

Exploring Parent Perceptions of Shared Decision Making and Outcomes of IEP Meetings: Power in Play

Chelsea T. Morris
University of West Georgia

Lindsey A. Chapman
University of Florida

Stacey M. Kesten
Batya Elbaum
University of Miami

Abstract

To ensure access to education for students with disabilities, U.S. federal law specifies requirements for developing students' Individualized Education Program (IEP; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). In particular, provisions are outlined for parents of students with disabilities to be included as members of the decision making process. However, studies continue to find that full participation in IEP meetings is an unrealized ideal. The present study was undertaken in order to better understand Florida parents' perspectives on the decision making and outcomes associated with IEP meetings. A qualitative analysis of written comments provided by parents ($n = 614$) highlights seven descriptive categories that provide insights about the who, how, and why of IEP decision making and the power dynamics that impede equal, meaningful participation and partnerships. Implications are drawn for practitioners and schools.

Keywords: special education, students with disabilities, parent involvement, shared decision making, power, IEP meetings

Introduction

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004) is the federal law that guarantees parents or guardians (hereinafter referred to as "parents") of students with disabilities the opportunity to participate with school professionals in decision making related to services for their child. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is convened for the purpose of determining eligibility and designing a plan to provide the child's special education services and supports. While it is true that parents' involvement in the special education process goes beyond their participation in their child's IEP meetings, the IEP meeting represents a pivotal event. Over the years, the necessity of parent involvement in the IEP process has been emphasized in interpretations of the law (e.g., Dieterich et al., 2019) and in the special education literature (e.g., Bateman, 2017; Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). In 2017, the U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed the need to recognize parents as equal partners in IEP meetings and to provide them with opportunities in IEP meetings, to "fully air their respective opinions" (Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District, 2017).

Unfortunately, neither the ideals of special education law and literature, nor the message from the Supreme Court, are always actualized. One indication of this is that many parents do not provide a positive report related to schools' facilitation of their involvement in the special education process related to their child. Since the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, states have been required to identify the percent of parents who report that schools "facilitated parent involvement as a means of improving services and outcomes for students with disabilities" (Early Childhood Technical Assistance [ECTA] Center, 2020, p. 62). According to ECTA's most recent summary of the federal accountability data (ECTA Center, 2020), across states, the mean percentage of parents of students with disabilities in kindergarten through twelfth grade who reported that schools facilitated their involvement was 76%, indicating that approximately one-quarter of all parents of students with disabilities nationally are *not* being adequately supported in their participation. Additionally, research in special education has demonstrated that parents report feeling excluded during IEP meetings, that they feel outnumbered by school personnel, and that they perceive a lack of trust and escalated conflict in the IEP process (Harry et al., 1995; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, 2009; Mueller et al., 2008). Research has also highlighted that parents' perceived lack of power and control contributes to their dissatisfaction with their involvement. For example, Karila and Alasuutari (2012) point to the "parent-teacher asymmetry which assumes the practices of the institution as being the sole realm of professional expertise" (p. 21) and places parents in "subordinate and asymmetrical positions" (p. 21).

The present study analyzes parents' perceptions related to their involvement in IEP meetings in the state of Florida. Guidance by the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEES), which administers programs for students with disabilities and coordinates student services throughout the state, supports the notion that parents "should have a voice in all discussions and decisions about [their] child's education" (FLDOE, 2012, p. 5). However, similar to other states, Florida has yet to consistently achieve the ideal of equal partnership between parents and schools during IEP meetings. In recent data, Florida's percent on the parent involvement indicator was 80% (FLDOE, 2019b)—higher than the national average, but still far from demonstrating universally high facilitation of parent involvement. Additionally, it should be noted that the federal accountability indicator that draws on parents' perceptions specifically targets schools' facilitation of parent involvement, and not parents' satisfaction with their child's services or supports.

The question of what it means to "facilitate" parent involvement is one that is not specifically defined in special education legislation. However, the survey that Florida uses to collect data for accountability reporting includes items that reflect many stakeholders' conceptualization of what this "facilitation" is about. For example, Florida's annual survey for parents of students receiving special education services includes the item, "The school gives me choices with regard to services that address my child's needs," which speaks to the extent to which parents not only participate in the IEP conversation but can actually impact the decisions made at the IEP meeting. In 2018–19, 78.8% of parents of students in kindergarten through twelfth grade who responded to the survey agreed with this statement (Florida Department of Education, 2019b). The fact that approximately one-fifth of parents in the state did *not* agree that schools facilitated their involvement, as expressed in the survey items, to a level meeting the state's standard, suggests that much work remains to be done in order to ensure parents' effective participation in the special education process. As a step in that direction, in the present study we analyze comments from hundreds of Florida parents in order to better understand their perceived experience of shared decision making and outcomes of their child's IEP meeting.

Method

Study Context

The state of Florida serves approximately 385,000 students with disabilities, representing 14% of all students enrolled in public schools in the state (FLDOE, 2019a). In line with its State Performance Plan (SPP), Florida collects statewide accountability data for the parent involvement indicator through an annual statewide survey of parents of preschool through twelfth grade students receiving Exceptional Student Education (ESE) services. In an attempt to reach all parents, the state distributes surveys to all of the state's school districts, which then disseminate them to parents of enrolled students. Parents may also access the survey online. The Florida ESE Parent Survey uses items recommended by the National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring to report schools' efforts to facilitate parent involvement (Elbaum, 2014). The data for the present study came from parents' responses to two additional open-ended items provided to parents who accessed the 2016 online survey: (a) "Overall, how satisfied were you with the decision making process that took place at your child's most recent IEP meeting?" and, (b) "Overall, how satisfied were you with the outcome of your child's most recent IEP meeting?"

Data Analysis

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the researchers' university. The data were derived from a total of 1,228 responses from parents to the additional online questions. Given that some parents wrote a comment in both text boxes, the total number of comments exceeded the number of parents who offered a response. Thus, a total of 1,926 comments were included in the data analysis. These comments were analyzed as *elicited text* using a recursive process: elicited text can include open-ended questions on a questionnaire that function to elicit thoughts, feelings, and concerns from respondents (Charmaz, 2006). Throughout the data analysis, a variety of techniques were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. These included a systematic process of coding, writing reflective memos, extensive peer debriefing, consensus coding, and maintenance of an audit trail (Charmaz, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005; Rodgers & Cowles, 1993).

Data Preparation

Many parents used the text boxes to comment on aspects that were unrelated to the prompts. Therefore, all parents' comments were filtered by two coders who were members of the research team. To do this, 100 comments were randomly selected to be independently coded as either addressing or not addressing the prompts. When the coders reached 80% agreement, the remaining comments were divided between the two coders for the determination of relevance to the study. A resulting total of 614 comments were deemed relevant to the prompts.

Data Coding

In the first step of data coding, *open coding*, two members of the research team, working independently, assigned one or more open codes to the same one-third of comments in the corpus, using the line-by-line coding technique suggested by Charmaz (2006). Once these coders compared and ensured coding reliability, the remaining two-thirds of comments were divided between the two coders, who proceeded to assign open codes. The purpose of this step was to capture the meaning of text segments embodied within comments. Next, *focused coding* allowed a closer examination of the open codes. The goal of this step was to begin to capture commonalities and differences across comments. As part of focused coding, nuances were noted about what contributed to parents' perceptions about their involvement in shared decision making and outcomes of the IEP meeting.

Finally, descriptive categories were formed to summarize the data through a *thematic coding* process. This was accomplished through an iterative process, constantly comparing the open and focused codes to each other in the emergence of recurring and salient patterns (Charmaz, 2006).

Findings

In sum, this three-step coding process (i.e., open coding, focused coding, thematic coding) involved the assigning of initial codes ($n = 648$) to segments of data, grouping of initial codes into focused codes ($n = 39$), and developing descriptive categories ($n = 7$). The seven descriptive categories illustrated how parents perceived both the shared decision making process and the outcomes of their child's IEP meeting. These categories were parents' role(s), school participants' roles, gatekeeping, predetermination, reaching agreement, procedures, and resource availability.

Parents' Role(s)

Parents' comments revealed the different ways in which they viewed their membership on the IEP team. Some parents asserted their role on the team as necessary, even when questioning the extent to which others validated them as such. Other parents expressed satisfaction when their role of contributing input, asking questions, and making suggestions was validated as essential. One role was being the key initiator on the team as indicated by comments such as, "I was the one who initiated everything" and, "I have been the one pushing the teachers and staff members to meet and to report progress." Also, some parents demanded a more dominant role by "not allowing [themselves] to be left out of the process." Sometimes, taking an active role on the team led the parent to perceive greater satisfaction: "During this last meeting we decided to be part of the decision making process and we realized that it increased our satisfaction in the program."

Parents also described ways that they were made to feel as if their role on the team was nonessential. For example, parents sometimes described their role as merely logistical and made comments such as, "[they] made me feel like I wasn't necessary in the process...I would like to feel like I was more of a partner in the process and not only there to sign the paper." In some cases, parents questioned if they were seen by other IEP team members as capable decision-makers and meaningful contributors. One parent who described themselves as "very schooled" believed that playing an active role resulted in concern, stating, "I run into situations where they're actually upset [that] I know what my child's rights are." On the other hand, some parents wondered themselves whether they were capable and/or knowledgeable enough to serve in a decision making capacity. A parent described this feeling, stating, "As a parent, I personally lean towards the advice [of] the educators and staff to give ideas and proven strategies for my child."

School Participants' Role(s)

School participants (e.g., school representatives, particular teachers, school administrators) were described in terms of how they fulfilled an expected role of facilitating the IEP meeting or easing the IEP process for parents. Parents shared examples of when other meeting members prepared and supported them, as well as offering suggestions to consider. Some expressed that this was the role of school participants because they were "very knowledgeable" in the IEP process and available services. This excerpt demonstrates a view that school participants are professionals whose role was to guide the educational decision making in IEP meetings: "[The teacher] offered several suggestions to help accommodate our son. Everyone in the meeting gave their professional opinions, which helped us all make the best decisions regarding my child's future in education." Parents also noted that the school participants' role as facilitator was necessary to ensure their own role, making comments such as, "I like how every option was explained and the opinions of the educators and therapists were included so we could make the best decision for my child."

Other parents expressed that school participants did not always fulfill a supportive role on the team. Instead, parents used words like “rude,” “unprofessional,” “defensive,” “stand-offish,” and “cold” to describe their dissatisfaction with school participants. This lack of support was also attributed to the physical presence of others in that specific meeting members were “no shows” and thus not able to participate in the IEP meeting. In this regard, one parent commented, “Additional input from all teachers is preferred. I received feedback from only two out of six teachers.”

Gatekeeping

Many parents were clear in their expectations that school participants and parents would “work as a team to provide services for the child.” However, school participants were described as gatekeepers, preventing this ideal from being actualized. Parents shared situations where their concerns and suggestions were dismissed and school participants made them feel “unheard,” even when under the impression that parent input is “allowed.” Further, gatekeeping was a category formed by comments such as the following, that was related to parents’ overall dissatisfaction:

The school makes the final decisions in all meetings. No consideration is given to parents’ input, at all. There is no team decision, it is only the school making the decisions. There is no negotiation, no options, no choices to find a middle ground when there is disagreement on an issue. The parent may be in the room, but the school supersedes the parent in all decisions. If the parent disagrees with something, the school continues as if the parent wasn’t even there...The parent has no say.

This parent is clearly sharing frustration, and similar gatekeeping was affirmed by many others. The perceived willingness on the part of the school participants to discuss parent priorities and preferred topics was overshadowed by the limiting of parents’ ability to make suggestions or provide input.

Predetermination

Parents expressed frustration that the IEP appeared to be predetermined, or “written out in advance.” When this happened, meetings were seen as a means of ensuring parents “agree[ed] with the IEP as written” as opposed to an opportunity for meaningful collaboration. Here, parents related predetermination to their negative perceptions of the meeting. One parent went so far as to relate predetermination to being bullied, writing, “I was bullied into making a decision that was predetermined by others. Even when I challenged the decision by bringing my procedural safeguards to the meeting.... I was told that it did not apply to my case.” Predetermination and/or “generic” meeting outcomes were perceived as being in the best interest of the school as opposed to “the individual needs of the child.”

Reaching Agreement

This category describes the process of reaching agreement during the IEP meeting, including any overt opposition felt by parents. Many parents used adversarial language, or the need to “fight” for their legal rights, when sharing how decisions were determined. They also provided examples of how reaching agreement simply was not possible without the support of a parent advocate. For example,

Our last IEP meeting was satisfactory, but it was only because we fought very hard for the services our daughter desperately needed at the previous IEP meeting. We brought an advocate with us to the previous IEP meeting...We will always fight for our daughter to give her the best possible chance at success.

The need of a parent advocate to assert the “shared” aspect of shared decision making was uniquely noteworthy. This perceived need for external reinforcement shows that parents feel they must “fight” in order to reach agreement. For example, one parent commented, “Most of us feel the school won’t

do the right thing unless you get a lawyer involved...an additional expense (time and money) for us who have a lot of expenses as it is.” This fighting was an “exhausting” yet necessary means of ensuring that mutually agreed upon outcomes were both appropriate and individualized to the needs of the child.

Procedures

The logistical components required to complete an IEP were often outlined as a set of procedural boxes to check to meet the requirements of providing services to students with disabilities. In comments that undergirded the formation of this category, parents noted what occurred before, during, and after the meeting such as meeting preparations, inclusion/invitation of meeting members, parent invitation, paperwork requirements, provisions for follow-up, and the time allotted for IEP meetings. One parent said the IEP meeting was “an exercise in futility” where participants were “just going through the motions.” Technical procedures of the IEP meeting (e.g., “getting the form filled out correctly”) were sometimes perceived as the primary goal of the IEP meeting: “I felt they were more concerned with covering the administrative paperwork than actually customizing and addressing my child’s needs.” One parent likened the IEP meeting to a “mortgage closing” due to the magnitude of paperwork involved. Offering a suggestion, this parent added, “I would recommend a common-sense approach to streamlining the forms that can take over an ESE teacher’s life.”

Resource Availability

Parents identified IEP decisions that were made due to limited resource availability. Parents’ comments highlighted the difficulty they felt in knowing what options were available (e.g., “...are there not any established techniques that actually work with these types of children yet?”) and the reluctance of schools to consider or offer options (e.g., “There are no additional services offered, or explained. I always feel lost trying to create a plan for my children”). Parents also acknowledged that resource availability is part of a larger system in which processes and decisions may not be within the control of team members. One parent wrote, “Money seems to be the determining factor in what my kid can receive.” This perception is similar to comments made by other parents who felt “stuck with whatever the school can offer rather than what is best for [their] child.” Recognition of this systemic issue resulted in some parents forgiving, or even excusing, inappropriate IEPs, as shown in these two comments: “We felt the school did what they could but didn’t have the adequate resources or support from the school district,” and, “There does not seem to be a specific service to help my child with his needs...The staff is wonderful, but their hands are tied.”

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to analyze parents’ perceptions related to the shared decision making process and outcomes of their child’s most recent IEP meeting. What emerged were seven descriptive categories that provide insight into the complex relationship between families and schools when making decisions about a student’s needed special education services and supports. Parents variously described the extent to which they were validated as essential members of the IEP team, supported in the decision making process, and satisfied with the procedures and agreements that framed their child’s IEP meeting. At the same time, many parents described feeling devalued and non-essential. They expressed how difficult it was to navigate the myriad interpersonal, local, and systemic challenges to meaningful participation.

The study findings provide numerous examples of the extent to which power dynamics influence shared decision making and outcomes of the IEP meeting. This “power” can be broadly conceptualized as the ability or opportunity to influence collective decisions (cf. Hayward, 2000). In line with this conceptualization, the balance of power tips heavily toward school participants who may either limit or promote the sharing of power, and hence the opportunity to influence the outcome

of the meeting. In other words, the extent and meaningfulness of participation was largely determined by the willingness of schools to support parents. According to Ruppap and Gaffney (2011), “Although the intention of multidisciplinary IEP teams is to ensure that multiple perspectives are considered when decisions are made, the relative power of the various team members significantly influences the outcome of the meetings” (p. 20). Our findings align with this, especially the multiple mentions of parents’ need to “fight” for their rights or for specific services for their child and references to the gatekeeping that occurred when they did so. It is within the context of these considerations that we discuss the imbalance of power as it relates to *who* made decisions, *how* decisions were made, and *why* such decisions might have prevailed.

Who Are the Decision Makers?

Parents frequently commented on the school participants who were or were not present and involved in the decision making process, and on perceived differences in the amount of power held by parents versus school personnel. That parents’ decision making capability and role were often in question is consistent with previous research indicating school personnel’s persistent view of parents as passive participants rather than active partners (Harry et al., 1995; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Soodak & Erwin, 1995). This unequal distribution of power in IEP meetings results in tension and disagreements between parents and school personnel. A number of studies have corroborated parents’ perceptions that school personnel hold deficit-based attitudes about their ability/need to participate and that school personnel are in a position of power (Ruppap & Gaffney, 2011; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2012). The perception that parents are outnumbered in meetings and inadequately prepared to truly be decision makers (Mueller, 2015) was echoed in this study’s findings. A balance of power manifested in parents’ beliefs that their input and opinions are overlooked, dismissed, or ignored by those making decisions. Overall, our findings suggest that parents believe they must gain power, either by asserting a more dominant role in the process or by engaging the assistance of a parent advocate to become a decision maker.

How Are Decisions Made?

IEP meetings are prone to procedural errors (Yell et al., 2016), a challenge that has led some researchers to consider the IEP meeting a “ceremonial myth” (Bray & Russell, 2016, p. 394). The data from this study support the idea that for many parents, the IEP meeting is a formality, with processes for how decisions are made rooted in the uneven distribution of responsibility and power. Additionally, parents perceived that the process involved “generic” procedures where team members “went through the motions” using a predetermined agenda in pursuit of compliance rather than stakeholder agreement.

Parents mentioned other sources of frustration related to decision making. Gatekeeping was described as relating to the control of all aspects of how decisions were made. As reported elsewhere (Kurth et al., 2020), parents perceived the need to assert themselves in order to get the additional services and/or accommodations they deemed necessary to meet their child’s needs. For some parents, fighting entailed speaking up or demanding an active role. For others, it meant obtaining support from legal counsel and/or parent advocates, increasing the likelihood of the initiation of due process proceedings or dispute resolution, both of which are avenues for parents to challenge the decisions and outcomes of IEP meetings and provisions of special education services and supports (Scanlon et al., 2018).

Parents did express satisfaction that offered some hope, albeit limited, for how shared decision making can take place when the power imbalance between parents and school-based stakeholders is successfully addressed. In these cases, the decision making process pointed to the importance of collaboration where parents felt they were valued members of a team and their voices were heard. Successful teams developed mutually agreed upon goals, a tenet that has been found important in other studies (Scanlon et al., 2018). Further, school personnel’s valuing of parent input, in terms of

how decisions are made, led to satisfaction with outcomes of IEP meetings. These results affirm the call for the use of strategies to ensure that parents have both sufficient time in IEP meetings to share their knowledge and opinions and the respectful attention of team members (Fenton et al., 2017).

Why Are Decisions Being Made?

The IEP meeting is intended to detail current levels of a student's performance, develop appropriate and individualized goals, and determine which services and accommodations are to be provided to assist the child in meeting these goals (Beck & DeSutter, 2019). Consistent with the findings of Leiter and Krauss (2004), parents believed that decisions were not being made based on the individual child. Additionally, decisions were influenced by limitations of resource availability, gatekeeping, predetermination of services and supports, and difficulty reaching agreement. As underscored in previous research, discrepant views of a child or the child's needs are aligned with escalated conflict (Lake and Billingsley, 2000). However, discrepant views do not need to lead to disputes; indeed, the airing of different points of view can lead to a broader understanding of the child and the child's needs, and a deeper shared understanding among team members. Parents' comments require interpretation in light of numerous factors (e.g., financial, political) external to the child that often underlie the decisions made in the IEP meeting. As such, why decisions are made was a source of great concern for some parents, and a seemingly inescapable reality for others.

Implications

The complex and multilayered nature of power dynamics in IEP meetings suggests that implications for stakeholders must be examined at multiple levels of the educational system. It is clear that parents' perceptions of who, how, and why decisions are made were not in line with the legislative mandate of equal participation. Implications for both practitioners and schools are provided here, recognizing that these two key groups of stakeholders are essential change agents in the IEP process. As change agents, practitioners and schools have the opportunity to address the systemic issues faced by parents in IEP meetings, thus halting the cycle of reproducing and reconstructing, however unintentionally, existing power imbalances that parents perceive as oppressive and that can have a negative impact on student outcomes.

Implications for Practitioners

We recognize that an imbalance of power is inherent in the special education system. It is school staff/educational professionals that determine a child's eligibility for special education services, contingent on parental consent; it is school staff who convene the IEP meeting, and it is school staff who fill out the required IEP documentation, even when in consultation with a parent. Most importantly, it is school staff who manage the IEP meeting, thus retaining control of the agenda, the allocation of turns, and, often, the final decisions (Goldman & Burke, 2017). The implications for practitioners, then, must include increased transparency of IEP meeting structures and agendas and the recognition of parents as assets who are essential to the IEP team. While it may be challenging for all IEP meeting agendas to be completely co-constructed by educators and parents, there is likely a middle ground between rigid, boiler-plate agendas and those that are flexible enough to meaningfully include parent suggestions and concerns. To enhance work within this middle ground, school personnel and parents should exchange information prior to the IEP meeting. At a minimum, both sides should be aware of the accommodations and goals that might be considered for the child, allowing enough time at the meeting for parents to consider the options.

Another strategy to address the power imbalance between parents and school staff is to provide all participants in the IEP meeting with the same amount of time to provide and discuss information (Mueller, 2009) and establish formal expectations and procedures for how divergent opinions should be shared (Giangreco, 2001). Practitioners can also ensure all team members agree before moving on

to a new topic and conscientiously validate parent comments. While these behavioral changes at the interpersonal level may not get to the root of other constraints (e.g., time limitations), they may help parents feel greater equality in the decision making process.

Implications for Schools

School-level teams and structures can be used to create a systematic and transparent IEP meeting process for offering choices, discussing options, and reaching agreement. This includes training practitioners to follow an evidence-based framework for shared decision making, as has been done in other fields (e.g., pediatrics; Makoul & Clayman, 2006). One way in which schools are attempting to improve balance and objectivity in IEP meetings is by using an IEP meeting facilitator (Mueller, 2009), a neutrally positioned individual assigned to assist IEP teams in establishing ground rules, fostering collaboration, and using specific communication strategies. The Facilitated IEP (FIEP) meeting is already available to parents in Florida (FLDOE, n.d.).

Based on the role practitioners play in making parents feel supported, schools need to further explore the self-identified and contextualized professional development needs of IEP meeting facilitators and supporting team members. Florida teachers, in particular, have previously identified the facilitation of parental involvement as the most difficult aspect of some IEP meetings (Lubbers et al., 2008). In the present study, parents who felt most satisfied praised specific school participants' ability to make them feel like valued contributors. Schools can, thus, support professional development opportunities related to successfully facilitating meaningful parental involvement in IEP meetings.

Critically, recognizing parents as assets is an essential charge to schools. This notion is especially necessary to ensure authentic participation of parents from disadvantaged social groups (Watson & Foster-Fishman, 2013) and can be critical in "fighting the throes of disproportionality" (Fenton et al., 2017, p. 221) in special education programming. Previous research indicates that socioeconomic and racial inequities impact parent satisfaction and involvement; for example, satisfaction has been found to be higher among middle- and upper-class White families (e.g., Fish, 2008), and lower among parents of color and families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Slade et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2012). While our study did not directly address this issue, it is imperative that Florida schools pay close attention to the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse families as well as those with less social capital. At minimum, it would be important for schools to disaggregate dispute resolution data by known sociodemographic characteristics that position parents in roles of decreased power, just as it is required that states report on the representativeness of their parent survey data by the race and ethnicity of respondents.

Limitations

Although this study has unveiled dynamics that are important to acknowledge when considering IEP meeting decisions, limitations must be acknowledged. First, parent comments were filtered to capture a single event: the IEP meeting. Therefore, other relevant events that may be important variables impacting parents' satisfaction were not included. Also, given the preponderance of comments expressing dissatisfaction with the IEP meeting, a significant self-selection bias among respondents toward parents who have complaints about the IEP process is likely (Poncheri et al., 2008). This limitation certainly does not suggest the negative perceptions are not valid but, instead, that it would be hazardous to draw inferences concerning the proportion of parents who experience inequities in decision making. Additionally, this study focused only on parents and did not collect data from other stakeholders whose perceptions might have lent nuance to the conclusion.

Conclusion

In 2002, Muscott wrote, “Parents are calling out to be heard by professionals. Is anyone listening?” (p. 69). Almost two decades later, this question is still relevant. Listening to the voices of parents remains vital to understanding the power imbalances that diminish parents’ equitable and meaningful participation in educational decision making. Failure to address the power at play in IEP meetings and to support equitably shared decision making represent pressing social justice issues in Florida schools and risk exposing our schools to what is considered a “fatal” (Zirkel & Hetrick, 2017) violation of legally mandated procedures. By focusing on preventive efforts, Florida can enhance parent satisfaction with their participation in IEP meetings and also contribute to more positive outcomes for parents, practitioners, schools, and, above all, students.

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Corresponding Author: Chelsea T. Morris

Author Contact Information: cmorris@westga.edu

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