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Parents of students with disabilities views of schools' efforts to facilitate their involvement in their child's educational progress

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Parents of Students with Disabilities Views of Schools' Efforts to Facilitate their

Involvement in their Child's Educational Progress

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An Honors Program Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of EXED, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION
This work is accepted for presentation in full at the Harrisonburg City Public Schools building on 1 Court Square on 4/14.

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Acknowledgements

The objective of this Senior Honors Project was to investigate schools' efforts to collaborate with parents of children receiving special education services within Harrisonburg City Public Schools in the State of Virginia. The study had two primary purposes.

The first was to empower parents by educating them about special education laws and their rights concerning how to obtain services for their child. The workshops, presented by the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center (PEATC), addressed areas such as communication skills and interpersonal skills for the purposes of bolstering relationships between schools and parents.

Second, since schools sometimes fail to effectively involve parents of students with disabilities in their child's education, parents do not get involved as much as they should in order to support their child's educational progress. (Zetlin & Curcic, 2013; Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2015; Rodriguez, Blatz & Elbaum, 2014). Therefore, a study was conducted using surveys and focus group interviews to obtain information about parents' perceptions of schools' efforts to facilitate their involvement. This feedback led to recommendations on best practices schools may use to collaborate with families more effectively.

Literature Review

Parent involvement is an important contributor towards children's success in school (Tran, 2014; Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 states that parent involvement includes playing an essential part in helping their children learn and being full partners in their child's education. Therefore, parents are included, if necessary, in decision making and educational committees regarding their child's education. (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that mandates services to children with disabilities in every state. Services such as early intervention, special education, and in-school accommodations must be accessible to eligible infants, children and youth from birth to age 21 (IDEA, 2004). Therefore, any services established in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings must be given to the child. The purpose of the IEP is to create a written educational program for each child with a disability that is established, reviewed, and revised in a meeting with team members composed of the special education teacher, the regular education teacher, an educational agency representative, the child if appropriate, an individual who can interpret evaluation results, and the parent (IDEA, 2004). Parents' concerns must also be addressed and they are to be treated as equal partners of the IEP Team (IDEA, 2004).

A section of IDEA also requires collection of data by states during the period of the State Performance Plan (IDEA, 2004). Because IDEA says that states are required to report to the federal government on their progress on 20 indicators of performance in State Performance Reports, the surveys used involve questions designed to demonstrate performance on Indicator 8, which are schools' efforts to involve parents for the purpose of improving their child's educational progress (SPP; U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

States are required to report on the extent to which they facilitate the involvement of parents of students receiving special education services (IDEA, 2004). Despite the emphasis on parent involvement in educational law, data has shown that invitations from schools to involve parents have been lacking (Zetlin & Curcic 2013; Fish, 2008). As a result, parents may take personal initiative to become involved with schools (Rodriguez, Blatz & Elbaum, 2014).

The U.S. Department of Education mandates that Individualized Education Plans should "create an opportunity for teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and students (when appropriate) to work together to improve educational results for children with disabilities." Despite being mandated by law for equal team memberships, parents face barriers that hinder their voice in their children's education. Some school administrators fail to give parents opportunities to better understand IEPs. IDEA is complex and hard for many parents to understand (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2015). This often lends to school administrators having the upper hand in deciding accommodations for children with disabilities (Zetlin & Curcic 2013; Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2015).

Parents also feel that school administrators do not take the time to understand their children's needs and speed through IEP meetings in order cross off another one off the list. This has resulted in asymmetrical relationships between caregivers and schools, the lack of implementation of IEPs, and tension between both parties (Zetlin & Curcic 2013, Fish 2008). The importance of effective school facilitation of parent involvement is important for children's academic success.

Why Do Parents Get Involved?

Hoover-Dempsey (2005) notes that motivation for parental involvement stems from three sources. First, parents' motivational beliefs arise from a sense of personal efficacy, a belief

in one's abilities to help their child learn, and role construction, which is the way in which parents perceive their role in becoming involved in their child's learning (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Second, parent involvement depends on parents' perceptions of the degree to which the school and the child invite the parent to become involved (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). If invitations and school climate are welcoming, parents are more likely to get involved (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). Third, parent involvement also depends on the family context, which includes factors such as socioeconomic status, education, culture, and availability (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). If parents experience one or more constraints in their lifestyles, they are less likely to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). In addition, creation of trust in school administrators and teachers is essential for responding to involvement invitations (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005).

According to a recent study, parents who felt personal responsibility for getting involved and had time to do so, still struggled to become involved due to an absence of schools' invitations to reach out to them (Fish, 2008). When parents pushed for further participation in Individualized Education Program meetings to determine services for their children, they were met with antagonism and an unwillingness to collaborate from school personnel (Zetlin & Curcic 2013; Fish, 2008). This has led to poor pre-IEP information sharing, meager post-IEP follow ups, and parental confusion (Zetlin & Curcic 2013, Fish 2008).

Method

  This project was approved by the Harrisonburg City Public Schools division, the JMU

Honors Program, and the JMU Institutional Review Board. Workshops were coordinated in

collaboration with the Parent Educational Advocacy Training Center stationed in Falls Church,

Virginia. A faculty scholarship grant of $4, 830 was awarded by JMU'S College of Education to

support project related activities. Letters in both English and Spanish were sent to over 500

parents throughout Harrisonburg city public schools inviting them to attend parent efficacy

training workshops. These workshops were held approximately once a month at JMU's Hiner

room in Memorial Hall on Thursdays from 5:30-7:30pm. Signed consent forms were obtained

from 17 parents who participated in the meetings. Parents were given a number and were

identified only by that number throughout the workshops**.** The ethnic makeup of parents in

attendance was largely White. Two parents were of mixed race and one was Hispanic. Not all

parents attended every meeting. All parents were surveyed using the same survey by the State of

Virginia to measure performance on Indicator 8 of the State Performance Plan (SPP; U.S.

Department of Education, 2013).

  All of the sessions were audio recorded with the parents' permission. The conversations

were then transcribed by JMU Exceptional Education department graduate students and analyzed

by two researchers on the team using Atlas Ti (2011) computer software. Four transcripts were

examined in total. Statements were labeled with codes that described important ideas and were

compared and revised based on Glaser's (1965) recommendations for conducting qualitative

research (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). 260 codes in all were labeled. The codes were then

separated into 23 "families" that shared conceptual similarities and seemed to comprise a broader

idea. Redundant codes were deleted. The final step of coding involved aggregating the 23

families of codes into 10 main themes. The two researchers came to consensus on any changes

made to codes and families. All four members of the research team collaborated on the final exposition of themes and obtained consensus on the importance of the themes and the families of codes comprising each theme.

The relative importance of each theme is indicated by the number of times that parents made comments that were described by a particular code according to established procedures for conducting mixed methods research suggested by Onwuegbuzie and Daniel (2003). Therefore, themes with higher frequency of codes may be considered more salient than themes with smaller numbers of codes. These themes will be presented to Harrison City Public Schools school personnel with recommendations on ways schools can improve efforts to facilitate parent involvement.

Results

Table 1 displays the first and most prominent of the ten themes that resulted from the study, the theme associated with parent-school collaboration.

Table 1

Parent-School Collaboration Varies

Codes	Frequency
Parent feels like part of IEP team.	1
Parent felt free to disagree.	1
Parent is involved in decision-making.	1
Parent learned new methods from school to help child.	1
Pre-IEP meetings are important for parent involvement.	1
School invited parent to participate on SEAC.	1
School is receptive to parent input.	2
School seems to be helpful.	1
School solicits involvement about school events.	1
School suggested pre-IEP meetings to parent.	1
Parent and school had pre-IEP meeting	1
School solicits parent input.	4
Parent did not want child to participate in CLM curriculum.	1
Parent feels like an outsider.	4
Parent gets defensive when school does not understand child.	2
Parent wants more involvement in planning services.	1
School and parents do not trust each other.	1
School does not solicit parent involvement.	2
School is not receptive to parent input.	12
School required advocate to meet in hallway.	1
School took action without parent input.	2
Parent has better relationship with some school personnel than others.	2
School response depends on the individual teacher/administrator.	6
Theme totals	50

The main idea behind theme 1 was that there were differences among parents with how they perceived schools' efforts in involving them. The code "school is not receptive to parent input" appeared 12 times, more than any other code under this theme. For example, Parent 4 said,

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They occasionally evaluate him and my concern is they feel like his status

changed where they feel like he doesn't need assistance. You know?

[Even though] we feel it's best. [Yet], they're able to say, 'No sorry.'

Parents also reported feeling like an outsider (4 times) and that the school response

depended on the administrator (6 times). Some administrators were more easily accessible and

personable to the parents which allowed them to more easily share their concerns. Others backed

this up by saying that the school asked for input (4 times) yet only one parent felt involved in

decision making. Parent 4 indicated,

The administrative support makes a difference. I mean, we had an ongoing

administrator that's supposed to be working with kids in resource and

[school name] is being very less than satisfactory for us, and he wound up

being unavailable for the last IEP meeting and so we had a different vice

principal who sat there, and it was actually a productive meeting.

Table 2 displays the codes associated with an important theme associated with school-

parent communications.

Table 2
Parent-School Communication Varies

Codes	Frequency
Communication between schools and parents should be frequent.	1
Confusion over the use of CLM in IEP goals.	1
Parent did not understand the referral process.	1
School does not communicate effectively with parent.	7
School does not explain child's curriculum.	1
School does not provide information on community services.	9
School does not provide sufficient notice of IEP meetings.	2
School should provide parents with training.	1
Teachers communicate with parent at inconvenient time.	1
Parent communicates with teacher via email daily.	1
Parent provides example of daily communication log.	1
School keeps parent informed of child's progress.	1

School suggested monthly meetings with parent.	1
Teacher communicates with parent via texts.	2
Parents share resources with each other.	7
Important to be nice even when you disagree.	4
Important to not burn bridges.	4
Parent never heard of SEAC.	1
Parent unaware of how to participate in SEAC.	1
Theme totals	43

The highest occurring code was that "schools do not effectively communicate about community services" which occurred nine times. In response to this lack of communication, parents have resorted to communicating with each other about findings in order to buffer lack of communication from schools. For example, Parent 7 stated:

I have offered to, you know, help with networking and I have offered to

give information and my daughter's special education teachers said 'Okay,

give me that list,' but they won't disseminate it. So not only will they not

talk about it … they won't let me in. …so, we are as parents, reliant on

one another for information and that's how you find out these things.

Similarly, another parent noted general ineffective communication:

I requested a communication sheet and it went all the way to the

predecessor and was shot down, so now the only thing I get is a sheet

that's highlighted that says 'she went to recess, she went to art, she did

social studies' and then what she ate for lunch which I had packed.

In contrast, a few parents reported positive communication experiences from school administrators. For instance, one parent stated,

I get an email from my daughter's teacher every single day. So to hear that

there are challenges to all of this is just shocking…I've never not had

daily communication with my children's teachers…I'm not sure where the

shutdown is.

Table 3 displays the codes associated with problems having to do with the IEP process.

Table 3

The IEP Process is Problematic

Codes	Frequency
IEP goals not implemented.	7
IEP goals not individualized/appropriate for child.	8
IEP can include social goals.	1
IEP goals may be linked to CLM and still be individualized.	1
IEP goals should be long-term.	1
IEP meeting is a power struggle.	2
IEP meeting is overwhelming.	3
IEP meeting was rushed.	4
Parent brought an advocate to meeting.	3
School pressures parent into signing IEP.	4
School should present initial IEP as a draft.	1
Theme totals	35

The codes with the highest frequencies are "IEP goals not implemented" and "IEP goals

not individualized/appropriate for child" with frequencies of 7 and 8 respectively. In part, these

issues resulted from unproductive and unconducive IEP meetings. Parents perceived IEP

meetings as power struggles, overwhelming and rushed. For instance, Parent 2 stated:

I was in a meeting where a teacher requested a one-on-one aid for my

child because she felt that her safety was at risk and I heard an

administrator stand up and say, 'I don't care. This isn't your school and

this isn't happening.' So… it does happen and it does become then a

situation of who's in charge of who…and I had to get an advocacy group

and then it becomes this awkward situation where they're puffing chests at

each other and it came down to yelling in this IEP meeting, and I feel like

everything is broken down.

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Similarly, one parent stated,

It can be intimidating…when you're starting out and you've never been

through this process, you know, I know [through] somebody that my

school personnel actually got up and walked around the table and slapped

it down in front of her because the parent didn't want to sign…so yeah

that's pressure.

Due to these combative issues that arose, some parents felt the pressure to sign the IEP

document despite disagreement with the school about IEP goals and thus brought advocates to

avoid being overpowered. This act of bringing advocates is supported by IDEA which states:

Each public agency must take steps to ensure that one or both of the

parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP Team meeting

or are afforded the opportunity to participate (IDEA 2004).

Theme 4 displays codes associated with the theme that it is important for parents to take

the initiative.

Table 4
Parent Initiative is Important

Codes	Frequency
Parent initiated a daily communication sheet with school.	4
Parent initiates contact when school does not provide services.	1
Parent obtained private evaluation.	1
Parent requested child be included in activities.	1
Parent requested different forms of communication with school.	1
Parent requests draft of IEP prior to meeting.	1
Parent suggested special ed. PTA.	1
Parent takes the initiative to research IEP issues.	1
Parent took the initiative to become a part of the team.	4
Parent took the initiative to learn about available services.	1
Parents can invite whoever they choose to IEP meeting.	1
Parents must take the initiative to become involved.	1
Parents need to advocate for child.	1
Resources are available if you seek them.	1

You have to move through the chain of command.	1
Parent has to insist for school to allow her in classroom.	1
Parent has to raise funds for child to attend field trips.	2
School is more receptive when parent knows rights.	3
School is receptive because parent initiated contact.	2
School more responsive when parent speaks educational jargon.	4
Theme totals	33

Parents who participated in the workshops demonstrated strong advocacy for their children. Parents acknowledged the need to advocate for their child even more so when the school was not receptive. If the school demonstrated minimal receptivity or invitations for involvement, parents moved through the chain of command for services or acquired services by themselves through personal funding, self-education of special education laws, and persistence for contact. For example, Parent 7 stated,

I'm all about communication, so, even in between these monthly

meetings, I have it written in my daughter's IEP that I have a daily

communication log…I can tell them what's going on with my child,

behaviorally or otherwise at home, and in turn they can tell me what kind

of day she had, her challenges, her triumphs, all of that stuff so that way,

you know, we're not treating my child as two different people and

confusing her. We have consistency.

School receptivity to parents increased when parents knew educational jargon, special education rights, or initiated contact. One parent indicated,

When you speak their jargon they get on board. So if you know what it

looks like to be written into an IEP… they'll go 'Okay.'

Similarly, another parent recounted an experience of taking charge:

You need to tell them. You need to walk in there, tell them you are going to

record the meeting but you are legally allowed to do that. And you can go

back and write your email when you know exactly what was said, and you

have proof and it's not hearsay, so you are allowed to do that.

Theme 5 displays codes associated with the theme that school resources and

teacher training are limited or inadequate.

Table 5

School Resources and Teacher Training are Limited/Inadequate

Codes	Frequency
Inexperienced teacher did not know how to prepare IEP.	2
Parent took the initiative because teacher was inexperienced.	1
Teachers need more training.	4
Parent hesitates to request services because other children also need them.	1
Providers of services should have to sign in and out.	2
Resources are limited.	11
School personnel are overworked.	2
Services provided according to professional's schedule.	1
Single point of contact is important.	1
Turnover is a problem.	1
Theme totals	26

The most prevalent code under this theme is the "resources are limited" with a frequency

of 11 times. Lack of resources were connected to insufficient availability of school personnel

teaching students due to being overworked, tight schedules, high turnovers, and too few being

hired. Parents also pointed out that general education teachers need more training in working

with children with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Parent 12 stated,

We also really have to advocate for the professionals in the school that

they are getting the training and support that they need to include [our kids

in the general education classroom]. A lot of times teachers, they mean

very well, but they're not special education teachers and they might not

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have a clue how to include your child. So, I think that's really hard to

handle.

Another parent explained the lack of resources that tax schools:

I think a lot of it has to do with our caseload. It's not that they're evil. They

have a lot of students and you know the squeakiest wheel gets the oil. They

have to knock through these IEP's, these meetings, everything.

Theme 6 displays codes associated with the theme "Quality of Services

Provided to Child Varies."

Table 6

Quality of Services Provided to Child Varies

Codes	Frequency
Peer program in elementary helped child.	1
School accommodated child on field trip.	1
School is receptive to inclusion.	1
School personnel work very hard.	1
Parent feels son is pushed aside.	1
Referral process takes too long.	1
School does not follow through.	1
School does not provide needed services for child.	10
School does not understand child's needs.	2
Schools provide more support for gifted than SPED.	1
Theme totals	20

By far the most frequently occurring code in this theme was that parent involvement.

Parents felt that schools do not provide needed services for their child. Some parents perceived

that insufficient services were because of overworked teachers, little understanding of child's

needs, and more funding for gifted programs. Those who received sufficient services had a peer

program, accommodations on field trips, and were included in general education classrooms. For

example, one parent stated,

That [one] teacher would go out to the other teachers and say 'Hey, I have this

kindergartener, this first grade, this whatever, I would love for her to be able

to come to your class. The assistant will be with them.' All of the teachers

were like, 'Absolutely, send them in.' Those kids were a part of our school.

Very much so.

However, the number of parents who felt that their child did not obtain enough services

far outweighed those who thought the school accommodated them. Absence of services on field

trips in particular was a common issue. Parent 9 said,

 My big thing was that my son's not being included with his regular

classmates because …. They [special education teachers] weren't even

told when the field trips were happening but even when they do, he

doesn't have a one-on-one aid, and he really can't go without an aid…

They're not going to get a sub so the aid can go on a field trip.

Theme 7 displays codes associated with the theme "Respect and Inclusion of Students

with Disabilities is Important."

Table 7
Respect and Inclusion of Students with Disabilities is Important

Codes	Frequency
Child's safety is important.	1
Child is a person first.	1
Child should reach full potential	2
Program placement is based on child's needs not label.	1
Child not included in school-related activities.	3
Child should be included to every extent possible.	3
ID label can mean less inclusive placement.	3
Students without disabilities benefit from having student with disability in class.	1
There are not enough out-of-school activities for children with special needs.	1
Theme totals	16

This theme was mostly defined by the idea that children with disabilities should be included and respected as whole persons, not just defined as having a disability.

Parent 9 stated,

The disability is what he has and not what he is. He's a person first, and

the disability comes second.

Parent 1 also stated that:

 [Schools] should help her child] reach his full potential whatever that is.

When schools fail to look beyond the label of the child, the child is left out of school activities

and inclusion opportunities in general classrooms.

Theme 8 displays codes associated with the theme, "Community Resources are

Limited/Disjointed."

Table 8
Community Resources are Limited/Disjointed

Codes	Frequency
Community resources are disjointed/not available.	11
Services in Virginia are horrible	2
There are community agencies that can advocate for child.	1
Theme totals	14

 Parents expressed their frustration that community organizations and schools fail to

communicate with each other and neglect to inform parents about the services offered. Some

parents spoke about how they had to travel outside of the county to learn about services offered

in their home county due to a lack of information available. For example, Parent 10 noted,

When we switched to a developmental pediatrician at UVA….he [a school

official] [ran] through this whole list the related services that we might be

interested and was telling me all the resources in Harrisonburg….it was

interesting to me that I had to go to Charlottesville to get the referrals that

I needed for local.

Another parent stated,

It's not a Harrisonburg city thing. I was having a conversation with the SPED

teacher at Peak View Elementary the other day and was talking about different

services and it was like they had never heard this before."

Theme 9 displays codes associated with the theme "Parents Faces Barriers to

Involvement."

Table 9
Parents Face Barriers to Involvement

Codes	Frequency
Inexperience limits parent involvement.	2
Lack of special ed. knowledge is a barrier for parents.	1
Parent participation is affected by SES.	1
Parents do not have the time to become involved.	3
Parents in this community do not take initiative.	5
Parents with language barriers find it more difficult to become involved.	1
Theme totals	13

Lack of IEP knowledge acts as a major barrier that keeps parents from fully participating

in IEPs. One parent stated,

We need some more parent training because how can you even

understand the IEP or engage in that discussion without understanding

what the objective is? … I need to know so that I can make sure the IEP

goals that you have written for her, you know, are appropriate."

Parents also discussed why other guardians failed to become involved due to

inexperience, lack of time, language barriers, and social economic status. Another

parent noted apathy:

Some of it is apathy. I'm with the PTA, [and] we can't get anybody to help us

and we're dropping like flies because it's a handful of people doing

everything. Yeah, we have 130 members on paper, but just getting involved

[is what we need].

Theme 10 displays codes associated with the theme, "Transitions are

Difficult."

Table 10

Transitions are difficult

Codes	Frequency
Child went on field trips in elementary but not in middle school.	2
Transitions from early childhood to school are overwhelming.	3
Transitions from elementary to middle school are difficult.	1
Transitions from school-to school are difficult.	4
Theme totals	10

Parents perceive complications that come with moving from school to school or from

grade to grade. Parent 6 explained,

Because my son transitioned, and it was a fully different system, you got this whole room

of people and the document was already all down on paper and just very overwhelming.

In addition Parent 5 stated,

When my son went to elementary school they had a peer program there

where they trained his peers and they worked with him when they did go

to outside programs….And it was a great program.

According to IDEA, transition services must involve a focus on "improving the academic

and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from

school to post-school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational education,

integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult

services, independent living, or community participation" (IDEA 2004). It must also be based on

the individual needs, partialities, strengths, and likes and dislikes of the child (IDEA 2004).

Based on this data, the parents in this sample indicated that for several of the items on the survey,

schools failed to effectively facilitate parent involvement.

Indicator 8 Survey Results

Percent of Parents Who Agreed with Indicator 8 Survey Items
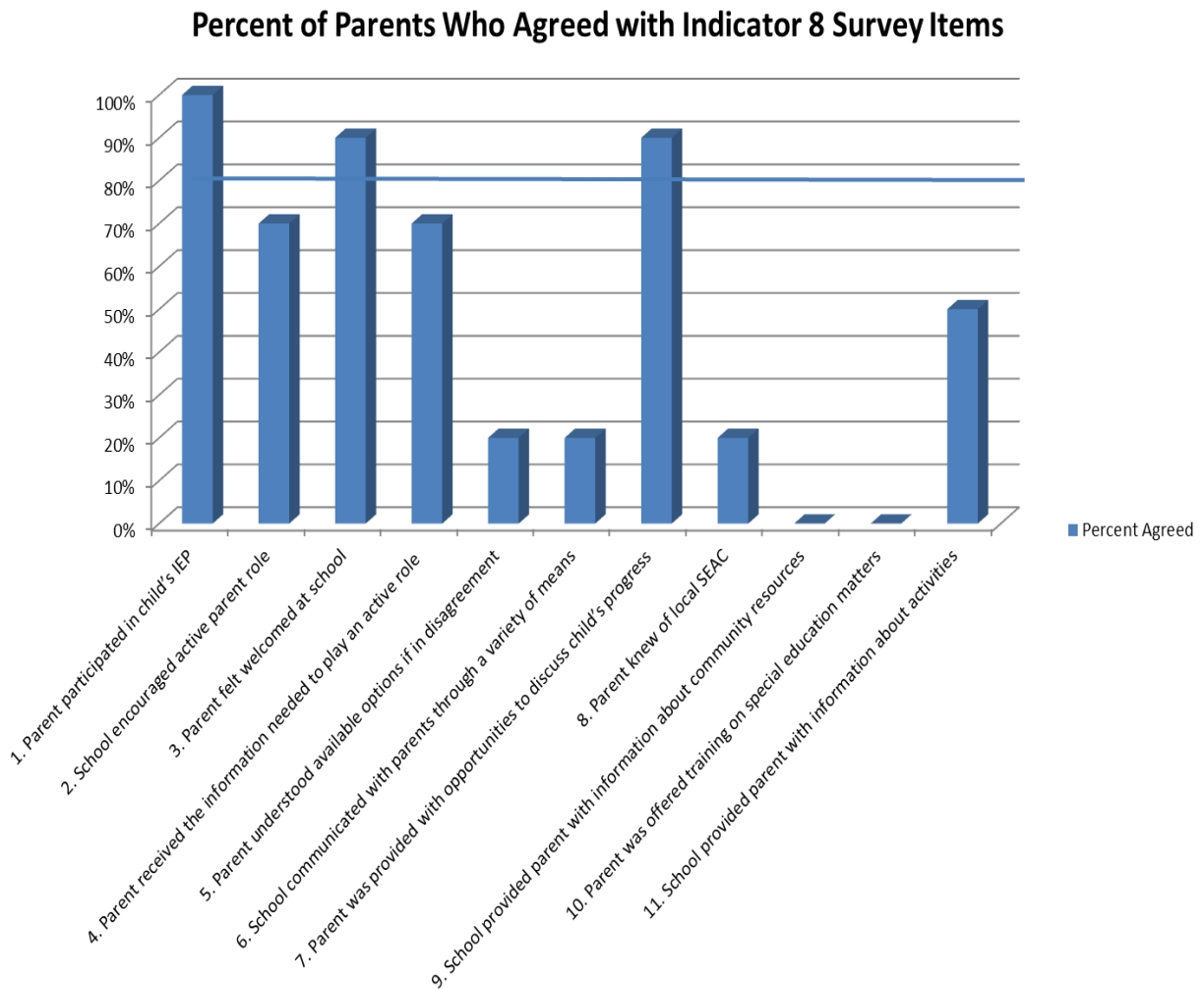
Many of the themes described supported the findings from the Indicator 8 survey.

According to the survey, schools lack effective communication with families with only 20% of

parents indicating that their school communicates with them through a variety of means. In

addition, 100% of parents surveyed agreed that schools did not provide them with information

about community services or training in special education activities. Also, only 20% of parents knew of available options if in disagreement with the school about services and only 80% knew of the local Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC). Despite 100% of these parents perceiving themselves as participatory in their child's IEP, lack of knowledge and communication from the school certainly hinders attempts their ability to be regarded as full team members of the IEP team.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest a number of ways schools can empower parents and facilitate their involvement in their child's education. According to Hoover-Dempsey (2005) a parent's role construction can be influenced by community factors. Sometimes schools may misinterpret lack of parent involvement as the parent not caring to be involved when in reality, the parent doesn't perceive it to be their role to become involved. If schools fail to encourage parental participation, then involvement rapidly declines. Letters for this study were originally sent to schools to pass on home to parents. However, some parents later reported that they never received such a letter from their child's school and instead heard from other parents through word of mouth.

If active participation is strengthened and encouraged, parents across all cultures will become more dedicated in playing a part in their children's education. Without a concerted effort from schools to involve parents, minority groups such as Blacks and Latinos may not become involved with their child's education at school (Rodriguez, Blatz, & Elbaum, 2014). Parents of some ethnic minorities may have the cultural mindset that it is largely the school's responsibility to educate their children because they, as parents, are not equipped to do so. As a result, an important part the child's circle of encouragement is missing. There is an obvious need for schools to stress that it is also the parent's responsibility to help educate their children and emphasize that their involvement is valued in the role of their children's education. Once schools emphasize this importance, it can override parents' previous negative experiences related to their children's schooling that may contribute to lack of involvement.

The second personal motivator that facilitates involvement is a sense of self-efficacy grounded in personal successes in achievement, encouragement from others, relayed

experiences, and a sense of importance of the final goal. Hoover-Dempsey's model dictates that parents with a stronger sense of self efficacy do a better job of motivating their children to succeed and in supervising their academic success. The parents in this sample were for the most part, highly educated, and demonstrated considerable knowledge of special education law, their rights, and responsibilities.

So what are some potential recommendations that can be made based on the data presented in this study? Rodriguez, Blatz and Elbaum (2014) highlight the importance of communication to increase parental involvement, particularly in Latino families with children with disabilities. Rodriguez et al. (2014) suggest four strategies that will facilitate involvement which will lead to improved relationships between families and schools.

The first strategy is encouraging feedback from families. Parent feedback is a necessary component for successful IEP meetings. Schools can communicate that guardians' presence and opinions are a crucial part of the IEP meetings and will only serve to help their children. There must be a transparency between teachers and parents in these meetings so that parents are fully aware of when these meetings will occur, what strategies are being used in the classroom, and that they feel valued as part of the team.

The second strategy is family empowerment. Many families may lack knowledge about special education laws and are unaware of the means to obtain it. Therefore, schools need to educate and train families through a series of programs that teach them about these laws as well as rsponses to intervention strategies, what to do if they disagree with a school's decision regarding their child's education, and invite them to participate in specialized development activities with teachers.

The third strategy is facilitating child transitions through grades and school systems. This strategy requires effective communication about imminent changes and what implications those changes would hold. Schools need to portray cultural understanding by gathering families' input on what their short term and long term goals are for their child to succeed during these transitions.

The fourth strategy is communicating effectively with families. Information must be available and relayed to the families in their native language as well as in layman's terms rather than educational jargon. Communication must also be consistent and easily achieved, reporting to parents on child's progress, not just issues. It is also beneficial to assign a mentor or teacher to parents so that they have a person to contact if necessary. Effective IEP facilitation can also be interweaved with effective communication strategies in order to maintain an equal teamwork balance during IEP meetings.

As indicated in Table 2, parents reported that schools do not effectively communicate with parents in general about the IEP process, which may have led to confusion over the referral process for IEPs, lack of notice of IEP meetings, and lack of knowledge of child's curriculum. While some of the parents did report frequent communication with their child's school, the majority were frustrated with communication with school administrators.

It is interesting to note that parents' felt it was important to "be nice" while communicating with the schools. Parents felt that it was necessary to maintain an air of cordiality during constructive criticism despite disagreements that may occur so that their children would still get the best possible services. The importance of being nice also ties into the significance of not burning bridges. Parents viewed it necessary to build relationships with school personnel

rather than risk losing opportunities to seek counsel and assistance from those within the school system.

Despite the issues that parents came across in building relationships with school personnel, some parents recognized that school administrators have difficulty helping numerous children at once. Parent 10 stated,

> There's probably nobody in this room that doesn't recognize that the teachers
> and the school staff are doing a very, very hard job, and I think nobody gets
> into this work for the money… I think it's really important that we recognize
> that when we're talking to them, you have to sort of frame it that [nice] way.

Limitations

Due to the voluntary nature of the study as opposed to random selection, only a small sample of 17 parents chose to participate and therefore, have few demographic differences. Parents surveyed are also mainly Caucasian and are parents of children with severe disabilities. Their children were also doing relatively well in school and had some accommodations. However, these parents already demonstrated large amounts of self-efficaciousness by attending the parent workshops and past experiences with school systems. These limits thus affect the impacts of the study and call for a greater number of parents and a wider demographic scope in order to have a better understanding of parent perceptions of parent-school relationships.

Directions for Future Research

To encourage better communication between schools and parents about workshops, it is recommended to send the letters directly to parents with schools' permission. The researcher should also encourage schools to utilize other platforms to advertise the parent workshops. This

will reach a wider audience of parents and create a more positive and welcoming climate in respective schools. Many parents also carry smartphones and appear social media savvy. A Facebook invite with updates would possibly entice a higher attendance rate. School websites can also be employed to advertise the workshops.

In addition, parent leaders from each school could be put in charge of informing other parents about the workshops and encourage attendance. Word of mouth is a powerful tool for participation and can significantly increase numbers and promote a sense of community.

Another realization is that Harrisonburg is a predominantly religious area. Pastors can be allied with at churches in order to bring attention to the importance of these workshops while attracting more Latino parents, an ethnic demographic that the study sorely lacked in despite the large population of Latinos that reside in Harrisonburg. Information about the workshops should also be available in Spanish on social media in addition to letters. These necessary steps for further parent inclusion will go a long way for more participants in the future.

Lastly, it is recommended to continue an ongoing dialogue with schools and parents before, during, and after the workshops. Schools should be communicated with about advertising the workshops. Teachers and administrators should be encouraged to attend as well in order to better understand parents' concerns and help fill in gaps about special education laws and rights. Parents' levels of self-efficacy should also be surveyed before and after the workshops to judge the workshops' impact. If parent efficacy levels drop or remain stagnant after the workshops, further modifications can be made to improve the program based on parents' suggestions.

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