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HOW CAN EDUCATORS BETTER INFORM PARENTS ABOUT THE SPECIAL
EDUCATION PROCESS SO THAT THEY ARE EMPOWERED TO INCREASE
THEIR ROLE AS ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS
IN THEIR STUDENTS' EDUCATION?

A MASTER'S THESIS
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OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY
BETH THIBODEAU

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BETHEL UNIVERSITY

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MAY 2022

APPROVED

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Abstract

The benefits of family involvement in students' education range from academic and behavioral growth to better attendance and social skills. Parent involvement in the educational process for students with disabilities is a legal right, yet barriers to involvement result in what researchers call an untapped capacity for joint collaboration between parents and educators. This literature review sought to determine how parent involvement is defined and then identify barriers to involvement. Those barriers are addressed with research summaries of how to empower teachers to support family involvement and how to empower parents to be involved in the special education process. One section focuses on what researchers say are the best ways to engage culturally and linguistically diverse families.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Positive parental involvement in a student's education can help the student grow academically and improve behaviorally. Kenner (2018) refers to this as "common sense ideology." Not surprisingly, with parental involvement, students score better on tests and have better attendance records than students whose families are not engaged with their learning. These students have better social skills and are more likely to progress to the next grade level, too (Lowe, 2020).

While parental involvement in a student's education is generally considered positive, educators' definitions of that involvement can differ based on everything from teaching experience and demographic makeup of students in the class to related support from administration and district expectations of teacher-driven attempts to involve parents. Researchers, on the other hand, use various but specific definitions of parental involvement. Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015), for example, define parental involvement as "parent interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success" (p. 223).

Epstein's research on social and academic achievement in relation to parental involvement defines that involvement as the connection between families, schools, and communities. This research identifies six types of parental involvement that are used in the organization she founded, the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS). These types of involvement are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating within the community, meaning partnerships between schools, families, and community resources. The organization uses these six types of involvement as categories for a variety of assessments to determine program effectiveness, including the effectiveness of reading interventions implemented in community settings. The results are then used to help foster better

relationships between families in diverse communities and schools and school districts within those communities (Kenner, 2018).

While Epstein is specific in her definition of parental involvement, Kenner's (2018) research shows that parental involvement most often is viewed in the abstract based on the compounding ideals of what it could look like. For that reason, diverse backgrounds and experiences of families and educators need to be taken into account when considering parental involvement. Cobb (2013) describes parent-school interactions as multi-dimensional and explains that these interactions vary based on perceptions people hold and the systems they encounter. The relationships with people in those systems all contribute to how parents are, or are not, involved in their children's education.

Researchers have studied this work at the system level, specifically interventions planned and implemented by school districts and schools in order to increase parent involvement. In a review and analysis of the effectiveness of such interventions, Goldman and Burke (2017) write that research shows such involvement positively affects the academic achievement of students without disabilities. The authors state that although the need for parent involvement in education is apparent, the need as it relates to students with disabilities has not been adequately researched.

More research in this area could help to address problems special education students, their parents, schools, and school districts face. Goldman and Burke (2017) write, "The ramifications of low involvement and poor parent-school partnerships for this population are especially severe. Poor parent-school partnerships relate to higher rates of due process and mediation to resolve conflicts, which lead to financial and emotional tolls on schools and families" (p. 5). Burke (2012) notes that involvement of parents of children with special needs resulted in a decrease in inappropriate placements.

Forming and maintaining these relationships can be difficult for all involved, but Brandon and Brown (2015) put the onus directly on educators, who they say have a legal and ethical responsibility to “aggressively seek parental involvement” (p. 89). Researchers write that educators need to be aware of the responsibilities of parents of children with special needs and how attending to those responsibilities often takes precedence over learning to navigate the world of special education. “Parents of students with disabilities are compounded with emotions regarding the health and well-being of their child while being expected to navigate a system of criteria-specific laws that, again, identifies their child as atypical. Parents place a lot of trust in schools to ensure that their child with educational disabilities is provided with the appropriate level of support to ensure their academic and social growth while continuously worrying that their child’s disability does not define them in the school community setting, is making friends and viewed positively by peers, is included in general education activities, and is kept safe” (Kenner, 2018).

There are other factors that influence family involvement in education, too. Parent-teacher relationships can be affected by things such as outside support for the family including help from extended family, counseling for the child and the family, and other services such as occupational or speech therapy. Child characteristics or behavior influence parent-teacher relationships, too. Research by Garbacz, McIntyre, & Santiago (2016) shows “that parents of children with higher developmental risk reported less family involvement and poorer relationships with their child’s teacher” (p. 485).

While there are many barriers to family involvement in special education, researchers consistently mention three: power imbalances, communication issues, and what Cobb (2013) calls a “disconnect between the perspectives of the schools and parents” (p. 47). Perceptions of

status are an issue of concern for parents. “According to researchers, perceptions of status prompted the mothers to feel reluctant to offer suggestions regarding their child’s learning program even in situations where they felt anxious and had strong views,” (Cobb, 2013, p. 47).

While educators have a responsibility to advocate and plan for parental involvement, in order for parents of students with disabilities to be involved in their students’ education, parents (with or without the help of educators) need to learn how to navigate the complex special education system. Federal law mandates parent involvement in the special education process, but the research repeatedly shows that parents who don’t do this, or aren’t able to, often believe their children are at a disadvantage: Burke (2012), for example, writes that 70 percent of families of students with disabilities reported their children lost services because the parents didn’t understand the special education system.

Much of the literature on parental involvement in special education focuses on involvement during Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. Researchers often refer to an imbalance of power in this setting, where educators plan and lead the meeting. This problem has long been well-researched: In 1994, for example, Ware wrote that even if strategies are in place to “enhance parent-professional collaboration, collaborative interactions in public schools privilege the interpretation of the professional over that of the parent” (p. 342). Research published in 2021 shows this problem still exists (Passmore & Zarate).

Cobb’s (2013) multi-dimensional view of parent involvement is described as an “entanglement theory” in which perceptions, people, and systems commingle to create a multidimensional problem. In the case of IEP meetings, teachers and those in the school district function in two roles: They are the people who also serve as part of the legal special education system. Brandon and Brown (2009) write that “school personnel must understand the barriers

created within the school that might lead to negative perceptions and poor parental participation” (p. 87). Researchers cite the use of educational jargon, including acronyms, as one example of creating a barrier that limits parent understanding and involvement.

Researchers agree that learning to work with families and to overcome the many barriers to creating effective collaboration between teachers and families needs to be a priority for educators. Everyone involved benefits from such collaboration; students do better academically, socially, and behaviorally, for example, and Goldman and Burke (2017) refer to the financial and emotional toll on school districts and families when lack of family-educator collaboration leads to an increase in due process or inappropriate placement of students. While this is important to address at every level, it could be argued that the most important work happens both formally and informally in the ongoing exchanges between teachers and parents. This is especially true of families who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Miller, Colebrook, and Ellis (2013) point out that collaborative “partnerships are critically important for families from historically underserved, cultural, or minority populations who may be economically disadvantaged and linguistically diverse” (p. 16).

Kenner’s (2018) research shows that educators often make the assumption that families understand how to best support their children in making sure they have appropriate educational opportunities. Kenner writes that consistent, two-way communication between educators and families is what helps to foster a sense of community, even if families know parental and child rights and have navigated the special education system with or without support. And for parents who are unfamiliar with the special education system, establishing and maintaining these family-school collaborative partnerships “can help overcome institutionalized disparities and inequities

by building social capital for families whom educators tend to overlook” (Miller, Colebrook, & Ellis, 2013, p. 16).

Laws Related to Family Involvement in Special Education

Unlike general education, in special education there is a legal mandate for parent involvement. By law, educators of students in special education must involve parents in each decision making process. “From assessment and eligibility, to program placement and learning goals, the policy recommends that school professionals not only inform parents of their rights but also incorporate parents’ knowledge of their child in the special education process” (Kerry-Henkel & Eklund, 2015). While educators have long known that good relationships between schools and families benefit all students, the importance of those relationships for students with disabilities wasn’t recognized officially until 1975, when the Education of All Handicapped Children Act was passed (Collier, Keefe, & Hirrel, 2015).

Decades of research on family involvement in special education most often includes information about parent-teacher communication, family involvement during IEP meetings, due process, and so on, but Cobb (2013) writes that a driving force in positive changes to family involvement in special education can be credited to “the deepening roots of parental involvement in research, policy, and legislation” (p. 40). That, in part, explains significant changes that were made to education laws in the 1990s and early 2000s. These changes were in the 1997 Amendments to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA). These new and altered laws reinforced the expectation that schools are responsible to build trust with families. Additionally, they spelled out administrators’ duty to handle the

differing opinions of parents and educators in how special education services are delivered (Cobb, 2013).

IDEA's principles direct that students who are eligible for special education services will have an IEP that includes goals and related services and that the teacher or teachers and parents will work together to make those determinations. IDEA also states that parents have a legal right to file a complaint, referred to as due process, regarding implementation of the IEP or how it was created (Kenner, 2018).

Most important, perhaps, is that these laws list families as active participants in decision making processes for their children's education. Parent involvement is one of the six foundational principles of IDEA, and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 stresses shared decision making between parents and schools. Under IDEA, parents are given specific rights and protection as a way of ensuring that their voices are heard. These procedural safeguards are intended to protect students' and parents' rights including the right for parents to be active and equal members of the IEP team (Shaw, 2018).

Guiding Question

This thesis seeks to explore the literature on parental involvement in special education by first summarizing barriers to family involvement and then explaining strategies to engage families in the special education process. It also includes a review of research on how to engage parents who are culturally and linguistically diverse. The intent is to answer the guiding question: How can educators better inform parents and guardians about the special education process so that they are empowered to increase their role as active participants in their students' education?

The studies referenced share a common theme, which is the importance of communication between schools and families as a way to ensure that families can and will actively and effectively advocate for their children. Of note are consistencies in references to power imbalances between family members and educators during IEP meetings which negatively affects collaboration. Researchers also point out concerns related to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education and specific barriers to family involvement for those students and for all students and families who are culturally and/or linguistically diverse.

The implications of the research articles included in this paper will be explained, and special attention will be given to strategies teachers can use to improve relationships with parents of students in special education in order to create opportunities for partnerships with those parents to benefit the students and everyone involved.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review focuses on qualitative research articles. There also are references to quantitative research in the area of parental involvement in special education. References to organizations' websites that offer information to educators and parents of students who receive special education are from peer-reviewed journal articles and are noted with the appropriate citations.

The literature suggests that the history of parental participation in education began as something somewhat passive with parents being the recipients of information from educators. Parental participation then shifted to parental involvement. This shift relates to laws that specified parental involvement rights in the area of special education. In the 1980s, researchers began to focus on how parent involvement affects student achievement. Current research tends to define parent involvement as engagement, meaning an active partnership between home and school that places pressure on educators to understand and respect cultural and socioeconomic differences that can affect families' abilities to be involved with their students' education (McKenna and Millen, 2013).

McKenna and Millen's (2013) research on parent involvement in education resulted in their grounded theory models of parent presence, voice, and engagement. The authors define parent voice as "the right and opportunity for parents and caregivers to express their thinking and understandings about their children's and families' everyday lives and educational experiences in and out of school" (p. 12). They write that parent presence "refers to a parent or caregiver's actions and involvement in their children's education" (p. 12). This can be both formal and informal. Parents can be present, for example, by attending a parent-teacher conference or by reading with their child.

McKenna and Millen (2013) refer to a “newer generation of parent engagement,” a home-school-community partnership that is only possible with a more inclusive understanding of what parent engagement means. Identifying barriers to forming these partnerships is the first step in the development of better relationships between parents and educators. McKenna and Millen write, “Parent engagement fosters the notion that the cultural and social nuances of families are a source of strength as opposed to an oppositional force in the education of children” (p. 13).

Barriers to Parental Involvement

Research shows that family involvement in education fosters student success in school. This is true of students with disabilities, too: For example, when their IEPs are developed with parents as active participants, academic achievement is improved (Sawyer, 2015). But despite research showing the many benefits of family involvement in education, in general, parent participation has declined over the past two decades (Sawyer, 2015).

Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015) refer to the role of parents of a child with special needs as the overarching barrier to parent involvement in that child’s education. They write, “The role of parents with a child with a disability shows a level of complexity and intensity not generally found in the general population ... learning how to provide the education and supports that their children need is an ongoing and frequently frustrating process” (p. 120). Barriers to family participation in special education can be attributed to a variety of specific factors mentioned repeatedly in the literature. Below are the common themes outlined in the literature.

Lack of Knowledge About Special Education

Parents are at a disadvantage when they have no knowledge of the special education process. Communication and decision-making are two types of parent involvement that go hand-

in-hand when a child is first considered for special education services. Initial conversations between school and home about the special education evaluation process can set the tone for what will be an ongoing relationship. Kenner (2018) states that parents rely on the expertise of teachers “to guide them through this arduous process and if positive communication is breached, on either parties’ end, and for whatever reason, future parent involvement may be adversely impacted” (p. 28).

Parents must place their trust in educators during the decision-making process after the completion of the special education evaluation process. Kenner (2018) writes that decision-making is vital to the success of “positive parent involvement and results in the inclusion and collaboration between parents and school members (p. 29). But educators disempower families when their input is ignored or devalued, regardless of their knowledge of special education. In an article on family perspectives of their students transitioning from high school to adulthood, one parent described IEP meetings as “... mostly professionals sharing information and deciding what to do” (Gallivan-Fenlon, 1994, as cited in Kenner, 2018).

Parent Education Level

Research shows that parent education level is a factor in how or if positive school-to-home relationships are formed. Rached (2015) writes, “... it is very clear that the quality of relationships vary considerably depending on the socioeconomic status of the parents such as: occupational class and level of education” (p. 13). Garbacz, McIntyre, and Santiago (2016) refer specifically to maternal education as a predictor of family involvement in special education. The higher a mother’s education, the more likely the family will be involved in the child’s education. This is especially true, they note, as it relates to mothers of children on the autism spectrum (p. 480).

But research shows that this life context variable regarding parental involvement in special education is largely a matter of parents' perceptions of their skills rather than a direct reflection of their own level of academic achievement. A parent who doubts their ability to make a positive impact on student achievement is less likely to be engaged in their student's education, but research shows that engagement increases when educators consider how parent skills, regardless of parental education, might be tapped to help students. For this reason, teacher requests for involvement need to consider parents' skills and abilities beyond academic achievement (McDermott & Rothenburg, 2012).

Cultural and Linguistic Diversity

Teachers need to understand there are different attitudes and beliefs about educating children in every culture. For example, Zarate (2007) found that Latino parents of students with disabilities referred to life participation more often than academic achievement and those parents also said they believe children receive better academic learning opportunities when they can apply the morals that they learn at home in the classroom.

Research focused on special education transition planning noted the importance of teachers honoring varying family values. When diverse or differing values aren't honored, dominant cultural values drive decision making. This sends the message that parent involvement is not valued. "School staff failure to value different visions of a successful adult prevented collaborative planning, and from the perspective of families may be one of the school staff's greatest weaknesses" (Hirano, Rowe, Lindstrom, & Chan, 2018). This research includes several studies and the authors point out that in each study, educators' attitudes, beliefs, and actions including prejudice, discrimination, and racism related to gender, disability, race, and social class

eliminated the possibility of collaborative relationships between staff and families. This, of course, has a negative effect on families' involvement at their children's schools.

Much of the research on working with culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education and their families is focused on perception, and this most often is associated with an ongoing lack of understanding about the special education process. When culturally and linguistically diverse families are unaware of students' rights and their rights as parents, they are less likely to access translation services, which limits or eliminates the possibility of establishing and maintaining good communication with the teacher and school (Kenner, 2018).

Perceptions of special education can prevent African American parents from participating in their children's education. These parents report that they do not know how best to be involved in their students' education, they believe the special education system is intimidating, and they report that educators aren't welcoming (Brandon & Brown, 2009).

The view of unwelcoming school personnel helps prove the point that lack of involvement in special education for culturally and linguistically diverse families isn't just a matter of perceptions that these families have: Differing perspectives of families and educators combine to create barriers to parental involvement. These perspectives, Cobb (2013) writes, "may even lead school professionals to hold deficit views of CLD [culturally and linguistically diverse] parents (p. 51). Buddy (2012) explains that educators have a responsibility to involve all parents in the planning process by first considering and then acknowledging the many differences and needs of all families.

Economics and Family Composition

Families who live at or below the poverty level are more likely to live in areas with higher crime and abuse rates, which often leads to a decrease of family involvement in schools in

urban areas (Savage, 2007, as cited in Kenner, 2018). McDermott and Rothenberg's (2012) research shows that there are three psychological factors that explain the hesitancy of urban, low-income families to be involved in their students' education. First, these families perceive their role in their children's education as outsiders and entrust teachers and administrators with teaching their children without their input. Second, efficacy is also a factor: If parents believe they have something valuable to contribute to their child's education, only then will they be more likely to be involved. Lastly, a welcoming school environment sends the message to parents that their participation in the education of their child matters.

Kenner (2018) reports that parents of a student living below the federal poverty level are far less likely to be involved in their student's education. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), in 2019, the average national poverty rate for children 18 and under was 16 percent, but it was as high as 28 percent in one state and 12 states were above the national average. The poverty rate of children under 18 varies by race and ethnicity, too, and when factoring in parents' highest level of education, the differences are notable. For children whose parents haven't finished high school, there are significant differences between races. Of Black children living in poverty, 64 percent have a parent who hasn't finished high school. Of White children living in poverty, 39 percent have a parent who hasn't finished high school (National, 2021).

In general, Rached (2015) postulates that the relationships between school and home seem to be less positive for working-class parents than for families with higher income because of things such as social class and power issues, structural inequalities, school culture, deficit-based propaganda, and teacher attitudes or perceptions of such families. She writes, "too often

parental involvement policies ignore the particular needs of underrepresented groups leaving those parents and students farther behind their higher income counterparts” (p. 13).

Marital status can have an effect on parents’ motivation to become involved in their child’s education. Fishman & Nickerson (2014) attribute this, in part, to parents’ differing perceptions of invitations from educators to be involved, and the authors point out that teacher-parent relationships are less often family centered when the student has a disability compared to relationships between teachers and parents of general education students.

It is important for educators to be especially mindful about communicating with parents who do not live together: Knowing a single parent might not have the resources of time or money to be fully engaged in their student’s education is an example. Both of these examples relate to teachers’ perception of involvement. Research shows that being aware of family status can help this barrier be overcome (“Why,” 2012).

A recurring theme in the literature is educators’ perceptions of parental involvement and how those perceptions can negatively affect communication between school and home. Family composition, divorce, specifically, influences these perceptions. Cobb’s (2013) research suggests educators often think of parents as information recipients rather than educational partners. Teachers need to be cognizant of family composition when communicating with a student’s family members who might not live together or communicate regularly if at all. Researchers point out the importance of communication being a two-way process for everyone involved in order to avoid misunderstandings.

School-Home Communication and IEP Meetings and Paperwork

McKenna and Millen (2013) found several themes that emerged from their research; the first and most prominent is negative family perceptions of school-to-home communication. In

Sears et al.'s (2021) research, families report they are ... "not considered valued members of their child's educational team as a result of barriers in effective communication" (p. 196).

Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015) completed a case study of teacher candidates asking them to comment on perceptions of communication between school and home. The candidates expressed their belief in a need for stronger partnerships between parents and educators, beginning with communication.

Educators and families agree that communication is vital to parental involvement in education, but there are differing ideas of what constitutes good communication. Other barriers come into play here, too, including cultural and linguistic differences. Kenner's (2018) review of the research points to best practices for communication including consideration of all barriers to parental involvement in education. She writes, "Communications between parents and teachers should occur in good times, not just bad times" (p. 48). Doing so helps parents and teachers look past perceptions and establish more honest and productive relationships.

Research shows that efficacious family and school relationships result in better outcomes for students. For students with a disability, the IEP is the foundation of the educational process where those outcomes are planned and progress toward them is then tracked. Most of the research on parent involvement in the special education process refers to IEP meetings with no differentiation between those meetings and others (formal or informal) that relate to special education. That is with good reason: The importance of an IEP meeting cannot be overstated. While barriers to family involvement in education often begin before an IEP meeting happens, the meeting itself can exacerbate those problems. "The IEP meeting is a critical component of the educational process for a child with a disability. The interactions between parents and school

personnel during IEP meetings are complex events that can leave parents feeling frustrated or uninvolved in their child's education" (Elser, 2017).

McKenna and Millen (2013) write about "the subordination of parent roles in educational decision making," specifically during IEP meetings. This is especially troublesome considering the negative effect on student learning repeated in the literature. Shaw (2015) writes, "It is particularly important that parents of students with disabilities are involved in their children's education. Academic achievement is improved when individualized education programs (IEPs) are developed with parents as partners in the process" (p. 172).

That partnership involves a lot of paperwork. From the referral process to evaluations and IEPs that are updated regularly, the stream of written materials that must be read, understood, and signed by parents is ongoing. But the amount of paperwork is just one part of the problem. "If parents can't read or fully comprehend the information that comes with entry into the special education system, they may not understand important procedures and rights, such as consent for testing, eligibility determination, and special education placement" (Kerry-Henkel & Eklund, 2015, p.3).

Parents need to know their rights and understand they have a say in the special education process from eligibility to transition services and everything in between. Because the implications of these barriers can have lifelong effects, the readability of those special education documents ought to be of concern to educators. Kerry-Henkel & Eklund (2015) write, "... these materials have been found to range from fifth grade reading levels to post college readability" (p. 3).

Researchers refer to the use of educational jargon including many acronyms as something that intimidates parents and then has a silencing effect, whether used in writing or in person.

Cobb (2013) refers to a study in which a parent stated that the use of educational terms without explanation at an IEP meeting made it feel as if the meeting was happening to her rather than for her child and with her involvement. This can set the stage for one-way school-to-home communication long after an IEP meeting.

Other Barriers

Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015) report that few teacher preparation programs educate future teachers on how to encourage parent involvement in the special education process. One of the problems is the challenge of establishing “authentic experiences that emphasize the importance of family-school-community collaboration” (p. 222).

This is true of school districts, too. Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel’s (2015) research shows that few school districts provide professional development designed to help teachers develop skills that will promote better relationships with families. They write, “Although school districts may have good intentions about providing parent involvement, many fall short in knowing how to engage parents at school or at home. School leaders nationwide continue to be unsure of how to create a supportive climate in which teachers are encouraged to initiate collaboration with parents” (p. 223).

Other barriers include personal constraints or what Brandon and Brown (2009) refer to as “institutional barriers” (p. 89). These include things such as meeting times that don’t align with a parent’s work schedule. The authors mention psychological barriers, too, referring to parents not trusting educators and feeling powerless to advocate for their children’s needs.

There are overlapping barriers for involvement of parents with students in general education and parents with students who are in special education; economics, cultural diversity, and lack of teacher training are examples, but comparisons aren’t always justifiable. Kenner

(2018) points out that “parental involvement is adversely impacted when additional challenges specific to children with educational disabilities are folded in” (p. 42).

Brandon and Brown (2009) point out the interaction of all barriers to parental involvement in special education as the overall cause of non-involvement. They write, “The interaction of these barriers can be complex and create a cycle of noninvolvement in which parents retreat and educators do not engage the parents” (p. 87). This affects parents on a personal level, too, especially African American parents. “This lack of participation can result in a sense of isolation. The isolation experienced by African American parents can cause them to express a sense of fear, depression, and even school phobia,” (Brandon & Brown, 2009, p. 87).

Understanding Parental Involvement

Although by law, educators of students in special education must involve parents in the decision making process, how that happens, or should happen, isn’t always well-defined. Epstein’s framework for parental involvement research, which was first published in 1995, continues to guide researchers as to the types of parental involvement necessary to have a positive effect on student success. Those types of parent involvement are parenting, communicating, decision-making, learning at home, volunteering, and collaborating with the community (Kenner, 2018).

Parent involvement in special education is one of the foundational principles of IDEA; the act promotes collaboration between educators and parents (Passmore & Zarate, 2021). Researchers who study parent involvement in special education agree that such involvement must be active rather than passive. For example, Moore et al. (2016) write that parent engagement in education refers to behavior that is directed, interactive, and purposeful. This applies to the effort put forth by educators, too. For educators and families, the goal of parent

engagement should be to “support youth by integrating parenting support within the school context to improve student academic outcomes and reduce problem behavior,” according to Moore et al. (2016, p. 230).

Research consistently shows the importance of parent involvement in education and educators understanding the importance of that involvement, especially as it relates to special education and legal mandates about parent involvement. There are many references in the literature on parent involvement in education to parents’ lack of motivation, yet many researchers report that it’s not lack of motivation that is the problem. Instead, they refer to a recursive cycle: Parents face a multitude of barriers to involvement and then educators interpret the resulting non-involvement as a lack of motivation. At the root of the problem are perceptions on the part of parents and educators.

Understanding parents’ perceptions of involvement in education is the first step to understanding their motivation to be involved. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s Model of Parent Involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005 as cited in Kenner, 2018) is the most comprehensive research on parental motivation for involvement. Their theoretical model was revised several times over a 15-year period, and it shows why parents are involved in their child’s education and the effect that involvement can have on a student’s academic progress. The model cites motivational beliefs, context variables for family/life such as socio-economic status, and parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement as the biggest influences of parent involvement in education (Kenner, 2018).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler refer to variables for parental involvement as “influences,” but again, many researchers list these things as barriers to involvement. Partnerships between schools and families could likely be formed more easily if educators acknowledged and

addressed these barriers directly. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model of Parent Involvement doesn't consider all potential variables and it specifically focuses on involvement of parents whose students are in general education, but Fishman and Nickerson (2014) write that, "... it provides a unique, interactional framework from which to investigate parents' involvement decisions" (p. 526).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's Model of Parent Involvement is a tiered approach that addresses three questions: 1) Why do/don't families become involved? 2) What do families do when they are involved? and 3) How does parent involvement positively affect student outcomes? There are five tiers or levels, with the first focusing on personal motivators, parents' perceptions of invitations to be involved in their children's education, and life context variables. The next two levels cover types of parent involvement and ways in which parents can learn to be involved. The other levels focus on students and include their perceptions of parent involvement and how self-efficacy and motivation can help with their academic achievement (McDermott & Rothenburg, 2012).

The model's first level includes three categories; the first is personal motivators, which includes parental role for involvement. Parents' understanding of what their role/s should be in regard to their involvement in their student's education is referred to as role construction in the model (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005 as cited in Kenner, 2018). Parents most often think of their role with their student's education as a homework helper, according to Kenner (2018) whose work focuses on teacher perceptions of parental involvement in special education. This is true despite the stated obligation under IDEA of schools to include parents in decision-making related to their children's education and parents' rights to be actively involved.

Parent efficacy is also included in the first level of the category of personal motivators. It is problematic when parents don't believe their direct involvement in their child's education would be beneficial; researchers consistently report that the opposite is true. Kenner (2018) writes that these concerns about efficacy often are "steeped in a parent's personal experiences with school, the current makeup of their family unit, and any specific instances that have recently occurred in their child's school experience that have either left a positive or negative perception in their own mind" (p. 31).

The personal motivators of parental role for involvement and parent efficacy relate directly to a barrier mentioned repeatedly in the literature, parents' lack of knowledge about special education. Kenner (2018) writes, "The barriers that already exist for parental involvement for the general population of families are adversely impacted when additional challenges specific to children with educational disabilities are folded in" (p. 43). Kenner's reference to additional challenges includes learning about everything from the initial evaluation and educational diagnosis to IEP meetings and more.

Parental knowledge and skills relate to efficacy, of course, but the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement shows that parental knowledge and skills fall into another first-level category referred to as life context variables (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005 as cited in Kenner, 2018). Parental time and energy and family culture are included in this category, too. The other category in the model's first level is about perceptions parents have to invitations to be involved with their students' education. These include invitations from the school, from teachers, and from students (McDermott & Rothenburg, 2012).

The factors of personal motivators, perceptions of invitations to be involved, and life context variables influence the frequency and different types of family involvement (McDermott

& Rothenburg, 2012). Burke (2012) explains that motivation for involvement can be influenced in many ways and it can vary on the part of the parents or the school. One influence is how receptive a teacher is to a family's input, for example. Burke's research shows that lack of trust and respect related to poor communication or disagreements at IEP meetings can alter how parents view their involvement and how teachers view and value that involvement. In addition, Burke writes, "... parents believe educators follow a perception of stereotypes about parents based on race, culture, and even gender."

Empowering Teachers to Improve Family Engagement

A recurrent theme in the literature on parental involvement in special education is trust. Researchers agree that parent trust of educators helps to form meaningful and productive partnerships. In turn, educators need to understand that parental involvement is not only legally necessary but also important; teachers must trust that parents' knowledge of their children is a valuable piece of the student success puzzle. Passmore and Zarate (2021) write, "Families bring a variety of strengths and knowledge to the education of children with disabilities. Educators can leverage the experience and investment of families to better support students and develop feelings of empowerment in their caregivers" (p. 311).

McKenna and Millen's (2013) research shows that how parents understand educators and education is vital to enabling parent voice, which they define as "the right and opportunity for parents and caregivers to express their thinking and understandings about their children's and families' everyday lives and educational experiences in and out of school" (p. 12). This knowledge is power, the authors state, and it helps to establish reciprocal communication between teachers and parents. Open lines of communication give families opportunities to consider preconceived notions about educators and schools. The result is a "more effective

parent presence within the traditional confines of the teacher-parent relationship and to a clearer picture of parent engagement” (p. 43).

A parent’s actions in a school setting or related to education outside of school represent what McKenna and Millen (2013) refer to as parent presence. Together, parent voice and parent presence create parent engagement, the authors write. In their research on parent engagement, themes gleaned from the data include families’ negative perceptions of communication between school and home and the “subordination of parent roles in educational decision making” (p. 12). Of the many barriers to parent involvement in special education, these are the two referenced most often in the literature.

McKenna and Millen (2013) stress that engagement shouldn’t be considered what they call “overt participation in schools,” but should take into account “subtle ways in which parents are active in a child’s life, which are more difficult to quantify and measure.” The authors also write about the importance of two-way communication between schools and families in their definition of parent voice (p. 36).

Again and again research points to the establishment of opportunities for parental engagement as the responsibility of educators, but before making parental engagement a priority, educators must first understand its relevance to the special education process, including the benefits not only to student achievement but also to improved home-to-school communication. This work, researchers agree, must start at the district level: “Involving parents in their children’s education should start at the top with district and building leaders” (Kenner, 2018).

Understanding Models of Involvement

In order for educators to increase parent involvement, they need to understand motivators for engagement and learn how to address barriers to involvement. Parent involvement models do

just that, and McKenna and Millen's (2013) research suggests that these models are useful for all educators but are designed to be especially helpful for teachers. They write, "Expanding the understandings and information that teachers have of parents could be the first step toward establishing this new ethic of parent engagement in schools" (p. 44).

McKenna and Millen (2013) propose that Epstein's framework for parental involvement or the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model of parental involvement should be taught through educational leadership programs and during professional development in school districts (p. 44). The authors stress the importance of teachers first acknowledging that parents are experts in their children's care, and they report that these approaches address issues that parents believe are barriers to their involvement in education.

The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model is sometimes referred to as a parental involvement process, and it is the parental involvement model referenced most often in the literature (Kenner, 2018). The levels in the model represent an order of steps for educators to use in helping parents understand their role in their student's education and the effect they can have on their student's success. The first level helps educators understand that personal motivators to involvement can be a result of social systems and other levels shows teachers how involvement activities at home can be beneficial to student achievement ("Why," 2012).

While the goal of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model is to positively influence student achievement, it also is viewed as a framework to guide educators as they find ways to consider barriers to involvement and work to empower parents to be partners in educating their students. Using it this way would call attention to barriers such as family composition and socioeconomic status, for example.

Epstein's framework (Epstein, 2019) outlines six types of family involvement, giving educators a straightforward support system upon which to base efforts to increase parental engagement. The first type of family involvement in Epstein's framework is parenting. Kenner (2018) points out that educators can be helpful to parents by explaining child development as it relates to academics; doing so empowers parent involvement outside the school. Epstein's framework also includes community, meaning the partnership of families and schools in the education of children (Epstein, 2019).

Epstein's framework refers to school, family, and community as overlapping spheres of influence. The researcher stresses the importance of how these influences could work together if educators would view students as children first. Epstein (2021) writes, "If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students."

While these models provide foundational work for educators' professional development, some studies have examined the effectiveness of interventions for parents created and implemented by schools with the intent to increase involvement in the special education process. In their meta-analysis of such interventions, Goldman and Burke (2017) said there is no evidence that parent training increases involvement.

The BRIDGES framework sidesteps professional development and instead is geared for teachers who want to "develop and implement strategies to facilitate various types and levels of parent involvement" (Sawyer, 2015, p. 173). The acronym stands for build, recruit, individualize, dialogue, generate, empower, and strengthen. It is flexible in that teachers can choose strategies

that best fit their classroom, students, and families at any point in the school year and then make adjustments as necessary. The focus is on collaboration.

Kenner (2018) suggests that school districts plan community engagement activities for students in special education and their families and then plan professional development after the fact, as a way to measure the effectiveness of such activities, viewing the activities through an intervention lens from which changes could be made to better serve teachers and, ultimately, families.

The recurring theme in all of the research included in this literature review is that perceptions play an important role in how, when, why, and to what extent parents are involved in their children's education. Researchers report that whether or not teachers receive formal training in how best to engage families in the special education process, educators need to accept that the responsibility to initiate and maintain family engagement lies with them. The first step, research shows, is to establish trust with families. The next, and perhaps most important focus should be on developing and maintaining open, two-way communication (Kenner, 2018).

Establishing Trust

Research shows that when families trust educators there is a likelihood of increased parental involvement (Kenner, 2018). While the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model outlines the progression of parental involvement and Epstein's framework explains influences, the BRIDGES framework gives teachers practical strategies that can be used to establish trust with families and meaningful relationships (Sawyer, 2015). "Meaningful relationships begin with a foundation of trust and understanding," Sawyer writes. "Parents must know they can rely on teachers to advocate for their children and establishing this trust requires teachers to examine and set aside their own biases, cultural norms, and beliefs" (p. 173).

McKenna and Millen (2013) stress the importance of educators addressing perceptions in order to create trust. This relates to the many barriers of parental involvement, including socioeconomic status, culture, language, and family composition. McKenna and Millen write, “Parent engagement fosters the notion that the cultural and social nuances of families are a source of strength as opposed to an oppositional force in the education of children. Central to the philosophy of parent engagement is the understanding of parents as a child’s first and best teacher” (p.13).

Cobb (2013) defines perception as the entanglement of “people and systems ... in which individuals view and define what surrounds them” (p. 50). In a review of research on culturally and linguistically diverse parent engagement in special education, Cobb reports that the majority of studies included showed that “the way in which school personnel responded to CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) parental perspectives adversely affected parental inclusion” (p. 50).

Passmore and Zarate (2021) stress the importance of building trusting relationships by respecting all types of diversity. “Collaboration with an eye toward individual families’ background, culture, and language have been identified as a high-leverage practice in the effective education of students with disabilities by the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) and Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center (McLeskey et al., 2017, as cited in Passmore and Zarate, 2021).

McKenna and Millen (2013) report that when educators are working to gain the trust of families, they must consider parent presence and, especially, parent voice, which receives “relatively little consideration in existing models of parent involvement” (p. 29). This is

necessary because once trust is established, it opens up “more possibilities for positive relationships to flourish” (p. 35).

Establishing Better Communication

The issue of insufficient communication from educators to parents, either by frequency or content, can be related to the recurring theme of trust in research on parent engagement in special education. But research has shown that the type of parent-teacher interaction more accurately predicts trust than how often parents and teachers interact (Kenner, 2018).

School-to-home communication is important for everyone, but it is most beneficial for everyone when educators communicate openly and directly with parents. The research is consistent in pointing out the importance of having educators create systems that allow for consistent school-to-home communication. Good communication can be defined in a number of ways: Researchers agree that minimally, the goal of good communication should be to help establish trust between the school and families.

Repeatedly researchers mention the importance of recognizing that good communication between school and home means establishing a two-way communication process. The importance of this is directly connected to power imbalances between educators, who plan and lead IEP meetings, for example, and parents. Cobb (2013) writes about this and warns educators that the perception of parents as recipients of information subordinates them and justifies poor communication or, at worst, nonexistent communication (p. 49).

In research by Rached (2015), special education teachers reported that knowing more about the lives of their students helped them better understand student’s and families’ needs. Rached writes, “communication and information sharing helped them (teachers) minimize the effects of class and cultural differences” (p. 82).

To establish communication between school and home, Moore et al., (2016) suggest the use of a parent-reported assessment at the beginning of the school year, which they write “may substantially increase the degree of freedom for schools to proactively engage with families before this engagement is contaminated with school-based problems and concerns. This strategy would increase the probability of developing a good working collaboration between home and school that emphasizes the best interests of the student” (p 238). Cobb cautions against standardized approaches to communication, however, writing that they “would neglect to recognize a diversity of perspectives and ultimately diminish the possibility of moving verbal-written exchanges into collaborations rooted in reciprocity” (2013, p. 52).

McKenna and Millen (2013) echo this concern in their research on parent engagement. They indicate that school-to-home communication should be based on actively listening to parents, including their hopes and concerns for their children. The authors write that good communication “encompasses an authentic, two-way communicative process between educators and family members. Such a process is necessarily predicated on the understanding of family members being more than recipients of information but also important providers of information” (p. 10).

In the BRIDGES framework, Sawyer (2015) states that without effective communication, parental involvement cannot happen. This is especially true as it relates to increasingly diverse student populations. Sawyer writes, “This diversity requires that educators learn to reach out in ways that support a variety of backgrounds and encourage family involvement that is purposeful and respected” (p. 173). Sawyer suggests that teachers set communication goals and then monitor them using a similar approach to writing and monitoring IEP goals and objectives. With that approach, communication between school and home can be intentional: Sawyer writes, “The

important aim is to actively recruit parents' input and feedback to establish parent buy-in" (p. 173).

Empowering Parents

Establishing trust and building honest, two-way communication between school and home are the keys to parental involvement, according to researchers (Kenner, 2018). Fishman and Nickerson (2014) report that this is especially important for parents of students who receive special education services. They write, "Parents of students with disabilities face greater barriers to involvement and are less involved than parents of typically developing children in schools" (p. 524). Research shows that parents view advocacy for their children who have disabilities as an obligation but they think of it as "an adversarial battle" (Fishman and Nickerson. 2014, p. 524).

To address this potential conflict of views, Moore et al., (2016) suggest that teachers use a parent-reported assessment at the beginning of the school year. To do so, they write, "may substantially increase the degree of freedom for schools to proactively engage with families before this engagement is contaminated with school-based problems and concerns. This strategy would increase the probability of developing a good working collaboration between home and school that emphasizes the best interests of the student" (p. 238).

Goldman and Burke's (2017) research shows that interventions for parents to increase their involvement in special education are not effective, but Fishman and Nickerson (2015) write, "Most of the available research suggests that teacher practices that encourage parent involvement are one of the strongest and consistent predictors of school-based and home-based participation" (p. 525). The BRIDGES framework is designed for teachers to help them address barriers to involvement intentionally, on a case-by-case basis (Sawyer, 2015). This work begins with establishing trust and two-way communication. Sawyer writes, "Meaningful relationships

begin with a foundation of trust and understanding. Parents must know they can rely on teachers to advocate for their children and establishing this trust requires teachers to examine and set aside their own biases, cultural norms, and beliefs” (p. 173).

Addressing Lack of Knowledge About Special Education

The overriding message from research on the topic of parental involvement in education is that educators must be proactive and intentional in addressing barriers to involvement in order for parents to feel empowered to help their students (Kenner, 2018). The work of addressing barriers to parental involvement needs to happen on a continuum, according to Sawyer (2015) whose BRIDGES framework leads to empowerment for parents. The BRIDGES approach to parental involvement includes individualizing the approaches teachers can use to gain parent trust and generate family involvement.

Addressing barriers to involvement family by family allows for what Passmore and Zarate (2021) refer to as “individual empowerment.” They write, “The discovery that your child has a disability can be an overwhelming and often isolating feeling. Families are often left feeling lost in their search for the knowledge, skills, and resources to support their child,” (p. 312). Despite the necessity of addressing barriers for involvement that are unique to each family, researchers consistently mention lack of knowledge about the special education process, in general, as a universal problem (Kenner, 2018). In their research on parent voice, presence, and engagement, McKenna and Millen (2013) write that parents want to be involved in their children’s education, but aren’t always aware of how to be involved.

Passmore and Zarate’s (2021) structure for family collaboration in special education addresses partnerships of empowerment, accessibility, and knowledge (PEAK). The authors write, “Tailored supports in the form of workshops, resource centers, lending libraries, and social

media collaborations provide an opportunity for family members to partner with school personnel and fellow families to learn more about supporting their child's unique needs and develop confidence in their knowledge and skills to support their child at home and in the school community" (p. 313).

Passmore and Zarate (2021) point out that just as families can differ, so can schools: There is no one-size-fits-all approach educators can take to helping families become more knowledgeable about the special education system. To address this, the authors write "it is vital to understand how families view their needs and goals for students" (p. 313). They suggest starting with a focus group or using a survey to assess families' needs before determining how best to educate parents about their role in their child's education.

Much of the research on parental involvement in special education focuses on parent involvement during IEP meetings (Kenner, 2018). Although IEP meetings are one way parents can actively participate in their student's education, Passmore and Zarate (2021) write, "The actions of collaboration that contribute to attendance at routine meetings only tap the surface of the potential for what effective family collaboration could involve" (p. 311). The meetings are, however, a starting point for engaging parents by making sure they understand the purpose of the meeting, the special education process, in general, and their ongoing role in their student's education.

Creating Collaborative IEP Meetings and Improving Paperwork Readability

Elser (2017) used a variety of communication theories to examine the effectiveness of participants' communication interactions during IEP meetings. The author refers to many challenges to working collaboratively on an IEP team including different views of the child, power imbalances, lack of trust, and differing knowledge of special education. Elser identified

barriers to effective communication during IEP meetings and how parent participation can be improved. Educators must create a welcoming environment for families of students with disabilities. By doing so, teachers lay the foundation for a collaborative team during the IEP meeting and beyond. Elser points out that all team members need to be adaptable and educators need to remember that caregivers know their children best and should be considered experts, too.

Researchers consistently mention the importance of using an IEP meeting as a way to engage parents so that their involvement in their child's education doesn't stop when the IEP meeting ends (Kenner, 2018). Interacting with parents to empower them to be active members of the IEP team can result "in feelings of confidence in their (parents') ability to contribute on a daily basis at home and school" Passmore and Zarate (2021) write. This knowledge can empower families in a number of ways such as helping them better understand how their child's disability can influence their education and what implications the disability and their education can have on their life, in general.

Parents can gain knowledge from information in IEPs and related documents, but this can be problematic because of the complexities of language often used by educators. Failure of parents to understand special education paperwork can have long-reaching negative effects. Kerry-Henkel and Eklund (2015) write, "If parents do not know their rights because they are unable to read them, they may not understand that they have an equal voice in all stages of the the special education process, including eligibility, educational placement, creation of goals and objectives, description of the student's strengths and weaknesses, and post-school options" (p. 3).

Kerry-Henkel and Eklund (2015) suggest educators simplify their writing and consider the use of graphic organizers to help explain information. Limiting jargon is another suggestion and including acronyms in a glossary of commonly used special education terms would be

especially helpful to parents new to the special education system. The authors also suggest that schools consider reformatting information such as state-required procedural safeguards to make them more reader-friendly.

Providing Resources

Passmore and Zarate (2021) report that “family-educator partnerships, beyond attending routine meetings, result in decreased caregiver stress and increased satisfaction in the education of their student with a disability” (p. 311). Sawyer (2015) writes, “Empowering parents means equipping them with knowledge and skills that will optimize parent-child interactions” (p. 176). By empowering parents, educators help them become collaborators in the education process.

Researchers suggest a myriad of resources that would be helpful for parents. While parenting interventions have proven to be largely ineffective (Kenner, 2018), Sawyer (2015) states that workshops and webinars on topics of interest to families can be beneficial. She writes, “Another powerful tool is to bring parents together to share their knowledge, hear each other’s questions, benefit from shared experiences, and learn from each other” (p. 176).

Most research on parent involvement in special education, including research resulting in engagement models, makes references to, or recommendations for, educator-driven resources. For example, in almost all of the research referenced, there are examples of specific approaches to school-to-home communication that take into account language, content, and frequency, among other things (Kenner, 2018). While the authors of some articles in this literature review write that teachers should remind parents that there are often helpful resources outside of school, few list specific resources such as PACER or the National Center for Learning Disabilities. The Council for Exceptional Children suggests that “teachers should collaborate with their school administrators and staff to create a video library on the school’s main web page” of relevant

resources for parents of students with disabilities as a way to help them better understand their student's disability and the special education process (Sawyer, 2015, p. 176). This includes printed and online materials prepared by some districts for parents of students who receive special education services.

Engaging Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Empowering parents so they believe they can contribute meaningfully to conversations about their students' educational needs and strengths is important for all families, but helping families to do so can be difficult when cultural and linguistic barriers exist. In a review of research on culturally and linguistically diverse families and their involvement in special education, Cobb (2013) sums up the findings in one sentence: "According to the majority of studies examined in this review, the way in which school personnel responded to CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) parental perspectives adversely affected parental inclusion" (p. 50).

McKenna and Millen's (2013) research reminds educators of the negative consequences of perceptions related to race and culture when trying to collaborate with parents. They write, "Holding untested assumptions about children and families is a harmful place to begin when attempting to work out issues related to teaching, learning, and parent involvement" (p. 10). Family perceptions of special education come into play, too, and building positive connections between Black families and educators, for example, becomes a sometimes daunting task when considering the overrepresentation of Black children in special education classrooms. Brandon and Brown (2009) refer to a "recursive cycle" of lack of involvement of Black parents in the school setting. They write, "Parents do not feel welcome, and educators believe that parents' lack of involvement signals apathy" (p. 87).

In a qualitative study, Brandon and Brown (2009) discuss the overrepresentation of Black students in special education and cited research that shows poor achievement is often associated with lack of parent involvement. They write “The representation of African American students in the intellectual disability and the developmentally delayed categories is more than twice the national population estimate” (p. 86). Brandon and Brown’s research shows a connection between family involvement and student academic achievement, attendance, behaviors, and social skills. The authors focused some of their research of the literature on perceptions and reasons for caregiver non-involvement and the barriers to participation in the special education process. They credit eight studies that give educators specific strategies to use to increase participation of African American families in their students’ education. In general, they call for educators to focus on multidimensional communication with special education students’ families.

In order for educators to engage parents to communicate effectively and consistently, a strong school-family relationship must first be established, and this is especially true when working with the families of diverse learners. Passmore and Zarate (2021) write that collaboration between schools and families with a focus on individual families’ backgrounds, cultures, and languages is considered “high-leverage practice in the effective education of students with disabilities by the Council of Exceptional Children (CEC) and Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) Center,” (p. 311).

High-leverage practices are considered important to best support student learning. These practices are techniques that all special education teachers must understand in order to use them effectively and fluently. They are categorized in four domains: instruction, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral, and collaboration practices (McLeskey, et al., 2017). One of the

collaboration practices is to organize and “facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families” (p. 30).

Referring to collaboration, McLeskey et al., (2017) state that the obligation to work together effectively isn’t just a high-leverage practice, IDEA infers that it is an obligation. The authors write, “IDEA requires that parents be given opportunities for full participation in the development of the IEP. The way in which the IEP meeting is organized and facilitated should ensure that the family is an equal partner in the development of an appropriate education for the child” (p. 30).

Effective collaboration as a high-leverage practice can be taught at the district level or at the school level with professional development for all educators. Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) stress that as classrooms become increasingly more diverse, the need and ability for educators to partner effectively with all families becomes more urgent. They outline steps teachers can use when working with diverse families. First, they write that teachers need to accept responsibility for establishing trust in order to set the foundation for a good school-family partnership.

Learning about families is one of the first steps teachers can use to gain the trust of diverse families. Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) write, “To forge culturally responsive relationships, teachers should be authentically curious and learn about students’ unique aspects and their families, while also becoming familiar with the community in which they live” (p. 46). The authors state that trust of families is best gained by acknowledging a shared commitment to students’ academic needs and overall well-being, and they write that embracing a strengths-based perspective shows families that their experiences and values are important.

The goal when working with families of all students is effective communication, but when working with culturally and, especially, linguistically diverse families, the most beneficial

primary focus is to create ways for reciprocal communication. Buchanan and Buchanan's (2017) research shows there are four main communication skills teachers need to use when establishing ongoing relationships with diverse families. Listening attentively helps to build trust and summarizing or paraphrasing conversations helps avoid misunderstandings. Asking appropriate questions can do the same, and it allows an opportunity for the teacher and the parents to learn more from each other. Buchanan and Buchanan also report that using constructive feedback can help families better understand concepts in the school setting that might be new to them.

Families' access to information about the special education process is a consideration when thinking about how and what to communicate to culturally and linguistically diverse families. In one study of such families, "... participants in several focus group sessions described multiple times when they had 'stumbled' on information they thought was critical for their child" (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, as cited in Cobb, 2014, p. 49).

When referring to opportunities for diverse learners, Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) call communication between schools and families as an untapped capacity. Teacher development in the area of better communication between educators and culturally and linguistically diverse families should be a priority for all schools, the authors write. Kenner (2018) warns of educators' perceptions of parent non-involvement in this area, too. Kenner writes, "... language barriers between families that are non-English speaking and the school may contribute to the perceived lack of involvement or engagement" (p. 42).

Kenner (2018) states that educators need to understand parental efficacy and parents' perceptions of invitations to be involved in their children's education. They also must be willing to do the ongoing work of learning about life context variables, especially differences in culture. Passmore and Zarate (2021) explain that this must happen before educators begin the work of

empowering parents. The authors write, “Families are an integral component to the education outcomes of students with disabilities, and educators have a responsibility to empower caregivers and build home-to-school partnerships” (p. 311).

Chapter III: Discussion and Conclusion

Summary

Kenner (2018) refers to the “common sense ideology” that positive parental involvement in a student’s education can help the student grow academically and improve behaviorally. While research shows parental involvement is generally considered beneficial to all involved, educators’ definitions of that involvement can differ. These differences often are based on preconceived notions of parental involvement that take into account, or disregard, various factors including cultural and linguistic differences.

Researchers use a variety of definitions for parental involvement, too, but they are more specific. Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015) define parental involvement as “parent interactions with schools and with their children to promote academic success” (p. 223). Parental involvement also can be defined by how (or if) a parent helps their child with schoolwork at home and how (or if) they connect with the teacher or school by attending conferences or exchanging email messages, for example.

Kenner (2018) writes that parental involvement most often is based on differing ideas of what it should look like. For that reason, researchers agree that diverse backgrounds and experiences of families and educators need to be considered when defining and working to improve parental involvement. Establishing and maintaining relationships between school and home can be difficult for a variety of reasons, but Brandon and Brown (2015) report that educators have an ethical and legal responsibility to “aggressively seek parental involvement” (p. 89).

Barriers to family involvement in special education are consistent in the literature, and three are mentioned consistently: power imbalances, communication issues, and what Cobb

(2013) calls a “disconnect between the perspectives of the schools and parents.” Cobb writes that perceptions, people, and systems commingle to create a multidimensional problem.

In this exploration of the literature on parental involvement in special education the question guiding the research was, “How can educators better inform parents and guardians about the special education process so that they are empowered to increase their role as active participants in their students’ education?”

The second chapter describes barriers to parental involvement in special education, including lack of knowledge about the special education process, cultural and linguistic diversity, family composition, readability of paperwork, and lack of teacher training on parental engagement. Each of these barriers is then addressed in categories intending first to show how teachers can be empowered to help families become more involved in their students’ education and then how parents can become empowered to be active participants in their students’ education.

Themes throughout the research and, consequently, in this literature review, include the importance of communication between schools and families as a way to ensure that parents can and will actively and effectively advocate for their children. Because researchers consistently pointed out concerns related to the overrepresentation of African American students in special education and specific barriers to family involvement for those students and for all students and families who are culturally and/or linguistically diverse, a separate section is included that addresses barriers these families face and steps educators can take to engage these families in their students’ education.

Professional Application

Professional application of the literature can be categorized succinctly by acknowledging common themes related to the importance of building trust and establishing ongoing, two-way communication with families. However reaching the goals of trusted relationships between teachers and families and effective communication often is complicated by the many barriers to involvement explained in the research. Negative perceptions on the part of educators and parents create a recursive cycle of non-involvement, proving the need that establishing trust should be of paramount importance to all involved, however researchers point out that it is the direct responsibility of educators to do so.

Research shows that interventions such as parent training are not beneficial, but several models for parent engagement show educators the necessary framework for successful parent involvement. These begin with taking into account life context variables such as family culture and parental knowledge, including knowledge of special education and parent education level. This helps to establish trust. Kenner (2018) writes, “In line with what research conveys as a barrier for students that are not diagnosed with a disability, distrust often occurs and can stem from ignorance on the part of the school as it pertains to cultural diversity and that lack of knowledge about belief systems” (p. 45).

Kenner (2018) states that school districts need to provide professional development to help teachers learn how best to create opportunities for parent engagement. When districts work to implement teacher support of parent engagement in special education, “parents become more confident in their parenting skills and gain an increased monitoring of child’s progress, greater understanding of instructional goals, as well as an increased ownership as a partner in the school community” (p. 39).

The benefits of professional development related to parent engagement could apply to teachers on a more personal level, too. In a study of teacher stressors, the researchers “found challenging parent interactions among the top reasons teachers are stressed and leaving the profession” (Haydon et al., 2018, as cited in Sears et al., 2021). Part of this could be attributed to a lack of training for teachers by school districts on this issue. The literature review did not include successful implementation of the models for parent involvement, instead focusing on the models themselves.

School districts’ professional development on cultural and linguistic diversity issues could be an opportunity to put into place something actionable for special education teachers related to school-to-home communication. This could include discussions about perceptions on the part of parents and educators regarding cultural differences and the need for educators to more carefully consider how best to accommodate families who don’t speak English. McKenna (2013) writes that it is the “process of clearing up assumptions, both coming and going, that allows teachers and parents to connect in new, robust, positive, and productive ways. Setting aside assumptions and engaging in listening matters to the educational process” (p. 34).

Sawyer’s (2015) BRIDGES approach to enhancing family involvement might be the most practical and efficient option for teachers to adopt as they seek to establish and increase parental engagement with or without district or building support. Its steps for engagement include build, recruit, individualize, dialogue, generate, and empower. The framework takes into account that one approach to increasing parent engagement is not equitable or feasible. Instead, the BRIDGES framework is tailorable: Sawyer writes, “The model is not limited ... teachers can incorporate their own variations based on their classroom dynamics and grade level” (p. 178).

Limitations of Research

After researching and reading articles on parent and family involvement in special education, the search was expanded to include the term parent (or family) engagement, which reflects a change in educational philosophy: Historical views of family participation are of a passive involvement in a child's education whereas researchers now refer to family involvement as actions that extend beyond home and school to the community.

Most of the research on family engagement in education is based on involvement in general education, although within most of those studies there are many references to parental involvement in special education. When viewed chronologically, the searches used for this literature review show a growing number of studies within the past eight years that are based on special education, specifically.

One study included in this literature review focuses on family involvement of students who are on the autism spectrum and another article included in the review focuses on students in special education who are near transition age. Only two articles included information about how differing disabilities could be a factor in parental involvement.

Searches revealed several models and frameworks for parental involvement, and although researchers reported that parent training interventions were not beneficial, there were few concrete suggestions on how districts could support or train teachers to increase parental involvement. Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015) write, "The lack of research on determining best practices for training teachers in effective ways of reaching out and encouraging parent participation has contributed to poor outcomes" (p. 223).

Implications for Future Research

Goldman and Burke (2017) state that although the need for involvement in special education is apparent, the need as it relates to students with disabilities has not been adequately researched. More research in this area would help to address problems special education students, their parents, schools, and school districts face. Goldman and Burke (2017) write, “The ramifications of low involvement and poor parent-school partnerships for this population are especially severe. Poor parent-school partnerships relate to higher rates of due process and mediation to resolve conflicts, which lead to financial and emotional tolls on schools and families” (p. 5). Burke (2012) notes that involvement of parents of children with special needs resulted in a decrease in inappropriate placements.

Kenner’s (2018) research showed significant differences in perceptions of parent involvement between general education and special education teachers. Her research revealed a strong connection between special education teachers and the perceived benefits of parental involvement as having a positive impact during the initial special education process for students with disabilities. In contrast, general education teachers understood that parents need to be involved but placed much less value on that involvement. This warrants further research so that districts can work to eliminate or lessen the effect of those perceptions which, if unaddressed, could have a negative impact on school-home relationships and, ultimately, student achievement.

One article included in this literature review made reference to the need for educators at the college level to provide coursework on, and experiential learning opportunities for, this topic. Collier, Keefe, and Hirrel (2015) write, “Teacher preparation programs providing students with authentic experiences to work collaboratively with parents can influence perceptions teacher candidates have toward parent involvement and collaboration” (p. 221). A search of this specific

topic would, perhaps, yield some examples of how teachers could better establish relationships with families, and future research could track the effectiveness of such programs on parent involvement.

Searches did not produce any studies that included student perspectives on parental involvement in special education. Kenner (2018) writes, “Their knowledge and experiences would offer a firsthand account of how they believe their parents’ involvement influences their academic achievement and progress on IEP goals” (p. 94).

Conclusion

The guiding question for this literature review was, “How can educators better inform parents and guardians about the special education process so that they are empowered to increase their role as active participants in their students’ education?” The short but complex answer might be for educators to listen, first. There are countless barriers to parent involvement in special education, but researchers consistently mention three: power imbalances, communication issues, and what Cobb (2013) calls a “disconnect between the perspectives of the schools and parents” (p. 47).

With these issues serving as the overarching barriers to involvement, trust becomes an outright or implied theme in studies as researchers point out the importance of teachers and parents avoiding negative perceptions of each other in order to begin the process of communicating honestly and consistently. Eliminating these perceptions helps to establish trust and lays the foundation for collaborative work that respects the special education process and empowers parents to be actively involved in their children’s education.

McLeskey et al. (2017) write that collaboration is “developmental, growing over time as participants increase their trust of one another and create a sense of professional community” (p.

28). This is perhaps one explanation of how the concept of parent involvement is changing to family engagement. Researchers now most often use the term family engagement, and a main focus of their work is on the importance of the collaborative nature of these relationships as they relate to students, of course, and the school community as a whole.

Buchanan and Buchanan (2017) refer to communication between schools and families as an untapped capacity, but this idea applies to all aspects of the research. Despite varying topics of focus within the research, including studies on parent perceptions of involvement in special education and how teachers can partner with diverse families, for example, authors were consistent in pointing out the potential of a joint effort between teachers and families to improve the educational process for students with disabilities.

Passmore and Zarate (2021) write that families are an integral part of the learning process of students with disabilities, but the authors stress that educators have an obligation to empower families to be active participants in the educational process. Research shows that teachers can do that by first learning more about families in order to set aside perceptions and establish open two-way communication. The goal, initially, is trust and, eventually, a collaborative partnership to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

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