were asked what, if anything, they would change about the IEP process. Every response was a perfect summation of every independent part of special education. The length of the process led to determining eligibility, and the business model structure of the special education department in certain districts, as well as to understanding co-teaching models and differentiations, composing an individualized plan for everyone, dealing with over-identification and implicit biases, knowing what it means to modify and how the document is written (length and language). All thoughts and ideas revealed what is certain: special education needs an overhaul as it relates to identification, policy, practice, and resources. Where do we go from here?

A pattern that emerged in response to these questions was that a majority of the leaders had access to a special education team. Included in that team was a special education director, whose primary role was to support leaders with law, policy, and practice. These leaders built

alliances with the individuals in this role for assistance with their programming and educated them on matters of the law. So, they could properly support students and families equitably, ethically and in a just manner.

Secondly, when asked to describe the one thing they would change about the IEP process, all the leaders described independent parts of the process that could be improved to support special education programming in schools. One declared that making the determination of eligibility process shorter could reduce delays in providing targeted services. Another suggested the need for resources to educate families. Another considered restructuring the special education department and transitioning the structure to an intermediate unit. Another suggested changing the education requirements when becoming an educator so that teachers would be more informed about the law, procedures, and the delivery of best practice. Overall, there was no wrong answer in response to these questions. In fact, each leader made a compelling argue that opens the conversation to consider new alternatives to practice.

Findings

The study was designed to examine the overarching issue of how parental experiences during the IEP process impacted or informed education plans for their children and education leaders to improve IEP processes. Additional sub questions were asked that were relative to the main question.

1. In what ways do school leaders welcome parents as valued members of the IEP process while considering the racial and cultural identity of the student and family?
 - a. What processes do school administrators have in place when complications develop between school personnel and families?
2. In what ways do parents experience the IEP process and understand their rights in determining what is best for their child?
3. How do parents' perceptions and understanding influence their actions in advocating for their children?

Collectively, these research questions were designed with the intention of surfacing enough information to discuss this overarching issue. However, there was not enough evidence in the data collection to substantially support question 1a to address this broader issue. It was not clear if school leaders had specific procedures in place to handle contentious issue. The data does reflect, however, that school leaders did resolve issues on a case-by-case basis.

From this research study, five major concerns were illuminated as potential barriers that could pose a challenge in the practice and implementation of special education programming in varying schools.

- Creating a sound relationship between schools and parents. Creating a process where parents feel heard and making them feel like they are included in the decision-making process of the creation of the individualized education plan for their children.
- School leaders not having an in-depth knowledge of special education programming.
- The over-representation of black and brown students that are placed into special education programming.
- The bureaucracy within school districts surrounding programming, staffing and resources.
- The continuing of education (seminars, conferences and or professional development) among school leaders and the frequency of professionally developing teachers in an isolated session.

These barriers affect facilitating authentic collaborations between school personnel and parents. It cloaks the practices of both implicit and explicit biases, which aids in the disenfranchisement of black and brown students. This unfortunately, ensures the efficacy of practice and has the potential to creating sterile educational environments.

In this study, some parents revealed that their experience at the table felt more like formality leaders were just checking the boxes, some felt that the dialogue was too technical, and some felt like the decisions were already predetermined. All of this was perceived as a breach of trust.

In the study, all the school leaders took steps to be informed about special education programming and try to keep up to date with policy, new procedures and or practice. The concern

that was illuminated was the frequency of ongoing learning about special education. Some leaders stated that they are engaged in professional development in this area on a yearly basis. Some said they inform themselves monthly, and others stated that they are informed weekly. It would be acceptable to assume that the stronger the leader is in special education programming, the more robust and effective their program would be in achieving academic gains and success. When a leader is not in tune with policy, procedure and/or practice, it forces them to be reliant on expertise of others who are more versed in special education. This is risky, considering all the possibilities that could result in litigation. Furthermore, a school leader is not just responsible for students and school personnel, but for everything that occurs within the walls of their building. The leader is the face of the building and the representative of the district, so it is imperative for the leader to be informed so they can be prepared to contend with district bureaucracies, academic programming and achievement, and unfortunately educational disputes should they arise.

Bureaucracies within school districts have been a longstanding problem that seem to have no resolution. Evidence has shown that there have been complications or challenges for schools to receive or obtain specific resources needed to meet the needs of students. This has included miscommunication surrounding the allocation of funding and or school personnel being assigned to specific schools in support of the student. In some cases, paperwork has not been processed in a timely manner, resulting in creating complex situations between the school and the parents. As another example, there is a delay in the process in determining eligibility for a student. Some school leaders argue that you don't need sixty days to determine eligibility. An extended amount of time for this process just delays the targeted support that could be given to the student.

Traditionally, veteran teachers and new teachers are professionally developed district-wide annually. This occurs at the beginning of the school year and the session might run over approximately a three-day period. Outside of this session, any extension of special education training relies on school leaders at their individual schools. This could potentially look different from school to school. School leaders' provide special education training support through PLCs,

which are already overloaded meetings that discuss rich conversations among a grade or content team (which could consist of 4 more teachers) around instruction, strategies, changes from the district regarding content, and/or student progress, usually within 45 to 60 minutes sessions.

The most concerning of all barriers is the over-representation of black and brown students in special education programming. Some leaders discussed how utilizing the multi-tier systems of support and implementing interventions and monitoring them correctly is essential. But if the intervention is not used or monitored with fidelity, it could yield a result where a student could be fast-tracked into special education. There appears to be a deference to special education instead of the differentiation instruction to meet the individual needs of students. Some leaders have recognized the misgiving and decided to bolster the efficacy of their MTSS programs to eliminate the possibility to improperly refer a student to be evaluated for service. The assumption is that this looks different from school to school because not all leaders may be involved in the process and may designate a person other than themselves to handle this process.

Again, these illuminated challenges look very different from district to district, from school to school and from leader to leader. Education is key. Integrity is key. Being culturally sound is key. Being honest and ethical is key. All of this determines how fair schools are being in the effort to provide a free and appropriate education for all students.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This project explored the inquiry “how do parental experiences during the IEP process impact or inform education plans for their children and education leaders to improve IEP processes?” This question presents a conundrum because the answer is a convolution of many processes entangled within social constructs that ensure challenges within educational system. In completing this research, that parents and parent leaders engaged in dialogue about their IEP experiences and left the conversation posing additional questions around our special education system, a system that provides support to ensure that every child receives a free and appropriate education. The findings about their IEP experiences does challenge the process and reveals how it informs parents to make decisions for their children.

In this study, interviews were conducted for both parent groups and school leaders. The objective of this research was to identify how their experiences informed decision making by both the parents and school leaders. Each subgroup was asked question relative to the role they played in the process. In addition to what was described in chapter 4, the study was also designed to better understand how parents experience the IEP process in schools where parent and student cultural and racial identity differ from the cultural and racial identity of most of the IEP team.

Again, this study was designed to determine if the personal educational experiences of parents cultivated preconceived notions or biases about educational institution, policies, and practices or hinder their ability to make informed decisions for their children.

Summary of Findings: Parents

In this study, it was observed that parents’ perceptions and view of academic institutions based on their own personal experiences with the education system seemed to play a role in their approach to education. A parent leader from the study had a very complex educational experience. He was tagged as an underachiever until the day a teacher noticed his exceptionality, which resulted in him being tested and deemed as mentally gifted. From this experience, he said he learned relationship building and manipulation. His life experiences led

him into a profession of servicing students and families. As a parent himself he became his own advocate by learning special education law. His knowledge base has been an asset to many parents by helping them advocate for their children. Another parent had a very positive educational experience and remembered how the parent-teacher organization played a vital role in schools by supporting teachers and students, creating an environment that was welcoming to students. Another parent who was an English language learner (whose parents did not speak English) spent most of her high school experience in a self-contained classroom and did not have school personnel that spoke her language or resembled her culture. Now as parent, her child attends a bi-lingual school where the child must learn to read and write in both languages (Spanish and English). Her child has been a part of special education programming since they were in preschool and a large part of the population at her daughter's school speaks her native language.

In short, as humans we are driven by our history, personal connections, environments, social status, and communities. Whether stable or unstable, perfect or imperfect, we live by the frames of reference as we proceed through life. From this study, it is plausible to make the claim that a facet of a parents' decision making is driven by how they view the world.

Bilaterally, both subgroups, 29% of parents and 25% of parent-leaders, shared that they didn't believe the institutions worked collaboratively with them. Initially, 29% of parents and 25% of parent-leaders did not understand their rights and responsibilities. Overall, 43% of parents and 25% of parent leaders were not happy with the outcome of their process. Fourteen percent of parents shared that their encounter with school personnel and the usage of technical language made it hard to follow the conversation in an already complicated process. Lastly, when asked if they felt that the IEP plan was effective, 43% of parents and 25% of parent-leaders responded no. Even though the sample interview was small, the percentage of the finding is high enough to raise questions surrounding special education programming practice and efficacy of the process.

All these accounts validate the similar experiences of parents obtain by the works of Woo Jung (2011) who is cited in saying,

In spite of theoretical validation and legal mandates in special education or parent participation, many studies have indicated that parents' roles in the IEP process are still not noticeable and influential and that too often they are not being treated as an equal partner with school professional...

Furthermore, Woo Jung cited a study done by Chun (2001),

Research identified professional educator's attitudes or perceptions which may establish potential barriers to family participation: (a) they stereotype or blame the parent, (b) they deny parental expertise and knowledge of child, (c) they are insensitive to religious beliefs, family traditions, and cultural diversity and (d) they withhold information and use educational jargon and terminology about placement and programming options (p.21).

This affirms the evidence captured in this study of parents describing their own personal feelings throughout the interview. For example, one parent shared that the school official attitude implied an aired like, "how dare you not know this...". While others shared how the conversation went over their head (with the heavy use of educational jargon) and they proclaimed that understand most things. In both instances, resulting in some of them resorting to some form of advocacy support. Whether their support came from a knowledgeable person in the personal circles, an outside educational professional or an actual advocate.

In the results of this research, although each experience was unique to the evaluation of the child, parents were restricted in their role as an advocate. In instances where parent was able to dogmatically demand certain resources or accommodations, that energy was channeled more so from the subgroup of parent leaders. School leaders were well equipped to banter back and forth because they are in the profession. Hence, they were more successful in getting their viewpoints across. They knew how to negotiate and come to a common means in the pursuit of obtaining a plan that would support the needs of children.

Inversely, going through an IEP process as a parent where knowledge is absent of the dogma of education regarding laws, statues, policy, or practice can be much more exhausting and intimidating without the advantage of knowing how the system and process works. The outlier for this group was the parents that hired an advocate to ensure they understood the process and to obtain targeted support and resources for their children. Their remaining participants were content with the outcomes of the proceedings, they felt like they understood, and they relied on the actions of the school.

Summary of Findings: School Leaders

It is important to reiterate this passage from chapter two to describe the role of a school leader. Today, principals of schools face multiple demands and challenges. They are required to develop school plans that outline the priority goals based on the school's performance. They are responsible for evaluating and developing educators, school management that involves progress monitoring of instruction (special education programming), academic achievement, attendance, climate and culture of the school. They also must build partnership with stakeholders, school personnel, students, and families; at the same time, leaders must create a culture that is inclusive and welcoming for all students. Therefore, professional experiences, education, certifications, and cultural awareness are characteristic attributes that afford leaders with tools to engineer successful institutions. When there is a breach of ethical practice within the school system is compromised, the breach of trust usually has a negative effect. This could impact school goals, student learning, quality of academic programming, climate and culture, morale, teacher quality/attainment and effectiveness, and even the opportunity to work collaboratively with parents. All of these variables determine how effective a school leader can be within his or her school community.

In this study, there was a tailored focus on how school leaders facilitate and manage the IEP process in their buildings and how those processes inform their leadership. All leaders were unique in their education, experience and the role they played in the IEP process.

The school leaders that participated in this study consisted of 73% women and 27% men. They all came from different educational backgrounds, varied years of professional experience, and knowledge of educational programming. Forty-five percent of the school leaders interviewed holds a doctorate degree and 55% has a master's plus degree. Many of them, 45% to be exact, transitioned into an administration by way of a pathway program. This means that they did not segue into leadership through traditional means. Out of all the participants, one leader has her certification in special education and has held a leadership position in special education before becoming a school leader. Five of the participants were not only leaders but they are also parents of students that were or are in special education programming, so they have experience on both sides of the process.

In this study, the school districts in which these school leaders led have different policies and procedures on how they handle their referral process and special education programming. For example, within different suburban communities in Pennsylvania, these districts have an intermediate unit that support and manage school districts with their special education programming. The same practices were followed in New Jersey. In the inverse, within urban school districts, the district itself manages their own referral process, special education programming, how they distribute personnel, and resources to individual school based on student populations and their individual needs.

It was founded in this study that within urban public schools there is some bureaucratic practices that created barriers for some of these school leaders in their schools. The rule in this district is resources are based on the special education population coupled with the specific needs that justifies how the district disseminates personnel, and distributes funding, transportation and open, specific classroom designations within a school building. In addition, each school is assigned a director of special education. One of the responsibilities of this person is assisting leaders in problematic cases, informing leaders about policy changes, etc.

School leaders face many challenges while trying to facilitate successful programming, and because of these challenges, a school leader in this study shared they would prefer their district to transition to the intermediate unit structure. They felt like it would eliminate a lot of the bureaucracy's leaders face in their district. Some leaders shared that they were faced with challenges in receiving adequate resources to legally adhere to the IEP for the students. In a more extreme scenario, in an emotional support classroom, students were not permitted to go outside (because the school is under construction and students could only go to the neighborhood park as an option) because of the lack of staffing (that is assigned by the district to the school) to support the targeted behaviors of students outside of the classroom. So, when you think about inclusion and the safety of the individual students (who have a history of eloping), this leader was put in a very complicated situation by not adhering to the components of the IEP while prioritizing the security and safety of the student over what was outlined in the IEP. Another leader reported that they had students with IEPs, and it was stated in their IEP's that they should

have a one-to-one. Based on her population, she was shorted two one-to-ones, and this leader had to debate to get the supports for the student. She stated that the district came into her building to count kids and review their IEPs before they conceded to give her the proper supports for the students. These are systematic challenges that are hinderances in meeting the needs of students. The study did not do a deeper exploration of the delivery of instruction, but it is important to note that if there is a problem with the delivery of service those problems can potentially drift into the delivery of instructional needs.

Another challenge is that not all school leaders are intimately involved in the IEP process and some do not educate themselves regularly outside of the mandated professional developments. Some leaders delegate this responsibility to their leadership team, which could be comprised of the special education liaison and/or the assistant principal. The challenge is, if the assistant principal is not well versed in special education programming and mis-manages the process, it opens the school to facilitating weak special education programming and/or litigations. As stated in chapter two, if a school leader has minimal special education experience and lacks course work and/or field experience then they are ill-prepared to support their institutions, teachers and their special education population (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Frost and Kersten, 2011). Some leaders acknowledge that they do not self-educate outside of mandated professional development as they should. Some shared that they rely heavily on their leadership team to keep them abreast of all cases and only interject on more serious cases, knowing that they have a resource (director of special education) they can turn to when problems or litigations arise.

In all, these leaders are good leaders, and all feel very passionate about their leadership. They all committed to their schools, students, and servicing the community. But the reality is that all schools are not created equal, and some school have more challenging issues than others. Through this research, it was evident that there is a distinct difference between policy-practice and the realities that school leaders must contend with as they lead. Sometimes these challenges impact other programming including special education programming.

However, what was projected from this research is that for the leader that is special education certified and the school leaders that were also parents of children in special education programming, their leadership over special education programming appeared to be well developed, organized, and inclusive. They ensured staff was cross trained in special education and their special education departments were inclusive at all instructional meetings. What was illuminated is how personal special education is to them. This is not to say that the other school leaders were not as passionate, but their experiences resonated more because they had an intimate attachment.

Education and experience are the buffer to strong special programming. Even though some leaders are not as well versed, it was evident that their districts put provisions in place to support the hidden deficit. The problem is that differentiation of instruction, intervention, understanding the IEP, abiding by the IEP, efficacy of practice, and ensuring students are making academic progress are all interwoven in the background of the leader. A leader education and experience are paramount to the process and the experiences for students and parents.

Limitations of the Study

In this study, there were some unforeseen circumstances that could be deemed as a limitation to the study. For example, the method used to recruit participant for this study was the snowball sampling strategy. The ideal of the snowball sampling strategy is that through personal and professional relationships known participants would consist of both a parent and a school leader. Then these participants would in turn make recommendations of prospective participants that they deemed would be beneficial to the study, and then those participants would continue to make their recommendations, creating a true organic study of participants. The method derailed and a large portion of the participants were recommended through a single personal or professional contact. Even though there was this development-rich conversation and viable context was able to be retrieved through this research, had there been a more successful outcome with snowball sampling, a possibly a larger population size may have been attained.

Another limitation to be considered in this study is that the parents that were interviewed were never questioned about the racial identities of the special education team that presided over

the IEP process. This would have been very vital question to ask in this research to determine the efficacy of fair and equitable practice when dealing with racially and culturally diverse families. That's not to say that the families that participated in this study did not or was not confronted with implicit or explicit biases. However, it was hard to determine in this study if that was the case.

Furthermore, the question about the ways school leaders welcome parents as valued members of the IEP process while considering the racial and cultural identity of the student and family was not fully answered. Even though this question was a sub question and the hope was to find an answer based the data collected, it should have been a direct question that was asked in the list of question for school leaders to provide a more substantiated response.

Recommendations for Future Research

Overall, thinking about the conclusions of this study, parents collectively want to be viewed as equal partners in this process, and school leaders want to include parents in the process. But the discrepancy is the intentions of both and how each views the other. Parents conveyed that they believed decisions were already determined before the meeting occurred. On the other hand, school leaders thought that because they provided the parent with the rights and responsibilities, and they gave a more formal analysis of their findings, that was the same as including them as active partners. Instead, the practice has been that they reveal how they will support their child through the creation of the IEP plan. They reveal what the school can offer to support the need of the students and sometimes it might be what some have described as “a one size fit all approach” to meet the needs of students. Just providing a formal context in their delivery doesn't necessarily invite the parent to be an active change agent. So, it appears that the parents are lost in translation when it comes to special education process. It is not believed that it is not the intention of the school leader to overlook this gap between informing parents and including them in the decision-making process. Their school responsibilities drive them to getting immediate resources and moving on to the next line of business. It was also found that school leaders that are more active participants in the IEP process and those that are parent leaders tend to have closer relationship to parents. For those leaders that admittedly state that special education is not their wheelhouse, they rely heavily on those experts in their buildings are more proficient in special

education. It is respectable that they make provisions to address the challenge. However, it still does not eliminate the conundrum between parents feeling that they are active agents and school leaders viewing them as such.

All school leaders were asked the question, If you could change anything about the special education process the IEP process what that would be? So, in thinking about the recommendations for change and how we can improve this process for both parties, the leaders already had the answers to this question. One leader said,

So, I think one of the most important things is just to make sure that that there was definitely a parental buy in in the process and also, they were making sure that they were an active participant in their children's educational plan... Also, if the student, even from kindergarten on making sure that they're a part of the process, too, because at the end of the day, it's their IEP, and they are the ones they need to know what they're plan says and they need to be a part of the process. The ultimate goal is that they test out of the IEP, it's not that they live in special ed forever.

Another stated,

I think the timeline is too long...It doesn't take 60 days to determine eligibility. So, I think if, you know, that's a long time, especially if you implement MTSS students can be in MTSS for a year. So, they've already missed, they're already behind and then they missed instruction.

Another stated,

I think the over identification of students really analyzing that process. I know now, like, we really go through the MTS s process with the three, you know, the tiers, and once they get to tier three, that, you know, they push them, you know, for specialists. But what I've, what I've seen through teaching, and as being a leader, a lot of times folks want to identify students, because they don't want to do the hard work.

Overall, it is believed that there is a strong need to revamp the entire IEP process. There is a strong need to evaluate how the MTSS process is implemented and managed and how progress monitored for its effectiveness. If there is a breakdown in this system and it is not properly addressed, it extends an invitation for students to be overly referred to the special education process. Another recommendation would be to reduce the determination of eligibility time frame for service.

The findings suggest that school districts should alter the frequency of how often teacher and school administrators are professionally developed around special education. This should change some of the perceptions school personnel might have surrounding special education and possibly

reduce explicit or implicit biases that could hinder professional decision making. Simply believing that a student can learn and make academic progress and believing that they can provide them authentic support would be paramount, as opposed to fast-tracking students into special education. Last and the most important is the recommendation that there needs to be some type of amendment to parent involvement in the process. They should provide their input and provide recommendations before the IEP plan is written. This would establish better relationships.

Leaders have the power to build strong schools, create inclusive environments, build strong leaders, and create school where all students are successful. All is the operative word. Where the district falls short the school leader has the opportunity to in stand out and lead. To be a strong leader you must be experienced, educated, informed, a relationship builder, soft to the needs of the families they serve, love what they do and operate in an ethical, honest, and just manner for the development and welfare of the students they serve. That means everyone under their jurisdiction should do the same. That should be the oath.

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APPENDIX A**PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Describe your educational experience.
2. Was there any incident that occurred in your educational experience that has affected how you feel about schools and schooling?
3. What was your marital status the year your child identified with a disability?
4. What was your highest level of education at the time you began the IEP process?
5. What type of school district did or does your child attend?
6. Explain your experience going through an IEP meeting process.
7. Were you happy with the final outcome of the process?
8. If not, how did you address your concern?
9. Do you feel that the institution works collaboratively with you and your family?
10. Did you understand your rights and responsibilities during this process?
11. Were you able to follow the conversation?
12. Did you ever hire an advocate?
13. Do you feel the IEP plan is effective?

APPENDIX B**PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What is your highest level of education?
2. What was your discipline prior to you becoming an administrator?
3. Did you attend any pathway programs that catapulted you into leadership?
4. How long have you been a school administrator?
5. As families go through the IEP process, are you an active participant in the sessions or is this process conducted by your special education team?
6. How do you ensure that inclusivity is perforated through all educational practices?
7. How often are teachers professionally developed on topics that involve special education practice or programming?
8. How are new teachers inducted into the school community?
9. How do you allow IEP processes that are conducted under your administration influence your leadership?
10. How often do you inform yourself about issues or policy changes that affect special education?

APPENDIX C**RECRUITING EMAIL**

Good morning,

My name is Keesha Ransom. I am a doctoral student at Temple University in the Educational Leadership program. For my dissertation research, I am interested in doing a study on the perceptions of parents of students with learning disabilities who have participated in the IEP process experience. In the inverse, capture the experiences of school leaders facilitating over the IEP process and how these processes inform/ed their leadership. This work could be used as a basis to make positive changes to improve the efficacy of the process and or be used as a tool to build stronger partnerships. If you agree to participate in this study, let this email service as your official invitation. Your consent involves you agreeing to participate in an interview that will be no longer than 60 minutes. Possibly, a second interview that will last no longer than 30 minutes only if follow-up questions are needed for the study. Please email me at tuc19586@temple.edu so, we can schedule a time that is convenient for you for the interview.

This research will be conducted under the supervision of my dissertation chair, Christopher McGinley, Ed.D. (christopher.mcginley@temple.edu). You may contact either me or him for further details. Please feel free to contact me at 215-490-8572 or tuc19586@temple.edu. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

K. Ransom

APPENDIX D**RECRUITING ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANTS EMAIL**

Hello,

I recently participated in a research project that I think you could contribute to. Please review the email below that I received and consider participating. It is a worthwhile project. I thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

K. Ransom

APPENDIX E

LEADER RESPONSES TO LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT QUESTIONS

Table 5

Leader Responses to Leadership and Development Questions

School leader	How do you allow the IEP process that are conducted under your administration influence your leadership?	How often are teachers professionally developed on topics that involve special education practice of programming?	How often are new teacher inducted into the community?
Leader A	<p>"I think for me, it's a lot about like, how we refer kids especially education. So, looking at the referral process, looking at our MTS s process and not in not trying to issue you know, permission to evaluate (PTE) that may not be necessary. So, like, making sure our MTSS system is strong so that people are like, oh, they just start special ed. You know, like, what are we doing? What interventions are working? What responses are students Giving to certain interventions and maybe we need to try a different intervention before we say that they need. Before they say they need a permission to evaluate, and they could be eligible, or they are thought to be eligible. So, I know for me, I spent a lot of time with teachers making sure that they implement interventions with fidelity, they're documenting the interventions with fidelity, they're communicating progress with the interventions with fidelity to families, and to also members of the leadership team. So, I</p>	<p>"This is something that the district is really bad at modeling. So, I'm sure our implementation is not that good. But as I mentioned in the question before, we have at least four opportunities for professional development between the special education teacher and the regular education teacher to collaborate on just the students in our caseload. Now, like I said, weekly, there's still collaboration on. You know, like the lessons that are being taught that week, but once a quarter, it's a step back to look at, like, let's look at the student's IEP, is there something that like maybe as a general education, like, there's a blind spot I don't see in a special education teacher like comes prepared. A special education team develops like an agenda for those meetings"</p>	<p>"Do our best say once again, trying to be as intentional as possible, right. So where are their opportunities to build moments of collaboration and what are the intentional touch points throughout the year where we need to work? I know like, given it's my eighth year, like I know, it's where there's going to be some questions or concerns from any teacher like this is where they're going to have issues."</p>

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	would say that that like, influences my leadership, because I try to be as clear and as equitable as possible. So, we don't see over representation, but also like kids can get a fair chance."		
Leader B	"It definitely influences my leadership, because I see where there's a huge gap and providing realistic support. I'll put it that way. And being able to fulfill things that you put in writing to parents... So, I'm trying very hard to think outside the box, and really use the support staff, the classroom assistants, the SSH, everyone that I can to put more meat and potatoes behind the supports for our special ed students. So that the goals that we create really do have a chance of coming to fruition. And instead of just writing something down to be compliant, because a lot of times we write goals so that you don't get sued."	Well, in my building, I found that in the last couple of years, we've had to have PD the same amount of time as we have a grade group meeting so that's weekly. And in my grade group meetings, I have Asst. principal, a special education team member, and the spectrum of she's available, as well as ELL teacher and ELL point person at all meetings, because we have the subgroups, especially my special education population.	I'm always 100% staff, like that's one of my main foci during hiring season that I do not that I'm overstaffed. So, I have the staff that can support new teachers. The district has a coaching program for new teacher coaches to come in and support teachers, but they can't get into every school, their caseload is massive, and my teachers haven't really found success with the coaches from central office.
Leader C	"15 years after that I was actually in one of our magnet schools for college preparatory was one of the top ranked schools in the state. And we had a pretty low number of students with IEPs in the school as a whole other than gifted IEPs... We realized was that there was a lot of work that needed to be	I really felt that that was a weakness for us while I was in the high school setting. You know, I think, especially because we had a number of new teachers, they did not necessarily get good professional development around bow focal co teaching model. And, you know, as often happens, I think, in education, you'll	our school district has always had kind of a not a super well structured, but at least a mentoring program that's available for new teachers that we do try to take advantage of... So, you know, I wouldn't necessarily say that all new teachers got excellent mentors all the time. But you know, we did work pretty hard to

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	<p>done in those in that area, you know, with special education because I think that while we had a lot of things in place, I think, certainly in our coursework...that was very eye opening for me, you know, to think about just how comprehensive special education really needs to be and to the made me reflect a lot, I think, on the level of service that we are able to offer our students and that There's a lot of, there's a lot of work still to be done in that area in special education is not really under my wheelhouse per se."</p>	<p>have a program that maybe exists, and people get trained within that program for maybe a couple of years, and then it's off and running, and then a bunch of new people come in, and they don't get the same level of training that was there initially. And so, things have a tendency to kind of kind of rust, right? They, they, they deteriorate a little bit, and they don't work quite as well as what they did initially.</p>	<p>make sure that we did try to put new teachers in with the best teachers that we possibly could, given the circumstances with the union leadership and contracts and things like that with mentors... So as a part of that, though, special education is something that we are intentionally driving back into that programming for our new teachers, because we do feel that that's going to be important, and specially it for I think, for the most part, a lot of our special education training was just on the job training with the teacher, there's their CO teacher, or maybe their mentor, teacher. And if they're not necessarily the same person, sometimes that would happen. And so that's something that we're trying to reform, so that there is more consistent delivery of programming for those new teachers, especially in areas like special education, career and technical education, you know, some of those other specialized areas that do require some specialized training for your teachers.</p>
Leader D	<p>we treat every child as if they were in need of IEP, so is actually spent at a special time looking at all of the students work, spend a special time figuring out what the skills are deftly His or areas of interest inside and outside</p>	<p>To be honest, not as often as our like, we spend a lot of energy around differentiation, because we just look at the lizard, everybody needs something special for them. So, we don't necessarily, you know,</p>	<p>we have the beauty of having about an hour each day of release time, that if a teacher is new, they go to a new teacher partnership with our SBTL. And after they go through with our SBTL they go with a peer teacher, where</p>

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	<p>of school are figuring out what the teachers should be working on by using teacher made assessments and or the normative assessments created by the core curriculum or adventure programs. So, the majority of the materials and at least half of our school day is specifically dedicated around how individual students or what individual students need.</p>	<p>people don't learn the particulars about being a special education. But they we do a lot of professional development, at least one hour a week, teachers get home for direct instruction from a professional around the core materials for excuse me, or to intervention materials that are being used.</p>	<p>they learn things, and on Wednesdays, it may be a different day, this week, they participate in professional development, or PLCs. To PLCs, we played around goal setting on one day, student interventions and support on another day on professional planning on the following day, and then just peer collaboration on the last one. So, through those processes and as the same system every single month."</p>
Leader E	<p>"It ain't easy. I will say, what for me is making sure that kids are at the forefront of whatever decision is being made. And especially when we think about our IEP students, those are our most vulnerable populations. And my well, they are the most vulnerable population, one of the most vulnerable populations in our district. And when we look at the demographics of the students that are in special ed is usually our black and brown students. And a lot of our black boys are placed in special ed. So really being cognizant of that. And then also making sure that our policies and practices and procedures that we put in place. Really making sure that what we do is fair, and that's always been one of my battles being</p>	<p>"So, when we think about specially designed instruction, I mean, for the most part, when I think of it, I just think of good instruction. So, like really making sure that teachers have professional development around those different strategies, best practices, and then I will say like, because I'm not, I wasn't a special ed certified, and that wasn't like my wheelhouse, really leaning into my special ed director or special ed liaison at the time to help support our special education teachers and then also just like through there were different opportunities. A lot of this special ed training was being based off of like, district, so it wasn't, I would say it was more heavily on a district side than what we what we develop at the school level."</p>	<p>"First of all, they get a special professional development, like in the beginning of the school year, just all of the new folks just trying to bring them in a full onboarding them into our policies, procedures, and then getting more in depth around whatever content that they're coming in for. So for our special ed teachers, ensuring that they know what their caseload is really reading those IEPs, to see what their specially designed instruction should look like for their kids, and then also meeting with, at the time, the SEO, and the counselor, and have been going through that process and understanding what that process should look like and what those expectations are around how kids should be supported."</p>

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	you know, firm, fair and consistent.”		
Leader F	<p>“I said this year that I was going to take some additional courses, right, because I really want to be well versed...the training piece, and I was reflecting to professional development, what I might do is say, hey, you know, anyone who, who takes it upon themselves to take more spec courses outside of what we give professional development on school site, there may be some, you know, there's a, there's a bucket, and where we have a commitment to school community on the evaluation, there may be some perks Did you can earn points, because again, that's going beyond and plus, it helps with your certification.”</p>	<p>“The first week that they're a part of the program, they're, you know, formally introduced, given their talents, skills and abilities share that out, not only introduced to the staff, but also to the parents, we have to have a process in which we, we have a personnel Committee that helps select new teachers. And so that, to me, that's the precursor because they get to know colleagues prior to.”</p>	<p>“Very seldom When I hire, and teachers are trying to see if they have any background in special education. So that as far as them being trained, and that's bringing in, we do it in house one once a year, you know, situation and that type of thing. But as far as them having formalized PD outside of the school setting, it hasn't happened.”</p>
Leader G	<p>I rely heavily upon the special ed teacher. Because we have a special ed teacher K to five, and have a special ed teacher 6, 7, 8. Well, our whole push is to try to identify the kids in grades two, three and four, so that we don't have to worry about identifying them six, seven and eight...I guess, over time, I've, I have come to trust the judgment of those two teachers and shared their leadership with them. I just turned it over to him</p>	<p>we do a training at the beginning of every year with all of our regular ed staff. And we just we just talked to Well, first of all, we give them confidentially, give them all the IPS and the accommodations and which kids are which...But we also go through and we intentionally outline the steps necessary to refer a child and also outline the steps necessary to make sure that they're getting the special instruction that they need, the additional instruction or whatever they need, and all accommodations are</p>	<p>I do observations, my head teacher does observations, and our instructional coach does observations, and we just talk to each other. I haven't had to hire a new staff member in four years...But as far as induction, we do all of the induction through the district office with, as far as all of that higher upper end stuff is concerned. As far as the school operations, we have a mentor teacher, we have the instructional coach, and myself.</p>

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		<p>being followed. So, we do a training every year...f our special ed teachers go to additional training with special ed law and changes there or those kinds of things. But as far as our regular ed teachers are concerned, we monitor them really closely and make sure they're taking care of the accommodations. And if there's a necessary for further professional development throughout the year, we would definitely make that available to them.</p>	
Leader H	<p>I think one of the things that we came out of the IEP process is one, teachers were referring students to special ed for issues, and some of them just being regular student issues that they could handle in the classroom. Right. So, it alerted us to the fact that we need to be doing some PD on differentiation for students because this child is struggling, but you could work on this, we don't need to put this child in special ed, just because, you know, they're struggling,</p>	<p>So, we have besides the PD that we have, at the beginning of the school year, we have, we would have five and a half days total. And we usually would do two of them, or three of them, beginning of the year. Before the pandemic we only did to the beginning of the year, that would give us three and a half during the school year. But when the pandemic started, we started doing three at the beginning of the year, and then two and a half during the school year. And those professional developments were not exclusive to special education practice or program. They were practices and programming for all students...special education director would meet with special education teachers</p>	<p>new teacher orientation. As a new teacher orientation usually takes place the fourth week, third week of August. So, we will take place around next week, and it will be three days and they would receive really high-level overview of curriculum, the special education department PLC process. Human Resources, like every day, we get a high level of everything. And that's three days and on top of the regular professional development that takes place during the school year. Okay, so all teachers get five and a half days PD, but the new teachers, we get three additional days for new teacher orientation.</p>

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		<p>monthly, as well as the child study team monthly and when during her monthly child study team meetings and her monthly PLC meetings with special ed teacher, she would do little professional developments with them. But the district wide professional development focused on a number of different topics, not just special ed. If it was something that both the special education teacher and the regular education or gen ed teacher would benefit from, then they would be in the PD together during one of those district wide PD.</p>	
Leader I	<p>So, one of the things is we of course, we want to have, we want to have a good school, we want to have the best school, where everybody wants to come right, and wanting to come and staying and doing right by them. So, one of the things that's important to me is that, you know, every student that's here is somebody's baby. So, we need to treat everybody how we will want are treated or even better. So, you know, having those four parents, that works for us, that was one way of ensuring that we actually did what we said we was going to do, because people aren't here watching us. The other part is just, you know, my expectation is my expectation, when we</p>	<p>So regular education teachers, and all honestly get very little to no training or support with being able to provide the appropriate accommodations and implementing an IEP is just the truth. All right, I suppose special education teachers, you know, our district does provide, you know, our spec homes, go to a meeting once a month and get or PD meeting PD, because it's a little bit random. So, our spec homes go to a meet the acronym, what does this down Santa Oh, special education Compliance Monitor, manager, they changed the name, I think their monitor this year...But so when they would come back, their role was to then provide the training and support</p>	<p>New teachers in our in our district, or new to teaching autistic support. They also can participate in the Billy Ames, which is through Drexel University, where they go through PD, but they also get a coach that comes in the classroom support some help some setup routines and procedures, and they follow them throughout the year. And then after that they can have consultations as needed.</p>

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	provide good customer service, when we meet the needs to the best of our ability to our students. And that goes to sometimes it doesn't fit the mold if we want it to fit. So, really just being flexible.	directly to the teachers Despit Special Education Department. And so, for me, even though my special education teachers were expected to go through their regular weekly, gray group meeting PLC with their great partners, I also had a Monday special education, PLC, just so that they will be able to get that support and training from the spectrum, things that were unique to them	
Leader J	I kind of look at it twofold. So, I'm into Rubins collect collaborative leadership, because the IEP process is collaborative. So I, I believe that when I think of me as an administrator, a combination of a collaborative leader along with a transformational leader, because I'm a change agent...so therefore, I want to make sure that teachers and related service providers, including the and parent educators, even the maintenance staff,... every person in this building is trained on de-escalation and on strategies to deal with kids who have emotional outbursts.	On a weekly basis. Through the Professional Learning Communities.	every act 48 that is held, has a series for new teachers. So, to teachers get trained on the protocols that exist in the school and learning restraint training, learning what the curriculum is, that is held once a month, besides the other PLCs. So, they become familiar with the culture of the school. And they know what our practices are.
Leader K	So, the IEP, it's involved the teacher, the school psychologist, and myself. So, it actually allows it opens, it continually allows for me to learn and grow, about different situation, different developmental delays,	So, I would say so the beginning of the academic year, we had two full day professional development sessions prior. And then I offer every other week, faculty meeting at 730 to discuss any issues, but I am going to say its quality	Well, so the thing about induction is, and this is the one good thing, and I think why people really like Catholic school teachers, if they move over to public, they are in ducked it. So, they do have to go

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	different issues that may happen with a student, which then I learned, the teacher learns, and then we are able to if the situation arises, or a similar situation, it assists us in knowing then how to support the next student.	managed the entire year, professionally developed.	through a to formal professional development trainings, through the diocese, to you know, teach them about communication, parent communication, students support differentiation. So, there are two inductions...there is usually a mentor teacher, like a master Teacher, that they work under to ensure that they know how to give the best teaching methods in the classroom.

APPENDIX F

LEADER RESPONSES TO INFORMATION AND IEP PROCESS QUESTIONS

Table 6

Leader Responses to Information and IEP Process Questions

School Leader	How often do you inform yourself about issues or policy changes that affect special education?	Probing question: If you could change anything about the IEP process what it be?
Leader A	<p>So, the one thing that I think our district is pretty good about is that we do have monthly, like special education, teacher leader meetings. And so those meetings are held with what we call our second special education compliance monitors (SPECM), there's one for every school. And that's where information is given to those persons who, who kind of facilitate that process at the school level. And it could be policy changes, it could be updates from the state corrective action information, new systems, or procedures. So, I meet with my SPECM on once a week...we're reviewing, caseload compliance, student progress, teachers, special education teachers, reviewing new systems from the state, new policies from the state and how that impacts our implementation, and newly identified kids that are in the referral process."</p>	<p>"I think the timeline is too long. I think once a student is given a person- I get that psychologist, you know, will work on multiple cases, and do like testing, but it doesn't take 60 days to determine eligibility. So, I think if, you know, that's a long time, especially if you implement MTSS students can be in MTSS for a year. So, they've already missed, they're already behind and then they missed instruction. Now you want us to wait 60 days and then from there and implementing the IEP, you know, you're looking at a long time where students may not be getting the right supports and is deserving of the right supports. So, I think the legal timeline for completion once they're in the process of being tested, should be shorter."</p>
Leader B	<p>"One, you know, like I said, again, my child, special needs so I try to stay abreast of any federal and or state changes. In case, you know, his school district tries to act dumb I can be up on it. Then to, just so I know how to support my school, and that way I can inform the teachers and the staff as a whole you know, this is what's required by law, this is what we have to do, and this is what we should do. So, I try to make sure that I stay up on what's going on, especially at Law Center. I read up on cases nationwide. You know, I'm a member of ASCD, you know, a lot of publishing companies that help educational leaders know what's going on. What's the current vibe in education, and honestly, every month I see something that if we weren't careful, that could have been me... in a lawsuit.</p>	<p>"I would completely dismantle for the School District; I will completely dismantle the OSS office. That's number one. Number two, OSS needs their own chief, they should not be under the umbrella of Chief of Schools, where the chief academic officer picks the deputy... We need to have a separate intermediate unit (IU), like all the counties where someone else like the state comes."</p>

School Leader	How often do you inform yourself about issues or policy changes that affect special education?	Probing question: If you could change anything about the IEP process what it be?
Leader C	<p>“We realized was that there was a lot of work that needed to be done in those in that area, you know, with special education because I think that while we had a lot of things in place, I think, certainly in our coursework...that was very eye opening for me, you know, to think about just how comprehensive special education really needs to be and to the made me reflect a lot, I think, on the level of service that we are able to offer our students and that There's a lot of, there's a lot of work still to be done in that area in special education is not really under my wheelhouse per se.”</p>	<p>“I think what we would do, you know, having one of the things that that has happened with me over the past couple of years in my new role is that I've really gotten a much better look at some of the new curricula that we purchased within the district. And seeing that there are a lot more what I would consider to be pretty powerful tools. At teacher's disposal, I think that number one, we need to do a better job of using them. But number two, I think we really need to enhance our teacher's skill and understanding how to use the tools at their disposal to differentiate for students within the classroom. So, we so one, one thing I would say, in particular, is that we have a pretty big tendency in our district to modify and not scaffold, right. So I think a lot of our teachers, they, they see students who struggle or maybe are having, they have specific elements that are included in their IEP, and really, rather than diving in deeply and dissecting that they go straight to modifications where rather than scaffold scaffolds that that may help out so and I don't know that that's always really the most appropriate measure for our students.”</p>
Leader D	<p>“Not frequently, most often learn about the trends in information as a district releases them. I receive a few of the educational brochures, news magazines, but overall, not as frequently as I need to overlay (sic), to be honest.”</p>	<p>“I will change my primary change that more students will qualify for education that meets their individual needs. And not they're just grouped in buckets or teams. So that everybody can actually feel like the things that are being taught as was directly for them. But with that, there comes other funding issues or capacity issues that the district that I'm in doesn't really have a solution for.”</p>
Leader E	<p>“Knowing about the different policy changes that affect special ed, a lot of that comes through the special ed department, providing us with the information, just like around the size of a classroom, the amount of space that needs to be in a room for special ed, safety care training, nor EPS and all procedural safeguards, a request for approval private school for kids like going through that process. So, I think a lot of it is you learn as you go, and then also</p>	<p>“I think the over identification of students really analyzing that process. I know now, like, we really go through the MTS s process with the three, you know, the tiers, and once they get to tier three, that, you know, they push them, you know, for specialists. But what I've, what I've seen through teaching, and as being a leader, a lot of times folks want to identify students, because they don't want to do the hard work. And the hard work is like really supporting kids and meeting kids</p>

School Leader	How often do you inform yourself about issues or policy changes that affect special education?	Probing question: If you could change anything about the IEP process what it be?
	based off the information that's provided, and then when there is something new or new policy were made, or definitely made aware of it, because it impacts so many folks in the district... Like, if you're not special ed certified, like you learn as you go..."	where they are and pushing them and motivating them. Like it's the whole game. And it's not just oh, I'm going to teach, but like, how are you supporting those kids? How are you bringing them into the classroom? How are you making them feel welcome? Because a lot of times kids get disengaged, because they don't feel like they're a part of the classroom community or is it even a classroom community is it's so sterile, that it's just like a place that I come into. And I don't feel like I'm a part of, and I think like, there's those missing pieces. And we lose kids. And so, when we lose them."
Leader F	"I said this year that I was going to take some additional courses because I really want to be well versed..."	N/A
Leader G	"I will go to training yearly. Usually, it's through my special ed department they'll go over in the summertime new special ed law, or whatever. Things that come down the pike, and then they'll let me know what that is and if I need further research, I go find out."	"That I could get 100% of understanding from teachers too. Just understand that a couple of these kids might need an extra moment that that because we give them accommodations is not not giving them an advantage over other students. It's making them so they have an equitable chance to learn at a good level so they can grow but that but there's some teachers that have a hard time with that especially the higher level teachers that you know, I wish I wish that I wish and yeah, I just wish I wish every person in the in the education space wouldn't be able to experience what it's like to sit in a classroom and not know how to spell and not know how to read very well. And what that feels like inside. That's what I would change."
Leader H	"Special Ed is the purview of a special ed director...we worked very, very closely together...I can't do anything without having a conversation with her...I'm planning curriculum and instruction, and I'm bringing, you know, programs in such into the district that need to meet the needs of all students. So, she and I would talk regularly. Honestly, she kept me informed of a lot of things they, you know, the state of New Jersey sends out different broadcasts and information of that nature. But she also kept me a form	"So, some of my biggest issues are that we get into special ed, and teachers don't understand what it means to modify and accommodate for students. Right? So, one of the things that frustrates me is it almost because, you know, we're just gonna dumb the material down, so to speak, or we're just going to, you know, make it easier...I wish that special ed teachers were better at truly differentiating, modifying and accommodate instruction for students like not the one size fits all."

School Leader	How often do you inform yourself about issues or policy changes that affect special education?	Probing question: If you could change anything about the IEP process what it be?
	<p>of a lot of things... I would say I'm bringing in a math program, and she would say, okay, well, I need this many minutes... We will sit down and make it work. So that that was helpful, you know, because my background is not special ed, besides being a parent, and a teacher, she has the firm background in special education."</p>	
Leader I	<p>"I always really, truly rely on, you know, that relationship with my special education director or special education compliance monitor (SPECM). I always save time in July, to have a meeting and it is usually about two hours. We really talked about what's coming, what's new, new programming, what our staffing is, what our programming is, where we're going to, we make goals for where we want to spend our time, talked about all the legal cases... and then we have a monthly check in... Whenever she has her meetings and training, they send me all the PowerPoints and the notes for anything I don't understand. They make themselves available for me to have a conversation."</p>	<p>"I think about the IEP process, for the majority of the IEP process is daunting. It is, over their heads. And we do some of it purposefully, we say stuff, and we just, it was like we're having a meeting with each other and not with the family. So, I really think about how we do meetings, how we present information. So one of the things that became really, really important to me, is that make sure the families get the IEP, or whatever documents we're going to do a weekend events, because schools, we love to do it because we're running, we're last minute, we send it out the day before... I'm really hearing parents voice in the process, like hearing parents, knowing what they what they are, what they want for their students, and really honoring it. And if we can't honor that, explain why, you know, but a lot of times, it's our meeting, we say some things."</p>
Leader J	<p>"I believe that when I think of me as an administrator, a combination of a collaborative leader along with a transformational leader, because I'm a change agent. So therefore, I want to make sure that teachers, related service providers, including the parent educators, and even the maintenance staff that every person in this building is trained on de-escalation and on strategies to deal with kids who have emotional outbursts."</p>	N/A
Leader K	<p>"I would say about once a month. It may even be a little more than that, because I meet with our school psychologist personally."</p>	<p>"So my change would be I would have to change the way principals view, special education students and that to mandate I'm going to say it teachers to take special education courses, so that it's not so frightening for them when a child who has you know, special education needs appears before them, that they realize not only does it benefit the child with</p>

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		special education to be in that type of environment, but all the kids around that child benefit. And then when they're out in society, it's not oh my goodness, this person has different behaviors or that it's the neurotypical people that need to be educated about the atypical."