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Multiple Perspectives on Parent Involvement for Middle School Students Receiving Special Education Services

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

By

Erin Blatz

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Coral Gables, Florida

August 2014
MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

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Parent involvement is recognized as an important factor in the education of all students, including those receiving special education services. Research indicates that parents of students with disabilities often experience barriers to their participation in their children’s education, and that the efforts put forth by school personnel to engage these parents may be insufficient or ineffective. Using data collected as part of a larger study of parents’ and professionals’ perceptions related to schools’ parent engagement efforts, this study compared the perspectives of 25 parents of students with disabilities and 26 teachers and administrators from five middle schools located in four different school districts in a large southeastern state. The analysis of data aggregated across participants from all five schools yielded four themes, identified as (a) the quality of the school’s efforts to engage and collaborate with parents, (b) the frequency, variety, and effectiveness of communication, (c) the quality of services, placement, and education, and (d) beliefs and values about parent involvement. When parents and professionals from each school were considered as separate units of analysis, important differences emerged across schools. In one school, there was a high level of agreement between parents and professionals in relation to all four themes; in the other four schools, the perspectives of parents were consistently different from the perspectives of school
personnel. The findings of this study add significantly to the literature on parent-school collaboration and highlight important school-level variation in the degree of congruence between parents and school staff. Insights gained from the study can inform middle schools’ future efforts to develop more effective educational partnerships with parents of students receiving special education services.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Wyatt. Know that you can achieve anything you put your mind to. Reach for the stars.
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, this dissertation would not have been possible without the opportunity, support, and feedback provided by my adviser, mentor, and dissertation chair: Dr. Batya Elbaum. Thank you for your unyielding commitment to my scholarly career.

Also instrumental to the completion of my dissertation is my committee: Drs. Beth Harry, Wendy Cavendish, and Heather Henderson. Your insights and feedback challenged me to dig deeper and work harder to make this dissertation the best that it can be.

To all the doctoral students in UM’s Special Education program, thank you for paving the way for future students to get the most out of the program as possible.

To my new family: Artie, thank you for putting your life on hold while we moved to Florida so that I could complete this program. You stuck by me despite countless late night writing, stress-filled weekends, and long days in Miami. I am eternally grateful for your support and encouragement. Wyatt, your smile made this process more challenging and more rewarding. Thank you both for bringing such a huge amount of joy to my life.

To my family, Ma, Dad, Mike, Jesse, Stacy, Emmet, and Lyle, thank you for always believing in me and challenging me to be the best that I can be. I feel lucky to have such a supportive family.
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Quality of collaboration with parents
Accommodations for parents
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Suggestions to improve parent engagement efforts

Theme two: Frequency, variety, and effectiveness of communication

Theme three: Quality of services, placement, and education

IEP implementation and accommodations
Child’s experience in school
IEP choices and decision making
Teacher quality and training
Transitions
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Chapter One: Introduction

As schools in the U.S. adapt their service systems for students with disabilities in response to education reforms and new accountability requirements, parent involvement in special education has continued to be a priority. Parents of students with disabilities have long been recognized as key participants in planning their child’s educational program and in supporting their child’s learning. More recently, as part of the federal accountability system implemented under the re-authorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), school districts are being held accountable for schools’ efforts to involve parents in ways that go beyond the specific requirements of the federal statute and are aimed at creating true partnerships with parents (Coots, 2007; Elbaum, Fisher, & Coulter, 2011).

Whereas the general education literature provides strong empirical support for the positive association between parent involvement and student achievement (Auerbach, 2012; Cox, 2005; Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Fan & Chen, 2001; Fishel & Ramirez, 2005; Guli, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoard & Sheppard, 2005; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Riehl, 2012; Theoharis, 2012; Zellman & Waterman, 1998), research on parent involvement for students with disabilities has not focused specifically on educational outcomes. Historically, the focus of special education on parent involvement has been on issues of access and equity. With regard to access, advocacy by parents was instrumental in helping students with disabilities to achieve access to public education in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975. With regard to equity, this advocacy ensured that students with disabilities were no longer placed in separate programs of lower educational quality. Indeed, the premise of IDEA is that if students are
placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) they are far more likely to receive an education that is equivalent to that of their peers without disabilities.

Subsequently, parent involvement came to be viewed as an additional means of ensuring the quality of educational services being provided to students (Coots, 2007; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000). Parents of students with disabilities are afforded protective rights under IDEA, and parent participation in the development of a child’s Individual Educational Program (IEP) (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000) is a cornerstone of special education practice. Owing to the legal protections afforded to parents of students with disabilities under IDEA, schools have largely focused on compliance with statutory regulations, rather than ensuring that parents are meaningfully involved with their child’s education.

Parent involvement at the middle school level is particularly important. It is often the time when consequential curriculum and assessment decisions are made for students with disabilities, such as what kind of diploma the child will strive for (e.g., the state of Florida offers a special diploma option for students with disabilities who do not qualify for a standard diploma) and what kind of pursuits beyond secondary school, e.g., college, vocational school, regular employment, sheltered employment, etc. are most appropriate. Despite this, researchers have noted an overall decrease in parent involvement as children progress through school (Eccles & Midgley, 1990; Epstein, 1984; Green et. al, 2007; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994), resulting in less parent involvement in middle school than in elementary school, and less involvement still in high school.
The issue of parent involvement has been examined from the perspectives of both parents and school personnel. To better understand the barriers that impede effective parent involvement, researchers have investigated the experiences of parents of students receiving special education services (Barrera & Liu, 2004; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2008; Fish, 2006, 2008; Lalvani, 2012; Murray, Handyside, Straka & Arton-Titus, 2013; Ong-Dean, 2009, Trainor, 2008) and the perceptions of teachers and administrators of students receiving special education services with regard to parent involvement (Ben-Yehuda, Leyser & Last, 2010; Bezdek, Summers & Turnbull, 2010; Campbell & Halbert, 2002; Geenen, Powers & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005; Lee et al., 2003; Luckner & Hanks, 2003; Trainor, 2011). Studies focusing on parents’ experiences have affirmed parents’ common desire to be involved in their child’s education, but have also found considerable variability among parents in the extent and type of their involvement and have identified factors associated with this variability (Harry, 2008; Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Ong-Dean, 2009; Walker et. al, 2011). For example, Harry’s (2008) review of literature related to collaborating with families of students receiving special education services concluded that a major barrier to involving families is related to differences between parents and school personnel in beliefs about disability and about the roles that parents can or should play in educational planning for their child. School professionals are often unable to see the strengths that parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds bring to supporting their children’s education. Similarly, Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that race and class play a role in how parents approach schools in order to be involved, and that the activation of social capital is an important factor for schools to understand when working with parents so that parents from CLD backgrounds
are not excluded. Walker et. al (2011) found that Latino parents were more involved at home than in school in supporting their children’s learning, which is rarely recognized by schools; schools often see only the types of involvement that occur in school and do not recognize and effectively support other forms of involvement.

Studies focusing on teachers’ and administrators’ experiences in relation to parent involvement have found that teachers are often inadequately prepared to engage effectively with parents, and that professionals’ practices in parent involvement are not consistent with their own beliefs (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009; Campbell & Halbert, 2002; Lee, Ostrosky, Bennett & Fowler, 2003; Luckner & Hanks, 2003; Trainor, 2011). The literature suggests that many teachers hold negative views of parents and their involvement, and that these negative views may impact teachers’ efforts to collaborate with parents (Bezdek, Summers, & Turnbull, 2010; Christianakis, 2011; Geenen, Powers & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005; Ludicke & Kortman, 2012). Additionally, little is known about the relationship between individual teachers’ beliefs and the beliefs of fellow teachers at the same school, or the possible impact of school context, including leadership, on these beliefs.

A national study of reports from parents and teachers about parent involvement (Chen & Chandler, 2001) found a significant discrepancy in perceptions of these two groups regarding both the level of involvement by parents and the level of schools’ efforts to involve parents. Specifically, parents reported attending more school events, including open houses and parent-teacher conferences, than teachers reported, especially as school level, size, and percent of minority students enrolled increased. The parent and teacher data in this study were not matched by school, however; as a result, the study
does not address the question of whether parents and teachers hold more similar beliefs when their experiences relate to the same school. Also, the study did not collect data from parents or school personnel about whether students of the parents who participated were receiving special education services or not.

A small number of studies have, however, examined perspectives of both parents of students receiving special education services and school personnel (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson & Beegle, 2004; Geenen, Powers & Vasquez, 2001; Ludicke & Kortman, 2012). These studies have found that parents and teachers have very different conceptions of parents’ role in relation to their child’s education, and that parents and teachers may not always be on the same page regarding parent involvement (Ludicke & Kortman, 2012). The results of these studies also suggest that the lack of communication between parents and teachers may lead to negative perceptions of one other (Blue-Banning et. al, 2004). Of the studies involving both parents and school personnel, only the studies by Blue-Banning et. al and Geenen, Powers and Vasquez involved parents of students receiving special education services in the U.S. The study by Ludicke and Kortman (2012) utilized a sample of Australian parents of students with “learning barriers;” therefore, it is uncertain whether the findings would generalize to parents of students with disabilities served in U.S. schools. Of note, however, is the fact that Ludicke and Kortman matched parents and professionals within the same school. Both the study by Blue-Banning et. al and Geenen, Powers and Vasquez found that parents and teachers agree about what factors are important for home-school collaboration and the activities in which parents should be involved. However, Geenen, Powers and Vasquez found differences both across parents and between parents and
professionals related to the importance of specific activities surrounding transition. Both of these studies report on parent and teacher beliefs about what should be happening regarding parent involvement, but do not address what was actually happening in terms of school practice within specific school sites.

Given the importance of the involvement of parents of students with disabilities in the education of their children, the dearth of research related to how schools—particularly middle schools—facilitate this involvement, and the need to better understand the views of both parents and school personnel in relation to parent involvement, the purpose of this study was to conduct a within-school comparison of the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities, on the one hand, and teachers and administrators, on the other, with respect to the schools’ efforts to engage parents of students receiving special education services. Understanding both parents’ and professionals’ perspectives on parent involvement, and more specifically, on schools’ efforts to involve parents of students with disabilities, is an important step in improving school-family partnerships and leveraging these partnerships to improve outcomes for students.

The study consisted of a secondary analysis of data collected as part a larger study, referred to hereinafter as the Parent Engagement Study, of schools’ efforts to facilitate parent involvement in the state of Florida. The Parent Engagement Study was conducted under the auspices of a project funded by the Florida Department of Education (FDOE), Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services. Data for this study were collected in two waves, the first involving parents and the second involving teachers and administrators. Primary analyses of the data from parents, and then from teachers and
administrators yielded separate sets of emergent themes. The present study involved a re-analysis of the parent and teacher/administrator data as a single data set to better understand both similarities and differences in parents’ and professionals’ perceptions, and to investigate how the relationship between the parents’ and professionals’ perspectives may differ across schools. Given the paucity of research on parent involvement at the middle school level, the study focused on the middle school context.

The study addressed two research questions, illustrated in Figure 1 (the n’s in the figure indicate the number of participants of each type from each school). The first research question, represented by the large horizontal ovals, is, How do parents’ perceptions compare to teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of schools’ involvement efforts for parents of students receiving special education services? This question will be addressed by means of an analysis of the data from parents and school personnel from all five middle schools, irrespective of individual school affiliation. The second research question, represented by the smaller vertical ovals, is, How do the consistencies and/or differences found across the larger group of parents and school personnel vary within individual schools? The second question will be addressed by creating separate school-level case studies that examine the data from parents and professionals within each of the five schools.
Figure 1: Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Washington Middle School</th>
<th>Lincoln Middle School</th>
<th>Wilson Middle School</th>
<th>Kennedy Middle School</th>
<th>Roosevelt Middle School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>$n=7$</td>
<td>$n=5$</td>
<td>$n=4$</td>
<td>$n=6$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionals</td>
<td>$n=8$</td>
<td>$n=6$</td>
<td>$n=5$</td>
<td>$n=4$</td>
<td>$n=3$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Parents’ involvement in their child’s education has been a focus of research for many decades now. Studies aimed at linking parents’ level of involvement with improved outcomes for children have shown the benefit of parent involvement. Multiple reviews and meta-analyses have synthesized the results of studies linking parent involvement and student outcomes (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007; Pomerantz, Moorman & Litwack, 2007), however, these syntheses have not pertained specifically to students with disabilities. Therefore, this literature review will focus only on the elements relevant to students with disabilities and will be articulated in eight sections. I will begin with a description of theoretical models of parent involvement, noting the extent to which these models address the focal issue in the present study, namely, schools’ parent engagement efforts. Subsequent sections of the literature review will address parent involvement in middle schools, parent involvement for students receiving special education services, parent involvement for middle school students receiving special education services, parents’ perspectives on their involvement with schools, teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives on parent involvement, and comparisons of the perspectives of parents and school personnel. I conclude with a summary of the literature review.

Theoretical Models

Several lines of research provide explanatory models addressing the process and types of parent involvement; they do not, however, explicitly integrate variables that index schools’ facilitation of parent involvement. Epstein (2001) outlined six types of parent involvement for the purpose of supporting schools’ efforts to involve parents. The six types of involvement are: parenting (helping parents with parenting skills),
communicating (discussing student progress with parents), volunteering (recruiting parents for in-school opportunities), learning at home (supporting parents to help with children’s home learning), decision making at the school level (recruiting parents for school committees), and collaborating with the community (creating a connection between the school and community). Importantly, Epstein’s types of involvement do not include types of involvement that are specific to parents of students with disabilities, such as participating in the development of their child’s IEP, nor how schools’ facilitation of parent involvement may be related.

The model of parent involvement proposed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) included five levels relevant to the process of parent involvement, beginning with parents’ involvement decision, parent’s choice of involvement forms, mechanisms that influence child outcomes, mediating variables, and ending with child or student outcomes. In level one, the parents’ involvement decision is based on their role construction, sense of efficacy for helping their child, and invitations from teachers. In level two, involvement form is influenced by parents’ skills and knowledge, demands on their time, and invitations for involvement that are proffered by the child and the child’s teacher. Mechanisms (level three) through which outcomes are influenced by parent involvement include modeling, reinforcement and instruction. Mediating variables (level four) include the parent’s use of developmentally appropriate strategies and the fit between the parent’s actions and the school’s expectations. In level five, child/student outcomes include skills and knowledge, and efficacy for doing well in school. Like Epstein’s model, this model does not speak to parent involvement for students receiving
special education services and only includes two elements of schools’ efforts to involve parents, i.e., teachers’ invitations and the schools’ expectations.

Hill and Taylor’s (2004) theoretical review of research on parent involvement focused on identifying the mechanisms of parent involvement that have been revealed to be important for student achievement. The first mechanism the authors identified is social capital; when parents are more involved with their child’s schooling, this increases their social capital, defined as their socially acquired knowledge and skills for helping their child. Social control, the second mechanism, was described as the process by which parents and schools work together to build academic and behavioral expectations to be communicated to children. This review focused on the issue of context and discusses the issues related to social class and other social factors that may impact (positively or negatively) parent involvement. Again, while these factors may pertain to parent involvement for students with disabilities, they do not explain schools’ facilitation efforts or how parent involvement is related to efforts by the school to engage parents. However, this theory is important for informing schools how their efforts to engage parents interact with parents’ social capital, which is an important construct to consider in understanding parent involvement, particularly for parents of students with disabilities.

**Parent Involvement in Middle School**

Parent involvement has been shown to decline as children progress through the education system despite the benefits of continued parent involvement (Hill & Taylor 2004). Studies focusing on secondary schools have shown that the ways that parents are involved change as children age (Green et. al, 2007). Hill and Tyson’s (2009) meta-analysis of studies related to parent involvement in middle school included fifty studies
published between 1985 and 2006. In these studies a positive relationship was found between parent involvement and student achievement. Additionally, more effective types of involvement were related to academic socialization. Parental help with homework had no association with improved achievement. A strength of this review is the authors’ attention to the types of involvement and whether all types are equally effective, which they conclude is not the case. Again, the extent to which the findings hold for middle school receiving special education services is unknown.

**Parent Involvement for Students Receiving Special Education Services**

Within special education, there is scant empirical evidence for the benefit of parent involvement for student achievement. There is, however, a considerable amount of research dedicated to understanding contextual issues related to parent involvement in special education and practices that best accommodate parents of students with disabilities (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2008; Harry, 1992; Ong-Dean, 2009, Trainor, 2008). In this literature, cultural or social capital has been discussed as both a factor contributing to parent involvement (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Ong-Dean, 2009; Trainor, 2008), and an outcome of parent involvement (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Additionally, cultural and social capital are particularly relevant to the involvement of parents of students with disabilities, who often act as advocates for their child’s access to appropriate services. Ong-Dean (2009), who has discussed the concepts of privilege, advocacy and social class in the area of parent involvement in special education, stressed the idea that parents are differentially equipped to promote and support their child’s education and that the special education system often does not serve all students and families equally. Trainor (2008) also emphasized the importance of acknowledging
cultural and social capital as these relate to parent involvement in transition planning and improving post-school outcomes for students with disabilities by suggesting the use of capital theory as a lens or framework for understanding outcomes.

The special education system has been criticized for its lack of equity not only with regard to families from lower-income backgrounds but also with regard to CLD families. Harry (1992) explored the experiences of twelve Puerto-Rican families of students with disabilities who had been disempowered by the special education system to be effectively involved with their child’s education. The study found that parents were not provided with the information needed to understand key events to participate meaningfully, and as a result, withdrew from being involved. Blanchett, Klingner, and Harry (2008) addressed the intersection of race, culture, language and disability, revealing the need for urban education research to acknowledge these issues, such as negative perceptions of CLD parents in order to improve research, practice, and policy for urban students. Also more recently, Harry’s (2008) review of special education literature related to collaboration with families of CLD students explicated the barriers to implementing effective practice with families and proposed recommendations for change in practice to promote more collaborative relationships.

Comparative studies have been conducted examining differences in involvement for parents of students with and without disabilities. McKinney and Hocutt (1982) measured the involvement of parents of students with and without learning disabilities (LD). The findings showed that parents of students with LD were slightly more likely to be involved in school activities, but that the main difference between parents of students with and without LD was the involvement of parents of students with LD in IEP
planning. However, interviews with parents revealed that a majority of parents of students with LD did not feel adequately involved in IEP planning and only a few could name their contribution to the IEP. Yanok and Derubertis (1989) conducted a survey to examine the extent of parent involvement for students with and without disabilities. There were no significant differences between the parents of these two groups of students, except on the subject of being contacted by teachers. Parents of students with disabilities were more likely to have been contacted by their child’s teacher regarding their child’s progress, but were otherwise not more likely to be involved. This finding is of particular interest because of the special education mandate for parent involvement in educational programming.

Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, and Leclerc (1999) used Epstein’s six forms of involvement to compare the extent of involvement of 112 parents of students receiving special education services and 525 parents of students not receiving such services. In addition to familial and achievement differences between the two groups, the study found that across the six types of involvement, parents of students without disabilities were more involved than parents of students receiving special education services. This is a disturbing finding given the specific requirement for parent involvement in special education; its interpretation may be tempered, however, in consideration of the fact that the Epstein model of parent involvement was designed to describe general parent involvement and, as mentioned earlier, does not include forms of participation that are specific to special education. Rogers, Wiener, Marton, and Tannock (2009) surveyed 101 parents of students with and without attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD). Compared to parents of students without ADHD, parents of students with ADHD felt less
efficacious to be involved with their child’s education, felt less welcomed by the school, and felt they had less time and energy to be involved. However, the two groups of parents reported equal involvement in the home. The study highlights some of the possible differences between the level of efficacy and stress felt by parents of students with and without disabilities that could explain findings of discrepant levels of involvement.

Few studies have focused on parent involvement for middle school students receiving special education services. A study of the effect of parent involvement on math achievement for middle school students with visual impairments using national longitudinal data revealed that parent involvement was positively associated with achievement (McDonnall, Cavenaugh & Giesen, 2010). The use of a large national longitudinal sample provides strong support for the study’s conclusions, however it is unclear to what extent the findings generalize to students with other types of disabilities. The authors also noted the complete lack of other empirical research on the association between parent involvement and student achievement for students with disabilities.

Parents’ Perspectives on Their Involvement

The perspectives of parents of students with disabilities have been well documented in the special education literature. Interview and observational studies addressing how parents perceive their involvement as well as how they participate in special education have shown the continued struggles that parents of students with disabilities face in being involved in their child’s education. Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin’s (1995) study of 24 African American parents of students receiving special education services showed that although the popular perception is that African American parents are less involved than other groups of parents, the parents interviewed were
motivated to be involved but became discouraged by the special education process and the schools’ focus on compliance over true communication.

Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, and Lasky’s (1988) observational study of parents’ participation in initial IEP meetings showed that school staff’s interaction with parents was minimal and that few parents asked questions during the IEP meetings. Overall, parents played a passive role in the meetings. The authors explained that parent participation may be low due to their satisfaction with the existing services and a lack of knowledge about the special education process and the terms used during IEP meetings.

More recently, variation in terms of parents’ participation in special education has been documented. Fish (2006, 2008) found contrasting perceptions of parents in regard to their satisfaction with their IEP participation. In the 2006 study, seven parents of students with autism were interviewed about schools’ efforts to involve them. Parents reported that they did not feel valued by school personnel and that they were not trained sufficiently to be involved in planning their child’s program. All of these parents were described to be of middle-class backgrounds. Fish (2008) found that 51 parents receiving services from a family support service agency were generally satisfied with their participation in IEP planning. These were all parents from middle to upper-class backgrounds. Parents did discuss the amount of knowledge they had acquired on their own to be able to participate effectively in the IEP meetings, suggesting that knowledge about the IEP process is essential for effective parent-professional collaboration. Lalvani’s (2012) qualitative study of 33 ethnically diverse parents of students with disabilities revealed variation in the responses from parents regarding their participation in educational planning. The author found that placement of students in more vs. less
segregated environments appeared to be related to the socio-economic background of the family, such that all of the parents in the low-socioeconomic status (SES) group had children placed in self-contained settings and were unaware that inclusive education was a concept relevant to their child’s education. On the other hand, parents in the high-SES group had children placed in more inclusive settings despite sharing similar needs to the children of parents in the low-SES group. Parent knowledge and advocacy was a significant theme present in this data. The findings in this study implicate the role that social capital plays in effectively engaging parents of students with disabilities in order to improve outcomes for their children.

Rodriguez, Blatz and Elbaum (in press), in a study involving 92 parents from 18 different schools, found significant variation in parents’ perceptions of schools’ engagement efforts. These perceptions were highly related to parents’ perceptions of their child’s progress and of the support their child was receiving in their special education program. Within schools, parents’ experiences were fairly consistent, suggesting that the school context may play an important role in parent-school relations. At the same time, parents also noted the importance of the contribution, either positive or negative, of individual professionals to their experience or to their child’s. Parents also perceived that transitions were difficult and rarely facilitated adequately, especially the transition from elementary school to middle school. They also perceived that the transitions between varying school settings within the school were difficult, such as when the child’s placement setting changed. Finally, parents discussed their perception that although services and accommodations may have been noted in the IEP, parents were not always sure if they were being fully implemented, suggesting an effort by schools to comply
with the law on paper while falling short of providing students with disabilities with all the services and accommodations needed for success.

Valle’s (2011) commentary related to parent participation in special education called for the field to diversify the methods used and research questions addressed. Valle discussed the trend in research findings for parents to be insufficiently or ineffectively involved as well as the assumption that knowledge moves in one direction only: from professionals to parents. Additionally, the author called for the field to be more aware of how the concept of disability may vary across cultures.

Research on parents and their involvement has documented the challenges faced by schools in creating and maintaining collaborative relationships with parents of students receiving special education services. Studies have revealed some of the key aspects of both successful and unsuccessful collaboration between families and professionals such as communication, trust, and knowledge and understanding. Although the perceptions and needs of parents in participating in special education planning is by now well documented, it appears that little progress has been made in helping schools to effectively engage and collaborate with parents of students with disabilities.

**Teachers’ and Administrators’ Perceptions of Parent Involvement**

Research examining teachers’ and other professionals’ experiences in working with parents of students with disabilities is limited, especially at the middle school level. One area in which there are studies of teachers’ experiences is that of early intervention, a program that is explicitly designed to provide supports and services to the family as well as to the child. Campbell and Halbert (2002) surveyed 241 early intervention providers about their perspectives on what could be improved in early intervention; two themes that
resulted dealt with their work with families. First, providers desired a return to center-based services over home-based services, especially for children with specific family characteristics, such as having working mothers. Second, they found that providers expressed a need for increased parent participation. Participants discussed a need for more involvement in home visits, increased training for parents, and greater accountability in following through with intervention practices. The authors interpreted these statements to mean that many early intervention providers lack understanding of how family-centered approaches should work for children with disabilities. Lee, Ostrosky, Bennett and Fowler (2003) also examined early interventionists’ perspectives on culturally appropriate practices in a survey study of 123 professionals. The authors found that early interventionists voiced strong regard for family-centered and culturally appropriate practices, such as using materials translated into the family’s native language, but were not able to implement such approaches. Participants expressed the need for further training to properly deliver culturally appropriate interventions to both children and families. Both of these studies reveal a high need for further training of professionals to work with families of children with disabilities.

Job satisfaction of teachers is also related to teachers’ roles in engaging parents. Luckner and Hanks’ (2003) national study of job satisfaction among 608 teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing found that the perceived lack of family involvement reported was one of the worst aspects of their job. The authors proposed that this may be due to two factors. The first is that teachers’ perceptions of parents as showing apathy or disinterest in being involved may be more related to barriers facing parents, such as logistics, exhaustion from family demands, and a lack of agency in their
child’s education. Second is the lack of professionals’ ability to work with parents due to time demands, pressure from state-wide exams, and a lack of training. Although this study was not designed specifically to understand teachers’ work with parents of students with disabilities, it contributes to the literature by revealing what other studies have also found: teachers of students receiving special education services often perceive a lack of parent involvement and also are not well prepared to work with families.

Ben-Yehuda, Leyser and Last (2010) examined the responses of teachers in Israel working with students with special education needs in inclusive classrooms. Out of 24 teachers, six were identified by administrators, and confirmed by the researchers during interviews, as having “successful” practices for student learning in inclusive contexts. Four of the six successful teachers discussed the importance of being in contact with parents of their students. Only one of these six professionals discussed the importance of getting to know the students’ family context in order to improve teaching. None of the 18 “unsuccessful” teachers discussed the importance of working with families. The study supports the high need for appropriate training for professionals specifically on inclusive models of teaching, which involve working with parents of students with special needs. This study also reveals some similarities between American teachers’ perspectives and those of teachers in other countries regarding inclusive education and working with families.

Trainor (2010) examined 17 general and special education teachers’ attitudes towards and expectations of parent participation in several focus group interviews. The study revealed that whereas teachers understood their role in providing opportunities for parents to be involved in special education decision making, they had conflicting views
about parents’ involvement. On the one hand, they believed that being involved did not require specific knowledge or training, but on the other hand, they believed that parents from low socio-economic or CLD backgrounds faced many barriers in being involved. Participants expressed their belief that it was up to parents to overcome obstacles in order to be involved. Furthermore, participants revealed a preference for working with parents who shared beliefs about disability and the special education process with them, rather than parents who had beliefs that differed from their own. Additionally, although teachers expressed the belief that they play a major role in engaging parents, they also expressed concern over what their role entailed. The study adds to the literature by revealing both inconsistencies in teachers’ beliefs and a need for better training for teachers of students receiving special education services in order to effectively collaborate with families.

Bezdek, Summers and Turnbull (2010) conducted interviews with 20 special education professionals regarding their beliefs about partnering with families. Three themes resulted from asking professionals about what is needed for effective family partnerships. First, professionals’ perceptions revealed a gap between their beliefs about partnering with families and their actions. Second, professionals held a “Goldilocks” perception: some parents are too involved, some not involved enough and that what is necessary is a good balance in the extent of involvement. Finally, the interviews yielded a theme related to parental blame: professionals blamed parents for not carrying out a collaborative relationship with teachers. This last theme reveals the belief on the part of many teachers that collaboration is the parents’ responsibility, rather than teachers’.

Rodriguez, Blatz, and Elbaum (2013) conducted focus group interviews with teachers and administrators from 17 schools. The authors found that professionals’
perceptions regarding schools’ efforts to involve parents were highly variable across schools. Whereas some schools clearly prioritized collaborating with parents of students with disabilities, others discussed engaging parents as just another constraining aspect of the job. Professionals also appeared to think of parents as being of one of two different kinds: parents who were over-involved in their child’s education and those who “never showed up.” Consistent across all schools was the identification of the many barriers to working with parents, including parents’ lack of knowledge of special education processes, difficulty reaching parents due to work responsibilities, and in some schools, parents’ lack of interest in being involved. Additionally, professionals’ attitudes towards parents seemed to be reflected in their actions in engaging parents. Professionals who held low expectations of parents’ ability to be meaningfully involved in IEP planning expressed fewer strategies for reaching out to and communicating with families. Professionals who viewed parents as valuable sources of knowledge about their children expressed more varied strategies for obtaining their input and keeping them informed about their child’s progress. Many professionals also stressed their adherence to special education laws and protocols, such as sending home progress reports to parents every nine weeks, however they revealed that they were not sure if parents were adequately prepared to understand them. This suggests the belief, on the part of some educators, that compliance with special education regulations can be achieved without ensuring that parents are adequately prepared to be meaningfully involved.

Comparisons of the Perspectives of Parents and School Personnel

Few studies have examined both parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of parent involvement and schools’ engagement efforts. A national study comparing parents’ and
teachers’ perceptions of schools’ efforts to involve parents (Chen & Chandler, 2001) showed a notable discrepancy between what parents perceived schools were doing to involve them and how involved they were, and what teachers and professionals believed they were doing to involve parents and how involved parents were. This study did not match parents’ and teachers’ responses within the same schools, and did not specifically address schools’ efforts to involve parents of students receiving special education services. However, the results of the study are consistent with the literature previously discussed in revealing a large gap between parents and teachers in perceptions of extent of involvement.

Three studies have examined the views of both parents and teachers involved in special education. Blue-Banning et. al (2004) conducted focus group interviews with parents and individual interviews with special education professionals regarding effective collaborative relationships. Six themes emerged: communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and respect. According to the research participants, communication between parents and professionals needs to be open, tactful, positive, and respectful. Parents and teachers need to feel that they are equal partners in the collaboration, with no individual having more power than another. Parents and teachers need to recognize each other’s skills and be willing to learn from one another. Finally, trust and respect need to be established between all individuals involved, including respect for the child. This study aimed to understand the views of both parents and professionals about what is needed for effective collaboration, but did not investigate the experiences they had that might have given rise to these perceptions. Furthermore, the authors note the high level of agreement between parents and professionals.
In a survey study, Geenen, Powers and Vasquez (2001) examined responses from 308 ethnically diverse parents about their participation in transition planning and 52 professionals’ responses about parent participation. These parents and teachers were not necessarily matched by school but were all from the same large U.S. urban school district. This study found agreement between parents and professionals about what transition planning activities were important for parents to be involved in. The authors found differences across parents of different ethnic backgrounds with regard to the extent to which parents were involved and beliefs about how to be involved. While CLD parents placed more emphasis on talking with their children about transition plans, they reported less involvement in school-based planning. Professionals reported lower levels of involvement by CLD parents in all areas of transition activities. The study offers some explanation for the beliefs by many professionals that many parents, especially CLD parents, are not sufficiently involved in planning for students receiving special education services.

Ludicke and Kortman (2012) also examined the beliefs and perceptions of both parents and teachers regarding parent-teacher collaboration for students with “learning barriers.” They interviewed four sets of parents and three teachers (each having more than five years of experience) from the same Catholic secondary school in Australia. Both parents and teachers expressed belief in the importance of parent involvement for planning for students with learning barriers, however, parents and teachers differed in their beliefs about their role in being involved, communication, sharing information, and building strategies to enhance student learning. Whereas parents believed that it was their role to assist in homework and to communicate with teachers regarding their child,
teachers believed that parent involvement in school-based events and volunteering opportunities at the school were also important for supporting student learning. Parents did not agree that involvement in school-based events was meaningful in supporting their child’s education. Additionally, whereas teachers attributed barriers to sharing information and collaborating with parents to school processes, e.g., providing access to parents to be involved, limited email and internet resources, time and scheduling constraints, parents did not acknowledge school-level processes as being a barrier in need of improvement. Instead, they tended to focus on the individual relationships with teachers. They also expected that teachers should be able to share information with each other and with other schools as necessary when the child started at a new school.

Although this study sampled parents and teachers from the same school, findings from the Australian setting may or may not explain differences and similarities between parents and teachers in American public middle school contexts.

**Summary**

Despite the abundance of literature on parent involvement, there are significant gaps in our understanding of how to improve collaboration between parents and professionals for students receiving special education services. Although the literature supports the positive impact of parent involvement on student achievement for the general population of students, there is as yet no empirical evidence of impact specifically for students with disabilities. Although there is considerable literature related to parent involvement at different school levels, including some studies at the middle school level, the literature relating specifically to parents of students with disabilities is limited. Within the special education literature, studies of parent involvement have
focused more on barriers to parent involvement and strategies for promoting involvement than on the links between parent involvement and student outcomes and explanatory mechanisms for such associations. The existing studies have revealed inconsistencies in the reports of parents versus school personnel, and have shown that there is a significant discrepancy between what teachers believe is important for special education planning and what they implement in their daily activities for parent involvement. Additionally, only one study located matched parent and teacher perspectives from the same school to better understand the relationship between the two within a specific school context. The study of multiple perspectives on schools’ engagement efforts within the same schools fills a significant need, and develops recommendations for both research and practice that may improve educational opportunities and outcomes for middle school students receiving special education services.
Chapter Three: Method

The method used for both the present and the Parent Engagement Study was qualitative. Qualitative methods were the most appropriate to inductively collect and analyze rich, descriptive data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) based on the experiences of both parents and professionals. Furthermore, a qualitative approach allows for analyzing the multiple perspectives (Creswell, 1998) inherent in the purpose of both studies. In particular, a grounded theory method was selected based on the purpose of the method. Grounded theory aims, first, to analyze data systematically and flexibly, and second, to generate theories “grounded in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006). For both the present and Parent Engagement Study, grounded theory was used in order analyze the data collected from parents, teachers and administrators systematically.

Data Source: Study of Parent and School-Personnel Perceptions Related to Schools’ Facilitation of Parent Involvement

The data used in the present study were collected during the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school years under the auspices of a state of Florida grant to the University of Miami. The purpose of the state-funded study (the Parent Engagement Study) was to better understand the experiences and perceptions of both parents and school personnel in relation to schools’ engagement of parents of students receiving special education services. The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) supported the study for the purpose of developing guidance for schools and districts on improving schools’ facilitation of these parents’ involvement in their child’s education.

Since 2005, states have been required to report annually on schools’ facilitation of parent involvement in the context of the federally mandated State Performance Plan (SPP) for special education services (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). To address
this reporting requirement, the FDOE collects families’ responses to the Schools’ Efforts to Partner with Parents Scale (SEPPS; Elbaum, Fisher, & Coulter, 2011), administered each year in the form of a survey, called the Florida Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Parent Survey, that is open to all parents of students with IEPs either online or on paper. Individual parent measures on the SEPPS are estimated through the Rasch measurement framework and range from 100 to 900. The state of Florida has established a performance standard of 600, meaning that parents with measures at or above 600 are considered to have reported that their child’s school facilitated their involvement at a level meeting the state requirement.

**Participants in the Parent Engagement Study.** Participants in the Parent Engagement Study included 96 parents and 101 teachers and administrators from 18 schools. The schools selected as sites for the study were drawn from a larger pool of schools that showed a relatively high parent response rate on the 2009-2010 Florida ESE Parent Survey; participating schools were purposefully selected to represent a range of performance with regard to facilitation of parent involvement. The schools were also selected to represent a range of district size and grade levels. Seven schools were elementary schools, five were middle schools, one was a K-8 school, and four were high schools.

**Data collection used in the Parent Engagement Study.** The state-funded study used focus group interviews as a means of eliciting the experiences of a relatively large and representative sample of participants across the state. Focus groups allow researchers to collect data by groups of individuals, where individuals are able to interact and discuss their experiences, thus, generating much more complex data than are generated through
the use of individual interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005). Additionally, participants can share their experiences with each other revealing the variation amongst experiences. These characteristics made focus groups an ideal method of data collection for the Parent Engagement Study.

The focus group interviews were semi-structured. Protocols (Appendix A) were created to include the items on the SEPPS as well as additional probes to be used in order to elicit thorough details from the participants. Given the large number of SEPPS items (25), the items were assigned in alternating fashion to two separate focus group protocols. Both protocols covered the full range of item difficulties (see Elbaum, Fisher, & Coulter, 2011) and included varied content. Thus, the nature of the comments provided across the focus group interviews was very similar, regardless of the specific item set used for a particular session.

In 2011, focus groups were conducted with parents of students with IEPs who attended the selected schools; in 2012, focus groups were conducted with teachers and administrators at the same schools. All focus group participants completed a demographic questionnaire; parents also responded to the SEPPS. At the beginning of the group discussion, the participants were assigned identifying numbers and were asked to mention their number when making a comment to allow for subsequent matching of individual participants to comments. The sessions with teachers and administrators began with a presentation on the district’s performance on the accountability indicator related to schools’ facilitation of parent involvement and a description of the themes that emerged from the parent focus group held at their school. In order to protect confidentiality, data from parents were presented to school personnel at the theme level, with supporting
quotes taken from parents whose children attended all 18 schools. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis for the Parent Engagement Study.** The study utilized a grounded theory method in order to systematically analyze the transcripts that resulted from the focus groups. The analysis process was inductive, working from a concrete level of analysis to a more abstract level in order to explain the experiences of both the parents and professionals that participated. Transcripts from the focus groups were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) using ATLAS.ti software (Scientific Software Development, 2011[version 6.2.27]) to code participants’ statements. ATLAS.ti allows for data analysis to follow a grounded process, in which researchers work from the raw data and move inductively towards generating themes to explain the data. The coding procedure adhered to guidelines recommended by Harry, Sturges and Klingner (2003). First “open coding” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was done to identify meaningful segments of the text within the transcripts and name them accordingly. Code names were often derived directly from participants’ language, and were refined to allow the codes to describe similar occurrences across many participants. Next, open codes were grouped into “families” (called “axial codes” by Strauss and Corbin), which combined open codes that conveyed similar or related ideas. Finally, families were grouped in order to generate themes that explain the data at a broader level.

Statements were first coded separately by two members of the research team. As the initial coding was applied to successive transcripts, the codes being assigned were compared to previously coded statements to refine the language used for the code labels (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The two researchers then consulted with one another and
jointly grouped the open codes into families, and subsequently grouped the code families into themes. This procedure, applied to the parent focus group data, yielded 127 open codes, 23 code families, and 10 themes related to how parents experienced schools’ engagement efforts. Application of the same procedure to the teacher and administrator data yielded 118 open codes, 32 families, and 10 major themes. Careful attention was paid to analyze the teacher and administrator data with the same grounded approach, independent of the parent focus groups analysis. Resulting codes, families, and themes from the two participant groups—parents, on the one hand, and teachers and administrators, on the other—were unique (see Appendices B and C).

Current Study

The current study expands on the findings of the above-described study of parents’ and professionals’ perceptions related to schools’ facilitation of parent involvement. Specifically, the current study sought to compare parents’ perceptions with those expressed by teachers and administrators (Research Question #1), and to examine the congruence between the perceptions of these two groups of participants within each individual school context (Research Question #2).

Approach to data analysis. In order to address Research Question #1, the grounded method of moving from open codes to families and themes from the prior study was used, as appropriate for the analysis of experiences viewed from multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2012). To address Research Question #2, a multiple case study analysis (Creswell, 2012) was applied to each pair of transcripts from a school. Each of the five schools thus represented a case. The use of the term “case study” represents Stake’s (1995) definition of a “case” as a bounded context for the analysis of the data.
This contrasts with Yin’s view of the case study method as encompassing the whole process from data collection through analysis (Yin, 1994). Following Stake’s conceptualization of case studies (1995), the analysis of school cases offered the possibility of bringing school-level factors to bear in understanding the congruence, or divergence, of the experiences and perceptions of parents and school personnel.

After completing the analysis to answer both research questions, a final step was taken to explain the themes that resulted from Research Question #1 in relation to the case studies for Research Question #2. By examining the themes within and across the five schools, “interrelated explanations” (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005) were developed to convey the final level of analysis of the data. This was done by examining the most prominent theme or themes at each school as well as the degree of congruence between parents and professionals.

**Participants.** Participants in the present study were associated with the five middle schools (located in four school districts) from the prior study. Demographic information on schools, participating parents, and participating school professionals is displayed in Table 1, and further described in the results section.

**Districts and Schools.** The four school districts involved in this study ranged in size from about 6,000 students to over 350,000 students. Student enrollment at the five schools ranged from approximately 750 to 1,500. The percent of students with disabilities in the four districts ranged between 10 and 12 percent, with percentages at the five schools ranging between four and 12 percent. The percent of students considered “economically disadvantaged” ranged from 19% to 88%. Four of the five schools were predominantly White; one was predominantly Hispanic/Latino. The achievement of
students with disabilities at the five schools, reported in terms of the percentage of students earning satisfactory or higher scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), ranged from 3% to 61% in writing, from 15% to 45% in reading, and from 5% to 59% in mathematics. SEPPS data collected during the year prior to the focus group study indicated that the schools demonstrated a range of performance on the indicator addressing schools’ facilitation of parent involvement. Mean SEPPS measures for the schools in this study ranged from 470 to 804.

**Parents.** The number of participants in the parent focus groups conducted at the five middle schools ranged from 3 to 7. Participants were mostly mothers. Parents’ education ranged between high school diploma or less and some graduate school or graduate degrees. The majority of parents were White, in line with the distribution by race/ethnicity of the populations of the schools. Parents reported a range of disabilities in their children, with the majority of children being served in general education settings. SEPPS measures for the parent participants were similar in range and mean values to those of parents from the school who had responded to the state’s annual survey the previous year.

**Professionals.** Participants in the teacher/administrator focus groups included special education teachers, general education teachers, school-level administrators, and district-level administrators. The number of participants in each group ranged from 3 to 8. Their years of teaching or administrative experience ranged from zero (indicating they were in their first year) to 24 years; over half of the participants had ten or more years of experience in schools. Additionally, more than half of the teachers or administrators were state-certified in special education.
**Data analysis.** First, the ten transcripts from focus group interviews conducted in the five middle schools were combined into a single data base, or “hermeneutic unit” (HU) within ATLAS.ti. This HU therefore contained all the coded statements from all ten focus group sessions. Data analysis began with the existing open codes from the prior study. The open codes largely capture what participants said at a very descriptive level. Codes that were not present in the five middle schools were excluded. The combined code list from both the parent and teacher/administrator data from the original study consisted of 245 open codes; 199 of these were used at least once in the coding of the middle school interviews. For this study, the open codes were sorted by data source (parent vs. teacher/administrator) and were re-analyzed into new “families,” which then were examined inductively for underlying themes. Noting that grounded theory scholars emphasize the need for inductive analysis throughout, but acknowledging the appropriateness of modifications to the method (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), I would describe the data analysis for this study as a modified version of grounded theory. That is, the first level of coding was accepted from the previous study but that set of coded data was then analyzed inductively to produce new family constructions and new themes. Interrelated explanations (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2003) across the themes were then identified to produce statements that adequately explain key patterns in participants’ perspectives regarding the research questions.

For the case study analysis, separate analyses of the data from each of the five middle schools were conducted. Specifically, the presence or absence of the code families was analyzed within the context of each school and the type of participant that mentioned
the idea. This was done by examining which open codes, families, and themes occurred in each pair of transcripts from each school. Finally, the most salient themes drawn from each case were interpreted in light of the stated research questions.
Chapter Four: Results

The data from parents as well as teachers and administrators yielded four main themes arising from fourteen smaller families. In this chapter, the themes are described as they are associated with parents’ experiences (first section), followed by the experiences of teachers and administrators (second section). The third section presents the results from each individual school. A visual display of the codes by family, theme, and participant is presented in Appendix D. The fourth and final section presents the results of the interrelated explanations, which synthesize the findings from each of the two research questions. A display of the entire process, yielding families, themes, and explanations, is depicted in Appendix E.

Research Question #1: Parents’ Perceptions of Schools’ Engagement Efforts

The themes in this section arise from the first research question: How do parents’ perceptions compare to teachers’ and administrators’ perceptions of schools’ involvement efforts for parents of students receiving special education services?

Theme one: Quality of efforts to engage and collaborate with parents.

Directly related to most of the survey items are parents’ experiences regarding the quality of schools’ efforts to engage and collaborate with parents. This is, in essence, the construct that the SEPPS measures and that serves as the foundation for accountability reporting.

Quality of collaboration with parents. Parents frequently attributed schools’ engagement efforts to a particular individual, and often times, the quality of this professional’s efforts represented the quality of the school’s efforts on the whole. In fact, crediting an individual or mentioning that the quality of collaboration depends on the
individual was one of the most frequently occurring comments, made by 19 of the 25 parents. Sometimes parents had positive experiences with particular individuals, sometimes negative, but they also explained that they understood their experiences to be dependent on the individual teacher, whether positive or negative.

Parents also mentioned the extent to which IEP terms were explained to them, how much professionals facilitated their involvement in learning at home, and how receptive professionals were to parent input. Only five parents mentioned that their input was sought out by professionals, while ten parents mentioned that professionals were unreceptive to their input. Some parents were able to discuss the level of “give and take” they experienced in planning with professionals, allowing them to feel satisfied with schools’ engagement efforts.

**Accommodations for parents.** Parents mentioned the accommodations that were made for their participation in IEP planning including whether or not they were flexible in scheduling and whether or not the school could provide child care. The points made here were brief relative to other aspects of collaboration.

**Parent involvement procedures.** Parents had experiences around whether or not information about outside agencies was given to them, and whether or not the Procedural Safeguards had been explained by the school. Some parents were able to name a staff member that could answer questions for them when needed, while other parents did not have a similar contact person at the school, which made collaboration more difficult.

**Theme two: Frequency, variety, and effectiveness of communication.** Separate from the quality of collaboration, was the frequency, variety, and effectiveness of communication with school professionals. Parents discussed methods of communicating
with the school as well as how often they spoke with professionals, and whether these were adequate or not. These experiences seem to vary widely between parents. Many parents agreed that they had frequent communication with professionals; fewer stated that the school kept them regularly informed about their child’s learning. Additionally, other parents relayed a lack of communication and frustration with not getting updates regarding their child’s progress.

**Theme three: Quality of services, placement, and education.** The quality of services and education for students with disabilities appeared to be as important as the quality of the school’s efforts to engage parents.

**IEP implementation and accommodations.** Items on the survey such as “At the IEP meeting, we discussed accommodations and modifications that my child would need,” and “At the IEP Meeting, we discussed how my child would participate in statewide assessments,” prompted parents to share their perception that although they had participated in discussions regarding accommodations for the classroom and for statewide testing, they were often unsure if the accommodations and arrangements made in the IEP were, in fact, being implemented. Codes such as “accommodations/services in IEP not implemented” and “teachers not familiar with child’s IEP” occurred, representing parents’ common distrust that the school was abiding by the IEP. Out of 25 parents, twelve raised concerns about the IEP being implemented, and seven mentioned that their child’s teacher was unfamiliar with the IEP. For parents, implementation of the IEP is more important than whether or not they were involved in the discussion about accommodations and this impacted how parents’ perceived schools’ engagement efforts.
Some parents had much more positive comments related to the quality of services; five parents discussed the impact that services were having on their child, and three parents were able to state that accommodations in the IEP were being implemented. These parents were able to affirm that their child’s IEP was being implemented, often, by the progress they saw in their child’s learning.

**Child’s experience in school.** Parents shared their perceptions about the ways in which their child had positive or negative experiences in school. In schools where parents perceived that their child was having a positive experience, parents mentioned that their child was valued by professionals. In schools where parents perceived that their child was having a negative experience, parents mentioned disengagement and even bullying. Often times, parents’ experiences matched those of their children in school, being either positive or negative.

**IEP choices and decision making.** About half of the 25 parents discussed the choices they were presented with at IEP meetings and how decisions were being made for their child’s program. This is one indicator of how parents perceived the quality of services their child was receiving. If parents were presented with few or no options for accommodations and services, they were likely to discuss their frustration with the overall quality of special education services for their child. Parents often mentioned the constraints that the school was under with regards to budgeting and time, but did not believe that this excused schools from delivering high quality services. Parents also made comments that relayed a sense that little differentiation was happening for students, and that a one-size-fits-all approach was used to deliver instruction to students.
Less often, and only in some schools, parents were satisfied with the choices they were presented with. Only four parents mentioned that choices were provided with regards to the services and accommodations their child could receive.

**Teacher quality and training.** A majority of parents believed that teacher quality and training of personnel was a significant issue related to the quality of services. Parents were pleased when they perceived competence and availability on the part of teachers. They were also aware of how well teachers were able to provide support for their child; 16 parents stated that their child’s teachers provide insufficient support. Others discussed how sensitive their child’s teachers were towards their child’s needs.

**Transitions.** Five parents mentioned the difficult experience they and their child had in transitioning to middle school. Parents also agreed that within-school transitions, such as when a child’s placement would change, or when transitioning from class to class, were difficult and often stressful. Fewer parents discussed the consideration that was taken by school staff with regard to transitions for their child.

**Child’s setting and placement.** A significant point of discussion for parents was related to their child’s educational setting or placement. Twenty parents discussed their child’s placement or setting including 11 parents that were unsatisfied with inclusion, and 4 that were unsatisfied with a separate or more restrictive setting.

In inclusive settings, in particular, parents often perceived that their child was not getting the support they needed to succeed. Twelve parents mentioned that this lack of support was due to a lack of training or inappropriate assignment of general education teachers.
Theme four: Beliefs and understanding related to parent involvement.

Individuals’ beliefs, values, and understandings about both parent involvement and special education were related to how parents perceived schools’ engagement efforts and their own involvement.

Beliefs and values about parent involvement. About half of all the parents stated their belief that it was their responsibility to be involved with their child’s education, whereas fewer mentioned that it was the school’s job to keep them informed and provide adequate education to their children. Parents had varying understandings of what it means to be an equal partner with professionals and what it means to be taking an active role in their child’s education. Parents also mentioned that sometimes professionals held different expectations from their own for what their child could or could not accomplish in school. In these cases, parents expressed the belief that they know their child best, and that their input should be regarded accordingly when planning.

Parent initiative. Although the discussion at each focus group was centered on schools’ engagement efforts, parents at each meeting discussed their own initiative in being involved with their child’s education. Ten parents expressed the belief that they needed to be persistent and demanding with professionals in order to get what they needed for their child. Twenty parents commented that despite it being the school’s job to engage them, that they initiated contact with the school in order to get information or services for their child.

Fourteen parents mentioned that the school was more responsive to their child’s needs when they initiated contact and five mentioned that they initiated involvement due
to the school’s failure to engage them. Additionally, six parents discussed their frustration with the school over experiences they had in contacting teachers without a response.

**Parents’ education and understanding of special education.** A significant idea that resulted from the focus group discussions is that parents’ own education and understanding of special education is an important factor related to schools’ engagement efforts. Eighteen parents made comments related to their own education or their understanding of the special education process and how this effected their involvement with their child’s education.

Some parents had much more experience than others regarding special education matters, and this impacted their perceptions of schools. Often times, perceptions changed because they learned over time what to expect, or not, from IEP meetings, for example. During the focus groups, parents were able to compare their experiences with each other, often learning about what they should expect from schools from other participants. Helping children in learning at home was also relevant; ten parents agreed that being involved with homework or home learning was a significant area of frustration due either to their own education or to a lack of facilitation by their child’s teacher. Finally, five parents discussed the lack of training provided for parents related to special education.

**Barriers faced.** A very small point of discussion amongst parents was related to barriers faced. In general, most parents had stated their beliefs about the importance of being involved, and did not mention barriers that stood in the way. Only one parent discussed the time barrier that they faced in being involved with their child’s education with many other responsibilities.
Research Question #1: Teachers’ and Administrators’ Perceptions of Schools’ Engagement Efforts in Comparison to Parents’ perceptions

The themes presented here are the same that were presented in the parents’ section. However, foci and specific topics differ from those of the parents in the study.

**Theme one: Quality of efforts to engage and collaborate with parents.** Much of the discussion from teachers and administrators centered on the engagement practices that make up the SEPPS (see Appendix A for items). Twenty out of 25 professionals mentioned the practices they employ in engaging parents of students receiving special education services.

**Quality of collaboration with parents.** Professionals acknowledged the stress that parents face in being involved with planning an educational program for children with disabilities. This appeared relevant for collaborating with parents. They also acknowledged that the quality of engagement efforts varied between professionals, which parents had discussed at length. Professionals widely acknowledged the practice of making documents more understandable for parents, being receptive to parent input and soliciting parent input as well. To varying extents, individuals across the five schools mentioned practices such as involving parents on the IEP team, acknowledging, encouraging, and valuing parent input, making the school a welcoming environment for parents and maintaining relationships with parents.

These practices occurred in some schools, but not in others. Additionally, there were far more practices mentioned by professionals related to collaborating with parents than were mentioned by parents, exemplifying one point of contrast between professionals and parents. Professionals focused much more heavily on the varying strategies they use to work with parents than parents did, suggesting that parents are...
unaware of these strategies, or did not perceive the same variety of strategies to be helpful or important. Professionals in smaller districts mentioned the benefit of seeing parents in settings outside of school, helping them to build and maintain relationships.

**Accommodations for parents.** More often than parents, professionals discussed the accommodations they made for parents in order to help them participate in IEP meetings. They also specifically mentioned accommodating parents’ culture and language; this was a topic that parents did not discuss, even when explicitly asked.

**Parent involvement procedures.** Professionals also discussed the systematic procedures that they practiced around parent engagement, which varied by school and district. In some schools, professionals were able to refer parents to websites that contained helpful information for their involvement. Other practices included using a visual projector to help aid the IEP meeting so that everyone present could view the draft of the IEP being created, or even having designated days for meeting with parents; none of these practices were mentioned by parents. In some schools, professionals were able to name the contact person responsible for answering parent questions; in other schools the contact person varied from child to child, which parents had conveyed as well.

Professionals mentioned practices such as explaining the Procedural Safeguards to parents, and providing information to parents about outside agencies. Parents often discussed these same issues, but more frequently than not they mentioned that these practices were not taking place.

**Suggestions to improve parent engagement efforts.** A family of codes occurring only amongst professionals and across all schools was related to improvement strategies. Sixteen professionals mentioned practices that they needed to improve, suggesting a
positive reception of the parents’ reports. Specific improvements that were named include having a single contact person and providing parent training. Sometimes, suggestions were broader, such as improving communication and involvement efforts overall with parents.

**Theme two: Frequency, variety, and effectiveness of communication.** Seven professionals noted frequent communication with parents of students receiving special education services. They also mentioned a variety of options for communicating with parents. It was widely stated that progress reports detailing students’ progress towards their IEP goals were sent home at every marking period, which contrasts with parents’ perceptions that they did not receive regular updates. This could be because parents were unable to access the information held in progress reports, or it could be that receiving updates at the end of marking periods is not frequent enough for parents, especially when their children were not progressing adequately in their academic classes. Three professionals mentioned their practice of contacting parents when their child had a problem, and one mentioned the practice of contacting all parents at the beginning of the school year. Overall, professionals relayed the sense that communication with parents was regular and adequate, while amongst parents the frequency of communication appeared much more variable.

**Theme three: Quality of services, placement, and education.** Professionals provided fewer comments related to the quality of services for students with disabilities than did parents. This theme often emerged from parents’ comments as the reason why they felt the need to be involved with their child’s education. For professionals, the
discussion focused on the challenges they faced in providing quality services for children with disabilities, especially in inclusive settings.

**IEP implementation and accommodations.** Three professionals discussed ideas relevant to IEP implementation by mentioning that IEP accommodations and services were implemented and that the school held high academic standards.

**Child’s experience in school.** Professionals made very few comments related to the child’s experience in school beyond mentioning that children are encouraged to be independent. In some cases, professionals also made an effort to convey their valuing of children as individuals.

**IEP choices and decision making.** Five professionals mentioned that they perceived limited options; only two stated that there were many options available for services. In direct contrast to parents, professionals stated that decisions were made based on data collected on students’ learning. Similar to parents, ten professionals mentioned the constraints that they face in providing services and options, such as school resources, district rules, and scheduling. Professionals conveyed the feeling that these constraints were significant barriers in providing quality services to children with disabilities, whereas parents did not excuse schools because of constraints. Additionally, professionals commented about the constraints they face in allowing every team member to be present during IEP meetings, which had also been a concern raised by parents.

**Teacher quality and training.** Three teachers stated that general education teachers were not adequately trained, and four mentioned that teachers need additional professional development for teaching students receiving special education services in inclusive settings. This was a major point of agreement between professionals and
parents; both groups perceived a lack of preparation for many teachers, especially in inclusive classrooms, for students with disabilities. Only two professionals stated that they or their staff was well trained and six said that professionals were readily available to parents. Teachers and administrators also discussed professionalism, mentioned by two professionals, and working as a team, mentioned by six.

**Transitions.** Five professionals agreed with parents that transitions are a challenge. However, seven professionals stated that transitions were regularly considered in regards to providing services for children with disabilities, which was not conveyed as frequently by parents.

**Child’s setting and placement.** An area of agreement between professionals and parents concerned educational setting or placement, specifically inclusion. Inclusive education for students with disabilities was a challenge and it was often stated that teachers were not well prepared to teach inclusion classes, or that parents were often not satisfied with inclusion settings for their children. Occasionally, professionals discussed a belief that communication was easier when students were in separate settings, and that children were often better served in separate settings. Parents’ comments are consistent with comments made by professionals that often times, inclusive placements are not working ideally for children with disabilities, due to constraints within the school and the preparation of teachers in inclusive classrooms.

**Theme four: Beliefs and understanding related to parent involvement.** Beliefs about parents and parent involvement were mentioned throughout the focus groups at all five schools. Most significantly, professionals discussed their belief that many parents are not adequately prepared to be effectively involved in their children’s education.
Beliefs and values about parent involvement. Professionals discussed a range of initiative on the part of parents, where some parents were highly involved, and other parents were not. They also stated that involvement was dependent on culture or SES sometimes, that some parents were better equipped for being involved than others, and that parents held different beliefs towards involvement.

The most frequently occurring code attached to statements made by nine professionals was that “parents don’t understand process/information.” This code was used when professionals discussed their perception that the special education process and information given in IEP meetings and other settings was difficult for parents to understand. For professionals, parents’ lack of knowledge served as a barrier to involving parents. In some schools this seemed to represent a belief by professionals that they could not involve parents because parents were not equipped to be involved, and it was not their responsibility to help parents be involved. Parents had acknowledged being frustrated by the IEP process and that they needed help in understanding documents provided by the school, but professionals focused on this much more than parents had. This suggests a major gap between professionals and parents. Professionals may overestimate the confusion held by parents with regards to special education processes, or even use it as an excuse not to engage parents.

In contrast, professionals in some schools acknowledged the lack of understanding by parents, but they expressed their belief that they needed to help parents understand documents and processes as part of the involvement process.

Overall, professionals asserted that they work extremely hard to involve parents and that sometimes their efforts went unnoticed by parents. This could explain some of
the discrepancy between professionals’ and parents beliefs about what is happening (and is not happening). It is also possible that professionals overestimate the efforts they take to engage parents or the effectiveness of these efforts.

**Parent initiative.** Professionals made comments to describe how involved they perceived parents to be. Their comments reflected that parents fit into one of two categories: parents either did not take initiative to be involved, or they were actively involved in their children’s education. Some professionals also drew distinctions among parents, noting that some parents are more involved than others.

**Parents’ education and understanding of special education.** This idea was described above as a major belief regarding parent involvement. However, in addition to beliefs about how involved parents are, professionals discussed their school’s practices regarding parent trainings. Whereas four professionals stated that parent trainings were offered yearly to help inform parents about the topics necessary to be involved in special education planning, not a single parent mentioned that trainings were held. Five parents stated that no such trainings had been offered. Professionals also did not discuss how they facilitate parent involvement at home, which had been a point of discussion amongst parents who were frustrated by the lack of help they received in helping their children learn at home.

**Barriers faced.** In addition to parents’ education and understanding of special education, professionals named various barriers they face in their daily practice that affect their efforts in engaging parents. They believed that schools have to meet many needs, and that meeting child and parent needs, as well as school, district, and state requirements are demands they feel constantly; this was recognized by parents as well.
Research Question #2: School Level Results

The following sections present the results from each case, representing the five individual schools. Each case contains background information about the school (see Table 1), followed by the results from parents, and finally the results from professionals. The relationship of the themes as well as the level of agreement between parents and professionals at each school is illustrated below, in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Themes and agreement across schools.

Washington Middle School. Washington Middle School is located in a small, rural district with an enrollment of approximately 6,000 students. It is the only public middle school in the district, with an ESE membership of 11%. In 2010-2011, the school had about 1,000 students, almost three quarters of whom were “economically disadvantaged” (FDOE SPARS, 2013). The majority of students were White, almost 15% were Black, and about 15% were Hispanic/Latino. FCAT performance shows that 33%,
15%, and 15% of students with disabilities achieved a score that was satisfactory or above in writing, reading, and math, respectively. This is the lowest performing school in achievement for reading and math, and the second lowest for writing (FDOE SPARS, 2013). The school’s SEPPS average in 2009-2010 was 470. This is the lowest performing school on school engagement efforts in the study.

Parents’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts. Three parents participated in the focus group at Washington Middle School: one mother, one father, and one legal guardian of children with disabilities. All three had either an Associate degree or some college. Two were White, and one was Black. The children of two parents were placed entirely in inclusive settings (Parents 1 and 3). The child of one of these parents was deaf, and the other was described as having multiple exceptionalities. Parent had a child with autism and was placed was in a self-contained setting. The parents’ experiences appear to be highly related to these placements and possibly to the child’s disability. Parent 2 discussed his experiences in having his child moved from an inclusive setting to a self-contained setting. He described the change as “drastic” (but positive) and noted that now he sees his child’s teachers daily, and is in constant communication with them. He also stated that the school was proactive about maintaining a collaborative relationship with him, but recognized that his experience may not be typical:

Anytime that I have any kind of a question or if there’s anything that they think I might have a question about, I’m contacted. But I am in kind of a unique situation in that I see the teachers on a daily basis.

He expressed his perception of being an equal partner with members of his child’s IEP team, and shared his experience of requesting additional meetings in order to get his child the services he required. She also explained his experience of contacting the school’s
administrator (rather than teachers) when he needed to speak with a teacher, and that this always got him in communication with the appropriate people. This was something he had learned through his experiences in working with teachers who did not always return phone calls. He also stated that the school had provided him with information about outside agencies, and expressed an overall level of satisfaction with the school’s engagement efforts and the quality of services his child was receiving.

The other two parents had experiences that directly contrasted with this. Both of their children were in inclusive settings and both discussed their frustration with this situation. Each of them expressed concerns about their children’s learning, explained that they struggled to help their child with homework, and both questioned the level of support their children were receiving in the regular education classroom. Parent 1 explained that her child regularly brings home tests on which he has earned high grades, but he cannot demonstrate his knowledge to her. She explains, “He’ll cheat off the next person’s paper.” She further explained that although her son was earning passing grades each year, she was concerned about the actual level of instruction he was receiving, stating that he “is in the seventh grade, probably with a fourth grade education.” Parent 1 also expressed her concern about the goals that were written for her child and documented in the IEP, stating that they were not appropriate for her son. She also stated that “every time you get an IEP, it’s the same goals, just reworded in a different way.” This parent did not feel her input was solicited, or even considered often times. This parent also mentioned her child’s frustration with school, and her thoughts about possibly finding a different school for her son.
Parent 3 had a similar experience to Parent 1. She was also concerned about her daughter’s progress in school, specifically in math, and about the implementation of the IEP. She stated that her daughter explained to her that there was no extra teacher in her classes, as was required in her IEP. She also explained that she did not see any progress in her child’s learning in math class. She explained that although she had contacted the guidance counselor regarding her concerns, no one had ever returned her calls: “They put you on a voicemail and that’s the closest you get to them.” When asked if IEP documents were explained to her, Parent 3 replied that only when she asked what was going to be happening in her child’s education, was anything explained.

In this school, whereas the two parents whose children were in inclusive settings were extremely dissatisfied both with the school’s engagement efforts and the quality of accommodations and instruction their children were receiving, the parent of the child in a self-contained setting was very satisfied. Additionally, Parent 2 seemed to have much more knowledge about how to work with the school system to get his child’s needs met. For example, Parent 2 mentioned advocating for a separate setting, which was the placement he felt was most appropriate for his child, and using the principal as a contact person.

*Professionals’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts.* Eight professionals, including both general and special education teachers, school administrators, and district administrators participated in the focus group at Washington Middle School. The discussion immediately centered on ways to improve communication efforts with parents, as it was recognized that they were falling short of parent expectations (according to both SEPPS results and the parent focus group). Professionals
also recognized a need to provide trainings to parents regarding ESE matters. In addition to the discussion about improving communication with parents, there was discussion of the constraints the school faces. One administrator recommended a solution, however, and suggested that each teacher be responsible for staying in contact with 25 of their students’ parents (as assigned by their “critical thinking” class):

That these are the 25 students that you are responsible for communication with and you communicate with your core team and you know, find out who that critical thinking teacher is and use them as a point of contact and then teachers also then wouldn’t have to feel overwhelmed that ‘I have 125 students I need to contact.’ If you can stay in contact with the 25 that you are assigned to for critical thinking and you can keep up with those 25… then just make sure that you are communicating with your team, on the others, then that should be manageable and I think that might be a place we can do that.

The group mentioned the practice of using guidance counselors as the point of contact for parents, and setting up conferences when parents contacted the guidance office. This was a practice that one parent had mentioned that had not yielded adequate results. The professionals in this focus group also responded to the parents’ concerns that only some teachers regularly contacted parents. Professionals explained that the “rotten apple” ruins the whole bunch. In other words, professionals believed that one teacher’s inadequate communication with parents changed parents’ perceptions of all of their children’s teachers. The professionals raised the concern that some teachers on their staff are not sensitive to the needs of students in ESE and that they are in need of additional professional development so that parents can have positive experiences communicating with each teacher. It was recognized that individual teachers become representatives of the school as a whole.
Lincoln Middle School. Lincoln Middle School is located in a rural district with fewer than 5,000 students; it is the smallest district represented in the study. Lincoln had just over 1,000 students in 2011-2012, with about 53% “economically disadvantaged” (FDOE SPARS, 2013). The majority of students were White (84.3%), 10.9% were Black, and 2% were Hispanic/Latino. FCAT performance shows that 3%, 27%, and 34% of students with disabilities achieved a score of satisfactory or above in writing, reading, and math, respectively. This is the school with the lowest writing achievement scores by far (FDOE SPARS, 2013). Of the schools in the study, Lincoln Middle School had the second highest SEPPS average in 2009-2010 at 632, which is above the state’s standard for schools’ engagement efforts.

Parents’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts. Seven people participated in the focus group for parents at Lincoln Middle School; three were mothers, two were fathers, and two were grandparents, representing the most diverse group in terms of relationship to the child attending the school. None of the participants had an education level higher than some college or an Associate’s degree. Six were White, and one was Black. Three participants’ children were in inclusive settings and four were in separate settings. The exceptionality categories represented are as follows: deaf: 2, developmental delay: 1, traumatic brain injury: 1, other: 1, and multiple exceptionalities: 2.

Two main foci emerged from parents at Lincoln. The first, expressed by most of the participants, was that it is the parent’s responsibility to be involved. Four out of the seven participants made comments that were coded in this way. They discussed their belief that it is the parent’s job to ask questions and get information, and that parents have
to “fight” for services. The following quotes from three different parents illustrate these beliefs.

You have to accept some responsibility for asking.

Always involved. Always you know, knowing what your child is doing from day to day and if anything changes, you know about it.

You have to. You’ve gotta step forward and say, ‘this is what we need.’

Additionally, five out of seven participants shared experiences in which they had initiated contact with the school to obtain information or services for their child. Participants discussed contacting teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators in order to get what they felt was necessary for their child, as shown in the following quotes by two different participants.

I think the important thing is you just have to keep asking and advocating and looking for what you need for your children. What you described about your wife is me, because my husband said when I went into the IEP meeting last week he goes, ‘I knew they’d move her [to a separate setting].’ I said ‘you don’t understand,’ I walked into a classroom where they were not going to move this child, where they were not going to do anything. And I love them to death, they are wonderful people, but their mindset is ‘oh it’s [separate setting] not in their best interest.’ But they see this kid smiling, happy little girl and then she comes home and screams at me and throws things and hollers at me and she’s only eight. You know, but you have to do as a parent what you think is best for your child, and whatever it takes.

Making and receiving [phone calls], trying to get information, trying to get you know, what you expect out of the school. Usually we go straight to guidance anyway and work with them and they usually can handle you know, like his IEP, you know, things of that nature.

The second main point that arose during the focus group was related to the variation in the quality of services provided and the praise for individual professionals.

Six participants made comments related to this idea. Specifically, teachers and other
professionals who made a difference for their child were named. None of the comments regarding individuals were negative.

You need to have [professional’s name] do it, that’s the one who they use here, and she is truly amazing. She takes the children that are non-verbal and she can get an IQ [score], she can sit down with them, she’s just, in our opinion, she walks on water.

Um, any question I need I just go to [teacher’s name]. He’s just like a jack of all trades.

The only one that has offered us that is [teacher’s name], he’s the only one that stepped up and said ‘you know, if you need extra help,’ …He works very well with the children.

However, four participants commented that teachers provide insufficient support for their children, yet no specific names were mentioned in these situations.

And they don’t give him any extra help in the classroom.
She [the child] was getting to the point where she was having a mental breakdown just about every day, she couldn’t keep up, she was frustrated. She did it in class, she knew it in class, and now everything was just spinning around her. And we had to do something.

We’ve seen the flip side here, when she was mainstreamed, she brought home an algebra paper one night, it was a good exercise for me, and I wrote them: ‘Really? Come on guys, she can’t do this,’ and nobody is responding. Not at all.

**Professionals’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts.** Six professionals participated in the focus group at Lincoln Middle School: three special education teachers, two administrators, and one other professional. The challenges of inclusion were the most prevalent points raised by the group. In particular, the professionals talked about a change in their placements that had occurred since the last school year. Students who were once pulled out for some classes were now fully included, and the general education teachers were described as having difficulty with this change. Furthermore, one participant noted that parents of students in separate settings have more frequent
communication with teachers, whereas parents of students in inclusive settings have less.

Other comments addressed students’ struggles in inclusion classrooms, and the training provided for general education teachers. The challenges of inclusion were described:

Last year was the first time we had to decide either they are out or they are in, for those main academics and our general ed teachers were not prepared for that. They weren’t ready and we had someone with them [students] all day, a facilitator, to work with them and work with the general ed teachers, but they kept saying they lacked the training and I think with the mainstream that, I mean that’s an issue across the state. Now teachers don’t need to just be general ed teachers, they should be trained in both because kids are going to be out and be mainstreamed and that’s our responsibility to have them trained.

And something I think too, with the resource room, and the kids being mainstreamed is if you’ve got a class of 22 kids and 6 of them are ESE kids, the other 16 are general ed, those 6 students are going to be less receptive to being the center of a certain teacher’s attention, or the facilitator’s attention whereas, right, when you are in that resource room, where everybody is the same and everybody is getting the same attention, they are going to be more of them to help.

Absolutely, I mean when they were with you…every single day, [student’s name]’s parents are so happy, I mean they think her parents…they are not always happy, but I mean she communicates with them weekly. The mainstream students…you start to lose that.

Well you know you got to understand too it’s more of [a] self-contained situation. Yeah, but a mainstream teacher that has 120 students and everyone starts calling them at 11:00 o’clock at night, I wouldn’t be giving out my cell phone number to that population. Too difficult…You know, that’s what can happen, but with a smaller setting, yeah it’s easier.

The lack of communication with teachers in middle school settings was also attributed to the transition from elementary school in which students had one or two teachers, to middle school, where students have six or seven. The professionals stated numerous times that there was frequent communication with parents, and some stated that contact with parents was often initiated by parents. There were also many questions
about the survey and focus groups, as some participants seemed hesitant to accept the comments from parents.

Another idea that was persistent throughout this focus group was the low educational level of parents and how this impacted parent involvement. Professionals noted that parents needed help to be involved. One professional stated that she had attempted to help the parent understand their important role in writing goals for their child’s IEP:

You have to tell them that they are the driving force behind that IEP. While it’s a team decision, but they need to put their input in and then you need to assist with writing the goals. ‘I want my child to do this,’ ok, this is how you write the goal. They don’t know how to write the goals. So that it’s sort of like you are teaching the parent how to write a goal or helping them.

At least one other professional was not nearly as positive when discussing the educational level of parents in the district and parents’ ability to access outside agencies that can support families of children with disabilities, as well as understand the Procedural Safeguards:

You have a rural county with a low socioeconomic status, which would dictate a lot of the education, you know, it has to be spoon fed to them. Whether they go out and get it or not, well, at least if you ask, you know we have the list [of agencies].

Now this is your child. Now are you interested in him or not? You should take the time to read those over and understand them. We can’t spoon feed every word and every line of the Procedural Safeguards that are dictated by lawyers in [the state capital]. And federal mandates. So but if you are that interested and you need to sit down and learn about them.

**Wilson Middle School.** Wilson Middle School is located in a very large school district, with more than 350,000 students. However, the school itself had fewer than 800 students in 2010-2011, making it the smallest school represented in the study.
Economically disadvantaged students made up 87.5% of the school. More than 97% were Hispanic/Latino, 2.7% of students were White, and 2% were Black. FCAT performance shows that 48%, 28%, and 18% of students with disabilities achieved a score of satisfactory or above score in writing, reading, and math, respectively (FDOE SPARS, 2013). The school had the highest SEPPS mean measure in the study at 804.

**Parents’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts.** Five parents participated in the focus group at Wilson Middle School. Four of them were mothers, and one was a father of a child with a disability. All five were Hispanic/Latino. Two had high school diplomas or less, two had some college or an Associate’s degree and one had a Bachelor’s degree. One participant’s child was in inclusive classes, one was in inclusive classes as well as resource room classes, two were in separate classes, and one’s placement was unknown. The exceptionality categories represented are as follows: autism: 1, other health impairment: 1, orthopedically impaired: 1, specific learning disability: 1, multiple exceptionalities: 1.

Four out of the five parents present at the focus group discussed their belief that it is the parent’s responsibility to be involved. It was also mentioned that the school is more responsive to parent and child needs when the parent is involved:

> It is the parent’s responsibility to make sure that they understand. Not everything has to be given out to all work out, like she [another parent] does, she gets constantly involved in her child’s education, in her child’s needs, she gets involved in making sure that she understands. You know, the school doesn’t have to provide everything for you unless you ask. It’s just like almost the Bible, knock and the door shall be open, ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. So we take some responsibility on us parents to make sure that you know, we are involved, that we are asking questions, that we are understanding what is being said. It’s not totally the school’s responsibility.
Consistent with the belief that these parents held in the importance of being involved were examples of these parents being involved with the PTA, initiating contact with the school for services or information or to advocate for their child’s needs, which were met with a positive reception on the school’s part.

A perception shared by the participants was that the school was receptive to their input, sought their input, was sensitive to families and children’s needs, and that parents were valued as team members. Three of the participants stated that the quality of services for their children as well as engagement efforts depended on the individual, and all three participants had positive remarks. Additionally, participants stated that communication with the school was frequent.

When I came in I also spoke to his homeroom teacher and I explained to him because like my son had been booted before in the previous school, which nothing happened through the services of the school. I wasn’t satisfied with the response, so that’s why I too looked into this school because I needed to protect my child. I came in, I explained to her what my experience had been, the homeroom teacher says that will never happen here because I will make sure that he is you know, protected at all times.

I feel like an equal partner because every time, from the beginning, my child, the teachers and other professionals, they speak with me, you know they try to work specifically with me about the needs of my child, you know, how I can help you to improve, you know the needs of my child.

The only negative remarks made by parents in this meeting came in discussion of experiences at previous schools and the constraints of the district. One parent explained that she was “fighting” for services for her child, but blamed the district rather than the school, saying, “Unfortunately it’s not available at this school level, unfortunately, it’s not the school’s fault, it is the fault of the [district] administration.” Another point of agreement between the participants was that the transition to Wilson Middle School was
a positive one; two parents discussed their negative experiences with their children’s previous schools compared to Wilson.

I had a very positive experience initially when I came to this school particularly. I had come to the first orientation meeting because I like to make myself available so that I, they see that yes, I’m a caring parent and I care what happens to my son and the relationship that we have. There is a stigma that goes along with having a, you know, handicapped child, and I felt great because the second time I came in, the principal knew my name, knew my son’s name. That to me was totally awesome, because she treated me as an individual, she had recognized who I was, it was to me, it’s like a love affair already because she knew me. So that gave me the assurance that well at least she knows, she knew where his class was, who his teachers were, and so that made me feel very, very positive…I’m not a problem coming into the school. She greeted me with confidence, with joy, so it was very good, it was a very positive thing so to me having come from another school to this one was very positive.

Parents were also in agreement that they were satisfied with inclusion at the school. Participants stated that they were proud that their children were able to participate successfully in inclusive classrooms and that their children’s self-esteem was positively impacted as a result. Only one parent was concerned about the level of support her child was receiving from teachers. Participants complimented teachers’ skills in working with children and communicating with parents regularly.

*Professionals’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts.* Five professionals participated in the focus group. Two were special education teachers, one was a general education teacher, one was an administrator, and one was the district’s parent liaison.

Two ideas were predominant throughout the meeting. The first theme that emerged was the collaboration of the staff with each other and with parents. Each professional discussed the ways in they work together as a team, and with parents. The
administrator explained that the collaboration between teachers was evident to parents, and helped the process of working with parents:

And I think we work well together. I think that’s something that, and I think the students see that, the parents see that, from my own personal experience, when I was a student I could tell right away when my teachers got along, that they were really collaborating and not just talking behind each other’s back. And I think they [parents] sense that as well.

Additionally, each of the teachers expressed their appreciation for the support they received from administration, as described by one teacher:

It starts at the top and the administrators, and it just trickles down. And I can just say my God, it is a pleasure to come to this school and I really enjoy the people that I work with and our administrators are there to support us.

Professionals provided additional examples of positive collaboration with parents noting the welcoming climate of the school for parents, and the fact that there was a professional on staff always available to speak with parents. The following quote illustrates this focus on respect for parents:

I tried, this is what I do, but it’s something personal, because I like respect…I will spend two, three hours with you literally and to address the situation to go over whatever issue that pertains to your child, and give that person my undivided attention.

Frequent communication with parents was also mentioned. Teachers explained their practice of providing daily progress reports for students that are struggling; this way, parents find out before the end of a marking period if their child is struggling academically, or behaviorally, and the issues can be addressed. Teachers also stated that they contacted parents with positive feedback about their child, not just when there was a problem:

We definitely, and we are not just calling the parent, like for example, a lot of times if the child has a problem, we also call to let them know that
the child is doing well, how happy we are since the last meeting that [we’ve] seen an increase in better performances in academics and behavior. We tell them.

The other discussion that arose during the focus group at Wilson detailed the challenges that the school faces in working with parents. In particular, the staff discussed the challenges in working with parents of low SES, the impact of parents’ culture on involvement, and the difficulty in reaching parents of students that attend Wilson Middle School. Some parents were described as not being very involved:

One of the biggest hurdles we need to overcome is the lack of personal involvement due to their low socio economic status, the fact that they work many hours, more than one job, sometimes their phones are disconnected, it’s difficult to reach them…It’s not that they don’t care, they do care about their child very much, but it’s just things that are out of our control like I mentioned earlier. And also, I, correct me if I’m wrong but I believe since we are predominantly a Hispanic school, the Hispanic mentality is that they trust the school 100%, and ‘I’m just dropping off my child, and I know they are going to take care of him’ because that’s what they bring from their own country where they trust the teachers completely whereas the more modernized and more Americanized parents are involved no matter what.

In addition to parents being difficult to reach, professionals explained the lack of knowledge that parents often had when participating in meetings. The staff explained that it could be difficult to make sure parents understood what their child was capable of, and what the best placement and services were for children with disabilities. Additionally, some parents were described as not understanding what special education was for and why their children were receiving services:

I think it’s so difficult at times to give parents everything that they absolutely want because as a parent, they don’t always know what’s involved in the teacher aspect of the education part of it. What they may think, sometimes they see their child as having all these beautiful strengths that they do have, but then they don’t see the weaknesses that they have and so it’s difficult to say, to tell them, ‘listen I’m sorry but we don’t want
your child to fail in an inclusion setting and that’s why we don’t recommend it’. 

But it’s talked about also in the IEP meeting. We do tell them that. They forget the exceptionality of their child. I’ve had parents and they do forget that. The exceptionality. ‘Why is my child in this program?’ We get that a lot in this school.

Professionals at Wilson Middle School also described the constraints they faced, especially in scheduling classes that fit students’ needs. Professionals explained that they could not always accommodate parents’ wishes or students’ needs due to the timing and staffing needed for schedules. In some cases, students could not participate in inclusive classes because of schedule conflicts.

I work with scheduling of classes, so sometimes depending on the classes that child is taking, we might offer you know an inclusion class, but might be in conflict with another class that the child is already in. And so sometimes you know, I meet with parents, we meet with parents and we found we can’t because of the way your child’s schedule is, and the classes he or she needs cannot be, we can’t place him or her in that specific inclusion class at that time.

Despite the school’s difficulty in providing inclusive settings for all students’ classes, it was clear that the school had a focus on improving inclusive education. The professionals discussed their weekly professional development sessions that were focused on equipping general education teachers with strategies for teaching inclusive classes. Teachers were given best practices weekly for working with children with disabilities.

Other practices that teachers and administrators mentioned during the focus group were dealing with bullying issues, working on students’ self-esteem, and holding parent trainings. The discussion around trainings for parents led to teachers wondering why some parents do not attend the trainings even when they are invited. The professionals began brainstorming ways to improve attendance, such as holding trainings on the
weekend, rather than on weekday evenings, and offering food or other incentives for parents to attend.

**Kennedy Middle School.** Kennedy Middle School is located in a large district with an enrollment over 100,000 students. In 2010-2011, the district had an ESE membership of 12%. Kennedy had 850 students with just under 20% “economically disadvantaged” (FDOE SPARS, 2013). The majority of students were White; fewer than 5% were Black, and almost 9% were Hispanic/Latino. Of the schools in the study, Kennedy represents the school with the highest performance on the FCAT in reading and math for students with disabilities, with 45%, (reading) and 59% (math) of students scoring satisfactory and above. Writing scores were not reported (FDOE SPARS, 2013). The school’s SEPPS average in 2009-2010 was 605, which is just above the state’s standard for schools’ engagement efforts. Finally, this school is not a typical neighborhood school. Children must enter a lottery to attend, and the school mission stresses the importance of parent involvement. Parents must agree to sign an involvement contract.

**Parents’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts.** Four parents participated in the focus group at Kennedy Middle School. All four participants were mothers. Two mothers had graduate degrees, while one had a Bachelor’s degree and one had an Associate’s degree. All four mothers were White. Three parents’ children were placed in general education settings, one was placed in a resource room setting for part of the day. The exceptionality categories represented are as follows: developmental delay: 1, other health impairment: 1, multiple exceptionalities: 2.
All four parents had somewhat similar experiences; the group discussed their overall satisfaction with the school’s engagement efforts. They also agreed that they were advocates for their children. Parents mentioned the involvement contract they had each signed as required by the school for attendance. Additionally, the school was described as having high academic standards.

Advocacy and parent initiative were the most salient topics in this group. All four discussed being proactive about ensuring that their children received the accommodations documented in their IEP. Parent 1 described herself as a “high maintenance mom,” contacting teachers, “fighting” for accommodations and services, and staying “on top of the school.” This mother also stated that she felt valued by the school members of her child’s IEP team.

Parent 2 also described fighting for accommodations, but felt valued by IEP team members. She mentioned that someone at the school could always provide an answer to her questions. She also stated that if she needed anything, she contacted the principal rather than teachers. Whereas Parent 2 described using the child’s planner to communicate with the school as a successful practice, Parent 1 had expressed some concern about getting responses from teachers when using the child’s planner. The biggest concern for Parent 2 was the child’s work at home. She stated that her child was “exhausted” upon getting home and that working with the child on homework was difficult. She explained her frustration with teachers’ expectations:

I’ve had the teachers talking to me around the table ‘Well, do this with him, do that with him.’ We can’t. There’s so much we do already with the child, that’s overwhelming, for us to kick in and be an educator.
Parent 3 also mentioned her child’s learning at home as well. She stated that her child learns as much at home as in school. She agreed with the other parents in feeling valued by school members, and also explained “backing” the teachers in working with her child. She described the school’s engagement efforts as being effective and stated that she was “very satisfied” overall.

Parent 4 had a slightly different experience than the other three. She also described being an advocate for her child’s needs, and feeling valued by the IEP team, but stated of her role on the team: “Well, I’m on the team and I’m not benched, but I’m not the star pitcher.” She also responded to the other mothers’ descriptions of collaboration with the school that she felt not all teachers were responsive, and that it must depend on the “teacher personality” to explain why she was not always getting the same collaboration. She also expressed concern that some of her child’s teachers were more attentive than others, and that she felt the need to make sure that all the teachers were familiar with her child’s IEP.

Professionals’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts. Four professionals participated in the focus group at Kennedy Middle School: one special education teacher, one general education teacher, one school administrator, and one district level professional. The staff discussed the high academic expectations held by the school, and the pressure to maintain its “top status in the county” in terms of test scores. The staff also mentioned that transitions were both a challenge and something that they worked particularly hard on to make sure that students receiving services had a smooth transition into the school. Specifically, the special education teacher was attending fifth grade IEP meetings to make sure that the transition from elementary school to this middle
school went smoothly. This may explain why none of the mothers had raised the transition to middle school as a concern.

The staff also discussed their constraints in allowing all teachers to attend IEP meetings, but stated that they contacted parents prior to meetings to make sure that if there was a specific teacher they wanted to speak with, that the teacher was present at the meeting. Overall, the staff described a highly dedicated staff that worked hard, particularly with parents, to ensure the success of their students by accommodating parents during IEP meetings, making sure parents feel welcome, and having an “open door policy” at all times to engage all parents. They described making sure IEPs were written in understandable terms, and sending IEP planning notes to parents prior to the IEP meeting. They recognized that the testing “lingo” used with standardized testing may be an area in need of improvement by the school in order to make sure parents were involved and understood the testing process at the school to reduce stress they may have.

The administrator also mentioned a concern about the pressure being put on teachers regarding testing.

One area of discussion amongst the professionals was the general education teachers’ attendance for IEP meetings. The school administrator was concerned that not all general education teachers were familiar with the IEPs, despite the special education teachers’ consistent reminders. Another topic of discussion was the use of the planner to communicate with parents. The professionals described this as an effective practice, but did not seem aware that some parents were less than satisfied with this.

**Roosevelt Middle School.** Roosevelt Middle School is located in the same large district as Kennedy Middle School, with just over 100,000 students. Roosevelt had
almost 1,500 students in 2011-2012, making it the largest school represented in the study. About 32% of students were “economically disadvantaged.” The majority of students were White, 2.3% were Black, and about 9% were Hispanic/Latino. Roosevelt Middle School has the second highest achievement scores, with 89%, 69%, and 65% of students scoring satisfactory and above in writing, reading, and math, respectively. Additionally, Roosevelt had the second highest achievement scores for students with disabilities, with 61%, 33%, and 31% scoring satisfactory and above in writing, reading, and math, respectively (FDOE SPARS, 2013). The school’s SEPPS average in 2009-2010 was 580, which is under the state’s standard for schools’ engagement efforts.

**Parents’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts.** Six parents participated in the focus group at Roosevelt Middle School; five were mothers of children with a disability, and one was a grandparent. Three of the participants had graduate degrees or had attended graduate school, one had an Associate’s degree or some college, and two had high school diplomas or less. All six participants were White. Three parents’ children were in general education classes, two were in separate settings and the placement of one was unknown. The exceptionality categories represented were as follows: autism: 2, language impaired: 1, other health impairment: 1, multiple exceptionalities: 2.

The most prominent theme for all six participants was the quality of services provided to their children; all six participants had comments related to their concern about IEP implementation, decision making, their child’s experience in the school, teacher quality, and/or transitions.

All six participants discussed implementation of their children’s IEPs or a lack of options offered at IEP meetings. They discussed following up to make sure that
accommodations were being implemented because they did not believe that services were being delivered according to the IEP. They also stated that they did not believe teachers were familiar with their children’s IEPs. Two parents explained that their concerns were not with creating the IEPs, but with the school’s ability to implement them:

They are not equipped to get the IEPs out to the teachers as quickly as possible, so the kids are going in at a disadvantage when they know they are allowed accommodations but the teachers don’t know that yet.

They [accommodations] might be documented on there, but they do not follow through with it because my husband and I have a lot of concerns.

Other participants were concerned with the options they were given during IEP meetings. These participants discussed being “proactive” and “fighting” for services. They also made reference to the lack of options being the fault of the district, rather than the school, and even stated that some teachers were “secretly” helping parents get the services their children needed, as shown in the following quote:

Well I would say though secretively, the teachers tell us what to do. ‘You didn’t hear this from me, but this is what you need to do.’ That’s what goes on, how to get what you need because they are trying to tell us ‘No you can’t get this, no you can’t have that, no this won’t work out.’

Concerns over the child’s experience in school were prominent during this focus group as well. Two parents described specific incidents in which their children had been bullied. Both parents were disappointed with the school’s response to the incidents, and felt they had to be involved because of the school’s failure to deal with the problem and involve them.

Another parent also had concerns about her child’s experience in school, specifically, with the amount of feedback her child was getting from teachers. She explained:
They are given questions to do at home and as long as they put numbers down, they give it a 10. Whether it’s right or wrong, nobody is marking the papers right or wrong.

Five out of six of the participants discussed their concerns about the quality of teachers their children had at Roosevelt as well. Participants stated their belief that general education teachers were not prepared to work with children with disabilities, that often times special education teachers were not certified to teach children with disabilities, that teachers were unfamiliar with IEPs, and provided inadequate amounts of support in inclusive settings. The following quote illustrates the concerns amongst the group:

He’s in one class this year where there are a number of autistic children in the classroom, and I think that it’s pretty [problematic] for both levels for the children who are autistic and the children who aren’t because the teacher is not able to teach to either level.

Transition was another significant point of discussion in this focus group. Parents were concerned with the transition from elementary school to Roosevelt Middle School, the transitions occurring within the school, and the transition they were preparing for to enter high school. One parent described the within-school transitions:

The kids just run willy-nilly all over the school. I mean if you are out there doing class changes and in gym, the noise is horrendous. There’s no manners, there’s no- they let them go bananas.

Additionally, parents were concerned that changes were being implemented with their child’s teachers or classrooms, and they were not being notified so that they could help prepare their child, as explained by one parent:

Adding new teachers to the units, putting the kids with different teachers and days later we get phone calls. And our kids, they need to be prepared for this, they need to talk about it. And we are dealing with behaviors at home because there are changes going on that no one is communicating.
Professionals’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts. Three professionals participated in the focus group at Roosevelt Middle School: one administrator, one special education teacher, and one general education teacher. They were initially unaware of the survey and had many questions, but appeared to take the comments from parents seriously and offered suggestions for improvement.

The special education teacher noted that “parents are very proactive” at Roosevelt, and that they “very much like to be involved.” This belief was consistent amongst the participants; additionally, the professionals noted how much they valued parent involvement and a collaborative relationship with parents. The administrator commented that parents are “more than equal” with regard to how much parents participate in creating IEPs. It was also noted that teachers build good relationships with parents and that they value the input they get from parents.

The professionals discussed parents’ beliefs that teachers were unfamiliar with the IEPs. One professional noted:

There’s something as a general education teacher something that our staff, what our counselors do, even before the school year begins and I know that the liaison has done this also, is that they have a sign out every year before we receive our students, copies of the IEPs and even 504 accommodations and there’s a signature sheet for us to go and have copies of them readily available [for teachers] and kept in a binder so if someone comes in and needs to see it they would know exactly what accommodations are needed for this student, so I will say that all of us do receive copies of those IEPs.

The administrator was aware that teachers at Roosevelt were not always informed of students’ IEPs and classroom needs. During IEP meetings, some teachers were mentioning that they were uninformed, so he explained his response:

As an administrative team, we encourage teachers not to inform parents that they have not done their job of reading the IEPs. That doesn’t make
sense for you to tell the parent that you didn’t know the kid had an IEP, so
we push the process and encourage them not to say that.

Both of these comments reveal the professionals’ understanding of compliance and the
legal issues with regards to IEPs, but do not seem to comment beyond this in terms of
what it means for teachers to be unaware of or unfamiliar with IEPs.

Parents’ comments about transitions were addressed by the group. The
professionals stated that the previous school year, class units were changed, which
involved a change of teachers for some children. The administrator explained:

We made sure that we called those parents so there was a gap in there that
didn’t occur, we had to make sure those parents were called. There was a
unique [situation] to call the parents before it was scheduled for the
change to take place.

The above comment contrasts directly with the remarks made by parents that changes
were occurring without any notification.

The professionals also commented on parents’ concerns about irregular
communications, specifically related to progress towards IEP goals. One professional
suggested that they find a new way to get the progress reports to parents directly, rather
than sending them home with children. Another suggestion was that the school make sure
all parents know who their child’s case manager is at the beginning of the school year.

Interrelated Explanations across Research Questions

The results from both research questions yielded rich information about how
parents’ and professionals’ views of schools’ involvement efforts vary. Beyond this, the
synthesis of the findings across these two questions in the form of interrelated
explanations (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2003) yields the most significant information
about how parents’ and professionals’ views vary across schools. Additionally, these
explanations reveal how the level of congruence between parents and professionals may be related to the overall quality of schools’ engagement efforts and parent involvement for students receiving special education services. In this section, three interrelated explanations are presented in order to convey the final level of analysis.

Illustrated in Figure 2 are the main findings related both to the congruence between parents and professionals and the themes at each school. The schools are ordered in terms of the level of agreement between parents and professionals, from low agreement (at Lincoln Middle School) to high agreement (at Wilson Middle School). Additionally, the four themes (abbreviated for clarity) are depicted in terms of how prominent they were at the focus groups across parents and professionals, shown by their location and size within the rectangles (with the most prominent theme located at the top of the rectangles). Additionally, the themes are positioned in terms of how closely related they were to the other themes when participants spoke. Whereas at Wilson Middle School, the themes were very much related to one another, at Lincoln, the themes were less related to one another. In other words, at Lincoln, the themes emerged from separate comments. In contrast, at Wilson, for example, the themes emerged from comments that showed that the quality of collaboration, services, and communication were very much related, and also reflected professionals’ beliefs in the importance of working with parents.

Quality of services: Inclusion as a shared challenge. The quality of services, placement, and education was the most salient theme at a majority of the five schools (see Figure 2). Specifically, participants discussed the challenges of inclusion. At four of the five schools, parents and professionals were overwhelmed with the challenges and
shortcomings of inclusion. Comments made by parents and professionals at Washington, Lincoln, Kennedy, and Roosevelt Middle Schools revealed a perception that inclusive education, as well as high academic standards for all students, including those with disabilities, is a very difficult ideal to achieve.

Some parents talked about “fighting” to receive adequate services and options for their children in inclusive settings, the stress they (and their children) faced as a result of high-stakes testing and high standards, and the struggle to help their children with schoolwork so that they could keep up with the high standards. Additionally, many parents stated their belief that their child would benefit from a special education classroom setting, or that general education teachers needed to be more adequately prepared for inclusion to be appropriate for their child. Teachers discussed the challenges that come with providing effective instruction for students with different abilities and the enlarged class size in inclusive settings. Teachers were frustrated with the level of school support for implementing accommodations and other special education services for their students with disabilities, including their own preparation for inclusive teaching.

Only at Wilson Middle School did parents and professionals agree about the benefits of inclusion and their confidence in teachers’ ability to implement effective inclusive education. The school’s commitment to implementing high quality inclusion, however challenging, was evident in their practices; professionals described “best practice” professional development days. These days were dedicated to allowing all teachers to gain knowledge and strategies for effective inclusive teaching, such as differentiated instruction, on a regular basis by allowing special education teachers to work with general education teachers. Furthermore, professionals at Wilson discussed the
importance of inclusion for all students and noted the attention they paid to issues like bullying. Wilson teachers noted that inclusion was a challenge, but that it was the reality of education for students with disabilities and that they were working hard towards preparing general education teachers to be equipped for teaching in inclusive settings.

The communication contrast. The frequency, variety, and effectiveness of communication theme represented a significant point of contrast between parents and professionals across the five schools. In most cases, parents perceived less than adequate communication with professionals, often specifically regarding their child’s progress on their IEP goals. Professionals, on the other hand, reported regular and varied communication with parents and asserted that progress reports were sent home at the end of every marking period. This discrepancy between parents and professionals reveals that the perception of communication is highly contrasting; parents perceive communication with the school to be inadequate, while professionals perceive the opposite in terms of frequency, variety, and effectiveness.

At some schools the difference between these perceptions was much greater than at others. At Lincoln Middle School, which had the largest gap between parents’ and professionals’ perceptions overall (see Figure 2), the frequency of communication appeared highly discrepant. A majority of the professionals asserted frequent communication with parents, however, none of the parent participants mentioned that they had frequent communication with teachers. It is possible that parents regarded other aspects of schools’ facilitation efforts to be more important, and therefore, did not discuss the issue. Parents at Washington Middle School had the most complaints about having “little communication” with teachers. Here, professionals discussed the need to improve
their communication efforts with parents, and specifically discussed the challenge of communicating with parents of children with disabilities within inclusive settings, revealing a more consistent picture portrayed between parents and professionals.

**Beliefs about involvement.** Another major discrepancy between parents’ and professionals’ perceptions that was revealed in comments across all the themes related to the motivation behind and extent of parent involvement. Parents at all five schools discussed their beliefs about the importance of being involved in their children’s education, and that they regularly initiated their involvement, rather than waiting for the school to provide involvement opportunities. Frequently, parents were motivated by a need to advocate for their children. In contrast, professionals at all five schools asserted that in general, parents did not always understand everything necessary to be effectively involved in special education planning. For example, professionals discussed parents’ limited understanding of special education terms and processes.

Lincoln Middle School represented the school with the biggest discrepancy between what parents and professionals conveyed regarding parent involvement (see Figure 2). Most notably, professionals at this focus group discussed the limited knowledge and education of parents as a significant barrier to staff efforts to involve them. However, much like the parents at Kennedy and Roosevelt, the parent participants focused their discussion around their beliefs about being involved, taking initiative to support their child’s education, and advocating for their children. The professionals’ comments that parents lacked the education to be involved or that low-SES background hindered schools’ efforts to involve parents seems at odds with the parent perspectives from the focus group. Professionals who worked in this rural district believed that parents
were not involved, did not take initiative to learn or find information necessary for being involved, and with the exception of one professional, did not appear to believe it was their responsibility to help parents be effectively involved in the special education planning for their child.
Chapter Five: Discussion

The comparison of parents’ and professionals’ perceptions of five middle schools’ engagement efforts yielded four themes, which were presented in the results section. In addition, the case study analysis of the five schools as separate, bound contexts revealed differences in both the extent of the themes present and the amount of agreement between the parents and professionals. Finally, three interrelated explanations offered a synthesis of the findings in terms of the themes and the case studies (see Appendix E for a visual display). In this chapter, I will situate these three explanations within the existing literature. Then, I will describe how both the middle school and demographic contexts of the study impact these three main findings. Additionally, I will discuss implications for practice and research, as well as limitations and final remarks.

Three Interrelated Explanations

The three interrelated explanations that resulted from the final level of analysis in the study synthesize the findings from both research questions. Each of the following sections will describe the level of agreement between parents and professionals, as well as the most salient points that were made within the idea. Only one of the interrelated explanations (‘inclusion as a shared challenge’) revealed consistency between parents and professionals. The other two (‘the communication contrast’ and ‘beliefs about involvement’) revealed vast differences between parents’ and professionals’ perceptions.

Inclusion as a shared challenge. Parents and professionals at four of the five schools agreed that inclusion was a significant challenge in terms of effectively educating students with disabilities. At the fifth school, parents and professionals agreed upon the value and benefit, despite its challenge, of inclusive education. Whether the remarks
made by parents and professionals were positive or negative, this represented the most consistent idea between all participants.

Teachers’ reluctance concerning inclusion has been seen in previous literature (Bennet, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). Parents’ reluctance concerning inclusion at four of the five schools in this study contrasts with results from other studies. In particular, Lalvani’s (2012) study of parent involvement in special education revealed that parents had to advocate for inclusive settings and that parents from higher SES backgrounds were more successful in having their children placed in inclusive classrooms. In the present study, parents with higher levels of education (typically associated with SES) at Kennedy and Roosevelt were more frustrated with inclusion and often advocated for special education settings for their children.

Professionals’ candid remarks about inclusion suggest that they were comfortable in discussing the difficulties and limitations of inclusion in line with previous literature (Bennet, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997). In Bennet and colleagues’ study, which examined teacher and parent perceptions of parent involvement and inclusion, teachers perceived inclusive education to be so challenging as to have a negative impact on educational opportunities for students with and without disabilities. However, parents in the Bennet et. al study highly agreed with implementing inclusive education for their children. The perception on the part of parents in this study that inclusive education was not effective for their children could be a result of the lack of confidence held by teachers in implementing effective inclusive practices. If teachers have low self-efficacy in implementing inclusive education, it is likely that their practices may fall short of benefitting students with disabilities, as revealed in Ben-Yehuda, Leyser and Last’s
(2010) study of teachers. According to these authors, teachers that believed in the value of “mainstreaming” students with disabilities were more effective at implementing strategies, whereas teachers with reservations about the importance of inclusion were less effective at implementing inclusive instruction. The commitment to inclusion presented by the professionals at Wilson Middle School matches Ben-Yehuda, Leyser and Last’s (2010) finding that teachers that value inclusive education are more likely to effectively implement it, illustrating the importance of providing adequate training for general education teachers to teach in inclusive settings.

The communication contrast. Communication appeared to be the point of greatest contrast between parents and professionals. One possible explanation for the gap in perceptions about communication has been documented in previous literature. Barnyak and McNelly (2009) found that professionals underestimated the difference between their beliefs about collaborating with parents and their actual practices to engage them. Additionally, Chen and Chandler’s (2001) national comparison of parents and teachers found a significant gap between parents’ and teachers’ reports of both parent involvement and schools’ involvement efforts. These authors cite multiple possible reasons, including ineffective engagement efforts by schools and inaccurate reports of involvement or engagement on the part of both parents and teachers, which could be factors here.

The discrepancy in participants’ perception of progress reports seems the most notable point, as it raises the issue of true communication versus compliance (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995). Assuming that progress reports were sent home regularly, as professionals mentioned at three of the five schools, the question may be raised as to why parents reported that they received inadequate updates on their children’s progress.
It is possible that progress reports are sent out, but do not get to parents due to the distribution method, that parents are unaware that the progress reports with their children’s report cards contain information about their child’s progress towards IEP goals, or that if they do, indeed, read the progress reports, that they still believe this is inadequate information. Regardless, it appears that this discrepancy could be explained by the contrast in perceptions of parents’ and professionals’ regarding communication. If schools focus simply on complying with this special education requirement, rather than ensuring that parents receive the updates and understand their content, then parents may perceive these reports as inadequate. As Harry, Allen and McLaughlin (1995) found, parents often do not understand the specialized terminology used in these reports. However, if schools made a concerted effort to inform parents not only that they would be receiving these updates, but how to read and interpret the reports, it is possible parents would feel that these reports helped them stay informed of their children’s progress and might perceive that communication was frequent and adequate.

**Beliefs about involvement.** Also highly discrepant between parents and professionals were beliefs about parents’ involvement. Parents described being highly involved and taking initiative to be involved; professionals described parents who were difficult to engage and communicate with. Professionals also categorized parents in terms of their involvement, describing parents who “don’t show up” and some parents who are overly involved; they rarely acknowledged parents that were appropriately involved in their children’s education. This demonstrates two of the three categories of parents that Turnbull, Summers, and Turnbull (2010) found in their study of professionals’ attitudes towards partnering with families of students with disabilities. As stated previously, these
authors described a “Goldilocks perception” wherein parents’ involvement was either not enough, too much, or just right. Additionally, these authors found that professionals blamed parents for a lack of collaboration, which was also seen in some schools in the present study.

This discrepancy in perception of how involved parents are was also seen in the national reports of parents’ and teachers’ perceptions of parent involvement and schools’ engagement efforts (Chen & Chandler, 2001). However, at Kennedy and Roosevelt, parents’ and professionals’ perceptions were less discrepant, specifically with regard to parent initiative and education. Parents in both focus groups asserted their own initiative and discussed being advocates for their children. Professionals at these schools stated that parents were very involved and active within the school. Here, the level of education attained by the parents of students attending the school may have influenced professionals’ perceptions of parent involvement.

SES appeared to impact professionals’ perceptions of parents’ involvement, especially at Lincoln Middle School. This has been documented in previous literature; professionals perceive the challenges that families from low SES backgrounds face to be difficult to overcome, often expecting less out of parents from low SES and minority backgrounds (Trainor, 2010). At Lincoln, it appears that either professionals do not give sufficient credit to parents in terms of their ability to support their children’s education, or the parents that participated in the meeting at Lincoln were more involved than the average parent. If professionals at this school fail to believe in the ability of parents to support their children’s education, it is unlikely that they can adequately facilitate parent involvement, (Ben-Yehuda, Leyser & Last, 2010; Trainor, 2010).
Middle School Context

The middle school context appeared to be highly influential on the main findings of the study. In particular, the discussion concerning inclusion and communication were highly influenced by the middle school context. Parents of middle school students stressed the difficult transition from elementary school, discussed the change in having multiple teachers rather than just one or two, and the difficulty in communicating with multiple teachers. Professionals also noted the change for students in moving from elementary to middle school, the difficulty in working together as teachers and in communicating with parents. These issues are impacted by the fact that inclusion settings at the middle school level can look very different than they do at the elementary school level. Previous literature has recognized that inclusion beginning with middle school, is increasingly difficult (Kozik, Cooney, Vinciguerra, Gradel & Black, 2009; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2001).

Parents and professionals agreed about the difficulty in communicating once students were beyond middle school as well. Teachers in some cases had upwards of one hundred students, which makes it very difficult to communicate with every student’s parents. Similarly, parents have to communicate about their child’s progress with not just one or two teachers, but sometimes as many as five or six teachers. Therefore, it appears that the results from this study are highly related to the middle school context, suggesting the importance for both parents and professionals to consider aspects of the middle school context that are unique when working with one another, particularly given the previous finding that parent involvement decreases as children age (Hill & Taylor 2004).
Shared Culture

The demographic context of the schools appears to be influential as well. In particular, at Wilson Middle School the level of congruence between parents’ and professionals’ perceptions was very high (see Figure 2). Additionally, parents’ perceptions of the school’s engagement efforts were very positive. The level of collaboration and receptivity that participants expressed was higher than at any other school; this was also reflected in the mean SEPPS measure in 2009-2010, which was the highest measure of any school in the study. In reflecting on the level of congruence in comments from parents and professionals and examining the demographic data, it appears that one interpretation for the results here is that of the importance of shared culture.

A majority of Wilson’s students, parents, and professionals are Hispanic/Latino. This may play a role in the level of comfort parents and professionals feel in working with each other. The shared minority culture may make it easier for professionals to identify with parents. Professionals did discuss the trouble they had in engaging parents who worked multiple jobs, moved frequently and had changing phone numbers, as well as other barriers to facilitating parent involvement. However, overall, they revealed a strong commitment to reaching out to parents and being receptive to their input.

As demonstrated in Harry’s (1992) ethnographic study of Puerto Rican families of students receiving special education services, cross-cultural communication between parents and professionals is challenging; parents lost trust in the school and withdrew from being involved in their children’s education. In the present study, the shared ethnicity, and often times, language and country of origin of the parents and the
professionals working at the school may have provided the context necessary for collaboration to be successful. The findings from this case study extend previous findings from the national comparison of parents’ and teachers’ perceptions, which found that schools with lower minority populations were more effective at engaging parents (Chen & Chandler, 2001). In the present study, the population of the school was majority-minority; the parents and professionals shared their minority status in the larger, societal context, however, within the school context they represented the majority. The benefit of shared culture was not replicated in the other schools, of which the majority of students, parents, and faculty were White, in particular at Kennedy and Roosevelt. It appears that shared minority culture within a larger context is more important than simply having a cultural match between parents and professionals.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study across the five schools reveal the need for additional support in the area of parent involvement for both practicing teachers and pre-service teachers. First and foremost, teachers need to be prepared to work with parents from backgrounds different from their own, in order to reduce the biases held by many teachers regarding parents from low SES or minority backgrounds (Kalyanpur, Harry & Skrtic, 2000; Trainor, 2010). Providing teachers with the opportunity to understand that parent involvement may not look the same from family to family is vital in order for teachers to be adequately prepared to engage parents.

The findings related to the challenges of inclusion emphasize the importance of improving inclusive education for students with disabilities. In particular, teacher preparation is in significant need of attention, as the majority of students with IEPs are
being served in inclusive settings. Teacher preparation programs should require all candidates to participate in significant course work and practicum experience related to teaching in inclusive environments, rather than have just one course or one practicum experience.

Also important is providing professional development for practicing teachers and other professionals related to inclusive teaching. The model provided at Wilson Middle School was exemplary; special education teachers should be utilized as supports for general education teachers during formal professional development so that in-service teachers and professionals are equipped to meet the needs of students receiving services in inclusive settings.

Addressing the diverse perceptions about communication is key as well. If parents and professionals perceive such vast differences in the frequency, variety, and effectiveness of communication, it is unlikely that high quality collaborative relationships will be possible in order to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. If parents and professionals from within the same school can establish expectations for communication, and abide by these expectations, true collaborative relationships are much more possible. Additionally, because progress reports are mandated to be completed by teachers of students receiving services, then some attention ought to be paid to ensuring that they represent accurate and relevant information about student progress. This may indicate a need for preparing teachers and professionals to write and monitor high quality goals for students with disabilities. Additionally, progress reports need to be read and understood by parents. This may require offering training or workshops for parents at the school or district level so that parents can become knowledgeable about how to read and interpret
these reports. Another possible means to address this issue is to discuss progress reports at IEP meetings with parents. If parents are provided with an explanation as to how the read and interpret the report, within the context of the IEP meeting where the goals are written, it is likely that parents will be better prepared to receive the reports. This could help reduce the gap between parents’ and professionals’ perceptions of communication.

**Implications for Research**

Due to the wealth of research in the area of parent involvement, it is vital that further research continue to focus on factors that have the potential to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Intervention research in the area of preparing future and current teachers to engage parents of students with disabilities, as well as helping parents play an active role in their children’s special education planning is necessary. Areas of research other than intervention research are needed as well. First, the present study did not match the parents with the professionals that worked with their children directly. Future research should match parents and professionals at the child level to understand any discrepancies in perception. To further understand the variation between parents’ and professionals’ perceptions, qualitative and mixed methods research should focus within school settings and match individuals, such that parents and teachers of the same children are interviewed and observed.

With regard to professionals’ perceptions, one finding of this study is that professionals are very focused on the barriers they face in engaging parents of students receiving special education services. Some research has begun to understand the barriers specific to engaging parents of students receiving special education services (Geenen, Powers, & Vasquez, 2001; Ludicke & Kortman, 2012), however, research has yet to
inform how to reduce these barriers. Furthermore, understanding facilitators of parent engagement is needed.

Another takeaway from this study is that the role of professionals in engaging parents of students receiving services may be somewhat unclear in practice. Many students are served in inclusive settings, where the special education teacher may have limited contact with the student. General education teachers may have more than one hundred students, making communication with parents a cumbersome task. Research has revealed the role construction that influences parents’ involvement (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995), but has yet to uncover the same for professionals. Therefore, research addressing the role of various professionals in engaging parents is vital in order to inform practice, especially given the number of students being served in inclusive settings with multiple professionals responsible for implementing IEPs.

Lastly, future research should investigate the perspectives of demographic groups that were not fully represented in this study. For example, the parents that participated in the study were mostly mothers and mostly White, non-Hispanic. Since we cannot assume that the perceptions of parents with different demographic characteristics are similar to those captured in this study, it would be helpful for future research to target the perceptions of fathers as well as those of individuals from varying racial/ethnic backgrounds. Also, parents’ reports revealed that a majority of the parents’ children were served under IDEA for “multiple” disabilities. It is unclear whether this matches the breakdown of students served under IDEA nationally, which only identifies children’s primary exceptionality. Furthermore, “multiple” disabilities may denote children with more severe conditions, who are a minority within students receiving special education
services. Future research may be able to discern whether parents’ and professionals’ perceptions and experiences of parent engagement are related to the type or severity of the child’s exceptionality.

**Limitations**

The most significant limitation of the study is due to the voluntary nature of participation in the study at the district, school, and participant level. First, districts were contacted prior to the Parent Engagement Study. If the district agreed to have its schools targeted (on schools meeting selection criteria, e.g. a range of levels and SEPPS performance), participating schools were contacted. Therefore, both districts and schools had the opportunity to decline participation. Additionally, parents were invited by the school to participate. In order to participate, parents had to attend the focus group meetings during school hours at the school; this may have limited participation to those parents who were readily available during school hours, and those willing to share their experiences regarding schools’ facilitation efforts. It is also likely that the parents that participated represent a more involved group of parents than is typical. Similarly, the professionals that participated were invited by the administrators at their schools. Administrators may have only invited specific professionals.

The focus group method used for data collection has two specific limitations. First, the focus group method in general may result in certain participants not sharing their opinions or filtering what they share because of the presence of other participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Second, there were two different protocols (A and B; see Appendix A) were used during the focus groups. The protocols that were developed divided the SEPPS items in order to be able to spend more time on discussion related to
each item. This means that not every participant had the opportunity to discuss every item. However, participants were given the opportunity to diverge from the protocol in order to convey their experiences as they related to the items and to participants’ perception of how important their points or experiences were. It is possible, however, that given the same set of items to respond or comment on would have produced more congruence between parents and professionals.

As is the case with all qualitative research, the results of this study are not meant to generalize, rather to provide insight into a particular context. Therefore, it is not the intention of this study to represent the views of all parents or professionals with regard to schools’ facilitation efforts. Results should be considered within the contexts described.

**Conclusion**

This study has drawn attention to the differences in the perceptions of parents and professionals, and has revealed the importance of school context with regard to schools’ facilitation of parent involvement for middle school students receiving special education services. Each of the five schools in the study presents a different picture of the perceptions of parents and professionals and of the similarities and differences between them. Demographics of the school, such as racial/ethnic make-up, SES, and district size certainly influence the context. In particular, the shared Hispanic/Latino culture of one school may have influenced the high level of agreement between parents and professionals found at that school, as well as the level of satisfaction amongst parents and staff. Surprisingly, this school does not reap the benefits of wealth or plentiful resources, demonstrating the reality that these assets do not necessarily translate into better parent-
professional relationships. In fact, at this school, parents and professionals appeared to rally around the constraints they faced.

The perception of communication amongst parents and professionals varied tremendously, indicating a need for clearer expectations and norms for parent involvement and schools’ engagement of parents of students with IEPs. If parents and professionals within a school context can agree on what is to be expected and delivered, collaborative efforts may be improved. Improved collaboration between parents and professionals may even have the potential to improve outcomes for students receiving special education services. Motivations for parents to be involved need to be better understood by researchers and practitioners. As was found in many cases here, if parents are only involved in order to advocate for their child’s needs and fight for services, then true collaborative relationships is an unattainable ideal. If parents do not need to become involved in order to “fight” the school and can form true collaborative relationships with the professionals serving their children, progress may be made in terms of the outcomes for students receiving services. In the end, this is the goal for both parents and professionals, so if the two can realize the mutual goal and work towards mending their differences (for example, by establishing clear communication expectations), the results may be extremely beneficial for students.

Research and practice in the field of special education should continue to focus on improving outcomes for students by striving to achieve meaningful parent engagement, rather than simply complying with special education requirements, and by stressing involvement that has been shown to benefit children. As school resources become more and more limited, both parents and professionals need to become adept at utilizing the
resources they have in order to maximize the potential in parent-professional relationships. As Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack presented in their model of parent involvement, “more is not always better.” Rather, parents and professionals need to focus on meaningful relationships that benefit children for life beyond K-12 education.
References


Table 1: District, School and Participant Information

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<th>District Level Information</th>
<th>Washington Middle School</th>
<th>Lincoln Middle School</th>
<th>Wilson Middle School</th>
<th>Kennedy Middle School</th>
<th>Roosevelt Middle School</th>
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<td>11%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<table>
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<th>746</th>
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<td>86</td>
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<td>11.5%</td>
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<td>598</td>
<td>653</td>
<td>165</td>
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<td>2.3%</td>
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<td>8.7%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
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<td>.2%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.1%</td>
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<td>Percent of Students American Indian or Alaska Native</td>
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<td>.5%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.1%</td>
<td>.3%</td>
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<td>1.1%</td>
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<td>Percent of Students Migrant</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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</table>

**Student Achievement**

| Percent of Students Scoring Satisfactory and Above on Writing FCAT | 64% | 73% | 78% | 94% | 89% |
| Percent of SWD Scoring Satisfactory or Above on Writing FCAT | 33% | 3% | 48% | NR | 61% |
| Percent of Students Scoring Satisfactory and Above on Reading FCAT | 50% | 60% | 55% | 82% | 69% |
| Percent of SWD Scoring Satisfactory or Above on Reading FCAT | 15% | 27% | 28% | 45% | 33% |
| Percent of Students Scoring Satisfactory and Above on Math FCAT | 46% | 62% | 51% | 83% | 65% |
| Percent of SWD Scoring Satisfactory or Above on Math FCAT | 15% | 34% | 18% | 59% | 31% |

**School Staff Characteristics**

<p>| Number of “Instructional Staff” | 63 | 74 | 39 | 49 | 88 |
| Number of School-Based Administrators | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 |</p>
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<th>Number of Teachers with Bachelor’s Degrees or Higher</th>
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<th>71</th>
<th>36</th>
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<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Code1</td>
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<td>Code3</td>
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**Child’s Educational Setting**

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**Teachers/Administrator Information**

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**Role**

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**Highest Level of Education**

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\(a\) From Florida Department of Education (FDOE) Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services 2013 LEA Profile  
\(b\) From FDOE School Public Accountability Reports 2011-2012  
\(c\) From FDOE Florida School Grades 2010-2011  
\(d\) Indicates that the parent had more than one child attending the school
Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Protocols

**Parent Focus Group Moderator Protocol A**

I. Introduction
   - State the purpose of study, which is to obtain parents’ views of schools’ efforts to facilitate their involvement in the education of their child with special needs. Clarify the ways in which data will be used, which include gaining a better understanding of how to interpret the results from Florida’s ESE Parent Survey and providing recommendations to the state on best practices for improving schools’ efforts to engage parents. Provide a brief description on the background for the survey’s development, how it has been used, and its role in accountability for Indicator 8.
   - Collect and/or distribute the informed consent forms as needed and thank the parents for agreeing to participate. Introduce yourself, and then ask each participant to introduce him/herself in turn using first names only.
   - Review the meeting agenda with the participants.
   - Review some “ground rules” for the meeting, including the importance of:
     i. accepting differences of opinion,
     ii. listening respectfully to others
     iii. allowing everyone to participate to the extent they desire to
     iv. not dominating the discussion at the exclusion of others’ participation.

II. Warm-up activity
   - Conduct the “warm-up” activity with group members.

III. Clarification of terms
   - Clarify the following terms and others as needed for the group participants:
     - IEP: Individualized Education Plan
     - ESE: Exceptional Student Education
     - ESE Parent Survey: FDOE annual survey consisting of the Schools’ Efforts to Partner with Parents Scale (25 items) and a general satisfaction item

IV. Completion of Parent Information Questionnaire
   - Ask parents to complete the parent information questionnaire.

V. Completion of ESE Parent Survey
• Distribute the ESE Parent Survey and ask the parents to complete it. Allow for everyone to complete all of the items before proceeding. Clarify any questions concerning item meaning, but do not engage parents in a discussion of the items at this time.

VI. Conduct the open-ended probes of selected items as listed below. Some of the items ask for clarification on how the parent interpreted the item (“item clarification probes”). When this is the case, ask the item clarification probe first, followed by the school engagement probe. These probes seek further elaboration on specific school engagement activities associated with the item.

Item 2. I was offered special assistance (such as child care) so that I could participate in the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meeting.

School engagement probes
• In what ways have school staff demonstrated sensitivity to your needs and obligations as a parent and considered your work responsibilities when scheduling meetings?
• To what extent have you been given sufficient notice of upcoming IEP meetings?
• In what ways has the school demonstrated flexibility in scheduling IEP or other teacher-parent meetings?

Item 4. At the IEP meeting, we discussed accommodations and modifications that my child would need.

Item clarification probes
• What do you understand by the terms accommodations and modifications?

School engagement probes
• Did school staff explain what accommodations are, and which ones might be appropriate for your child?
• Did school staff explain what modifications are, and which ones might be appropriate for your child?
• If your child’s IEP included any accommodations or modifications, how does the school keep you informed about how these accommodations and/or modifications are being provided to your child?

Item 7. I was given information about organizations that offer support for parents of students with disabilities.

Item clarification probes
• To what extent are you aware of organizations that provide services?

School engagement probes
• In what ways, if any, has the school provided you with opportunities to network with other parents of children with disabilities?
• To what extent have you been provided with information about agencies such as FDLRS, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Council for Exceptional Children, or local parent support groups?

Item 9. My child’s evaluation report is written in terms I understand.

School engagement probes
• Was your child’s evaluation explained to you by a qualified professional?
• Did that person give you time to ask questions? If you had questions, did the professional take the time to answer your questions fully?

Item 12. Teachers treat me as a team member.

Item clarification probes
• What does being a member of a team mean to you?

School engagement probes
• How have teachers demonstrated respect toward you as a member of the IEP team?

Item 13. Teachers and administrators seek out parent input.

School engagement probes
• In what ways have teachers shown you they care about your involvement in your child’s education?
• Could you describe how the school invited you to your child’s IEP meeting?
• If you have made suggestions to teachers about working with your child, how receptive have teachers been to your suggestions?

Item 16. Teachers and administrators respect my cultural heritage.

Item clarification probes
• What do you consider respecting your culture to mean?

School engagement probes
• Has the school demonstrated sensitivity to your cultural, racial or ethnic background? If so, how did they do this?
• Has the school given or sent you written material (e.g., school notes, newsletters, announcements) in your native language?

Item 17. Teachers and administrators ensure that I have fully understood the Procedural Safeguards [the rules in federal law that protect the rights of parents].
School engagement probes

• Did school staff give you a clear explanation of your rights as a parent of a child receiving special education services?
• If you had any questions about your rights as a parent, did school staff give you clear answers to your questions?

Item 18. The school has a person on staff that is available to answer parents’ questions.

School engagement probes

• Did the school let you know the name of a specific staff person, or give you a number to call, if you had any questions about your child or your child’s services?
• If you have had occasion to ask school staff questions about your child or your child’s services, to what extent have these school staff answered your questions?

Item 20. The school gives me choices with regard to services that address my child’s needs.

Item clarification probes

• What kinds of choices do you expect to have concerning services for your child?

School engagement probes

• Have school staff explained options available to meet your child’s needs, for example, different classroom placements, the use of assistive technology, or the provision of related therapies?

Item 22. The school offers parents a variety of ways to communicate with teachers.

School engagement probes

• To what extent have teachers informed you of different methods to communicate with them, including telephone, email or school websites?
• To what extent have you been provided the training you need to effectively use electronic methods to access your child’s information, such as the school website?
• To what extent have school staff encouraged your child to give you feedback about what happens at school?

Item 23. The school gives parents the help they may need to play an active role in their child’s education.

Item clarification probes
• What do you consider to be an active role?

_School engagement probes_
• To what extent have teachers provided you with specific information on their teaching strategies and methods involving your child?
• In what ways have school staff encouraged you to participate in activities at school such as classroom visits, chaperoning or tutoring activities?

**Item 25.** The school explains what options parents have if they disagree with a decision of the school.

_School engagement probes_
• To what extent have school personnel explained courses of action available to you, such as mediation, in the event you should disagree with decisions made concerning your child?

**Item 26.** Overall, I am satisfied with the school’s efforts to facilitate my involvement in my child’s education.

_School engagement probes_
• Please describe any additional experiences you have had, whether positive or negative, concerning the school’s efforts to involve you in your child’s education.
• What has been the single most important factor that has determined your overall level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with your school’s efforts to involve you in your child’s education?

**Questions about participation in the ESE Parent Survey:**

1. Prior to your participation in this project, were you aware that the state of Florida had an obligation, under federal law, to collect data from parents of students with disabilities on the extent to which schools are facilitating parent involvement?
2. Have you ever received a survey from the state containing items similar to those we discussed today?
3. Have you ever been invited, by your school or your school district, to complete a survey of this type on the web?

**VII. Wrap-up and member checks**
• Summarize the major themes that may have surfaced during the focus group.
• Ask if anyone has any additional comments to add.
• Check with participants to see how they feel about what was discussed during the meeting and how the meeting was conducted.

**VIII. Closing statements**
• Remind participants of confidentiality of responses.
• Answer any final questions that may remain.
Focus Group Moderator Protocol B

I. Introduction
   a. State the purpose of study, which is to obtain parents’ views of schools’ efforts to facilitate their involvement in the education of their child with special needs. Clarify the ways in which data will be used, which include gaining a better understanding of how to interpret the results from Florida’s ESE Parent Survey and providing recommendations to the state on best practices for improving schools’ efforts to engage parents. Provide a brief description on the background for the survey’s development, how it has been used, and its role in accountability for Indicator 8.
   b. Collect and/or distribute the informed consent forms as needed and thank the parents for agreeing to participate. Introduce yourself, and then ask each participant to introduce him/herself in turn using first names only.
   c. Review the meeting agenda with the participants.
   d. Review some “ground rules” for the meeting, including the importance of:
      i. accepting differences of opinion,
      ii. listening respectfully to others
      iii. allowing everyone to participate to the extent they desire to
      iv. not dominating the discussion at the exclusion of others’ participation.

II. Warm-up activity
   a. Conduct the “warm-up” activity with group members.

III. Clarification of terms
   a. Clarify the following terms and others as needed for the group participants:
      • IEP: Individualized Education Plan
      • ESE: Exceptional Student Education
      • ESE Parent Survey: FDOE annual survey consisting of the Schools’ Efforts to Partner with Parents Scale (25 items) and a general satisfaction item

IV. Completion of parent information questionnaire
   • Ask parents to complete the parent information questionnaire.

V. Completion of ESE Parent Survey
   • Distribute the ESE Parent Survey and ask the parents to complete it. Allow for everyone to complete all of the items before proceeding. Clarify
any questions concerning item meaning, but do not engage parents in a
discussion of the items at this time.

VI. Conduct the open-ended probes of selected items as listed below. Some of the
items ask for clarification on how the parent interpreted the item (“item
clarification probes”). When this is the case, ask the item clarification probe first,
followed by the school engagement probe. These probes seek further
elaboration on specific school engagement activities associated with the item.

Item 1. I am considered an equal partner with teachers and other professionals in
planning my child’s program.

Item clarification probes
• What does it mean to you to be considered an equal partner?

School engagement probes
• In what ways have you been given equal opportunity, on a par with teachers
and other professionals, to contribute to IEP meetings or parent-teacher
conferences?
• To what extent have you been informed about the different people who
should be present at the IEP meeting?

Item 3. At the IEP meeting, we discussed how my child would participate in statewide
assessments.

School engagement probes
• In what ways have you been informed of alternative assessments to the
FCAT, if applicable, or testing accommodations, such as an alternate setting
or extended time, that your child might receive?

Item 5. All of my concerns and recommendations were documented on the IEP.

School engagement probes
• In what ways have school staff reviewed the IEP document with you to
ensure that your concerns were addressed?
• To what extent have you left IEP meetings with a better understanding of
your child’s IEP?
• To what extent have you ever left an IEP meeting with unanswered
questions?

Item 6. Written justification was given for the extent that my child would not receive
services in the regular classroom.
**Item clarification probes**
- To what extent has your child been placed in regular classes, rather than classes specifically designed for students with special needs?

**School engagement probes**
- If your child is not being taught in regular classes, to what extent have you had the opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of placement in special classes with school staff?

**Item 8.** I have been asked for my opinion about how well special education services are meeting my child's needs.

**School engagement probes**
- In what ways, if any, has your child’s teacher(s) or the school modified something they were doing based on your suggestions?

**Item 10.** Written information I receive is written in an understandable way.

**School engagement probes**
- To what extent have you felt that written communications from the school have been understandable and clear?

**Item 11.** Teachers are available to speak with me.

**Item clarification probes**
- How often do you expect to be able to speak with teachers?

**School engagement probes**
- To what extent have teachers and staff responded to your requests (e.g., for a meeting, or to get information) in a timely fashion?
- If teachers have not been accessible at times you have tried to contact them, have you been informed of alternative methods you may use, such as email or electronic portals, to contact teachers or access your child’s information?

**Item 14.** Teachers and administrators show sensitivity to the needs of students with disabilities and their families.

**School engagement probes**
- In what ways, if any, has the school demonstrated sensitivity to the stress associated with being the parent of a child with a disability?

**Item 15.** Teachers and administrators encourage me to participate in the decision-making process.
Item clarification probes
- To what extent do you expect to be able to make decisions about your child’s education?

School engagement probes
- Could you describe efforts made by school staff to solicit your input concerning your child’s program, and/or to involve you in the decision-making process concerning your child?
- To what extent have school staff taken steps to make the IEP process seem less intimidating?

Item 19. The school communicates regularly with me regarding my child’s progress on IEP goals.

Item clarification probes
- What do you consider to be regular communications?

School engagement probes
- To what extent have teachers provided you with information concerning your child’s homework or class assignments?
- To what extent has the school sent you regular communications such as status reports updating you on your child’s progress on IEP or other curricular goals?
- In what ways has the school sent you the message that they have your child’s best interests in mind?

Item 21. The school offers parents training about special education issues.

School engagement probes
In what ways, if any, have school staff educated you about the IEP process or other aspects of special education?

Item 24. The school provides information on agencies that can assist my child in the transition from school.

School engagement probes
- In what ways, if any, has your school supported your child’s transition goals?
- To what extent have you been informed about the transfer of rights at age 18?
- To what extent have you been provided with information about agencies such as the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation that can assist in the transition process?

Item 26. Overall, I am satisfied with the school’s efforts to facilitate my involvement in my child’s education.
School engagement probes

- Please describe any additional experiences you have had, whether positive or negative, concerning the school’s efforts to involve you in your child’s education.
- What has been the single most important factor that has determined your overall level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with your school’s efforts to involve you in your child’s education?

Questions about parent survey completion:

1. Prior to your participation in this project, were you aware that the state of Florida had an obligation, under federal law, to collect data from parents of students with disabilities on the extent to which schools are facilitating parent involvement?
2. Have you ever received a survey from the state containing items similar to those we discussed today?
3. Have you ever been invited, by your school or your school district, to complete a survey of this type on the web?

VII. Wrap-up and member checks

- Summarize the major themes that may have surfaced during the focus group.
- Ask if anyone has any additional comments to add.
- Check with participants to see how they feel about what was discussed during the meeting and how the meeting was conducted.

VIII. Closing statements

- Remind participants of confidentiality of responses.

Answer any final questions that may remain.
Teacher/Administrator Interview Protocol A

IX. Introduction
State the purpose of study, which is to obtain parents’, teachers’ and administrators’ views of schools’ efforts to facilitate parent involvement in the education of their child with special needs. Clarify the ways in which data will be used, which include gaining a better understanding of how to interpret the results from Florida’s ESE Parent Survey and providing recommendations to the state on best practices for improving schools’ efforts to engage parents. Provide a brief description on the background for the survey’s development, how it has been used, and its role in accountability for Indicator 8. Explain that you will be asking questions to obtain input on actions taken by the school to involve parents based on specific items contained on the survey.

- Provide the participant with the informed consent form and thank him/her for agreeing to participate.

X. Completion of Teacher/Administrator Information Questionnaire
- Ask the interviewee to complete the demographic information questionnaire.

XI. Conduct the open-ended probes of selected ESE Parent Survey items as listed below:

**Item 2.** I was offered special assistance (such as child care) so that I could participate in the Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meeting.

- In what ways do school staff demonstrate sensitivity to parents’ needs and obligations, such as considering their obligations at work when scheduling meetings?
- To what extent are parents given sufficient notice of upcoming IEP meetings?
- In what ways does the school demonstrate flexibility in scheduling IEP or other teacher-parent meetings?

**Item 4.** At the IEP meeting, we discussed accommodations and modifications that my child would need.

- Do school staff explain what accommodations are to parents, and which ones might be appropriate for their child?
- Do school staff explain what modifications are, and which ones might be appropriate for a given child?
• If a child’s IEP includes any accommodations or modifications, how does the school keep parents informed about how these accommodations and/or modifications are being provided to their child?

**Item 7.** I was given information about organizations that offer support for parents of students with disabilities.

• In what ways, if any, does the school provide parents with opportunities to network with other parents of children with disabilities?
• To what extent does the school provide parents with information about agencies such as FDLRS, the Agency for Persons with Disabilities, the Council for Exceptional Children, or local parent support groups?

**Item 9.** My child’s evaluation report is written in terms I understand.

• Is the child’s evaluation explained to parents by a qualified professional?
• Does that person give parents time to ask questions? If parents have questions, does the professional take the time to answer them fully?

**Item 12.** Teachers treat me as a team member.

• How do teachers demonstrate respect toward parents as members of the IEP team?

**Item 13.** Teachers and administrators seek out parent input.

• In what ways do teachers show they care about parents’ involvement in their child’s education?
• Could you describe how the school invites parents to their child’s IEP meeting?
• When parents make suggestions to teachers about working with their child, how receptive are teachers to their suggestions?

**Item 16.** Teachers and administrators respect my cultural heritage.

• Does the school demonstrate sensitivity to parents’ cultural, racial or ethnic background? If so, how does it do this?
• Does the school give or send written material to parents (e.g., school notes, newsletters, announcements) in the parents’ native language?

**Item 17.** Teachers and administrators ensure that I have fully understood the Procedural Safeguards [the rules in federal law that protect the rights of parents].
• Do school staff give parents a clear explanation of their rights as a parent of a child receiving special education services?
• If parents have any questions about their rights as parents, do school staff give them clear answers to their questions?

**Item 18.** The school has a person on staff that is available to answer parents’ questions.

• Does the school let parents know the name of a specific staff person, or give parents a number to call, if parents have any questions about their child or their child’s services?
• If parents have occasion to ask school staff questions about their child or their child’s services, to what extent do these school staff answer their questions?

**Item 20.** The school gives me choices with regard to services that address my child’s needs.

• Do school staff explain to parents what options are available to meet children’s needs, for example, different classroom placements, the use of assistive technology, or the provision of related therapies?

**Item 22.** The school offers parents a variety of ways to communicate with teachers.

• To what extent do teachers inform parents of different methods to communicate with them, including telephone, email or school websites?
• To what extent are parents provided the training they need to effectively use electronic methods to access their child’s information, such as the school website?
• To what extent do school staff encourage students to give their parents feedback about what happens at school?

**Item 23.** The school gives parents the help they may need to play an active role in their child’s education.

• To what extent do teachers provide parents with specific teaching strategies and methods for working with their child?
• In what ways do school staff encourage parents to participate in activities at school such as classroom visits, chaperoning or tutoring activities?

**Item 25.** The school explains what options parents have if they disagree with a decision of the school.
• To what extent do school personnel explain courses of action available to parents, such as mediation, in the event parents should disagree with decisions made concerning their child?

**Item 26.** Overall, I am satisfied with the school’s efforts to facilitate my involvement in my child’s education.

• Please add any additional comments you wish to make concerning the school’s efforts to involve parents in their child’s education.
• What do you think may be the single most important factor that determines parents’ overall level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the school’s efforts to involve them in their child’s education?

Questions about participation in the ESE Parent Survey:

4. Prior to your participation in this project, were you aware that the state of Florida has an obligation, under federal law, to collect data from parents of students with disabilities on the extent to which schools are facilitating parent involvement?

5. Have parents ever been invited by this school, or the school district, to complete the ESE Parent Survey online?

XII. Closing statements
• Thank the interviewee for his/her participation
• Remind the interviewee of the confidentiality of his/her responses.
• Answer any final questions that may remain.
Teacher/Administrator Interview Protocol B

I. Introduction
State the purpose of study, which is to obtain parents’, teachers’ and administrators’ views of schools’ efforts to facilitate parent involvement in the education of their child with special needs. Clarify the ways in which data will be used, which include gaining a better understanding of how to interpret the results from Florida’s ESE Parent Survey and providing recommendations to the state on best practices for improving schools’ efforts to engage parents. Provide a brief description on the background for the survey’s development, how it has been used, and its role in accountability for Indicator 8. Explain that you will be asking questions to obtain input on actions taken by the school to involve parents based on specific items contained on the survey.

- Provide the participant with the informed consent form and thank him/her for agreeing to participate.

II. Completion of Teacher/Administrator Information Questionnaire

- Ask the interviewee to complete the demographic information questionnaire.

III. Conduct the open-ended probes of selected ESE Parent Survey items as listed below:

Item 1. I am considered an equal partner with teachers and other professionals in planning my child’s program.

- In what ways are parents given equal opportunity, on a par with teachers and other professionals, to contribute to IEP meetings or parent-teacher conferences?
- To what extent are parents informed about the different people who should be present at the IEP meeting?

Item 3. At the IEP meeting, we discussed how my child would participate in statewide assessments.

- In what ways are parents informed of alternative assessments to the FCAT, if applicable, or testing accommodations, such as an alternate setting or extended time, that their child might receive?

Item 5. All of my concerns and recommendations were documented on the IEP.
• In what ways do school staff review the IEP document with parents to ensure that parents’ concerns were addressed?
• To what extent do parents leave IEP meetings with a better understanding of their child’s IEP?
• To what extent do parents ever leave an IEP meeting with unanswered questions?

**Item 6.** Written justification was given for the extent that my child would not receive services in the regular classroom.

• If a child is not being taught in regular classes, to what extent do the child’s parents have the opportunity to discuss the pros and cons of placement in special classes with school staff?

**Item 8.** I have been asked for my opinion about how well special education services are meeting my child's needs.

• In what ways, if any, have teachers or the school modified something they were doing with a student based on a parent's suggestions?

**Item 10.** Written information I receive is written in an understandable way.

• To what extent do you feel that written communications from the school are understandable and clear to parents?

**Item 11.** Teachers are available to speak with me.

• To what extent do teachers and staff respond to parents’ requests (e.g., for a meeting, or to get information) in a timely fashion?
• If teachers are not accessible at times parents have tried to contact them, have parents been informed of alternative methods they may use, such as email or electronic portals, to contact teachers or access their child’s information?

**Item 14.** Teachers and administrators show sensitivity to the needs of students with disabilities and their families.

• In what ways, if any, does the school demonstrate sensitivity to the stress associated with being the parent of a child with a disability?

**Item 15.** Teachers and administrators encourage me to participate in the decision-making process.
• Could you describe efforts made by school staff to solicit parent input concerning their child’s program, and/or to involve parents in the decision-making process concerning their child?

• To what extent have school staff taken steps to make the IEP process seem less intimidating?

**Item 19.** The school communicates regularly with me regarding my child’s progress on IEP goals.

• To what extent do teachers provide parents with information concerning their child’s homework or class assignments?

• To what extent does the school send parents regular communications such as status reports updating parents on their child’s progress on IEP or other curricular goals?

• In what ways does the school send parents the message that the school has their child’s best interests in mind?

**Item 21.** The school offers parents training about special education issues.

• In what ways, if any, do school staff educate parents about the IEP process or other aspects of special education?

**Item 24.** The school provides information on agencies that can assist my child in the transition from school.

• In what ways, if any, does the school support students’ transition goals?

• To what extent are parents informed about the transfer of rights at age 18?

• To what extent are parents provided with information about agencies such as the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation that can assist in the transition process?

**Item 26.** Overall, I am satisfied with the school’s efforts to facilitate my involvement in my child’s education.

• Please add any additional comments you wish to make concerning the school’s efforts to involve parents in their child’s education.

• What do you think may be the single most important factor that determines parents’ overall level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the school’s efforts to involve them in their child’s education?
Questions about participation in the ESE Parent Survey:

6. Prior to your participation in this project, were you aware that the state of Florida has an obligation, under federal law, to collect data from parents of students with disabilities on the extent to which schools are facilitating parent involvement?

7. Have parents ever been invited by this school, or the school district, to complete the ESE Parent Survey online?

IV. Closing statements
   - Thank the interviewee for his/her participation
   - Remind the interviewee of the confidentiality of his/her responses.

Answer any final questions that may remain.
Appendix B: Open Code List from the Parent Engagement Study

Codes present in the current study:

1. Accommodations and modifications familiar terms
2. Accommodations on IEP are implemented
3. Accommodations refers to assistive technology
4. Accommodations/placement are discussed with parents
5. Accommodations/services in IEP implemented
6. Accommodations/services in IEP not implemented
7. Active role means helping child learn
8. Administrators do not seek parent input
9. Assistive technology is a necessary accommodation
10. Child care offered
11. Child is best served in separate setting
12. Child is disengaged from school
13. Child is encouraged to be independent
14. Child receives no feedback from teachers
15. Child was bullied
16. Choices are offered for services
17. Comment about survey
18. Communication from school through child is effective
19. Communication from school through child is not effective
20. Communication through child's planner is effective
21. Communication through child's planner is not effective
22. Decisions about child are data driven
23. Difficult transition to middle school
24. Efforts to involve parents are improving
25. Equal partner means giving input
26. Equal partner means taking part in decision making
27. Feedback from parents is an opportunity for school to improve
28. Focus group is training and info sharing for parents
29. Frequent communication with parents
30. Frequent communication with teachers/professionals
31. General ed teachers are not adequately trained/assigned
32. General ed teachers challenged by dealing with ESE students
33. General ed teachers not adequately trained
34. Goes over head to get information/services
35. Helping child with school work is difficult
36. High turnover of special ed. staff
37. IEP fully explained
38. IEP is team effort
39. IEP not fully explained
40. IEP/evaluation process is cumbersome and frustrating
41. Initiated contact with teacher with no response
42. Initiative begins in response to school's failure to engage/provide services
43. It's the parent's responsibility to be involved/informed
44. It's the school's job to educate child/provide services
45. It's the school's job to inform parents
46. Little communication with teachers
47. More frequent communication with parents of children in separate setting
48. No person on staff to answer questions/help
49. Not applicable
50. One shoe fits all
51. Parent attendance is low for meetings/trainings
52. Parent distrusts that school is doing as they say
53. Parent experience matters for involvement
54. Parent gets the run-around
55. Parent highly involved with child at home
56. Parent informal network is important to gain info
57. Parent initiates contact for outside agencies
58. Parent initiates contact to get information/services
59. Parent involvement depends on culture/SES/education
60. Parent is a part of team
61. Parent is under stress
62. Parent knows child better than school
63. Parent liaisons are available
64. Parent more involved in response to child having problems
65. Parent not satisfied with inclusion setting
66. Parent not satisfied with separate setting
67. Parent personal circumstances are a barrier to involvement
68. Parent proactive but tactful
69. Parent resources are available on district website
70. Parent satisfied with inclusion setting
71. Parent understands written report
72. Parents' constraints are a barrier to attend meetings/trainings
73. Parents' experience/understanding affects response
74. Parents and teachers have different expectations for child
75. Parents are difficult to contact
76. Parents are involved in decision making
77. Parents are overwhelmed by IEP meeting
78. Parents are under stress
79. Parents can only do so much
80. Parents do not ask questions about Procedural Safeguards
81. Parents don't take initiative to become involved
82. Parents don't understand even when it's explained
83. Parents don't understand process/information
84. Parents expectations of child are unrealistic
85. Parents must be persistent and demanding
86. Parents must sign involvement contract for school
87. Parents not satisfied with inclusion
88. Parents respond better when school personnel are a team
89. Parents take initiative to become involved
90. Person on staff to answer questions/help
91. Placement decisions are tailored to child's needs
92. Procedural Safeguards have been explained by school
93. Procedural Safeguards have not been explained by school
94. Professionalism is important
95. Progress reported every 9 weeks
96. Projected IEP facilitates parent input
97. Quality of parent involvement/services depends on teacher/professional
98. Quality of services/efforts depends on individual teacher/professional
99. Question/Comment about feedback from focus groups
100. Question/Comment about Parent Survey
101. School's high academic expectations affects level of support
102. School (more) responsive when parent takes initiative
103. School accommodates parent for IEP meeting
104. School accommodates parents' culture/language
105. School accommodates parents for IEP meetings/events
106. School acknowledges parent input
107. School and parent may openly disagree
108. School contacts parent when there is a problem
109. School contacts parents at beginning of school year
110. School coordinates/offers parents training
111. School designates days for parent-teacher conferences
112. School documents parent input
113. School does not involve parent in placement decisions
114. School does not provide regular updates on IEP progress
115. School educates/empowers parents to help child
116. School encourages parent input
117. School facilitates transitions
118. School gives parent the run-around
119. School gives parent what she asks for
120. School has procedures for getting parents to respond to survey
121. School has to meet many needs
122. School helps parents understand documents
123. School highly values parents
124. School involves parent in placement decision
125. School is constrained by lack of resources
126. School is constrained by rules/resources/procedures
127. School is constrained by teacher/professional's schedule
128. School is out of compliance
129. School is receptive to parent input
130. School is rigid about choices provided
131. School is sensitive to parents' needs and stress
132. School keeps parent informed
133. School maintains high academic standards
134. School maintains relationship with parents
135. School not accommodating around discipline issues
136. School not receptive to/did not solicit parent's input
137. School personnel are a team
138. School personnel are available to parents
139. School personnel are sensitive to parents' stress
140. School personnel are well trained
141. School personnel commends teachers
142. School personnel feel supported by administration
143. School personnel unaware of parent survey
144. School personnel willing to spend time with parents
145. School personnel work extremely hard
146. School proactive about solving problems
147. School provides a welcoming climate
148. School provides contact number for parents
149. School provides enough notice prior to IEP meeting
150. School provides frequent feedback on child's progress
151. School provides info about outside agencies
152. School provides limited program/assessment options
153. School provides multiple program/assessment options
154. School provides no parent training
155. School responds to parent in a timely manner
156. School responds to parents' requests
157. School solicits parent input
158. School values child
159. School values parent input
160. School work/testing is stressful for child
161. School/teachers receptive to parent's input
162. School/teachers seek parent input
163. Self-determination is a consideration
164. Services having an impact
165. Single point of contact to answer parents' questions
166. Small community fosters relationships between teachers and parents
167. Some parents lack internet access
168. Some parents take more initiative than others
169. Suggestion about providing parent trainings
170. Suggestion for procedure to get parents to respond to survey
171. Suggestion that district educate parents
172. Suggestion to educate parents more effectively
173. Suggestion to facilitate transitions
174. Suggestion to have a staff person who is the point of contact for parents
175. Suggestion to improve communication/involvement efforts with parents
176. Suggestion to provide parents with list of agencies/resources
177. Surprised by feedback from parents
178. Teacher contacts parent when there is a problem
179. Teacher(s) is/are insensitive to child's special needs
180. Teacher(s)/professional(s) facilitate how parent can be involved with child
181. Teacher/administrator focus groups useful
182. Teacher/professional values individual child
183. Teachers are accessible
184. Teachers are competent
185. Teachers are not accessible
186. Teachers need additional professional development
187. Teachers not familiar with child's IEP
188. Teachers provide insufficient support
189. Testing accommodations/alternative assessments implemented
190. Transition planning is a consideration
191. Transition planning is inadequate
192. Transitions are a challenge
193. Transitions are stressful
194. Validity of survey/focus group results questioned
195. Variety of communication methods
196. Variety of methods for communicating with teachers
197. Very good experiences with teachers; good give and take
198. Was given info about outside agencies
199. Was not given info about outside agencies

Codes that do not occur in 5 middle school transcripts (from both original code lists)

1. Accommodations refers to avoiding distractions
2. Accommodations refers to speech therapy
3. Accommodations refers to testing child
4. Active role means knowing what services are being provided
5. Active role means volunteering
6. Agencies not readily available in area
7. Child care not offered
8. Communication difficult to understand
9. Difficult transition to elementary school
10. Difficult transition to high school
11. Electronic gradebook has no IEP info and/or is frustrating
12. IEP means "a plan of action for your student in setting goals to accomplish"
13. IEP meetings may be held multiple times per year
14. IEP meetings scheduled so everyone can attend
15. Intimidated by IEP meeting
16. It's the parents' responsibility to be involved
17. It takes a village to raise a child
18. Lack of communication with parents through RTI process
19. Parent contact person varies from child to child
20. Parent invites people to IEP
21. Parent involvement has increased
22. Parent is a liar
23. Parent not informed of what to expect in IEP meeting
24. Parent satisfied with separate setting
25. Parents are complainers
26. Parents are difficult to work with
27. Parents are not willing to be involved
28. Parents don't appreciate schools' efforts
29. Parents experiences as students affect their involvement as parents
30. Parents go over head when they disagree
31. Parents should continue to be involved as child gets older
32. Parents should not have complete choice
33. Received phone call to inform of IEP meeting
34. Received written notice of IEP meeting
35. RTI is improving instruction for all kids
36. School does not address child's behavior to avoid dealing with aggressive parent
37. School does not provide regular updates on child's progress
38. School encourages parent volunteers
39. School personnel make home visits
40. School personnel obtain parent input prior to IEP meeting
41. School provides parent training meetings
42. School provides accommodations for homework
43. School provides regular updates on IEP progress
44. School provides student functional curriculum
45. School respects parents' heritage
46. Small community fosters communication with school
47. Teachers must limit their availability to over-involved parents
### Appendix C: Families and Themes from the Parent Engagement Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent FG Themes (10)</th>
<th>Parent FG Families (23)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It’s the Individual that Matters</td>
<td>It’s the Individual that Matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents must initiate involvement</td>
<td>Parent Initiated Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior parent experience, knowledge, or expectations affect interactions with school</td>
<td>Prior Parent Experience, Knowledge or Expectations Affect Interactions with School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of school engagement and collaboration varies</td>
<td>Accommodations and Supports for Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency and effectiveness of communication varies</td>
<td>Variety and Effectiveness of Communication are Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of school services, supports, and choices impacts on child outcomes</td>
<td>Choices Depend on School Resources and Constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions and school work are stressful to parent and child</td>
<td>Transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group became a resource and training ground for parents</td>
<td>Focus Group is Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey-related comments</td>
<td>Parent Criticisms of Survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents distrust that school is doing what they should for their child</td>
<td>School is Not in Compliance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher/Admin FG Themes (10)</th>
<th>Teacher/Admin FG Families (32)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of services varies from school to school</td>
<td>High Quality of Educational Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Personnel are Well Trained</td>
<td>Low Quality of Educational Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Personnel are Inadequately Trained</td>
<td>Transitions are a challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Has Many Needs with Limited Resources</td>
<td>School Facilitates Transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulties with Inclusion</td>
<td>Suggestions for Improvements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions and activities to improve parent involvement are ongoing</td>
<td>Collaboration with Parents is Improving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey/Focus Group related comments</td>
<td>Suggestions for Improvements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency, effectiveness and variety of communication vary from school to school</td>
<td>Frequent Communications with Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate Communications with Parents</td>
<td>Variety of Communication Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents more than schools should take responsibility to be involved</td>
<td>Parents lack the ability to be involved effectively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents Do Not Take Initiative</td>
<td>School Values Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Values Parents</td>
<td>School is Receptive to Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration with Parents is Necessary</td>
<td>School is Receptive to Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent characteristics affect schools involvement efforts</td>
<td>Parents’ Barriers to Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Barriers to Involvement</td>
<td>Parents’ Barriers to Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ Barriers to Involvement</td>
<td>Parents’ Barriers to Involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School’s go above and beyond</td>
<td>School Educates Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Educates Parent</td>
<td>School Personnel Work Hard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approaches and strategies to involving parents vary from school to school</td>
<td>Small Community Fosters Relationships with Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Involvement is a Team Effort</td>
<td>Systemic Procedures to Involve Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration Meets Minimal Standards</td>
<td>Collaboration Meets Minimal Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP Process</td>
<td>School Accommodates Parents’ Needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Themes, Families, and Codes from the Present Study.

Blue: Parents  
Green: Professionals

**Theme 1: Quality of efforts to engage and collaborate with parents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality of collaboration with parents</th>
<th>Codes with agreement</th>
<th>Codes without agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent is under stress</td>
<td>Parents are under stress</td>
<td>IEP not fully explained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is sensitive to parents' needs and stress</td>
<td>School personnel are sensitive to parents' stress</td>
<td>School not receptive to/did not solicit parent's input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of parent involvement/services depends on teacher/professional</td>
<td>Quality of services/efforts depends on individual teacher/professional</td>
<td>Administrators do not seek parent input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP fully explained</td>
<td>School helps parents understand documents</td>
<td>School gives parent what she asks for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/teachers receptive to parent's input</td>
<td>School is receptive to parent input</td>
<td>IEP/evaluation process is cumbersome and frustrating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/teachers seek parent input</td>
<td>School solicits parent input</td>
<td>School and parent may openly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher(s)/professional(s) facilitate how parent can be involved with child</td>
<td>School educates/empowers parents to help child</td>
<td>Very good experiences with teachers; good give and take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School highly values parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Accommodations/placement are discussed with parents  
Parents are involved in decision making  
IEP is team effort  
Parent is a part of team  
School acknowledges parent input  
School documents parent input  
School encourages parent input  
School maintains relationship with parents  
School provides a welcoming climate  
School responds to parents' requests  
School values parent input
## Efforts to involve parents are improving
Small community fosters relationships between teachers and parents

### Accommodations for parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes with agreement</th>
<th>Codes without Agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School accommodates parent for IEP meeting</td>
<td>School accommodates parents for IEP meetings/events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child care offered</td>
<td>School accommodates parents' culture/language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Parent involvement procedures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes with agreement</th>
<th>Codes with contrast</th>
<th>Codes without agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was given info about outside agencies</td>
<td>School provides info about outside agencies</td>
<td>Parents do not ask questions about Procedural Safeguards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person on staff to answer questions/help</td>
<td>Parent resources are available on district website</td>
<td>Single point of contact to answer parents' questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Safeguards have not been explained by school</td>
<td>Procedural Safeguards have been explained by school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Safeguards have been explained by school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Codes without agreement | |
|--------------------------| |
| Parents must sign involvement contract for school | Parent liaisons are available |
| No person on staff to answer questions/help | Projected IEP facilitates parent input |
| Was not given info about outside agencies | School designates days for parent-teacher conferences |

### (Not applicable to parents)

**Suggestions to improve parent engagement efforts**

- Suggestion about providing parent trainings
- Suggestion for procedure to get parents to respond to survey
- Suggestion that district educate parents
- Suggestion to educate parents more effectively
### Theme 2: Frequency, variety and effectiveness of communication

#### Codes with agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequent communication with teachers/professionals</th>
<th>Frequent communication with parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School keeps parent informed</td>
<td>School provides frequent feedback on child's progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher contacts parent when there is a problem</td>
<td>School contacts parent when there is a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parent gets the run-around</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School gives parent the run-around</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety of methods for communicating with teachers</td>
<td>Variety of communication methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Codes without agreement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Little communication with teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School does not provide regular updates on IEP progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication from school through child is effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication from school through child is not effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication through child's planner is effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication through child's planner is not effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goes over head to get information/services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated contact with teacher with no response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School provides enough notice prior to IEP meeting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Progress reported every 9 weeks
- School responds to parent in a timely manner
- School contacts parents at beginning of school year
- School provides contact number for parents
### Theme 3: Quality of services, placement, and education

#### IEP implementation and accommodations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes with agreement</th>
<th>Codes without agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations/services in IEP are implemented</td>
<td>Accommodations on IEP implemented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing accommodations/alternative assessments implemented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School's high academic expectations affect level of support</td>
<td>School maintains high academic standards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Child’s experience in school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes with agreement</th>
<th>Codes without agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher/professional values individual child</td>
<td>School values child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child is disengaged from school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child was bullied</td>
<td>Child is encouraged to be independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School work/testing is stressful for child</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child receives no feedback from teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### IEP Choices and Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes with agreement</th>
<th>Codes with contrast</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choices are offered for services</td>
<td>School provides multiple program/assessment options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is rigid about choices provided</td>
<td>School provides limited program/assessment options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is constrained by lack of resources</td>
<td>School is constrained by rules/resources/procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One shoe fits all</td>
<td>Decisions about child are data driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes without agreement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School is constrained by teacher/professional's schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School proactive about solving problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher quality and training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes with agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel are well trained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel are available to parents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes without agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers provide insufficient support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher(s) is/are insensitive to child's special needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are not accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers need additional professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel willing to spend time with parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel are a team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel commends teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel feel supported by administration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes with agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition planning is a consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions are stressful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School facilitates transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitions are a challenge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes without agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficult transition to middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition planning is inadequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-determination is a consideration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s setting and placement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes with agreement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| General Ed teachers are not adequately trained/assigned | General ed teachers not adequately trained |
| Parent not satisfied with inclusion setting | Parents not satisfied with inclusion setting |
| High turnover of Special Ed. staff | Codes without agreement |
| Parent not satisfied with separate setting | |
| Parent satisfied with inclusion setting | |
| School does not involve parent in placement decisions | |
| School involves parent in placement decision | |

**Theme 4: Beliefs and understanding related to parent involvement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs and values about parent involvement</th>
<th>Codes without agreement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents and teachers have different expectations for child</td>
<td>Parents’ expectations of child are unrealistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active role means helping child learn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal partner means giving input</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal partner means taking part in decision making</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s the parent’s responsibility to be involved/informed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s the school’s job to educate child/provide services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s the school’s job to inform parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent knows child better than school</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents must be persistent and demanding</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>School more responsive when parent takes initiative</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents can only do so much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent involvement depends on culture/SES/education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents are overwhelmed by IEP meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel work extremely hard</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Parents respond better when school personnel are a team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Parents’ education and understanding of special education</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Codes without agreement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations and modifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>familiar terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations refers to assistive technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group is training and info sharing for parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping child with school work is difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent informal network is important to gain info</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent understands written report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ experience/understanding affects response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Codes with contrast</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School provides no parent training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School coordinates/offers parents training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents don't understand even when it’s explained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents don't understand process/information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent experience matters for involvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Barriers Faced</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Codes with agreement</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent personal circumstances are a barrier to involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents' constraints are a barrier to attend meetings/trainings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Codes without agreement</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School has to meet many needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent attendance is low for meetings/trainings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents are difficult to contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some parents lack internet access</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Visual of Process and Results