

Positive Communication Skills and the IEP Meeting

by

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ABSTRACT

This action research is about empowering teachers to communicate positively in discourses with parents at Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings. It builds on the premise that giving teachers communications tools will increase their motivation to communicate more effectively and to be aware of their dialogue behavior. Taking a case study approach, I investigated how to encourage five special education teachers to communicate and involve parents. Parent reluctance to advocate for their student provided impetus to implement a teacher training program aimed at improving teacher ability to communicate with parents and engage their collaboration in IEP meeting processes. The methodology involved teacher interviews, IEP simulation group reflection training sessions, and IEP meeting observations. The study gave teachers an opportunity to self and groupreflect around issues of collaboration and effective communication with parents. The three-session virtual professional development (PD) covering sequential portions of an IEP meeting gave the teachers a sense of the communication flow of a meeting. Application of critical reflection to the joint community actions of role playing and discussions during the PD helped the teachers raise their communication awareness skills and carry over to their post-innovation IEP meetings.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my personal community—my family. We have a shared purpose of love, enjoyment, happiness, and learning.

To my husband, Carl, who has always encouraged me to follow and achieve my dreams. You have unselfishly shaped and cleared my path so that I can reach my goals. Thank you for your love, supporting me in my endeavors, motivating me to continue, and for being fantastic!

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“Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much”
(Helen Keller)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Meaning is motivation; motivation is energy; energy is engagement; engagement is life.” (Fullan, 2007, p. 303)

Imagine being a parent, sitting at a long conference table, with six school staff members at an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) conference. The teachers are talking among themselves and sending glances over your way. The meeting starts, and each teacher talks about the strengths and needs of your child. Professional language and acronyms fly around, and you feel like you are visiting a foreign land. Throughout the duration of the meeting, no-one asks your opinion and decisions are made for your child. If you ask a question about a decision, you are told “don’t worry, trust us.” Then the staff declare that all is done and all you must do is sign the consent. How do you feel? Satisfied or Frustrated? This scenario is a common occurrence in the public-school system. I was once in the shoes of the frustrated and confused parent trying to comprehend the meeting components. Now, as a case manager of students with special needs, I often see the confused expressions on the faces of our parents.

This action research study is about empowering teachers to communicate positively in discourses with parents at the IEP meeting. Empowerment is the feeling of having control of one’s own actions, and this empowerment allows for people to take an equal or leading role for enacting change (Murray et al., 2013). Positive communication is the behavior of active listening and relationship building (Koch & McDonough, 1999; Symeou, et al, 2012; Walker & Dotger, 2012). The innovation for this study entailed communication skills training for special education teachers. This training encouraged

the participants to self-reflect on their current communication practices and empowered them to utilize positive communication strategies.

To provide context for this study, it helps to understand the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) and the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for special education. IDEA is a public law that entitles a child, with a disability, a free and public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA, 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (IDEA) requires public schools to assure that parents of students with disabilities can participate in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Impeding the parent's opportunity for participating in the decision-making process is a denial of Free Appropriate Public Education (IDEA, 2014).

The IEP is a specific plan written for a special education student with a disability, which develops goals that will provide access to a public education. Special education is instruction given to a child with disabilities, that entails developing an IEP to meet the individual needs of the child. An IEP team meets annually to develop the education plan including academic goals, life skills goals, behavior improvement goals, and social skills goals, state assessment information, service hours, accommodations for access to the curriculum, and school placement. This team includes the parent(s), special education teachers, general education teachers, and related service providers, such as an occupational therapist, speech/language therapist, physical therapist, English as a second language teacher, and others as appropriate.

This action research study aimed to motivate and prepare special education teachers to effectively communicate with parents and encouraged them to engage as equal partners at the IEP meetings. For this research's purpose, the operational definition

of equal partnership is the joint (teacher/parent) development of the IEP and of educational decisions. This study was built on the premise that when teachers are given the tools for communicating with parents, their motivation to use communication strategies will likely elevate.

This action research took a case study approach in which I investigated how to encourage teachers to communicate and collaborate with the parents. The reasons behind parents' reluctance to advocate for their student was the impetus to the implementation of a teacher training program aimed at improving teachers' ability to communicate with parents and engaged their collaboration in the IEP meeting process. The methodology involved teacher interviews, IEP simulation group reflection training sessions, and observations of IEP meetings.

Larger Context

IDEA 2004 regulations require schools to ensure meaningful parental involvement or active participation in the IEP process (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Fish, 2008; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). Regulations for free and appropriate public education (FAPE) ensure parents the opportunity for participating in their child's educational decision process (Yell, et al., 2013). Procedural safeguards allow parents to examine all records relating to the child, participate in all meetings, get prior written notice for meetings, be given opportunities for mediation, complaints, and due process (Losinski et al., 2015). There are 6 Core IDEA principles: 1) Zero reject - all students with disabilities are entitled to a FAPE 2) Non-discriminatory evaluation - assessments must be fair 3) Individualized and appropriate education- must provide individualized services 4) Least restrictive environment 5) Procedural due process (safeguards) - parents and schools are

held mutually accountable 6) Parent participation - parents are partners in education decisions (PL 94-142).

School professionals must be knowledgeable of procedural rights and regulations pertaining to parental involvement in the IEP process (Drasgow et al., 2001).

Unfortunately, even under the tenets of IDEA, reports from the field indicate that there is not an equal partnership in the participation of parents in their child's education planning and within the IEP process (Fish, 2006). School professionals still dominate the student education planning process and parent involvement is often minimized (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1997). When the right of parent participation is not given to the parents, this becomes a violation of FAPE. This denial is a procedural error and deprives the student of educational benefits.

Recent court cases have affirmed parental rights in the IEP process. *Spielberg v. Henrico County public schools*, 1988, ruled that there was a denial of FAPE due to a placement decision made before developing an IEP with the parents. In 2001, the U.S. Court of Appeals, 9th Circuit, ruled in the case of *Amanda J. v. Clarke County Schools* that interference with parent participation in the IEP development undermined the essence of IDEA (Yell et al., 2013). *Deal v. Hamilton County board of education*, 2004: 6th circuit court of appeals, ruled that there was a denial of FAPE due to predetermination of IEP placement and services (Yell et al., 2013). In 2005, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Shaffer v. Weast*, ruled that the IEP is the central vehicle for ensuring collaboration and cooperation between parents and school (Yell et al., 2013). In 2013, the US Court of Appeals 9th circuit, *Doug C. v. State of Hawaii Department of Education*, ruled that parental participation overrides IEP deadline. Because the IEP was held without the

parents, even to correct an overdue timeline compliance, the decision went in favor of Doug C. In summary, parent participation is critical in all IEP decisions.

As these court cases indicate, the denial of parental involvement is unconstitutional and is a violation of the Federal IDEA regulations, and as such, schools need to be held accountable. Magaldi-Dopman and Conway (2012) note that parents are frequently unsure of their rights and do not actively participate in the development of their child's education plan. They become passive observers instead of active participants. This lack of participation, in connection to a student's home and family life, may keep parents from helping their child succeed in school.

IDEA 2004 is the umbrella policy for this research study. Schools are required to ensure parental involvement and active participation in the IEP process (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Strassfeld, 2018). This study aims to make sure parents are not deprived of their right to participate by correcting the dysfunctional communication and collaboration between the IEP meeting parties. Communication rifts between the parents and teachers could be the cause of parents being passive observers at the IEP meetings. The communication rift could also be caused by teachers not having prior training in collaboration and communication.

As a special education teacher, a case manager, and by extension an IEP participant, I have seen many quiet and passive parents who are not given the opportunity to participate and collaborate in the IEP process of their child. Parents are assuming the role of a passive listener instead of active and equal partner in the IEP process (Burke et al., 2017). An uncooperative tone within the meetings sometimes causes parents to be adversarial (Fish, 2006). Fish (2006) suggested that parents would not be as defensive at

the IEP meetings if the meetings were a democratic process where they would be afforded an equal part. Many parents do not know their rights and feel defenseless in the IEP process (Burke et al., 2017).

Providing the teachers with strategies for effectively communicating special education knowledge to the parents may be beneficial in aiding parents to advocate. To improve the IEP communication process, I motivated and prepared the staff for action. This study attempted to improve communication between parents and teachers in IEP meetings, by giving teachers an opportunity to self and group reflect around issues of collaboration and effective communication with parents. Studies show that when teachers receive training around a topic, they often increase in confidence around that topic—the goal being that as the teachers are trained, they will improve in their confidence to collaborate more effectively with the parents around the IEP process and motivate them towards the vision of an improved IEP process (Mereoiu et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2011). These collaborations involve reflection and honest communication. The collaborative vision developed in such meetings sets a pathway for working for improvement and supporting student needs. Total communication involves both verbal and non-verbal communication including listening, speaking, and body language between all parties involved. Listening to parents is essential to building and maintaining positive interactions at the IEP table (Coots, 2007). Yet many parents believe that there is a disconnect in communications and want consistent and respectful communication from the teachers (Ankeny et al., 2009).

It is important to note that in addition, parents often have difficulty with interpretation of the IEP team's use of professional jargon (Mereiou, et al., 2016). It may

also be important for teachers to be aware of the power that their words have on parents. Burke et al., (2017) conducted a parent survey in which the participants reported that it was stressful to hear negative comments about their child. Often, teachers use negative terms to describe characteristics, academic weaknesses, and behavioral issues. Mutual respect is critical for effective IEP meetings as it fosters trust, and parents respect and trust school staff when the teachers are forthcoming and respectful with information about their child's education and when they respond to concerns and questions (Francis et al., 2016). To summarize, two-way effective communication is essential for efficient collaboration.

The pre-requisite to parent involvement is getting the teachers ready and willing to communicate with parents. For my intervention, I developed and implemented a virtual teacher professional development that provided teachers opportunities to learn strategies that can be carried over to their classrooms and parent meetings. Importantly, the virtual training did not take extra time out of the teachers' schedules. The time constraint issues brought on by school meetings, lesson planning, conferences, and personal time conflicts did not play in here.

The key idea of this action research was communication improvement between parent and teachers. This research aimed to improve communication and collaboration between teacher and parent. If teachers exhibit positive communication, then the parents will feel welcomed to verbally participate at the IEP meeting. As follows, I discuss the situated context for this study.

Situational Context

This action research study took place in a school within the Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) district. I am a special education teacher at Fairfax County Elementary School (FC). There are 16 students, grades K- 6, within the low-incidence program, with severe Autism and Intellectual Disabilities. We have a good staffing ratio, with three teachers and three assistants. FC has a student population of 970 students, with 124 students having IEPs (20.5%). FC has 12 special education teachers, along with an administrator (assistant principal).

Fairfax County Public Schools' (FCPS) mission is to inspire and empower all students to meet high standards. FCPS believes that there should be a partnership between students, parents, and educators; parents play an important role in their child's education; and that everyone desires a respectful environment. The strategic plan goal for FCPS is to implement a caring culture within the schools. This includes "fostering a responsive, caring and inclusive culture where all students feel valued, supported, and hopeful." (<https://www.fcps.edu/about-fcps/beliefs-mission-vision>) FCPS provides parental rights: right to student information and records; right to visit child at school and to participate in school activities; right to have child released from school; rights relating to emergency care card; right to make educational decisions; and right to a family/student ombudsman. Family Engagement resources that are available through FCPS (as shown through the links) are community liaisons, advanced academic resources, early literacy resources, family literacy, home instruction for parents of preschool youngsters, immigrant family reunification program, information for homeless families, kinship care support, parent resource center, parenting classes, resources for military families, and

tutors/tutoring. These resources are helpful only if the parents have the knowledge of how and where to find these resources. Current delivery modes of resources may not reach all families with limited access to computers.

During the spring of 2019, I conducted five observations of IEP meetings and parent interviews at my previous school, Fairfax County High School. The phenomenon behind this communication skills mission was developed from the Cycle 1 IEP meeting observations, which revealed the nature of some of the problems in teacher-parent communication, with results of this cycle of data summarily outlined in Table 1.

Per a discussion with the principal of my new workplace, Fairfax County Elementary School, this research study is relevant to their needs. I used the cycle 1 results to inform the research and innovation for the new school. The interviews were done immediately after the IEP meeting that was observed. Observations included tallying the amount of parent questions/comments, positive comments; negative comments; whether the atmosphere in the conference room was congenial; whether there was evidence of parent/teacher collaboration; and did the parent leave with a smile.

Table 1

Cycle 1 Results

Theme	Result
Pre-service/ On-site Professional development courses	No pre-service or on-site professional development in parent communication skills
Parent/staff communication	Ineffective communication between parents and staff Professional jargon used without defining for parents Staff sidebar conversations Talking at the parent and not with Parents told “Don’t worry, trust us”
Relationship	Mutual distrust Parent opinions were not asked
Parent advocacy/ Equal Partnership	Majority of parents were passive participants Unequal partnership IEP decisions were made without parental input

The observation results showed that only three parents verbally commented and asked questions. One parent showed body expressions of being angry and left the room without talking to the teachers. Three of the meetings involved the teacher rushing through the IEP sections, without explaining about the IEP components. Interview questions included: Do you perceive yourself as an active, passive, or in-between verbal partner at the IEP meetings? Do you think the staff listened to your concerns and ideas? Do you feel that you have enough special education knowledge to advocate for your child? The

results showed that out of five parents interviewed, only three parents verbally communicated and saw themselves as an equal partner at the IEP meeting. The other two parents felt that they could not verbally participate because of either not having enough special education knowledge or feeling intimidated. Three of the parents felt that the teachers listened to them while the others perceived the teachers as not caring for what they had to say. Only three of the IEP meetings showed a collaboration between the teacher and parent. The result of these interviews demonstrates that there is a need for better teacher/parent collaboration and effective communication. If teachers demonstrate effective communicating skills and exhibit an attitude of partnership invitation to the parents, then parents may feel empowered to verbally participate at the IEP meeting.

Effective communicating involves helping parents in understanding, sharing of knowledge, active listening, empathy, and collaborating on ideas and decisions. Taking the need of effective communication, from the cycle 1 research, I developed a communication professional development training for the special education teachers. Pilot testing the simulation sessions showed that teachers preferred an interactive training that stimulates self-reflection of their parent communication style. This research's innovation is a three-module virtual training, working on communication skills for having difficult parent discussions at the IEP meetings. The training sessions followed a sequential sequence of IEP meeting openings, IEP meeting goals, and IEP meeting closing, which follows the structure of an IEP conference. Session delivery was interactive and included discussions, reflections of personal practice, and role-playing. All participants, which included the low-incidence special education teachers, participated together, with the researcher as facilitator, through the training program.

Each participant was given a packet of material, such as Positive Communication brochure and hypothetical IEP packet/data for the role-playing and discussions.

Based on this, the following research question guided research into an innovation that aided teachers in effectively communicating with the parents at the IEP meetings.

- How does the teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect the collaboration and relationship with parents at the IEP meetings?

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND GUIDING RESEARCH

Action research appropriately combines and integrates action (change) and research (understanding). Most often, all those affected by the change are responsible for both the understanding and the action. These characteristics – action oriented, research-based, participative and cyclic – determine how the research is actually done, who is involved, how it is reported, and what outcomes are achieved (Dick, 2014, p.11).

This action research aimed to develop communication between special education teachers and the parents. The goal was to have positive impact on participant growth and to make research useable in my own practice and for practitioners in the special education realm. As an action researcher, studying my own professional setting and collaborating with my teaching colleagues and student parents, I took the role of an insider in collaboration with other insiders' positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2012).

In order to develop an understanding of why special education teachers in this context are not successfully communicating with parents, and how the ineffective teacher/parent discourse affects parents and prevents them from effectively advocating for their child at the IEP meeting, I took a constructivist grounded theory approach to this research. Looking into the historical and social conditions that constrain the communication efforts enlightened my innovation development. As the researcher and a practitioner in this setting, I played an active role in the whole process. The action, process, and meaning of this research produced a new understanding of the problem and ways to address it as well as future directions for research (Charmaz, 2006).

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical perspectives informing this action research and constructive grounded theory approach were: Transformative Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, and Communities of Practice. The goal was to break down communication barriers for effective collaboration at the IEP meetings. The combined theoretical perspectives from Transformative Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, and Communities of Practice provided an understanding of the need for effective communication skills that invites parents to be involved at the IEP meeting.

Transformative Theory

Introduction to Transformative Theory

John Mezirow (1997), the author of Transformative Theory, suggests that a person's frame of reference can be changed through provision of new knowledge, resources, and collaboration through use of two dimensions: habits of mind and points of view (Mereiou et al., 2016). We can alter our reference views by using critical reflection about the assumptions and interpretations that we make (Meriou et al., 2016; Mezirow, 1997). According to Mezirow (1997), there are ten phases of transforming behaviors: dilemma (seeing the problem), self-examination of guilt (self-reflection of feelings), critical assessment of assumptions (reflection of thoughts), recognition of need for change, exploring options of action, planning a course of action, acquisition of new knowledge, trying a new role of acting, building of competence and confidence in new role, and reintegration with using the new role (Mezirow, 1978, as cited in Kitchenham, 2008). From 1978 - 2005, Mezirow added the theory to add reflection of assumptions, self-reflection, and knowledge that two points of view can coexist. When we critically

reflect on our assumptions and interpretations, we can determine if we are assuming with bias. Learning through our discourses shows us how to communicate fairly and effectively. This happens when we focus on the assets of a situation instead of the negatives and transform our point of view. Self-reflection about our misconceptions may result in a positive shift in perspective, along with greater tolerance and understanding of those who are different from us. When this transformation happens, thoughts, feelings, and actions are changed (Kitchenham, 2008). By becoming more aware of our situation, role, and present condition through self-reflection we can become more mindful, which is an impetus for transformation (McLain et al., 2010).

Mindfulness

The learning and change that comes from self-reflection in Transformative Theory, involves the awareness of oneself (Meriou et al., 2016; Mezirow, 1997), and such self-awareness resonates with the concept of mindfulness. Mindfulness is often defined as a nonjudgmental moment-to-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn & Hanh, 2009). This lets people realize how their actions affect others through the practice of keen observing and self-reflection on their internal discourses and actions. Burke et al. (2017) implemented eight sessions of mindfulness strategies for parents of children with special needs. The strategies included meditation exercises for relaxation and awareness. These strategies of relaxation and awareness of dialogue and events produced positive results for parents who used the strategies at the IEP meetings. Sixty-nine percent of the parent participants reported that the strategies helped them feel less stressed. Fifty-eight percent of the parents stated that the mindfulness strategies helped them attend to the focus of the IEP meetings. Doyle et al. (2019) developed a mindfulness stress reduction program,

called CARE. Through trainings that involved interactive activities, discussion, and practice, the researchers' taught emotional regulation skills, caring, and compassion practices to teachers. The results showed that the teachers were less stressed, more able to regulate their emotions, had increased their self-efficacy, and a rise in positive interactions with others. Teacher stress may potentially surface in leading communication efforts with the parents. Implementing a mindfulness program into professional development may be beneficial to the discourse, leading to a great sense of calm and relaxed confidence for teachers and willingness to flow with positive invitations to communicate. Learning occurs through social interactions, in which modeling and collaboration provide a vehicle for learning (Herr & Anderson, 2012).

Transformative Theory Application

The distribution of resources and knowledge on effective communicating, collaborating, positive role construction, and stress relief, will bring about positive collaborative change. Transformation must be attainable, even convenient, with respect to the time, work, and effort constraints that affect the acceptance of new strategies (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Knopf & Swick, 2008). To address these constraints, this study's intervention involved an on-line virtual and interactive professional development. Using a virtual approach allowed the participants to gain the knowledge and to engage in a peer discourse.

Use of an interactive vehicle of knowledge delivery—such as this study's innovations, which included: the virtual interactive professional development along with the correlating supplemental materials, and positive communication and mindfulness strategies brochures— supported the goal to engage teachers toward change of attitude

and action. Reflecting upon one's own actions and practice is a transforming learning opportunity (Mezirow, 1997). The training included opportunities for the participant to reflect upon their interactions with parents during difficult discourses and think about how they could change the dialogues to be friendly and effective. The prompted group discussions brought up points about their present interactions and encouraged group brainstorming to find appropriate communication alternatives. Their evaluation of their discourses gave them an awareness of the need for change (Mezirow, 1997). According to Mezirow (1978), reflection gives knowledge and knowledge will aid in reflecting. The simultaneous use of reflection and peer discussion is a transformative knowledge tool. This newly formed knowledge transformed the teacher's verbal behavior at the IEP meetings into being welcoming for parent partnership.

Positive and informed dialogues occur more easily when the conversation participants are relaxed and aware of the situations (Doyle, et al., 2019). Training teachers in Mindfulness strategies would give teachers a way to be calm and relaxed. When they are relaxed, they are open to active listening and having positive interactions (Burke, 2017; Doyle, et al., 2019). Mindfulness aided in the teachers being aware, calm, resourceful, and ability in handling the difficult conversations.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Introduction to Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that a person's belief in oneself will propel one's behavior and decisions. This self-reflective social learning theory combines self-knowledge with the interaction of observing, learning from, and interacting with social environments. Self-efficacy and the cognitive learning process are reflected in

personal confidence, perceived abilities, and self-pride (Bandura, 1977; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). If learning from consequences, knowledge resources, and modeling from others is emphasized, the awareness of personal behavior should help with acceptance and persistence of challenges. This awareness is a building block of having positive self-efficacy which propels action (Bandura, 1977). Attitudes and emotions from personal experiences affect perceptions of ability and may show in their communications.

Attitude

Attitude, composed of perceptions about people, places, things, and situations, forms the self-efficacy that a person has and controls behavioral actions (Mulholland & Cummings, 2016). Engagement with observed events, shape attitude and confidence to communicate (Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). The boosting of self-efficacy helps with tackling communication challenges and acquiring knowledge needed for verbal discourses (Bandura, 1977). Attitude and beliefs that a person has about achieving a task, such as communicating at an IEP meeting, determine their ability to accomplish the task. Furthermore, practice and experience raise the level of self-efficacy and successful communication.

Application of Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy was a critical construct in this study regarding the effect it played upon teachers' perceptions of their abilities to connect and communicate effectively with parents in the IEP process. Teachers are likely to decide how much they will collaborate based on their beliefs about their own communication abilities. Parents are likely to advocate during the IEP meetings if they feel empowered to speak. Giving teachers the strategies and resources to boost their collaboration efforts improved their self-efficacy

and, in turn, boosted parental self-efficacy. Leading from the definition of equal partnership (see chapter 1), if there is a boost in self-efficacy, a more equal partnership in the IEP process may be promoted.

Communities of Practice

Introduction to Communities of Practice

Self-efficacy involves a concept of identity, an attitude of knowing oneself, and being in control of one's own behavior. According to the construct of Community of Practice, identity comes from the interpretation that we get from social interactions and being part of a community (Wenger et al., 2002). Identity is an important concept for being a community participant. Our identities are formed and shaped by the experiences that we have from our participation within the group (Wenger, 1998). The experiences from our participation in community activities give us new knowledge. We interpret meaning from the knowledge and use this to develop our identities (Wenger, 1998). Building community dialogue and discourses can provide us with new knowledge.

Community is the sense and action of belonging to an environment. Within a community, there is a sharing of ideas and concerns, common practices, and a shared commitment. Being a part of the community makes isolation less likely and gives participants a feeling of belonging (Byington, 2011; Patton & Parker, 2017). *Practice* is the on-going action of participation in the community. The social nature drives our motivation and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). The shared purpose of an event, such as an IEP meeting, brought the community members together to make collaborative decisions. In an effective situation for a meeting, the participants are all comfortable in sharing their thoughts and knowledge, and a sense of community and respect brings

transparency to the group proceedings. Such transparency builds mutual trust and confidence of the actions. Trust is a requirement for effective and honest dialogue, and collaboration is built on good communication. Bonding with others in the community depends on a trust between the participants. They need to feel that their perceptions and ideas will be heard in non-judgmental ways (Patton & Parker, 2017). This communities of practice framework leads to training of educators on communicating and collaborating with parents effectively (Wenger et al., 2002).

Application of Communities of Practice

Teachers and parents formed a collaborative coalition to benefit the students through open dialogue. Parents effectively advocated for their child when they felt bonded, or a sense of community, with the staff. For such bonding to happen, instilling a community of practice that is amenable to the needs and constraints of the teachers and parents was important. The community boosted confidence and motivation for collaboration and allowed dialogue to flow. Further, professional development around communication strategies helped in boosting teacher self-efficacy and confidence for supporting parents in their knowledge acquisition.

Model of Parent Involvement

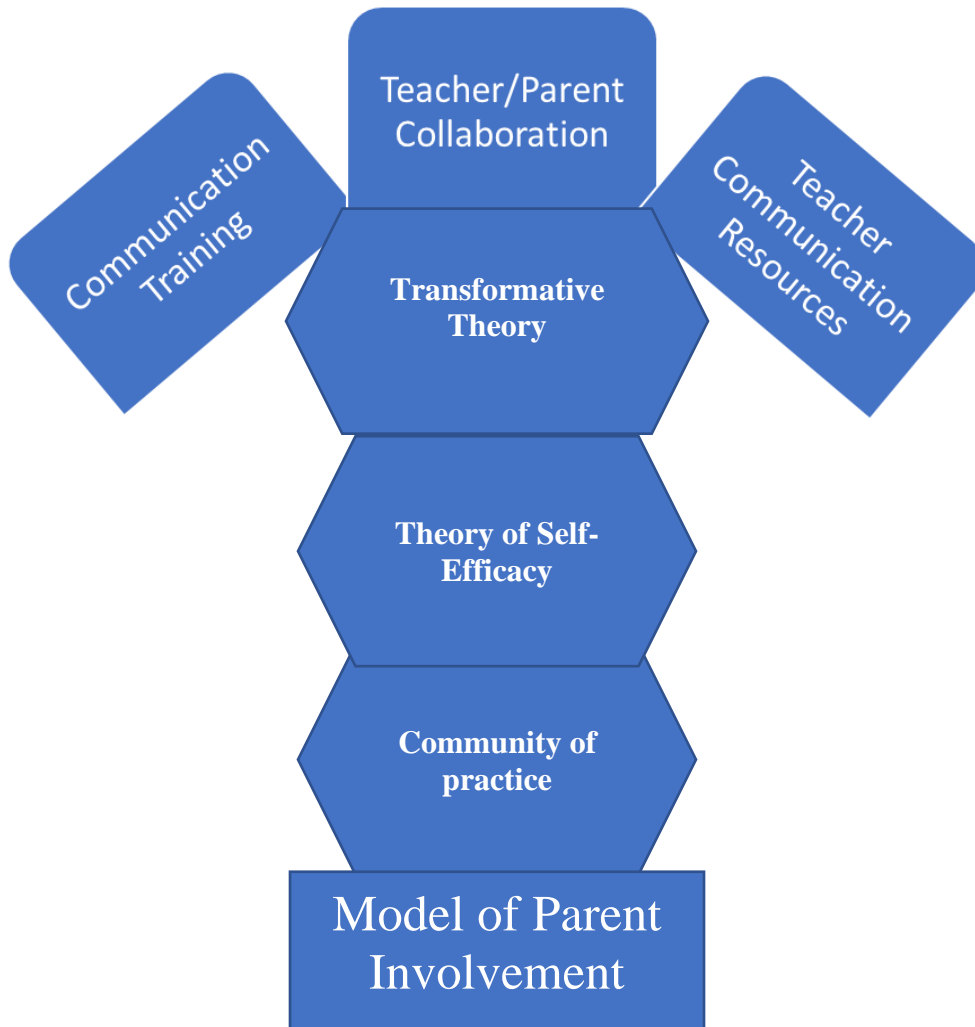
The theoretical perspectives drawing upon transformation, self-efficacy, and communities of practice, combine to support a theoretical model of parent involvement. This model is composed of three psychological constructs: parents' motivational beliefs (role construction and self-efficacy), parents' perceptions of invitation for involvement (teacher and school welcoming), and parents' perceived life contexts (parent time, energy, skills, knowledge) (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). Parents need to know

how they are expected to act in their roles as parents at the meetings. Role construction, as an important social construct, needs to be planned and relayed before the IEP meetings. It is shaped by social communities as well as personal beliefs (Howland et al., 2006). People behave and communicate in the way that they believe their role dictates them to act (Goss, 2019). The avenue to the roles needs to be open, though some parents believe that the educators prevent them from accessing and taking an active role (Fish, 2006). This inaccessibility is due to the breakdown of communication and collaboration.

Self-efficacy plays into this model in that the parent's belief of how their involvement will result in a desired outcome affects the degree to which they are motivated to be communicative participants. Parents need to feel invited to be involved by the professionals, within a welcoming environment (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Ideally, they can then form a relationship with the teachers when they are engaged in the school, based on communications with the teachers and joint decision making (Underwood, 2010). When parents are engaged and exuding positive self-efficacy, they become empowered through a sense of control. Such empowerment can provide parents with the realization that they can actively communicate and demonstrate making informed decisions—focused on self-control, self-efficacy, and self-determination (Hsaio et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2013). Given resources and communication training to the teachers, along with open dialogue to the parents, supported parents' move from a passive participant to a verbally active partner.

Figure 1 shows a visual representation of this study, the Candlelight Parent Involvement Model. I created this framework to show the integration of theories that are used, in this research study, in aligning into parent involvement.

Figure 1: *Candlelight Model of Parent Involvement*



This model depends on the collaboration and effective communication efforts of the teachers. The target of this action research study was to pave the way for parents to be equal partners at the IEP meeting. Transformative Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, and Communities of Practice together form the candle. The knowledge from these theories molded together into the base of Parent Involvement. The flames that kept this model shining were ignited by communication skills training for the teachers, communication

resources available to the teachers, and the collaboration of the teachers and parents. The candle fed the flames which in turn developed the change.

Literature Review of Research on Communication/Collaboration

As described, there was an opportunity gap in the IEP meetings, in which the IEP knowledge was held primarily by the teaching faculty and not disseminated to the parents. While it was not the intention of the teachers to withhold information, it can often be challenging for teachers to understand how to communicate and collaborate in this type of meeting and to ensure that parents have the information they need. This produces a schism that can be wide, and which affects the parents' self-efficacy and confidence to be an equal partner. Therefore, this gap must narrow as it impedes collaboration. Resources are needed to close the opportunity gap (Carter et al., 2013); and knowledge is a powerful resource here. Through providing teachers with strategies for collaborating and communicating, I achieved narrowing the gap.

Teacher Perspective

From the teacher perspective, interactions are often hampered by perceptions of inadequacies in working with families and by fear of negative parent interactions (D'Haem & Griswold, 2017). Teachers often enter the practice with extraordinarily little experience and knowledge of how to gain parent respect and communicate with parents successfully. Many teachers are unsure of how to discuss tough issues with the parents (Ankeny et al., 2009). Such fears keep them from communicating openly and honestly (Ankeny et al., 2009). Academic progress, special education services, placement, and behavioral issues are contentious topics for families—thus teachers need empathy and understanding of the children (Fish, 2006). In addition, there is a lack of multi-cultural

training and of understanding family dynamics in diverse cultures (Harry, 2008; Magaldi-Dopman & Conway, 2012). Teachers need real experiences of communicating with diverse families in order to understand family needs (Elbaum et al., 2016; Howland et al., 2006). Therefore, professional development that gives strategies for communication, along with opportunities for role-playing practice, should be available for teachers (Collier et al., 2017).

A common complaint of some teachers is not having enough time to devote to collaboration efforts. Constraints such as lesson planning, grading, and meetings may prevent teachers from putting in the time to get to know and communicate with parents. To effectively communicate, research results show the teachers must make it a priority to learn about their students' families in order to benefit the collaborative relationship (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Teachers need some understanding of family culture, background, strengths, and needs (Rosetti et al., 2017). School administrators also must be on-board in committing to furthering family collaboration, as administration can help faculty and inspire partnership by giving the teachers time and opportunities for professional development (Elbaum et al., 2016). A lack of communication between stakeholders in any endeavor prevents effective collaboration (Coots, 2007; Slade et al., 2018), and this is critical to IEP meetings which involve shared action that requires both understanding and communication (Fullan, 2007).

Communication

For change to happen, there must be a shared vision which comes from effective communication (Barber, 2009). Teachers should be aware of cultural differences and the parents' English skills when communicating with the families (Cheatham & Lim-

Mullins, 2018). Open communication helps negate bias and detrimental stereotypes allowing the parents to feel invited to participate at the IEP meetings (Hess et al., 2006). Parents are more likely to advocate for themselves when they perceive that the teacher is listening to them (Angell et al., 2009; Ryan & Quinlan, 2018). When teachers talk *at* parents, instead of *with* them, the culture of IEP meetings becomes unproductive, leaving parents to feel potentially weakened and angered (Goss, 2019). Consequently, contentious meetings derive from inadequate communication.

To enhance communication efforts, teachers must be open and honest with the parents (Fish, 2008) and this involves inviting a two-way communication partnership that leads to collaborative decision making (Fialka, 1997). Teacher training in communication strategies and active listening, such as empathetic commenting, honesty, asking appropriate questions, and summarizing for clarification, can benefit the joint communication at the IEP meetings (Slade et al., 2018). Fialka (1997) suggested strategies to unite parents and teachers which involve forming unforced relationships. The relationship needs to evolve, and parents need to be given the role of contributor while the teacher should be expert. Families want to play an active role in their child's education but unfortunately, parents are often unsure of how to do this and believe that a communication deficit with teachers keeps them from an active role (Hess et al., 2006).

Collaboration

This literature review identified several barriers that teachers encountered around collaboration, such as lack of pre-service training in parent collaboration and communication. Teacher education colleges did not provide collaboration coursework and authentic experiences in conducting such meetings were not typically covered

(Howland et al., 2006). Teachers also sometimes have a lack of understanding of the disabilities, which leads to disagreements with the parents over the academic and behavioral issues (Fish, 2006). Additionally, teachers have voiced concerns that the school systems do not provide communication and collaboration training (Elbaum et al., 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Some teachers have also expressed concerns that excessive duties and time constraints prevented them from attending workshops and spending extra time in understanding their students' family cultures (Magaldi-Dopman & Conway, 2012; Rosetti et al., 2017). Appreciation of family culture shows in communicative interactions. Building up opportunities and motivation for collaborative communication involves a change. Teachers will need professional development in communicating, with the goal that such collaborative communication, critical reflection and taking ownership can spur on interactive communication change (Foley & Lewis, 1999).

IEP Meeting

As in most relationships, dialogue is extremely important for relationship building (Coots, 2007). The IEP meetings involve critical and tough issues. Therefore, when teachers show empathy to parents and their situation—being honest, open, and not withholding information—it can help parents feel more comfortable. Teacher misunderstandings of student disabilities have been shown to lead to disagreements with parents (Ankeny et al., 2009). At the same time, parents must see that teachers are dedicated to their profession and committed to putting in extra effort to make them feel welcome. Teachers need to be viewed as honest and transparent, which involves not being afraid to admit to not knowing something (Blue-Banning, 2004), but instead

seeking new answers when needed. Lack of special education and IEP meeting knowledge has also prevented parents from advocating (Besnoy et al., 2015; Whitbread et al., 2007). This knowledge deficiency makes collaboration and advocacy difficult as it keeps the scale of power at the IEP meetings imbalanced (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Goldman & Mason, 2013).

In general, there has been a sense that IEP meetings tend to bring out feelings of anger and disappointment, as some parents are left feeling that school staff do not always keep to their professional responsibilities (Besnoy et al., 2015). However, when parents have the knowledge, they need and good communication, perceptions of IEP meetings were more likely to be satisfactory. Fish (2008) surveyed a family support group about their satisfaction with the IEP process. This group had consistent collaboration and resource opportunities resulting in the following conclusion: 39% of the parents had a clear understanding of the IEP process, 78% had a moderate to high level of IEP documentation knowledge, and 51% felt they had a positive relationship with the teachers. Parent satisfaction with the IEP meeting is correlated to the parent sense of connectedness to the staff and program and their involvement in the process (Slade et al., 2018; Underwood, 2010). All of this speaks to the need to transform the sense of self-efficacy that both teachers and parents have in the roles that they play in IEP processes, which is a focus of this action research study.

Innovation Pathway

As Fullan (2007) associated engagement to being motivated from the meaning we construct from our experiences, we must shape the pathway for collaboration. Heath and Heath (2010) wrote that change happens when we consider a person's elephant

(emotional side) and rider (rational side) and shape the path to the goal. The proposed innovations took into consideration the personal needs and constraints of the parents and teachers. The innovations were given in a clear, convenient, and concise manner that encouraged the participants to interact as a community. The goal for community interaction is to be supportive and encouraging for collaboration.

To further add to Heath and Heath's metaphor, I instilled a teacher mindset for growth through professional development trainings around communicating with parents. The delivery of communication strategies and needs motivated the rider by giving the staff the learning opportunities and reasons for gaining the knowledge. The elephant side was satisfied by the engagement of the trainings, through use of interactive community activities, shared with their colleagues. The brochures (positive communication and mindfulness) were satisfying to both the elephant and rider because it delivered strategies and resource knowledge in a convenient mode. This innovation limited the time constraints for all participants, and stressed community support.

Rationale for the innovation

Transformative Learning changes the learner's frame of reference or previous thoughts. Change is driven from the reflection and absorption of new knowledge (Cranton, 1994, 1996; Meriou et al., 2016; Mezirow, 1997). Each of the above innovations provided knowledge of collaboration, effective communication, and of special education process. The knowledge and strategies that the teachers received helped them reflect and communicate with ease. The collaboration and communication effort enhanced the parents' experiences through improved teacher dialogue and interactions, and invitation for involvement. The professional development training motivated

teachers to reflect on their communicative practices and look at areas in which improvement can be made. The community of teachers worked together to understand and communicate with the parents which created action aiming to convert empathy into compassion (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). Learning involves community (belonging to a group), practice (interacting, talking, and learning together), and meaning (the resulting experience output) (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Wenger et al., 2002). The purpose of this intervention was that the teachers would learn from each other for a shared purpose of fostering a positive relationship toward making parents more equal partners.

Moving Forward

Moving forward in communicating with confidence involves an earnest effort among both parties— the teachers and the parents. Teachers needed to acquire strategies for effective communication and parents needed to feel welcomed to participate. Through analysis of interviews with the teachers and observations of IEP meetings, I determined that the teacher communication training influenced the teacher/parent interactions and consequentially, parents verbally advocated at the meetings. The analyses patterns helped me to understand the efficacy of this innovation. Chapter 3 describes the methodology, in terms of the process of inviting and gaining participants for the community of practice, the interviews for teacher data, the professional development, and the timeline of this research study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

“Qualitative research is about words and actions (the “how” and “why” questions).”

(Butin, 2010, p.74)

Introduction

This chapter begins with an introduction to the purpose of the study, and the research questions that the methodology addressed. Following that, I describe the situated context and setting for this study. I will elaborate on how this study fits into the FCPS Strategic Plan goal #2: Caring Culture and with the FCPS Mission. Then, participants for this study are discussed as well as processes for selecting and inviting them. Afterwards, I will detail my role as a researcher and how my insider positionality played into this study. Then I will elaborate on the data collection methods for this qualitative study and show the linkage of these methods to the research questions. Finally, the methods, data analysis, intervention details, study timeline, and limitations to this study are provided.

This research involved a two-mission approach: 1) improve communication between the teacher and parent; and 2) help teachers know how to make parents feel welcome and give them the knowledge to boost their confidence to participate at the IEP meetings. The end goal of this research study was for parents to be more equal IEP meeting participants.

Using the data results from my cycle 1 study (IEP meeting observations and parent/teacher interviews), I developed the following research question, which guided this study:

- How does the teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect the collaboration and relationship with parents at the IEP meetings?

Measurement criteria for the research questions are shown in table 1.

Research Study Summary

Table 2 provides a summary of the linkage of the data collection tools and data measurement to the research questions. The appendices include the protocols for the data collections. Appendix A depicts the IEP observation protocol and Appendix B describes the interview protocol for teachers.

Table 2

Research Question Measurement

Research Question	Data Collection	Data Measurement
How does the teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect the collaboration and relationship with parents at the IEP meetings?	Pre and post interviews with teachers Observations of IEP meetings	After the training, do the teachers work collaboratively with the parents in developing the IEP? After the training, do the teachers feel that they have more empathy and a better understanding of the parents? Do the teachers use the communication strategies provided during the training?

Situated Context/Setting

Within this program at Fairfax County ES, there are a total of 16 students assigned within the three classrooms. Of the 16 students, there are a few parents who regularly communicate with the teachers and advocate for their child. Developing an IEP

requires the teacher and parents to come together and communicate at a meeting. But when the teacher and parent do not know each other well, there is a strain in their interactions and potential for breakdown in communications.

Fairfax County ES has a total student population of 604 students (2019-20 school year). Of that population, 124 students have an IEP (20.5 %). FCPS has over 180,000 students. It is the 10th largest school district in the United States, with 140 elementary schools, 23 middle schools, and 24 high schools. Students with disabilities make up 14.5% of the FCPS population (<http://www.fcps.edu/about-fcps>).

The FCPS mission is to inspire and empower all students to meet high standards. FCPS beliefs are that there should be a partnership between students, parents, and educators; parents need to have an important role in their child's education; and that everyone needs a respectful environment. The strategic plan goal is for FCPS to implement a caring culture within the schools. The goal, Caring Culture, commits to fostering a responsive, caring, and inclusive culture where all feel valued, supported, and hopeful. All FCPS employees should seek to demonstrate cultural responsiveness when supporting families, students, and other staff. Through this strategic goal, families should feel respected at their school. In the context of this study, if teachers are given training in effective communication and collaboration with parents, they should have the ability to foster a responsive, caring, and inclusive culture, helping them to treat parents with less adversity and intimidation (Fish, 2006, 2008).

Participants

Since this is an action research study of a problem within my practice, I invited twenty-two special education teacher colleagues to participate in this research and five

teachers accepted the invitation to participate. This study involved participants using their non-contracted time to take part in two interviews and an IEP observation, in addition to being part of the innovation itself which required a total of four hours of their time. The IEP observation is not included in this time summary because the IEP meeting is a non-research event that would have happened normally.

At the time this research was commencing, COVID-19 occurred, and school instruction changed to distance learning putting extra pressure on teachers. The instructional upheaval may be a reason for teachers not being able to take on extra commitments. Despite this, five special education colleagues agreed to be a member of this study's innovation group. Participant consent included: taking part in a pre-innovation interview, reading resource materials, engaging in three community simulation professional development sessions, allowing me to observe at an IEP meeting, and participating in a post-innovation interview. For this dissertation's purpose and to protect their identity, a pseudonym number was assigned to the participants as depicted in Table 3, along with their demographics.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Participant Number	Grade Level/ Special ed. category	Years of Teaching Experience	Research Study Participation	Observation: IEP or Reevaluation
1	4-6/Intellectual Disability	>20 years	Pre-interview, innovation, observation	IEP
2	K-6/Intellectual Disability	<5 years	Complete study	Reevaluation/IEP
3	K-6/Related Service	>20 years	Complete study	IEP
4	Pre-K/Developmental Delays	>20 years	Complete Study	IEP
5	3-6/ Multi-Disability	15-20 years	Complete study	Reevaluation

As an incentive for the teachers to participate, each received a \$25 Amazon gift card. These teachers not only participated in the intervention (professional development) but was an active part of data collection/analysis at IEP meeting observations and pre/post-training interviews. Informed consent, from parents and staff, were obtained for all training sessions, observations, and interviews.

Study Timeline

Table 4 provides the actions that were conducted for this research study and linked to the time sequence. This study was to begin in early September, but due to the school year change to distance learning, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it began in mid- October. This month delay allowed the teachers time to become acclimated to the new instructional delivery mode.

Table 4

Study Timeline

Time Sequence	Action
Mid-October, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invitation for participation sent• Pre-training interviews with teachers that accepted invitation
End-October 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Virtual professional development communication training (PD)• Teachers read positive communication and mindfulness strategies brochures. Discussed them at PD.
November 2020- End of January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• IEP Observations
December 2020- January, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Post-intervention interviews
January 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Analyzed data• Wrote report

Role of Researcher

Since this action research study influenced my practice as a teacher and case manager, I had a vested interest. This research involved students, parents within my school, and my colleagues, so I took the insider in collaboration with other insider's

positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2012). This insider approach enabled me to have influence through understanding the perceptions and needs of the participants. I took on a dual role as the researcher and as a teacher/case manager. The dual role allowed me to have a genuine interest in the study and to use the resulting theories. Being an insider helped me gain a rapport with the teachers. As the researcher, I developed and implemented the innovations, invited, interviewed participants, and observed the IEP meetings. In addition, I collected, coded, analyzed the data, and formulated a research report.

Innovation Overview

The school year began on the first week of September. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, FCPS opened the school year, two weeks later than planned. This later starting date allowed for teachers to prepare for distance learning instruction mode, by accessing technology-related professional development. Because of hectic nature of the beginning of school, this research innovation implementation started in October. The professional development training for the special education teachers consisted of three virtual sessions of 45-minutes in length. Each session sequentially covered a portion of the typical IEP meeting, from beginning to end—with the goal of giving teachers a sense of the communications through the typical flow of a meeting. The first session, IEP openings, was presented on October 16, 2020. The second session, IEP goals, was presented on November 10, 2020, and the third session, IEP ending, was presented on November 23, 2020. In late October, some of the participants returned to face-to-face teaching, within FC. The three-week gap between innovation sessions allowed for their instructional planning needs. The participants opted for a convenient professional development time

using Doodle polls. The times were set for after school contract time. Each of the chosen times were of full consensus.

In addition, I supplemented this training with materials that supported teachers' ability to communicate effectively in meetings. Table 5 shows the supplemental resources that were given to the participants before the communication training sessions.

Table 5

Supplemental Resources

Resource	Description	Author
Positive Communication Brochure	A brochure of tips on active listening and collaboration with parents.	Summary of conversation research ((Bauer et al, 2018; Koch & McDonough, 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Walker & Dotger, 2012).
Mindfulness Strategies	Strategies on relaxation and aware.	Mayo Clinic
IEP Accommodations Toolbox	Accommodation descriptions, strategies, and resources	Fairfax County Public Schools
ABCs of Special Education	Dictionary of special education terminology	Helene Shapiro
Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) worksheet	Pre-IEP meeting worksheet	Harmon, et al. (2020)

Interviews with the teacher participants were done pre- and post-intervention. Additionally, each participant chose one difficult IEP or IEP Reevaluation meeting (before February, and after attending the training sessions) for me to observe (Appendix A). The observation granted me an opportunity to see if and how the training was reflected in the teachers' conduct of their meetings, or if/how it impacted the

communication and collaborations happening in the meeting. Prior to the IEP meeting, the parents were given an informed consent for me to observe their IEP meeting. Data from the teacher interviews and the IEP meeting observations were collected and analyzed to help determine if the communication skills training was influential in supporting the teachers' communication with the parents. The concluding analysis and report were written in January/February.

Innovation Components and Details

Innovation Introduction

The teacher interviews and IEP observations identified whether the innovation of a virtual professional development had a beneficial influence on teachers' communication awareness at their IEP meetings. Parents would feel more welcomed to verbally participate with positive teacher discourse. This aspiration of teacher communicative awareness, spurred on by engagement in the professional development sessions and the supplemental communication materials, was guided by Transformative Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory. As explained by Transformative Theory, autonomous thinking plays a part in discourse behavior and occurs through deriving meaning and interpretations of dialogue, body language, and occurring events (Mezirow, 1997; 1998; 2003). Thus, critically self-reflecting on one's own responses and actions can lead to a better understanding of the discourse at hand, and help in determining appropriate reactions (Mezirow, 1997). When teachers feel comfortable and well-practiced at effective communication behaviors, they may exude confidence to promote more effective dialogue. This is supported by Self-Efficacy Theory in which attitudes towards the participants in a conversation or dialogue, can inhibit or encourage the verbiage or

dialogue participation (Bandura, 1977). Knowledge delivery and practice should be an impetus to awareness or behavioral change. The Community of Practice concept came into play through the teacher engagement as a member of the learning community of practitioners. Their participation helped them attain communication skills, jointly reflect on their communication practices, and rehearse the discussions together. Along with the IEP team's mutual engagement of providing an appropriate education plan for the student, the joint enterprise of their energy level to co-participate, and their shared repertoire of reflection and knowledge, increases teacher professionalism and the participation of parents (Wenger, 1998). Peer influence and guidance can be a powerful change agent. This innovation's simulations related to parent concerns, and aimed to help the teachers with understanding parent feelings and communicating effectively.

Professional Development Training

Most of the professional development that teachers receive, in the FCPS district, are lecture based in which the instructor presents the materials, and occasionally will have a short discussion breakout, but then revert to lecture. Not only are attendants auditorily obtaining the instruction but the other modes of learning, visual, reading, and kinesthetic are eschewed. According to Fleming's VARK Model (2006), learning is accomplished through the above modes, not just through one type, such as auditory (Prithishkumar & Michael, 2014), indicating people are diverse with individualistic ways to absorb information. Consequently, training attendees may be listening to the lectures but not internalizing and retaining the information which may be an obstacle to carry-over and behavior change.

Dewey's (1910) work suggests that reflection engages meaning-making faculties, and Mezirow (1998) suggests that reflection can transform behavior. With these theories in mind, I define reflection as the action of thinking, observing, rethinking about the observations, and then acting on the new and updated thought. This study's innovation was based on reflection of personal communicative practice spurred by observing and interacting with the community. With this intention, a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) was comprised of the five special education teacher colleagues who worked at the same school and was cognizant of the same students and families.

VARK modes of learning (Prithishkumar & Michael, 2014) was used by checking that the innovation delivery used: visual learning through vignette scripts and innovation resource supplements; auditory learning through community discussions, role-playing, and video vignettes; kinesthetic learning through the role playing; and reading through the written discussion prompts and parent script. Instead of the assimilation through lecture, new thoughts were derived through the community interactions and group reflections. My job, as researcher, was to deliver the discussion prompts and simulation exercise while the participants took control of their own reflecting and learning.

This innovative training was delivered virtually and in three sections that mirrored the IEP meeting progression (IEP beginnings, IEP goals, and IEP endings). The first PD session was implemented on October 16, 2020. Kick off began with a summary of what to expect during the sessions, how the role-playing works, and the meeting agenda. Participants were alerted that the sessions would be recorded, transcribed, and after the report is written, recordings would be permanently deleted. Confidentiality was promised and only pseudonyms would be used in the report. Afterwards, the teachers verbally gave

consent for participation and recording. Resource information of a positive communication brochure (Appendix D), mindfulness strategies (Appendix E), and an acronym, SPEAK (see Figure 2) were emailed to the participants. Of these information supplements, I authored the positive communication brochure and SPEAK UP while Mayo Clinic developed the mindfulness strategies. Equally important as having resources is to use it as a discussion prompt that spurs on topic thought. The brochure gave pointers on what to and not say during parent communication opportunities. Mindfulness strategies lowers anxiety and can raise awareness of the moment (Burke, 2017; Doyle, et al., 2019). Using these strategies help when situated with a contentious meeting by keeping the teacher's stress level down so that the teacher could be aware of his/her verbal and non-verbal behavior. SPEAK UP was used as an engaging reminder for teachers to be self-aware of their communications.

Figure 2

SPEAK UP: A Positive Communication Acronym

S: Smile, say hello, and use names

P: Provide meeting agenda, meeting structure, and meeting roles

E: Empathize with emotions and feelings

A: Ask about their concerns and thoughts; ask open-ended questions

K: Keep parents up with the latest knowledge

U: Understand or ask for clarity

P: Provide solution ideas, meeting summary and closure

Prior to the session scenarios, I discussed the supplemental resource materials and presented the training agenda. Afterwards, I shared my screen to show the simulation activities.

The simulation exercises were pilot tested with six special education teachers from schools that were not the research setting. These teachers were recruited through

social media. For the pilot test, the teachers were asked to independently access the training simulations, using the virtual platform of Teacher Moments (MIT Systems Lab), assessing the discussion prompts and simulation scripts. Results of the pilot test showed the discussion prompts to be communication skills relevant and the simulation scripts were authentic and encouraged reflection. The participants gave a tip of adding audio or video to the simulations, to strengthen the authenticity. This suggestion was incorporated into the actual innovation, through use of an actor dramatizing the parent role and use of videos of difficult IEP sessions (you tube).

For the actual innovation, the participants engaged as a community and I screen shared the training exercises and facilitated all group discussions. Prior to the simulation, anticipation questions about the teachers' IEP related thoughts were asked. The simulation included authentic conversations between the parent and the case manager/teacher. The parent script was shown, with an actor verbally acting it out. The participants responded in the teacher/case manager role. Communication prompt cues, such as be empathetic or relate data, were given to aid the teacher in responding. Participants were given a contextual background of the student and parent, to help inform their responses.

The simulation discussions and role playing were screenshared as an eight to ten slide PowerPoint presentation that served as the format for the exercise. The first slide was a simulation information paragraph of what to expect. Afterwards, I repeated the confidentiality statement so that the participants would feel at ease in voicing their opinions and ideas. The first slide of this professional development session provided simulation information:

This simulation exercise includes simulation activity segments of an IEP meeting. Your mission is to reflect upon the vignette and determine whether the teacher is demonstrating best practices. Think about how you would react to the situation and what you would say to the parents. After the vignettes, a slide will follow, asking for your reflection. Respond verbally or write your response in the chat box. All answers will be recorded and used only for this professional development and research study. Confidentiality will be kept. The research report will not include your identifier information.

An explanation of the simulation scenario alerted the teachers to expect to role play a difficult and uncomfortable situation. Again, a confidentiality statement was included so they can feel at ease for role playing and openly discussing.

Simulation Scenario

This simulation activity is designed to aid in the reflection of your practice. It will help you prepare for difficult parent discussions at the IEP table.

This context is an IEP meeting. You will read the dialogue of the parent. You will respond as the case manager immediately after reading. Please respond as quickly as you would do in a real conversation. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but it is better to feel uncomfortable here than at a real IEP meeting. You will need a computer/laptop. You will need to respond, as the teacher, to the parent dialogue. Responses can be done through audio (computer mic needed) or written in the response box. This activity should take about 15 minutes. All responses are protected by ASU's IRB review procedures. No personal information will be shared, and your responses will only be used for research purposes, if you consent.

The following slide gave the simulation case context in which the participants read and offered their meeting predictions.

Simulation Context

Today is Billy Martin's annual IEP meeting. He is a 4th grader in the self-contained CAT B (low incidence) classroom. His primary service is Intellectual Disability. He gets services of speech, occupational therapy, adapted physical education, and assisted technology services. The IEP team includes: Case manager (special education teacher), general education teacher (P.E. teacher), principal designee (IEP facilitator), speech therapist, and occupational therapist. The meeting is scheduled at 2:00 pm. Billy's mom (Mrs. Martin) is present at this meeting. An IEP packet was sent home, before the meeting, that included the graduation requirements, procedural safeguards, IEP agenda, form to write parent concerns, and the IEP goals draft. There was not a pre-IEP meeting and

little contact with the parent before this IEP meeting. Mrs. Martin had to take time off from her job to come to the meeting. She is sensitive and can get upset when she is frustrated and feels that she is not being involved.

Critical reflection involves self-awareness of one's words, actions, thoughts, assumptions, and habits of mind (Mezirow, 1998). Transformation Theory demonstrates that change can occur through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1997, 1998). The anticipation questions, simulation role playing, and simulation response reflection prompts were aimed to encourage such critical reflection. After each dialogue exchange, the participants were asked reflection questions about the exchange, such as "what would they say differently?" The participants reflected and discussed as a group, with my facilitation. At the end of the simulation activity, the participants were given debriefing questions that guided them to reflect on the conversation and critically self-reflect, in a group discussion format. The team approach to learning and practicing together, as a community of practice, elicited engagement, and knowledge acquisition, which is supported by Wenger's (1998) conception.

Table 6 shows sequence of the training activities and correlating each component to the aim and theoretical basis.

Table 6

Profession Development Organization

Activity	Activity Components	Aim	Theory
Read about simulation and consent.	Simulation description Informed Consent	Read Sign consent	
Resources: Mindfulness, Communication Brochure, SPEAK UP acronym	Read and discuss about resources and relevancy	Provide knowledge source	Transformative
IEP Reflection/Anticipation Questions	Three Discussion Questions	Critical reflection of own practice	Transformative Community of Practice
YouTube video of IEP meeting	Video		
Post-video discussion	Four question discussion prompts about the video	Reflection of video events	Transformative Community of Practice
Simulation	Simulation instructions and simulation context	Think and Predict	
Simulation	Dialogue scripts	Role Play the teacher part-learn from action and community help	Self-Efficacy Community of Practice Transformative
Debrief	Five reflection questions about simulation	Critical group reflection	Community of Practice Transformative Self-Efficacy

The goal of the study was for the joint discussions to lead participants to reflect and modify their communicative behaviors. The positive communication brochure

supplemental material is a knowledge resource that includes pointers on effective communicating and building relationships with parents. Mindfulness strategies (supported by the work of Kabat-Zinn & Hanh, 2009) are provided through the brochure and I introduced them to the group, prior to each session, with the aim that these strategies should help with personal calming and relaxation. Practicing Mindfulness strategies, before a discourse, will bring awareness of self and ease of mind so that the participant can critically reflect and be open to transformation of their habits of mind (Mezirow, 1997; 1998). The rationale behind this is that if the teachers remain relaxed and self-regulated through mindfulness, then they will be able to communicate calmly and effectively even in a difficult communication exchange.

Both Self-Efficacy Theory and Transformation Theory recognizes that the provision of knowledge elicits a boost in a person's belief in their own ability, awareness, and reflection (Bandura, 1977; Mezirow, 1997). Bandura (1989) theorized that to participate in interactions, a person needs to be confident and aware of their abilities. The resource information that was given to the teachers, prior to the simulations, aided in awareness, knowledge acquisition, and provided the teachers a tool for dialogues. The defined accommodations, special education jargon, and IEP meeting agenda sheets were useful knowledge resources that the teachers could relay as information to the parents. Teacher dialogue needs to be organized and structured. The PLAAFP worksheet (Harmon, et al, 2020) is an organizational tool which includes the student's strengths, needs, present learning, goals, and other student information. This resource allows the teacher to be prepared to share student information with the parent. Transparency around student progress and student needs brings trust from the parents. The teacher's positive

self-efficacy level will rise when parents exhibit a trust in the teacher's communicative abilities (Bandura, 1977).

Data Collection

This study consisted of three data sources: IEP meeting observations, teacher interviews, and innovation responses.

IEP Meeting Observational Data

IEP meeting observations involved my taking anecdotal researcher notes on the parent and teacher interactions. I observed the verbal interactions at the IEP meetings of the special education teachers. There were 5 constructs to the observation protocol: attendance, pre-IEP discussion, IEP meeting, parent participation, time constraints, and IEP meeting summary. The anecdotal notes included the following points of data collection:

- types of parent/ teacher interactions (positive or negative),
- whether there was a welcoming tone for parent participation?
- whether parent was passive or active,
- notes of parent/teacher verbal and body language,
- whether there was collaboration for IEP decisions and needs solutions
- whether a positive parent/teacher relationship established
- did teachers and parents act as equal partners
- Whether there was a pre-IEP planning meeting with the parents. (I asked the teacher, prior to the IEP meeting).
- If any of the supplemental resources were used, such as the PLAAPF worksheet.

Observations are instantiated in field notes based on my firsthand experience of observable actions through seeing and hearing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertler, 2017). I investigated to determine patterns through the interpretation of the data (Mertler, 2017). Observing the IEP meetings allowed me to directly see the interactions between the parent and teacher, and to determine if the communication strategies, provided at the professional development trainings, were used and if were successful. Progress was noted if there was a partnership of the teacher and parent working to solve a problem, compromise, and discuss concerns at the table. Positive teacher/parent interactions were noted. The descriptive fieldnotes were of real-time objective observations that were captured using a protocol that covers the above points (Appendix A) (Saldana, 2016).

Interviews

This research study involved intensive interviewing. Intensive interviews use open-ended questions to get detailed responses (Chamaz, 2014). Use of open-ended questions allowed the participants to share their experiences and the interview discussion to flow with honest communication around teachers' perceptions. With this type of questioning, I was able to rephrase, ask for clarification, and explore more deeply into a specific topic area (Charmaz, 2014). The focus to the topics and the responses provided explanations and insight that helped answer the research study question (Yin, 2018).

Teacher Interviews

Each participant was given an informed consent for participation and of my intent to record the interviews through the computer. The interviews occurred in October 2020. The interviews were conducted via BBCU for ease of recording and transcription and scheduled at the participant's convenience. The intensive interviews focused on a

participant's experiences of their IEP meetings, using an interview protocol designed to focus on understanding their takeaways from the meeting discussions and, if and how this affected their practice and relationship with the parents. The interview protocol consisted of three constructs: courses and training, IEP meeting perceptions, and perceptions of communicating with parents. There are six questions with probes. Sample questions were: How many pre-service courses did you have in parent collaboration and communication techniques? Have you had parents who were extremely negative toward you or the situation? Do you think parents could be more equal partners at the IEP meeting or IEP development? The code categories included communication and collaboration pre-service courses, professional development in collaboration, communication flow with parents, parent communication frequency and type, and equal participation thoughts. (Appendix B) shows the teacher interview protocol and code guide.

The interviews helped in understanding the situation from the participant's own perspective. I encouraged the participants to tell their personal views, opinions, and stories via a more open-ended conversation and question approach, aimed to socially construct meaning and new knowledge (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Coding of the responses were done with use of NVivo coding package. Using grounded theory analysis, the patterns developed from the pre- and post-intervention data showed if the training was effective in changing the teacher communicative behaviors.

Data Analysis

The analysis method for this research was driven by Constructive Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). Through use of Grounded Theory, coding of the data results can be played with and updated by changing or adding categories that lead to patterns (Charmaz, 2014). This data analysis helped in determining whether the professional development was effective.

The data from the interviews, observations, and the simulation responses were collected and analyzed to construct meaning and new theories. As the qualitative data were collected, the coding categories were modified and developed. I reflected on the interview data to interpret meaning and inductively formulate new theory (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2012). The use of the Constant Comparative Method (Charmaz, 2014) was done by comparing each single event data to itself and then to the other event data. This triangulation of data sets gave me a good comparison of the similarities and differences within the results. I analyzed the data through focused coding, using preliminary codes that were set up before the data, and codes that were developed during the data analysis. The appendices (A-E) give the preliminary coding guide that correlates with the data method. Then I revisit the coding categories and combine them to make new overall categories, and then re-analyzed them using the new coding frame. This axial coding related the primary coding frame to the new sub-category frame. The coding was done until the analysis reaches its saturation point (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2016).

The codes that I used were devised from the research study questions, interview results and observation data. These codes were relevant to answering the research question. allowing me to get a concrete view of strengths and weaknesses, where events

needed to change, and of ideas for the interventions. Table 7 is the correlation of the research question to the code.

Table 7

Preliminary Coding Frame

Research Question	Code Categories
How does the teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect the collaboration and relationship with parents at the IEP meetings?	Collaboration comfort Positive or negative communication Welcoming to participate Teacher self-efficacy Communication ease and flow IEP roles inequity Joint brainstorming/compromise Ease and flow of communication Active listening

The coding from the pre-interviews helped formulate the innovation protocols. The data results from the IEP observations and the post-interviews showed whether the innovation was effective in teachers having an enlightened awareness and positive communication change when interacting with the parents. With Constructive Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014) and Constant Comparative Method (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in mind, I gathered the data results from each interview and observation and compared their answers, within the single interview/observation and to the other participant interviews/observations. Constructive Grounded Theory and the Constant Comparative Method aids in the explanation of the data and determine if there is a relationship between the data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research literature and theories used to help develop this research (Transformative, Self-Efficacy, Community of Practice, and Model of Parent Involvement) helped determine the

preliminary coding constructs. After relating each teacher’s pre-interview results, I developed the new coding categories (secondary coding) that led to a more specific focus to categories that would lead to a richer understanding of how teachers and parents were relating to each other. The observational data demonstrated the communicative and relationship areas of strength and weakness. Coding, analysis, and triangulation was implemented immediately after each data set result. Triangulation of the data involved comparing the results within the single participant, to the other participants, and to the prior data sets. NVIVO qualitative coding application was used to help organize and compare the data. Table 8 shows the coding constructs and sequence of use. Figure 3 demonstrates the axial coding chart of the construct relationship.

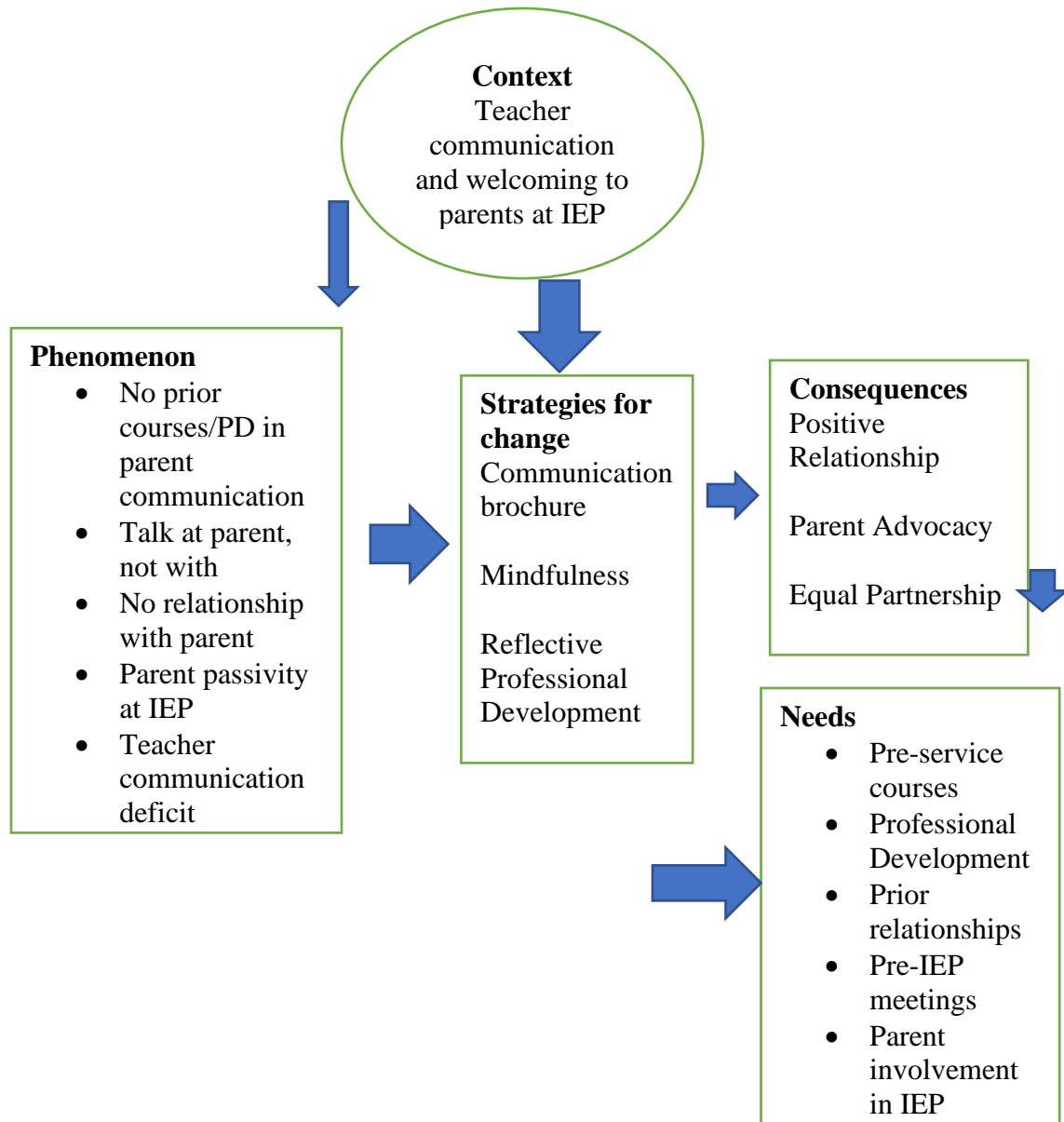
Table 8

Coding Frames

Preliminary	Secondary	Final
Communication/Collaboration pre-service courses	Teacher/parent relationship	Communication change
Professional development in communication/collaboration	Pre- IEP communication/collaboration	Parent advocacy
Communication frequency	Teacher attitudes	Teacher comfort
Communication type	Parent attitudes	Teacher/parent relationship
Equal participation	Meeting strengths	Innovation affect
	Meeting weaknesses	

Figure 3

Axial Coding Frame



Following the triangulation of the pre-interview and observational data, a final coding frame was developed. These constructs linked the prior coding frames together and formed the new categories that would help answer my research question of how does teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect the collaboration and relationship with parents at the IEP meetings? The axial coding diagram (Figure 4) shows the linking of the data results and sequential flow of this study.

Limitations

Foreseeable limitations are possible threats to the internal validity. There could potentially be participant bias which could show in the interviews and simulation discussions. Bias could show through non-engagement, non-compliance with verbal directions, or showing an emotional bias against the parents or other team-members. It is also possible that participants may not be honest with sharing their actual perceptions and thoughts. They may seek to comment using words and impressions that they think the researcher may want to hear, or they may be fearful of being totally honest and transparent. To mitigate potential participant bias, I explained to them about the need for honest and appropriate comments that reflect their individual perceptions. The need for this innovation and communication transformation required that each participant understand and want to strive for better parent communication skills. If the participant could not commit to being unbiased and open to new knowledge, then they were excused from this research participation. I, as the researcher, could also be biased because I am a special educator in the school. I maintained an awareness of this possible bias and carefully watched my words and actions. Other possible limitations could be that the participants could potentially become disengaged with the study and become a challenge

to get buy-in. For mitigation of a disengagement limitation, I pilot tested the innovation simulations and resources, looking for ideas to keep the participants engaged, such as using videos and authentic simulations.

Reliability and Validity

According to Creswell and Miller (2000), some of a qualitative research study's validity checks include: prolonged engagement and persistence in the field, triangulation of data methods, whether the study is clarifying researcher bias, member checking, and using detailed descriptions (Creswell, 2003). As a special education teacher and case manager at the study context, I have a prolonged engagement with the special education team, the students with special education services, and their parents. I have prior knowledge of the IEP meetings and was able to do pre-research IEP meeting observations. My participative engagement in the special education department has built up a trusting relationship. This trust carried through to the research in which all data methodology and innovations were relevant to the study's purpose of improving communication/collaboration between teacher and parent at the IEP meetings. Data from interviews, simulation responses, and observations were triangulated and coded to find patterns that were used for explanation and innovation. Each interview was member-checked with the participants to validate for accuracy. The study report was detailed to include vivid, rich descriptions of all data methods and innovations, allowing for replicability of methodology. Further, in the interest of rich, thick description, I included extensive direct quoting of participants and clear descriptions, in order to allow the reader of the research to consider the participants own words as well as my interpretations. The ability for this report to be reproduced by other researchers, teachers or special education

professionals makes it more transferable and reliable. I included a section on clarification of researcher bias, aiming that the report showed consistency, transparency, and trustworthiness.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

“Genuine communication involves contagion.” (Dewey, 1910, p.175)

The purpose of this action research was to improve communication and collaboration between teacher and parent(s), and to study an intervention to engage a more welcoming communication to boost parent confidence to communicate and advocate for their child at the IEP meetings. In this chapter, I share the results of this qualitative study of a teacher-parent intervention designed to support better communication and outcomes at IEP meetings. Mapping out the progression of this study, I begin with a summary of the pilot testing of the innovation as well as recruitment procedures and participant demographics. After this, I discuss what was learned from multiple qualitative data sources, including: pre-innovation interviews, IEP meeting observations, and post-innovation interviews. Each section includes a representative sample of participant quotes for explaining and enriching the data results. As the results were analyzed, a recurring theme emerged regarding the need for greater teacher awareness of effective communication practice and strengthening of parent/teacher relationships. This discussion of results is aimed at informing an understanding of my research question: How does teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect their collaboration and relationship at IEP meetings?

For understanding this study’s results, operational definitions for the code constructs are as follows:

- Communication is dialogue between the teacher and parent(s)

- Relationship is the trust and comfort of teachers and parents working together
- Parent advocacy/equal partnership refers to greater assertions of concerns, questioning, expressing their opinions, and staff jointly making an IEP decision together as a team.

Earlier research cycle results demonstrated that there was a need to encourage equal partnership for the parents. As defined in chapter 1, this research study considers equal partnership is when the teacher and parent works together in forming an educational plan for the student.

The first step for achieving this end goal was to examine the origin of the problem: teacher knowledge in the parent communication area. Parents' confidence to advocate for their child depends on encountering a welcoming attitude from teachers and gaining knowledge of their role at the IEP meeting (Slade et al., 2018; Underwood, 2010). Addressing the parent needs, in observing the IEP observations, was the first step toward developing a sense of how to engage a teacher-parent partnership. The follow up implications will be discussed in chapter 5. The need to support teachers' communication skills with training about communicating with parents was the impetus behind the development of this study's guiding research question.

Innovation Pilot Test Results

To ensure a valid and replicable innovation, I developed questions about parent/teacher collaboration, communication, and perceptions about the IEP meeting from the cycle 1 data (refer to Chapter 1 for a full discussion of the cycle 1 findings that informed this work). To gather as many opinions as possible to inform this, I looked to

crowdsourcing through social media outlets, including: Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

The respondents to my crowd sourced questions were parents and teachers, both known and unknown to me (Table 9). None of the respondents were the innovation participants.

Table 9

Crowd Sourcing Pilot Test

Question	Sample (n=)	Result/Percentage	Participant Quote Examples
What color is your comfort level in communicating with teachers or parents?	5	Red (extreme comfort) 40% Orange (comfortable) 40% Blue (discomfort) 0% Green (extreme discomfort) 20%	
Does the burden of parent/teacher collaboration lie mainly on the teacher or parent?	18	Parent 5.6% Teacher 38.9% Both 55.6%	“Parents have been accustomed to being shut down. We should treat them with value.” (Teacher) “If the teacher doesn’t value or believe the need to collaborate then it doesn’t matter what the parent wishes are. It all depends upon the teacher.” (Parent)
Do you believe that parents should be equal partners with teachers at the IEP meeting?	32	Yes 87.5% No 6.3% No comment 6.3%	“Parents are equal partners according to the law.” (Parent advocate) “Some teachers hide behind parents, telling them one thing and expecting the parent to advocate in the IEP meeting” (parent)

The crowd sourced pilot testing involved those three separate questions that were posted on different days. Each question brought different respondents, including parents, teachers, and parent advocates. The first question, asking for their color of comfort in parent/teacher communications, brought answers from five teachers, in which four of the teachers were comfortable but one teacher was uncomfortable with communicating.

The next question asked which stakeholder (parent or teacher) has the burden of forging a collaboration. The respondents consisted of seven parents, ten teachers and one parent advocate. Interestingly, only 55% of the teachers thought the onus is on both the parent and teacher. One teacher commented, “This is a great chance to learn from each other and make a unique experience for each child!” However, 38% of respondents, all parents, said the responsibility rests solely with the teacher, while one teacher mentioned that it depends completely on the parent. With these results, I concluded that neither stakeholder wants the responsibility of leading the collaboration effort even though the teachers know the legal requisite of collaboration. A quote from a teacher respondent demonstrated the need for collaboration with the statement: “If educators can’t speak freely and ally with parents to do what’s best for child, who loses out? The child.”

Lastly, I asked for their opinions on equal partnership at the IEP meeting, attracting thirty-two responses consisting of twelve parents, two parent advocates, and sixteen teachers. All respondents—except for two teachers (who suggested that “parents have their own agenda” and “partnership relies solely on the teacher’s values”)—believed that equal partnership was important. One teacher’s quote, whose sentiments were echoed by many more teachers, parents, and the advocates, was “This is the law and

teachers must involve parents in all IEP decisions.” The legality of collaboration seems to be of importance to the respondents, but no one seemed to pick up on intrinsic benefits of working together.

Using the cycle 1 data results, which showed a need for developing communication skills and involvement of parents, along with the teacher/parent crowd sourcing perceptions of an imbalance of collaboration efforts, I developed an innovation consisting of a three-session professional development on IEP meeting communication skills awareness for teachers. To establish a valid innovation, I pilot tested for authenticity, refining of discussion questions, and engagement of the simulation role plays with a group of five teachers. These teachers were from schools outside of this study’s context school, allowing for participant validity in the innovation. Independently viewing the three IEP simulation sessions on their own time, the teachers responded with their perceptions of the innovation’s strengths and weaknesses. Pilot testing data (Table 10) provided suggestions that helped adjust the innovation questions, prompts, and simulations to be more authentic, engaging, and reflective of practice.

Table 10

Innovation Pilot Test Results

Question	Results	Participant Quotes Examples
Did the background context help you with knowledge of the IEP case?	Four teachers mentioned that there was enough information. One teacher wanted test and work data from the student.	“I understood as much as any teacher sitting in on an IEP meeting. The questions and comments gave me information that helped to understand the concerns of the parent.” (Teacher 3) “I need to know the child’s test data and IEP progress to relate to the case.” (Teacher 2)
Did the IEP meeting simulation sound authentic and engaging?	All five teachers thought the simulations were authentic and engaging.	“The posted simulation questions were relevant these are questions that are reflected on my own practice all the questions are really well” (Teacher 1)
Do you think teachers will carry over improved communication skills to their interactions with parents?	All five teachers thought that there could be a carry-over of communication skills to the IEP meeting.	“I do think that teachers will carry over into communication skills and interactions with parents from the activity” (Teacher 2)
Suggestions for making an effective innovation experience?	An experience in which the participants can hear and see the parent frustrations.	“My suggestion would be to have it be an audible simulation, where we actually hear the parent crying” (Teacher 5)

Pilot testing the discussion questions and simulation exercises were important for validating the innovation’s structure, regarding authenticity and engagement. Not only

did the pilot test participants respond on the innovation language usage, but they also included new motivating presentation ideas. Per their comments, each of the participants considered the discussion prompts to be thought provocative and fitting to the topic—for instance, one teacher wrote that, “Those questions made me think about how I react at my IEPs.” Another teacher thought the prompts were “challenging and caused me to wonder about how I work with the families”. The simulation exercises elicited similar responses of “challenging,” “thought-provoking” and “difficult.” Even though there were hints of discomfort, each participant was engaged in the activity and found the simulations to be authentic. Pilot tester #4 said, “I was up on deck with parents, very frustrated at times not knowing what to do, having a child in cat B. It's all hard, so I do think the exercise was very engaging and that it was it was a very good stimulation;” and pilot tester # 2 said that the activity was “reflective of my meetings.” It was generally noted that the activity was authentic and induced reflection, and the pilot testers added some presentation pointers such as adding audio and/or video for realism.

Findings from Pre-Interviews

Structured, open ended individual interviews were carried out in October 2020 before the innovation commenced to understand teacher perceptions pre-intervention. The courses/training category looked at courses and on-site (in school context) professional development dedicated to communication and collaboration with parents. Other question categories and the preliminary codes included: present relationships with the parents, communication flow and frequency, negative interactions that they have experienced, perceptions of equal partnership, communication skills that they would like to develop and their prediction of the useability and benefits of participating in

simulations of difficult IEPs along with colleagues. Pre-service courses are defined as courses taken as part of the education/teacher licensure curriculum at the college/university level; and professional development are trainings given within the school. Tables 11-16 show the pre-innovation interview protocol and resulting answers. Following that, I share several pre-interview themes that emerged related to relationships and communications with teachers and parents.

Table 11

Pre-service courses and Prior Professional Development

Question	Result Analysis	Quotes
How many pre-service courses did you have in parent collaboration and parent communication techniques?	None of the teachers has a pre-service course in communications. Two of the teachers had one course in collaboration.	“The collaboration course only included a small portion on parents” (Teacher 2)
Have you ever received any professional development on parent collaboration and communication?	Four teachers did not have a PD training. One teacher had two-three trainings in collaboration, from an early intervention position, outside of FCPS.	“I think we had courses, but I don’t recall anything specific other than it being embedded into a course” (Teacher 1) “information was incorporated into other trainings” “A specialist in a school coached me on how to respond to parents” (Teacher 2)

Lack of Pre-Service and In-Service Training in Parent Communication

The first topic discussed was pre-service courses in parent communication and collaboration. One emergent theme that was surprising was that not one of the teachers had a preservice course on communication skills, and only two teachers had courses in team collaboration, though each teacher had a master's degree in education. This can be attributed to a gap within the pre-service education programs leaving the new teacher to seek out their own techniques and approaches to developing their discourse strategies. Without formal education in parent communication and authentic experiences, the teachers can be at a loss of how to respond to difficult discourses or how to encourage the parent to participate (Elbaum et al, 2016; Howland et al, 2006; Magaldi-Dopman & Conway, 2012). Along with this sentiment, Ankeny et al. (2006) proposed providing teachers with the knowledge of how to empathize, be transparent, and honest with the parents, even when in frustrating dialogues.

Two of the teachers mentioned that they had a team collaboration graduate course that had a unit on collaborating with parents but that did not include many parent interaction strategies. Each of the participants said a similar sentiment to Teacher #4, "School based professional development in parent communication or collaboration? Not that I can recall." Special education teachers in FCPS are offered monthly professional development within the school context or through the district, yet neither of the teachers had witnessed dedicated training in the areas of parent communication and collaboration. Teacher #5 pondered, "It is not a bad idea for the county to give professional development on communication." Meanwhile, Teacher #3 mentioned that administrators had emphasized good communication skills stating, "It has been a focus from supervisors

in my department, on the importance of communication.” Therefore, if positive relations and less IEP contention is being emphasized by administrators, it may suggest the need for training as well as communication guides for teachers.

Table 12

Teacher/Parent Relationship

Question	Result Analysis	Quotes
What type of relationship do you have with the parents?	Each of the five teachers consider their relationships with the parents to be good and warm despite some parent interactions are negative. The participants saw the importance of relationship building	<p>“Typically, my relationships are good and warm. Sometimes it can get tense. A good relationship is when the parents are supportive. It gets tense when the parents are critical or just rubs me the wrong way. I have to try a lot harder.” (Teacher 1)</p> <p>Parents needs to be onboard to develop a relationship”. (Teacher 2)</p>

Complex Relationships with Parents

Another emergent theme was the complexity of parent-teacher relationships in the teachers’ initial perceptions. When asked about their relationships with the parents, some inconsistencies occurred in their answers. For instance, “I typically have a pretty good relationship with my parents” (Teacher #5) was an expressed sentiment. Yet in contrast, other narratives indicated otherwise, showing instability as explained by Teacher #1, “It gets tense when the parents are critical or just rubs me the wrong way. I have to try a lot harder,” or Teacher #3, who noted that, “We have good relationships, but they are not as consistent as I like.” For this reason, there is a need for support in forging parent

relationships as Teacher #4 said “I want to develop strong personal relationships with my families.”

Furthermore, the teachers voiced relationship building as an area to gain more reflective skills in—though until being probed or asked to think about this, the participants did not seem to critically reflect on their parent relationships. The teachers put the onus of relationships onto the parent, explaining that relationships were strained because of parent criticisms, of them not being onboard with the staff, and noted feelings of discomfort in the interactions. For instance, Teacher #1 relayed a story of a tense meeting in which she saw forging a relationship was difficult, “The parent had a denial of what her son could do. She would not agree with whatever I said. After that, I had to try hard not to fall into negativity. She had a lot of denial.” Teacher #3 described similar feelings and experiences, “I had a few parents that were negative. Usually most of these were in the evaluation process. Either parents disagreed with what the team was recommending, or they were just unhappy with what was happening, and we just couldn’t fix it.”

Sometimes the more difficult discourses reportedly negatively affected the teachers, causing frustration and anger. As Teacher #2 noted, “I had one parent who took offense to everything I said. She wanted to fight about everything. She had an extremely negative outlook for her child. It frustrated me. She was difficult to work with. I had to learn how not to take these things personally.” Even with these complications, all participants claimed to value establishing positive relationships with the parents.

Table 13

Communication flow and frequency

Question	Result Analysis	Quotes
Does communication flow freely? Is it challenging? How often do you communicate with them?	Four teachers said that their communications with parents were consistent and frequent. One teacher mentioned that she did not communicate consistently but would like to. Unfortunately, her caseload has many students which make parent communication less frequent. Two of the teachers mentioned that consistent communication was tough to accomplish and takes a time commitment.	“You don’t want to call a parent the first time for something bad. You can have a conversation more if there is a rapport.” (Teacher 1) “Over the years, communication has gotten easier. I am an introvert. I hate to call parents on the phone. I like to do email” (Teacher 2)

Communication Pattern Inconsistencies

Another important idea was around communication frequency, wherein the participants alluded that conversation with the parents of their student cases were infrequent and inconsistent. Teacher #3 mentioned that, “It is hard to keep up with consistent communication. I struggle with getting things sent home and being in contact with parents on what is being worked on.” Similarly, Teacher #1 mentioned “Communication is tough for me because I am an introvert.” However, an interesting finding is that the distance learning (virtual) mode of instruction has enabled these teachers to engage in more dialogue with the parents, compared to when they were in the brick-and-mortar instruction. As Teacher #3 said, “The upside of the virtual is having the contact with the parents,” as she reflected on the fact that virtual learning has encouraged

teachers and parent to converse more. This unintended consequence of the global pandemic and moving to distance learning spurred on a frequency in communication, perhaps emerging because of the convenience and accessibility factor in having virtual conversations, especially for busy or working parents. It may also be that the virtual interactions could feel lower stakes or easier for uncertain parents than a face-to-face sit down. Despite this frequency improvement, teachers felt that the parent conversation flow was still not as smooth and open as it could be.

Hess et al. (2006) proposed that effortless communication flow has an opening effort on discussions and is a part of healthy relationships. Even though the teachers understand the importance of consistent communication flow, the reported phenomenon of parent disinterest caused a problem for the teachers. Teacher #5 voiced that “Communication flow depends on the parent. They hold all the cards close to their chest.” Likewise, Teacher #2 said “You can have a better conversation if there is a rapport.” As has been noted, dialogue between teachers and parents depend on the relational aspect. The teacher participants mentioned that they have frequent communication with the parents in the forms of parent emails, texts, and communication journals, particularly around school events and child concerns. Yet, although these communication forms are helpful, they do not demonstrate true conversing or meeting of the minds—and thus may demonstrate a chasm between the teacher and parent.

Table 14

Meeting Negativity

Question	Result Analysis	Quote
Have you had parents who were negative toward you or the situation? Why do you think this happened? What did you do to handle it?	All participants have had negative parent interactions at the IEP meetings. None of the meetings ended in mediation or due process.	“It gets tense when the parents are critical or just rubs me the wrong way.” (Teacher 1)

Encountering Triggers for and Managing Negativity

Negativity, from all stakeholders, can be detrimental to forging a relationship (Coots, 2007; Ankeny et al., 2009). Elements surrounding negativity (both in terms of triggers for negativity and how teachers handle it) surfaced when teachers felt that their expertise was being questioned. Teacher #2 relayed a story of having to deal with displaced frustration, “I had one parent who took offense to everything I said. She wanted to fight about everything. It frustrated me that she was difficult to deal with. I had to learn to separate what she said and not take anything personally.” Similarly, teacher #1 talked about encountering a negative situation, “A parent brought in an advocate who came in with a stack of papers and extremely critical of the schoolwork. The parent had a denial of what her son could do. She would not agree with anything I said. They did not believe the difference between home and school environment. A lot of denial.” Along with the teacher’s sense of a difficult discourse caused by the questioning of their expertise, it is possible that the parent’s attitude may play a part in the overall bitterness too. Teacher #3 surmised that parents may get upset because, “We just can’t fix it.” Likewise, teacher #5 proposed that the cause of frustration as, “parents may feel responsible for the disability.

They may feel that they are a bad parent. They can be very defensive.” Whether or not this was a factor or something that had occurred, the teachers did tend to personalize the parent actions. Despite the purported antagonism that the teachers sensed, they noted that they tried to carry through with empathy.

Table 15

Equal Partnership

Question	Result Analysis	Quote
How do you think parents could be more equal partners at IEP meetings or IEP development?	All teachers liked the ideal of an equal partnership, but two teachers had questions of whether it was possible.	<p>“I do believe parents should be equal partners at the IEP, but I see the flipside that they look at us for the educational expertise. Not many parents do more than a little tweaking to the goals” (Teacher 1)</p> <p>“I do not know if it could be 50-50” (Teacher 3)</p>

Tensions in Partnership Roles

Though most teachers noted valuing an equal partnership role between parents and teachers, there was a measure of hesitancy or tension in some ways. When asked their perceptions of an equal partnership at the IEP table, Teacher #2 said, “Absolutely! Parents and teachers need to be equal partners” and Teacher #5 thought that, “Parents should be equal partners in the IEPs. They know their kids best.” Each of the participants agreed that an ideal IEP meeting would involve both teachers and parents working together, as a team, making joint IEP decisions. On the other hand, teacher #3 perceived equal partnership to be linked to knowledge, “Equal partnership depends on the goals that

you are talking about. I don't know if it can be 50-50. Parents can help develop a functional communication goal but not an articulation goal." Overall, the teachers saw a slight tension here, noting comprehension as an obstacle to establishing an equal partnership wherein, without the experiences and skills that teachers have, parents rely on the teachers for their professional advice. For example, teacher #1 explained this conundrum, "I do believe parents should be equal partners at the IEP, but I see the flipside that they look at us for the educational expertise of how to get their children to learn. The parents look at us to be the experts in that setting." Though the teachers saw themselves as the knowledge guide for the parents, not all mentioned sharing that comfort level with providing parents the resources they need for advocating.

Two teachers attributed the inequity in roles to the parents opting for non-involvement, with Teacher #3 saying, "Not every parent wants to contribute. There are parents who want me to just tell them. It is not their expertise. It matters how much affects the parents." Yet they all agreed that something could be done for raising the comfort level of these parents. It has been a goal of this study, that sharing academic and behavioral knowledge or including parents in the IEP development would help this situation. Teacher #3 realized the inequity, stating, "Parents who don't have the special education knowledge are the ones who agree to everything. They all say it sounds great, very agreeable, because they do not know the process. They should understand the curriculum."

Table 16

Innovation Thoughts

Question	Result Analysis	Quote
Do you think taking a professional development training in parent communication skills might help in your parent interactions?	Each of the participants mentioned that they predict that the training would be beneficial to their practice.	“The parent communication training would be helpful. I think there would be a carryover in our IEP meetings. I would develop an awareness of things not going well” (Teacher 1) “It is always helpful to learn something new. I can always change what I do. It will be helpful in being prepared to talk with parents.” (Teacher 4)

Usefulness of Communication Training/Support

Each teacher thought that the innovation could be beneficial to their practice and they all were willing to continue to the activity part of this research. Teacher #4 envisioned possible change in their communicative habits, stating “It is always helpful to learn something new. I can always change what I do.” Similarly, Teacher #5 imagined that the training would help in preparedness, “It will be helpful in being prepared to talk with parents. Anything that can help me do my job better and be a better communicator with the parents would be good.”

Each participant was asked to reflect on their own practice to determine which communication and collaboration areas that they needed to develop and how can teachers forge a more solid and equitable bonding with the parents. Being prepared to enter difficult discourses and having the communication skills were of utmost importance for the teachers, Specifically, Teacher #1 queried about how to positively interact in adversity,” I take it so personally that parents are so critical, and they never give positive

feedback.” Likewise, Teacher #2 considered leaving the field because of difficulties with the parents, saying “I thought about leaving the field, but then I think of the children.” For these reasons, the participants had hopes that this professional development would give them remedies for the problematic discourses. Additionally, the participants wanted to gain awareness of their communication behavior with carry-over of dialogue consciousness, thus the teachers equated the effectiveness of the innovation to their personal communicative awareness change and to having less uncomfortable parent exchanges.

Table 17

Distance Learning Thoughts

Participant	Benefit to Communication	Teacher Quote
1	yes	“The virtual experience has helped me to grow in dealing with parents”
2	yes	“Every time I get online, I involve the parents. I make sure that the parents know we can’t do this without them”
3	yes	“The upside of the virtual is having the contact with the parent” “Virtual has been helpful for the parents. The parents see the online activities”
4	yes	“I can spend as much time working with the family as I have with the child himself”
5	yes	“In the virtual environment, communication is more frequent”

During the pre-innovation interviews all participants talked about the rise in their interactions with parents, through the distance learning. Thus, they saw an unexpected benefit to the pandemic. Teacher #1 mentioned, “the virtual experience has helped me grow in dealing with parents”, so the distance learning format has become an impetus for parent/teacher communication change. Similarly, teacher #3 and teacher #5 both saw

virtual instruction as helpful for both parents and them because of the greater frequency of contact and sharing of activities.

In summary, the pre-interview phase of this study demonstrated that there is a lack of courses and trainings for communication and collaboration with parents, and that teachers often struggle to develop good relationships with parents and communicate effectively. In the light of this deficit, the teachers still do their best to communicate in IEP meetings. There is a need to foster and create an atmosphere of respect and equality; and supporting teachers with an understanding around developing their parent interaction skills, at the pre-service level and again at the school site, could pave the way for teacher success. Thus, communication skills transfer into the actual IEP meetings may positively affect the parent verbal participation of parents and transfer to a stronger relationship. Yet, for this to happen, communicative dialogue requires more consistency than was discussed and described in the pre-interviews. Teachers' strategies and modes are varied but the communications are business-like, such as in talking about progress, concerns, and goals.

As an insider researcher, I am putting trust into the validity of their responses. The youngest teacher, with less than ten years teaching experience, and the teacher with the most teaching experience, greater than 20 years, were the teachers with the most confidence in their practice and most forthcoming with strategy ideas. The results from the pre-interview data helped in developing the innovation simulation scripts and discussion prompts, assuring for innovation authenticity and effectiveness.

Innovation Findings

Data collected from my observations during the innovation/simulation (see chapter 3 for more background and discussion on the innovation itself) helped reveal the teachers' learning in process. In this section, I will walk through the progression of the innovation, weaving in examples and quotes that aim to capture teachers' experiences and thinking along the way.

From the beginning, there was a sense of uncertainty from some of the teachers whose prior professional development experiences may have been lacking. Teacher #2 stated her annoyance with professional development but then asserted a caveat:

In the back of my head, I say 'oh no another training'...but if it is about collaborating with parents, then I would be up for this. The most meaningful learning is experience. Responding to situations and watching others respond would be super helpful.

This suggested that offering teachers opportunities for interactive activities that engage critical reflection could be engaging and useful for the participants.

The pre-innovation interview responses informed me that this community was enthusiastic for teaching (Teacher #2: "I love teaching, instructing the children, and working with their families"), wanted to have positive relationships with the parents (Teacher #4: "I want to develop strong personal relationships with my families"), and were willing to learn from each other for improvement and/or change (Teacher #1 "The parent communication training would be helpful. I think there would be a carryover into our IEP meetings. I would develop an awareness from discussing and role playing with the others"). In the hope that this study would be beneficial for the teachers, the

innovation approach was an interactive delivery method that was based on group reflection

Session 1: IEP Beginnings

Table 18

Session 1: Components and slide numbers

Component	Slide Number
Simulation information and consent	1
Resources	2
What do you think? reflection questions	3
Simulation exercise background	4
Simulation exercise	5, 6, 7
Debrief reflection questions	8

Table 19

What do you think? IEP actions (slide 3)

Question	Sample Discussion Thoughts
What do you think are the most important actions to do before and at the beginning of an IEP meeting? What actions should be avoided?	<p>“Make sure you have the paperwork and preparations done before the meeting. Make sure you have a good place for the meeting.”</p> <p>“The staff need to check in with each other before time. I have been in meetings where the general ed and special ed teachers were not on the same page, especially if a complicated case.”</p>

Preparation and paperwork were most of the pre-meeting actions. Thus, the participants communicated the importance of being prepared to address the child’s needs.

Preparedness included having data documentation ready, IEP paperwork ready, and

inviting the team. Teacher #2 brought up the practice of surveying parents before the meeting, “I like to send home a survey of what are you most proud of your student doing and what you would like to see? Are you happy with what we are doing? I like to give the parents a list of acronyms so that we are on the same page.” Similarly, some teachers will convene a pre-IEP meeting, such as Teacher #3, who shared, “We need to talk to the parent ahead of time to go over the goals and make sure they understand the goals and what we are looking at and why they were made.” The teachers all agreed that talking to the parents ahead of the IEP meeting to explain the goals is helpful for parent knowledge and team participation. As part of the pre-IEP meeting, the teachers present the already drawn-up goals. Yet, if goals are pre-determined and presented to the parents, then are the parents equally participating in the goal development?

Table 20

What do you think? Roles (slide 3)

Question	Sample Discussion Thoughts
Setting roles for the IEP team members is important. What do you see your role as? What do you see the parent role as? What do you see the other member roles as?	“It’s as the teacher is the hostess of the party. It is your job to make sure that everybody is comfortable. The guest of honor is the parent. The parent should be the focus of the meeting.”

IEP meetings involve the use of roles, such as teacher, case manager, therapist, administrator. Even with the role labels, participants asserted that roles need to be defined and clarified, before and at the beginning of meetings. In that case, the teachers explained the types of jobs and their correlating responsibilities. Teacher #2 analogized that her role was to be the hostess and the parent was her guest, “It’s as the teacher is the hostess of

the party. It is your job to make sure that everybody is comfortable. The guest of honor is the parent. The parent should be the focus of the meeting.” Along with the role of being the hostess, Teacher #4 accepted the burden of facilitation and meeting flow, “As a case manager, my role is to make sure that every member is heard. Be a liaison to the parent. Make sure that every person is heard. We are the bridge for the parents.” Along with the teacher role, the parent role is of equal importance. All the participants perceived the parents as unsure of what their responsibilities entailed. Teacher #5 believes that teachers need to try to involve the family, “Parents need to be drawn in. They are the focus. People forget that parents are part of the team. The parent role needs to be clarified.” But sometimes the parent needs the extra guidance and clarification, as Teacher #3 mentioned, “Parents need to be drawn in. They are the focus. People forget that parents are part of the team. The parent role needs to be clarified.” Even with the knowledge that roles are important at the IEPs, some teachers commented that the teacher role was to be the expert and IEP driver while the parent role was to take in the information and ask questions. Even though in the pre-interview, they believed in getting parents involved, the involvement had a limit, which is in the development of the goals. An example is from teacher #1, “Parent role is to ask questions and listen to the child’s needs.”

Table 21

What do you think? Communication flow (slide 3)

Question	Sample Discussion Thoughts
How should a successful IEP meeting unfold? What tactics would you use to ensure the meeting stays positive and proactive in tone?	“I make sure direct my questions towards the parent. We must present a united front. The goals are something we all work on together.” “Ask questions and empathize.”

Tactics used by the teachers for ensuring a positive meeting includes team members coming prepared with documentation of child’s strengths and weaknesses, along with a united front. Since the parent is given a draft copy of the IEP goals, in advance, it is anticipated that the parent will have read them and determined questions or concerns. In this respect, there is a division of meeting roles. Hence, the teachers take on the role of data expert and the parent role is making interpretations of what the teacher is saying and to ask questions. The teachers felt that it was important for the team to be on the same page, when responding to the parent. Teacher #4 shared this sentiment in her assertion, “This is a whole child. This is a whole team.”

Additionally, with being data prepared, the teachers felt that they must be ready to respond to questions, concerns, arguments, and parent non-involvement. Teacher #5 summed this up, “Mom comes into meeting with questions and concerns, hopefully she read it. We all have had parent who has never opened the envelope. More parents have said that they have not read the goals than have. Parents may have questions on the wording. We might have to modify goals, service hours.” The consensus was that this meeting would be tough because in the simulation, the mother had to take time off from her job and she gets easily frustrated.

Slides 5, 6, and 7 were the simulation exercise. Slides included the parent narrative and a communication prompt to help the teachers respond. Another special education teacher, from a different school district, acted out the parent role. This teacher/actress has been involved with contentious meetings and was able to lend an authenticity to the exercise, acting with emotion. Keeping anonymity, her part was pre-recorded, and she was not told of any participant demographics. For the simulation exercise, the study participants volunteered to act out the case manager role by listening and responding to the parent, as in a real IEP meeting.

Simulation 1 (slide 5)

- **Parent:** *Hello everybody, I am Mrs. Martin. Usually, my husband attends the IEP meetings, so I am not sure of what will happen here.*
Case Manager: *(your response) Remember introductions, explain the agenda and structure of the meeting, ask for parent concerns, and their goals for the meeting.*

Simulation 2 (slide 6)

- **Parent:** *It is nice to know your names and job labels but what exactly do you do with Billy? I am very worried that Billy is not reading as well as he should, at his age. Reading is not his favorite subject and he'd rather play video games instead of reading a book. I am not sure he really understands the words he is reading. I've tried to help him, but he gets very upset at me. We would like to see him attend a work skills center and eventually move to an independent living home, but I don't think he will get in (parent begins to cry). He gets very upset at any type of schoolwork and his behavior becomes aggressive. What can we do for Billy? (parent is still upset)*
Case Manager: *(your response) Remember to actively listen (rephrase, nod, ask questions, face parent), show concern and express empathy.*

Simulation 3 (slide 7)

- **Parent:** *I have seen the notes about Billy hitting Mrs. D and the other students. This is terrible, how can we get him to stop this? He tells me that he won't hit at school, but then he still does. I also want to know why Billy got a C in math. He loves math. I thought he was doing very well in math. What can we do at home, to help him with math and reading? Billy has a brother here, in the 6th grade. Can his brother help him in school?*

Case Manager: (your response) Remember to actively listen, ask open-ended question, respond to parent concerns/questions, involve parents in brainstorming, share data and information be detailed in descriptions and ask about Billy.

The end slide (Table 22) includes three simulation reflection discussion prompts which included their thoughts of the parent and case manager roles. Each of the teachers reacted with awareness of their words and emotions. No one acted with tension, but they tried to appease the parent. Despite participant engagement and simulation authenticity, there still was a sense of it being contrived. Participants' cognizance of being watched by their colleagues and the nature of this professional development may be a limitation of the study exercise. After each simulation part, the teachers discussed their colleague's acting and other ways the volunteer could have responded. Discussions were vivid with ideas and participants seemed eager to voice their thoughts. Since this community of colleagues were familiar and comfortable with each other, critical group reflection flow and ideas were accepted without embarrassment (Teacher #5: "I like being able to hear from my colleagues how they would handle various situations, the language they use, etc.").

The teachers communicated a negative perception of the parent, describing her as frustrated, combative, and emotional. Teacher #3 noted about the parent, "I don't think she wanted to hear what we had to say. She had her own plans for the meeting," and Teacher #2 said, "The parent seemed combative and not willing to listen to the children." On the contrary, the teachers had a positive evaluation of their interactions, such as empathetic, supportive, and inclusive, as seen in the following quotes: "I think we should be more empathetic to her situation. (Teacher #3)"; "I wonder if the mom feels responsible for her son's disability? (Teacher #5)"; and "Maybe we need to treat her with

softness and understanding. (Teacher #2).” When asked if they have had meetings that involved similar discourse, all replied that they had. Thus, in a simulation, reactions may differ, but the awareness is the same. As this simulation brought awareness of verbal and non-verbal language to the forefront, there was hope that the community reflections and gained awareness will carry through to genuine parent interactions.

Table 22

Reflection Discussion (slide 8)

Reflection Question	Sample Participant Responses
How do you think the parent is feeling (satisfied, frustrated, etc.) during this meeting? Why?	<p>“Very Frustrated”</p> <p>“Not satisfied with the teacher and school”</p>
Reflect on the dialogues with the parent: Were you comfortable with this meeting? What were the tough situations? Would you have said or done anything differently?	<p>“I felt uncomfortable because I was being watched by you all but also annoyed with this parent. I get frustrated when the parent is combative and doesn’t want to listen to our expertise and data.”</p> <p>“I felt sorry for this mom. I think she must feel that we are all against her.”</p>
What 3 words would describe your communication approach? What 3 words would describe the parent’s communication?	<p>Parent: “distrustful”, “emotional”, “unsure”, “direct”, “demanding”, “worried”, “concerned”</p> <p>Teachers: “empathetic”, “supportive”, “thorough”, “parent oriented”, “team oriented”, “inclusive”</p>

Session 2: IEP Goals

Table 23

Session 2: Components and slide numbers

Component	Slide Number
Simulation information and consent	1
What do you think? reflection questions	2
You-Tube video of IEP Meeting	3
Post-Video discussion	4
Simulation exercise background	5
Simulation exercise	6, 7, 8, 9
Debrief reflection questions	10

Session 2 was implemented on November 9, 2020. Unfortunately, there was a three-week break between the first two sessions because some of the participants were returning to on-site instruction and were involved in planning for the change of setting. As in the previous session, the teachers viewed a simulation information slide including a confidentiality statement. Afterwards the participants engaged and shared reflections of their practice (Table 24). In their teaching practice, they get much training about need for documentation and assessment data. Notably, this showed in their organizational concrete approach, of presenting data and expertise.

Table 24

What do You Think? (slide 2)

Question	Sample Discussion Responses
What do you think are the most important actions to do when talking about the goals?	“talk about student progress and functioning; relate goals to the needs” “data, data, data”
Why would a parent get upset when it comes to this part of the meeting?	“There’s a lot of talk about what a child cannot do. That really bothers a parent” “IEPs are deficit based”
How could you prevent contentious issues with the parents?	“It goes back to the beginning of establishing relationship with the parent” “Emphasize and acknowledge”

Surprisingly, the teachers viewed the IEP as a deficits-based document, giving the IEP meeting a negative connotation. Teacher #2 mentioned the deficit-based thought, “IEPs are deficit based” and expanded her position for meeting transparency, “Tell parents that the IEP itself is a deficit learning process.” Though the IEP documents include sections for strengths along with the needs, parents mainly hear the negative since the goals are based on the needs. Therefore, the teachers address only the weaknesses of the child and will continue the meeting as deficit based. Bringing up the pessimistic nature of the IEP puzzled the participants as they discussed their ideas of how to turn the tables and make the meetings more positive. Teacher #3 noted that “parents don’t like to hear about their child’s problems. They may feel guilty.” As the researcher, I wonder how could the IEP approach turn to a more positive approach?

Following the discussion, the participants viewed the YouTube video (slide 3), A Non-Collaborative IEP Meeting (AG Bell Assoc, 2012). The video included verbal

discourse and non-verbal actions of the actors. Within this vignette, the parents and school staff were at a total disagreement and neither party listened to the other's reasons.

Table 25 reveals results of the video vignette community reflection discussion of the actions of each party.

Table 25

Video Reflections (slide 4)

Question	Responses
Did this meeting go well? What could have been done differently?	"Definitely Not" "Too much anger and disrespect on each side" "They need to listen instead of talk"
Was the purpose of this meeting met? What would you change?	"Not sure, I don't think anything was accomplished"
How do you think the parent felt at the end of this meeting? Please tell me 3 words to describe this meeting.	"unheard", "frustrated", "defensive", "overwhelmed", "don't feel included (out of the loop)"
Suggestions for the teacher? Suggestions for the parent?	Teacher: "Staff should have an optimistic mode" "Teachers should be transparent about their deficits but relate that they are willing to learn" Parent: "Listen to the staff" "Don't come prepared to fight" "Respect the staff expertise"

The video allowed the teachers to view a contentious IEP meeting as an outsider. The participants did not have to worry about hurting their colleague's feelings, thus they appeared more comfortable about being open and critical about the meeting proceedings. Criticisms were mainly pointed at the staff, pointing out a need for transparency, good listening, and empathy. On the other hand, the teachers also thought the parents to be closed minded and disrespectful to the staff.

Following the video vignette, the teachers participated in responding to the simulation parent. Similarly, they mentioned that they have heard these parent statements and concerns within their own meetings. Role playing was taken seriously, and the teachers talked to the parent as if in a real meeting. Playing out these discourses did make the teachers feel uncomfortable and responding took some planning and thought. Teacher #3 had this to say about her role play, “It made me feel very uncomfortable and nervous. I just imagined hearing one of my parents and I was trying very hard not to get her upset but to make my point.” Even with the discomfort, I observed engagement and motivation in participants cheering each other on and blurting out strategy ideas to use.

Simulation (slides 6-9)

- **Parent:** *You asked me if I read the goals at home. I said that I did but I still don't understand them. Why won't you read them and tell me what they mean. I may have questions about them. I know that the principal needs to leave at 3:00 but isn't my understanding important? Why does this meeting need to be rushed? Billy's old school used to allow 3 hours for a meeting. I never felt rushed there. They described and explained everything to me.*

Case Manager: *(your response)*

- **Parent:** *. I don't believe you! How can you say that my son is more than 2 grades behind in reading achievement?! Where's your proof? I don't see anything that shows me this is true? I don't understand all of these test letters. QRI, PCI, what is this garbage! Can't you talk in normal language? Let me see his math work! Billy can multiply, add, and subtract. Why does he need to learn fractions and solving word problems? That's way too hard for him! I don't think he will master that goal by the end of the year. Isn't mastery what you want? You never asked me what I would like Billy to learn? Can't we plan his IEP together?*

Case Manager: *(your response)*

- **Parent:** *What accommodations can Billy have? I wish there was a sheet listing them that I can see. I think Billy needs a lot of accommodations. Why aren't you giving him extended time for tests and assignments? Billy needs more time to think. You can't rush him. He needs read out loud. This will help him read. Isn't it up to the parent to decide what the accommodations should be? Why doesn't he have a behavior plan? I want him to not hit anyone. He has to learn how to behave! At home, he always hits his brother. He likes to play on the computer. The computer keeps him occupied. Can't he learn through computer games!*

Case Manager: *(Your response)*

- Parent:** *Why is Billy placed in the self-contained classroom? He has been progressing in his classes. He needs to be in the regular, general education classes. You can send an instructional assistant (IA) with him to help him out. I want him to have more friends. What help can he get from being in a small classroom? He doesn't even like one of the IAs, Miss D. Caitlin's mom said that she goes into the general classes, so why can't Billy! I wonder if Billy even gets the real curriculum in the small class? Don't the other students ridicule them. My Billy is not a clown!*

Case Manager: *(your response)*

The simulation exercise followed up with critically reflecting on the IEP meeting role play. Discussions were spurred on by question prompts (Table 26) looking for perceptions about the dialogue quality and ideas of different communication approaches to use.

Table 26

Reflection Discussion (slide 10)

Question	Sample Responses
Was this a positive or negative meeting? What could have been communicated differently?	"Positive because we calmed the parent" "negative, tough meeting"
How do you think the parent is feeling during this meeting? Why?	"frustrated" "doesn't like us"
What 3 words would describe your communication approach? What 3 words would describe the parent's communication?	Teachers: "calm" "empathetic" "understanding" "interested" "resourceful" Parent: "mean" "frustrated" "tough" "clueless" "upset"
Any suggestions or concerns about this meeting?	"May need to work with parents about reality" "Explain to parent that there is a difference between home and school setting"
Reflect on the dialogues with the parent: Were you comfortable with this meeting? What were the tough situations? Would you have said or done anything differently?	"Explain the acronyms- what they stand for and how they relate to the child" "Converse with the parent about skills and goals"

Introspectively, per table 26, the teachers considered this a positive meeting because they put in the effort to appease the frustrated parent, even though they thought it was a tough IEP because of the angry parent. For the most part, the reflections were technically based and light on the emotional side, such as the teachers based their practice on access, being document prepared and in following the IEP process. Therefore, in the participant's mind, giving the parents resources and knowledge would help them have confidence to advocate. Emotional factors, such as empathy, were thought of as a supplemental process that were in addition to expertise.

Session 3: IEP Meeting Ending

Table 27

Session 3: Components and slide numbers

Component	Slide Number
Simulation information and consent	1
What do you think? reflection questions	2
You-Tube video of IEP Meeting	3
Post-Video discussion	4
Simulation exercise background	5
Simulation exercise	6, 7, 8,
Debrief reflection questions	9

The participants arrived at the virtual session knowing the routine of the simulation exercise and ready to discuss, as the innovation structure was kept the same

throughout the three sessions. Only the content of the video vignette, simulation, and the discussion prompts differed.

Discussion questions for this session cued the teachers to talk about how they forge and maintain a relationship with difficult parents and how to work with the frustrated parent, even if the parent refuses to give IEP consent. IEP consent is defined as the parent agreeing to goals, services, assessments, and accommodations for their child. Thus, the parent has a right to partially agree with only specific portions of the IEP or disagree with the total document. If the parent disagrees, then it goes to mediation and the current IEP stays in effect. Table 28 shows the session beginning discussion and a sample of the responses.

Table 28

What do you think? (slide 2)

Question	Responses
What do you think are the most important actions to do at the end of an IEP meeting? What actions should be avoided?	<p>“Ask parents if they have any questions, if they understood everything that was talked about at the IEP, if there is anything else that they would like to add or include.”</p> <p>“Show appreciation to the parent for being present and taking time out of their day.”</p>
What would you do if the parents won’t agree with the IEP and sign the consent?	<p>“Keep the meeting as even-tempered as possible. Make sure that parents know that it is their right to disagree.”</p> <p>“Ask parents what they think their child needs. Address the specific concerns.”</p>
How would you forge a good relationship with the parents?	“Teachers don’t want contentious IEPs. They want to work with the parents.”

In consensus, the participants have all experienced contentious IEP meetings and those where the parents disagreed with the goals, services, or assessments. Teachers noted that even despite a good prior relationship, the meeting can still go sour, and arguments can occur. When this happens, the staff agreed that they must keep their frustrations in check and treat the parents with extra kindness. Teacher #5 agreed, “having relationships with the parents help.” Even though, as Teacher #3 mentioned, relationship building may not be so easy but is doable, “some parents won’t bend. Can keep disagreement amicable. It doesn’t have to be ugly.” In this circumstance, the teachers felt that they need to be more aware of their words and empathy. Unfortunately, they felt that the parents could be difficult and frustrated with the IEP process, causing them to act out on their frustrations. Therefore, teacher #1 suggested empathy as a useful tool, “empathize with parent that it is a lot” and teacher #2 added, “make sure that the parent knows we appreciate their involvement. Their input is so important.” Along with showing empathy and understanding of the parent needs, the participants considered strategies that may calm the tensions, such as “Reinforce the idea that they are part of the team and that they can always ask questions, even after the IEP (Teacher #4)”; “Make sure they know this is a living document. We can always come back to the table (Teacher #5)”; and “Let the parents take IEP home and relook before decision (Teacher #1).”

After the pre-simulation discussion, the participants watched a video (slide 3) of an IEP meeting that was not run with respect for the parents, *The Basic Dos and Don'ts of an IEP Meeting* (Clark, 2016). Viewing this video allowed teachers to see the inappropriateness of staff side-bar conversations, arriving late to the meeting, not providing explanations to parent, use of professional jargon, and making decisions for the

parent. That said, the teachers admitted that these actions occur in real meetings and they have seen these in their own context. Accordingly, the participants discussed what they would have done differently in the video situation (Table 29).

Table 29

Video Reflection (slide 4)

Question	Responses
What would you have said to the parents, if IEP team members were late or absent?	<p>“That’s tough, I don’t know. I would hope this wouldn’t happen”</p> <p>“I ask the parent if they want to go forward or can have another meeting”</p> <p>“I explain that the staff member will be late and move the meeting forward- not wait”</p>
What would you have done if the interpreter was not present?	<p>“If the parent asks for an interpreter or needs one, we can’t meet without one. The meeting needs to be rescheduled”</p>
Please tell me 3 words to describe the bad meeting.	<p>“Thoughtless” “Disrespectful” “unprofessional” “Mean” “Lazy approach”</p>

Next, the participants role-played in the simulations and as in the prior sessions, an actor (outside special educator) voiced the parent role while the teachers played the case manager part. Likewise, this exercise was a continuation of the previous sessions, depicting the same parent character. Again, participants were reminded of the background context of this simulation. Knowledge of the parent/child situation helped the teachers in role playing with contextual understanding and in encouraging eager volunteers to role play. When asked about their enthusiasm, they said that they felt role playing was fun and that they learned through the acting process. Furthermore, teachers

seemed more aware of their words and actions than they did during the previous sessions, responding with empathy and understanding of parent needs. Hence, the case manager worked with the principal designee to keep this IEP to one meeting and extend the time frame. As a result, parent frustrations may be eased, showing respect for time and effort. Praise for the child and parent were plentiful, parental concerns were taken seriously, and all questions were responded to. As with a real meeting, even after working carefully with a parent, teachers may find that parents still may refuse to sign consent. Unfortunately, the teachers had difficulty with the non-consent remark, only responding with the statement that it is a parental right.

Session 3 Simulation Exercise (slides 6, 7, 8)

- **Principal Designee (PD):** *It is now 3:00. We will have to finish this IEP at another time. Let's get our calendars out. The teachers and I can meet on Thursday at 2:00. So, we will see you then.*
- **Parent:** *Wait a minute! I didn't tell you that I can meet on Thursday. Don't I have an option? I want to finish this IEP today. I took off from work today. I will be fired if I take off again.*
- **Case Manager: (your response)**
- **Parent:** *You never asked me about my concerns. I want it written into the IEP that Billy has strengths in science. He loves to do experiments. Billy is very curious, and he has a great memory for facts. I do see that he is weak in reading. He has a hard time following the text.*
- *Billy does not like the bus ride, to and from school. He says that there is a group of boys that pick on him. The bus driver just ignores this. I've complained to the driver, but he doesn't listen. Do I need to drive him to school and find someone to drive him home? What do you think?*
- **Case Manager: (your response)**
- **Parent:** *You are asking me to sign that I agree on the IEP consent page. I am not sure if I fully agree with the math goal and I definitely don't agree with placing Billy in the self-contained classroom. Don't I have options. Who can I talk to about this? I want to talk to someone at the district level. You didn't listen to my concerns. You didn't even try to compromise with me. I feel that you do not have respect for parents. So, therefore, I refuse to sign any documents that you give me and I am not going to come back for another meeting!*
- **Case Manager: (Your response)**

Due to either simulation session acclimation or greater involvement, the teachers spent more time on their acting responses and reflections than in previous sessions. Thus, the participants demonstrated continued engagement in their actions. When asked about this engagement, Teacher #5 responded that the scenario was “like a mystery book that you cannot put down.” Therefore, the interactive learning and realistic uncertainties and complexities proved to be a motivator—suggesting that these elements might be useful in future trainings.

The teachers responded to the parent using paraphrasing for clarification and to show the parent that they are listening. Along with clarifying statements, use of more parent-friendly language and empathizing words were noted. Awareness of dialogue seemed to be presented which, could simmer down a difficult discourse. But, for this exercise, the parent still disagreed and did not give IEP consent. Despite the surprise and turmoil, the teachers reacted with professional grace and friendliness towards the parent. Afterwards, the post-simulation reflections and discussion (Table 30) revealed the teachers’ perceptions of the whole IEP simulation exercise. Critical reflecting involves thinking about behavior of oneself and of the situation so that sense and change can be made for the future (Murdoch-Eaton & Sanders, 2014). Likewise, the teachers were forthcoming with suggestions of alternate ways of responding to the parent and demonstrated self-analysis of their discourse actions.

Table 30

Session 3 post-simulation discussion (slide 9)

Question	Responses
What could have been communicated differently to make this meeting end on a positive note?	“Ask parents for goals input, before the meeting. A pre-IEP meeting should have been done.” “Ask parents if they would rather have another meeting so that new data can be done.”
How do you think the parent is feeling during this meeting? Why?	“Frustrated but probably relieved when we showed respect to her” “Mad at the system” “Being runover by the staff”
Reflect on the dialogues with the parent: Were you comfortable with this meeting? What were the tough situations? Would you have said or done anything differently?	“Uncomfortable at first then my comfort grew as I got used to the parent” “I felt comfortable because of the help in responding, from my colleagues”
Was a good relationship with the parent established? If not, what would you do differently	“I would feel ashamed if the parent didn’t feel involved and not being listened to” “Be aware of what kind of parent that you are dealing with.”
What 3 words would describe your communication approach? What 3 words would describe the parent’s communication?	Teacher communication: “flexible”, “compassionate”, “grounded”, “collaborative” Parent communication: “Blunt” “open” “anxious” “dis-jointed”

The participants noted that their comfort levels, or sense of calm, improved as the sessions progressed. As Teacher #2 noted that she was, “uncomfortable at first then my comfort grew as I got used to the parent.” Therefore, using a continuing context brought

familiarity and aided relaxation. Along with contextual carryover, comfort levels could be attributed to community practice. Teacher #3 credited her teammates for helping her feel at ease, “I felt comfortable because of the help in responding from my colleagues.” Having a raised comfort is good at meetings but many IEP meetings can go awry and spin out of control. Teacher #4 thought that this simulation was a good example of how a meeting can be rocky. “The last session is the hardest because the parent was getting more ramped up and frustrated. I don’t think she heard us trying to calm things down.” This is the point where the participants were involved in helping each other out, telling each other strategies, and what to say or not say. I found this engagement action to be the gemstone of my research.

For this study, a successful training is defined as having full verbal participation, engagement, and carryover of training concepts. As I did not look for behavior change, I observed for self-awareness. In this case, awareness was measured from listening to the teacher perceptions of how they reacted and communication changes that needed to be made. During the first session simulation, the teachers responded to the parent quickly, with short remarks. This reaction could be associated with role play discomfort or because the volunteer knew her colleagues were watching. After the role playing, the teachers were full of praise of the volunteers and discussions elicited different ways of response and approach. Hence, comfort in working with the parent grew with the subsequent sessions as demonstrated by the lengthier dialogues. Accordingly, the post-simulation reflections brought on lively topic discussions and the teachers revealed awareness of effective communication strategies.

Findings from IEP Observations

Post-innovation, after the teachers participated in the simulation sessions, for each of the five teachers, I observed at an IEP or IEP reevaluation meeting that they were case managing. Because of the COVID pandemic and distance learning, the IEP meetings were held virtually, using the BBCU platform. Prior to beginning these meeting, the parents and staff members verbally consented to my observation and observations were only done in which I had 100% IEP team consent. Fortunately, I did not run into a non-consensual situation, but because of the nature of IEP meetings, this could have happened. My status at the meetings was as a non-participant, with my video and microphone disabled, allowing me to observe the actions, expressions, and verbiage of all parties.

In observing the post-innovation meetings, it was encouraging to note that meetings were generally positive in tone, with parents consenting to the IEP goals and no contention was observed. Positivity was demonstrated through teachers' welcoming language and attitude to parent inclusion thorough explanations of the IEP process. This was coupled with encouragement of parent active participation and the asking of questions to the parent along with teachers intentionally giving space to and pausing for understanding. All teachers positively responded to parent questions and concerns and offered detailed explanations using parent-friendly language. I define parent friendly language to include the defining of acronyms and offering of examples for explanations in describing what will be expected of their child—thus, welcoming the parent into the conversation by ensuring they understand the language and practices in order to fully

participate. Along with positive verbiage, the teachers exhibited empathy and praised the academic and behavioral efforts of the students.

Even though the meetings were positive and welcoming, there were still some obstacles to equal partnership. Four of the five teachers came into the IEP meeting without a prior relationship with the parent and two teachers did not convene a pre-IEP meeting. Pre-IEP meetings are not mandatory, but without a prior opportunity for some teacher/parent bond, casual conversing may have been difficult to do. I observed that the teachers at times talked at, but not with, the parent and in these specific instances, genuine conversations were not evident. At one of the meetings, the other staff team-members talked indirectly to the parent, going through the case manager first. Similarly, in two of the meetings, the discomfort between the teachers and parents could be subtly observed wherein parents only spoke when a question response was elicited. To analyze for what I consider to be equal partnership, I looked for evidence of a relationship between the teacher and parent, whether they had a back-and-forth dialogue, and if they developed the IEP goals together. Only one of the teachers (Teacher #4) involved the parent in developing the IEP goals by having pre-IEP meetings and asking the parent what they would like to see for their child. Table 31 is a summary of the meetings linking to the coding construct.

Table 31

Pre-IEP

Participant #	Pre-IEP Communication
1	Pre-IEP meeting
2	Pre-IEP meeting
3	No pre-IEP meeting
4	Pre-IEP meeting
5	No pre-IEP meeting

A pre-IEP meeting is a vehicle of involvement for the parent. Giving the parent an opportunity to discuss their concerns and education ideas offers a kind of invitation for involvement (Slade et al., 2018; Underwood, 2010). During the post-simulation community discussion of innovation’s session #3, some of the participants found that discussing the IEP goals beforehand with the parents, such as at a pre-IEP meeting, helps deter any surprises or misunderstandings. They felt that the simulation meeting would have been more positive for the parent if there was a pre-IEP meeting. Of the IEP observations, three of the teachers conducted a pre-IEP meeting with the parents. After those meetings, the teachers reported that they explained the goals and IEP process while the parents were able to ask questions, voice concerns, and tweak the goals.

The teachers who did not convene a pre-IEP meeting also did not have a prior relationship with that parent. Table 32 depicts the observed parent relationship that each participant demonstrated. The operational definition that I used for good relationship is when the teacher and parent converses informally (chatting) and there is an observed calm demeanor (smiling, looking at each other, hands relaxed). In contrast, no relationship is when there are no casual conversation and only little glances to the other party.

Table 32

Relationship

Participant #	Teacher/Parent Relationship
1	Good relationship, had informal conversations
2	Good relationship - parent and teacher informally chatted
3	No informal conversation relationship was not noted
4	Relationship was not observed, meeting appeared businesslike. No informal conversation noted
5	Relationship was not observed, meeting was clearly businesslike - no informal conversation

In this study, the code for ‘relationship’ is exhibited in the observed quality of interactions, notably informal conversing, smiles, joint laughter, and having calm body language. Likewise, dialogue should have an even and comfortable flow, without significant stunted or awkward interaction. By this definition, two of the meetings demonstrated a positive parent/staff relationship, with observation of informal parent/teacher chat. Furthermore, these teachers implemented a pre-IEP meeting beforehand. The two teachers that did not involve the parent before the IEP did not reveal notable positive qualities in the relationship. Those meetings involved less parent interactions and had a heavily structured business-like atmosphere to them, with no informal conversing observed. Along with relationship, I was observing for outward signs of participant comfort (Table 33). For observing comfort, I looked at the speech tone, fluency, and body language of the teachers. Likewise, if the teacher smiled, showed any instances of humor, and exuded an aura of calmness, I assumed that she was comfortable and confident. In contrast, when the teacher spoke too fast, did not smile, did not show humor or elements of their personality, I attributed this demeanor to discomfort.

Table 33

Comfort

Participant #	Teacher Comfort
1	Confident and prepared
2	Looked nervous and talked very fast, without pausing for understanding
3	Confident and prepared
4	Confident and prepared
5	Confident and prepared

While most of the teachers emanated confidence, the one teacher with less than five years of teaching demonstrated discomfort at the meeting. This was observed through her excessive speed of speech and a lack in the comfortable/confident behaviors noted previously. In this case, more IEP meeting experience and intentional training, guidelines or support in parent communication may help her comfort level. It was surprising that the two teachers who did not have an observed good relationship seemed comfortable with their meeting facilitation. When asked about the noted difference, each teacher mentioned that the student was new to their caseloads and that they were not familiar with the parents. According to the post-innovation interviews, the simulation practice in the innovation seemed to play a part in preparing the teachers for parent discourses and interactions. Teacher #3 mentioned that the role-playing and the advice of her colleagues helped her be cognizant of parent needs and perspective. Similarly, teacher #5 said that the simulation activity was engaging and helped in her development of new strategies for communication. Each teacher mentioned that the role-playing along with the community guidance was beneficial to their dialogue awareness and was the most helpful part of the professional development. Use of community role playing gave the teachers skills that would carry over to their authentic practice. The teacher comfort level,

relationship, and IEP process knowledge surfaced in the meeting strengths (Table 34) and weaknesses (Table 35).

Table 34

Meeting Strengths

Participant #	Meeting Strengths
1	Parent-friendly language, welcoming, smiled, exhibited warmth, confident, gave explanations and details, paused for comprehension, asked questions of clarity and understanding, deferred to team members, asked for opinions
2	Gave frequent praise for child. Parent was happy to hear this, and teacher explained and described statements
3	Explained goals and process, waited for responses, slowed speech down for understanding, acknowledged parent concerns, restated questions, gave examples and details. Asked for opinions, checked for understanding
4	Welcoming, checked for understanding, explained process, empathized, asked parent for opinions, gave a summary of the pre-IEP meeting
5	Welcoming, explained process and items, gave examples, didn't rush parent, asked for opinions

My observations practices for the strengths of each meeting in terms of communication flow included looking for transparency, active listening, use of parent-friendly language, inviting words, asking questions, acknowledgement of other's comments, and involving the parent in a complete dialogue. For this study's purpose, I define complete dialogue as the back-and-forth conversation of parent and teacher. Parent involvement depends on their perception of whether the teacher is actively listening to them and perceived invitation for partnership (Angell et al, 2009; Hess et al, 2006; Ryan & Quinlan, 2018). In each meeting, I observed the teachers using parent-friendly language, acknowledgement of parent concerns, asking questions, and responding to the

parent. Their friendly attitude and IEP process expertise was noted, even from Teacher #2 who displayed nervousness (see comfort table 21). Similarly, Teachers #3, #4, and #5, all who were observed as not having a close relationship with the parents, facilitated the meeting with confidence and communication awareness. In my view, this indicates evidence that the teachers were aiming to be welcoming for parent involvement. But that said, equal partnership requires a complete dialogue and that was still remiss in some of the meetings—particularly in places where there was still a tendency for talking at, but not with, the parent. This suggests that there is still more work and complex nuance to be found in training teachers for building parent relationship based in collaboration and partnership.

I did not have opportunity to observe, pre-research time, the IEP meetings of the participants. Therefore, to see whether the three-session innovation clearly supported the teachers in moving the needle on some of their communication awareness behaviors in trying to engage more positive parent involvement, I relied on the anecdotal notes of the IEP observation and the participant perceptions voiced after the IEP meeting and/or during the post-innovation interview. During the post-innovation meetings, I observed each teacher putting in effort to involve parents by using active listening strategies (e.g., listening without giving solutions, being aware of emotions, paraphrasing, asking only relevant questions, and giving wait time for responses), checking for understanding, giving explanations and definitions, and being congenial (ex. smiling at parent). These welcoming questions were heard at Teacher #3's conference- "Does this sound like a good plan?", "Does this make sense?", and "How do you feel about that?" At the post-innovation interviews, the participants relayed that the components of the professional

development training had moved the needle forward for communication awareness. They mentioned the reflective community action and role-playing parts of the innovation helped in their being more attuned to their communicative actions. Teacher #2 contributed the innovation to sparking her imagination of how she would “respond in different scenarios” and teacher #4 responded that “participating in the training has made me aware of how I communicate with parents, not just at the IEP meeting but overall”. She went on to say that the role playing contributed to her “becoming more reflective in how I work with families and of the voice I am giving them”.

Even though the participants saw positive results in terms of communication awareness, they did not feel that the innovation spurred the parents to advocate at the meetings. More work may be needed to help them develop more reciprocal relationships with parents. A reciprocal relationship is observed when the teacher and parent brainstorm together and feel free to voice their perceptions to each other. Teacher #4 asserted “although I have made sure that parents have a voice during IEP meetings, I still feel we need to assist many of our families become stronger advocates for their children and rely less on our expertise”. Table 35 demonstrates the need areas of the teachers as observed during their IEP meeting.

Table 35

Meeting Weaknesses and Parent Participation

Participant #	Meeting Weaknesses	Parent Participation
1	Answered parent questions with short responses, talked at parent instead of with parent.	Parent asked questions but did not participate in brainstorming or decision-making.
2	Gave an IEP disclaimer that the staff will only talk about the child's deficits and parent can schedule another meeting to hear about the child's strengths. Read a narrative too fast for full understanding. Did not check for parent understanding or questions. Called parent, "mom". Talked at parent instead of with.	Parent was quiet, passive, asked some questions.
3	When team was asked their opinion, parent did not respond	Parent was quiet and passive. Did not ask questions
4	Parent looked sullen, confused, and no smile. Parent was asked too many questions.	Parent talked only for responding, sullen - no smile
5	Parent did not talk except for responding to questions, parent seemed nervous	Passive participant, some questions asked

Thematically, I felt it was important to link meeting weaknesses with parent participation, because the observation demonstrated how weak links occurred because of ambiguity of parent role and because of certain behaviors (fast talking, etc.) that could imply they were not invited to be involved. Even though the teachers often did try to be welcoming to parents, my observations showed that the parents did not pick up on the opportunity to verbally participate and more active attempts to engage reciprocity were still needed. The teachers took on the role of experts, but the parents did not seem comfortable to act on a role as their child's advocate. Possibly, the parents did not know what their role was or how to perform in it. A reason for this could be from the teacher

talking at the parent instead of with the parent (e.g., not giving opportunities to engage or elicit their ideas). Parents may feel weakened and angered by the process when they feel that they are not heard or involved (Goss, 2019). Hence, their weaknesses surfaced as speaking only to respond to questions and not engaging.

Table 36 shows connections in the observation coding constructs for each individual teacher. In addition, knowing the specific meeting strengths and weaknesses and comparing these results to the teacher's relationship and comfort levels helped me see where the innovation worked and areas that need tweaking for future PD sessions.

Comparisons were made on an individual level and not compared to the group. Hence, the group conclusion was a general summary of the community.

Table 36

Compilation of IEP Meeting Observations

Teach/ yrs	Pre- IEP	Relation	Comfort	Meeting Strength	Meeting Weakness	Parent Participate
1 >20	yes	yes	yes	Positive welcome Explained questions Asked for opinions Checked for understan- ding	Answered parent questions with short responses, talked at parent instead of with parent.	Parent asked questions but did not participate in brainstorming or decision- making.
2 <3	yes	yes	no	Praised child Explained examples	Told parent that IEP will only cover child's deficits. Talked too fast Called parent "mom" Talked at parent	Quiet passive Not many questions Smiled when child was praised
3 >20	no	no	yes	Explained details, examples Asked for opinions	Talked at parent Asked team opinion, not parent	No questions passive
4 >20	yes	no	yes	Welcome, empathy, asked opinion, gave pre- IEP summary	Talked at parent Asked too many questions	Only talked when responding
5 >10	no	no	yes	Welcome, explained, opinions	Talked at parent	Passive nervous

Teacher #1, who was the most senior of the teachers, had a comfortable relationship with the parent and this carried through to the parent, enabling her to feel welcomed to ask questions and converse. This parent may have felt welcomed to be involved, especially with being given a pre-IEP meeting to find out and opportunity to tweak the goals. This teacher's comfort level with meetings may be attributed to her teaching experience and this professional confidence was sensed at the meeting.

Teacher #2, who was the newest to the field, was the most nervous and unconfident in her actions but exerted much effort to following protocol, such as having a pre-IEP meeting and using parent involvement strategies in her communications. Unfortunately, her heightened anxiety caused her to rush through the meeting by talking at an excessively fast rate. Another weakness of this meeting was when she told the parent that the IEP meeting was deficit based, in which only the child's weaknesses would be discussed and that another meeting could be scheduled, to hear about the child's strengths. This disclaimer along with the fast rate of speech could be the cause of the parent being passive and not asking any questions. At the IEP meeting, teachers discuss the strengths and needs of a child in a specific area then goals are discussed that addresses the deficit. This teacher saw the crux of the meeting to be the weakness area. Unfortunately, parents could find this as unnerving and may have been the possible pitfall to communication in this meeting.

Teacher #3, with over twenty years, facilitated the meeting with expertise, using good communication skills and strategies, e.g., explaining, detailing, giving wait time. Even though she did not have a prior relationship with the parent and did not convene a pre-IEP meeting, the teacher tried to forge a professional relationship with the parent, at

the IEP table. Unfortunately, I observed that the parent did not look comfortable and was not involved, as noted by her passiveness, and not asking any questions.

Teacher #4, an educator of over twenty years and a former parent advocate, seemed to run the IEP meeting in a business-like way. Despite not having a prior relationship with the parent, she conducted a pre-IEP meeting and seemed comfortable in using welcoming communication strategies (e.g., empathizing, asking of opinion, giving a recap of the pre-IEP meeting). Even with using appropriate meeting protocol, the teacher asked too many questions which took on a slightly interrogative tone. This may have caused a negative effect on the parent's involvement causing her to only respond to questions and not converse more freely.

Teacher #5, with over fifteen teaching years, used communication awareness of offering descriptions, explanations, examples, and giving the parent wait time for understanding. But she entered this meeting, with a new student, with no prior relationship and not implementing a pre-IEP meeting. Even though she was comfortable and confident with communicating with parents, the absence of a relationship may be the reason that the parent seemed passive and was quiet at the meeting.

In summary, the IEP observations did demonstrate an awareness of language and efforts by the teachers to forge a welcoming atmosphere, as was supported by the innovation. I noticed that those parents who were not invited for a pre-IEP meeting were also the most passive participants, and this correlated with apparent strained parent/staff relationships. Even though the teachers ran a welcoming meeting, and I believe the innovation supported some positive behaviors in making attempts to collaborate, I still wonder about the equal partnership piece. When parents appear only willing to speak

when a response was needed, it demonstrates to me that the equal partnership element was still missing. Further, this may be evidenced or demonstrated by the absence of parents helping with the IEP decision making. Ambiguity of meeting roles could have played a factor in their meeting passivity. Unfortunately, this innovation's simulations did not employ much practice with role designation, even though the reflective discussions touched on participant perceptions of meeting roles. Actual practice with roles may be helpful in future reiterations of this innovation. It is also possible that their awareness of my observing at their IEP meetings may have put the participants under extra stress and anxiety (e.g., this seemed especially true in terms of the nervousness of the participant with the least amount of teaching years).

Findings from Post-Interviews

Post-Interviews were done, individually, after completing the PD sessions and IEP meeting observations. These interviews provided me with an understanding of the participant perceptions around parent communication, strategies, and innovation efficacy. To consider this, I organized their perceptions into coding constructs of communication change, parent advocacy, teacher comfort, teacher/parent relationship, and innovation affect, to determine the effectiveness of this study's innovation. As follows, I present a brief overview of how these themes emerged in each of the participants interviews.

Each of the teachers relayed to me that the innovation had a positive effect on the self-reflection aspect of their parent communication habits. Since the PD, they noted that they have self-reflected on their own practice and gained an awareness of how their dialogue comes across to parents. Likewise, they have been putting thought into responding to questions/concerns and addressing them in the moment, instead of later.

Another reported change was that they have been slowing the timeframes of the IEP meetings down by checking for parent understanding and asking for parent opinion. Related to this, Teacher #3 observed, “I and others that participated in the study are working hard to ensure that all parent concerns are addressed, and questions answered thoroughly, and trying to elicit questions or concerns so that parents know we are here to work together.”

In each of the post-interviews, teachers mentioned that they are putting in extra effort to help parents feel welcomed to advocate. In my discussions with them it was apparent that teachers are now putting a priority to parent inclusion and involvement. Table 37 shows the participant responses to the post-interview constructs. Due to upheaval of her return to on-site instruction and personal constraints, Teacher #1, was unable to complete a post-interview.

Table 37

Teacher #2

Construct	Change due to Innovation
Communication	<p>Helped the teacher in responding to different scenarios.</p> <p>Have not noticed much difference in parent advocacy but have only led one meeting after the innovation.</p>
Relationship	<p>Relationship has been good before and still is.</p> <p>Sends home a parent survey to ask about their homelife, culture, traditions, and needs. “I take their responses into consideration when planning”</p>
Collaboration	<p>Making sure that the parents know I am available through phone call, text, email, and BBCU.</p>
IEP Meeting	<p>“I have no baseline to compare because all of the parents are new to me.”</p>

Innovation	“Communication has been similar. I did take away the need to address the parents by name rather than mom and dad.”
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In summary, Teacher #2, did not sense a great deal of change to her communication and relationships with parents, though her caseload only has four students, and she was only involved with one IEP since the PD sessions. Being a teacher of less than five years and new to the context of the school, she mentioned that she would need more interaction time with the parents and experience with IEP meetings, to notice a difference. As to the innovation, she enjoyed working along with her colleagues and the PD not being of a lecture mode delivery. As a positive take away, she did note that the training had helped her reflect on how to respond to different scenarios, and as a newer teacher, this has great utility for her adaptability and learning in meetings.

Table 38

Teacher#3

Construct	Change due to Innovation
Communication	<p>“I am more careful in my interactions with parents, for example, in reminding them more frequently of the value of their input and that they are a part of the team, taking more time with explanations and double checking on understanding of and/or satisfaction with each goal/step.”</p> <p>“I noticed that everyone on the team is putting effort into their communications. The parents know we are here to work together.”</p> <p>“I would like to see periodic check-ins, perhaps during special education department meetings, regarding parent relationships, reminders how important this piece is, and refreshers or ideas on addressing difficult cases.”</p>
Relationship	<p>“I have been lucky to generally have good relationships with parents overall, but I have noticed that a few parents have reached out to say, Thank you. This is very rewarding on a number of levels and making me feel that we are working together more.”</p>
Collaboration	<p>“Especially during virtual therapy, parents are more engaged as well as carrying over skills at home. During the break, I had a</p>

	parent request about addressing a specific speech target for her child. This led to a very helpful exchange of prompts and activities, as well as a new IEP target, and a good reminder of how parents can be the best observers of their child’s communication and provide that valuable feedback.”
IEP Meeting	“I have noticed, especially with newly-identified students, that parents are a bit more willing to ask questions about goals and the process as I encourage more interactions/questions in each part of the meeting or in my email messages.” “I know I am feeling more internally receptive to suggestions or questions rather than feeling they may be questioning my expertise.”
Innovation	“I have definitely been more cognizant of the parent perspective and more attuned to maintaining attention to that. I have tried to make sure I am not rushing through the process and ensuring that they are making sense of and feeling part of the program.” “I’m finding it very enriching and encouraging when parents have a good handle on everything and a sense of how their child’s needs will be addressed.”

Teacher #3, a special education related service provider of over twenty years, saw a large effect in her communication style. She noted that she is now putting extra thought into her responses and considering how to get the parents more involved. With a large caseload, of over twenty-five students, she is now making more of an effort to communicate with the families, seeking out their perceptive thoughts on their child’s educational needs. Additionally, this teacher has observed the communicative improvement of her colleagues.

Table 39

Teacher #4

Construct	Change due to Innovation
Communication	“Participating in the training has made me more aware of how I communicate with parents, not just at IEP meetings but overall. I have tried to be clearer when sharing information.” “Although I have always made sure that parents have a voice during IEP meetings, I still feel we need to assist many families

	become stronger advocates for their children and rely less on our expertise.”
Relationship	“I don’t think that the relationship has changed but I am more thoughtful in my responses. I have one child whose family have already contacted me about the transition to kindergarten and I have made sure that I have answered their questions and concerns rather than say we will talk about it later. I also made sure to ask if they felt that I had answered their questions and reiterated we would work together as a team. The family’s response back was to say that I made them feel included, so I guess I have done something right!”
Collaboration	“I will meet and talk with families prior to drafting IEP goals and get their input as to their hopes and dreams for their children. I will review the draft goals with the family prior to the meeting.” “I make sure that I am available to families beyond the IEP.”
IEP Meeting	“During the meeting, I make sure the parent feels comfortable asking questions and seeking clarification.”
Innovation	“I did not learn any new communicative strategies but did become more reflective in how I work with families and the voice I am giving to them.”

A change in communication awareness, more so than in relationships, was noticed by Teacher #4. A teacher of more than twenty years and a former parent advocate, she mentioned that the intentional reflection on communication (and collaborative active style of the PD for doing this) helped her develop a heightened awareness of how her words and actions come across to the family during and outside of the IEP meeting. This reflection exercise helped her practice but furthermore, the new cognizance is something she said she carried over to empowering the family.

Table 40

Teacher #5

Construct	Change due to Innovation
Communication	“I find myself being more thoughtful in how I present information to the parents/caregivers during IEP and eligibility meetings. I am very conscientious about being prepared for meetings, now even more so.”

	<p>“I have not noticed a dramatic difference in parent advocacy. They typically accept our recommendations.”</p> <p>“I liked being able to hear from my colleagues how they would handle various situations, the language they would use, etc. I don’t think we have enough opportunity for that.”</p>
Relationship	<p>“My relationships are definitely for the better.”</p> <p>“I got a really nice compliment from a family member following an initial IEP meeting, in an email. The parent asked a lot of questions which I felt I needed to take my time with and answer thoroughly and thoughtfully. I feel that I really think more about our relationship in regards to their child’s education.”</p>
Collaboration	<p>“I am making a concerted effort to really understand the child’s disabilities and strengths. I am backing up with data and anecdotes about the student, to illustrate my depth of knowledge about their child.”</p>
IEP Meeting	<p>“I feel this depends on the parent. They need to ask questions and voice concerns.”</p>
Innovation	<p>“I definitely feel that I developed some new strategies and really reflected on what I had been doing, what was working and what needed tweaking. I definitely feel like I am more thoughtful in my communications with parents, both in writing and when we meet online.”</p>

The self-reflection elements of the training again were helpful to teacher #5, a teacher of over fifteen years, with her parent relationships and communicative practice. This innovation encouraged her to look critically at her prior parent interactions and in evaluating her interchanges. As a result, she made proactive changes to her communication style, such as seeking out parental opinion and questions instead of just telling them her professional thoughts.

Each of the teachers shared positive perceptions of the PD sessions and mentioned that this innovation was effective in alerting them to how their words and actions affect the feelings of the parents. Role playing with the simulations and group reflecting on the discourses helped to encourage them to self-reflect on their own communicative habits, giving the teachers a channel to imagine responding to difficult situations. Teacher #5 mentioned, “I liked being able to hear from my colleagues how they would handle various situations, the language they use, etc. I don’t think we have enough opportunity for that.” A benefit of the innovation was the participants picking up new strategies and ideas from each other, propelled from the community sharing of ideas and perceptions. Their group consensus was to put consideration of relationship upfront in their actions with the parents.

Summary of Results

To recap these results, this study’s research question is as follows: How does the teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect the collaboration and relationship with parents at the IEP meetings? The results could be seen through the analysis of the post-interview constructs.

Communication

Data suggests that in some ways, the innovation was beneficial for encouraging the teachers to reflect on their communications with parents. Reflecting on their practice carried through to their being aware of their words and thinking about the way they present to the parents. Teacher #3 discussed her awareness change, “I am more careful in my interactions with parents, such as reminding them more frequently of the value of their input and that they are part of the team, taking more time with explanations and

doublechecking for understanding and satisfaction with each goal”. Along with awareness of dialogue, they were mentioned that they were more prepared for responding to different scenarios, such as difficult discourses. Teacher #2 mentioned that the simulations encouraged her to imagine how she would react in tough parent meetings while Teacher #5 perceives herself as “more thoughtful in how I present information to the parents”. Teacher #4 considered the new awareness not a strategy but a reflection in action, “I did not learn any new communication strategies, but I became more reflective in how I work with families and of the voice I am giving to the”.

No matter whether the effects of this innovation are called strategies or reflections in action the resulting data showed the teachers obtained a positive awareness of their communicative habits from the trainings. Unfortunately, the teachers did not see a positive e

ffect on parent advocacy. Even with the teachers using more parent welcoming communicative actions, the parents still were less involved, only responding when necessary, and relying on teacher knowledge. Teacher 4 voiced this conundrum, “although, I have made sure that parents have a voice during the IEP meetings, I still feel we need to assist many of our families become stronger advocates for their children and rely less on our expertise”.

Relationship

When the teachers were asked if they felt their relationships with the parents have improved, they all said that they had good relationships with the families of their cases, before the trainings. Of the four post-interviews, two teachers saw no change while two other teachers experienced better relations. The positive gain was seen through parent

compliments after the IEP meetings. Teacher #3 mentioned, “I have been lucky to generally have good relationships with parents overall, but I have noticed parents have reached out to say thank you after meetings and communications. This is very rewarding on a number of levels and making me feel that we are working together more.” Similarly, teacher #5 was happy about the relationship improvement, “definitely for the better, I got a really nice compliment from a family member following an initial IEP meeting in an email.” Surprisingly, these two teachers did not have a relationship with the parents of their observed meetings but they both said that those families were new to their cases. They mentioned that knowing the families before the meetings help with forging a relationship. Given this notion, there is not proof yet that the innovation helped with the relationships.

Collaboration

The teachers saw collaboration as working with the parents in getting their input and thoughts on the IEP goals, pre-IEP. During the IEP meeting they considered collaboration as encouraging parents to ask questions and voice concerns. Teacher # 5 told how before the training she would send home the IEP goals draft solely developed by herself, now she gets the parent input before drafting the goals and at the IEP meeting, she is open to amending and changing goals when the parent voices a concern. Unfortunately, she noticed that very few parents will say their concerns or opinions. Teacher #3 realized a possible solution to this problem, “parents are a bit more willing to ask questions about goals and the process as I encourage more interaction/questions in each part of the meeting”.

IEP Meeting

The participants mentioned that their thinking about their word choices and being a good listener may have helped at the post-innovation IEP meetings. They contributed this effort to the training sessions encouraging them to reflect on their practice. Therefore, they felt ready to deal with the difficult discourses and being more welcoming to the parents. They mentioned that they are trying more to make the parent feel involved, by asking them questions, and by encouraging the parent to ask questions. Teacher #4 told of how she is involving the parents at the meetings, “I make the parents feel comfortable by asking them questions”. Likewise, teacher #3 is “internally receptive to making sure the parent’s concerns and questions are heard and responded to.” The participants correlated the successful IEP involvement to the amount of verbal participation of the parent. Teacher #5 explained this, “It depends on the parents. They need to ask questions and voice their concerns.”

Innovation

The participants voiced that learning through critical reflection was helpful and was something that carried through to teachers’ practice. The observational data showed the participants attempting to welcome the parents for involvement by actions such as giving explanations, descriptions, and checking for understanding. During the post-interviews, the teachers linked their communication awareness and welcoming behaviors to the community reflection components of the trainings which encouraged them to self-reflect on their professional practice.

More so than the common lecture mode training, the teachers said that they would like other professional development to follow this community reflection practice and interactive style. According to the participants, the innovation group discussions and role

playing kept up their engagement and watching their colleagues was a motivating experience that helped to transfer some behaviors into practice. At the post-innovation interviews, participants gave an example of how this innovation would or has helped them in their meetings. Teacher #2 appreciated the training, saying “Thank you for the simulations. It helped me imagine how I would respond in different scenarios” and Teacher #3 mentioned that she is “feeling more internally receptive to suggestions or questions, rather than feeling they may be questioning my expertise”. She contributed her receptiveness to the discussions and simulation. Similarly, Teacher #4 reported that “participating in the training has made me more aware of how I communicate with parents, not just at IEP meeting, but overall” Likewise, Teacher #5 enjoyed the community discussions and getting new ideas from her colleagues. She said that this community learning has helped her “develop some new strategies and reflect on what I have been doing”. She noted that the strategies and awareness carried over to her parent interactions, meetings, and on-line dialogues.

Thus, it appears that a positive innovation effect might be found in the carryover, or transferability, of communication awareness to the teacher’s meeting interactions. That being said, I did not observe any significant relationship change, and clearly more work is needed to develop better reciprocity in parent-teacher communications. However, the implementation of welcoming language, asking of parent opinion, and checking for comprehension (as noted in observing teachers #1, #3, #4, and #5), is something that supports better communication and opens the door to parent communication. In effect, this kind of ongoing training can create communication flows that allow parents to feel invited to actively participate ensuring access for equal partnership. Due to the short

research time frame of this study and as of the writing of this report, there were not many IEP meetings to determine full innovation effect. Hence, for this dissertation purposes the efficacy of the innovation is determined more by the participant perceptions and is limited in scope. However, the results show some promise and potential for future work. Therefore, as reported by the teacher participants, the PD trainings influenced parent satisfaction and IEP understanding, to some degree, through awareness of teachers' verbal actions and welcoming behaviors.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

*“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn”
(Benjamin Franklin).*

Involvement is the key word for this action research study, the involving of a community of teachers in critically reflecting, together, on their practice with achieving the goal of parent involvement in the IEP meetings. Mezirow (1997) notes that learning from active involvement in application transforms our actions even beyond the acquisition of knowledge. For effort and involvement to happen, the experience must be meaningful and shared by both the teachers and parents (Fullan, 2007). I quoted Michael Fullan (2007, p.303) in the chapter 1 heading, *“Meaning is motivation; motivation is energy; energy is engagement; engagement is life”* because this study relied on motivating the participants to reflect on their parent communications and share their engagement with the parents.

Barber (2009) proposed that positive change in parent involvement requires the teachers and families have good communications, transparency, and a shared vision of providing an appropriate education for the child. The purpose of this research was to 1) improve communication between the teacher and parent; and 2) help teachers gain skills to forge a welcoming invitation for involvement and verbal participation at the IEP meetings. Chapter 5 will: discuss the formation of the research question and innovation; connect the data results to themes that can work to support ongoing parent involvement; offer implications for my own practice and school context; offer implications for the

greater education context and future research; share this study's limitations; and reflect on my personal thoughts.

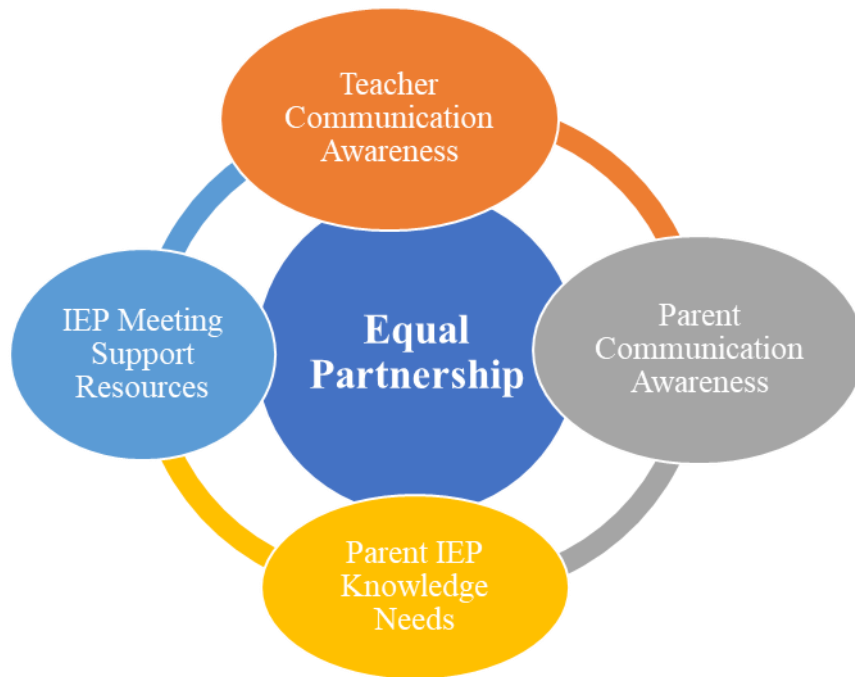
My research was driven by the question: How does the teacher professional development training on communication with parents affect the collaboration and relationship with parents at the IEP meetings? Weick (1984) theorized that being able to control an opportunity will produce results that will lead to greater accomplishments. It is these small wins that add up to the greater goal. Relevant to this study, the ultimate long-term objective is to move the conversation forward related to advocacy of the parents, while the first 'small win' victory was to show teachers' gain communication awareness that might emerge in IEP meeting practice.

As shown in Figure 4, teacher communication awareness is just one step to achieving equal partnership with parents. I developed this model to depict the major needs for parent involvement. These steps to equal partnership were determined from the research literature, cycle 1 study data, and the results from the crowdsourcing pre-research data results. The other small wins include parent communication awareness; parental IEP knowledge needs; and implementation of IEP meeting support resources. An extended research question should ask, if giving parents skills and strategies in communicating will help them in taking on the role as their child's advocate. Slade et al. (2018) found that giving parents training in communication and active listening helped forge an equal partnership with the teachers. Further studies should investigate how provision of knowledge resources would give parents confidence to actively participate at the IEP meetings. Each of these four need areas, when put together, may give the parents the comfort to actively be involved. Given the short time frame of this study, I view one

small win as a useful start to clear the pathway for future steps in ensuring an equal partnership between teacher and parent.

Figure 4

Equal Partnership Needs



Synthesizing Key Aspects of this Research Innovation

Critical reflection involves seeing a problem and purposely critiquing actions and placing meaning to them (Mezirow, 1998). This study’s virtual communication skills professional development innovation aimed to address a common problem, which each of the participants have observed, that being the passive participation of parents at the IEP meetings. Applying critical reflection to joint community actions of role playing and discussions helped the teachers raise their communication awareness skills. Mezirow (1998) proposed adding critical reflection to transformation theory by emphasizing the importance of giving meaning to communications. As the teachers engaged in lively

dialogues with their colleagues, they were engaged in meaning-making based on what they were hearing and the assumptions that ensued. An example of this was noted by Teacher #3, “I liked being able to hear from my colleagues how they would handle various situations, the language they use, etc. I don’t think we have enough opportunity for that.” This demonstrated a core takeaway for future innovations of this sort, in trying to engage teacher dialogue and shared meaning making around how they would converse, communicate, and handle challenging and representative situations. The engagement of the participants was rooted in belongingness and working towards a joint purpose and sharing meaning of the simulations. During the simulation sessions, the teachers each role played, trying to act as they would in an authentic meeting, putting in effort to appease the frustrated parent while the rest of the community suggested other strategies or wording to try. The goal here was to lessen the fear of failure or being singled out. Bandura’s (1977) work suggests that elevating self-efficacy through community motivation and positive experience could boost communication awareness. Carryover of this new awareness was observed in the post-innovation IEP meetings. As a result, at the IEP observations, each teacher was observed to be more welcoming to the parents than their pre-interviews might have suggested, through asking parent opinions and providing explanations. When asked about their communication change, they mentioned carefully using language and making sure that they include the parent.

While the results did demonstrate that there is still a long way to go in forging a truly equitable teacher-parent relationship, and more work is needed—positive aspects of the innovation was evidenced from the interviews, innovation itself, and in meeting

observations. Key ideas revolved around relationships, communication frequency, flow, and comfort, and roles.

Relationship

A positive relationship is based on honesty, trust, and mutual respect. For relationships to flourish, engagement of both sides must happen. This engagement includes understanding of each other and giving each an opportunity to be heard (Underwood, 2010). Relationship building was considered a priority of the participants. Even though each teacher considered their present parent relationships to be good, the strength and consistency of that relationship was a weak area that they needed support with. Having the trust of the parents was important to their practice and would provide a smooth rapport. Through the community reflections, the teachers were able to determine that there was a need to empathize; understand the family background and culture; and bring the parent into the IEP meeting discussions. As communication is the buzzword for this research, the participants realized that awareness of communication involves relationship building.

It seems that the teachers became more aware of their communications, however the relationship piece still needs further ongoing work. At each of the five IEP observations, I noted that the teachers ‘talked at’ the parents but not ‘with’ the parents. This was detected through seeing teachers telling the parents what the child’s goals and accommodations should be and the teachers stating their thoughts of the child’s development, yet not one teacher asked for the parent opinions and ideas. I perceive talking ‘with’ as being when teachers have a two-sided dialogue in which both sides offer

their uninterrupted thoughts. As a result, joint brainstorming is happening, and equal partnership is accomplished.

Extensions of the professional development in the communication skills should include working on involving the parents in decision making and joint brainstorming. Fullan (2007) proposed that shared meaning is important for communications and must include transparency. This suggests a need to help teachers understand how to share their meeting ownership with parents and realize that this would not diminish their expertise but add quality to their professionalism.

Communication

The participant reflections on communication determined that strong relationships depend on consistent and frequent dialogue that flows smoothly and informally. Therefore, having a prior working relationship with the parents will help with the IEP discourses. Conversation may run smoothly when both parties are familiar and comfortable with each other. In the pre-innovation interviews, some of the participants noted that discussing the IEP goals beforehand with the parents, such as at a pre-IEP meeting, helps deter any surprises or misunderstandings. Surprising, was that during the observed IEPs, only three out of the five teachers conducted a pre-IEP meeting. Even though the parents were not necessarily aiding in the goal development, they were still welcomed for involvement. Amending small parts of the goals could have cued the parent to share thoughts and result in giving them a little ownership of the IEP development. Future research should investigate whether a pre-IEP meeting helps in their meeting advocacy. Tweaking a part of the objectives may not fully show equal involvement in goal development when the goal was originally created solely by the teacher—but it may

be a first step to engaging parents in feeling more comfortable in being part of the process.

Dewey (1910, p.175) proposed that thought and conversation was community oriented, “*general communication involves contagion.*” True dialogue requires the efforts of everyone that is involved in that dialogue—so this is still an area for development. When parents sense the encouragement of the teachers to engage in conversation, they may feel more relaxed and welcomed. Further, giving new knowledge to the parent may provoke change (Kayler & Weller, 2007). During the IEP observations, I observed the teachers explaining and offering descriptive examples to the parents, along with asking clarifying questions—but the parents only talked when prompted with a query. I suspect that these parents were becoming comfortable enough to voice their concerns and check for understanding but are not yet at ease to initiate conversation and/or informally converse. Thus, further research should continue onto the next steps, to equal partnership, of providing communication skills for parents and giving of knowledge resources. Equal partnership may be demonstrated when the teachers work along with the parents in jointly developing the IEP goals and joint discussions happen at the meeting.

Virtual

The COVID-19 pandemic was the backdrop and landscape for this research. Yet while it may have caused havoc to our society, for this research, there *were* positive effects to partnership, which can be taken forward into future trainings. Given that teachers were online, there have been many more opportunities for interactions with parents. In my own practice, I chat with the parents, multiple times during the day and

involve them in the daily lessons—as the online setting has enabled more access to busy parents who otherwise could not be in the school. Because of this sharing, a bond has developed between us, along with confidence on both sides to voice concerns, brainstorm ideas, and laugh together. This is a key takeaway for enabling relationships via access. Teacher #2 shared a similar sentiment about distance learning, “every time I get online, I involve the parents. I make sure the parents know we can’t do this without them”. Because of the consistent interactions, Teacher #1 mentioned, “the virtual experience has helped me grow in dealing with parents”, so the distance learning format has become an impetus for parent/teacher communication change. Zhang et al (2018) researched online family/teacher relationships before the COVID19 move to virtual learning. They found that through the sharing of common purpose, collaborations, and frequent interactions; relationships were strengthened, and parents felt a sense of belongingness. Hence, a community of practice, teacher, and parent, has formed with the shared purpose of an appropriate education for the child.

This research study began at the same time as the onset of distance learning. Each of the teachers were comfortable with on-site teaching but the move to full-instruction virtual teaching threw them into a new experience or fire pit. Teaching and engaging students through a laptop screen was tough and frustrating but all the teachers noted that the on-line has increased their communication frequency. As noted in the pre-innovation interviews (see table 17) the uptick in communications helped the participants in their communication awareness and meeting interactions. This may have played a factor in their interview responses and show in their innovation reflections. Even if virtual teaching may have been unplanned, the benefit for promoting communication frequency

and comfort was invaluable, such as the daily dialogue and interaction experience. Unfortunately, as the teachers are beginning to return to on-site teaching, the parent/teacher conversing is fading and returning to pre-pandemic status. Communication skills trainings need to capture the virtual informal conversation spark and transfer it into the school setting. Possibly, joint parent/teacher communication trainings may help carry on the experience and bring comfort in working together.

Implications

Implication for Local Context

This action research began from my initial conception of the problem of practice, which was parents demonstrating passivity at the IEP meetings and not advocating for their child. After implementing a review of the literature and implementing earlier cycles of research, I found that a core obstacle to equal parent/teacher partnership was teacher communication skills, and a need to better support these. Hence, this study's innovation was established. The success of this professional development was to encourage the teacher to have communication awareness and welcoming with their parent discourses. Observations and post-interviews indicated that the parent communications skills training was successful in the sense that the participants described how the innovation was the impetus for their verbal awareness in attempting to involve parents. At the observation for teacher #2 (see table 33), I noticed that the parent smiled and seemed very elated each time the teacher offered praises for the child. Consequently, parents seemed more satisfied, as evidenced through complimenting staff, and how they verbally interacted during the meeting. During post-interviews, Teacher #5 (see table 37- relationships) mentioned, "I got a really nice compliment from a family member following an initial

IEP meeting, in an email”. Although, as I have noted, there is still more work to do in terms of getting to more equitable relationships and relationship-building skills—this innovation did spur on useful and needed change. The teachers attributed this positive change directly to the reflective and interactive nature of the innovation. When asked about professional development trainings on parent communication skills given prior to this research, neither of the participants have seen this offered. Nor have they had trainings dedicated to parent collaboration and communication. This research study has offered some evidence that PD devoted to working with parents can be beneficial to teachers. If teachers make parents feel welcomed and comfortable at the IEP meetings, then contentious meetings might lessen. When parents feel that they are not appreciated, listened to, or involved, then frustration may creep in and cause a rift in the relationship.

Given the utility of the innovation, the continuance of regular PD sessions dedicated to parent communication and collaboration, along with future work on relationship building, would be beneficial for the staff and families. These interactive and reflective sessions should be implemented in a small group, such as a collaborative learning team. Utilizing a cluster community allows for colleagues to feel comfortable to critically reflect with each other and role play without embarrassment. Frequent meetings for this purpose may keep communication awareness in teacher thoughts and strategies.

Implication for Greater Context

In my pre-service education, consisting of a master’s in special education and education leadership, I never had a dedicated course for parent communication and/or parent collaboration. This revelation was also echoed by the five research participants, and was a surprising fact, since all the teachers graduated from reputable institutions.

This suggests that there is a pertinent missing piece in the post-secondary education programs related to supporting teachers' communication skills with parents. Given a required course in parent communication skills and a course in collaboration with families, teachers might enter professional practice with knowledge, skills, and experience, carrying over to comfortable interactions with parents. Providing this experiential learning at the college level may lead to less frustrations for new teachers and could elevate their ability to engage in challenging dialogue with greater ease and understanding. This innovation also suggests that such courses might benefit from the interactive critical reflecting and role playing of the community of practice. Therefore, the pre-service courses should be implemented in a similar fashion, using small group communities and presentation of simulation exercises. Consequently, the students may become empowered through the mutual reciprocation of the thoughts of others in the group.

Implication for Research

As shown in figure 4, four small victories need to be accomplished for the establishment of equal partnership. For purpose of this research, I equate parent empowerment with equal partnership. The theoretical model of parent involvement includes three constructs: 1) parent perception of invitation for involvement (teacher communication and welcoming); 2) motivational beliefs (roles and self-efficacy); and 3) perceived life context (knowledge needs and time/effort constraints) (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). My study succeeded in providing teacher awareness about communication, but future research innovations should include communication awareness training for teachers together with parents; strategies for relationship building;

IEP and special education process knowledge training; and the implementation of resources into the IEP meetings. Altogether, these pieces work towards the goal of parent involvement. Parents should have the opportunity to take control of making their own decisions regarding their child's education and not be solely beholden to the teachers, moving their meeting status from passive to active.

Following from this, such research could be extended to achieve other small wins that are needed for the parent empowerment objective. Given the efficacy of this innovation's community reflection training, the next step would be extending the communication awareness training to include the parents.

Limitations and Mitigating Factors in this Work

As in most action research studies, there are events and limitations that I, as the researcher, cannot control. Some of the threats to validity was mitigated in this study or can be in future extended research. This section will address the limitation associated with sample size, innovation timeframe, my participation as an insider researcher, and COVID-19 restrictions.

Sample Size

Action research addresses problems of the researcher's practice, within the local context. My local context is a small elementary school with only twenty-two special education teachers. Despite each teacher was invited to participate, only five teachers (23%) accepted the invitation. Sample size may have been small due to teacher time constraints (meetings, planning, personal), change to distance learning instruction, and disinterest in attending another professional development. Even though teachers have contract hours, they are professionals, and they spend many extra hours conferencing,

attending required trainings, instruction planning, and analyzing student data. Spending twelve or more hours daily on work is not an unusual occurrence. Along with the excessive time and energy constraint issues, the teachers may feel bored and annoyed with having too many professional developments. Most of these trainings are lecture based and not pertaining to the specific needs of the teachers or their instructional category.

This limitation was mitigated in this study by 1) the implementation of interviews and the innovation sessions which were done at a consensus time for the five teachers; and 2) the innovation was based on an interactive community reflection and role-playing format. For future research, mitigation for sample size should include expanding the research to special education teachers and families from other schools as well as to include general education teachers.

Innovation Timeframe

Due to the short timeframe for the research part of this study, five months, this innovation only included a three-session delivery. This limitation happened because the school year started two weeks later than expected due to the extra instructional training for distance learning that the teachers were required to take. Consequently, September was a month of upheaval for the teachers, so introduction of this research was delayed to October. This is reflective of the nature of action research, which is often driven by conditions ‘on the ground’ and requires flexibility to the context of practice and events outside of the researcher’s control. For mitigating this limitation, I offered innovation sessions around the required school PD courses, staff meetings, and the erratic nature of return to school for some of the teachers and classes. Future studies could mitigate by

extending the research for over one year, to take in consideration for unintended circumstances.

My Participation

My participation in this research study was as an insider in collaboration with other insiders' positionality (Herr & Anderson, 2012). As a special education teacher within the research context and my relationship as a colleague with the participants gave a rapport of trust and comfort with them. But a limitation could potentially occur here due to participants not responding or reacting with transparency or honesty because of our collegueship. Interview responses and reflective discussions could have been contrived to include what they think I would like to hear.

To mitigate this limitation, during the innovation sessions, my position and involvement was only to facilitate the slides while the participants took control of their discussions. In addition, this report only used the direct quotes from the teacher's critical reflections. Future studies could mitigate for this limitation by conducting the study in a setting that is outside of the researcher's context. The separation of the researcher from the teachers may enable for more participant comfort in discussions and role-playing, allowing for less embarrassment. It also suggests a potential strength of the innovation design for future replicability and transferability—in that it might be done in other contexts, allowing the expert practitioners to control their discussions with minimal facilitator involvement needed.

COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite the positive effect that virtual teaching had on increased amount of teacher/parent communication and interactions (see chapter 4), the pandemic was still, in

some ways, a limitation to this study. Due to COVID-19, this research was delayed by one month, and the pandemic caused upheaval for the teachers, students, and families. The school building did not open to students, forcing the students to access their education through a laptop screen. Teachers had to learn how to virtually teach and to keep their students engaged enough so that they stay online for the instructional day. Parents were bogged down with making sure that their child learns and tending to their own personal work. Stress levels were elevated for all involved, the teachers, parents, and the students. Then, in November, the school system returned the special education students and teachers back to the brick-and-mortar building. Unfortunately, this was short-lived as the pandemic rose in cases, FCPS decided to pull back, in early January, and returned the students and teachers back to the virtual setting. This erratic era caused some of the teachers to not be readily available for this research. I mitigated for this limitation by being understanding of problems that the teachers were facing and to not schedule interviews or sessions when teachers were over-stressed from this situation. Unfortunately, upsetting events can happen at any time, so future studies may only mitigate this by learning from history and preparing for unintended issues.

My Thoughts and Personal Research Journey

Action research was the impetus for my applying to begin my EdD journey. I equate action research with growth mindset and perseverance. Letting problems sit and allowing for more of the same, without trying to figure out the why, how, and what ifs is a recipe for stagnation. Change is invigorating and involves healthy challenges, which keeps me engaged and young. As a sixty-year-old, I do not have the luxury of watching, I

need to keep moving. Moving forward, accumulating the small victories, and progressing towards lasting change is central to my philosophy.

I am a parent of four grown children who all had IEPs throughout their public schooling years. When they were young, I was not in the education field and did not have formal instruction in special education. I sat at each IEP meeting, listening to the professional jargon, and feeling overwhelmed by the fast-paced meeting process. It was upsetting knowing that I did not have control over the education decisions made for my child. Even though each frustrating meeting gave me experience, I still had a desire to learn how to advocate for my family, so I went into a special education career. The course knowledge and the professional experience gave me the command to be an active participant and the satisfaction knowing that I was helping my child, even if the contentions brought discomfort to the staff.

Throughout nineteen years in my practice, I noticed that there were many parents who acted as I had in the past, by not advocating for their child and leaving the educational decisions to the teachers. My observations depicted frustrated and unhappy parents who left the IEP table with glazed eyes. Parent passivity seemed the norm, and ownership of the IEP was solely on the teachers. Informally discussing this phenomenon with my colleagues, I realized that they had similar sentiments that parents should be more involved and less stressed in the IEP process. With these thoughts and my personal objective to equalize the IEP meetings, I developed this action research. The problem of practice was real to me, and it was still happening even years after I experienced it, so a pathway to change had to be paved.

Even with teachers' community of collective IEP experiences, we needed knowledge on how to involve the parents and make it a less frustrating experience for them along with gaining of new skills and thoughts to consider. Our community of colleagues had a joint purpose in learning together and in mutually celebrating the success of parents advocating for their child. The saying, *it takes a village*, applies to our united actions to gain communication awareness and be more welcoming to the families. Reflecting and brainstorming together made this innovation successful and useful for us all. In contrast, the average professional development, provided through our district, is less interactive and relies on self-learning. My hope is that future trainings be in an engaging style that sparks the various modes of learning (e.g., visual, kinesthetic, auditory, and tactile) and keeps the participants moving forward.

Surprising was that not one member of our community had a pre-service course or on-site professional development in parent communication skills. Even though each participant is a good educator and graduated from reputable programs, this was the missing link for welcoming the families. With this in mind, my future endeavors will involve persuading the post-secondary education programs to implement a course dedicated to communication skills and collaboration with parents. Along with this, I plan to work with school districts as a consultant and professional development facilitator, in providing this study's innovation as a regular PD for collaborative learning teams.

This action research worked towards a victory in teacher communication awareness but the ascent to equal partnership is not complete. My study is a work in progress and a path that needs to be continued on. So, I plan to keep researching to reach the elevation of parent communication awareness and parents' special education

knowledge. This invigorating ascent will have long lasting effects for teachers, parents, and students. When these small victories have been achieved, then the peak of equal partnership has been reached.

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APPENDIX A

TEACHER PRE-INNOVATION INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Teacher Pre-Innovation Interview Protocol

Courses and Training

1. How many pre-service courses did you have in parent collaboration and parent communication techniques?
 - a) Were these courses helpful? What types of strategies did they cover? Do you use any of this in your practice?
2. Have you ever received any professional development on parent collaboration and communication?
 - a) How many? 1-2 or 3 or more
 - b) Tell me a little about this professional development or what it covered.
 - c) Do you use any of this learned knowledge in your practice?
 - d) What suggestions or types of needs do you have for professional development in parent collaboration/communication?

Parents

4. What type of relationship do typically you have with the parents? Tell me a little about many parent relationships.
 - a) Does communication flow freely? Is it challenging? How often do you communicate with them?
 - b) Have you had IEPs of your cases in which you never had a chat with the parents?
5. Have you had parents who were very negative toward you or the situation? Why do you think this happened? What did you do to handle it?

6. How do you think parents could be more equal partners at IEP meetings or IEP development?
7. What communication strategies do you need to help you with your IEP meetings?
8. Do you think taking a professional development training in parent communication skills might help in your parent interactions? If so, how do you think the skills from this training will help at the IEP table?
9. How do you think positive communication between you and the parent will affect your relationship with them? How do you think learning how to improvement negative communications or situations might help?

APPENDIX B

IEP MEETING OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

IEP Meeting Observation Protocol

Date of IEP Meeting _____

Attendance

Parent was: Present on Telephone on Internet Not Present

Number of staff present: _____

Parent advocate present: yes no by phone/internet

Interpreter present: yes no by phone/internet

Pre-IEP

How did the parent seem before the meeting (attitude, preparation)?

Was there a pre-IEP planning meeting with the parent?

Was the teacher welcoming of parent to participate? If so, what did they do? If not, what was unwelcoming?

Description of teacher attitude and preparedness:

IEP Meeting

Reading of goals (descriptions given):

Teacher response to parent concerns:

Teacher response to parent questions:

Teacher response to parent trepidation, frustration, anger:

Description of IEP events:

Language use by teacher:

Parent Participation

Relationship with parents:

Collaboration, brainstorming, joint decision making:

Compromise with parents:

Meeting Summary

On a 1 – 5 scale, 5 being great, 3 being fair, and 1 being poor, collaboration with the parents was: 1 2 3 4 5

Did the parents look satisfied at meeting end? Yes No

What observable qualities/behaviors indicated if they looked satisfied?

IEP Consent? Agree Disagree Partial Consent Did not sign

APPENDIX C

POST-INTERVENTION TEACHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Post-Intervention Teacher Interview Protocol

Communication

1. Since the training, how do you see your parent communication going?
2. Has your comfort in communicating improved? If so, how? Do you have some examples?
3. Since the training, what have you noticed about parent advocacy at IEP meetings? Has there been a difference in the quality and amount of advocacy?
4. Did the training help you in your parent communication behavior? Could you give some examples of how the training affected your communications?
5. Are there any communication areas that you would like extra assistance with? What types of extra resources or support could be helpful?

Relationship

2. Has the relationship between you and the parent or parents been affected or changed in any ways since the training sessions? If so, how?
3. Do you feel that you are meeting the needs of the parents and have an understanding of their culture? Did the training sessions affect this in any ways?

Collaboration

4. Do you feel that parents are taking part actively in collaborating with you? Do parents develop the IEP with your help or in conjunction with you? Or do you tend to drive the IEP development as the teacher?

IEP Meeting

5. Are parents more vocal at the IEP meetings? Have you seen any change in how parents advocate? In what ways? Or if not, why not?

Innovations

6. Did you view the collaboration website? Was it helpful for understanding the parent?

7. Did the professional development give you any new communication strategies?

How do you feel about communicating with parents? Since the training is communication any different, or similar to how it has been?

APPENDIX D
IRB APPROVAL

EXEMPTION GRANTED

[Danah Henriksen](#)
[Division of Educational Leadership and Innovation - West Campus](#)

-
 Danah.Henriksen@asu.edu

Dear [Danah Henriksen](#):

On 9/23/2020 the ASU IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title:	Positive Communication Skills and the IEP Meeting
Investigator:	Danah Henriksen
IRB ID:	STUDY00012548
Funding:	Name: Mary Lou Fulton Institute and Graduate School of Education; MLFIGSE
Grant Title:	
Grant ID:	
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helene Shapiro administrative consent, Category: Off-site authorizations (school permission, other IRB approvals, Tribal permission etc); • Helene Shapiro- Consent: Social Behavior, Category: Consent Form; • Helene Shapiro IEP observation protocol, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Helene Shapiro Leadership and Innovation Research <p>Award letter, Category: Sponsor Attachment;</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helene Shapiro post-interview protocol, Category: <p>Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions);</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helene Shapiro pre-intervention interview protocol, Category: Measures (Survey questions/Interview questions /interview guides/focus group questions); • Helene Shapiro recruitment letter, Category: <p>Recruitment Materials;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helene Shapiro-IRB, Category: IRB Protocol;

The IRB determined that the protocol is considered exempt pursuant to Federal Regulations 45CFR46 (1) Educational settings, (2) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation on 9/23/2020.

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

If any changes are made to the study, the IRB must be notified at research.integrity@asu.edu to determine if additional reviews/approvals are required. Changes may include but not limited to revisions to data collection, survey and/or interview questions, and vulnerable populations, etc.

Sincerely,

IRB Administrator

cc: Helene Shapiro
Helene Shapiro
Danah Henriksen