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Lessons Learned from IEP Meeting Experiences of Parents and School Professionals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) requires Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings to be held at least annually to develop or review plans that address the educational needs of students with disabilities. IDEA mandates that the IEP team include the child's parent(s) or guardian(s) along with school professionals representing regular education, special education, a representative of the local education agency, and related service providers (e.g., speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist) as applicable.

The multidisciplinary nature of the IEP team presents collaborative opportunities and challenges, especially between school professionals and parents (Goldman & Mason, 2018; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller & Vick, 2019). Researchers have explored how parents

and school professionals experience the IEP meeting process, including their collaboration with other members of the IEP team. Research on stakeholder perceptions of the IEP meeting experience generally falls into two categories: studies focused on the perceptions and experiences of individual stakeholder groups such as parents and school professionals, and studies that explore the collaborative relationship between these two groups. While the experiences of IEP team members in traditional face-to-face meetings have been documented, little is known about their experiences with virtual meetings, especially those held after the forced and unforeseen transition to remote collaboration caused by the recent pandemic.

Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of the IEP Process

Parental involvement is linked with positive academic outcomes for students (Wilder, 2014). The emphasis on parental satisfaction regarding the development and implementation of the IEP has led to a line of research on how parents perceive and experience their participation in IEP meetings, much of which focuses on the concept of “parent voice” in the IEP process. Parents who feel heard, understood, valued, and considered knowledgeable regarding their child’s education plan are more likely to have positive perceptions of the IEP meeting experience (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). However, evidence suggests that parental input has less influence on team decisions than the input of school professionals (Love et al., 2017). For example, many parents feel that certain actions of school professionals, such as coming to meetings with predetermined student goals or paperwork completed in advance, relegate them to a passive role during IEP meetings (Childre & Chambers, 2005). This is further supported by findings that school professionals tend to dominate discussion during IEP meetings, with one case study reporting that school staff members spoke during 86% of the time intervals observed during a single meeting (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Qualitative analysis of IEP documents has revealed that although parents may voice their concerns during IEP meetings, these concerns are merely documented in the meeting notes and seldom lead to the addition or revision of special education goals and/or services (Kurth et al., 2019).

Parents’ IEP Meeting Experiences During the Pandemic

Research conducted during the pandemic identified both advantages and disadvantages to virtual IEP meetings

related to parental input and experiences. Notable perceived advantages included improved family-professional relationships, increased communication, flexible meeting times, and the ability to attend meetings from home or work (Glessner & Johnson, 2020; Steed et al., 2021). Perceived disadvantages were similar to pre-pandemic research findings and related largely to the negative experiences of historically marginalized groups, especially families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Larios & Zetlin, 2018; Salas, 2004). For example, a study about parent perceptions of special education processes during the pandemic found that Spanish-speaking families felt disempowered, excluded, and devalued when information was not presented in their home language (Alba et al., 2022). Findings from this study indicate that linguistic and cultural considerations may compound existing barriers that already prevent parents from fully participating in their child’s IEP meetings (Alba et al., 2022). Additionally, families who were economically disadvantaged or lived in rural communities reported challenges with limited internet connectivity and thus fewer opportunities to attend virtual meetings during the pandemic (Glessner & Johnson, 2020).

School Professionals’ Perceptions and Experiences of the IEP Process

School professionals are required to assume a range of roles in facilitating the IEP meeting process, including that of collaborator, planner, organizer, communicator, and relationship builder (Weaver & Ouye, 2015). Much of the available research on school professionals’ perceptions and experiences of the IEP process describes how educators interact with and support other team members as

they fulfill these obligations. Special education teachers in particular are expected to be “masters of collaboration” (Fisher et al., 2003, p. 46) when it comes to facilitating the IEP development process by encouraging active engagement among families, related service providers, case managers, school psychologists, and administrators. Collaboration between general and special education teachers during the IEP development process is especially important for effective instructional planning and delivery (Rotter, 2014). Research on non-instructional school professionals’ perceptions of the IEP process is quite limited. However, a recent qualitative study found that principals leading inclusive schools identified building the capacity of teachers to develop and implement high-quality IEPs as their primary role in the IEP process (DeMatthews et al., 2021).

School Professionals’ IEP Meeting Experiences During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, special educators reported acquiring the unexpected and additional duty of providing technological support to IEP teams, especially when conducting virtual meetings with families who had little or no previous experience using technology for education or work (McNamara et al., 2021). After an initial adjustment period at the start of the pandemic, special education staff reported positive outcomes of virtual IEP meetings including improved adherence to meeting agendas, expedited communication through the chat option available in many popular virtual meeting platforms, and increased meeting attendance for both families and itinerant school staff due to fewer scheduling and transportation challenges (McNamara et al.,

2021; Rowe et al., 2020; Steed et al., 2021; Tremmel et al., 2020). The most common barrier to virtual collaboration reported by school staff was reliable internet connectivity (Schaffer et al., 2021).

Collaboration Between Parents and School Professionals During the IEP Process

A growing body of research has examined the nature of relationships between parents and school professionals during the IEP process (Cavendish & Conner, 2018; Kyzar et al., 2019; Mueller & Vick, 2019) including some research on online collaboration for IEP teams (Catagnus & Hantula, 2011). Families and educators should work in partnership when making decisions about a child’s educational needs, but may come to the meeting with differing expectations, perceptions, and ideas which creates conditions for conflict (Kurth et al., 2019). A seminal study on factors contributing to parent-school conflict in special education found that 90% of conflict escalation during IEP meetings occurred due to divergent viewpoints between parents and educators on the needs of the child (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Conflict within the IEP team can also be fueled by factors such as varied levels of expertise, the history of interactions, and real or perceived power differentials between team members (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller & Vick, 2019).

Studies have also addressed how common barriers to collaboration among IEP team members can be remedied. Communication is often identified as a factor that contributes substantially to the creation of a cohesive IEP team (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). One contributor to effective collaboration during IEP meetings is student-centered discussion that

highlights the unique strengths and needs of the child (Childre & Chambers, 2005). Additional recommended practices for fostering collaboration between families and school professionals include pre-meetings with parents, the utilization of meeting agendas, and the development of team norms (Mueller & Vick, 2019).

Collaboration During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, increased use of online collaborative tools and workspaces (e.g., Google Docs, Dropbox) enabled team members to prepare for meetings, share draft IEP goals, and document individuals' input prior to meetings (Rowe et al., 2020). Rural communities facing barriers such as geographic isolation, poverty, and lack of access to specialists and technology derived particular benefit from the proliferation of these tools and resources during the pandemic, with one study reporting positive implications for community partnerships, stakeholder participation, professional development opportunities, and resource allocation for students with disabilities (Tremmel et al., 2020). Children of these families were less likely to have received appropriate special education services during the pandemic due to their inability or hesitation to report lapses in services (Alba et al., 2022). In addition to the adoption of new virtual collaboration tools, organizations also invested resources to develop and disseminate guidance for educators and families of students with disabilities. For example, six technical assistance centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) developed infographics and tip sheets containing guidance for parents and educators on orchestrating and participating in virtual IEP

meetings (Center for Parent Information & Resources, 2020).

In the current study, we investigate how IEP team members experienced virtual IEP meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic, an event that resulted in a sudden and remarkable shift in the delivery of special education services. We describe common themes across the lived experiences of school professionals and parents of children with disabilities as they navigated collaboration in this new and unfamiliar format. This timely and relevant study examines lessons learned during the pandemic while addressing a gap in research on virtual collaboration processes within the field of special education. The research question addressed in the study is:

What were the perceptions and experiences of parents and school professionals participating in virtual IEP meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methodology

The goal of this study was to identify and analyze school professionals' and parents' perceptions of the virtual IEP meeting experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend conducting a phenomenological study when the researchers' intent is to develop a composite description of a lived experience and interpret its meaning through the development of common themes. Additionally, we used a social constructivist framework as a mechanism for extracting meaning from the social interactions within the context of the IEP meeting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a phenomenological approach and social constructivist framework, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the lived

experiences of participants in virtual IEP meetings during the pandemic. The interview questions posed to participants were broad and open-ended to enable us to gain a comprehensive understanding of participants' views and to construct meaning from their accounts.

Researchers' Stance

As researchers, we acknowledge that our professional and personal backgrounds and experiences inform our positions in relation to the research topic, setting, participants, data collection, and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Our research team consisted of five researchers who are doctoral students and professionals in the field of special education. Two members of our team are parents of a child with a disability. In addition, two of us were contracted with the participating school districts, one as a behavior consultant and the other as a school psychologist. While this relationship had the potential to limit their objectivity, it also provided an opportunity for dynamic connection and transparency between the interviewer and interviewee (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When necessary, we bracketed, or set aside, our personal opinions to ensure we collected and analyzed data with an impartial perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay, 2013). However, the inevitable integration

between researcher and subject in phenomenological studies can be useful in evolving an understanding of participants' experiences when managed with critical self-awareness and self-reflection (Finlay, 2013).

Participants

This study included participants from two public school districts in the United States. One district was a small mixed urban-suburban district in a northeastern state and the other was a large city district in a western state. We used a convenience snowball sampling method to recruit participants easily accessible to two of us who were working for the participating school districts. We recruited 19 participants, including 10 school professionals and nine parents of students receiving special education services. To increase the applicability of the findings across settings, we attempted to recruit participants who varied in cultural background, race, gender, and who had experience with a variety of disability categories (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2015). Demographic information about study participants is presented in Tables 1 and 2. All study participants had attended at least one IEP meeting prior to the district's transition to virtual learning and at least one IEP meeting during.

Table 1*Demographic Characteristics of School Professional Participants*

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Education	Current position	Years in education	IEP meetings attended
Claire	F	White	Master's	Special education teacher	3	10
Lucía	F	Latina	Bachelor's	Special education teacher	6	30
Jimmy	M	White	Bachelor's	Special education teacher	27	20
Maggie	F	White	Master's	General education teacher	8	15
Maureen	F	White	Master's	Special education director	26	40
Nelson	M	White	Master's	School psychologist	4	40
Nina	F	White	Master's	Speech therapist	10	40
Ana	F	Latina	Master's	Vice principal	24	100
Stacey	F	White	Master's	School psychologist	11	80
Vivian	F	Latina	Bachelor's	Speech therapist	13	80

Table 2*Demographic Characteristics of Parent Participants*

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Native English speaker
Elena	F	37	Latina	Bachelor's	No
Kevin	M	33	White	Bachelor's	Yes
Krystal	F	34	Latina	Bachelor's	Yes
Linda	F	50	Latina	Master's	No
Amy	F	41	Latina	High school	No
Lisa	F	35	Latina	Some college	Yes
Mary	F	35	Latina	High school	No
Noemi	F	34	Latina	High school	No
Theresa	F	36	Latina	High school	No

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews. Interview sessions took place via Zoom, a web-based video conferencing platform. The interview questions and protocol were developed collaboratively by the research team. Each participant was interviewed once by one member of the research team. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, site approval by district administrators, and prior to the interview, the participants were emailed a consent form which provided them with information related to the purpose, logistics, and confidentiality

procedures of study and to document their agreement to participate in the study.

During the interview, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions in a semi-structured format related to their lived experiences of IEP meetings before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the participants had the opportunity to ask us clarifying questions. We prompted participants with follow-up questions that emerged during the interview. The interview concluded with questions related to participant demographics. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

During and after each interview, we composed field notes detailing our

impressions of the interview, including possible initial codes that had emerged. Transcription of the interview occurred immediately following the interview. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to maintain confidentiality regarding their identity, their location, and the identity of anyone else mentioned during the interview.

We conducted this study in two phases. The first phase piloted the interview protocol with nine participants in the fall of 2020. The second phase expanded the study to include an additional 10 participants in the spring of 2022.

Trustworthiness

Research trustworthiness was ensured through rigorous precautions taken throughout the study. The four dimensions of trustworthiness are credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Connelly, 2016). To ensure credibility, we conducted member checks by asking each participant to confirm the accuracy of their interview transcript and affirm our interpretations of their responses (Burt et al., 2016). All participants responded back indicating that each of our interpretations of their experiences was accurate. After receiving a written response from the participants we each interviewed, we communicated with each other during our biweekly meetings. Commonalities were recorded and discussed. For example, all 19 respondents indicated that a positive outcome of the virtual format was a notable increase in meeting attendance for various team members. In addition, we recorded our own insights and reflections in our field notes after each interview and all members of our team participated in a peer review of themes from the data. After the member check step, we reviewed each transcript a

minimum of two times. We exchanged the transcripts from the interviews we individually conducted and assigned them to other members of our team. In addition, we met biweekly and also included our field notes in a spreadsheet as we each reviewed our individual transcripts and the transcripts of other members of our team. We established dependability by keeping detailed accounts of our data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes in weekly research journals. We also engaged in regular, ongoing discussions about our research process with our research advisor and his research assistant. Transferability was maintained through the use of semi-structured interviews, intentional prompting, and follow-up questioning which provided us the opportunity to gather rich, thick descriptions of participants' lived experiences (Connelly, 2016). Finally, to ensure confirmability, we engaged in weekly collegial debriefing sessions and kept records of these discussions, which created an audit trail for other researchers seeking to replicate the study (Connelly, 2016).

Data Analysis

We analyzed qualitative data collected during this study using a thematic analysis approach. According to Clarke and Braun (2017), the purpose of thematic analysis is not just to summarize the qualitative data, but to "identify, and interpret, key, but not necessarily all, features of the data, guided by the research question" (p. 297). We chose this analytic method because it provided a framework by which to identify relevant social themes among the lived experiences of participants and a process for coding the data with qualitative richness (Boyatzis, 1998). Using a thematic analysis approach to data

interpretation allowed themes to be directed by participant responses rather than by our own preconceptions.

After conducting and transcribing the interviews, we used NVivo 12© software to perform qualitative coding. During initial coding, we utilized an inductive process, rather than a deductive process, to allow for themes and interpretations to emerge naturally from the data instead of the data being used to test pre-formulated theories (Thomas, 2006). At least two members of the research team reviewed each transcript and the initial codes from each interview to ensure the credibility of our interpretations. Next, we worked together to identify patterns within and relationships between the initial codes across the data. We engaged in multiple rounds of discussion to synthesize these patterns and relationships into a set of themes, which we named using short phrases aligned with the stages of the IEP meeting process.

Findings

Six major themes emerged from our thematic analysis. In keeping with a phenomenological approach, we chose to organize these themes to reflect participants' lived experiences of the sequential stages of an IEP meeting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following six themes, which are discussed further in this section, reflect how IEP team members navigated the virtual IEP meeting experience by (a) prioritizing preparedness, (b) conquering technology, (c) negotiating new communication norms, (d) building rapport, (e) adapting to a new kind of collaboration, and (f) harnessing flexibility.

Theme 1: Prioritizing Preparedness

Six school professionals and six parents spoke about the increased importance of preparation prior to the IEP meeting since transitioning to virtual meetings. Maureen, a special education administrator, opined that while adequate preparation is essential to the success of any IEP meeting, it is even more critical in the virtual environment. She noted, "when everyone is very prepared, that's when we have the most productive meetings." When speaking about preparation for in-person meetings held prior to the pandemic, school professionals reported being responsible for several pre-meeting tasks including compiling documentation of progress from teachers and related service providers, collecting student work samples, and preparing the IEP document for the team's review. For meetings held virtually during the pandemic, school professionals indicated that these responsibilities have expanded, with additional pressure to ensure that documentation is comprehensive and detailed enough to demonstrate educational progress made during virtual learning. Claire, a preschool special education teacher, stated:

I just feel like you have to prove your data so much more now because it's being done differently. Because some students really aren't progressing, I feel like we have to prove that we tried everything that we can virtually.

This was substantiated by parent participant Elena, who voiced concern about how data was being collected. She shared that the way data was shared virtually made it difficult to understand the IEP document. Nina, a speech-language therapist, echoed that the transition to virtual meetings has heightened the importance of preparation prior to the

meeting. She noted that in the virtual IEP meetings she has attended, “it felt like everyone was very prepared and knowledgeable,” whereas prior to the pandemic, it was common for staff members to “wing it” by coming to the meeting without written notes or prepared talking points. When team members come to the meeting unprepared “it can take away from making the meeting personal and letting [families] know we’re putting individualized effort into it.”

Parent participants also described changes in their perceptions of school professionals’ preparedness for meetings. Kevin, the parent of a preschooler, noted that his child’s IEP team “did everything they could to make sure we were ready” prior to the first virtual meeting and “gave us the material we needed” to fully participate in the meeting. Three parents spoke about carefully reviewing documents such as evaluation reports, student work samples, and a draft of the IEP provided by the school prior to the meeting. Linda, the parent of a first-grade student, said that she believes it is “impossible for parents to participate” in the IEP meeting without receiving materials in advance to prepare. She described past experiences when her child’s IEP team did not send her materials until minutes before the meeting began. During these meetings, she felt unable to keep up with the discussion because she had not been given the opportunity to review the data and formulate her questions for the team.

Conversely, two parents described how members of their child’s IEP team took proactive steps to email documents and materials in advance of virtual meetings and recalled feeling appreciative for the extra preparation efforts made by staff. Amy, the mother of a fifth grade student, explained,

“now that we do it online, you know they... do send me all my documents first and everything and the teacher is really good like letting me know...the date.”

Additionally, Kevin stated:

They had emailed prior to the meeting the documentation so that we could have it in our hands and I do recall them screen sharing as well. I believe that the caseworker shared her screen and shared the actual IEP, and we went through page by page, but we also had it in our hands.

Theme 2: Conquering Technology

A second theme that emerged from the interviews involved difficulties with the technological aspects of hosting IEP meetings virtually. Parents and school professionals alike described their relationships with virtual meeting technology in combative terms (e.g., struggle, fight) and spoke of their efforts to “overcome” technological hurdles. In spite of these challenges, all nineteen interview participants reported having successfully participated in at least one virtual IEP meeting since the start of the pandemic and that they were getting easier with each experience.

Parents in particular expressed concern with navigating the technological demands of virtual collaboration. Five parents described having moderate to significant difficulty with technology during virtual meetings, citing issues such as unstable internet connection and difficulty accessing and utilizing video conferencing platforms like Zoom. Kevin reported: “...it does provide its own challenges. People have different levels of technology knowledge and experience.” Furthermore, Linda shared her perception of the

importance of understanding how to navigate technology during the meeting. She stated it is important to be able to “navigate and access” not only the internet but the software used to host IEP meetings.

School professionals reported spending a substantial amount of time educating parents on technology, both in relation to virtual IEP meetings and their child’s virtual instruction. Nelson, a school psychologist, shared the following anecdote about helping a parent with limited technology access transition to virtual communication and meetings:

The parent was very unfamiliar with technology. I don't even think she had a computer. And the computer that she did have was the child's Chromebook. She was having trouble with getting on the Internet and everything. So when I tried to communicate with her... we had to do it over the phone. And I guess she misunderstood some of the things over the phone. She was assuming things would be one way and they actually were never told to her that way. But she just misunderstood, and I think it was because we couldn't really talk in person. Then when we actually got to the IEP meeting and used Zoom...it kind of cleared up a lot of things.

Four parents and seven school professionals mentioned that navigating technology can be especially challenging for parents who are not native English speakers. Elena, a parent who is bilingual in Spanish and English, expressed her concern for other parents facing a “technology or language barrier,” asserting that technology issues often compound struggles faced by parents with limited English proficiency. Six

of the nine parent participants in this study were native speakers of languages other than English, four of whom reported some level of difficulty navigating the technology required to participate fully in virtual IEP meetings.

Seven of the ten school professionals interviewed named technology as a significant barrier to parent participation in meetings held virtually. School professionals reported interacting with parents who had a wide range of skill and comfort utilizing virtual meeting technology. Maggie, a general education teacher, offered her opinion that “being able to participate virtually and access the technology can make or break things.” In spite of the school’s best efforts to assist parents with technology, she said that progress has been incremental and that technology remains an obstacle to full and meaningful participation in IEP meetings. Jimmy, a special education teacher and case manager, shared his experience:

There are certain people that just don't participate at all, you know, and it's like pulling teeth to try to get them to even answer basic questions... so having a zoom meeting with them is not beneficial.

Nelson, a school psychologist, further explained how difficult it was for some parents to log into Zoom and described a situation in which he tried to assist a parent with logging into the meeting. After a period of continuous struggle, Nelson and the parent eventually resorted to other methods of communication because “we couldn’t do it through Zoom.”

Theme 3: Negotiating New Communication Norms

In addition to describing technological barriers, participants also

described how the virtual meeting format has changed the way team members communicate with each other during meetings. Participants shared examples of how the communication norms they were accustomed to during in-person IEP meetings did not successfully translate to the virtual setting. Kevin, a parent, identified the absence of “nonverbal communication” as an example:

It will still always lack that immediate feedback... faces in the room, you know, nonverbal communication. Just all the things that we take for granted in our interactions with people, the sense, the feelings we get from people. It just didn't have that... comforting nature that this was the village of people that were going to help my son grow. It was just a totally different experience being online.

Seven participants reported difficulty maintaining a balanced exchange of conversation between parents and school professionals during virtual meetings. Although this challenge existed prior to the pandemic, participants found that it was exacerbated by the transition to a novel format. Mary, the parent of a third-grade student recently found eligible for special education services, reported that she struggled to feel “comfortable” speaking up during virtual IEP meetings, noting that “all of that information at once from four or five different people can be slightly overwhelming to a new person.” In retrospect, she wished the case manager running the meeting had paused more frequently to allow her to process new information and ask questions. Two other parents echoed this sentiment in their interviews, remarking that the virtual format makes it more difficult to interrupt

the momentum of the meeting to ask questions. Linda expressed that the virtual IEP felt hurried:

It's all in a rush because they have to summarize a lot of pages for you because you didn't read. So you are like that sometimes you wanna... I ask questions or everything but you miss a lot of things that it's a lot of information.

Noemi felt similarly:

I felt like it was a little rushed, just you know, to get everything kind of done. Like boom, boom, boom, you know, all right, let's go. That's how I thought. I mean, I'm not sure if it was just me feeling like that, but I felt like everything was just, you know, kind of like, ok we... wanna get this done. Hurry up!

Furthermore, Nina, a speech-language therapist, expressed similar concerns about the flow of virtual meetings, stating:

I just feel like for a parent it's more challenging to interrupt and say, 'Wait, I don't understand,' because the setting you're in is very different. It almost doesn't allow for it, even though it's always asked if you have questions or if you want me to explain something that's offered... They're shorter, they're quicker... maybe parents don't feel as comfortable.

Theme 4: Building Rapport

Nearly all participants spoke about how the transition to the virtual meeting format has impacted relationship development between IEP team members. Five of the ten school professionals spoke about the importance of building trust with parents, but noted that establishing mutual

trust is more easily accomplished through face-to-face interaction. Stacey, a school psychologist, believes that “trust between the home and the school” is a critical prerequisite for effective IEP meetings, especially those held virtually, but that “you’re not going to get the same comfort level with parents that I think we would have gotten in person.”

Previously established relationships between members of the IEP team eased difficulties for some participants during virtual meetings. Eight participants reported that having strong pre-existing school-family partnerships contributed substantially to the success of virtual meetings held during the pandemic. Elena shared her belief that her child’s recent virtual IEP meeting was productive because she already had strong working relationships and positive rapport with her child’s school team from the previous school year. She stated that she felt grateful that she already knew her child’s IEP team members, and that “communication and cooperation across the board” helped make the virtual meeting experience a positive one.

Jimmy, a special education teacher, shared that holding IEP meetings in person gave him a better opportunity to meaningfully engage with families:

I feel a lot more comfortable with them because I was able to use all my senses when I was engaged with the... meeting. I could see everybody, you know? I could hear everybody really well, I was in close proximity to the parent and all the parents know me pretty well 'cause we're always in communication, so it just made it a lot more meaningful when we were engaged in the conference room at school.

Jimmy further expressed his opinion that developing relationships with parents is the “most important linchpin in this whole operation.” He added that knowing the family will lead to more “meaningful communication, which translates to better participation.”

School professionals also expressed awareness of the challenges of building rapport between team members and parents during virtual IEP meetings. Three participants gave examples illustrating their efforts to address these challenges. Maureen indicated that her staff has invested significant time and resources to foster interpersonal relationships with parents through this new medium:

It's been a lot of working and practicing on how to make the Zoom setting – for lack of a better way to say it – more intimate and more professional. I think we've done a pretty good job... I feel good about what we've done, but I definitely see the challenges in the interpersonal relationship piece on Zoom.

Theme 5: Adapting to a New Kind of Collaboration

Across interviews, participants described ways in which they had to quickly shift how they collaborated with other team members to develop and implement IEPs for the virtual learning environment. Six participants spoke to the increased level of partnership and cooperation needed between home and school, especially to manage virtual services for younger students. Elena described what this increased collaboration with members of her child’s IEP team entailed, noting her expanded role in monitoring and supporting her child’s education:

I bring to them some of the challenges that I'm facing with my son and I also ask them about any recommendations on how I should be presenting materials or how I should be doing certain things. And they have been very helpful in supplying that information to me.

Six school professionals and three parents spoke about the ways in which IEP team members have had to adjust the way they collaborate on data collection and data-based decision making since the transition to virtual meetings. Vivian, a speech therapist, expressed concern that the virtual setting has made it more difficult to work jointly with other team members to conduct evaluations. Claire, a preschool special education teacher, expressed that "it's just so much easier to have the child there with you... for evaluations and for, you know, just through the year. I feel like the data is more accurate".

Elena expressed her concerns about the reliability of data collected on her child during virtual instruction, especially behavioral data, and emphasized that this is an issue for the entire IEP team to address:

I don't think I fully understand how that data is being taken, because parents are not the professionals. So, when the IEP meeting comes next year those are some of the things that we're going to have to look into because I want to be effective... at supporting my son.

Additionally, Lisa, the mother of an eighth-grade student, shared the following regarding the downfalls of virtual assessment and evaluation: "it was more relying on me and having him in the Zoom to get him tested, but he wasn't allowing them to test him and then his teacher had to leave.

Theme 6: Harnessing Flexibility

Finally, five participants identified the increased flexibility offered by virtual meetings as a positive aspect of the change in meeting format. Both parents and school professionals reported increased attendance at IEP meetings since the shift. Two parents commented that the transition to virtual meetings has afforded them more flexibility in scheduling IEP meetings at a time convenient to them, often eliminating the need to adjust their work schedules or secure child care. Krystal, a parent of a kindergartener, shared her thoughts:

It's more convenient for the parents, especially the parents that do work... it's something they would be able to do, I would say, like, during their lunch hour, whereas to take the whole day off to go to a meeting... you know, it's just more the travel time.

Ana, the mother of a fifth grade student shared that she had a good opportunity to be more available with having zoom IEP meetings and expressed the following, "I would like for them to give you an option if you wanna do it on zoom or go in person. Yes, you know. Just to have that option..."

Lucia, a special education teacher, shared the same sentiment about flexibility and felt that moving forward, IEP meetings should be offered in both formats. She stated that presenting two options would "be most convenient to the...families and to the team." She also posited that providing this option would benefit both families and school teams by eliminating stress: "I feel like it would just help with the scheduling and we won't

have to, you know, make these meetings so close to the due date or be afraid of falling out of compliance because of dates.”

Maureen noted feeling excited that she and her support coordinators were now able to “pop in and out of more meetings” because she didn’t have to spend time driving between schools which gave her the ability to “get to know more families.” She also reported that administrators’ increased availability meant they could attend for reasons other than resolving conflict, which contributed to stronger and more positive rapport with families.

Discussion

Most U.S. schools successfully implemented full or partial return-to-school efforts in the 2021-22 school year. As of February 2022, 99% of public schools offered full-time in-person instruction with 34% of schools offering a full-time remote learning option and 10% offering a hybrid learning option (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). Despite setbacks, this has largely met the expectation set forth by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) that every student with a disability be provided with the opportunity for full-time, in-person learning by the 2021-22 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

As the threat of COVID-19 subsides and schools resume normal operations, some parents and educators of students with disabilities want to return to a “business as usual” model of holding IEP meetings in person. However, although study participants acknowledged the challenges inherent in virtual collaboration, our findings also suggest that parents and school professionals alike found benefit in

virtual meeting format. This was especially true for working families, itinerant services providers, and administrators. In fact, sixteen of the participants voiced a desire for schools to continue offering a virtual meeting option alongside an in-person option. In the same way that educators provide options to make instruction accessible for students with disabilities, virtual IEP meetings provide another option to make school-family collaboration more accessible for all team members. Two of the respondents were anxious to return to in person meetings and one was undecided.

Flexibility and accessibility are valuable guiding principles for IEP teams in the coming school years as educators work to address potential learning loss and missed opportunities during the period of school closure. For example, an IEP team may need to meet several times a year instead of just once a year to review and adjust a student’s instructional program or behavioral supports as they reacclimate to in-person instruction. Additionally, IEP teams are beginning to meet to consider the provision of compensatory services for students with disabilities who experienced significant service disruptions during the pandemic. Offering virtual IEP meetings may help educators manage an increased volume of meetings while providing parents with flexible and accessible options for engagement.

Implications for Research

Our study focused on examining the lived experiences of school professionals and parents of children with disabilities as they navigated IEP meetings conducted virtually during the pandemic. One potential limitation of our study is that there was a gap of slightly over a year between the pilot in the fall of 2020 and the

expansion in the spring of 2022. Although there was a substantial amount of time between the first and second phases of the study, key themes were similar for both groups. Additionally, it would be valuable to conduct a comparative study between parents and school professionals to better understand how their roles influenced their IEP meeting experience during the pandemic. This would also provide an opportunity to generate specific recommendations for strategic support to each group. Finally, as virtual meetings become more commonplace, research is needed to identify best practices for virtual collaboration during the IEP development process, such as the use of virtual IEP meeting protocols.

Implications for Practice

While some of the issues revealed in the study are best practices for IEP meetings, it is evident where these practices are not being applied. This study contributes to the understanding of virtual collaboration practices in special education by discussing the benefits and challenges of virtual IEP meetings as perceived by parents and school professionals. Findings from this study highlight the importance of the interpersonal aspects of virtual collaboration, most notably the need for families and school professionals to find ways to purposefully maintain positive relationships through all stages of the IEP process. Findings also suggest that school professionals can improve the virtual meeting experience for parents by carefully and comprehensively preparing for meetings, providing technological support and training, and prioritizing follow-up communication after meetings.

Effective collaboration between parents and school professionals is critical

for successful IEP meetings, whether they are held virtually or in person. The results of our study have informed the following recommendations for IEP teams seeking to enhance the virtual meeting experience for all participants:

1. To encourage parent attendance and accommodate the family's scheduling needs, school professionals may offer parents the choice between holding their child's IEP meeting in person or on a virtual platform.
2. To increase parent comfort and fluency with technology so that they can participate fully in virtual meetings, school professionals may offer regularly scheduled training and workshops specific to the hardware, software, and online tools used by the school.
3. To support meaningful participation and equitable discussion at virtual meetings, preparation needs to be prioritized by all team members. School professionals can provide parents access to relevant reports and materials in advance of the meeting and parents should spend time reviewing the documents and formulating questions and discussion points to raise at the meeting.
4. To facilitate organization and promote accountability, standardized protocols and practices for virtual IEP meetings may be thoughtfully developed by schools and shared with parents.
5. To establish and maintain supportive and effective partnerships, school professionals may prioritize building positive

relationships with parents by engaging in open and respectful communication, fostering an atmosphere of authenticity and care, and encouraging frequent, meaningful involvement in their child's education and IEP.

The unexpected global shutdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a massive and abrupt shift in nearly all aspects of special education service delivery. While the limitations imposed by the pandemic inarguably resulted in significant stress and hardship for those in the field of education and beyond, they also provided a unique, albeit unsolicited, opportunity to discover new ways to collaborate and communicate. Participants in our study described the barriers they faced in navigating the unfamiliar world of virtual collaboration during IEP meetings, but their experiences also illuminated the value of adaptability and accessibility. As the pandemic continues to loosen its grip on the world and a sense of normalcy re-emerges, educators and families of students with disabilities are encouraged to reflect on lessons learned that can promote more effective, equitable, and progressive collaboration.

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