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Partner or Participant? Parent Experiences within Pre-referral Meetings

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Abstract

Existing research on parent experiences in school-based problem-solving team meetings has focused on the special education process; however, the pre-referral process precedes this and may influence future collaborative efforts. This study investigates parents' experiences in pre-referral meetings and explores their perceptions of participation, factors influencing their involvement, and barriers they face. A convergent mixed methods approach was utilized to analyze parents' quantitative and qualitative responses to an online survey; frequency of response to survey items and thematic analysis were used to present a holistic depiction of parents' personal experiences. Results suggested that although parents report positive experiences within their meetings, factors were present that influenced their participation. Parents emphasized the importance of setting clear expectations, effective communication, and limiting technical jargon to enhance their engagement in pre-referral meetings. Connections between the current study and existing literature are made, implications for future research to address the limitations of this study are discussed, and recommendations for schools to promote effective collaboration and improve parent experiences in pre-referral meetings are provided.

Introduction

Schools are complex systems of interprofessional collaboration that, when working as intended, operate like a well-oiled machine. They consist of a diverse selection of roles that provide specific school services to students with the shared goal of promoting development and academic success; the same is true of pre-referral intervention teams. Since the 1980's (Carter & Sugai, 1989, as cited in Buck et al., 2003), these multidisciplinary problem-solving teams have developed strategies to address the academic, behavioral, and social/emotional needs of students in the general education curriculum. These problem-solving teams go by many names (e.g., child study team, teacher assistance team, student strategies team, pre-referral intervention team); however, all refer to school-based problem-solving teams that use a collaborative and systematic approach to address students' difficulties in the least restrictive environment (Buck et al., 2003). The teams, henceforth referred to as pre-referral intervention teams (PITs) are typically composed of general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists and the parents/guardians of the student. While active participation by all team members is one of the foundations of effective and efficient collaboration (Griffiths et al., 2021), multiple aspects of PITs influence the willingness or ability of parents to participate (Esquivel et al., 2008). Parents are a vital part of the pre-referral process; their active participation in PIT meetings and throughout the pre-referral process increases positive student outcomes (Chen & Gregory, 2011; NASP, 2019). The current study intends to expand on previous JMU thesis projects that examined parent experiences within the special education process (Jones, 2016; Knight, 2021). By reviewing the literature around PIT structure and examining factors that affect parent participation, the goal is to identify evidence-based practices for increasing parental satisfaction and facilitating parental engagement in pre-referral intervention team meetings.

Literature Review

Pre-referral intervention teams act as a gateway for students exhibiting academic or behavioral difficulties before being referred for special education evaluations. The intention is to reduce unnecessary special education placements by addressing student needs through problem-solving, implementing interventions, and monitoring student progress within the general education curriculum (Truscott et al., 2005). With such an important purpose, one would imagine that state education departments would closely regulate how these team processes are conducted. However, several national surveys that examined how the pre-referral process has been used in schools have found that schools are often left to their own devices (Buck et al., 2003; Truscott et al., 2005).

In their 2003 study, Buck et al. replicated a national survey conducted by Carter and Sugai (1989) with the intention of updating data on the trends in pre-referral processes used by schools in the United States. Buck et al. (2003) solicited participation by mailing surveys directly to Directors of Special Education in each state, including the District of Columbia, resulting in 51 participants. These surveys asked participants to identify the regulations and policies in place for the pre-referral intervention process, as well as the common practices and outcomes of the process for schools within their state. The findings indicated that instructional modifications and behavioral management interventions were recommended more frequently than a decade prior, but still less than half of the states required the use of the process in schools, and 29% only recommend it (Buck et al., 2003). However, Truscott et al. (2005) recognized the limitations of soliciting responses from such a small sample of individuals that may not have personal experience with the practices used by PITs within school buildings. In their study, Truscott et al. (2005) gathered data by conducting two national surveys. The first survey interviewed state

education representatives (*n*=51) over the phone to gather information regarding state PIT policies and regulations. The second survey collected information about PIT practices and outcomes by conducting phone interviews with school psychologists and school counselors from four randomly selected elementary schools in each state (*n*=200).

Similar findings regarding state regulations were reported in both studies; the majority of states required or recommended the use of PITs; however, few states had guidelines that detailed which individuals PITs should consist of or what practices to use within meetings. The consequence of this limited guidance was reported by Truscott et al. (2005), who found that the surveyed schools did not agree on the goals of the pre-referral process, and often implemented low quality interventions that did not specifically address students' needs. One detail that may be related to this is that parents were only present in 28% of meetings, which limited the ability of PITs to consider factors outside of the school that might contribute to the student's problems (Truscott et al. 2005). It is important to note that both studies were conducted nearly two decades ago and may not accurately reflect the current state of pre-referral intervention processes in schools. Changes in federal special education law such as the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004) have certainly affected the state of PITs. Specifically, parents now had the right to be included in any school-based decision-making teams that intend to make changes to their child's education. However, despite this positive shift towards parental involvement, IDEA did not set guidelines as to how this was meant to be accomplished which left the responsibility of facilitating meaningful participation on the schools.

Collaboration is a necessary consequence of any system of diverse roles operating in parallel. School systems are one example of this, as are pre-referral intervention teams. However, another consequence of this diversity is that differences in training may lead to inconsistent or

ineffective approaches to collaboration, which in turn leads to inconsistent or ineffective student outcomes. Griffiths and colleagues (2021) recognized the need for a consistent foundational model of collaboration and conducted a systematic review of collaborative literature across disciplines to identify key elements of effective collaboration. After conducting an analysis of published research involving models of collaboration in educational, community, and healthcare settings (*N*=34), researchers identified eight common themes which fit into four broad categories or "building blocks" (Griffiths et al., 2021).

The first block, *Relationship Building*, involves open communication, trust, and mutual respect; all of which are necessary for conflict resolution. The second block, *Shared Values and Beliefs*, requires team members to develop shared goals and a common understanding of the problem. The third, *Active Engagement,* highlights the importance of shared responsibility and active participation among members; recognition that each member of the team has a different role and related skills they are expected to contribute. The authors argue that all of the aforementioned conditions are foundations of effective *Collaboration* that are essential for shared decision making and intervention implementation (Griffiths et al., 2021). Relatedly, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) stated the importance of home-school relationships in their 2019 position statement. From their review of the research in this area, it was evident that educators, students, and families all experience benefits when parents form effective partnerships with schools (NASP, 2019).

Unfortunately, minimal research has been conducted in the area of parent involvement within pre-referral meetings. However, Chen and Gregory (2011) sought to fill this gap in the literature by examining how parental involvement affects the pre-referral process and subsequent student outcomes. To accomplish this, the researchers reviewed students' prereferral case records

from 14 public elementary schools. All records were assigned numbers by the pre-referral team throughout a school year and were randomly selected by researchers to be reviewed and coded. Up to 10 records were gathered from each school and only met the researchers' criteria for inclusion if data were available for both the initial and follow-up meetings; the final sample consisted of 88 pre-referral cases. There were more male students in the sample, but the difference was not significant. However, Black students were significantly overrepresented, which aligns with what special education research has shown in the past (Chen & Gregory, 2011). Parent involvement in the process was defined as attending the initial and follow-up meeting, and whether or not parents reported implementing recommended interventions. Finally, the variables of interest were intervention alignment (how closely the interventions aligned with referral concern), and whether students were evaluated for special education. Through correlational and logistic regression analysis, researchers found that higher parent involvement was significantly correlated with increased intervention alignment. On the other hand, when parents were present in at least one PIT meeting, students were significantly less likely to be referred for evaluation. By using multiple regression analysis, these results were significant beyond the effect that race, and gender had on student and PIT outcomes.

While the findings from Chen and Gregory's (2011) study suggest that the quality of pre-referral intervention teams is affected by parents being present in meetings and taking an active role in intervention implementation, it raises the methodological question of what constitutes as meaningful parental involvement. Presence alone is insufficient in determining the extent of their participation as it trivializes any contributions made by parents throughout the pre-referral process. Chen and Gregory (2011) included the delivery of interventions as part of their measurement, yet this still fails to recognize the many other ways in which a parent might be

involved in the various problem-solving stages. In fact, the implementation stage occurs toward the end of the collaborative process (Griffiths et al., 2021) and is dependent on the events leading up to it. For that reason, parent participation throughout the preceding stages of any collaborative process should be carefully considered. Additionally, factors related to the foundations of collaboration may affect parent participation, such as their relationship with members of the PIT, or how valuable parents perceive their input to be. Esquivel et al. (2008) specifically examined these factors among others in a phenomenological study that explored involved parents' experiences within collaborative multidisciplinary teams. The participants were current and former members of a school district's special education advisory committee (*N*=17) who parented children receiving special education services. Parents were asked to complete a survey that prompted them to describe their positive and negative experiences participating in school team meetings, as well as the details of the meeting and their feelings regarding the experience. The researchers summarized and interpreted the responses before submitting a follow-up survey to check for accuracy and clarification.

After coding the responses, five thematic categories were identified: meeting context and organization, relationships, communication, problem-solving, and parent emotions (Esquivel et al., 2008). Some of the factors that contributed to positive experiences were smaller meeting sizes, taking a strengths-based approach when discussing the student, and actively encouraging parent feedback and team collaboration. Additionally, parents reported that forming relationships with team members outside of the meetings facilitated participation, as did being involved in the meeting's planning and organizational processes (Esquivel et al., 2008). However, one notable limitation of the study that authors identified was the small sample size and lack of diversity among the participants; all were White, middle class, and highly educated (Esquivel et al., 2008).

Esquivel et al. (2008) notes that parents with lower socioeconomic status may take a less active role in these meetings, preferring to leave the decisions up to educators instead. Considered together, the findings reported by Chen and Gregory (2011) and Esquivel et al. (2008) suggest that parents feel more meaningfully involved when their contributions to the team are encouraged and recognized, and this involvement may lead to higher quality of pre-referral interventions and better student outcomes.

Building off of Esquivel and colleagues' (2008) findings, Jones further explored the perceptions of parents involved in multidisciplinary team meetings in her 2016 study. Utilizing semi-structured interview questions adapted from Esquivel et al.'s (2008) research, Jones (2016) sought to explore parent perceptions of the meetings, their understanding prior to and following the meeting, and specific aspects of the experience they found valuable. Parents were recruited based on their upcoming participation in either PITs or special education eligibility meetings. Those who consented to participate (*N*=11) were first observed during their meeting before taking part in a phone interview with the researcher. Using thematic analysis to organize and interpret the data, Jones (2016) concluded that parents' perceptions of the multidisciplinary team meetings they took part in were positive overall, though negative emotions such as guilt, stress, anger, hurt, and fear were also prevalent. Similar to Esquivel et al.'s (2008) findings, parents reported appreciating the strengths-based approach school staff took when describing their child's functioning. In her observations, Jones (2016) notes that school staff typically only encouraged parents to participate after they had finished speaking; one participant reported feeling unsure about when it was acceptable to contribute to the conversation. Additionally, another participant felt that the amount of jargon used throughout the meeting would likely intimidate parents unfamiliar with the technical language (Jones, 2016). This finding and several

others were echoed by Knight (2021) in his exploratory mixed-methods study investigating parent experiences in eligibility meetings.

Although his recruitment procedures and data analysis were nearly identical to Jones' (2016), Knight's (2021) study utilized a locally developed questionnaire in addition to follow-up interviews to capture data from parent participants (*N*=20). Results from the questionnaire suggest that the majority of participants felt comfortable asking questions during their meeting and felt that their contributions were meaningful, though several respondents disagreed with those statements and also indicated feeling misunderstood by the school-based team (Knight, 2021). Parents reported experiencing a range of emotions that closely align with past research (Esquivel et al., 2008; Jones, 2016); the most frequently reported emotion was sadness (Knight, 2021). Additionally, qualitative data from the follow-up interview suggests parents experienced frustration at the frequent use of jargon and somewhat overwhelmed by the amount of information presented to them. Finally, parents who received validation for their concerns and suggestions felt that they had more positive experiences in the meetings (Knight 2021). Overall, the findings between the three studies are strikingly similar. Parents tend to report positive experiences when collaborating with other team members, especially in intimate settings with fewer members present; however, the lack of empathy, absence of encouragement, and use of technical language by the school staff serve to decrease participation (Esquivel et al., 2008; Jones, 2016; Knight, 2021). This suggests that educators are the individuals responsible for facilitating a collaborative environment that encourages participation from all members of PITs.

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this convergent mixed methods study was to better understand the factors that influence parent participation in pre-referral intervention team meetings, and as a result, contribute to the existing body of research that has examined parent experiences in collaborative multi-disciplinary teams (Jones, 2016; Knight, 2021). Much of the research surrounding parent participation in school-based problem-solving team meetings has focused on special education eligibility meetings. However, pre-referral meetings are typically parents' first exposure to school-based problem-solving teams, given that they act as a gateway into special education and occur before the eligibility process. Considering this, schools should be aware of the precedent that poor experiences in initial meetings might set toward future home-school collaboration and participation in team meetings. By surveying parents and guardians with past involvement in pre-referral intervention team meetings, the intent was to answer the following questions:

1. How do parents view their own levels of participation in pre-referral team meetings?
2. What factors of pre-referral team meetings influence parent participation?
3. What barriers to participation do parents experience in pre-referral team meetings, and how might schools address these barriers?

Research Design

This study employed a convergent mixed methods design to investigate parent participation within pre-referral intervention team meetings. The research design encompassed qualitative analysis of open-ended responses and quantitative analysis of Likert scale items, aiming to provide a more holistic understanding of parent perspectives and experiences than

isolated methods of analysis would allow (Hott et al., 2021). Additionally, an online survey was used as the primary method of data collection for several reasons: First, the convenience and flexibility offered by online surveys allowed participants to complete the survey at their own pace and in their preferred location. Relatedly, the anonymous nature of the survey facilitated a more open and honest expression of views, which is particularly relevant given the sensitive nature of this data. Finally, using a brief online survey provided access to a larger and more diverse sample of participants than would be possible with direct parent interviews.

Procedures

Approval for this study was first obtained through the district's school board, followed by the James Madison University (JMU) IRB (protocol #: 23-3867). Initially, participation in the study was solicited by five of the district's school psychologists who directly approached parents and guardians following elementary-level pre-referral meetings both parties had attended. A recruitment flyer was distributed to parents interested in participating in the study; this flyer included information about the study and methods to access the online questionnaire. Roughly 30 flyers were distributed to potential candidates using this method, however, only one response was received. Due to the limited response rate, and a decreased number of pre-referral meetings occurring toward the end of the school year, data collection procedures were adjusted to expand the subject pool. Once approval for the changes in data collection procedures were received from the district's school board, and amendments to the protocol were approved by the JMU IRB, lists of students for which pre-referral meetings were held in three elementary schools during the 2022-2023 school year were obtained from the meeting facilitators at these three schools within the district. Meeting minutes for each student were reviewed to determine if: 1) the pre-referral

meeting occurred during the current school year, and 2) if the student's parent/guardian was physically present in this meeting. If both were true, the parent/guardian's email address was obtained from the student's records and documented in a separate spreadsheet. After sorting these data, 93 candidates were identified as meeting criteria for inclusion in the study. These candidates were emailed a copy of the recruitment flyer, as well as a link to complete the online questionnaire. Copies of the recruitment flyer and survey items are provided in appendices A and B, respectively.

Participants

Of the candidates recruited through direct solicitation by a school psychologist in the district, one individual responded to the online questionnaire. Once data collection was adjusted to expand the subject pool, 93 potential candidates were emailed the aforementioned recruitment flyer and a link to complete the online questionnaire; out of these potential candidates, 11 parents responded to the survey. Together, the final pool of participants included in this study consisted of 12 English-speaking parents and guardians who physically attended pre-referral intervention team meetings for their children within three elementary schools in a rural public school district in Virginia during the 2022-2023 school year. Parents were recruited through direct solicitation by a school psychologist following the pre-referral meeting, or by email communication. Participation in this study was completely voluntary and no incentives were provided. Informed consent was obtained from parents and guardians through the cover page of the online survey. Additionally, to protect participant confidentiality no demographic information was collected through the review of case records or by the questionnaire. Due to the anonymous nature of the questionnaire, the exact elementary school at which parents' respective pre-referral meetings

were held could not be determined; however, the team composition and structure of the pre-referral meetings would be similar for each parent, as the schools were each beholden to the district's policies.

Measures

A locally developed questionnaire consisting of three open-ended and 14 five-point Likert scale items was used to collect data from participants. Completion of the questionnaire was expected to take no more than 10-15 minutes of the participant's time. Items were developed based on the foundational aspects of collaboration identified by Griffiths et al. (2021) and adapted from relevant items and interview questions created by Jones (2016) and Knight (2021). The survey items sought to identify participant's perception of their own participation in the meeting, methods used by school staff and aspects of the meeting that influenced parent participation, as well as perceived barriers to participation that schools might address in the future. Specifically, Likert items one through four addressed research question one, items five through 10 addressed question two, and items 11 through 14 correspond with question three; open ended items one through three directly align with research questions one through three, respectively.

Analysis

Once data collection concluded, responses were pulled from QuestionPro and organized into separate spreadsheets. The quantitative analysis focused on 14 Likert scale items that measured various aspects of parent participation. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly

Agree, or N/A). The frequency of responses for each item was calculated, providing insight into parents' views on their own participation in pre-referral team meetings, factors influencing their participation, as well as encountered barriers. In parallel, qualitative data from participant responses to open-ended questions were subjected to thematic analysis by the lead researcher. Through an inductive approach, described by Braun and Clarke (2006), responses were organized and analyzed in a comparative manner to uncover recurring patterns, concepts, and ideas within the data. Finally, frequency of responses from the Likert scale items were compared with the qualitative data to identify consistencies, discrepancies, and relationships between the two sets of findings.

Positionality, Trustworthiness, and Rigor

As the researcher conducting this study, it is important to acknowledge and reflect upon my own positionality and potential biases that may have influenced the research process and findings. I recognize that my background, experiences, and beliefs shape the way I perceive and interpret the data collected. Firstly, I come from a background in education and have a vested interest in understanding and improving parent participation in pre-referral meetings. This personal interest and familiarity with the educational system could have influenced my approach to the research and the questions asked during data collection. Moreover, it is important to note that my own cultural and linguistic background may have influenced the way I understood and interpreted the participants' experiences. Recognizing the potential for bias, I engaged in ongoing reflexivity and critically reflected upon my assumptions and preconceived notions of participation and what parents value from schools. Additionally, as a researcher, I am aware of the power dynamics inherent in the researcher/practitioner-participant relationship. Participants

may have been inclined to provide socially desirable responses or may have felt obligated to conform to societal expectations. To address this, an anonymous online survey was used to allow participants to complete it in an environment in which they felt comfortable expressing their genuine perspectives. By acknowledging and actively reflecting upon my positionality, I aim to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the study. While efforts were made to minimize biases and maintain objectivity, it is important for readers to be aware of the potential influence of the researcher's position on the research process and findings. Transparency in acknowledging and addressing these biases strengthens the overall rigor and validity of the study.

To further ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, various additional measures were taken throughout the research process. To establish credibility, multiple data collection methods were employed. Firstly, Likert scale items were used to gather quantitative data, providing a standardized measurement of parents' perceptions. Additionally, a comprehensive questionnaire allowed parents to provide more detailed and nuanced responses. The combination of these methods allowed for triangulation, strengthening the credibility of the results.

While this study was conducted in a specific context with a limited sample size, efforts were made to provide detailed descriptions of the research setting and participants. This allows readers to assess the applicability of the findings to similar contexts. Additionally, the inclusion of direct quotations from participants enhances the transferability of the study, providing readers with firsthand accounts of parents' experiences. Next, to ensure dependability, a clear and systematic research process was followed. The research design, including the selection of participants, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures, were thoroughly documented. This transparency allows for the replication of the study in similar settings, increasing the dependability of the findings. Finally, confirmability refers to the objectivity and

neutrality of the study findings. To enhance confirmability, the researcher's positionality and

potential biases were acknowledged and critically reflected upon.

Results

Table 1
Parent responses to the Participation Questionnaire

	Frequency of Ratings (N=12)				
	Strongly Disagree	**Disagree**	**Agree**	**Strongly Agree**	**N/A**
1) I felt like I was a meaningful contributor in the meeting.	2	1	4	5	0
2) I felt satisfied with my level of participation in the meeting	2	0	6	4	0
3) I felt that I should have offered more suggestions during the meeting	0	10	1	0	1
4) I felt that I should have asked more questions during the meeting	0	9	3	0	0
5) I felt comfortable asking questions, when necessary	0	1	6	5	0
6) I felt comfortable expressing my feelings during the meeting	0	2	5	5	0
7) I was encouraged to contribute by a member of the school team	1	3	6	2	0
8) I felt that the other members of the team valued my contributions	0	2	7	3	0
9) I experienced negative emotions during the meeting (anger, guilt, sadness, anxiety)	2	4	3	2	1
10) I experienced empathy from at least one member of the school team	0	2	6	2	2
11) My prior contact with members of the school team has been positive overall.	0	1	8	3	0
12) I feel satisfied with the amount of communication the school has had with me	1	2	4	5	0
13) I had a clear understanding of my role within the team meeting	0	1	8	3	0
14) I felt that each member of the team contributed equally during the meeting	0	2	8	2	0

Of the 93 candidates emailed, 11 completed the Likert scale items, and six of these

completed the full questionnaire; the single participant recruited through direct solicitation

completed the full questionnaire and was included in the final dataset as the method of recruitment was not believed to influence participants' responses. While the sample size for the qualitative data may be smaller, parent responses still provided valuable insights and perspectives that complement the quantitative data. The following sections discuss participant responses to the survey items as they relate to each research question. Responses to the Likert scale items can be found in Table 1.

Perceptions of Participation

Survey items related to the first research question explored parents' perceived levels of participation following pre-referral meetings they attended. Most participants rated their levels of participation positively; nine parents felt that they had made meaningful contributions to the meeting, although three raters disagreed with this statement. Similarly, although two raters were dissatisfied with their level of participation, the majority of parents reported feeling satisfied. Additionally, 10 parents did not feel that they should have offered more suggestions during the meeting, however, a quarter of participants felt that they should have asked more questions. The first open-ended question expanded on this by asking parents to reflect on their expectations of participating prior to the meeting, and whether these expectations were met. Most of those that completed the open-ended responses reported that they expected to share information about their child's home-life and how their child's behaviors at home might contribute or relate to their current challenges at school. Several parents specifically identified "conveying [my child's] perspective" as an expectation they came prepared to share, however, one parent admitted that they had no expectations entering into the meeting as they had not participated in a meeting such as this before. A theme that emerged from responses to the first question was *Alignment with*

Expectations. Five parents expressed that their participation in the pre-referral meetings met or exceeded their expectations. Either from previous experiences in pre-referral meetings, or due to intentional preparation from a member of the team, parents expected, and found, the team members to be supportive, open to input, and interested in finding solutions for their child's needs.

Factors Influencing Participation

The second research question sought to identify factors that participants in this study felt influenced their participation, both positively and negatively. While most parents endorsed feeling comfortable asking questions and expressing their feelings, one participant felt uncomfortable asking questions, and two felt uncomfortable expressing their feelings. Furthermore, just under half of participants reported experiencing feelings of anger, guilt, sadness, or anxiety in their meetings. Eight parents reported that at least one member of the school team expressed feelings of empathy; two parents disagreed with this, and two parents felt that it did not apply to their experiences. Several notable themes emerged from the open-ended responses; the first, *Supportive and Caring Attitudes*, relates to parents' emotions and comfort. Four parents mentioned that the school team's efforts to help their child and their genuine care encouraged their participation; they appreciated the team's positive and open approach in addressing their child's needs and providing support.

The second theme, *Communication and Active Listening*, was identified in two parents' responses: one parent expressed feeling discouraged by the school psychologist's actions, stating that "she wanted to put up walls and barriers and really wasn't listening to what had been said by me or the rest of the team." In contrast, another parent highlighted the meeting facilitator's clear communication of expectations, as well as the team's attentive listening, which encouraged their

participation. Only eight out of the 12 participants reported receiving direct encouragement from a member of the school team, but 10 felt that their contributions were still valued. One parent shared in their open-ended response that they were asked to speak first in the meeting, which "...made me feel that my concerns were valid and at the forefront of the meeting." On the other hand, another parent recalled "stifling some comments due to concerns on how they would be perceived by the team."

Overcoming Barriers

The third research question expands on the second by directly identifying barriers to participation that result from actions taken by the school team, and obtaining parents' perspectives on how schools might address these barriers in the future. Overall, parents rated their past interactions with members of the school team to be positive, though one parent disagreed with this. Most parents rated their prior communication with the school positively, however, three raters were dissatisfied with the amount of communication they received. All but one parent felt that they had a clear understanding of their role within the meeting, and 10 parents felt that each member contributed equally during the meeting. The most notable theme identified in this area was *Education and Support.* In their open-ended responses two parents expressed concern with the jargon used during the meeting, one stating that "sometimes [the school team] would refer to tests or assessments and I did not know what they were … they did not offer me an explanation", while the other added that the school team "... also spoke of different teaching modalities that I am unaware of" and went on to suggest that schools offer a summary of commonly used terms to parents beforehand. The importance of clarifying

expectations was repeated by one parent, who suggested that schools should "lay out expectations for all those involved, including what the parent/guardian will be looked to for."

Discussion

The current study exists within a continuum of research surrounding parent experiences in school problem-solving meetings (Jones, 2016; Knight 2021); however, pre-referral meetings have not been specifically addressed. As stated previously, pre-referral meetings may be a parent's first opportunity to collaborate with the school, and effective collaboration is difficult, if not impossible to achieve if barriers to participation are present (Griffiths et al., 2021). The purpose of this study was to explore parents' experiences within pre-referral meetings, and by doing so, discover 1) how parents view their own participation, 2) identify factors that influence participation, and 3) identify barriers to participation that schools might address. While the majority of parents in the current study held positive perceptions of their own participation, and reported positive experiences in these meetings, several factors were present that influenced their participation and experiences, nonetheless. In addition, four notable themes emerged from an analysis of parents' qualitative survey responses; these were *Alignment with Expectations, Supportive and Caring Attitudes, Communication and Active Listening,* and *Education and Support.*

Although the first research question did not specifically address this, how a parent expects to participate prior to the meeting may influence their perception of their own participation following the meeting. This is particularly apparent when parents lack prior experience in school-based problem-solving team meetings. Without adequate preparation or information, they may not fully understand the purpose of the meeting, their role as a member of

the team, or how to prepare the information they will be expected to share. Providing parents with a clear understanding of their role and the purpose of their participation can help alleviate any uncertainties and empower them to actively engage in discussions. In fact, clear expectations of roles and responsibilities was one of the higher-level aspects of collaboration Griffiths et al. (2021) highlighted in their study. One potential method school-based teams might adopt to provide this to parents would be to include a brief summary of information they should be prepared to share with the team or provide a list of frequently asked questions when the parent is first contacted for scheduling purposes. The meeting facilitator is typically responsible for inviting both school staff and parents to these meetings, so the added responsibility of simultaneously distributing a summary of expectations would be a reasonable addition that could lead to an improved understanding of attendee's roles.

In addition to setting expectations, several factors were identified in the literature review as both positive and negative influences on participation, including the use of technical jargon, meeting size, emotions experienced by the parent during the meeting, relationships between team members, and the effectiveness of collaborative efforts among team members (Esquivel et al., 2008; Jones, 2016; Knight, 2021). With the exception of meeting size, the majority of these influences were alluded to, if not directly addressed, by parents in the current study. One of the themes identified in their responses, *Supportive and Caring Attitudes*, closely relates to the relationships developed between parents and members of the school team. Positive interactions with teachers and educators, who showed openness, honesty, and interest in meeting the child's needs, were mentioned by several parents, and may impact a parent's willingness to ask questions and express their thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, supporting parents by directly encouraging their participation, such as being asked to speak first or having their concerns

prioritized also facilitated parent engagement. Building supportive relationships based on communication, trust, and mutual respect is not only beneficial to participation (Esquivel et al., 2008), but also the foundation of effective collaboration (Griffiths et al., 2021).

The second theme related to factors influencing participation, *Communication and Active Listening,* highlighted the importance of actively demonstrating engagement in discussions. Parents in this study felt validated when other members of the team showed interest in their contributions to problem-solving conversations. Conversely, one parent recalled a negative experience in which a team member failed to attend to what had been said by the parent and other members of the team. Active listening is an intentional method of communication individuals can use to validate a speaker's efforts by conveying feelings of interest, empathy, and understanding. In order to assist preservice education professionals in developing this skill McNaughton et al. (2008) developed the LAFF active listening strategy. This mnemonic encouraged teachers to 1) Listen, empathize, and communicate respect, 2) Ask questions and ask permission to take notes, 3) Focus on the issues at hand, and 4) Find a first step towards addressing the issue. Parents overwhelmingly agreed that teachers who applied this strategy demonstrated stronger communication skills than those who did not (McNaughton et al., 2008). By actively listening to parents and attending to their emotions, school-based team members can avoid the challenges that miscommunication presents in collaborative settings.

The third and final research question sought to identify barriers to participation parents experienced, and methods schools can use to overcome them. In their studies, Esquivel et al. (2008), Jones (2016), and Knight (2021) identified the frequent use of technical language, poor or absent relationships with the school-based team members, and parents' experience of negative emotions as barriers to participation that negatively influence parents' experiences and

subsequent collaboration. Given that the focus of the pre-referral process is on a student's challenges at school, feelings of sadness, anger, guilt, or anxiety are common emotions parents may experience, but should still be responded to with an empathic approach as they occur. In this study, the majority of parents reported maintaining positive relationships with members of their pre-referral teams and felt that school-based members conveyed empathy in response to their feelings of sadness or guilt. Although these are factors that influence participation, parents in the current study did not experience them as barriers to participation in their own meetings. However, several parents identified jargon as an area schools should address in the future. The theme of *Education and Support* emerged in this section due to parents' reports of feeling confused by unfamiliar technical terms used by school-based team members. One parent suggested that schools provide summaries of teaching methods and tests used in the school before the meetings take place. Providing this information can help parents become familiar with the approaches and terminology, enabling them to actively participate during meetings. Additionally, another parent highlighted the importance of educating parents about the steps to take when a child needs additional support. Schools can offer resources, workshops, or information sessions to help parents navigate the process and feel more empowered in their participation.

It should be noted that the team composition of pre-referral meetings may vary depending on the school district, as do the procedures that guide the meetings themselves (Buck et al., 2003; Truscott et al., 2005). The school district used for the current study may not reflect policies in place throughout other districts within the state, so it is possible that aspects of meetings within the district influenced the positive experiences parents in the current study reported. One aspect in particular is the individual responsible for organizing the meetings, distributing invitations to

parents and school staff, and facilitating the meetings themselves; this is the role of the intervention specialist. The school-based team members typically invited to pre-referral meetings in this district include the intervention specialist, the school psychologist, the student's general education teacher, an administrator, and the parent or guardian of the student. Although the nature of the student's concern may lead to other specialists being included, the core school-based team will consist of the aforementioned individuals. Parents in the current study specifically identified the intervention specialist as the individual that provided clarification of expectations prior to the meeting as well as direct encouragement to participate in team discussions. Because these factors contributed to positive parent experiences and increased engagement, it may be beneficial for schools to have an individual "point person" responsible for connecting with the parent in-order to communicate expectations, answer questions, and provide support to parents before, during, and after the meetings conclude. The intervention specialist is the individual responsible for this facilitation in the case of this district, but any one member of the school-based team could include this as an aspect of their role.

The familiarity and comfortability that members of the school-based team have over parents with regard to the function and procedures of problem-solving meetings cannot be overstated. For some school staff, meetings such as these may occur on a daily basis, so the opportunities to learn from their experiences and refine their understanding of the information discussed are plentiful compared to those available to parents. School psychologists in particular are common members of the school-based team that tend to hold the most knowledge and experience of pre-referral practices and procedures. As experts in intervention and assessment, they also tend to be more familiar with the technical language used in schools and in their practice when compared to general education teachers and administrators. As a result, school

psychologists are likely the most qualified individuals to provide guidance to other school-based team members on how to collaborate effectively and include parents in this process. Specifically connecting this idea to the thematic findings of the current study suggests that school psychologists could provide professional development opportunities to school staff such as the previously mentioned LAFF training to increase the use of active listening, guidance on how to reduce the use of jargon by explaining technical language in parent friendly language, and become a resource to parents by providing information on how to support their child's needs outside of the school building. Knowledge is just one factor that, if not addressed strategically, can lead to an imbalance of power between members of the team, and parents are the individuals that are most likely to be impacted by this. Developing effective partnerships with parents requires more time and effort than pre-referral meetings allow for; they are just one opportunity schools have to facilitate a working relationship with their students' families.

Limitations

The current study has several limitations, most notably is the sample size. Efforts were made to increase the survey response rate by adjusting the methods of recruitment, however, participant engagement was still limited. In addition, this study only included parents that had physically attended pre-referral meetings, so the experiences of parents for which more significant barriers exist, such as transportation or negative relationships with the school, were not captured. Additionally, the current study took place in a single school district; previous studies had shown that pre-referral guidelines differ among schools (Buck et al., 2003; Truscott et al., 2005), so it is possible that replications of this study outside of this school district may produce different results depending on the pre-referral procedures in-place. Finally, demographic

information was not collected, and only English-speaking parents were included in the study, so the influence of race, ethnicity, and language could not be considered in the results. It is entirely possible, and very likely, that parents with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds experience different or more significant barriers to participation in their children's education than parents that share these demographic features with the school team.

Implications for Future Research and Recommendations for Schools

Future research should address the aforementioned limitations of this study, such the lack of cultural and linguistic considerations as well as the small sample size. Also, to expand upon the continuum of research that this study exists in, direct consideration of the methods that school-based members of the team use to encourage participation and parent involvement, what, if any, specific frameworks for facilitating engagement are being used, and how these actions relate to levels of parent participation are other topics beyond the scope of this current study that should be considered in the future.

Parents identified several actions that schools could take to increase positive parent experiences and facilitate participation in pre-referral meetings such as intentional preparation and setting expectations for parents and other members of the team parents prior to the meeting, supporting parents' understanding of technical language related to teaching modalities or assessment batteries, and most importantly, building relationships with parents prior to the meetings taking place. Additionally, although participants from this study did not directly mention this, in their study, Knight (2021) suggested that a strategy schools could take to clarify parent's understanding of the material discussed is to follow-up with parents after the meeting and provide a space to ask and respond to questions that may have arisen once the meeting had

concluded. At the very least, parents may benefit from frequent check-ins during the meetings to ensure they understand the materials being presented. Results from this study support the value of preparing parents to participate in pre-referral meetings by providing clear definitions of technical language, maintaining positive relationships with parents, and directly encouraging parent engagement.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT FLYER

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research project. My name is Mason Folk, I am a graduate student in the James Madison University School Psychology program, and an intern school psychologist in ACPS. Your participation in this study will contribute to the completion of my graduate thesis project.

The purpose of this study is to explore how parents and guardians participate in pre-referral team meetings, also referred to as student strategies team meetings. By learning about your experiences, I hope to find methods that schools can use to help parents feel more comfortable actively participating in these meetings.

You will be asked to complete an anonymous survey which asks a series of questions related to your experiences as a member of the pre-referral team. Questions will ask about your view of your own participation in the meeting, aspects of the meeting and methods used by school staff that you believe affected your participation, as well as barriers to participation that schools might address in the future.

Time Required	**Incentives**
Participation in this study will require approximately 15 minutes of your time.	You will not receive any direct compensation for participation in this study.
Benefits	**Risks**
There are no potential direct benefits for your participation in this study. However, your participation may contribute to positive outcomes for future parents and guardians collaborating with school staff, and will contribute to the growing body of research on parent participation and home-school collaboration.	The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Confidentiality

The results of this research will be presented at a Graduate Psychology Research Symposium. While individual responses are obtained and recorded anonymously and kept in the strictest confidence, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. At the end of the study, all records will be destroyed. Final aggregate results will be made available to participants upon request.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. However, once your responses have been submitted and anonymously recorded you will not be able to withdraw from the study.

Questions about the Study

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

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Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject

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Giving of Consent

I have read this cover letter and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about this study and have received satisfactory answers to my questions. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age. By accessing the survey using the QR code or link below, and completing and submitting this anonymous survey, I am consenting to participate in this research.

QR Code Instructions (iPhone or Android):

Open your phone's built-in camera app. Point the camera at the QR code so that the full square is visible on your screen. Tap the banner that appears and prompts you to open the link. The survey will open in your default web browser (Chrome, Safari, Firefox). If you experience any problems with the QR code, please type the link below into your web browser:

Jmu.questionpro.com/ParentParticipation

This study has been approved by the James Madison University IRB and ACPS School Board
IRB Protocol # **23-3867** – Approved on **03/03/2023**

APPENDIX B - Parent Questionnaire

For the purposes of this survey, a pre-referral intervention team or student strategies team meeting is a problem-solving meeting involving multiple school staff that takes place following a student's academic or behavioral difficulties being identified, but before a student is referred for a special education evaluation.

For the following questions, please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.
1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) or N/A (Not Applicable)

1. I felt like I was a meaningful contributor in the meeting.

2. I felt satisfied with my level of participation in the meeting.

3. I felt that I should have offered more suggestions during the meeting.

4. I felt that I should have asked more questions during the meeting.

5. I felt comfortable asking questions, when necessary.

6. I felt comfortable expressing my feelings during the meeting.

7. I was encouraged to contribute by a member of the school team.

8. I felt that the other members of the team valued my contributions.

9. I experienced negative emotions during the meeting (anger, guilt, sadness, anxiety)

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

11. My prior contact with members of the school team has been positive overall.

12. I feel satisfied with the amount of communication the school has had with me.

13. I had a clear understanding of my role within the team meeting.

14. I felt that each member of the team contributed equally during the meeting.

Please answer the following questions in a few short sentences:

- Prior to the meeting, how did you expect to participate? In what ways did your participation in the meeting differ from or meet your expectations?

- What aspects of the meeting or the team do you feel encouraged your participation? What aspects discouraged your participation?

- What actions do you believe schools could take to make other parents feel more comfortable participating in these meetings?

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