ENHANCING THE IEP TEAM:
MOTHERS’ IN-SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS OF THEIR CHILDREN
WITH DISABILITIES

by

Corina R. Gilden

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of a Master of Science in Human Development and Family Sciences

Fall 2019

© 2019 Corina R. Gilden
All Rights Reserved
ENHANCING THE IEP TEAM:
MOTHERS’ IN-SCHOOL OBSERVATIONS OF THEIR CHILDREN
WITH DISABILITIES

by

Corina R. Gilden

Approved:
__________________________
Steven M. Eidelman, M.B.A.
Professor in charge of thesis on behalf of the Advisory Committee

Approved:
__________________________
Bahira Sherif Trask, Ph.D.
Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies

Approved:
__________________________
Gary T. Henry, Ph.D.
dean of the College of Education and Human Development

Approved:
__________________________
Douglas J. Doren, Ph.D.
Interim Vice Provost for Graduate and Professional Education and Dean
of the Graduate College
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without my advisor and committee chair, Steve Eidelman, whose sustained passion across decades for expanding opportunities for people with disabilities is inspiring, and who offered advice and resources readily; along with my distinguished committee members, Dr. Jen Gallo-Fox and Dr. Rob Palkovitz, for their expert guidance through the challenging task of qualitative research.

I would also like to thank my parents, Dr. Michael and Kathy Penn, who instilled the power and value of education in me from a young age, and whose sacrifices throughout the years have facilitated my schooling.

Finally, I am grateful for my husband, David Gilden, for his confidence in me and his encouragement that kept the wheels of this project in motion; and my son, Casey Gilden, whose enthusiasm for life keeps me smiling and whose autism journey inspired this research.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LIST OF TABLES</th>
<th>vi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microsystem</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mesosystem</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 RESULTS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Interactions</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Interactions</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Placement</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Activities</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Capacities</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills Generalization</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Empowerment............................................................................................................. 45

Parent Empowerment .............................................................................................. 47
Team Empowerment ................................................................................................. 49

5 LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ........ 55

6 DISCUSSION........................................................................................................... 57

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................... 57

Appendix

A INITIAL PARENT SURVEY ................................................................................... 69
B BEFORE YOUR OBSERVATION ............................................................................. 70
C SAMPLE LETTER TO SCHOOL ............................................................................. 71
D STUDENT OBSERVATION FORM ....................................................................... 72
E INTERVIEW SCHEDULE ....................................................................................... 76
F UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE IRB APPROVED RESEARCH ......................... 78
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1  Participant and Child Information ......................................................... 20
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>The Bioecological Model</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Concept Map</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Johari Window Model</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Johari Window Model — Initial Phase</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Johari Window Model — Increased Awareness Phase</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Complementary perspectives and expertise of caregivers and school professionals on Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams are meant to culminate in the most appropriate special education and related services for children with disabilities. Current literature reveals that inadequate education about the IEP process, educational practices, and mistrust have made adversarial or passive parent participation on IEP teams commonplace.

This qualitative study sought to examine the feelings and insights of mothers about their in-school observations of their children with disabilities, and explored whether observation might positively influence future parent participation on the IEP team. Ten mothers independently observed their early elementary school-aged children with disabilities for a minimum of 30 minutes during one school day and then participated in a follow-up interview of open-ended questions within one week of their observations. Analysis of interviews revealed that through the process of observation, participants gained familiarity of interpersonal relationships at school and educational processes; discovered new capacities in their children, as well as new strategies to implement in the home; and felt more empowered to participate on the IEP team, which in turn could enhance IEP team effectiveness. This study suggests in-school mothers’ observation of their children with disabilities as practical and worthy of further development, and serves as an initial step toward creating effective, tested methods to assist parents in becoming valuable contributors on the IEP team.
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, P. L. 108-446, guarantees a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to children with disabilities and developmental delays. To ensure suitable services, an IEP team is formed for each eligible child and tasked with designing and managing appropriate placement and special education services in school. IDEA appoints parents or caregivers to the IEP team along with school personnel to identify or confirm eligibility for services, assign appropriate placement, select services, design individualized educational plans, and/or plan transition to adulthood (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004).

Complementary perspectives and expertise of caregivers, educators, school administrators, psychologists, therapists, and other specialists who are assigned as IEP team members are meant to culminate in the most appropriate services for the child. This model of team collaboration intended by IDEA has limited success in being realized in part because caregivers are often not included in the process appropriately by school personnel, and are not educated adequately to participate as members of the IEP team (Fish 2006, Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003).
Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified five realms of influence in his early Ecological Systems Theory: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Nested at the center of these systems lies the individual child, whose qualities and characteristics are molded by the environmental influences that are represented in the enveloping circles of the model. These influences begin with the most intimate relationships in the home environment and extend outward to the larger school system, and then even further to the external systems of society and culture. Bronfenbrenner believed that by studying the lives of children within the context of these multi-layered ecological systems, their individual development could be better understood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Interactions between the ecological systems could be considered especially critical for the optimal development of children with disabilities because of the extra services and expertise required in most cases to evaluate, educate, train, monitor, and care for them. This coordination of services and care requires additional and intense interactions in Bronfenbrenner’s mesosystem, where the interactions between microsystems occurs.

Bronfenbrenner’s later adaptation of his theory in 1993 from an ecological to a Bioecological Model takes into account the influence of the child’s characteristics in stimulating his or her own development in the context of the ecosystems (See Figure 1). The bidirectional nature of the Bioecological Model is especially relevant when discussing the development of children with disabilities, who are more likely to have atypical interactions with
The Bioecological Model

their microsystems (Sontag, 1996). Furthermore, a study by Dunst, Trivette, and Cross (1986) revealed that not only does the type of disability influence in significant ways the degree of developmental gain, but their work also revealed that the amount of social support a family provides can mediate child outcomes. Thus, the condition of the child may necessitate more intense coordination between microsystems by the parents to advance the child’s development.

The current study focuses mainly on the mesosystem level of the Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Theory; more specifically, it takes as its focus the interaction between a child’s home and school. To understand the interactions that occur in the mesosystem, we must first discuss how a child’s development is influenced by his or her relationships in the microsystem.
Microsystem

The microsystem of the Bioecological Model refers to the groups and institutions that have direct contact with the child and thus affect the child’s development without mediation. Peers, family, school, religious institutions, and neighborhood are included in this most intimate realm. The people in these groups often have direct, personal relationships with the child and thus are regarded as the most influential. Supportive interactions in this context will tend to foster the child’s development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Due to limitations in their ability to engage effectively in what Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) refer to as proximal processes, children with disabilities may be more limited in their interactions with microsystems than typically developing children. Bronfenbrenner’s supplemental Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model claims that developmental processes and outcomes are a joint function of the characteristics of the environment and of the person (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Proximal processes are the driving forces at the center of human development that involve the bidirectional relationship between the biological and psychological characteristics of a person and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Disruptive generative force characteristics, such as impulsivity, explosiveness, distractibility, inability to delay gratification, and the tendency to resort to aggression and violence under stress, can impede or interrupt proximal processes. Poor resource characteristics, such as physical handicaps, genetic defects, persistent illness, and damage to brain function can also disrupt proximal processes. Finally, demand characteristics, such as an agitated temperament, hyperactivity, and passivity can also discourage reactions from
the social environment and hinder proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner also hypothesized, however, that the power of proximal processes was dependent on not only the characteristics of the individual, but also the environment (Darling, 2007). He found that parental responsiveness could disrupt the negative processes that might occur in a negative environment, such as with children of low socioeconomic status (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). If the effect of a negative environment can be alleviated by parental responsiveness, perhaps the deficits associated with disabilities can also be mitigated by parental influence.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the next ring of the Bioecological Model and it encapsulates the microsystems and the individual. In this realm the microsystems interact. These interactions are of crucial importance for children with disabilities.

To address characteristics that have the potential to harm a child’s development, or to help awaken and cultivate latent positive characteristics, parents, therapists, physicians, psychologists, and school personnel work together to provide additional supports and services for children with disabilities. This coordination of effort between microsystems takes place in the mesosystem. Such coordination is necessary because people and organizations in the microsystems may not separately have the knowledge of the complete child or expertise in a specific area of need. For example, a doctor may know the child’s history of medical procedures, but may not know details of the child’s diet that may contribute to better health. Alternatively, the child’s teacher may know the best academic styles with which to teach the child, but
may not know how to best motivate the child to complete his work or understand both the strengths and limitations of the child’s home environment. Each person relating to the child has a specific role and expertise in facilitating the child’s development. However, without a system of communication within the mesosystem, these professionals may lack the kind of information that could render them more effective. If the teacher can learn from the family what best motivates the child, and the family can learn how to generalize the child’s learning into their natural home environment, the child’s development stands to benefit from this collaboration.

To ignore the potential impact of continuity and cooperation between the two environments where a child divides the majority of his or her waking hours has become the norm in traditional educational practices. For six-to-eight hours a day, most children in the nation are placed in a school setting separate from their homes to receive an education. Bronfenbrenner (1979) has suggested that schools are becoming increasingly isolated from the home and that this results in parents and teachers becoming less likely to know each other at all. He has gone so far as to describe school as “one of the most potent breeding grounds of alienation in American society” (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 60) and associates this destructive trend of the break down between home and school with declines in test scores, and rising rates of homicide, suicide, drug use, and delinquency of school-age children. Separation between school and home may leave children who are already developmentally challenged in a more vulnerable state. In the light of this background, the current study explores the potential of in-school observations by parents to enhance the connection between the two dominant microsystems in a child’s development: home and school.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A strong relationship has been established in the literature between parent involvement and academic and behavioral advancement of students (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Spann et al., 2003). Parent involvement with a child’s schooling can come in many forms, such as following up on learning activities with children at home, attending and volunteering at school events, participating in committees or advisory councils associated with the school, and being included in educational decision making (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Parent involvement in the education of children with disabilities has also shown benefits such as increased student achievement (Zhang, Hsu, Kwok, Benz, & Bowman-Perrott, 2011), increased generalization of skills across environments (Kaiser & Hancock, 2003), improved transition outcomes (Greenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001), and increased the ability of high school students with disabilities to evaluate options and advocate for themselves (Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003). Parent involvement is widely recognized as a best practice in a child’s education, and the law mandates that parents be invited to IEP meetings, but ultimately it is up to parents to decide if and how they want to participate on IEP teams (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006).

Turnbull et al. (2006) outlined nine components of a collaborative IEP meeting: preparing in advance; connecting and getting started; reviewing formal evaluation and current levels of performance; sharing resources, priorities, and
concerns; sharing visions and great expectations; translating student priorities into written goals and objectives; specifying placement, supplementary aids/services, related services, and assessment modifications; considering the interactions of the student’s proposed goals, service, and placement; and summarizing and concluding. While it is appropriate that much of the meeting be guided by school staff due to their expertise about school practices and students’ academic performance, parents can contribute to the IEP by: offering insights into the child’s testing, academic performance, and classroom and community functioning and behavior; helping prioritize needs; collaborating on appropriate goals; and generating questions throughout the meeting.

A review of literature by Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, and Valdes (2012) found that the vast majority of parents, nearly 90%, reported that they attended their children’s most recent IEP meeting. Fewer than 2% of the more than 1,500 parents included in the analysis reported they wanted to be less involved than they already were. While many parents want to participate in the processes associated with their children’s special education planning, parenting a child with disabilities often involves a range of stressors and challenges that are unique to this population (National Research Council, 2001).

Many studies have found that parents of young children with disabilities and developmental delays are apt to experience more elevated child-related stress than parents of children without disabilities (Baker, Blacher, Crnic, & Edelbrock, 2002; Cameron, Dobson, & Day, 1991). Parents of children with autism, for example, experience higher levels of parenting stress and depressed mood than other parents (Baker-Ericzen, Brookman-Frazee, & Stahmer, 2005; Benson, 2015). Amplified stress
can be the result of disability-related child characteristics that demand a parent’s time and energy, and may also stem from the extensive financial burdens that tend to accompany the care of children with disabilities (Baker-Ericzen et al., 2005). Furthermore, it is typical of parents of children with disabilities to have to manage stress related to struggles that are associated with working with school staff (Myers, Mackintosh, & Goin-Kochel, 2009; Resch et al., 2010; Carroll, 2013). While all parents communicate with school staff about their children’s progress, parents of children with disabilities interact more frequently with professionals due to their participation on the IEP team. Participation of parents of children with disabilities further surpasses those of students in regular education because is a protected right.

Parent participation stands as a fundamental tenant of special education law to safeguard FAPE for children with disabilities (Yell & Drasgow, 2000). However, in a national telephone survey of 510 parents by Johnson and Duffet (2002), 70% of the parents questioned strongly agreed that “too many special-needs children lose out because their parents are in the dark about the services they are entitled to” (p. 12). More than half of the parents surveyed (55%) also strongly or somewhat agreed that “parents have to find out on their own what help is available to their children—the school is not going volunteer the information” (Yell & Drasgow, 2000, p.12). Mitchell and Sloper (2002) found that sometimes families are late in getting information they need, or get it in a format that is not easily understood. Furthermore, families want relevant, user-friendly, and easily accessible research-based information and assistance to use the information (Ruef & Turnbull, 2001).

There is no standardized training to become an IEP team member, and school personnel are not obligated to offer counseling or training about the IEP process to
families. Schools are merely required to invite parents of children with disabilities and developmental delays to participate in IEP meetings at least once a year, and to offer parents copies of the procedural safeguards and due process procedures (Procedural Safeguards Notice, 2012), a booklet that in most states reads like a set of laws and statutes and is written at a college level (Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012). This leaves parents of the nearly 13% of students in the nation with an IEP with the burden of educating themselves about the IEP process (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2015).

Conversely, school personnel tend to have more knowledge about and exposure to the IEP process, which makes them more at ease on the IEP team. Simon (2006) surveyed 98 teachers and 143 parents and found that teachers overall had significantly more positive views of the IEP process than parents. This could be because teachers have more exposure to the IEP process through several different students and in-service trainings, and therefore, have a higher level of understanding and comfort with the process (Simon, 2006). These results suggest that disparities of perceptions exist among various members of the IEP team.

Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008) also interviewed a mixture of parents and district employees in two school districts and found that although both teachers and parents thought parent participation in the IEP process was important, oppositional views toward parents by some educators and administrators was identified as a major systemic problem. Administration in these two districts implemented ongoing professional development and legal compliance training for educators, and sought to hire parent-friendly staff. They also provided more teacher and parent support and focused on building relationships through communication and cultivation of trust.
(Mueller et al., 2008). Such conscious, preemptive approaches that encourage parent involvement in the IEP process are rarely described in the research.

Changing negative dynamics and establishing parity on IEP teams requires deliberate, active effort from school personnel to empower families (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004). The responsibility falls to the school district to ensure adequate parent participation, otherwise it could be held legally liable (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Yell and Drasgow (2000) found that 34 of 45 due process hearings and court cases they examined were lost by school districts mostly they failed to provide adequate notice for parents to attend IEP meetings, neglected to inform parents of their procedural rights, or held meetings without inviting parents. The courts decided that these procedural violations obstructed the effective implementation of FAPE and were considered such extreme infringements that they usually rendered a student’s IEP illegal (Yell & Drasgow, 2000).

While schools are obligated by law to formally invite parents to a child’s IEP meeting and to offer them a copy of their state’s procedural safeguards document, parents want to do more than show up and sign on the dotted line (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). At a basic level, if parents are to become effective advocates for their children with disabilities, knowledge of special education law, the IEP document, and familiarity with special education terminology to understand it all is required (Trainor, 2010). Without thorough understanding of the IEP process, confusion can breed negative attitudes among caregivers about special education (Stoner et al., 2005).
Disenchantment with the IEP process, in turn, can easily lead to passive, non-existent, or adversarial parent participation on the IEP team.

A rocky introduction to the IEP process leaves many caregivers feeling isolated, inadequate, confused, and desperate for information and guidance, and prompts many parents to educate themselves about their rights on the IEP team (Applequist, 2009; Fish, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). In addition, parents may feel the need to become self-taught experts in their child’s disability so they can take part in the educational decision-making more effectively (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). A school official interviewed by Lake and Billingsley (2000) noted that when parents have to look elsewhere for support and information, the school has failed. Mediators in the same study reported that parents had difficulty knowing whether their self-acquired knowledge was sufficient or dependable. Parents want accurate and easily accessible information in a variety of formats, but they may not be receiving it (Ruef & Turnbull, 2001). An imbalance of knowledge about IEP rules and regulations puts parents at a disadvantage (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Literature regarding parent perceptions of the IEP process repeatedly reports parents feeling nervous, unsettled, intimidated, isolated, incompetent, and judged as they take a seat across from school professionals at IEP meetings (Applequist, 2009; Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Despite these feelings, parents desire to play an instrumental role in planning their child’s special education program (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). They would like to have more influence in their child’s IEP meetings and collaborate on IEP content, including curriculum, instructional approaches, and goals (Fish, 2008; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). However, as existing research reveals, many parents report being
excluded from the goal writing process and instead are often presented with pre-written goals at the IEP meeting (Garriott, et al., 2000). Such an approach is not only contrary to best practices, but violates the law as well (Fish, 2008; Spann et al., 2003).

Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) found that less than half, 46%, of the 84 parents surveyed were “always” satisfied with their input into the formation of goals and objectives for their children. Of the remaining parents in the study, 22% replied that they were “sometimes” satisfied and 5% said they were “never” satisfied with their input into goals and objectives for their child because the goals were already developed by school personnel prior to the IEP meeting. Furthermore, some parents in the study who gave feedback about proposed goals at their children’s IEP meetings expressed discontent with how it was received, noting that their input was disregarded (Garriott et al., 2000), even though IDEA clearly lists parent input as one of the sources of information, in addition to tests, teacher recommendations, and other sources, in determining the educational needs of the child (IDEA, 2004).

Exclusion from the central activity that gives rise to the IEP document thus tends to render parents feeling frustrated and undervalued (Fish, 2006). Such feelings can, in turn, lead to defensive behavior by parents (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Other parents who feel frustrated and devalued may withdraw from the process altogether. Of the 18 parents observed and interviewed by Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) over the course of three years, only 11 (61%) were attending school meetings by the third year of their child having an IEP process. Some reasons for absences included the routine nature of meetings where parents felt they had no influence, and the fact that “the school would send the papers to sign anyway” (Harry et al., 1995, p. 368).
Additionally, parents may not know how to prepare for an IEP meeting, may not even know the purpose of the meeting, and may be ignorant of important elements of the procedures (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Lo, 2008). In sum, without proper support in the IEP process, many parents of children with disabilities become overwhelmed, frustrated, angry, and/or become passive attendees at meetings instead of being the valuable contributors that they could be were they better prepared (Harry et al., 1995; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Salas, 2004; Turnbull et al., 2006).

Martin et al. (2006) used 10-second momentary time sampling while observing 109 middle and high school IEP meetings to determine how often various IEP team members contributed to the discussion. The study concluded that family members spoke for only 15% of the intervals recorded. Special education teachers often spoke the most during the IEP meetings studied, speaking 51% of the 17,804 intervals, illustrating the perception that IEP meetings are a place where professionals give information and family members receive information (Harry et al., 1995; Martin et al., 2006). This may be especially true of fathers, less educated parents, and parents with limited English proficiency, who are more likely to take passive roles in the meetings (Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Lo, 2008; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). While it may be appropriate for school staff to speak more than family members so they can report the child’s behavior and performance in school, if an IEP meeting were more of a workshop where parent questions, comments, and insights into the child’s education were encouraged, and if parents were suitably educated about the IEP process and school procedures, parent time spent talking would likely increase.

Many studies recommend that school districts offer more training for school personnel and parents, as well as initiate more communication from school to home to
foster more active parent participation on the IEP team (Applequist, 2009; Garriott et al., 2000; Lian & Fontanez-Phelan, 2001; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Other studies point to making improvements to the meeting itself by implementing meeting agendas, norms for expected behaviors, and creating a comfortable environment for families to produce more productive teams (Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Simon, 2006). Yet more research suggests that building trusting relationships and learning to resolve conflicts is crucial to increasing parent participation in the IEP process (Esquivel et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Salas, 2004; Stoner et al., 2005). While previous research recommends what school districts can do to improve parent participation on the IEP team, few studies have explored what might be initiated by parents themselves to advance their value and participation.

Although school districts are held legally liable for ensuring there is parent participation on the IEP team, the current literature confirms that many school districts continue to settle for minimum compliance with the law at best, which does not offer family involvement in the IEP process. Therefore, parents must have options available that guide them in leading their own advocacy efforts on behalf of their children.

In the effort to promote more effective functioning of IEP teams, education or training has been recommended throughout the literature; but education, while necessary, is not sufficient. Education, alone, does not always motivate action. Two people with the same levels of knowledge and capacity may experience different levels of success in pursuit of a goal if they differ in their beliefs about their ability (Bandura, 1977). Similarly, while enhancing trust, communication, and meeting related processes may be important elements in facilitating the proper functioning of IEP teams, these factors alone do not guarantee effective action or even participation.
by parents. However, there is a method that is often used by school professionals that holds promise for calling parents to action and assisting them to become more effective IEP team members. That method is in-school observation.

Parent observation has the potential to resolve some of the inadequacies of the IEP process outlined in the current literature because parent observation may serve to: clarify or demonstrate unfamiliar language, programs or methods proposed in IEP meetings; help inform parents about possible content or achievability of past or future goals; teach parents how to generalize activities and behavior in the home by demonstrating how school staff are doing it; reveal to school personnel methods being tried in school that have or have not been successful in the home; illuminate insights about the child’s school environment, behavior, attitudes, relationships, and overall functioning; generate more possible solutions to problems the child may be having; and help build trust between members of the IEP team. Parent observation of their child in school could also help increase communication between school and home, through the coordination of the observation and in discussing perceptions afterward. Because most of the IEP meeting involves discussion about school behaviors and programming, parents who observe their child in school may also feel better equipped to speak not only about how their child is at home or in the community, but also about their child’s educational program. Indeed, while parent observation is not commonly seen in the literature about parent participation in the IEP process, such an approach could be a useful method for educating parents and incorporating them more actively and effectively as members of the IEP team.
Research Questions

Existing research explores parents’ perceptions of the IEP process, where feelings of exclusion, devaluation, and dissatisfaction continuously surface. Lacking education about the process and clearly defined roles on the team triggers either a withdrawal by parents, or a journey of self-education where they are forced to carve out their own position on the IEP team. While caregivers’ emotions about the IEP process and their obstacles to productive participation on the team is well documented, little research has been conducted about methods that might aid parents in becoming more effective participants on their child’s IEP team.

Observation is required for data collection by professionals on the IEP team before student placement and when considering a behavior intervention plan (IDEA, 2004); yet, it is rarely utilized by parents in school to gather data or gain insights about their children. In-school observation may have benefits for parents and may help enhance their contributions to the IEP team, which could ultimately lead to better social and academic outcomes for the students. This study aims to fill the gaps in existing literature by exploring parents’ feelings about observation and their perceptions about the benefits and limitations of parental observation of children with disabilities in the school setting. Three questions were investigated in this research:

1. What are mothers’ feelings associated with in-school observations of their children with disabilities?
2. What insights do mothers take from observing their children with disabilities in school?
3. In what ways did parents think observations might influence their future participation in the IEP process?
Chapter 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Participants

Ten participants were recruited to participate in this study. Participants were mothers living in Delaware who have attended one or more IEP meeting for their children, and whose children are currently in preschool through fifth grade, have an active IEP plan, and who spend a portion of their time in a regular education setting. Convenience sampling was used to obtain participants.

Participants were recruited through: the organizational email lists of Autism Delaware and the Parent Information Center of Delaware, as well as informal meetings such as Autism Delaware coffee talks, social events, and support groups. Invitations to participate were also posted on various Facebook groups geared toward families with disabilities. Mothers were also invited to participate in the study via email and in person through local extracurricular organizations for children with disabilities, such as the Challenger Baseball League, the University of Delaware’s Sport Club for You, Special Olympics, and TOPS Soccer of Hockessin.

Ages of participants ranged from 29-51 years. Nine of the participants identified as White or Caucasian, and one participant identified as Black or African American. All participants held college degrees. Nine of the ten participants were married, and one was single. IEP meeting experience varied among participants, with
five participants having attended 2-5 IEP meetings, three participants having attended 6-10 IEP meetings, and two having attended more than 20 IEP meetings (See Table 1).

The children of all participants had active IEP plans, with six of the students attending school in Christina School District, and four in Red Clay School District. The students were in various grade levels at the times of the observations, with four of the participants’ children in preschool, one in kindergarten, one in first grade, two in second grade, one in third, and one in fifth grade. Seven of the participants’ children have a primary diagnosis of autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder. Of the remaining three participants’ children, one was identified as having a developmental delay, one has a diagnosis of orthopedic and mild mental impairment, and one has a diagnosis of Trisomy 9 Mosaicism (See Table 1).

This study focused on perceptions of mothers because in general mothers engage more frequently with school personnel than either fathers or sets of parents (Valle, 2011). Valle (2011) asserts that parenting a child with a disability becomes linked with the imposed cultural identity of being an ideal mother. Also, some fathers acknowledge that they best advocate for their children in the IEP meetings by supporting their wives’ requests (Mueller & Buckley, 2014). While fathers no doubt serve an important role in the development and success of children with disabilities, the small sample size of this study was limited to those who have been found on average in the literature to be the most active participants on the IEP team.

Participants were also limited to Delaware, since observational rights of parents in Delaware are protected by state law. Delaware’s Administrative Code states
that parents of a student with disability can observe current or proposed educational programs (Children with Disabilities Subpart E, 2016).

**Data Collection**

Qualitative research using semi-structured, open-ended interviews was used to examine parents’ feelings and insights about their observations of their children with disabilities in school, and investigated in what ways parents thought observation might influence their future participation on their children’s IEP teams. Ten participants were asked to independently observe their child with disabilities for a minimum of 30 minutes during one school day and then participate in a follow-up interview with the primary investigator within one week of their observations to share their experiences. Because all environments, even the playground, can be written into a goal on an IEP plan, participants were given the freedom to decide when during the day and in what school environment it would be best to observe their child.
Upon consenting, participants completed a pre-observation “Initial Parent Survey” (see Appendix A) to report demographic information, information about how many IEP meetings they have attended, how actively they have pursued education about the IEP process, as well as background information about their children and diagnoses.

Participants were also given several worksheets to guide them through the observation process. An informational “Before Your Observation” worksheet advised participants to follow procedures for observation set by their school district, and reminded parents in writing that observation periods for this study are required to be at least 30 minutes long in any school environment during normal school hours (see Appendix B). A “Sample Letter to School Requesting Observation” was delivered to participants digitally so they could adapt it as desired (see Appendix C). Participants also received a two-page “Student Observation Form” worksheet that drew their attention to certain aspects they may want to make note of, such as the environment, teaching styles, child’s mood and behavior, and child’s interaction with staff and peers (see Appendix D). Additional blank pages were also given to participants to write notes. All worksheets were read through with the participant before the observation to ensure understanding of the recommendations and reinforce the study requirements.

The worksheets given to participants were developed by the primary investigator for specific use in this study. Internet investigations using search engines such as Google for in-school observation worksheets yielded worksheets for educators and IEP team members to observe things like undesired behaviors, environment, and learning styles. Searches for existing observation sheets for parents returned worksheets designed for in-home recording of behaviors and habits, mostly targeting
undesired behaviors. Additionally, an inquiry sent to state parent training and information centers across the region through an employee of the U.S. Department of Education disclosed no known resources for parents to observe their children in the classroom. Because no worksheets could be found for in-school parent observation, some were created that focused attention on the environment and the child’s behavior, functioning, and interactions, per the experience and discretion of the researcher.

These worksheets were offered as aids to participants, but it was made clear that worksheets could be completed, or not completed, however the participants felt was appropriate. Participants were encouraged to take some notes in whatever form they desired since some interviews did not occur for several days after the observations. Because it was predicted that notes from participants would vary widely in both their length and detail, and that some participants may not even take notes, observation worksheets and notes were not analyzed.

All interviews were conducted within a week of each observation. Interviews consisted of several open-ended questions to elicit narratives from participants about their in-school observation experiences and in what ways parent observation might contribute to parent participation on the IEP team. The interview schedule focused on feelings surrounding the observation, benefits and shortcomings of observation, insights gained from the observation, helpfulness of information obtained during observation, how the observation could contribute to their involvement on the IEP team, and suggestions for improving the observation process (see Appendix E). Additional prompting, probing, and follow-up questioning relevant to the research questions in this study were used during interviews where appropriate.
Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the primary investigator. Participants were forwarded the transcripts of the interviews and asked to verify accuracy to ensure internal validity. The shortest interview lasted 13 minutes and 48 seconds, and longest interview was 39 minutes and 20 seconds. The average interview length was 21 minutes and 44 seconds.

Analysis

Phenomenological analysis as outlined by Daly (2007) was used to analyze and interpret the interview data. The description provided by participants was transcribed to record their subjective experiences. Meanings were condensed from the transcription and themes were identified. Similar themes were clustered together under broader conceptual labels. These concepts were refined into structural elements that revealed something broader about the observation experience in general, as well as observation in association with participation on the IEP team. Qualitative research software (NVivo) was used to support coding.

Because analysis is interactive between researcher and participant from the beginning of the interview in the way the participants interpret the questions and what they choose to tell of their experience, as well as how they portray their experience (Daly, 2007), I continued to involve participants in the analysis process through respondent validation after the interview. In addition to having participants review the transcription of their interviews, I also verified emerging themes in individual participant data with participants. After each participant’s interview was coded, a brief summary reflecting the main emotions and themes of the interview was shared with the participant via email to serve as confirmation of the participant’s perception of the
observation experience. All participants confirmed via email response that the researcher’s interpretations of data were accurate.

The worksheets used by participants in this study were not coded or formally analyzed because they were optional. However, 8 out of 10 parents did report that the “Student Observation Worksheet” helped focus their observation and gave them a place to record what was seen. Two parents felt intimidated by the length of the worksheets, while three others completely filled all four pages. Two of the parents said they would take their completed worksheets to the next IEP meeting.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

This study examined the feelings and insights mothers experienced during in-school observations of their children with disabilities and explored how those observations could contribute to parents feeling more prepared to participate on the IEP team. Analysis of the interviews resulted in three over-arching concepts: familiarity, discovery, and empowerment (See Figure 2).

Interviews reflected a noticeable disconnect between parents’ knowledge of their children at home and knowledge of their children in school. Additionally, most parents were unfamiliar with the school staff, academic activities, classroom environments, and how IEP goals were being worked on in school. Many of the parents in this study have children who are physically or intellectually unable to tell them about their school experiences, and the study revealed that communications from educators were often brief and incomplete. Previous ineffective communication from school, and parents’ general lack of knowledge about interactions and activities in school led observation by the study participants to have a strong impact on them. In many cases, parents felt empowered by the insights and feelings experienced during their observations and were motivated to action at home and/or in the school.

**Familiarity**

It is very difficult to be part of something if you are unfamiliar with the processes and people involved. Previous research finds that parents do not know all
they want to know about what happens in school, and that they feel isolated from school staff at IEP meetings (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). The current study reveals that parents have been missing out on valuable information as a result of superficial relationships between home and school, and unfamiliarity with what happens in the classroom.

Before entering the classroom to observe, parents may have had assumptions about how the staff related to their children and a shallow understanding of school day its activities. But, seeing interactions and events for themselves deepened participants’ understanding of what happens in school and their children’s functioning in the classroom, raising parents’ knowledge of school from a second-hand awareness to closer familiarity with it.

The observations in this study enabled many parents to become more familiar with their children’s interpersonal interactions, classroom placement, and the educational processes that were happening in school.
Staff Interactions

Most participants were interested in seeing how the staff interacted with their child. Gaining familiarity with student-staff relationships through their observations fostered greater comfort with, and confidence in, educators.

The mother of a preschooler with autism felt more at ease with the occupational therapist (OT) working with her son after seeing them in school together.

The way she interacts with him — she’s very soft and gentle and patient, which is a stark difference from his old OT, and he responds better to that. I feel like she makes more of an effort to connect with him, which, you know, as a parent you want to see … You want to have your kids comfortable. You want to feel comfortable with who’s taking care of your children and who’s working with them.

The mother of another preschooler with autism was impressed with the way the teacher handled her daughter’s behavior issues in the classroom.

I wouldn’t even say it’s a negative; I see her do it at home. I guess her general ed teacher is always like, ‘Oh, don’t worry, all kids do that,’ but when you actually see her interrupting or doing the things that aren’t your proudest moment, that kind of was like, ‘Oh, what do we do with that? She’s doing it here.’ But the teacher went along with that and handled it and had no problem correcting her with me there, so I was very confident that she was experienced.

Participants also wanted to see how staff handled situations in school so that they might manage their children’s behavior at home the same way. “If we see a behavior at home and don’t see it at school, or even if we do see it at school, I want to see how they diffuse it, or how they redirect because it could be totally different than what we’re doing.”
Parents appreciated not only seeing consistency in behavior intervention, but also in teaching practices. In one instance, a participant observed school staff guiding interactions the way the parent was taught by outside sources, which helped reaffirm that staff were competent and following best practices.

We did the parent class with [a doctor] at AI [Dupont Children’s Hospital] last summer into the fall, and it was nice to see how the teacher spoke to her and interacted with her because [the doctor] had taught me a lot about how to get the right responses from her. This time last year, she wasn’t speaking at all. So, that was really nice to see that it was very similar, which is great because we have that consistency going with [my daughter].

Many participants’ children have additional support staff, such as paraprofessionals and therapists, who assist them during the school day. These support staff are often the ones who have the most hands-on interactions with the students daily. However, it was clear during the participant interviews that many parents did not know the paras or specialists well and had not had many opportunities to see the support staff interacting with their children before the observations for this study.

For one parent of a second-grader with autism, observing the support staff in action altered how she viewed paraprofessionals.

I just think you feel more a part of the classroom and you get to see them interact with your child. Whereas at the IEP meeting the paras aren’t present. They’d say, ‘Oh, so and so did this with him,’ but I got to see the para do it with him. I realized I used to get a little annoyed that he wasn’t always with the teacher, you know what I mean? But now I’m like, ‘Oh, she’s doing the same thing,’ and he’s probably getting more undivided attention from the para than he is right now. So they’re all just a part of the team.
While most participants were comforted by the student-staff interactions they witnessed, a few were also disappointed with some of the interactions they observed.

One mother of a kindergartener with physical and cognitive disabilities voiced her dissatisfaction with the lack of technological proficiency of the occupational therapist (OT), which could hamper her daughter’s ability to communicate.

For the most part, I was pleased with everything except the OT. Her OT is a little older and doesn’t know how to use the Kindle or an iPad and that’s the communication device my daughter needs. So I think, unfortunately, there’s some regression there because the OT is not familiar with everything she should be with the iPad. So that was kind of frustrating. And I did bring it up with the administrator who was in the room. I actually said, ‘Can you please talk with this OT to make sure that somebody shows her how to use the iPad, so when [my daughter] hits the wrong key it won’t shut the whole thing down?’ I mean, this was at the end of the school year and this was still happening, so that was very frustrating.

Another mother of a preschooler with autism was also frustrated with her child’s occupational therapist for not having higher expectations for her son.

I think he’s in his comfort zone and I get the impression that they don’t want to, or they’re scared to push him out because new behaviors can develop. Which I agree, you know, but you can’t stay at this level forever … The therapist is very soft spoken and gentle. I think that’s great with rapport building. But, you know, something I’m constantly hearing from her is, ‘He doesn’t like doing…’ I don’t like making dinner every night, but I gotta do it!

Similarly, the mother of a first grader with autism observed the school staff being too lenient on her son for making noise, which she considered a disruptive behavior in the classroom. She was also concerned about the school having low expectations for her son.
Talking, because he likes to make noises and sounds and songs, and whatever he can think of out of his cute little mind. And I’m like, ‘[Son], you need to be quiet and keep yourself still.’ I don’t see the personnel at school even talk to him about it. I kind of feel that he just gets shuffled around and lost in the school system somehow and somehow passes from one grade to another. It’s like his reading. He’s not quite at grade level, but they see it as he’s reading, so he’s okay, but we knew it could be a lot better. So they’re like, ‘Well, you know, his marker is green. He’s okay.’ No! I mean, if he needed a 20 to pass, he got a 20 or 21, just barely getting that passing, but we know he could be a lot better at it if he just had that extra support somewhere.

The same mother complained that the staff was not paying enough attention to her son.

[My son] needs that somebody to be like, ‘Hey, stay on task,’ which his special ed teacher does, when she’s in the classroom. But, she’s not always there. So, I’m like, ‘You need someone else in the classroom.’ And it sucks this year because his teacher was the teacher my daughter had last year. So we were like, ‘Oh, aw man, that’s great, we already have an in. She already knows the family, she knows [my son], we’re good.’ But she just did a total 180 this year with us. I just don’t feel that she’s equipped to handle students like [my son]. … He’s being ignored. That’s the one thing that really took me by surprise. Whether it be the teacher of the other kids. He says something that’s just a puff in the wind kind of thing. And then he looks around for someone to be like, ‘Yeah, okay, you acknowledged me.’ Most of the time it just doesn’t happen.

While experiences such as these can be disheartening for parents, both positive and negative interactions observed held value for participants. Parents who saw positive interactions between their children and staff felt comforted and more confident that school staff are handling their children in appropriate ways, which built trust. Parents who saw interactions that prompted negative emotions were more motivated to speak to staff after the observation about what they observed.
Peer Interactions

In addition to witnessing student-staff interactions, participants were also very interested in seeing how their children interacted with peers. Watching peer-to-peer interactions or lack thereof, brought on a spectrum of emotions for parents, ranging from thrilled to heartbreaking.

The mother of a second grader with autism was pleased to see her son help another student. “He’s, I think, the only one in the classroom that does not have behavioral problems. The newer girl in the classroom has tantrums, which I witnessed. And then the one child is nonverbal, so [my son] spoke for him!”

Another mother of a third grader with autism was relieved to see other children asking her son to play with them at recess.

At home he doesn’t interact with other kids. I think all of the kids in the neighborhood have known him since he was like little. And he, this is terrible to say, but he had a reputation at two for biting and hitting, and these same kids have known him so they kind of have this like, I mean, he’s fine now, but they still have that in the back of their mind so they don’t tend to want to play with him that much. But the kids at school, they don’t know anything. They don’t know about that because these are all new kids here. Apparently, the teachers tell me that everyone loves him and that he’s very entertaining, which he is! And he has no aggressive behaviors that he had when he was little. So, it was interesting to see him interact with other kids.

The mother of a preschooler with autism was saddened by the lack of peer interaction her son had in school.

I don’t know if frustrating is the word, but kind of sad that he, out of four kids in the class and two teachers, he levitates toward the teachers. Like the other kids, he has no interest in them at all. I wish he wanted to play with the other kids instead of the teachers. That was kind of one
of those moments, like, ‘Please, I wish you would do this instead of this.’

Likewise, the mother of a first-grader with autism was disappointed with the lack of friendly interactions with peers her child had at school.

He kept inviting other kids to come and sit with us on our new blanket that we brought. The kids pretty much ignored him. When he’s at recess he only plays with one friend who happens to live down the street from us. He really doesn’t deviate from certain friends. There’s only one or two friends he plays with he doesn’t really play with anyone else. So I don’t know if it’s now that they’re getting older they’re starting to see that [my son] is a little different, or they kind of shy away from that. I don’t know. I don’t get it.

Many of the children of the participants in this study have disabilities that are commonly associated with deficits in social interactions. Being socially accepted can have a significant impact (Mpofu, 2003). It was clear from the interviews that many parents were concerned about peer-to-peer interactions and were curious to see how their children were socializing with peers without parental assistance. With the trend of inclusion of students with disabilities into regular education classrooms on parents’ minds, observations of their child’s peer interactions at school contributed to participants’ deliberations about inclusion for their child, as one mom of a fifth grader with orthopedic and intellectual disabilities shares:

My child happened to be the most functional person in this classroom, so her peer-to-peer interactions are kind of minimal because the other children in the class. But, at the same time, last year when she was in a more typical classroom, she struggled because she needed more. She had behavioral issues and that kind of stuff because she wanted people to pay more attention to her. So, I wish she could be with other students and socialize, but at the same point and time, I realize this is the best fit for her. Maybe as she matures a little more form a social perspective,
then maybe she’ll be able to go and handle more peer to peer interaction.

Another parent of a preschooler with autism also viewed social interactions as a contributing factor when thinking about inclusion for her daughter.

There are some children that I see as worse than [my daughter] and have more challenges, and then I know of see [my daughter] in the middle, and then you have the neuro-typical children. So I think it’s a good balance for her to learn from both of them. I don’t feel like she’s picked up bad behaviors, which was a really big concern. We still have a little problem with hitting, but it comes and goes. And a little anger here and there, but school has been great with redirecting that, and the older children in the class have been great with just kind of keeping her distracted.

Student Placement

Many parents used the observations to help assess whether their child was in the correct placement. With the trend toward inclusion of students with disabilities in regular education classrooms, observation gave parents an opportunity to see for themselves what they thought was appropriate for their children based on current functioning in school. For a parent of a second grader with autism, the observation confirmed he was in the right place. “My question about him integrating was answered there. I was questioning the inclusion thing for a little while and went back and forth, and back and forth. But then after seeing him here, I think he’s where he needs to be.”

Observation also reinforced feelings another parent of a child with physical and intellectual disabilities was having about inclusion for her daughter:

Overall I was quite pleased. [My daughter] is in a special needs program within a general education school and I found out yesterday that basically only for about 30 minutes of that day is she in with the general education students, which I am supportive of. I’m glad she’s
not in for any longer than that because she’s so climatically affected, she wouldn’t get anything out of their class. But it is good for just about 30 minutes a day that they are with kids like [my daughter] and she is with them just for the general atmosphere. But then after that she is in her special needs classroom. She goes to lunch with gen ed kids and sits at their table, but by herself because she’s fed by a nurse and a feeding therapist and all that. Then they have what’s called specials every day, you know, gym, art, music, so she was in music with the general ed kids, which is also a good experience. Then aside from that she’s in her special ed setting with either an OT, PT, speech therapist, her special ed teacher and paras. It’s a lot of one-on-one or two-on-one attention, which is wonderful because that’s what she needs. I am personally for [my daughter] not a fan of full inclusion. It would not work for her. I think it has to be on a student-by-student basis. And in her program now, it’s definitely working that it’s not full inclusion.

For parents of children who spend the majority of their time in self-contained classrooms of just students with disabilities, observation forced them to face the harsh reality of their children’s situations. One mother of a kindergartener with intellectual and physical disabilities said:

It was a mix of feelings. There were times when I was very pleased with what I saw and was happy that my daughter was doing what she was doing and progressing her own way. But, for the most part, it was very sad and very tough because it really hits home that my five-year-old is not a true kindergarten student. I have an older daughter that’s nine and a typical child and I know what she was doing and what she was capable of in kindergarten, so to have that resonate that [my daughter] is not doing any of those things, nothing, it’s hard. It’s very sad.

Another mother of a preschooler expressed similar emotions, but put a positive spin on what she observed.

Not necessarily frustrated, but seeing your child in that sort of environment and knowing why they have to be there is a little bit disappointing, I guess. But at the same point and time, the fact that she
was so good. I mean, she behaved well, did what the teachers asked her to and she seemed to have a sense of accomplishment, that was a good feeling to know that for her this is a place she’s happy being and things she’s happy doing.

School Activities

For many parents of students with disabilities, the central way they learn about what is going on in the classroom is through discussion at the IEP meetings. However, IEP meetings host discussions about the current functioning of the child and the future goals of the child, but often leave out the important middle piece of explaining what activities will be utilized to bring about achievement. Observations of everyday classroom activities helped to illustrate to parents the more abstract or larger goals that were previously discussed at IEP meetings. One mother of a preschooler with autism voiced her desire to get details:

I feel like in the IEP meetings or talks, it’s more big picture issues. So, the social aspect, we want him interacting with peers. Alright, so for me it’s getting more of the nuts and bolts of how are we going to get this to come to fruition? What steps are we taking?

Another parent also valued seeing activities that would contribute to achieving goals.

I guess I didn’t really have a concept of how they were implementing the IEP. We have IEP meetings and all that kind of stuff and we talk about it, but I didn’t have any practical knowledge of it. So, going to the class and actually seeing it, and maybe they’re not doing it as perfectly as you’d expect, but they’re doing as good a job as I think anyone could.

Observation was particularly useful for another mother, who was not getting much information about her daughter’s progress in between IEP meetings.
I was happy and relieved that she’s actually learning. She kept saying, ‘It’s such a long day. We just sit there. It’s just me and the teacher.’ I kind of figured that wasn’t the case, but none of the work was coming home because they were saving it for the IEP meeting, so I wasn’t seeing anything either and that’s usually what I go on. I can start a conversation with papers, but if I don’t have anything and she’s going, ‘Nothing,’ then I said, ‘Okay, let me just go and observe this.’ Which was great.

Another parent’s observation of an activity also opened opportunities for communication between the parent and the child.

He had told me about the reading and how they did that, but I had never actually seen it. They have a Smart Board and they have a program called ‘News to You’ that the use. So seeing that was good so I could understand the sort of things they were doing and maybe things to talk about at home.

While some observations of classroom activities enabled communication with the children, others may increase communication with parents and school staff.

I guess the negative emotion that immediately comes to mind was that, he’s stringing beads. He’s been doing this since age two, so it’s like, what the? Why do you have him doing this? She explained her rationale, which I don’t necessarily agree with, so it’s something that we need to address.

None of these conversations would have happened without the parent seeing for themselves what was going on in the classroom.

Because they lack the formal training of educators and therapists, parents have incomplete knowledge about school curricula and how the IEP goals will be achieved. This results in some parents leaving the process of developing the IEP to the professionals, which does not support the spirit of IDEA and may result in a less personalized special education program for the child. But, most interviews in this
study indicated that parents feel more comfortable entrusting their children and their children’s education to the school when they are more familiar with the actual daily interactions and activities in school. Furthermore, because most parents in this study considered themselves actively involved, they took their role as contributors to their child’s special education and related services seriously. Upon discovering things in school that they did not know were happening and that they did not like, negative feelings such as annoyance and frustration emerged or grew in parents. These feelings of discontent could hinder proper IEP team functioning in the future by creating discord or distrust on the team.

While many parents said they did not have goals going into their observations, observations uncovered many subconscious concerns parents had, such as how their children were being treated by staff and peers, proper classroom placement, and the appropriateness of academic and therapeutic activities. Despite not having a clear agenda for the observations, participants all felt observation was useful and they relayed strong emotions, both positive and negative, about something they had observed during the course of the interviews. This shows that parents do not necessarily know what they do not know, which makes the case for observation even more compelling. Until parents become familiar with interactions, classroom environment, and activities in school by seeing things for themselves, they are limited in their knowledge about their children in school.

**Discovery**

Parents crave communication about their child’s behavior, interactions, and progress (Angell, Stoner, & Shelden, 2009; Applequist, 2009; Blue-Banning et al.,
Participants noted that due to time limitations of the staff, communications home can be shorter and more incomplete than is adequate for parents understanding of student behavior, achievement, and functioning in school. Also, there may be information that does not get relayed home because school staff may not be familiar with the child’s functioning outside of school and therefore do not know what may be noteworthy to parents.

Almost all of the parents said it was helpful to see the way the children behaved in school directly because they could learn from it and because they may not have heard about it otherwise. One mother of a preschooler with autism shared how observation helped catch the little moments:

It’s good to see it in person. And the more you see it, the more you learn from the experience. Just seeing all the different little moments that don’t really make it into the notes, because [the teachers] do so much. They’re juggling these four or five kids and they’re so busy all day that I don’t expect her to have the time to write down every little thing, so it’s nice to see it first-hand.

While parents became more familiar with the interactions and activities in the classroom through observation, spending time in school also revealed new things to parents about their children’s capacities. Parents, who are presumably the experts of their children and already very familiar with them, discovered new capacities of their children during their observations. Parents were generally shocked by these discoveries, and in some cases were also motivated to implement changes in the home due to the discoveries.
Student Capacities

Many participants discovered that there was information not making it home that was useful to know about their child’s development. Their children were displaying new capacities in school that parents had not yet seen at home. One parent of a nearly non-verbal preschooler with autism heard her daughter say a new word during her in-school observation.

I pick her up every day, so there’s a lot of dialogue everyday with the teacher. So she tries to tell me as much as possible about what they do, but there’s always little things that when I go to the observation, like ‘book.’ I didn’t know she knew the word ‘book’ and I’ll see little things like that. It’s kind of cool to know that there’s even more that she’s learning that I haven’t seen so much at home.

Another parent of a non-verbal preschooler with autism saw her son perform skills during her observation that she was unaware he could do.

I was actually really proud of him … He went to his cubby, he got his lunch, he put it in the book bag, he knew how to zip the book bag. And then he laid his coat upside down on the floor and did the trick that the little kids do. I remember going home that night and saying to my husband, ‘Did you know he could do that?’ And it was just we hadn’t ever given him the chance because we’re always rushing to get out of the door. So we’re like, ‘Put your coat on or we’ll do it.’ So it was a moment of like, ‘Huh. He can do that.’ You know? And it was neat to see it, where I probably wouldn’t have known that. Because I’m not going to call a teacher and say, ‘Hey did he put his coat on?’ It’s just not one of those topics that come up. It was a little thing that was more important than, ‘Oh, he also put a puzzle together.’ It was that independent care of himself that I was like, ‘Wow. I didn’t know he did that.’

This parent was also amazed to see her son use new sign language in the classroom.
I was actually surprised to see that. His signs are like modified signs but I had never seen him do ‘help’ and I actually had to ask when I got home my other son, like, ‘What’s help? Oh, okay, that’s what he was saying.’

Similarly, the parent of a kindergartener with physical and cognitive impairments was delighted to witness her daughter’s accomplishments during the observation.

After they were done eating, they had her clean up, take things back to the cafeteria. And then she was supposed to ask the cafeteria lady what was for lunch and she did that. I was happy to see that she accomplished that because sometimes with memory sort of things, she can’t remember to do that. … Having to ask someone something and having to remember it for a 10-minute period of time, that’s something new … At one point at lunch they asked her to take her bib off and she did it. Even though that sounds so minor, that’s huge in the special needs world. That’s huge! And at some point, when the speech therapist asked her if she wanted any more chocolate milk, and there’s sign language for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and she said no and we all clapped and said, ‘Great job!’ She loves that feedback so she kept shaking her head, which was hilarious! So you know, moments like that are priceless.

Even participants who did not observe displays of development as impactful as a new word or skill still experienced revelations about their child’s performance in school. Many participants remarked about how well behaved and focused their children were in school, even with the distractions of a hectic classroom environment. Those observations were accompanied by feelings of pride, happiness, and surprise.

One mother of a second grader with autism was amazed at her son’s behavior in the classroom.

I just didn’t expect him to behave as well as he behaved, to be completely honest! I just expect [the son] we have at home to be the same in the classroom setting. But he was much more calm and he was
focused and attentive. You could tell that the para and teachers had worked with him before because he would repeat and they would just deter his repetition. He was quiet, attentive, he raised his hand. At home he won’t let me read him a story, he’ll just read the pages or talk about the pictures. He let them read the story, he would repeat some of the sentences, and then they would talk about the story. He answered questions and raised his hand. He won’t let me read him anything. So it was good. It was neat to observe.

Another mother of a third grader with autism was shocked at her child’s immediate obedience to his teacher.

He at some point was given some little fidgets if he like finished what he was supposed to be doing. I don’t know how long she let him play with them, but then she was like, ‘Okay, time to put them away,’ and he put it right in the basket with no questions asked! Where at home if I ask him to do something, he’s like, ‘No!’ Like, oh, that would be nice, if he actually did what I told him!

Likewise, a mother of a preschooler with autism was stunned at her daughter’s compliant and focused behavior at school.

I can’t get her coloring at home and even if I do it with her, it'll just be a few minutes that I’ll really keep her attention. And I’ll try to shut off other distractions, I’ll put my phone on vibrate and shut the TV off and whatever else, but that was the first time I’ve seen her be able to sit still and maintain direct communication with her teacher, or any adult, for that length of time … She loves to do arts and crafts so she just honed in on what she was supposed to be doing. I’m still just floored that I saw that she was so good!

A mother of a first grader with autism remarked how well behaved her son was at school, even in the chaos of a school field trip: “He did really well waiting because his bus was almost 20 minutes late to pick us up. So he did really well waiting in line. … He even got one of their little school dollars and everything because he did very well that day.”
However, the same mother also expressed feelings of frustration because her child was more misbehaved at home than in school. The contrast in performance at school and home has contributed to her perception that she has to fight to get her child appropriate services.

They don’t really see that there’s a problem because they don’t see it. Kind of like his ADHD; they don’t see it in the classroom, so they don’t care that he has it. They don’t see his autistic side in the classroom so they don’t care that he has it. And that’s the really main thing that I’m fighting with his IEP. Trying to get extended school year and stuff like that. Well, he’s been going to school since he was three. He knows the yes and no, he do’s and don’ts, the rights, the wrongs. He knows all of that, so he’s not really going to act up in school because he knows the consequences for that. So yeah, I’m going to see the majority of the bad side of everything because he holds it all for home.

Another mom also voiced frustration after seeing a disconnect between home and school performance in her preschool son with autism.

A point of discussion at a recent IEP meeting is that he’s not performing the same way at school as he is at home. Like, I’m seeing a lot more things, so I’m wondering what disconnect there is. Why isn’t he, you know, showing them he can’t do his when he’s doing I beautifully at home, you know?

Most participants saw a difference in their child’s behavior or performance at school than a home, which is something that surprised them. Because educators may not have the resources to relay every detail of the day to parents, and because they may not know which details may be of importance to parents, some reports of student performance slip through the cracks.
Skills Generalization

Goals that focus on generalization of skills in different environments are often included in IEP plans. If generalization within various environments in school aids a child’s development and application of skills, then it follows that generalization into the home and community outside of school would be beneficial as well. Exposing parents to classroom activities can help transfer and maintain skills, which can be difficult for some children with intellectual disabilities (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007).

Through observation, parents discovered capabilities of their child that left such a significant impression on parents that they adjusted the way things were done in the home. New skills that parents saw their children performing in school that may have been too small to be communicated home by the teachers made a huge impact on families, as one parent illustrated:

They had, like, a smaller cubby on the ground, so we did that at home. So now he can go get his own coat because we were basically doing that for him. So that was nice to see, like ‘oh, gosh, he can do this! He can do everything but zip it. He can put it on himself.’

Based on what that parent saw during her observation, she also implemented changes to help her non-verbal son with using his Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) at home.

They were using the PECS, which I liked seeing that. At home at that time he had just started to use the sentence strip, so it was nice to see him using the two cards, instead of just one at home. So I was able to take that home and add that to his book.

Another parent planned to use some environmental strategies she saw implemented in her daughter’s preschool class at home.
It was nice that they kept the classroom cool and dark to keep the whole attitude of the room mellow. That was something I was not expecting. I thought they had just done that for the air conditioning because it was pretty warm out that day. However, it did seem like they were trying to bring the kids down because they were going to have lunch after dismissal. They have lunch and then they chill for a little bit and then they lay down for quiet time. … It was nice to see how they start the process of mellowing down. I was like, ‘Hmmm.’ They close the curtains and they turn on some music, so they had started the process. And the lightbulbs were going off in my head, like maybe I have to try that at home.

The same mom was also inspired to reinforce the way the teacher in school presented a choice to the preschooler with autism. She noticed that the offering of a choice lead to positive behavior change in the child.

One thing that the teacher did with her that I really haven’t done a lot with her at home was to give her two choices for things. So she does give her two choices, like ‘Do you want a dot marker or paint markers?’ or something like that. And [my daughter] typically will choose the second thing because it’s right fresh in her mind. But the fact that she is going ahead and making the decision and not grabbing both is a big change for her. So after I saw that on Friday, I did a couple choices over the weekend. ‘Do you want a blue crayon or red crayon? Do you want a blue cup or purple cup?’ She started to actually pay attention like, ‘Huh, I really want the purple cup,’ and actually speak to me, which was great! It was nice to see that the same type of environment and instruction is being used in school.

These adjustments to home life based on what was observed in school can help generalize skills for children. Through in-school observations, parents were able to reinforce things done in school and fill in the gaps in the information they were not receiving home. Most participants said they would share the insights they gained during the observations with educators or the IEP team, which in turn may lead to
increased understanding by school staff of what information and achievements should be relayed home.

Observation is seemingly one sided, where one person is watching while the other is doing. But in-school parent observation is bi-directional because it can motivate parents to then act on what they saw or go on to discuss their thoughts and feelings with IEP team members. The shared experience of even very brief observations enables both school staff and parents to adapt their routines in a way that will advance the growth of the child’s capacities and functioning in various environments.

**Empowerment**

Participant observations in this study made parents more familiar with what was happening in school, as explained in previous chapters. This increase in familiarity was found to be empowering and tended to fuel parents’ desire to speak with the team further about things they witnessed during their observations. The Johari Window model created by Luft (1961) shows how increases in parental empowerment and motivation serve to increase communication and awareness among IEP team members, which could improve the functionality and effectiveness of the group.

The Johari Window presents group dynamics in terms of awareness. As awareness of yourself and of others increases, so does the effectiveness of communication in the group (Luft, 1963). The window consists of four quadrants: quadrant one is the open area that refers to behavior and motivation that is known to yourself and known to others; quadrant two is the blind area where others can see
things in yourself of which you are unaware; quadrant three is the hidden area that represents things you know but do not reveal to others; and quadrant four is the area of unknown activity where neither you nor others are actively aware of certain behaviors or motives (see Figure 3).

In the initial phase of group interaction, relationships are relatively superficial and there is more anxiety or threat felt because of the unknown (see Figure 4). This leads to stilted interchange between the group, which stifles progress. Many relationships on IEP teams remain superficial and untrusting (Angell et al., 2009; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). However, when the “open” quadrant one increases in size through awareness, interactions, and knowledge, such as is gained through the process of observation in this study, the third quadrant of “hidden” information to others shrinks (see Figure 5). As this shift occurs, group members feel more comfortable to act more like themselves and to perceive others as they really are and an atmosphere of mutual trust emerges. As trust grows, there is less need for members to hide their true thoughts or feelings, and they are empowered to contribute to the group in a less guarded way (Luft, 1963).
Figure 4  Johari Window Model — Initial Phase

Parent Empowerment

Parents approached the observations with various attitudes and goals. Most parents went in with very few expectations and just wanted to see how their child’s day was at school. Other parents had specific things they were looking to confirm, clarify, or see for themselves. In both cases, observation contributed to parents feeling more confident and motivated to speak to school staff about their child’s needs in school.

Observing their children with disabilities gave some parents an opportunity to collect their own data. The mother of a first grader with autism had a concrete plan to record what she saw during her observation.

One of the things is the general ed teacher, when I was trying to get the autism label for [my daughter], was saying she didn’t see a lot of behavior or movement and stuff. And then we had an independent evaluation and they saw what I saw. So when I was here, I was actually counting how many times she had to be redirected to sit down or sit still and I think in say a half hours’ time, it was 20 times. So, it kind of validated what I thought all along. … But that’s one of her big things
Johari Window Model — Increased Awareness Phase

with her, her movements. It keeps her from learning; it distracts her and she has to reorganize. So this will be one of the first things we bring up, the observation and how many times she actually is getting out of her seat and need to be redirected.

The same parent thought that observing before her daughter’s first IEP meeting would have made her feel more prepared.

They kept saying, ‘Well, school environment is different than home environment,’ and if I would’ve had my observation then and said, ‘Well, no, actually within a half hour she jumped, she had to be redirected, she covered her ears three time,’ they would’ve seen some of the sensory issues and I would’ve been a little stronger. But I just kept thinking, ‘Oh, maybe it’s me. Maybe home is different.’ So I was second guessing myself. If I would’ve had [the observation] first, I think I would’ve been more prepared and willing to stand up and say, ‘No, that’s not the case.’

Another mom of a preschooler with autism felt like collecting her own data helped bridge the gap between home and school.

I think it’s going to be nice to be able to say, ‘When I observed or came in I noticed [my son] was doing x, y, and z.’ I feel like they treat home like this little island and there’s this disconnect. So to be able to say I
observed x behavior or whatever he’s doing in multiple settings, I feel like that will carry more weight.

The mom of a preschooler said that observation could let her collect data about trends in her child’s development:

I think that taking notes gives me something to go back on and say, ‘Well, when I came here last month, you know, I noticed last month he was doing this and now this month he’s not doing it as well or he’s doing it better.’ Like patterns of regression and making improvements.

When parents feel less isolated from situations discussed in the IEP meeting, they seem more likely to share their opinions about them. Without knowledge acquired from observations, parents would appropriately act more reserved with the team because they would not feel prepared to speak about things unknown to them. With first-hand knowledge about their children in school, parents are more empowered to speak up about what is best for their child.

Team Empowerment

Knowledge about a child’s personality, motivations, and functioning beyond school walls, along with holding the largest stake in the child’s development, warrants parent placement on the IEP team. However, understanding of the child outside of school may not be enough to enable parents to contribute to the IEP process, which is about the child’s functioning in school. For many parents, this disconnect distances them from the IEP team and process (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Spann et al., 2003). In addition to empowering parents through knowledge acquired during their experiences in school, observation also enhanced the quality of relationships between parents and team members.
Observation offers a natural opportunity for increased communication and relationship building. From the very beginning communications to arrange the observation, through to the post-observation conversations and contributions to meetings that result from the observation, parents and staff are building relationships and learning from each other. Nurturing these relationships helps build trust on the IEP team. Groups that trust each other accomplish more than groups without trust (Coleman, 1988).

One parent of a second grader with autism observed her daughter learning social skills in a small group. The teacher invited the mother back the next day to observe her daughter actually applying the new skills with peers in the cafeteria. The mother spoke about how that invitation transformed how she felt about her place on the team.

The happy part was then they asked me to come back and view what she was actually taught so I could see her actually apply it, you know, the knowledge. That was a good turning point for me, that they didn’t feel that I was in the way. The teacher actually appreciated that I took time out of my day to go in and view, so it made it more of a working relationship. You know, that we’re part of the same team, not you against me or vice versa.

Another participant shared the same sentiment: “He’s a totally different kid at school than he is at home, so I think seeing both sides of it helps us at home and when we do stuff at home that they’re doing at school it just becomes more of a team and not just us at home and then school.”

For one parent, the sense of acceptance she felt during the observation made her feel like more observation of her son would increase her comfort with participating on the IEP team.
I actually felt part of the classroom because I was in there. Now I prepare myself a lot for the IEPs. When I get the IEP, they give me a copy and I get through all of my questions. I think it would be helpful to have the actual IEP and to watch him maybe more than one time. Watch him in math, watch him in each segment of it, with speech and OT, just to see how they’re doing with each thing. And then I think I’d feel more comfortable in the IEP meeting.

Another parent thought observation would improve her ability to contribute to writing goals for the IEP plan, which is a part of the IEP process many parents in previous research felt excluded from (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). “It just gives me a better basis to understand what they’re dealing with in terms of the classroom environment, and when we actually have goals that we’re writing, think about how we can apply them more.”

All parents in the study said they would share their insights from the observations with school staff. Most thought their input would be received positively. However, one parent who expressed a lot of frustration with her previous interactions with school staff during the interview felt that her feedback would not be valued by the IEP team: “They’ll probably receive it as going in one ear and out the other, you know, just brush it off their shoulder. They really do not care.”

This mother obviously did not feel like a significant member of her son’s IEP team. Her frustration and negative opinion of school staff resonated throughout her entire interview. It would probably take a lot on the part of the school to gain this mother’s trust again.

However, the positive responses of inclusion on the team expressed by other parents signal that observation may be useful in building constructive relationships with the school. Observation may be a way of encouraging communication and
collaboration in the team process before negative relationships between home and school form.

Parent observations were not only beneficial to parents, but could contribute to improvements in educational and therapeutic practices. One parent who is active on the PTA spoke about how she encouraged staff to use their relationship to get needed tools.

We’re highly participative parents. Probably so much that the school is like, ‘Oh my gosh, we have another email from this family,’ But actually the physical therapist has said that if all families participated like we do, it’d be so much easier for them to do their jobs. Because I do send them her medical updates, I send them what she’s doing at home and they’re like, ‘Well, we tried this at school.’ I would say the biggest positive out of this would be that she needs different OT applications and tools on her iPad. Like, she needs finger grasps and pointers and things like that. So these are things I said, ‘Don’t hesitate to Google something you want and ask me for it and I can ask the PTA to approve it.’ So I think going into first grade and what she needs, we can ask for OT adaptive equipment, speech therapy equipment devices and that kind of thing. And I’ve told the therapist, ‘Don’t be afraid that if you need something specific for [my daughter] or any other student to ask the PTA for the money, because we have it and this is exactly what it’s for.’ These kids don’t have the other expenses the gen ed kids have, so you know, so if the kid needs special equipment, ask for it.

One participant suggested that observation could be a way to build relationships between home and school. She remembered feeling surprised when she learned she could observe because the school had not been forthright with offering the option.

I wish I knew that I was allowed to do an observation. That really wasn’t shared until I said, ‘Well, how would I know? We keep going back and forth.’ So I, out of frustration said, ‘I want to see her’ the first time I did an observation. ‘I want to see.’ That’s when they were like,
‘Well, okay, what day and time?’ and I was like, ‘Oh, I didn’t even know that was an option.’ So I think that, you know how they give you that procedural safeguards and everything? If they said at that point, ‘If you ever want to observe your child…’ I think they would have a lot more parent, I mean, it would be a lot more work for them, but I think it would be beneficial to the parents and the children.

Another parent offered a recommendation that took it a step further, where schools would host specific times for observations.

If there’s any way that the district or administration could encourage, like this November or October is observation month, and maybe have all of the parents come in at a time, if that’s easier. That way maybe if the parents know this during the summer time, that the week of November first and April first are going to be parent observation week. So that staff and teachers are ready and parents can put it on their calendar and kind of have a goal and say, ‘I’m going to try and come in sometime that week.’ And that way the school knows there will be parents coming in, the teachers will know it and that kind of thing. And if your child is cognitively aware you can say to them, ‘I’m going to come in next week and see you.’ That’s what I would say, to make it more proactive from the district’s part and the school’s part that they would encourage parents to come in and make it easy for them.

Participants in the study viewed observation of their child in school as a parent’s right. Although all participants were college educated, because they were self-taught about the IEP process and school procedures, many did not know they could observe their child in school. A few participants voiced frustration that they had not known about option to observe sooner. The lack of transparency about observation felt by participants could possibly contribute to mistrust of school staff. If they feel as if the school is hiding something that could be beneficial to them or their children, parents may feel cheated of their rights or that the school is purposely withholding valuable information.
Parents felt so strongly about the benefits of observation that resulted from this study that they went so far as to offer suggestions as to how schools could be more upfront about sharing the opportunity with all parents.

Trust and communication were two major deficits seen in the literature about IEP team functioning (Stoner et al., 2005; Angell et al., 2009). Observation seems to contribute to both of these areas, which could significantly contribute to a more effectively functioning IEP team.
Chapter 5

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The current study substantiates mothers’ in-school observation of their children with disabilities as worthy of future research, and suggests many possibilities that could be explored further. All mothers in this study wanted to observe their child again in the future, so investigations into parent motivations to observe their children could be productive. Conversely, many parents did not choose to participate in this study, and six parents expressed interest in participating but then later said they were unable to follow through with the observations, indicating that research into obstacles to parent observation could also be valuable. Participants shared opinions about certain aspects of observation that were not examined fully in this study, but perhaps should be further explored, such as the optimal timing of observations during the school year or in relation to IEP meetings, ideal length of time for an observation, and the potential benefits or hazards of incorporating a video component with observation.

Because this was a small qualitative study with a narrow, convenience sample of participants, the results should not be generalized to the population. All the parents in this study were well-educated and already active in their children’s schooling. The interviews revealed that many parents in this study also had preconceived notions that observation would be advantageous. Perspectives from other populations about observation could be useful to examine. Participants from different racial, economic, and geographic groups may yield different results than revealed in this study. A difference in the perceptions about observation may also be experienced by parents...
with children having different disabilities, or varying severity of the same disability. Parents with varying levels of experience or relationships with their IEP team members may also expose different perspectives about observation. Future studies could also examine the viewpoints of other IEP team members, such as educators, administrators, or therapists, about the advantages and disadvantages of parent observation.

The “Student Observation Worksheet” used in this study was untested before use, and therefore may have unintentionally skewed perspectives and may not be the ideal tool for data collection by parents. However, results from this study could inform a future study where parent observation worksheets are created and tested, giving parents an evidence-based tool that might encourage parent-school communication, increase parent participation at IEP meetings, and augment parenting self-efficacy in the IEP process. Such a tool could be obtained by parents independently online, distributed by parent organizations, or even offered by the schools directly. School personnel presenting parents with an in-school observation guide could help establish transparency and trust and contribute to a positive IEP team dynamic, something that literature shows is noticeably lacking.

This study explored a method that could enhance parent participation in the IEP process. However, there is currently no standardized measure of parent participation in the IEP process. So, parents could consider themselves active on their children’s IEP teams, but in reality not be very active at all, or vice versa. Similarly, increases or decreases in parent participation are difficult to measure. Development of a tool to gauge school and IEP team participation of parents of children with disabilities could offer a uniform basis on which to found future research.
Chapter 6

DISCUSSION

Education in the United States often operates in isolation from other areas of a child’s life. This poses a problem for students with disabilities, whose special education and related services in school calls for collaboration not only among school staff, but also with parents who are knowledgeable about the child’s medical, social, and behavioral history and functioning outside of school. However, because the IEP hinges on the child’s functioning and needs in school, it is difficult for parents to contribute to the IEP if they are unfamiliar with educational practices, social interactions, and behavior of their children in school. Alternatively, it is difficult for the school to know the capacities and motivations of the child if they are unfamiliar with the child’s functioning in the home and community. A more complete picture of the child’s capabilities, needs, and motivations offered by the parents will help the IEP team create a more specific and personalized plan. Furthermore, an amiable and trusting partnership between home and school would naturally enhance functioning of the IEP team and result in a more relevant and effective IEP plan for the child.

Findings from this study echo parents’ frustration with the IEP process found in the literature, with mothers feeling unprepared and intimidated serving on their children’s IEP teams. Parents would like to take part in planning their child’s special education program (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013; Fish, 2008), but have felt excluded from the process and at a disadvantage because they are unfamiliar with what is discussed at IEP meetings (Spann et al., 2003; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). The power
of the first-hand knowledge gleaned from observations in the current study, that in some cases were as brief as half an hour, inspired increases or decreases in trust of school staff, more communication between home and school, generalization of skills at home, and self-confidence in parents to speak up at future IEP meetings.

Similar to findings in a review of the literature by Wagner et al. (2012), mothers in this study expressed a clear desire to be more actively included in their children’s schooling. However, parents were limited in the extent to which they could be involved on the IEP team without being more familiar with what is going on in school. Observation offered an opportunity for parents to become familiar with their children’s functioning in school, which led to discovery of many insights about child capacities and broadened opportunities for generalization of skills in the home. Feelings and insights from their first-hand observations contributed to a sense of empowerment in participants. After becoming more knowledgeable about their children in school, mothers reported being inspired to do more and had a higher sense of self-efficacy as IEP team members.

All participants reported that observation was useful to them and they wanted to observe their children in school again in the future. Most mothers did not go into the observation consciously searching for specific things, however, observation revealed that inclusion, social relationships, consistency between home and school, and communication between home and school were at the forefront of participants’ thoughts.

In-school parent observation increases communication between home and school, helping to cultivate the home-school partnership on the IEP team. From the
start, the practice of observation increases communication between parents and educators to work out the details of the observation. After observing, parents may have questions or comments they want to share with the school staff. All mothers in this study said they would share insights from their experiences, both positive and negative, with educators directly or the IEP team as whole. In addition to questions and insights, participants of this study had suggestions for the school staff they were eager to share, some of which might benefit other children in the classroom as well as their own. Additional informed communication within team members stemming from observations could enhance IEP team functioning.

Furthermore, observation by parents is an ideal method to augment the IEP process because it does not require lengthy training for either the parents or school staff, does not need additional preparation of the school environment, does not detract from instructional time, and does not require any additional funding. Observation that enables parents to view any activity or environment, during any time of year that may be important to a specific child’s development also upholds the central construct of the IEP, which is to support individualized instruction. The main burden of observation falls on parents to devote time to go into school, which may be difficult for those with other obligations during school hours. However, parents in most cases stand to benefit from making time for observation because it adds opportunities for communication between home and school, insights about the child’s functioning in school, first-hand knowledge of educational practices, and stimulates parent involvement on the IEP team. More educated and empowered parents will ideally create a more balanced IEP team, where parent perspectives are valued.
When organizations within the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model operate harmoniously, it more efficiently promotes a child’s development. Synchronization in the mesosystem is especially important for children with disabilities, whose inability to engage effectively with proximal processes may put them at a developmental disadvantage (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Additionally, children with disabilities may be receiving assistance for development from not only school and home, but also from community agencies, creating a more complex web of interconnection in the mesosystem. Parents are the only contingent connected to all of the other components of the mesosystem, making them the most essential piece of the mesosystem.

The IEP process is often presented with the flawed assumption that parents should blindly trust school officials to do what is best for the development of the student. However, even with the ideal school staff, who are the best in the field and have unlimited time and resources necessary to create the best program for a child, the process is incomplete without parent input. Parents of children with disabilities are the crux of the mesosystem, serving as the central coordinators of medical, social, and academic services for their children. This knowledge is useful in designing a truly individualized special education program. Furthermore, of all the IEP team members, parents have the most invested in their children’s development, and will continue to be involved in that development long beyond the school years. Observation enabled the parents in this study to become more familiar with the educational processes, student functioning, and interpersonal relationships that are happening in school, and empowers and inspires parents to take their place as equal contributors on the IEP team.
More than 40 years since the IEP has been established, dysfunctional IEP team relationships have become commonplace, possibly obstructing the optimal educational outcomes for children with disabilities. Solutions that actively build awareness, relationships, and communication between home and school are essential to developing productive IEP teams that stimulate each child’s development. In-school parent observation of children with disabilities is a proactive practice that has potential to breakdown the imaginary borders surrounding schools, opening the possibility for all IEP team members to contribute equally.
REFERENCES


66


Appendix A

INITIAL PARENT SURVEY

Name: ____________________________

Age: ______ Gender: (circle one) Male Female Other

Marital Status: (circle one) Single Married Separated Divorced Widowed

How many children do you have? (circle one) 1 2 3 4 5+

What is the highest level of education you completed?

- High school graduate or less
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree (master's degree, Ph.D., etc.)

Which race do you identify with?

- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- White or Caucasian
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Other

Have you ever observed your child in a school setting before this study? Yes No

Please indicate your level of participation in the following activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>A few times</th>
<th>Many times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workshop/Training related to IEP process by the school or district</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop/Training related to IEP process by an outside organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation related to IEP process at a conference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researched IEP process independently on the internet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researched IEP process by reading studies or scholarly articles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researched IEP process by reading popular articles (magazines, newspaper)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researched IEP process by reading a book</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networked with other parents in person (meetings, support groups)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networked with other parents online (social media, chat rooms)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted an organization about IEP process (advocacy group, law firm)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How prepared do you think you were going into your first IEP meeting? Completely Unprepared A little prepared Adequately Prepared Well Prepared

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparedness Level</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Once</th>
<th>A few times</th>
<th>Many times</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Does your child have an active IEP? (circle one) Yes No

How many of your child's IEP meetings have you attended? 0 1 2-5 6-10 11-14 15-19 20+

What is your child's current age? _____ years _____ months

What is your child's current grade? Preschool Kindergarten 1st 2nd 3rd 4th 5th

What is your child's school district? __________________________

Please list the reason/disability for your child's IEP: __________________________

At what age did your child receive an IEP? _____ years _____ months In what grade? ________

Approximately what percentage of your child's day on average is spent in a regular education setting? ________%

Thank You!
Appendix B

BEFORE YOUR OBSERVATION

School Procedures

According to Delaware law, parents of children with disabilities are entitled to observe their children in the school setting. However, each district may have different standards for student observations regarding notice submission requirements and sign in procedures. Please be sure to consult with your child’s principal or school district officials to ensure appropriate procedures are followed.

A request to observe can be done casually, through discussion or email with your child’s teacher or principal, or more formally through a written letter. Attached is a “Sample Letter to School Requesting Observation” that can be personalized and submitted to your child’s school. Please arrange your observation through whatever means you feel most comfortable.

Classroom Procedures

In order to avoid disruption of regular classroom routine and distraction to other students, please consult with your child’s educator/therapist before the observation about when you would like to observe, length of time you would like to observe, and where you hope to sit/stand during your observation. It may also be helpful to discuss the purpose of your observation with your child’s teacher/therapist.

Study Requirements for Observation

This study requires you to observe your child for at least 30 minutes anytime during typical school hours occurring during the 2015-2016 school year. You can observe your child in any school setting (general education classroom, inclusion classroom, therapy room, etc.), in any activity (whole class instruction, one-on-one instruction, math, gym, recess, etc.), and with any instructor (general education teacher, special education teacher, para, therapist, etc.) during normal school hours. It is also okay for your observation to overlap some of these activities or environments.

Please call or text Cary at 302-339-2124 to let her know the confirmed date and time of your observation and to schedule the follow up interview.

**The parents of a student with a disability shall have the right to visit and observe, either personally or through a representative, their child’s current or proposed educational program. The public agency may require advance notice when parents or guardians wish to visit a proposed educational program.**

Delaware Regulations can be found at: [http://regulations.delaware.gov/Admin/Code/id/4/900/910]

©Gilden
Appendix C

SAMPLE LETTER TO SCHOOL

[Your Name]
[Your Street Address]
[Your City, State, Zip Code]

[Month and Day, Year]

[Name of Teacher/Principal/Therapist]
[Name of School]
[School Street Address]
[School City, State, Zip Code]

Dear [Dr./Mr./Ms.] _________________________________,

To enhance my contributions to the IEP team, I would like to come into school to observe my [son/daughter], ______ [child’s name] _________. I think it would be helpful to observe my child in school firsthand to see [his/her] classroom experience. In particular, I am interested in observing ___ ________ [name anything specific you are interested in observing, or if there is a specific reason for your observation] _________.

I would like to come and observe ______ [child’s name] ________ on ______ [date] ______ from ____ [start time] ______ until ____ [end time] _______.

Please let me know if this date and time would be suitable for observation. If not, I welcome suggestions about when you think would be the ideal time for observation.

I want to be sure I follow any school district regulations for parental visits. If there are formal procedures set forth by the school or district for scheduling an observation, please forward them to me in writing.

I look forward to working together to ensure the most appropriate education for my child!

Sincerely,

[Signature]
[Print Your Name]
Appendix D

STUDENT OBSERVATION FORM

Student Observation Form

Date: ____________  Observation Start Time: _______ am/pm  End Time: _______ am/pm

Child’s Age: ________  Child’s Grade: ________  Child’s School: ________________

Goals for this observation:

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

Environment

What environment did you observe?  
(general ed, classroom, therapy room, gym, etc.)

What adults were in the room?

Briefly describe the observed activity:

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

Your impressions of the physical environment:

(temperature, lighting, displays, seating arrangements, class size, etc.)

_________________________________________________________________________

Your impressions of the learning environment:

(volume level, activity level, students on task, etc.)

_________________________________________________________________________

Your impressions of instructional format:

(whole group, small group, or individual instruction, pace of instruction, technology used, etc.)

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

Other thoughts about the classroom or instruction delivered:

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________
Describe your child's mood during the observation: ____________________________

Describe your child's functioning during the observation: ____________________________
(ability to move around, get help, do what his/her peers are doing, etc.)

Describe your child's behavior during the observation: ____________________________

Describe your child's interactions with peers: ____________________________

Describe your child's interactions with teacher/staff/therapist: ____________________________

Do you see any behavior that is different than at home? ____________________________

Other thoughts about your child in the situation observed: ____________________________

Any questions you have: ____________________________
Student Observation Form

Please record other observation notes here:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Please record other observation notes here:
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Did you find the observation process helpful or not? How and why?

2. Can you briefly tell me a little bit about what you observed? (Additional probing questions: What was going on in the classroom? How long did you observe your child? What are your thoughts about the length of the observation?)

3. How did you feel observing your child in the classroom? (Additional probing questions: Please describe any positive emotions that came from the observation. Please describe any negative emotions that came from the observation.)

4. What emotions did you experience when you were setting up the observation?

5. What expectations did you have before going into the observation? Did you have particular goals or things you wanted to focus on during this observation?

6. Was there anything unexpected or surprising that came from the observation?

7. Did you gain any insights from this observation? (About the classroom environment, your child, the teaching, etc.)

8. On the initial parent questionnaire, you were asked, “How prepared do you think you were going into your first IEP meeting?” and you said ____. Do you think observing your child in school before that first meeting would have helped you feel more prepared?

9. How would you feel about sharing your recent observations with the IEP team? Your child’s teacher individually? Your child? Why?

10. How do you think this observation of your child will influence your participation on the IEP team?

11. Would you like to observe your child again? Why or why not?
12. How would you improve the process of observations? Why?  
(Additional probing question: Is there anything you wish you had known before this experience about observing? Is there anything else that would have been useful to you during this observation?)

13. Do you have any other overall impressions or thoughts about observing your child in a school setting that I haven’t asked you about?
Appendix F

UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE IRB APPROVAL

DATE: March 23, 2016

TO: Corina Gilden, MEd
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: Catching a Glimpse: In-School Parent Observation of Students with Disabilities

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: March 23, 2016
EXPIRATION DATE: March 22, 2017
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # (6,7)

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The University of Delaware IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years.
Based on the risks, this project requires Continuing Review by this office on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate renewal forms for this procedure.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Farnese-McFarlane at (302) 831-1119 or nicolefm@udel.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.