Parent Perspectives on Special Education Services: How Do Schools Implement Team Decisions?

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine parents' perspectives and experiences of special education, including the degree to which decisions about their child's education were implemented as they had agreed upon with the school personnel. Additionally, a secondary purpose of this study was to understand how parents explain why school personnel do or do not implement elements of their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP). In this study, parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities described their experiences attempting to reach agreement with school personnel on decisions involving their child's educational placement and special education services. Parents expressed a desire to be involved in decisions, and they described a desire to obtain inclusive educational placements for their children. Parents described varied experiences with the implementation of special education services. They also described both successes and concerns related to the special education services their child was receiving at school. Implications for special education policy, practice, and research are discussed from the perspective of supporting family involvement in the special education process.

Key Words: parents, special education services, placement decisions, intellectual disability, developmental disabilities, Individualized Education Program

Introduction

The process of providing students with disabilities a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) is complex and should be a collaborative effort among all members of the educational team, including both school personnel and parents (Cook & Friend, 2010). Because parents know their child's strengths, preferences, and support needs, they are well-positioned to discuss and select, in collaboration with school personnel, the most effective practices to use when educating their child (Cook, Shepherd, Cook, & Cook, 2012). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) mandates the involvement of parents in this team process (IDEA, 2004; Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). In 2007, the United States Supreme Court ruling in *Winkelman v. Parma* confirmed parents' role in the special education process. Specifically, this U.S. Supreme Court decision mandated parent involvement in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) process, and it clarified that IDEA guarantees the rights of both children with disabilities and their parents. Additionally, this decision explained that parents must be involved in the process of providing a student with a disability with FAPE (*Winkelman v. Parma*, 2007; Yell et al., 2009).

Parents' Experiences With Special Education Services

Despite legislation and court rulings, researchers have continued to document parents' difficulties engaging in discussions with school personnel to obtain services for their child with disabilities (Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011; White, 2014). Specifically, parents have described situations in which they have experienced difficulties expressing concerns to school personnel and requesting services for their children with disabilities (Elbaum, Blatz, & Rodriguez, 2016; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). These services may include specialized instruction with accommodations and modifications or direct support services from a related services provider such as a speech–language pathologist or teaching assistant. These services are documented in the child's IEP; however, parents have described the IEP development process as fraught with challenges. Parents have described this process as "educator-driven," meaning that educators might provide parents with testing data, recommend goals, and leave little room for the parents to respond, contribute, or discuss (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Similarly, Elbaum and colleagues (2016) surveyed parents of children with developmental and multiple disabilities, finding parents met with school personnel who were not open to their input or did not respond to their ideas in the planning process for their children (Elbaum et al., 2016).

In addition to parents experiencing difficulty discussing and planning special education services for their child, parents have also described challenges reaching agreement with school personnel about their child's educational placement. The IDEA mandates that students with disabilities must be educated in the Least Restrictive Environment. IEP teams, including parents and school personnel, must collectively decide on the educational placement for a student with a disability, which can be a very complex process (Rix, Sheehy, Fletcher-Campbell, Crisp, & Harper, 2015). In one study, parents described difficulties in obtaining inclusive placements for their children, and they attributed this difficulty to a lack of knowledge of school personnel (Fish, 2006). This difficulty in obtaining more inclusive placements for their children is particularly concerning given the documented benefits of learning in the general education classroom for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2012; Oh-Young & Filler, 2015).

Researchers have also documented that parents have felt they needed to learn about special education law in order to successfully participate in the special education system (Fish, 2006; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Mueller and Buckley (2014) obtained the perspectives of fathers of children with IDD receiving special education services, and they explained that IEP meetings were too overwhelming and confusing without the legal background and knowledge of special education. Additionally, the fathers described feeling more comfortable when the educators listened closely to them in IEP meetings. The fathers also provided the insight that conflict and legal proceedings are likely to occur when parents perceive that they are not active participants in the process (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). The participants in that study advocated for changes to the IEP process to make it more inclusive of all team member's opinions, including the parents (Mueller & Buckley, 2014).

Parents' Experiences With the Implementation of Special Education Services

In addition to experiencing difficulties in discussions and reaching agreement with school personnel on placements and services, parents have reported inconsistent implementation of the services documented in their child's IEP (Fish, 2006). In a study investigating the nature and outcomes of complaints filed by parents of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), the most commonly cited issue was related to the content of the IEP or the implementation of the IEP (White, 2014). Complaints concerning the content of the IEP centered around missing components and a lack of clarity in goals. Complaints involving the implementation of IEP services often involved a lack of services from related services professionals such as speech–language pathologists and teaching assistants. In addition, some parents filed complaints on the basis that

they were not able to provide input or participate in the process of making decisions about service delivery (White, 2014).

In the instances in which parents have described schools' lack of implementation of special education services in prior research, they have often discussed educators' lack of knowledge and training as one possible reason. For example, Sansosti and colleagues (2012) found parents have encountered school personnel who lacked knowledge of the characteristics of ASD (Sansosti, Lavik, & Sansosti, 2012). White (2014) documented similar experiences of parents who described concerns over the training and qualifications of the school personnel who were working with their children with ASD.

Parent Partnerships With School Personnel

Researchers have also documented positive partnerships between school teams and parents, as well as the factors that may have contributed to these relationships. In a recent study, parents of children with and without disabilities described their positive relationships with school personnel, and their descriptions involved school culture, leadership, opportunities for family involvement, and positive outcomes (Francis et al., 2016). Overall, parents appreciated being treated as equal partners in the special education planning process for their child, and they appreciated when school teams sought their input. Parents in that study emphasized the importance of educators truly listening to them and demonstrating respect toward their concerns and requests (Francis et al., 2016). Fish (2008) documented similar findings among parents of children with IDD receiving special education services. Parents described positive relationships with educators and generally positive experiences with IEP meetings, including the opportunity to ask questions and contribute to the discussion during the meeting (Fish, 2008).

As members of the IEP team, parents are integral to the processes and decisions in planning and implementing special education and related services for students with disabilities. To foster successful relationships between schools and families, researchers have expressed the need for high-quality communication and an equal partnership (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). In 2004, Blue-Banning and colleagues held focus groups with school personnel and parents of children with and without disabilities, and they found communication, commitment, trust, and respect, among other qualities, as being important in successful collaborative partnerships. Parents want to have input in the development of the IEP, and it is important for the school team to welcome their contributions not only as part of their obligation under IDEA, but also as a best practice in collaboration (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

To determine potential future directions for policy, practice, and research supportive of parents' interactions with school professionals, it is important to continue to examine parents' perspectives and experiences interacting and collaborating with school personnel to obtain services for their children. As Tucker and Schwartz (2013) explained, "In order to build a bridge to collaboration, the education field has to continually examine stakeholders' perspectives so that our efforts span the distance toward effective teaming" (p. 4). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to (a) understand parents' perspectives on special education services, including the degree to which special education decisions about goals, services, and placement were implemented as agreed upon; and to (b) understand how parents explain why schools do or do not implement elements of the IEP. Specifically, the following research questions guided the focus of this study:

1. To what extent do parents believe schools implement goals, services, and placements that are mutually agreed upon?
2. How do parents explain why schools do or do not implement agreed upon elements of the IEP?

Method

Parents of children with an intellectual disability or developmental disability were recruited to participate in focus groups. In three instances, only one parent arrived at the focus group; rather than potentially missing the opportunity to hear their story, we decided to conduct an interview to learn about their respective experiences. We ultimately completed seven focus groups and three individual interviews with parents of children with IDD. The data analyzed for the present study was part of a larger project focused on parents' experiences making decisions regarding educational placements for their children (Love, Zagona, Kurth, & Miller, 2017; Miller, Love, Kurth, & Zagona, 2019).

Participants and Setting

The study participants included 18 parents and guardians. Demographic information about the parents and their children is included in Table 1. With the exception of two parents, all study participants were mothers of children with IDD. Participant number 10 was a father of a child with an intellectual disability, and participant 13 was a foster mother of a child with an intellectual disability. Parents who participated in this study had children who ranged in age from 2–20 years; however, the data from the interview with the parent of the two-year-old was eliminated from the analysis in the interest of ensuring commonality amongst the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015), particularly

given that this parent did not have experience with IEPs in K–12 schools. The final age range of children was 6–20 years old. It is also important to note that some parent participants living in rural areas were members of special education cooperatives, in which school districts combine resources and jointly hire special education administrators, related services providers, and even teachers. This approach is often necessary in small communities in rural areas where the schools may lack the capacity to serve small numbers of students individually. As a consequence of this approach, providers often serve students spread over many hundreds of miles. The focus groups and interviews took place both in person and on the phone. The focus groups and interviews that took place in person were held on a university campus or in a public library, depending upon what was convenient for the participants.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

ID	Parent		Child			Area	Format
	Age	Ethnicity	Age	Gender	Disability		
1	39	White	14	Male	ASD	Urban	FG
2	42	White	19	Female	ASD	Rural	FG
3	40	White	9	Male	ASD	Urban	Int
4	42	White	11	Female	ASD	Rural	Int
5	52	White	20	Female	ID	Suburban	FG
6	37	White	8	Male	ASD	Urban	FG
7	45	White	18	Male	ASD	Suburban	FG
8	47	White	13	Male	ASD	Urban	FG
9	49	White	13	Male	ID	Urban	FG
10	51	White	13	Male	ID	Urban	FG
11	54	Asian	19	Male	ID	Urban	FG
12	38	White	10	Male	ASD	Suburban	FG
13	47	White	19	Male	ID	Suburban	FG
14	42	White	10	Male	ID	Urban	FG
15	36	White	6	Male	ID	Urban	FG
16	38	White	8	Female	ID	Suburban	FG
17	45	White	2	Male	ID	Rural	FG
18	38	White	10	Male	ID	Urban	Int

Notes. ASD = Autism Spectrum Disorder; ID = Intellectual Disability; FG = Focus Group; Int = Interview.

Procedures

We recruited study participants by sending emails and flyers to parent support groups in two states including the local Down Syndrome Guild, Down Syndrome Society, and Autism Society. We also sent flyers to schools and to disability-related events. Further, we used the "snowball" method for recruitment in which we asked parents to share the information about the study with other families who might also be interested or eligible to participate (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Parents were invited to complete an online poll to indicate if and when they were able to participate; parents who signed up for the same focus group time were therefore randomly grouped together. We obtained informed consent from the parents by sending the consent forms to them in advance and then reviewing consent together briefly at the beginning of the interview or focus group. At least two facilitators were present during each interview or focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2015). All three facilitators had prior experiences with focus groups and interviews. The facilitators did not know any of the parents who participated in this study prior to meeting them for the interview or focus group.

Instrument

The interview and focus group protocol consisted of several open-ended questions designed to gather parents' perspectives on the provision of special education services for their children (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Patton, 2015). The members of the research team used a semi-structured interviewing method with follow-up questions (Patton, 2015). The interview questions were derived from an earlier, large sample survey. The survey respondents were asked if they had other information they wanted to tell the members of the research team, and their comments were used to develop more probing questions. The interview questions were pilot tested with two mothers before data collection began. Their comments and suggestions were used to refine the questions before beginning the focus groups and interviews.

Parents in the interviews were asked the same questions as those in the focus groups. The protocol included questions about special education services, placement, and inclusive education. For example, one question was "What is the first thing you think of when you hear the words special education?" Next, we asked the parents to "tell us about the process of deciding your child needed special education services." We asked the parents to think about how services were provided for their child and how they interacted with the school team members to provide input regarding services and placement. In addition, we asked parents to think about the special services that their child received such as related services, support from personnel such as teaching assistants, as well as

accommodations and modifications. Interviews were audiorecorded and sent to a professional transcriptionist.

Members of the research team ultimately held three individual interviews, five focus groups with two participants each, and three focus groups with three participants each. The interviews and focus groups ranged in length from 49 minutes to 2 hours and 17 minutes overall, and the overall mean length was 1 hour and 32 minutes. The three interviews ranged in length from 49 minutes to 1 hour and 43 minutes, and the focus groups ranged in length from 1 hour and 34 minutes to 2 hours and 17 minutes.

Analysis

The research team conducted an initial analysis of a subset of transcripts to identify general, main ideas that the parents conveyed. Given that qualitative analysis is an iterative process, the research team met weekly to discuss and debrief emerging themes, ultimately determining a broad framework aligned with the research questions (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). The first author read each transcript and completed an initial, first round of coding using descriptive codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). During this process, the first author developed a code book that included a list of codes, definitions, and keywords or phrases from the transcripts as examples. Next, the first author reorganized the initial codes into broad categories that aligned with the purpose of the study (Saldaña, 2016). Two axial codes were identified: "parents' beliefs in the ways schools implement services, placements, and goals that are mutually agreed upon" and "parents' perspectives on the reasons for successful implementation or any lack of implementation." Each axial code included several descriptive subcodes that were refined and defined using examples and quotes from the participants (Saldaña, 2016). The first investigator then applied the revised descriptive codes to each transcript using Dedoose Version 8.0.42 (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2018), an online, mixed methods data analysis program.

Trustworthiness

To establish credibility, the second author applied the codes and definitions to a subset of excerpts (meaningful phrases of text) in Dedoose. The first author created this subset of excerpts (n = 90), and the first authors' codes were hidden from the second author during the reliability coding. Throughout this iterative process, the two authors met to debrief, clarify codes and definitions, reach consensus, and revise the code book as needed (Creswell, 2013). The two authors continued to discuss agreements and disagreements until consensus was reached. The members of the research team met regularly to debrief and discuss

the findings of the study as a way to address any potential bias in the analysis and interpretation of findings. As an additional effort to ensure trustworthiness, all participants were sent copies of the transcripts for member checking (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Five parents provided written feedback and edits, and these transcripts were used in the final analysis (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Positionality

The facilitators of the focus groups and interviews included two doctoral students and one university faculty member. An additional doctoral student joined the research team for the analysis. All four members of the research team were women, and all have worked in schools as teachers. Two of the research team members have a family member with IDD, and none of the researchers had prior experiences with the parent participants. The research team members support inclusive special education from a social justice perspective (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand parents' perspectives on special education services, including the degree to which their child's special education services were implemented as agreed upon. Further, a secondary purpose of this study was to understand how parents explain why schools do or do not implement elements of the child's IEP. The following themes emerged: (a) parents have had mixed experiences reaching agreement with school teams; (b) parents described instances in which services were and were not being implemented as the team had agreed; and (c) in the instances in which parents described the school personnel not implementing services as the team agreed, they provided possible explanations that included lack of school personnel knowledge, the school district's fiscal positioning, and philosophical and system barriers.

Parents' Mixed Experiences Reaching Agreement With School Personnel

Parents described mixed experiences when attempting to reach agreement with school personnel about their child's goals, services, and educational placement. Parents described instances in which they were able to reach agreement with school personnel; however, these experiences were often described as being very challenging. Parents also described experiences in which they were not able to contribute to the decision-making process and were therefore unable to reach an agreement with the team.

Challenges Reaching Agreement With School Personnel

Some parents described situations in which they were able to successfully contribute to the decision-making process for their child's special education goals and services; however, these situations were often difficult. As one parent explained, "Once I asked, I get what I want. It's always hard to keep on top of it. It's a full-time job." While this parent was able to reach agreement with the school personnel, it took a great deal of work and many phone calls to the school psychologist until she received what she felt her child needed.

Other parents also described experiences in which they were able to reach agreement with the school personnel, but the process was very challenging. For example, two parents described similar experiences in struggling to reach agreement with the school team about the quantity of services from a teaching assistant for their children. One parent explained that she "pushed" for her child to be in the general education classroom, and the school personnel insisted that the child needed to have the teaching assistant all day. As a result, the parent "fought for her to not have a [teaching assistant]." While the school personnel and parent agreed to obtain services from a teaching assistant, they were still in disagreement about the quantity of these services, resulting in the parent needing to fight for a different amount of services. In another example, a parent reported that both of her children should have had full time services from a teaching assistant as specified in the IEP; however, they were only receiving these services during core content subjects. She explained that she talked to the principal, but the availability of teaching assistants was limited. The parent eventually wrote an email to the director of special education, who then worked with the school team to develop a plan for providing the correct number of minutes of services from a teaching assistant. While both of these parents were able to contribute to team decisions regarding services from a teaching assistant for their children, both parents also described very challenging experiences.

Lack of Agreement Between Parents and School Teams

While some parents described instances in which they were able to reach agreement with schools, other parents described the struggles they encountered when they tried to participate in making decisions, and ultimately, they were often unsuccessful in achieving their desired outcome and did not reach agreement with the school team. For example, parents described difficulty contributing to the decision-making process regarding their child's educational placement. When asked to describe the decision concerning what school or program her daughter would attend, one parent said: "there was no choice, it was 'this is it.'" This parent's experience of not being able to contribute to the

discussion of her child's educational placement was striking because she said she knew they had to either take that placement or move out of the district.

Parents also described experiences with being unsuccessful in reaching agreement with school teams regarding inclusive placements for their children. One parent explained that she provided the school personnel with research and information about training opportunities on inclusion, but she had not been able to reach agreement with the team on a more inclusive classroom placement for her child. Regardless, she explained that she was "never going to stop fighting for this.…I want to do right by her; [schools] should also want to do right by her….She needs to be prepared for real life, and I don't feel she is getting that." The parents who described a desire for inclusive placements felt that would be the most appropriate educational setting for their children, but they were not able to discuss this placement or reach agreement with the school team on this topic. Parents' desire for inclusive education was particularly powerful for one parent who explained, "I want inclusion to be a real word." She further expressed, "I want my child to have the same opportunity as the quarterback on the football team.…I don't want her to be labeled." For this parent, having an inclusive educational placement was an issue of equal opportunity. However, when parents were not able to reach agreement with the school personnel, school personnel typically continued with the placement and service decisions they preferred.

Variations in Implementation of Services

When discussing the implementation of special education services for their children, parents described a variety of experiences, including instances in which services were indeed implemented as they were agreed upon as well as instances in which services were not being implemented as agreed.

Implementation of Agreed-Upon Services

When describing the implementation of services, parents described their positive feelings toward the services, and they did not emphasize that they had to advocate for these services. Within these descriptions of the implementation of services, some parents spoke highly of the teachers and teaching assistants. One parent described the importance of the teaching assistants receiving training from a qualified teacher. This parent explained that her child's teacher consistently offers on-the-job training to the teaching assistant, and as a result, the teaching assistant provides the student with opportunities for independence. This parent had not always had this experience with teaching assistants being trained, and she described her current experience when she said they have "a great teacher, a great principal, a good program that keeps things

consistent and keeps staff, and it works." This parent recognized the value in having services that are being implemented successfully, and she described her child's teacher favorably when she explained that the teacher communicates consistently: "Our regular [education] teacher this year is really, really good, and she communicates really, really well." When this parent described the services being implemented as agreed upon, she praised the teacher, noting that the teacher provides training for the teaching assistant and consistently communicated with the family.

A different parent described mixed experiences with the implementation of services for her child within an inclusive placement. This parent explained that some teachers have provided her child with the support he needed, including accommodations and modifications. This parent explained, "Most of the general education teachers have been really accepting of him, and they've worked with us…all of the general [education] teachers took it upon themselves to modify his work and include him on his terms, you know, where he could be included and where he couldn't." However, this parent explained that it has not always been this way. In fact, she explained that some teachers did not know how to support her child, or they were not willing to do so. For this parent, it was very important that the general education teachers accepted and included her child using accommodations and modifications.

Other parents also described the implementation of accommodations, modifications, and services in reading, counseling, and behavior support for their children. For example, one parent described the services, including specialized literacy instruction, that her child received from the reading teacher at the school. She appreciated the services her child was receiving and noted that the transition to the other classroom was subtle and smooth. She explained, "everybody at [the] school travels at that time, so they're all going to different groups, wherever their needs are." In other words, this parent was pleased with the service provision for her child. Another parent explained that the school provided her child with counseling services and implemented accommodations for behavior support such that if her child was hungry, he could leave the general education classroom to go have a snack. In another example, a parent explained the modifications her child received including access to a scribe and answering a reduced number of questions. She discussed how her child attended the special education classroom during math, and her daughter was in the general education classroom during the main reading lesson, then she was "pulled out." Parents described situations in which they were pleased with the way the school was implementing services for their child, and they also described general services including modifications and specialized instruction in the general education classroom or separate, "pull-out" classrooms.

Services Not Implemented as Documented in the IEP

Parents also described negative experiences with the implementation of special education services as they related to diagnoses, accommodations, and behavioral supports. For example, one parent described the school team's lack of service implementation consistent with her child's diagnosis. She said, "They had been treating him all semester from the perspective that they thought he had [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder], when he actually had autism and several serious mental health diagnoses." This parent explained that all of her child's diagnoses are listed in his IEP, and she was frustrated that the school personnel were not aware of this information. Another parent described a similar situation, in which services were not being implemented, and the school team was unaware of the components of the IEP. When talking about the IEP, this parent said the teacher "confessed that she hadn't looked at it. School started the third week of August, and this is the third week of October." Parents' displeasure when schools were not implementing services as agreed upon was related to a lack of awareness of the student's needs and the information about their child that was included in the IEP.

Parents also described experiences wherein schools were not implementing agreed-upon accommodations and supports. Another parent described a situation in which she discovered that her son's accommodations were not being implemented. She described a conversation in which the principal "pulled me aside and said [her child has] been watching movies and not doing anything since he started in August." A different parent described a situation in which her child's accommodations were not being implemented. In this example, the child had not used his frequency modulated (FM) system for nine weeks. Thus, parents' descriptions of inadequate service implementation were sometimes due to certain personnel not carrying out specific services aligned with their child's needs that were documented in the IEP or school personnel not implementing accommodations. These gaps contributed to schools not implementing services as agreed upon, despite the IEP documenting those services.

Other parents described more specific examples of instances in which services were not being implemented as documented in the IEP. These experiences included lack of implementation of IEP goals and behavior support services. One parent described the school team's lack of implementation of the behavior support components documented in the IEP, which resulted in her child going to a school for children with behavior disorders. This parent explained the failed efforts of the school counselor who was not able to get the school team to implement the IEP. The parent said the school counselor "tried really hard to get the school to follow the IEP, and they just wouldn't, and that's when I said, 'well, I'm okay with him going to the behavior disorder school.'" For this

family, a lack of implementation of services documented in the IEP resulted in the choice of a more restrictive educational placement.

Reasons for Variation in the Implementation of IEP Components

As parents described the implementation of special education services for their children, they asserted possible reasons for the instances in which schools were not implementing services as they were agreed upon. Parents described their own lack of knowledge of the special education system and their rights under IDEA as one possible reason. Parents also described educators' lack of knowledge and training, district-based financial reasons, and philosophical and system barriers as being the main reasons special education services were not implemented as they were agreed upon.

Educator Knowledge, Preparation, and Training

When providing possible reasons for a lack of implementation of placement decisions and services, parents described educators' general lack of knowledge and preparation to teach students with complex support needs. One parent explained:

> The resource [special education] teachers are trained to deal with kids who are learning disabled, but if you come in and you have autism, or you have Down syndrome, or you have cerebral palsy that affects you drastically, forget it. They don't know what to do, so they don't do anything.

Another parent recommended "mandated autism training." She explained her concerns about the "negative consequences" on the child if he or she did not receive the necessary behavior therapy. Importantly, this parent described a need for teachers to understand the characteristics associated with ASD so that they don't perceive self-stimulatory behavior as misbehavior. Parents described the educator's lack of knowledge of their child's needs related to their disability as one possible reason that services were not implemented as agreed upon. One parent also described educators' lack of knowledge as a factor in services not being properly implemented in the general education classroom, which impacted the educational placement for the child. The parent explained that they "tried the inclusion setting, but I think the general education teachers were totally unprepared." Teacher preparation continually contributed to parents' perceptions of service implementation.

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, parents also described their own lack of knowledge regarding their rights as parents of children receiving special education services as a potential reason for services not being implemented. For example, one parent explained, "We don't feel like we're getting the right services. I don't even know what the right services would be." Parents

expressed concerns about other parents who also lack similar knowledge. Another parent provided an interesting insight, "It's not necessarily that schools don't want to offer those things, but sometimes they haven't been asked to offer those things, and parents haven't asked because they don't know they can." Another parent described her own lack of knowledge and said she would like her child's teachers to share resources with her and inform her of support groups that would be relevant. In these descriptions, parents' own knowledge was important for them to advocate for their child to receive appropriate services.

School Districts' Fiscal Positioning

Parents discussed the financial aspects of school districts and the ways in which they influence the extent to which special education services were implemented. These descriptions focused on both a lack of money as well as a focus on making money. When describing the opportunities for an inclusive placement for her child with cerebral palsy, one parent said, "they had the mindset that it was going [to] cost too much." Another parent described the special education cooperative in their area as being focused on money, referring to "how they make their money" is through identifying students to receive special education services, thus increasing federal funds. Ultimately, this parent believed that the behavior of school personnel was focused on making money, and that the school personnel were "all about the dollar." One parent described that the school wanted her child to be placed in a segregated program, and she explained that she believed this was a financial decision. This parent explained, "If they can take 10 of our kids and put them in this room then… they're making money." For parents who named finances as influencing service implementation, they often viewed schools as continually trying to cut costs or work around small budgets at the expense of implementing agreed upon or desired services.

Philosophical and System Barriers

Parents also described philosophical and system barriers as possible reasons for the instances in which services were not being implemented. Philosophical barriers included educators' focus on deficits and lack of acceptance of the students. Some parents described school personnel as not accepting their child and being too focused on their child's deficits. When describing a desire for services to focus on her child's strengths instead of focusing on his needs, one parent explained her preference for her child's behavior support system to include a focus on the positive behaviors. She explained, "Whenever he has the behaviors…they track it, and they show me this chart. I said this is great, but I will only look at this chart if you can show me the positive behaviors as well." Parents also described instances in which the school team was not accepting

of the student, including one parent who explained, "When I said ignorance, they're just not accepting." One parent explained the desire to have teachers do more than just address their child's challenges; rather, the parents wanted them to build on the child's strengths. Parents described their concerns about the educator's focus on their child's deficits, and this was cited as one possible reason for a lack of implementation of services as agreed upon.

In addition to philosophical and deficit-focused perspectives, parents also described various system-level barriers as reasons for a lack of implementation of special education services, including school team members being overworked. Parents described instances in which the teachers and service providers were overworked, meaning that they had large class sizes and large caseloads, and this impacted the implementation of special education and other services, including IEP goals, related services, and modifications. One parent explained, "For two years, my son had the same resource teacher in middle school, and she worked on his IEP goals one time in nine weeks. When I called her on it, she said, 'well, I just don't have time because I have too many other students.'" Parents believed such system-level influences impacted teachers' capacity to deliver appropriate and agreed upon services, even when they possessed the necessary knowledge and skills.

Three parents who participated in the focus groups described challenges working with the special education cooperative in their area because of the barriers posed. They explained situations in which the teachers and service providers were not able to do what they wanted and what was best for the child because "the co-op keeps telling them no." One parent had tried to "encourage teachers or parents or anybody to go and get that additional training, [but] the co-op shoots them down." Another parent described an instance in which their child was supposed to receive speech services at preschool; however, the speech therapist only went to the preschool twice the entire year, and the "co-op director ignored it, so I was told you can fight the battle, but you're not going to win." In summary, in the instances in which parents described a lack of implementation of services as agreed upon, parents cited their own lack of knowledge, the lack of preparation and knowledge of the teachers, as well as financial and philosophical barriers as possible reasons.

Discussion

One of the main findings of this study was that parents described both instances in which they were able to reach agreement with school teams as well as experiences in which they were not able to reach agreement. Interestingly, when parents described reaching agreement with school teams on the provision

of special education services for their child, this was often due to the persistence of the parents. When describing the process of attempting to reach agreement with the school team, one parent in this study described it as a "full-time job." Parents in this study also described instances in which they were not able to reach agreement with the school teams, and this was often related to decisions on educational placement. Many parents described asking school personnel for a more inclusive placement for their child, a desire that researchers have identified in previous work (Burke & Sandman, 2015). However, some parents in the present study were not able to reach agreement with the school team about inclusive placements for their child. This finding reflected the tendency for schools and districts to separate and segregate students on the basis of their disability. Further, this finding reflects a national trend of students with IDD not having the opportunity to experience inclusive placements in the general education classroom (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014). Given that students with IDD continue to experience restrictive educational placements (Kurth et al., 2014), this finding is particularly troubling. Placement decisions should be made by the team (IDEA, 2004), and it is important for teams to engage in a systematic consideration process of the supports necessary to ensure each student's success in the least restrictive environment.

In addition to experiencing difficulty reaching agreement with school teams regarding inclusive educational placements for their children, parents in this study also described difficulty reaching agreement with school personnel regarding individualized special education services for their child. One parent described the set of predetermined services the school personnel proposed for her child because her child had an autism spectrum disorder. This finding of a disconnect between the individualized services requested by the parent and the services proposed by the school has been described in previous literature as well (Trainor, 2010). This disconnect reflects the need for school personnel to gather the perspectives of parents and work in partnership with the parents to systematically consider a range of services and placements in order to be consistent with the spirit of IDEA and its focus on parent collaboration (Elbaum et al., 2016; Mueller & Buckley, 2014).

The second main finding of this study was focused on the implementation of special education services. Specifically, some parents described experiences in which schools were indeed implementing goals, services, and placements that were agreed upon. However, parents also described instances in which the school was not implementing services consistent with the documented services in the child's special education paperwork. When parents in this study described instances in which special education services were not implemented as the team had agreed, they cited educator knowledge, preparation, and training

as a primary reason for this gap in implementation of services. For participants in this study, this lack of knowledge and training may have impacted the child's access to academic content and their participation in inclusive classrooms. For example, one parent explained her experiences with a shortage of teachers who had the knowledge to teach her child with Down syndrome. This finding has been identified in prior work and highlights an enduring need for more training and professional development focused on inclusive education and individual support strategies for students with IDD (Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood, & Sherman, 2015; Fish, 2006; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). In particular, researchers in previous studies have identified teachers' need to learn more about autism spectrum disorder, accommodations, and supporting students in the general education classroom (Able et al., 2015; Sansosti et al., 2012). Therefore, the need exists to support *all* teachers, not just those who are special educators, to learn about best practices in inclusive education and supporting students with IDD. This knowledge can be provided for preservice teachers through university coursework, practicum, and student teaching experiences. Additionally, in-service teachers can gain this knowledge through the use of modeling and performance feedback provided by a coach or consultant (Brock & Carter, 2016).

While many parents in this study described challenges with the implementation of special education services, others discussed the successful implementation of special education and related services for their child. Within these descriptions of special education services being implemented, parents often described the presence of positive and strong communication with the school personnel. This finding underscores the importance of communication for creating positive partnerships with parents (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2016; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013), and it has important implications for teacher preparation. It is important for preservice teachers to have opportunities to learn and practice strategies for communicating with parents. Content focused on parent collaboration should be deliberately included in university coursework in both general and special education, particularly because of the importance and complexity of building relationships with parents through effective and positive communication.

Limitations

The limitations of this study center around the parents who participated. First, the parents were recruited from two states; therefore, their experiences may not be transferrable to parents in other areas of the United States. Second, parents were initially recruited in part from local support groups, and it is possible that parents who participate in support groups are different from

other parents in terms of their prior experiences and reasons for joining a support group. Additionally, the sample size for participants in this study included 18 parents. While a larger sample size would have provided an understanding of the experiences of a larger number of families, we believe the parents in this study provided an in-depth and detailed explanation of their experiences of special education services and decisions for their child. As is true for any focus group, it is possible that reactivity may have occurred, meaning that parents' responses to questions may have been influenced by each other's responses to the questions or by the description of the topic in the recruitment materials (Morgan, 1993). It is possible that mothers and others assuming parenting roles (e.g., fathers, grandparents, foster parents) will have different experiences interacting with schools, as would parents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Yet the findings of this study included instances in which parents were and were not able to reach agreement with teams, and the findings also included instances in which parents explained how services were and were not implemented as agreed upon. Therefore, we believe it is important to document and learn from their perspectives and experiences.

Implications for Policy

One of the most troubling findings in this study was that some parents described instances in which special education services were not being implemented in a manner consistent with the child's evaluations and paperwork. In previous research, parents have expressed their views of the importance of special education paperwork including progress updates, data collection, and assessments (Burke & Sandman, 2015). Such paperwork provides the parent the opportunity to reference and review the services that were agreed upon. However, the parents may eventually need to assume the responsibility of monitoring and reviewing the implementation of special education services (Wakelin, 2008). Therefore, there is a need to develop and implement safeguards and policies that do not rely on the parent as the main enforcer of accountability (Wakelin, 2008).

The findings of this present study suggest a need for further attention to the paperwork provisions of IDEA including a need to ensure the documented supports and services are indeed being provided as the team agreed. Regular progress updates (Burke & Sandman, 2015) are certainly a first step in this direction; however, the school district and state should have their own system to ensure and monitor the implementation of services. Schools and districts could require educators to conduct an internal peer review of the goals and services documented in the special education paperwork as compared to what is actually being implemented.

There is a need for continued efforts to develop policies and regulations for the consideration process in which teams engage when making decisions about a child's placement. For example, one potential policy change could require IEP teams to document the process in which they specifically considered supplementary aids and services as a support for the student to access the general education classroom as well as how the child's parents or guardian were involved in that process. Currently, data are reported on the percentage of students inside the general education class for certain amounts of time during the day; however, data involving the rationale for these placements are not reported (Kurth et al., 2014). Therefore, there is a need for documentation of the rationale for specific placements as well as the consideration process that led to that placement decision. Further, this data could be monitored on a local, district, state, and federal level to ensure the equitable implementation of this aspect of IDEA.

Implications for Practice

In this study, parents also described situations in which they tried to obtain a specific service or accommodation for their child but were unsuccessful. To be consistent with the intention of IDEA, school team members should engage in a systematic planning process which also includes parent input. Earlier research has documented that, throughout the IEP process, parents have a desire and right to be substantively involved in providing input and developing IEP goals (Fish, 2008). Additionally, parents in earlier work have expressed their preference and enjoyment of experiences in which they were treated as "equal partners" in the special education planning process, meaning that the teachers actively sought their input (Francis et al., 2016). Therefore, given the findings of the present study, there is a continued need for school team members to use specific strategies for listening to parent input throughout the process.

Implications for Research

To advance special education practice and research, there is a need to identify specific strategies for communication that school personnel can implement to ensure parents of children with IDD have the opportunity to contribute to IEP team decisions and reach agreement with school teams about services for their child (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). For example, future research should continue to investigate the experiences of parents of children with IDD to learn about the strategies school personnel have used that have resulted in positive collaborative experiences for parents (Francis et al., 2016). Preservice and in-service teachers, as well as related services providers, may benefit from learning these strategies for effective collaboration, and

future research should investigate the effects of professional development interventions for preservice and in-service teachers learning new skills focused on supporting the involvement of parents in the special education process (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Trainor, 2010).

Further, future research must also investigate strategies to ensure the successful and accurate implementation of services as they were agreed upon by the school team. Such research could include interviews with administrators and school personnel in school districts that are successfully implementing special education services, including inclusive practices, as well as districts that have zero or very few previous formal complaints from parents. Such research could investigate patterns of agreement, disagreement, and varying perspectives on practices and policies in special education. Such research could also inform policy as well, given the need to ensure that parents are not the only team members enforcing the implementation of services as agreed upon.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand parents' perspectives on special education services and to understand how parents explain why schools do or do not implement elements of the IEP. We found that parents had varied experiences in reaching agreement with the school team about goals, services, and placements as well as the implementation of these components. Given the need to plan for access to high-quality instruction and educational placements in partnership with parents, there is a need to continue to refine and advance special education policy, research, and practice.

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