Parental Perceptions of the Individualized Education Plan Process

by

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Abstract

This research seeks to answer the question: **What are parental perceptions of the Individual Education Plan process?** Efforts to improve student performance are at the forefront of every IEP. The IEP outlines the necessary supports, adaptations and modifications that are necessary to aid the student supported in special education in reaching their full potential within a mainstream classroom. Central to the development of an authentic IEP is the involvement of parents who know their child best and can anticipate their child’s behaviours. The goal of this study is to shed light on the barriers that inhibit parents from having a positive perception of IEP meetings and provide insight into what factors help to build positive parental perceptions. A personal interview and a survey were used to gather data from parents who participate in IEP meetings. The data gathered revealed a need for agendas to guide the IEP meeting, a lack of student participation in their own IEP meeting, and the innate desire of parents to be involved in the IEP process. In addition, the data highlighted that positive parental perceptions of IEP meetings were negatively affected by: a lack of trust between educators and parents, depersonalization of the student, parents not understanding school or government policy directly related to their child, and educators that ‘listen’ but do not ‘hear’ parents.

**Keywords:** parent, perception, individualized education process (IEP), education, special needs
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Thank you as well to Lana Durand, my second reader, who graciously took on the task of reviewing this study.
Dedication

This research study is dedicated to my husband and kids, thank you for all you did to help make this achievable. I could not have completed my studies without your constant support: you fed me when I was hungry, hugged me when I was discouraged, unplugged me from my computer late at night, and walked beside me each step of the way.
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Chapter One - Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Parents of children with learning disabilities are faced with the responsibility of supporting their children through a variety of academic challenges, social issues, unique and often disruptive behaviours. The discovery that a child has a disability affects the entire family as together they, “enter the world of special education which has its own terminology, rules, settings, and personnel” (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006, p. 148). Navigating this previously unknown world while still, “grappling with the meaning of their child’s special needs, families are also thrown into the role of principle advocate for their child” (Hess et al., 2006, p. 148). Due to a child’s youth and a potential cognitive disability or an inability to vocalize their needs, an advocate who can represent a child’s views and interests is necessary. Normally, this role falls to the parent. When a child enters school, the parent becomes a part of a larger School Based Team whose purpose is to meet the needs of the child within an inclusive classroom by designing and implementing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). An IEP, according to the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2009), is defined as “a documented plan developed for a student with special needs that summarizes and records the individualization of a student’s education program” (p. V). Collaboration is identified by the Ministry as a key component necessary to compile an effective IEP. Employing the input of all stakeholders (specialists, teachers, teacher aides, student, and parent) is paramount to an IEP’s success. The ‘voice’ of the child in IEP meetings is the parent, yet little is known about how parents view the IEP process and how educators can improve this perception. This seems to be a gap in research that has yet to be fully explored.
Background

Researchers in education agree that the more involved a parent is in their child’s programing the more successful the child will be in their education. Researchers have also shown that in order for a child with disabilities to obtain appropriate educational services parents need to seek advocacy for their child. Parents also need to be able to decode their child’s diagnosis, both the positive and negative aspects, including any educational jargon or legal rights that are pertinent to their situation (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Fish, 2008, 2006; Stoner et al., 2005; Trainor, 2010; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Vldes, 2012).

Unfortunately, the participation of parents in the IEP process continues to be more the exception than the rule, particularly among parents from different cultures, lower socio-economic backgrounds, and those with less education (Hess et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2012). A parent’s feelings of “inadequacy constitute a tremendous obstacle to facilitating parent-school collaboration” (Burke 2013, p. 227), and though the IEP meetings consist of critical educational decisions for students with special needs, the IEP meeting is often the place where most disagreements occur between home and school (Burke, 2013; Stoner et al., 2005; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).

Rationale for Study

The interaction between parents and educators is a dynamic and complex process that includes three main themes, “parental perceptions of IEP meetings, the role of a parent as a collaborative partner, and the level of parental trust between the education professionals and the parent” (Stoner et al., 2005, p. 39). There seems to be no debate among educators and researchers that the more a parent is involved in the school the more likely a child is to be successful. Parents are key to success for the learning-disabled child, as no one can know their
child better than they do. No one can anticipate their child’s behaviours better and it is vital that this knowledge be shared within the school so that educators are equipped to meet the child’s needs. It stands to reason that a parent will not be willing to participate or comfortable in sharing knowledge in an IEP meeting if they do not fully understand the process. As observed by Fish (2006), “parents should possess equitable roles during IEP meetings, as the essential insight they possess concerning their children facilitates the success of the IEP process. Instead educators are likely to dominate the decision-making process regarding educational outcomes of these students” (p. 58). This leads to a lack of parental participation in the IEP process which in turn leads to, “inappropriate and unsound educational programs for students with disabilities. Accordingly, without parental involvement, students with disabilities are vulnerable to receive inadequate and inappropriate services (Burke, & Hodapp, 2016, p. 225).

When parents leave the specialist’s office with the knowledge that their child has a learning disability they are faced with a steep learning curve. There is no one manual or agency that contains all the answers to their questions and often the struggle to navigate the system seems overwhelming when combined with the daily task of coping with their child’s unique needs. As a result, “parents feel guilty, intimidated, disenfranchised, and alienated towards educational systems and often view the IEP meeting as an opportunity for educators to brief them on the failures of their child (Fish, 2006, p. 57). As a consequence, parents can become reluctant to attend IEP meetings where they are surrounded by educators who purport to know what their child requires to be successful. This is unfortunate, as early studies conducted on the effectiveness of the IEP process consistently state that family support and input are critical in developing programs that effectively meet the needs of families and children with special needs.
(Hess et al., 2006, p. 149). Therefore, the question arises, what is being done in the research community to understand this complex dynamic between parents and education professionals?

There seems to be an abundance of government generated documents like *A Parents’ Guide to Individual Education Planning* (Ministry of Education, 2002), *IEP planning for Students with Special Needs* (BC Ministry of Education, 2009), and the recently revised, *Special Education Services - A Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines* (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). These are lengthy, somewhat daunting documents full of educational and diagnostic terms that are meant to guide parents and education professionals through the IEP process. There are specialized associations like Autism Community Training, and the Canucks Autism Network, located in different provinces or states that focus on understanding and coping with the diagnosis a child may receive. As well, numerous books and or web sites are available on the topic of IEP’s: how to write one, how to prepare for one, and how to measure the effectiveness of your child’s IEP. The pitfall with all of the above is finding a document that is understandable, applicable to your situation and has realistic views. Seldom found in this abundance of literature and societies is anyone asking how parents actually feel about the IEP process and what can be done from their perspective to make the experience of IEP meetings more productive for both them and their child.

To date the research on IEP meetings and parental involvement seems to span a brief period in the late nineties and early years of the new millennium. It can be hypothesised that the reason for this was new legislation in both the United States and Canada that clearly laid out the guidelines expected in the development of the IEP. Recent years have led to only a few studies being conducted that begin to examine the complicated interaction between parents and professionals during IEP meetings (Burke & Hodapp, 2016).
The common recommendation from researchers is that parents require support navigating
the complex world of the special needs student. Parents need to be asked what their perception of
the IEP process is, and what can be done to improve their experience. Within the BC 2016
Ministry Document entitled *Special Education Services – A Manual of Policies, Procedures and
Guidelines*, it clearly states that the process of developing and implementing an IEP works best
when

parents/guardians and students have the opportunity to be active participants in the
process, to initiate discussions regarding the learning needs or request school-based
access to support. They should feel welcome and encouraged to contribute
throughout the process and are important partners in the development of the
Individual Education Plan (p. 12).

Whether or not educators are meeting this expectation within schools, the short and long-
term repercussions of doing or not doing so, and ultimately the parents’ and students’
perspective of the IEP process, has to date not yet been fully explored by the research
community.

**Personal Context**

Personal experience, as both an educator and a parent of two special needs children, has
shown that often the traditional IEP meeting can become a meaningless ritual, as educators
present and expect parents to approve predetermined educational programs or goals. Other times
parents can be left feeling excluded and ill-equipped to address the educational needs of their
child as they are unable to understand special education jargon and terminology (Fish, 2006). To
add to this complexity, in today’s world many parents face such logistical issues as finding
transportation or child care to attend IEP meetings. There are sometimes language or cultural
barriers, as well a parent’s feelings of inadequacy or guilt about their child’s challenges. These can all interfere with the success of the IEP process.

**Overview of the Study**

In order to explore the important issue of how parents, as key advocates and partners in a child’s learning, understand and experience the IEP planning process within BC schools, this study will address the following research question: **What are parental perceptions of the IEP process?**

This study will employ mixed methods research design. An initial survey will be administered to participants and then a portion of respondents will engage in a semi-structured interview process. The semi-structured interview will be used to get the story behind a respondent’s experiences and to pursue more in-depth information about the topic. New knowledge will be collected as the researcher considers the multiple viewpoints, positions and standpoints that are revealed by the survey and semi structured interview process. The new knowledge gained will provide evidence to support better alignment between parents’ needs and the IEP meeting’s structure and conduct in order to produce a document that both meets funding purposes and provides goals, guidance, and direction for each child’s learning. This new knowledge will also develop deeper insight and understanding of parent’s perceptions of IEP meetings within the targeted school. The data generated will aid in pinpointing any necessary changes or improvements that can be made. This study will also generate knowledge that other researchers can potentially investigate further to unpack the IEP meeting.

Participants will be recruited from parents who participate in IEP meetings within the target school. The backgrounds of participants will range with regard to social economic status, ethnicities, education, age, and the number of IEP meetings they have
attended. This study will provide insight into parent perceptions of the IEP process and create knowledge of how the process in this school might be improved to be more effective. The study is limited by the number of participants, the fact that it is a self-report study, and the possibility that only dissatisfied participants will complete the survey.
Chapter Two - Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to discuss how parents of children with disabilities perceive the IEP process. Published articles, peer reviewed research, books, dissertations, BC Ministry of Education documents, and professional association publications will be examined in relation to parental perceptions of IEP meetings. The parameters for constructing an IEP will be outlined in the first section, providing a conceptualization of the IEP document and the process of its creation for the reader. Next the guidelines for writing an IEP, which are legislated by the BC Ministry of Education, will be presented.

Once a working knowledge of the IEP document is established a history of the development of the IEP will be reviewed. This will be followed by the establishment of the critical importance of parental involvement in the preparation of the IEP which is directly linked to a disabled students’ potential school success. Next barriers to parent involvement in the IEP process will be discussed. Finally, this review will end by exploring current research illustrating what parents themselves require from educators to help ensure they remain active participants in the IEP process. Each topic will focus solely on its importance in relation to parental perceptions of the IEP process.

What is an IEP?

Efforts to improve student performance and to support inclusion are at the forefront of every IEP. The IEP outlines the necessary supports, adaptations and modifications that are necessary to aid the student supported in special education in reaching their full potential within a mainstream classroom. As researchers Timothy and Agbenyega (2018) explain “the IEP provided an ongoing record to assist all key stakeholders with continuity in programming and
transition planning for students with disability and/or additional needs” (p. 17). In addition, mainstream classrooms of today are dynamic platforms for quality and equal education for all students. To quote Evmenova (2018), “Today’s classrooms are characterized by ever-growing diversity. In one instructional setting students with disabilities, gifted students, English language learners, and students who are culturally and linguistically diverse learn side-by-side” (p. 148). This is particularly true in British Columbia where the move towards the full inclusion students with exceptional needs into the regular classroom has had a profound effect on a typical classroom’s population. Curriculum is intended to provide students with the flexibility to inspire personalization of their learning and address the diverse needs and interests of all BC students (BC Ministry of Education, 2018). Using an inquiry-based learning approach, the emphasis in BC is for students to acquire a deeper understanding of concepts and the application of processes, rather than on the memorization of isolated facts and information (BC Ministry of Education, 2018).

**A Shift in Special Education.** This has led to a major shift in special education as the focus moves away “from designations to ‘needs-based’ approaches utilizing the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Response to Intervention (RTI)” (Naylor, 2013, p. 3). The RTI (Response to Intervention) model, reviewed by McIntosh et al. (2011), is focused on “boosting the quality of school-wide instruction, implementing school-wide screening, and a tiered model of service delivery, the goal is to enable 80% of students to be successful through classroom-based, school-wide interventions” (p. 22). UDL (Universal Design for Learning) is based on designing the teaching and learning within a classroom so that it is accessible to students with and without special needs (Evmenova, 2018). Teachers of the new millennium are required to use multiple ways to motivate students to learn, present content in multiple ways, and allow
students the flexibility to demonstrate their learning in multiple formats. It is expected by the BC Ministry of Education (2018) that all students, in all classrooms, will be given an equal opportunity to learn.

**A New Vision.** BC’s new vision for student learning has left front-line educators scrambling to assimilate previously unknown theories into their teaching while facing an ever-expanding kaleidoscope of unique learners (Wadge, 2016). Existing practices are challenged daily, which results for some in periods of temporary destabilisation in addition to an increased work load for all teachers (Day, 2007). Given increased student diversity in schools, as well as a need to provide educators with a standardized method for documenting the progress of students with special needs, the adoption of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) has been developed to inform pedagogy (Timothy & Agbenyega, 2018). In the province of BC, the IEP is used to document the resources, goals or objectives, and strategies that are implemented within a classroom or school to aid each student with special needs in meeting his or her full learning potential (Naylor, 2013).

The most important educational decisions for a student with a disability take place during the construction of an IEP, “it is the roadmap that helps educators and families drive the education of students with disabilities, improve outcomes, and fulfill each child’s potential” (Mereoiu, Abercrombie, & Murray, 2016, p. 36). Angela Patti states in her research, that the IEP “outlines a child’s current abilities, identifies his or her needs, sets forth goals, and provides a guide to implementing the goals” (p. 151). The IEP is meant to specify adaptations or modifications while narrowing the focus of the teaching to target the individual goals that are considered to be the most relevant to each student’s development. Mandated by the BC Ministry of Education (2009), schools are required to “design an IEP for a student as soon as practical
after the school identified the student as having special needs” (p. 3). To help schools to meet the goals outlined in an IEP the Ministry of Education provides additional funding for students with special needs. Note that not all students with special needs receive additional funding, as funding is dependent on a student’s diagnosis and how it impacts their learning. To access this funding a current IEP must be place to meet the funding allocation criteria as outlined by the BC Ministry of Education (2010). It is in this way that the IEP has become tied to critical funding for schools to help support the ever-increasing diversity of students.

The Special Education Services Manual (2016) states that the IEP must have one or more of the following:

- the goals or outcomes set for that student for that school year where they are different from the learning outcomes set out in an applicable education program guide
- a list of the support services required to achieve goals established for the student; or
- a list of the adaptations to educational materials, instructional strategies or assessment methods
- the present levels of educational performance of the student;
- the setting where the educational program is to be provided;
- the names of all personnel who will be providing the educational program and the support services for the student during the school year;
- the period of time and process for review of the IEP;
- evidence of evaluation or review, which could include revisions made to the plan and the tracking of achievement in relation to goals; and
• plans for the next transition point in the student's education (including transitions beyond school completion) and linkages to Graduation Portfolio during Grades 10-12. (p.17)

As researchers Yildirim and Akcamete (2018) report in their study, the “IEP is meant to include student’s powerful sides, available performance, purpose and goals, services provided for the child and assessment results” (p. 32). Every student who has an IEP becomes part of a school-based team that is made up of the student, the students’ parents, classroom teacher(s), teacher assistant(s), administration, and the special education teacher. These team members are meant to meet at least once a year to review a student’s IEP. The document itself is designed to be fluid and flexible as it grows and changes to match the needs of the student (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Thus, the IEP becomes an ongoing record used to chart the progress of students with special needs as they travel through the school system; allowing collaborative planning between the school, the parents, and the student, who are the main stakeholders in its development and use (BC Ministry of Education, 2009).

The construction of an effective and worthwhile IEP is not a simple process. Not only do Ministry of Education guidelines need to be followed but all members of a school-based team supporting a student with exceptionalities need to take part to take part in its construction. As Barrio et al., (2017) emphasised in their study,

Due to its central function as both a planning tool and a map for services and interventions, the IEP has been described as “the cornerstone” for special education, there is no document more significant to districts, agencies, administrators, teachers, parent and educational advocates, and students (p. 1).
Yet nowhere in Ministry of Education documents or in teacher manuals is a parental perspective towards the IEP process discussed.

**History of the IEP**

Historically, once a child reached school age the educational decisions concerning said child were placed firmly in the hands of the professionals who the parents depended on for training and emotional support (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Educators were trusted to make the right choices for the student with regard to how and what the child learned. Parental involvement in educational planning was minimal and prior to the 1980’s partnerships between family and school were the exception, rather than the norm (Spann et al., 2003).

In BC, the first recorded legislative appropriation to provide for the education of ‘handicapped children’ was made in 1890 (Siegel & Ladyman, 2000). By 1955, “the provincial government introduced funding for programs for “handicapped” children as part of the basic grant to school districts with funding tied to teacher entitlements known as “Special Approvals”” (Siegel & Ladyman, 2000, p. 6). This system was to remain in place until 1982 when refinements to the *Ministry of Education Manual of Policy, Procedures and Guidelines* placed a stronger emphasis on the need for IEP’s (Siegel & Ladyman, 2000). The new framework was a foundation for a policy on special education to be developed and since that date the special education policy in BC has been revised numerous times (BC Ministry of Education 2002, 2009, 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2018). In 2004 the *BC School Act* was amended to require that students with special needs be integrated into classes alongside other children, wherever possible (Alkahtani & Kheirallah, 2016).

Currently in BC, students with special needs are part of mainstream classrooms whenever it is feasible for the student. As a BC Teacher’s Federation (2017) publication shows, between
2000-01 and 2016-17, students with special needs made up a relatively constant one tenth of the total student population in schools (para.1). Therefore, it is no surprise that in BC, writing an IEP for special needs students has become a common occurrence as educators strive to meet a wide variety of needs. The IEP is a document that should not be taken lightly, but rather approached by all the contributors as a vital, obligatory part of educating students with special needs within BC schools.

The Importance of Parental Involvement

Parent participation in the special education process has been federally mandated for over 40 years (Rossetti et al., 2018), and Yell, Katsiyannis, and Losinski (2015) state that

Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families...have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home (p. 118).

The recognition that the success of an IEP depends on the input of its team members, most importantly the student’s family, does not seem to be questioned by research. Quite the opposite in fact as studies have shown that a positive parent – school relationship leads to improved student success (Lake, Billingsley, & Stewart, 2018; Hess et al., 2006; Shevin, 1983).

Furthermore, the results of multiple studies have shown that establishing a cooperative relationship between parents and schools is critical for students with special needs (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Durisic & Bunijevac, 2017; Siegel & Ladyman, 2000). Students can only benefit when families and school staff work in a collaborative manner. As well, the BC Ministry of Education acknowledges parents as key participants when writing an IEP. This is made clear in
the BC Special Education Services Manual (BC Ministry of Education, 2016) which states, “Parents of students with special needs know a great deal about their children that can be helpful to school personnel in planning educational programs for them” (p. 10).

The work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) helps to illustrate again the importance of a positive parent–school relationship and why a collaborative parent-school partnering is so critical for special needs students. The theory developed by Bronfenbrenner states that everything in a child’s environment affects how a child grows and develops. Bronfenbrenner’s theory consists of “four environmental levels – the micro-system, the mesosystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem – with each level impacting differently the development of each person” (Onwuegbuzie, Collins, & Frels, 2013, p. 4). The system closest to the child, the microsystem, involves those environments closest to the child such as the “classroom, playground, home, friend’s home and neighbourhood” (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013, p. 4). The next system, the mesosystem represents the interrelations among two or more settings in which the child actively participates (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2013, p. 4). Commonly the two settings a child would most likely participate in are the home and the school. Therefore, the two systems closest to the child are made up of the school and home, the parent and the teacher, who are closely intertwined around the child. Bronfenbrenner’s theory states that “how these individuals, groups or organizations interact with the child will have an effect on how the child grows; the more encouraging and nurturing these relationships and places are, the better the child will be able to grow” (Oswalt, 2018, p.1). Given the interconnection of relationships that support a child’s growth, it is vital that the different environments of home-family-child and school-teacher-special education support,
communicate and work together in a cohesive and cooperative manner when planning educational decisions that impact a child’s learning and support.

To further support parent participation in the IEP process, Capizzi (2008) discusses how to engage all members of the school-based team in the decision making and writing of an IEP. Capizzi (2008) explains, “Team involvement in IEP development is vital to crafting a comprehensive document that meets the full range of a student’s needs” (p. 20). She continues by stating that each team member brings their different perspective to the meeting, but it is only the parent who can provide the updated and valuable medical information and/or reports, consent forms for related agency communication, insight into a child’s unique strengths and or challenges, and any personal or family goals for the student (Capizzi, 2008). This highlights yet again the essential nature of a parent’s involvement in the IEP process.

The importance of parent involvement in the IEP process is also illuminated in a study by Underwood (2010). The focus of her study was to “determine how parents are meaningfully involved and engaged in the development and monitoring of education programs for their children” (Underwood, 2010, p. 18). Her study used a mixed methods approach that included both an interview and questionnaire. The study involved four schools that were chosen by their school boards to be schools where inclusive practices with parents were currently taking place. Parents in Underwood’s (2010) study described being “engaged in direct input into the decision making and programming goals for their children by talking to as many school and board personnel as they could or rewriting the IEP in great detail” (p. 31). Also highlighted in her study “for parents to be supportive of inclusive placement schools must meet the support needs of students. Schools can engage parents through empowering parent voice and creating a welcoming environment” (Underwood, 2010, p. 31). Indicating that parents of special needs
students need to be welcomed into the decision-making process for children. In addition, the study stated that parents themselves describe their involvement in the IEP process as “critical in inclusive practice” and that their involvement is a “complex picture” not easily understood (Underwood, 2010). Limitations of this study were acknowledged by Underwood as the design of the questionnaire which limited the direction of responses, and the short time she had access to the parents.

In another study by Woods, Morrison, and Palincsar (2017), the researchers examined communication practices among educators and parents. Their conclusions were based on 17 semi-structured interviews from a suburban school district. In their study it was noted that, “conflict can arise when educators and/ or principals do not regularly communicate, or consider opinions from parents” (Woods et al., 2017, p. 2). The researchers also noted that one of the most critical areas where parents need to be involved is the writing of their child’s IEP (Woods et al., 2017). Therefore, the importance of parent involvement in the IEP process seems to be not only mandated by the Ministry of Education, but also recognized by researchers.

**Barriers to Parental Participation in the IEP Process**

An examination of the reasons behind why parents do not participate in the IEP process revealed the following: parents were overwhelmed by the education jargon and legal requirements of an IEP; parents and educators emotions hampered collaboration; culture, language and socio-economic backgrounds made parent participation difficult; educators went into the meeting with preconceived notions about parents. Clearly there is not one simple explanation to the problem. As Harris and Goodall (2008) explain,

Disentangling the web of variables enmeshing the whole of family–school relationships and their impact on learning is a complex task. But it is very clear that levels of
engagement vary considerably depending on the parents and the context in which they find themselves (p. 279).

In order to provide some recent statistics on parental participation in the IEP process, a study by Slade, Eisenhower, Carter, and Blancher (2018) was chosen as their research was recently completed and their study is peer reviewed. The study examined “parents’ satisfaction with IEP programs and their level of involvement in the process” (Slade et al., 2018, p. 242). The researchers focused on four main aspects of the IEP process: content, services provided, agreement between IEP and actual services being given, effectiveness of the school-based team. 142 parents of Autistic children were recruited to participate in the study, participants were from a variety of cultural and economic backgrounds, their only commonality being that they had participated in the IEP process (Slade et al., 2018). Data was gathered through both a survey and a personal interview. The results of the study showed that “61% of parents were dissatisfied with at least one of the four aspects of the IEP process” (Slade et al., 2018, p. 253). In addition, Slade et al., (2018) found that the overall results of their study indicated that “the communication, involvement, and positive regard between parents and school staff . . . lay an important foundation that carries over to create a more satisfactory IEP (p. 254). In addition, the “overall IEP satisfaction was positively associated with parent–school connectedness” and their “findings demonstrate the importance of parent–school relationships” (Slade et al., 2018, p. 242). The researchers do note that their study is limited by the fact that the pool of participants was small and that further studies would benefit being more diverse in race and socioeconomic status.

**Legalities.** The IEPs of today have evolved into documents that focus on legal framework, measurements, and diagnosis, not on collaboration. Burke and Hodapp (2016) recognized that parents need to know their legal special educational rights as well as the realities of their school
district. This information is not easily accessed as there is not a handbook for parents who attend IEP meetings outlining relevant information. Instead parents find themselves overwhelmed as they struggle to understand relevant special education regulations, educational jargon, and their child’s legal rights (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Dilberto & Brewer, 2012; Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010). In addition, Zeitlin & Curic (2013) state that the IEP process has created unintended consequences such as a focus on multilevel documentation, paperwork, and compliance rather becoming a collaborative plan between parents and educators. Due to the fact that the IEP is tied to additional funding from the Ministry of Education (2016), often the focus of meetings is a race against time to fill in the boxes on a document to satisfy Ministry requirements. This leaves parents confused and frustrated as they struggle to understand the “professionalized language” while armed with insufficient information about what an IEP actually is (Rossetti et al., 2018). To support this notion, Cavendish and Connor (2018) note that teachers in their study mentioned that “parents did not seem to understand the meetings if they were present” (p. 37).

The study by Woods et al. (2017) also supports the above findings. The researchers state that when interactions around the development of the IEP took place between educators and parents it was found that parents expressed varied knowledge about and perceptions of the interactions that went into IEPs. Responses ranged from naive to adversarial … Several parents felt as though they did not have as much input as they should, and one indicated that parents’ understanding of the IEP is not prioritized by the school. Indeed, researchers have hypothesized that parents [avoid IEP meetings due to their] incapacity to comprehend the technical terms often accompanying IEP meetings (Woods et al., 2017, p. 9).
Given the size of their sample (17 semi-structured interviews), the fact that all participants were from one school district, and all respondents were white, middle-to-upper class, the results of the study are limited. Still, the study by Woods et al. (2017) illustrated clearly the lack of knowledge parents in this Midwestern suburban school district in the United States have about the legislation and processes around writing IEPs.

**Collaboration.** It has been established that to write an effective IEP a multidisciplinary team is formed. Educators who work with the student, the parents, and any other professionals necessary all form part of the IEP team. Establishing and maintaining a productive, collaboration relationship between multiple participants can be a challenge for all parties. Researchers Mereoiu et al. (2004) suggest that when “stepping into the IEP process, both professionals and parents find themselves in a context in which collaboration is essential in order to achieve positive outcomes” (p. 37). In addition, the BC Ministry of Education (2016) defines collaboration as a process in which people work together to address a common concern. A lack of parent involvement in the IEP meeting results in the IEP team missing important information that only the parent can provide. Researchers Jones and Peterson-Ahmad (2017) explain in their study, Parent/family collaboration is vital because parents are the primary advocates, speaking for their children regarding what services and supports are suitable to address their specific needs and have been critical factors for predicting successful student outcomes (p. 698).

Whereas when a parent participates in a collaborative way, a holistic IEP can be developed that considers all aspects of a child and their unique needs.

**What is my role?** Logic dictates that each member of the school-based team needs to have a defined role for meetings to be effective and avoid chaos due to the amount of people
involved. The BC Ministry of Education (2016) clearly and succinctly lays out these roles for educators. The main goal is to design an IEP which “describes individualized goals, adaptations, modifications, the services to be provided” for the student by the school (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. V). How and when to design an IEP is mandated by the Ministry that even provides a handbook with samples of IEPs. Thus, educators have a clearly defined role and direction to follow during the meeting.

In contrast parents often enter the meeting unsure of what their role is or what part of the IEP process is their responsibility (Santiago-Lugo, 2018). There is no manual for parents of newly diagnosed children to refer to for guidance and parents must take the initiative in educating themselves (Burke, 2013; Fish, 2006; Trainor, 2010). Rossetti et al. (2018) describes the parents’ “experience of a learning curve in which they did not, at first, realize the importance of the IEP” (p. 8) and how greatly the content of the IEP can affect their child’s education. The parent is at a disadvantage as they do not understand the special education process and the legislation around the design of an IEP.

**Emotions.** Members of the IEP team need to keep in the forefront of their mind that when an IEP is being written the individuals involved all bring different emotions to the meeting. To quote Dale Carnegie (1888-1955), a well-known author, “When dealing with people, remember you are not dealing with creatures of logic, but with creatures of emotion” (2019). IEP meetings are fraught with emotions; the parents, the special needs student who the IEP is designed for, and the educators involved in IEP process, all come to the meeting with a variety of emotions.

Researchers have identified common emotions that parents experience during the IEP process such as: feeling dissatisfied over the decisions being made, a feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer number of professionals at the meeting, sad because their child needs
“fixing”, and feelings of being judged for their lack of parenting skills (Burke & Hodapp 2016; Fish 2008; Stegman, 2016; Stoner et al., 2005). One parent in a study spoke about IEP meetings as something to be dreaded because it was an “us against them” format with everyone facing toward the parent instead sitting beside them at a round table (McLeod, Causton, Radel, & Radel, 2017, p. 8). Other parents shared that their IEP meeting and their school experiences were “the bane of my existence,” “a living nightmare,” “truly horrible,” and “emotionally draining” (Burke & Hodapp, 2016, p. 146). Echoing these emotions, Zeitlin and Curic (2013) found in their study that parents expressed frustration and unhappiness about the process used to decide where and how their child would receive services.

This is not to say that parents never experience positive emotions in an IEP meeting. In a study conducted by Esquival, Ryan, and Bonner (2008), the researchers specifically examined parent experiences in school-based team meetings (IEP meetings). The participants in the study were members of a Midwestern suburban school district’s special education advisory group who provided open-ended descriptions of their experience in IEP meetings. The researchers found that positive meetings seemed to be the informal ones, where numbers were limited and the team could be more efficient (Esquival et al., 2008). Parents in the study also noted that “it was the quality of the relationships between their children and professionals that affected their experiences” (Esquival et al., 2008, p. 243). Other parents commented: “I don’t agree that all meetings are emotionally difficult for parents but that it’s a high possibility” and “Sometimes as I’ve listened in meetings I’ve had an overwhelming sense of sadness even though things are going well” (Esquival et al., 2008, p. 249). These quotes reinforce the fact that IEP meetings are very emotional for the participants, especially the parents, who daily are faced with the ongoing challenges of their child with a disability. Note that a limitation of this study was its small
sample size and the fact that the parents were from a socioeconomic status that was generally high (Esquivel et al., 2008).

Parents are not the only ones who experience high emotions during IEP meetings and in their book entitled *Handbook of Leadership and Administration for Special Education*, authors Crockett, Billingsley and Boscardin (2012) state that the primary issues in disputes between parents and educators “cluster around decisions relating to IEPs” (Chapter 13, n.p.). The authors go on to explain that powerful dynamics are a part of these disagreements and that school personnel are generally inexperienced and untrained in how to deal with the feelings of vulnerability and stress they themselves may feel during meetings (Crockett et al., 2012). In addition, Crockett et al. (2012) explains that it is also common for educators to experience frustration and complicated emotions during meetings. They quote one educator as stating,

> How do you always get a parent to listen? I was so frustrated by [the parent’s] refusal to listen to anything we had to say. She wanted to remove him from special education, but I knew he would die without support. It’s tough going sometimes. Emotions complicate things (Crockett et al., 2012, p. Chapter 13 preview).

It seems undeniable that when entering into the IEP process all parties involved are dealing with a wide variety of emotions that can lead to provocative and strenuous moments during the meeting.

**Culture, language, and socioeconomics.** Since the first IEP was written in 1975 (Jozwik, Cahill & Sanchez, 2018, p. 140), educators and parents have strived to overcome culture, language and socioeconomic barriers. Researchers Jozwik et al. (2018) explain in their article that given the demographics of today students on IEPs are from a wide variety of
culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (p. 142). Therefore, when crafting an IEP and conducting an IEP meeting it is important that educators strive to build cross-cultural competencies and recognize the unique ways in which culture, language, family organization, economic status, and perceptions of social values can influence conversations around a student’s disability-related needs (Jozwik et al., 2018, p. 142).

The IEP is an outline of a child’s educational goals and strategies to help the student meet those goals. Without having the full picture of a student’s background, culture, language and family it is impossible to maintain an authentic collaborative relationship between home and school. As Jozwik et al. (2018) explains this may result in IEP goals that lack alignment to meaningful learning outcomes for the student given his or her family dynamics. Another problem is that the goals set in the IEP need to be in a language or at a readability level that is accessible to parents. How can parents be actively a part of the IEP process or partners with teachers in working towards helping a child meet the goals in their IEP if they cannot read the document? As researchers Tamzarian, Menzies, and Ricci (2012) explain,

Unfortunately, professionals and CLD (culturally and linguistically diverse) parents are likely to blame communication difficulties on the other person, rather than attributing misunderstandings to cultural differences, thus contributing to a cycle of misunderstanding that limits meaningful communication and possibly alienating CLD parents from the IEP process (p. 2).

This lack of parent involvement is in direct conflict to the BC Ministry of Education (2018) goal and the research that has shown that parental involvement in the designing of a student’s IEP is

**Preconceptions about families.** When the members of the IEP school-based team gather around a table to begin to design the IEP goals for a student, it is a gathering of people who each bring a unique set of experiences, knowledge, and skills to the table. Research has shown that team members often have different views on what special education means and how it relates to the student involved (Dabkowski, 2004; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Tamzarian et al., 2012).

Educators themselves are influenced by their backgrounds and beliefs. Therefore, educators need to be especially careful not to let their bias or stereotypes affect their views on a family or student. In their study of parent-professional partnerships Cheatham and Lim-Mullins (2018) noted that, “Educator beliefs and presumptions about immigrant, bilingual parents can encourage or discourage equitable partnerships” (p. 41). In another study by Spann et al. (2003) it was recognized that “negative perceptions about families” can lead to educators not recognizing the family as a “credible source of information” (p. 229). Spann et al. (2003) goes on to explain that at times “school personnel perceive families as adversarial and even dysfunctional” (p. 229). For example, a parent who is strongly advocating for their child in the IEP meeting may be seen as hostile or unreasonable, especially when they refuse to accept ‘No’ for an answer from educators when it comes to providing what the parent considers a necessary service for a child.

Another problem encountered in IEP meetings “is the lack of training in culturally sensitive practices among teachers” (Mereoiu et al., 2016, p. 38). As a result, an educator may unintentionally offend a parent or vice versa without even realizing it. To support this notion Tamzarian et al., (2012) explain in their study, “communication in culturally diverse settings is
prone to more complications, because parents and school personnel may interpret messages in unexpected and sometimes conflicting ways (p. 2). Members of the IEP planning team need to realize that mistakes will be made and misunderstandings will happen; this cannot be helped when a group of people meet together. The challenge is to not take offence during meetings, focus on the needs of the student, and be open to admitting mistakes when necessary or clarifying something when needed.

Parents need time to learn the language of their child’s disability, accept the limitations the disability places on their child, and grapple with the powerful emotions that often come forth during an IEP meeting. Educators in turn need to recognize the parent as an asset, recognize that parents are diverse, and put aside any judgements in favour of positive collaboration. As Dilberto and Brewer (2012) write in their article, “Team members must remember that interpretations are largely based on one’s background knowledge and experiences … each team member comes to the meeting with a different perspective, all views need to be respected and welcomed (p. 132). When parents are unsure or feel they are at a disadvantage, their participation in IEP meetings will be affected.

**Overwhelmed and outnumbered.** Parents are often given minimal information when their child is diagnosed with a disability. It is left up to the parent to gather information about the disability and what it means to their child in terms of their life long challenges. Parents who have not yet fully processed the meaning and implications of their child’s diagnosis can become easily overwhelmed by their emotions or the educational jargon being used during the meeting (Miereoiu et al., 2004). Parents who do not understand the education acronyms being used during a meeting are “feeling that participation in this process leaves them feeling confused [and thus, parents] lack sufficient opportunity to fully participate in their child’s education” (Jones &
Parental Perceptions

Peterson-Ahmand, 2017, p. 698). Plain language needs to be used in meetings so that communication can be understood by all the participants.

In a dissertation study conducted by William Strong (2018), he conducted a mixed methods study that used both a survey and a semi-structured interview to gather insights into the IEP process. This study again echo’s the previous findings as participants discussed a perceived lack of power and voice during IEP meetings (p. iv). Strong (2018) describes the parents experience in an IEP meeting in the following quote,

parents may feel alienated by confusing language, procedures, or paperwork that they must navigate within the formalized process of special education and disempowered by a perceived power difference between a “professional” and a “parent” (p. 25)

Strong goes on in his study to describe how parents in his study also referred to lost dignity for themselves and their children due to high levels of frustration caused by poor communication during the meeting and or poor follow through after the meeting (Strong, 2018, p. 299). Note that the researcher did point out the limitations to his study as it only utilized 14 participants who had experienced the IEP process.

Another problem encountered is the size of the school-based team attending the meeting. The school-based team is made up of school personnel who support classroom teachers and coordinate support resources for the student. Unfortunately, the size of this team of professionals often out numbers the lone parent or two in the meeting. In a study conducted by Zetlin and Curic (2013), they quote a mother who said the IEP meeting made her feel “‘like a little gazelle that was being shot at one-by-one by each of the twelve staff members at the meeting’” (p. 377-378). The researchers went on to explain how parents can be “overwhelmed by the power dominance” (Zetlin & Curic, 2013, p. 381) of multiple educators sitting across from parents.
Mueller et al., (2018) supports this in their research stating that “multiple barriers to parent involvement during the IEP meeting continue to exist … families, describing it as overwhelming, daunting” (p. 1-12). Parents should be actively involved in the design and implementation of their child’s IEP, but if they are not comfortable in the meeting how can this possibly happen?

**Depersonalization.** In a study by MacLeod et al., (2017) conducted to “understand parent perspectives about how educators might help make the IEP process more collaborative and inclusive” (p.1). The researchers concluded that “effective IEP development relies on educators who see their children in a holistic way, not as a file, or set of goals” (MacLeod et al., 2017, p. 11). Their study consisted of participants from an on-line parent advocacy group. Each participant was asked open ended questions about the IEP process. The researchers also asked the first two parent participants to work on the research as experts and collaborators. The limitations of their survey were acknowledged to be that because of the use of a questionnaire it limited the depth of their data, nor did they collect demographic data from the participants which may have skewed the results.

One of the significant findings in the study by MacLeod et al. (2017) was that when participating in IEP meetings it is crucial that educators remember the meeting is about a child, not a disability. Educators need “to ‘see the whole child’ and focus on the child’s strengths and abilities, not on the child’s perceived deficits” (MacLeod et al., 2017, p. 11). Esquivel et al. (2008) reinforce this in their study where they “recommend that professionals improve parents’ experiences in school-based team meetings by sharing their knowledge of the child as an individual with unique interests, strengths, and weaknesses and avoid discussing the child in ways that suggest he/she is defined by his/her disabilities” (p. 250-251). Multiple studies have shown that at times educators can get caught up in how to ‘fix’ the child and tend to focus on
their deficits versus strengths (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Lake et al., 2018). Educators should take time to know the special needs students before the IEP meeting so that each child is seen as an individual.

If an educator does not know the child and only looks at their diagnosis, the goals in an IEP have the potential to be completely unrelated to the child’s needs. As well this approach closes the door for family and educators to work together to create a shared educational vision for each child (MacLeod et al., 2017, p. 2). As Dilberto and Brewer (2012) state in their article, “Strong communication promotes productive meetings, which in turn produce holistic IEPs that fully address the student’s needs. When IEP team members communicate well, the IEP becomes a useful tool for guiding instruction and monitoring progress” (p.133). Parents and educators are partners in deciding the type of intervention the student will receive, planning extra supports a student will receive, and setting achievable goals for the student. In addition, Barrio et al. (2017) state in their recently published article entitled, “Designing Culturally Responsive and Relevant IEPs” that

In the process of developing an IEP, the IEP team develops a comprehensive view of the student, from present levels of performance to measurable goals for the future. At the heart of the IEP is knowing who a student is, having positive expectations and high goals for the student, and understanding the context students bring to the educational setting (p. 116).

Therefore, it is critical that both parents and educators collaborate in a positive, productive manner when engaged in the IEP process.

We are experts too. Becoming a parent of a child with exceptional needs is a daunting task that often challenges parents in extraordinary ways as they cope every day with their child’s
unique needs. Parents are the acknowledged expert on their child, and both the Ministry of Education (2016) and researchers (as previously noted) have recognized this as a truth. Educators need to remember this when they are writing an IEP. Even if the educators do not like what a parent is saying it is important that they listen to these experts. As Mary and Patrick, parents of special needs children state in the study by MacLeod et al. (2017),

We simply want them (educators) to know we are experts too. Not unbiased experts, admittedly. But we have spent more time than anyone living with our child. If for no other reason than pure survival, we have found a strange alchemy of patience, firmness and attitude that allows us to make it through the day, most of the time. We practice inclusion every single day – trying to find a way to support our child in the context of our otherwise typical family (p. 8).

Parents that are not respected and acknowledged for their insight into their child can become angry and frustrated (MacLeod et al., 2017), experience feelings of stress and negative emotions during IEP meetings where they do not feel like equal and valued collaborators (Rossetti et al., 2018), and perceive themselves as isolated, excluded and disempowered in the IEP process (Miereoiu et al., 2004). These negative emotions can lead to a parent not attending their child’s IEP meeting or attending in body only while not actively contributing to the discussion or decisions being made (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). This devalues the intended purpose of an IEP which is meant to be built on a parent-school collaborative partnership. As Alkahtani and Kheiallah (2 explain, “the family should be active and integral component in the process… the goal is to ensure the rapid and clear dissemination of information, … as well as making sure that the needs of each student are met and that any difficulties are overcome” (p. 16).
Trust. In the study by MacLeod et al. (2017), many parents spoke of trust “as one of the most crucial elements of building and maintaining positive collaborative relationships” (p. 9). The first day of school brings with it the normal excitement and worries for every parent. “As parents of a child with disabilities, the seemingly ordinary fear of the drop-off moment is compounded by extra worries about bullying, behavior, toileting, safety and specialized learning needs” (MacLeod et al., 2017, p. 9). Communication is key to the parent–school relationship and trust is built with honesty, positivity and using parent-friendly language (MacLeod et al., 2017). Parents need to trust that educators will keep their child safe, trust that educators will follow through with the educational goals outlined in the IEP, and trust that educators will inform parents if any problems arise. As one researcher shared, “The variety of needs among special education students, the complexity of procedures involved with the IEP process, and the knowledge and skills required for participation can also pose substantial challenges (Mereoiu et al., 2016, p. 38) for both the parent and the educator. Thus, an educator must learn how to effectively listen to parents and recognize that ongoing honest communication is a prerequisite for maintaining positive feelings of involvement among parents (Stegman, 2016; Tamzarian et al., 2012). At all times in their interactions with parents’ educators need to remember trust is easier to maintain than it is to regain once lost.

Be positive. Dwelling on negativities does not help make the IEP meeting parent-friendly or collaborative. Educators need to focus on a child’s strengths and the progress they are making rather than dwelling on their weaknesses. There is no benefit in telling parents what they already know. Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) in their study quoted parents who stated,

IEP goals were limiting and positioned their children as an object of remediation, with deficits, rather than a student who learned differently. Parents were interested in a
broader goal for their children, one that spoke not to the deficit but to support and inclusion (p. 383).

Another parent interviewed in their research explained that, “The hardest thing about the meeting is getting your nose rubbed in your child’s shortcomings ... [choking to hold back tears at this point] ...This IEP process is very stressful on families” (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014, p. 381).

In support of this, in a study by Cavendish and Conner (2018), parents discussed how the IEP was emotionally draining as it only focused on the deficits of the student rather than designing the IEP with a child’s strengths in mind. Esquivel et al. (2008) note that educators should avoid generalizations and characterizations that define a child by their disabilities. Instead, educators should share their knowledge of the child as an individual with unique interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

**Conclusion**

Prior research investigating the IEP process has provided an overview of some of the challenge’s participants in the IEP meeting encounter. The focus of this study is to examine the parental perceptions of IEP meetings in a small independent school located in British Columbia. Gathering specific information to inform the school team as incentive and support to highlight what is successful and make changes to address concerns. Therefore, the studies and articles referenced for this review are mainly drawn from Canada and the United States to providing an overview of current research. The intent of this literature review is to examine past research to investigate how each group of parents in the individual studies perceived their experience in the IEP process.

Throughout this literature review attention was given to factors that affected parental perceptions of IEP meetings, both the positive and the negative. As Baker, Wise, Kelley, and
Skiba (2016) recognized in their study “… parents are able to identify both barriers and solutions to these barriers. Consistently, when parents identified barriers they provided connected solutions” (p.179). Past studies have shown that the current IEP process is deficit driven and the need for change is clear. The process that was designed to promote collaboration between educators and parents causes anxiety and stress instead. The final IEP document has evolved into a legal requirement, failing in its original intent to provide a dynamic cycle of planning, monitoring, and evaluating between parents and educators. In the end becoming a document which is both hard to read and difficult to understand. The main stakeholders in the IEP’s development are beginning to view the IEP as a disfunction of the education system. Parents who participate in the IEP process need to be consulted, “future research investigating stakeholders’ views about the IEP as a tool to improve education (and factors that influence these views) must examine more deeply the actual experiences and strategies implemented by participants” (Hyatt, 2004, p. 89). Data about how parents perceive the IEP process and ideas for improvement should be gathered. Researchers MacLeod et al. (2017), echo this sentiment,

> We believe educational researchers should continue to privilege parent voices in order to document persistent challenges that children, families and schools face. Together, parent voices and legal mandates will hopefully provide educators with a blueprint for more collaborative and productive relationships with families that can lead to the development of IEPs which provide effective and excellent inclusive education for all students (p. 18).

The aim of this study will be to explore the question, “What are parental perceptions of IEP meetings?” within the target school. The objective is to identify specific successes and challenges to the process, and the potential for providing possible solutions for other districts with similar goals.
Chapter Three - Method

This mixed methods study will investigate the research question: **What are Parental Perceptions of Individualized Education Plan Meetings?**

Methodology

Following the recommendation of Cavendish and Conner (2018), a mixed methods approach was used to investigate parental perceptions of IEP meetings so that the best of both worlds (interview and survey) could be utilized to better describe the general to the specific details uncovered in the research. A collection and analysis of quantitative data will be followed by a collection and analysis of qualitative data. First a sequential explanatory design where the quantitative data is collected and then this is followed by qualitative data collection (Biddix, 2009).

In this study, a survey (Appendix A) and a follow up semi-structured interview (Appendix B) provided data to be analyzed. The survey provided numerical data, as each possible answer is assigned a numerical value. This numerical data will provide evidence to discuss common trends, opinions, and perceptions about aspects of the IEP process from a parental perspective. The semi-structured interview in contrast will be more subjective and common themes will be noted (Stratton, 2015). The personal interview allowed the participant the opportunity to further expand their responses to provide insight into the factors that influence participant parental perceptions of IEP meetings (Biddix, 2009). The new knowledge collected helped illustrate multiple viewpoints, positions, and standpoints from participant parents.

Participants

Participants in this study are parents of IEP students who were approached by the head of the Student Support Services (SST) in their school after the first IEP meeting in September. Each
potential participant was given a letter (Appendix C) which explained the purpose of the study, the potential benefits, and the researcher’s information. The letter also provided a link to the anonymous on-line survey, which the participants were asked to complete. Following the advice of Halej (2017) who explains “Research participants should be given appropriate and accessible information about the purpose, methods and intended uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails, and what risks and benefits, if any, are involved” (p. 4).

The letter given to parents also explained to participants how the study would be conducted and the goals of the study. When participants opened the online survey, consent was obtained to use their responses. For as Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2013) explain, it is vital that the researcher establishes informed consent, the right to withdraw, informs participants of the potential of improving IEP meeting practices, and guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity are established. To ensure respondents have anonymity, the researcher directed participants to a webpage on Survey Monkey Canada (Cohen et al., 2013). Upon completion of the survey parents were asked to contact the researcher by email if they were interested in taking part in the semi-structured interview process.

The scope of this research project was shared with potential participants in the letter that introduced the study as well as providing an outline of the purpose of study, importance and benefits of the research, potential use of data, and methods that would be used for data collection. As researcher Halej (2017) explains, “to ensure that research participants are able to give informed consent, the study should be clearly described to them in written form” (p. 7). Participants were invited to contact the researcher by email or by phone if they had any questions or concerns about the research project. The letter also outlined why a respondent was chosen and highlighted their right to refuse to participate in the study (Cohen et al., 2013).
Demographic criterion for participants are: the respondent must be a parent to a child within the school being studied, their child must be on an IEP, and the respondent had to have attended at least one IEP meeting prior to completing the survey. It was important to select participants who have specific, recent experience with IEP meetings to allow the researcher closer insight into the phenomenon itself. As Lewis (2015) stated, valid research needs to recruit respondents who meet the criterion and will provide the study with the most recent information about IEP meetings from a parent perspective. The education levels of the participants varied, as did their age, income, and the number of years they had been participating in IEP meetings.

Participant anonymity was ensured during the study. “The identity of research participants should be protected at all times through anonymity or confidentiality, unless research participants explicitly agree to, or request the publication of their personal information” (Halej, 2017, p. 4). Clearly outlined in the letter was a guarantee that no personal identifying information was contained in the survey. As Cohen et al., (2013) explains it is vital to “provide assurances of confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability; indication of how the results will and will not be disseminated, and to whom” (p. 400) for every research project. Completed surveys were returned through the online survey portal as a “blind” survey, which ensured an anonymous compilation of data (Exploring qualitative methods, [Video file], 2005).

During the semi-structured interview, a signed permission form gave permission to record the interview, take notes during the interview session, and use quotes from the interviewee when discussing data. In an effort to keep the anonymity of the participant throughout this study, the name of the interviewee was changed. It should be noted that the survey was closed and only open to those who were given the online link, thus eliminating any random participants. Risks are minimal for participants who take part in this study. That said, the
participants could be at risk for mental/emotional distress when recalling difficult or negative events, situations or experiences during the semi-structured interview. To support this possibility the researcher was prepared to immediately stop the interview and give the respondent the contact information of counseling support services available locally. Halej (2017) supports this, stating, “potential risk or harm should be mitigated by robust precautions, including, if applicable, signposting participants to resources or support around sensitive issues that may arise in the research process” (p. 4). Fortunately, during the semi-structured interview, the respondent did not experience any undue distress and thus the interview was able to move forward to completion.

A total of 14 parents participated in the online survey and one parent volunteered to take part in the semi-structured face to face interview. For this reason, the interview will be treated as a separate case study.

Data Collection

A survey and a semi-structured interview are used in this study to collect data. “Surveys are information collection methods used to describe, compare or explain individual and societal knowledge, feelings, values, preferences, and behavior” (Fink, 2006, p. 1). The intent of the survey was to produce preliminary details about each participant’s parental perceptions of the IEP process within their school. The survey had clear instructions, it is free of any jargon, and contained a thank you at the end. The survey was designed so that all questions were necessary for the research and the researcher did not collect any data that clearly would not be used to satisfy the purpose of the study (Halej, 2017). The survey allowed the researcher to gather data efficiently using standardized information for the targeted population. The descriptive data was then used to ascertain correlations and generalize about the targeted group (Cohen et al., 2013).
The survey contains both open and closed questions, with the open-ended questions being placed near the end. A combination of dichotomous, multiple choice, and rating scale questions made up the survey, and the last page contains a section for additional comments. As Cohen et al. (2013) states, dichotomous questions give an unequivocal response, multiple choice give a likely range of choices, and rating scales give a degree of sensitivity and differentiation of responses. Leading questions were avoided as well as double question questions as those can lead to confusion and unreliable answers (Exploring qualitative methods, [Video file], 2005). Questions were spaced apart on the page to avoid a compressed layout which could be uninviting. Following the advice of Cohen et al., (2013) who state that a larger questionnaire with plenty of space for questions and answers is more encouraging to respondents. The survey ended with a thank you, a request to participate in a personal interview, and a guarantee to inform the respondent of the results of the study if they would like to contact the researcher at a later date by email (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009).

Survey questions centered around three main themes:

a. Participation in the IEP meeting: Who are the participants in the IEP meeting? Who in the parent participants opinion speaks the most during the meeting. Is there anyone not at the meeting who should be there? Did the student attend their IEP meeting? Were parent participants satisfied with the outcome of the meeting? What was the length of the meeting and was the time allowed for the meeting sufficient?

b. Communication between parent participants and educators: How often do parent participants and educators communicate? What is the main reason for the communication? How do parent participants view their relationship with educators? Who spoke the most during the IEP meeting? Who spoke the least at the IEP meeting? Do
parent participants feel equal to the educators during the IEP meeting? How much influence did parent participants have on the outcome of the meeting? What was the overall tone of the meeting?

c. Knowledge that parents have about government legislation, district policy and available school supports that their child is qualified to receive. Do parent participants believe that a lack of funds influenced decisions made during the IEP meeting?

The follow up semi-structured interview will provide the story behind a respondent’s answers, allowing for more detailed responses. The personal interview was conducted at the respondent’s convenience in a quiet room. Permission was obtained to tape record the interview for future reference and allow the researcher to take brief notes during the interview. A number of open-ended questions were prepared ahead of time to guide the interview. The goal being to unpack and delve deeper into the parent participant experience with the IEP process. When necessary the parent participant was asked to expand on a response or offer further clarity.

“Questioning gives us information about what people say and the context to help interpret their observations” (Cowles & Nelson, 2015, p. 2). Permission was obtained to use the parent participant’s “real words” in the study (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009), and the researcher made sure the parent participant was informed in writing how the interview was to be structured prior to beginning. Privacy was important so the interview took place in a private room so interruptions could be avoided. A scribed copy of the interview was made available to the interviewee and only approved comments were published.

**Potential Issues Encountered During Data Collection**

By employing the survey and interview methods for data collection the researcher realized that the questions asked “will always be an intrusion into the life of the respondent, be it
in terms of time taken to complete the instrument, the level of threat or sensitivity of the questions, or the possible invasion of privacy” (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 377). Thus, it was established from the start of the interview that the names of people or places would not be revealed without specific permission to do so in writing (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). In addition, the parent participant was encouraged to be honest in her responses without fear of repercussions. It was also acknowledged that due to the use of a self-reporting survey, the respondents may have over or under reported to give socially appropriate answers. Self-reporting also required that the researcher strived to ensure that parent participants understood each question, that all respondents understood the question in the same way, and that all respondents understand it in the way intended by the researcher (Cohen et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, due to the anonymous nature of the survey this was impossible to confirm with the individual respondents, but every effort was made to keep the questions clear and concise. The difficulty is that words are inherently ambiguous, so plain, clear, easily understood language was used throughout the survey to help mitigate the fact that different respondents could potentially interpret the same words differently. “Anchor statements’ were provided to allow a degree of discrimination in response (e.g. ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, etc.) but there was no guarantee that respondents would always interpret them in the way that is intended” (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 384). Using an online survey method was also asking respondents not only to administer the questionnaires themselves but also to report on themselves. As Cohen et al. (2013) cautions, “this may introduce bias, as respondents may under-report (e.g. to avoid socially undesirable responses) or over-report (to give socially desirable answers)” (p. 259). This influence was balanced with the fact that parent participants could complete the survey at their convenience, take as long as they wanted, have the opportunity to check information, and think
about their responses carefully, which were positive aspects of using a survey to collect data (Cohen et al., 2013).

The researcher made every effort to not assume that respondents had the information or an opinion about the matters in which the researcher was interested (Cohen et al., 2013). To mitigate this, the researcher gave the respondent the opportunity when answering questions to indicate on the survey if they had no opinion (Cohen et al., 2013). In addition, during the personal interview, the respondent was encouraged to decline answering a question if they so wished. The researcher also acknowledges that parent participants will be “relying on memory, and memory can be selective and deceptive (e.g. people may not remember accurately). Also, some responses will depend on a person’s state of mind at the time of completing the survey” (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 261). Parent participants had a deadline for accessing the online survey and participants were encouraged to complete the survey as quickly as possible after their September IEP meeting.

**Types of Data Generated**

The responses to the survey were analyzed with quantitative methods by assigning numerical values to Likert-type scales. The researcher used descriptive figures and tables to organize, summarize, and present the data. The collected data was presented either as a percentage of the whole, as a numeral representing the total amount of like-minded parent participants, or as a correlation using Spearman’s Rho Calculator (Stangroom, 2019, Calculators section).

The semi-structured interview was coded so that “it is easier to search the data, to make comparisons and to identify any patterns that require further investigation” (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010). The coding was based on common themes and phrases that emerged from the interview
process. The researcher developed codes for gathering data on three main themes: factors affecting parental participation in the meeting, communication between parent and educators, and the knowledge a parent holds regarding special education services and legislation. Taylor and Gibbs (2010) state, “as the researcher reads through their data set the number of codes they have will evolve and grow as more topics or themes become apparent” (Coding section, para. 4). In addition, the data collected will “appear in different forms in the final report: in the main body of the text, as extracts to support a specific point; in your appendices, as immediate contexts for the extracts, or as elaboration of the specific points you are making; in your archive, as the more general material from which you have extracted your data” (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009, p. 170). As such is it imperative that every eventuality is cleared with participants before their responses are collected (McNiff & Whitehead, 2009). Therefore, all parent participants reviewed and agreed to a release form at the start of the survey and the interviewee signed a release form before the start of the interview.

**Significance of Findings**

The mixed method approach of this study provides both breadth and depth of understanding, offering an opportunity for honest feedback from participants while giving those who wish to respond more directly that opportunity. The accumulated data will aid in identifying changes or improvements that can be made to the IEP process within the target school. The study will add to the current research examining parental perceptions of IEP meetings by providing new insight into the process. The study will also generate new questions for future studies that seek to investigate the complicated, multi-layer relationship that exists between educators and parents during IEP meetings. Once completed the research findings will be forwarded to the
district Special Education department where it can be used for reflection on the positive and negative aspects of the IEP process, with a goal towards improvement.
Chapter Four - Data

The purpose of this chapter is to report, analyze, and interpret the findings of this study which sought to explore the parental perceptions of individual education plan meetings. Reported in this section are the data collected from survey questions and a personal interview which is examined as case study. Parent participant responses will be explored within the following three guidelines.

1. Respondent perceptions of the factors that influence their participation in IEP meetings.
2. How communication patterns between educators and parents influence perceptions of the IEP process.
3. Parent knowledge of special education legislation and how this knowledge influences parental perceptions of IEP meetings.

The Survey

Each of fourteen parent participants completed the survey in its entirety with no skipped questions. The response time for the survey varied, with most of the surveys being completed on weekends. Due to the anonymous nature of the survey it is unknown which parents completed the survey and the exact nature of their child’s disability.

Before delving deeper, it is important that the reader understand that a total of fifty parents were invited to take part in the survey. Fourteen participants completed the survey and what influenced this reluctance to participate is unknown as the scope of this study does not address this.

Participation. Setting a convenient time when all stakeholders; the educators, students and parents, can meet is challenging. Parental participants were asked to provide information about the length of time between notification of the upcoming meeting and when the meeting
took place. 4 out of 14 parent participants were given less than one week’s notice, 3 out of 14 participants were given one to two weeks notice and 7 out of 14 respondents were given three to four weeks (or more) notice. Parental participation in the IEP is vital, yet inadequate notice (less than 1 week) may potentially eliminate 30% of parents. Note that it is unknown how notice about the upcoming meeting was given to parents.

The IEP meeting length is also an important factor to consider. The average meeting time reported was between 30-45 minutes, and the majority of participant parents surveyed reported that this length of time was sufficient to review, design, and discuss the IEP goals. 10 out of 14 of the parent participants reported that the meeting afforded plenty of time, and 4 of the parent participants stated that they felt the time scheduled was insufficient. Respondent #1 commented on the survey that,

We were discussing strategies for behaviour when the bell went, the teacher had to go back to class, the TA (teacher assistant) who works with my son also left. I was left with the Special Education co-ordinator who I had never met before today. I was told they (the team) would meet without me to finish the IEP and then I would get a copy. What happened to discussing strategies?

An experience like this does not achieve the Ministry of Education (2013) mandate, which states “consultation should be sought [with parents] in a timely and supportive way, and the input of parents respected and acknowledged” (p. 10). Respondent #3 stated, “I was mad; I had taken time off work for this; why stop before we are finished? I cannot get another day off.” Blackwell & Rossetti (2014) explain that failing to finish the meeting in a timely manner devalues a parent’s contributions as it does not provide them with the opportunity to make significant contributions to the content of their children’s IEP. Respondent #9 explained, “I had to leave; my
lunch was over. We had barely started, too much time debating and telling me what my son could not have.” Rossetti et al. (2018) emphasize that barriers to family engagement can be created as a result of IEP meeting logistics; scheduling a meeting in too short of a time frame, rushing through the meeting, not finishing the meeting in time.

Delving further into how parent participants perceived IEP meetings it is noteworthy to examine whether or not the student with special needs was reported by parent participants to attend the IEP meeting. Figure 1 illustrates, that a large number of students with special needs do not attend their own IEP meetings. In total, if one was to consider the students who did not participate and add them to those that only attended the IEP meeting for part of it, a noteworthy 90% of students did not attend. The BC Ministry of Education (2016) states, “students with special needs can contribute to the process of assessment and planning for their own educational programs, and provide an evaluation of the services available to them” (p. 11). Guidelines set by the BC Ministry of Education (2013) advise that the “school board must offer the parent of the student, and where appropriate, the student, the opportunity to be consulted about the preparation of the IEP” (p. 3).

Parent participants were asked who in the IEP meeting contributed the most and the least to the discussion; none of the participants chose the student. Aligning with Royer’s study that highlighted, “students talk only 3% -6% of the time ... studies have consistently showed lack of student involvement and participation throughout the IEP process” (p. 235). Unknown is the diagnosis of the student which could have an effect on their perceived ability to effectively participate in the IEP meeting. In addition, though the literature recommends that students with special needs should attend and be active participants in the meeting, this study found that only 3/14 students attended, and of those, only 1 was described as staying for the entire meeting.
Parental Perceptions

Communication. Cox (2018) explains, “The key to successful parent-teacher collaboration is to become a team. This collaboration is the most powerful tool in helping a child be successful at school” (p. 1). Aspects of communication explored include the welcome, familiarity with educators, participation in discussion. Parent participants were asked in the survey if they perceived a welcoming atmosphere when they arrived at the IEP meeting. 13 out of 14 participants stated that they felt welcomed by the educators. The level of familiarity that parent participants had with their child’s educators was investigated next in the survey. Respondents were asked how often they communicate with educators. Figure 1 below illustrates parent participant responses. It is apparent that this interaction is as varied as the possible diagnosis of the child. 4 out of 14 respondents only communicate with their child’s teacher during the IEP meeting. In contrast 5 out of 14 parent participants communicated at least once a week or more with the educators in their child’s school.

**Figure 1.** Data representing the age of student with special needs who the IEP is being designed for and their attendance / lack of attendance at the IEP meeting.
Next the survey asked who in their child’s school do parent participants communicate with the most. It is not surprising to see that the majority of the participants cited the teacher as the person they interacted with the most. Interestingly the principal / vice principal was chosen by two parent participants as the person they communicate with the most, which indicates the breadth of the support team in place to support a range of student needs. Figure 2 illustrates the most common reason for communication between educators and parent participants is to problem solve challenges that a child is experiencing or to share how their child is progressing.

*Figure 2. Frequency of communication between parent participants and educators.*
In an attempt to further unpack the relationship between parent and educators the survey investigated which of the IEP team members contributed the most to the discussion. Parent participants were asked to record who they thought contributed the most during the meeting and who contributed the least. Principal / Vice principal of the school attended 5 of the 14 meetings, and were identified by parent participants as one of the members of the school-based team that spoke the least (see Figure 3). In contrast the Student Support teacher (SST) who managed the child’s file was identified by all parent participants as the one who contributed the most to the meeting possibly due to the dual role of the SST who both facilitates and provides input into the discussion. The classroom teacher and the Educational Assistant (EA) who work with the student every day contributed less than the SST. None of the parent participants chose the student for the person who spoke the most or spoke the least, even though it was an option.
Given that the design of the IEP is based on a team approach the survey continued by asking parent participants if they perceived themselves to be an equal partner with educators during the IEP meeting. 1 out of 14 parent participants reported that they did not feel equal to educators during the meeting. 13 out of 14 stated they felt equal or at minimum somewhat equal with educators during the meeting. When comparing participants perception of equality with how
parents feel about their relationship with educators it is significant to note that there is a statistical correlation between a perceived positive relationship and a perceived equality during IEP meetings. Using Spearman’s Rho Calculator: The value of $r_s$ is: 0.56488. By normal standards, the association between the two variables would be considered statistically significant.

The level of parent satisfaction with home-school communication was investigated next. The data revealed that half of the respondents were satisfied with the amount of communication, 2 of the parent participants were not satisfied, and 5 participants were only somewhat satisfied. Note that the Student Support Teacher (the co-ordinator of services and chair of the meeting) is not separated from the general educator pool, therefore the intricacies of their relationship are not fully explored within the parameters of this research.

The survey then attempted to provide a picture of the overall tone or mood that was perceived by the parent participants during the IEP meeting. 4 out of the 14 parents surveyed commented that they were very satisfied with the outcome of the meeting. In contrast 2 of the 14 parents felt that the outcome of the meeting was not satisfactory. One parent participant attended a meeting where it was perceived by the parent to be strictly informative with no collaboration between educators and parent; parent was just told what had been decided about their child. This type of meeting is in direct conflict with the overall expected experience for a parent attending an IEP. “Special Needs Students Order M150/89: defines students with special needs, describes the obligation of school boards to consult with parents in the placement of students with special needs and describes policy regarding integration” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 1). The parent participants were offered the option of choosing ‘conflict – a you against them attitude’ for the tone of the meeting, and none of the parents indicated they felt that way. The perceived tone of the meeting was correlated with the level of input parents felt they had in the meeting.
(see Table 3 below). As noted in the table, the more input that educators asked parent participants for the more positive and collaborative parent participants perceived the IEP meeting to be.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Participant #</th>
<th>Parent participants perception of the tone of the meeting.</th>
<th>Do educators ask for parent participants input?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>informative - you are told what has been decided</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>positive - can do attitude</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>positive - can do attitude</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>positive - can do attitude</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>positive - can do attitude</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>positive - can do attitude</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Spearman’s Rho Calculator: The value of \( r_s \) is: 0.61734.

By normal standards, the association between the two variables would be considered statistically significant.

*Table 1.* Correlation between parental participants input during the IEP meeting and perceived tone of the meeting.

The SST and the classroom teacher contribute most to the discussion during IEP meetings. Parents that perceive themselves as equal with educators report a more positive relationship with educators. Parents invited by educators to give input into the discussion perceive the tone of the IEP meeting to be collaborative and positive.
Knowledge. The last three questions on the survey explored the knowledge that parent participants have about the services and supports their child is qualified to receive following Ministry of Education legislation and school district policy. 9 out of 14 participants reported they do not clearly understand what services their child could or should be receiving at school. This lack of knowledge continued as 14 out of 14 parent participants also answered No or Somewhat, when asked if they felt they understood special education legislation in BC. Mereoiu et al. (2016) explains “the design and delivery of special education services often turns out to be a complex process … [due to] the multitude of procedures and compliance requirements specific to each of the IEP components” (p. 37). Tamzarian et al. (2012) support this, explaining that “an IEP is a highly bureaucratic process where each step is documented in writing, formal procedures are followed, and there are copious written materials for parents to review (e.g., assessment reports, the IEP) … [and the] approach can appear unfriendly and even be unhelpful” (p. 4) if parents do not understand the documents they are viewing and what supports are available for their child. Participant parents also reported that they are aware that funding influences the decisions made during the IEP meeting.

In summary, the survey responses highlight the importance of keeping an IEP meeting organized and timely. A timeline for action items is important so that there are no unresolved issues at the meetings end. Educators should treat parents as equals so they can develop a positive and collaborative relationship with families. Encouraging parent input into the design of the IEP and incorporating parental suggestions into the final document helps to build positive perceptions of IEP meetings. Survey responses also revealed that even when a student attended their IEP meeting they seemed to contribute minimally to the IEP design. Ideally students with exceptional needs can begin to develop self-advocacy skills attending their own IEP meetings. In
addition, educators need to share their knowledge of Ministry of Education guidelines and policies that are related to a students’ challenges. Parents do not have access to this information and often cannot find sources that are easily understandable.

The following paragraphs outline the knowledge gained from the semi-structured personal interview. An attempt is made throughout to link the findings with the survey so that common trends can be explored.

**The Interview**

In an attempt to answer the question: **What are parental perceptions of IEP meetings?** in more depth, this mixed methods study attempted to recruit survey participants to participate in a semi-conversational interview. The following interview is a parent participant’s account of her recent perceptions of the IEP process. For the purpose of this study it is important to note that only one parent who completed the survey volunteered for an interview. Therefore, what is reported, though valuable, is limited in scope. Quotes from the interviewee are used throughout the following paragraphs to help the reader gain insight into this participant’s perceptions of an IEP meeting. Note that the IEP meeting referenced for this study is not the interviewee’s first for her child and therefore earlier IEP meetings she has attended may influence some of the answers given.

Similar to the survey responses the interview will be explored within the following three guidelines.

1. Respondents perceptions of the factors that influence their participation in IEP meetings.
2. How communication patterns between educators and parents influence perceptions of the IEP process.
3. Parent knowledge of special education legislation and how this knowledge influences parental perceptions of IEP meetings.

**Participation.** Beth’s IEP meeting was attended by her child’s teacher, the SST, and herself. This meant that she was acquainted with all the team members prior to the meeting and felt comfortable in their presence. As Esquival and Ryan (2008) found in their research, a small team and familiarity with team members can often improve the experience for parents.

Neither the principal or the educational assistant (EA) who works closely with her child every day were at the meeting.

*When the one EA was not there, I knew I could give my information to the teacher to give to her but I would not get her information, I would not receive feedback from her. This made me feel like, ok, now we are not on the same page again!*

In addition, Beth does not usually have contact with the EA outside of the IEP meeting as she mostly interacts with her daughter’s classroom teacher. This lack of EA attendance contradicts research findings that advise that everyone who works with the special education child is a critical member of the team and should be included during all levels of the process. Thus, educators should ensure that everyone who is required to be at the IEP meeting attends even if this means postponing or rescheduling the meeting (Dilberto, 2014; Cheatham et al., 2012). Esquival et al. (2008) supports this by stating educators should encourage attendance and contributions from all team members as “Parents in the present study wanted to see that interventions reflected contributions from all team members” (p. 251). Note that Beth is part of a group of 10 out of 14 participant parents who reported in the survey the they mainly communicate with their child’s teacher. Furthermore, Beth shared that she would have liked the Principal at the meeting so that she could get clear answers about issues involving funding from
the school. The response given instead was, we [the educators at the meeting] can look into that with technology but the special education person who said they would speak to the head computer tech about an iPad for my child, she never got back to me. Researchers suggest that regular and clear communication is necessary to build trust between educators and parents, which in turn leads to effective collaboration (Macleod et al., 2018; Tamzarian et al. 2012).

Beth did not bring her child to the IEP meeting, which is consistent with all of the respondents who either brought their child for only part of the meeting, or did not bring their child at all. Researcher D. Royer (2016) explains that this is not unusual as “studies have consistently shown a lack of student involvement and participation throughout the IEP process” (p. 235), despite the fact that research has also shown that “the earlier students get involved, the more likely they will be to engage in meaningful participation …students have great insight into their own strengths, preferences and learning needs” (Patti, 2016, p. 152). The reason her daughter did not attend the IEP meeting was,

\[I\ have\ thought\ about\ it\ but\ at\ this\ point\ I\ was\ not\ too\ concerned\ only\ because\ she\ is\ just\ getting\ to\ know\ herself\ against\ what\ other\ children\ know.\ It\ is\ going\ to\ be\ a\ lifelong\ skill\ for\ her\ to\ learn\ why\ she\ might\ be\ learning\ something\ different,\ something\ lower\ than\ peers,\ which\ bothers\ her\ as\ she\ is\ just\ starting\ to\ understand\ her\ differences,\ yet\ in\ many\ ways\ still\ does\ not\ fully\ understand,\ maybe\ next\ year.\]

It should also be noted that Beth’s daughter’s age falls in the 7-10-year range, so she is still considered quite young in societal terms. Connor & Cavendish (2018) explain “Student attendance is critical … otherwise, the IEP becomes merely a document that represents a student in an abstract manner, leaving students rudderless as they move through the grades” (p.82).
Beth’s IEP meeting lasted for 35-40 minutes, which is shorter than the bulk of parent participants who reported meetings lasting 60-90 minutes on the survey. The time was adequate to address the necessary concerns, but the lack of an agenda left Beth unaware of the timeline for action items and an inability to think about, or research, discussion points before the meeting. She suggests that items that were to be covered in the meeting could be outlined with each item being given a set amount of time for discussion. Beth recommended that an agenda be used for every IEP meeting so that a parent

would know from the onset how much time we have, presented that just so you are aware we have blank things to discuss and blank time to do so, then go with that, so that way you know if you are looking at your own watch or they say ok we are about half way now, we should move on to something else.

The problem being that “things come up, and then you are like crap, we have 3 minutes to discuss that thing” so items are left unresolved as there is not enough time left in the meeting to fully address the matter. Fienberg et al. (2014) explains,

People [participant parents of IEP students] generally appreciate having some idea of what will be discussed at meetings, as it gives them a chance to gather materials and prepare mentally so they can participate fully. In addition to a meeting agenda and the opportunity to review paperwork that might be discussed at the meeting, participants find it helpful to know who is expected to attend the meeting, how long the meeting is expected to last (p. 5).

Beth came to the meeting with a little list about what I want to say, what is most important to me. I know the time frame and I just want to get what I want off my chest. Dilberto (2014) and Esquival et al. (2008), emphasise the importance of sharing an agenda for the IEP meeting with
parents prior to the meeting so they have time to prepare their thoughts ahead of time or add to the agenda if an item important to the parent is not included.

When asked who spoke the most during the meeting, Beth stated that it was the SST who directed the meeting trying to keep it focused and on topic, who seemed to speak the most. This is consistent with the research of Mereoiu et al. (2016) who found in their study that “Typically, special education teachers provide the most extensive input in IEP meetings … about students’ strengths, needs, and interests … about tasks they needed to complete in IEP meetings” (p. 37). This is also consistent with the data collected by the survey which showed that half of the parent participants indicated that the SST is the person who spoke the most during IEP meeting. Beth also mentioned that throughout the meeting conversation seemed to go around the table fairly evenly with everyone, in her perception, respecting each other’s input.

Satisfied parent participation in IEP meetings can be supported by planning that includes: appropriate notice of upcoming meeting; specific, time managed agendas; representation of all learning team members. Special needs students need to attend their own IEP meeting.

Communication. The survey revealed that communication flows between parents and educators for a variety of reasons. Beth does not communicate with the EA or the teacher outside of scheduled IEP meetings and reporting periods unless there is a problem or she wants to check in to see how her child is coping. This is consistent with the findings of researchers Spann et al., (2003) who state “that most common impetus for communication was exchanging information related to the child’s needs and performance” (p. 234).

Beth explained that the purpose of the most recent IEP meeting she attended was to set new goals for the coming year. Beth stated that the meeting did not take place until well into the new school year and she felt it was a long time coming. Beth shared how important she perceived
regular communication is between IEP team members (the teacher(s), SST, educational assistant(s)(EA), administration) with regards to the accommodations her child should or could receive. Macleod et al. (2017) reinforce this by stating in their study “that regular check-ins, both before and after the IEP meeting, would help build trust” (p.10), and “satisfaction with goal setting for the parents was evident when parents saw appropriate revision of the goals from one year to the next” (p. 28).

Beth described what she thought of as communication breakdown between members of the IEP team throughout the interview. *I asked about it, told we have not had that meeting yet, will you put my child’s name forward, and she [SST] never got back to me.* Survey results show that participant parents communicate with educators either a lot (at least once a week) or very infrequently (once a month, never (this was their first IEP meeting), and only at IEP meetings). Beth advocated scheduling 4-6 IEP meetings a year to help solve this perceived communication challenge. Note that the BC Ministry of Education (2016) only requires one formal IEP meeting a year. The scope of this research did not investigate strategies and processes to foster effective school-home communication.

Beth expressed that during the IEP meeting she felt she had to teach [educators], and was disappointed; *Why do you teachers not already know this information about my child and her diagnosis?* Note that research has identified that one of the barriers to effective communication between educators and parents, from the parent’s perception, was the educators lack of specific knowledge about the child’s diagnosis (Spann et al., 2003). There were also times in the meeting when Beth perceived that the educators were no longer respectfully listening to her input. *I am staring at teacher telling them these things and they are looking at me like I have 5 heads, I get that blank look.* Researchers report “parents want to be respected for their insight and knowledge
about their child — this is especially applicable during IEP meetings” (Fienberg et al., 2014, p. 16). A perceived lack of respect from educators led to Beth being less satisfied both with the parent–educator relationship and the overall outcome of the IEP meeting. As researchers Connor and Cavendish (2018) explain there is a difference between school personal ‘hearing’ and listening’, which educators need to recognize during IEP meetings.

Beth stated it was when she began to advocate strongly for the services she felt her child needed that the communication in the meeting changed from collaborative to a less friendly tone. Beth described,

\[ \text{if I push too hard there would be a consequence of some kind, something would happen,}\]
\[ \text{the positive relationship would deteriorate, not sure how, but feel it would, it would do}\]
\[ \text{damage in some way.}\]

For this reason, Beth’s husband did not attend the meetings as he would be very demanding, not politically correct, and cause more damage than could ever be repaired... so let me be the nice guy first. Parents who “believe they must fight the school for desired services for their children” (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Stoner et al., 2005; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013) is a common occurrence in research.

**Knowledge.** Beth was asked about her knowledge with regard to IEP meeting procedures and policies, BC Ministry of Education legislation in relation to IEP meetings, and her child’s diagnosis. She pointed to her binder that is full to overflowing, explaining that it contains all the research, assessments, timelines and notes from IEP meetings she has attended that concern her daughter. Explaining *what I know I have dug for, information is not always easy to find.*

Research by Stoner et al. (2005) and Trainor (2010) found that parents in their studies had to educate themselves through reading printed material, accessing Internet resources, attending
seminars and advocacy training, contacting consultants, and participating in parent support groups. Hyatt (2004) and Dilberto (2014) state that in order for parents to successfully participate in the IEP process it is essential that they understand school policies and know government regulations with relation to their child’s diagnosis.

*I felt that when I get dredging up what I know and what has happened and where we can go with this, it often ends up being more of a Ministry of Education issue or a school policy or funding issue and what they are allowing and not allowing. Then I get the silence and blank look, there is not a great deal that anyone can do or say about it.*

Beth went on, *I do not want to be the person who said, here I know everything, I do not, but this is what I researched,* and I want to share it with my daughter’s educators. This aligns with K. Underwood (2010) who found that “Parents took on active roles when they set goals and advocated for supports not in place for their children, particularly seeking resources and accommodations and assessments” (p. 24). Beth is self-educated about her child’s diagnosis but she is very motivated to continue to search for strategies, workshops, and any other relevant resources that could potentially aid her daughter in her learning.

*If I do not do it who will? She is my daughter, I have to help her is any way I can. Trying to be respectful, but demanding to get what my child needs. Why should I feel this way, why should I feel that I have to come across anyway except tell the truth, tell them where things are at, what my child needs, and it happen. Is every school the same? Why cause that strife, it is a ridiculously slow process [to get the supports her child needs], just give my child the help.*

Her desire to be heard by educators, recognized for her knowledge of both her child and the many pages of research she has found can be heard. Beth does not want be a *parent who is pushy*
and rude during meetings, but her commitment as a parent to be her child’s advocate has placed her in a position of expectation, where no as an answer is not okay.

Conclusion

The mixed method approach used in this study helps to answer the research question:

What are parental perceptions of the IEP process?

Parental participation in IEP meetings is influenced by many factors. The amount of notice a parent receives about the upcoming meeting influences how easy it is for them to accommodate the chosen time. Meetings need to be organized and timely. The addition of an agenda to the meeting would provide reinforcement for members of the IEP team to stay focused. An agenda will also provide a timeline for item discussions and alert parents to what items will be discussed. Students with special needs seem to attend their IEP meetings for only a portion of the meeting or not at all.

Regular communication between educators and parent participants is encouraged. Parents who provide input into the IEP process perceive a collaborative partnership with educators, leading to satisfaction with the IEP process. Parents need to be heard during meetings not just listened to and IEP goals should reflect their input. Educators should treat parents as equals in order to develop a positive relationship and trust.

Parent participants’ knowledge of special education legislation is lacking. Parents have little knowledge of legislation, though they do recognize that school funding from the government controls the availability of services their child can access. Finding out about legislation is difficult for parents as they have to ‘dig’ for it.

Parental perceptions of IEP meetings are complex; parents that attend IEP meetings wish for efficiency during the meeting, equality in their relationship with educators, and ease in
getting the services they ask for. In addition, it can be hypothesized that parent participants in this research study were not aware of the benefits of their child attending their own IEP meeting.
This study has endeavored to answer the question: **What are Parental Perceptions of the IEP Process?** Data collected from survey questions and a face to face interview has contributed to the following findings.

**Discussion of Findings**

Parents want to be involved in the design of their child’s IEP yet there are still perceivable barriers that inhibit a parent’s involvement. The scheduling of the IEP meeting time can prove to be prohibitive for parents. Sufficient notice about an upcoming IEP meeting is necessary for parents to organize their personal responsibilities so they can attend. Parents meeting during school hours can be challenging due to work commitments so it is important to keep meetings on schedule and of reasonable length (35-40 minutes). Parents who leave a meeting without their concerns being addressed will have a more negative perception of the IEP process.

Communication is key and the parent-educator relationship influences the tone of meetings. Maintaining positive communication between educators and parents during an IEP meeting can challenging for educators. To help mitigate this, regular communication between educators and parents is important so that familiarity with educators is established for parents so that they are more likely to perceive further interactions in a positive light. Educators who adopt a collaborative approach when discussing IEP goals with parents also create a positive connection. Check-ins to see how a student is coping with the challenges of school, problem solving with educators about a student’s challenges, and sharing how a student is progressing all lead to positive connections between parents and educators. In contrast, discussing problem
behaviour or what the student cannot do, or the school cannot do is a negative approach and should be avoided.

Collaboration between parents and educators is vital to the successful design of the IEP document. Parents who perceive themselves as equal to educators during meetings will be more comfortable taking risks and offering input. Regular interactions between educators and parents helps to build a reciprocal relationship that is perceived as equitable by parents. Furthermore, the difference between educators that hear and educators that listen to parents during meetings cannot be over emphasized. Educators who actively listen to parent recommendations, value their contributions, and reflect this when designing the IEP will help build positive parental perception towards IEP meetings. If educators wear a ‘blank face’ when listening to parents it is perceived by parents as the educator not listening which disrespects and devalues a parent’s input. In addition, follow through by educators is vital to build trust with parents, if an educator says they will do something, they must do it.

Educators need to recognize that finding information about legislation and policy with regard to their child’s diagnosis is challenging for parents. Moreover, information once found is often not easy to understand due to legal terms and educational jargon, thus time needs to be spent sharing and explaining this information to parents. Parents who do not have a working knowledge of possible services and supports can leave the IEP meeting dissatisfied with the outcome and a perception of inequality with educators.

It is clear that parents want to be involved in the IEP process for their child. It is also clear that many barriers to this involvement exist. Parental perceptions of the IEP process are affected by their relationship with educators outside of the IEP meeting. An educator’s willingness to share their knowledge about available services and legislation along with
educators demonstrating respect and valuing parental contributions help create a positive parental perception of the IEP process.

**Applications**

This study investigated the question: **What are parental perceptions of the IEP process?** The research identified possible additions to the IEP process that would promote positive parental perceptions as well as identifying areas for further study as it sought to answer this question. One possible addition that came to light was the use of an agenda for the meeting. It is recognized that both parents and educators have a finite amount of time for the IEP meeting. An agenda that outlines the main discussion items and provides a timeline for their resolution will help motivate participants in the meeting to use the available time wisely, helping to ensure that neither the parent nor the educator leaves the meeting with items unresolved. In addition, parents and educators will have time, with a preset agenda, to prepare for the meeting so that they are not caught unaware or unprepared. Thus, a well-constructed agenda can only lead to parents having a positive perception of IEP meetings which in turn can lead to more parental participation in the meeting.

On a broader level this research also highlighted the fact that students do not attend their own IEP meetings which is detrimental to the student with special needs as it allows for an IEP to be designed that is not based on the intimate needs of the student. Only the student themselves can provide this first-person knowledge of their challenges and what interventions are or are not effective. In addition, a special needs student will need to advocate for their needs throughout their lifetime; it is a life skill that cannot be undervalued. The earlier a student is able to begin to learn the mechanics of the IEP meeting the earlier they themselves can begin to direct its outcome. Educators and parents need to support and aid the student’s participation in the IEP
meeting from a young age, taking time to guide, direct, and teach the student how to advocate for themselves.

Future research needs to investigate how students can be taught to self-advocate, methods that would encourage self-advocacy, and the benefits of self-advocacy. This study did not address these areas, only highlighting this need that is not being met by educators or parents. Similarly, the effectiveness of an agenda needs to be explored further in new research so that educators can design agendas that are best suited to the IEP meeting and its participants.

**Limitations**

The researcher acknowledges the following limitations to this study. The participants in the study were all middle-class families from an urban area and the question remains whether or not the results would have been the same in a lower social economic or even with a different group of parents.

The sample size of parents was small, only 14 participants, and covered the perceptions of only one IEP meeting. Future studies should be more longitudinal, perhaps covering the entirety of the year to better represent parental perceptions of IEP meetings, and effort should be made to engage more participants. In addition, the survey nature of the study, while guaranteeing anonymity, could have perhaps been prohibitive to some parents due to its online nature.

Despite these limitations, this research did provide insight into how parents perceive the IEP process, highlighting for educators’ areas that would help to build positive parental perceptions of IEP meetings including; building positive trusting relationships with parents, treating parents as equals, sharing their knowledge, and appreciating parent contributions.
References


Parental Perceptions


Appendix A: Survey questions

**Parent Perceptions of the Individual Education Plan Process**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marie Lewis</th>
<th>Mary Ann Richards</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master of Education in Special Education</td>
<td>MEd, PhD</td>
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<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:mlewis@cisdv.bc.ca">mlewis@cisdv.bc.ca</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:MaryAnn.Richards@viu.ca">MaryAnn.Richards@viu.ca</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dear Parents,**

Marie Lewis  
Student  
Master of Education in Special Education  
mlewis@cisdv.bc.ca

Mary Ann Richards  
Supervisor  
MEd, PhD  
MaryAnn.Richards@viu.ca

Currently I am a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University (VIU). As part of my program, I am conducting research on Parental Perceptions of the Individualized Education Process. The intent of this study is to extend current knowledge about parental perceptions of Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings. It is hoped that the new knowledge gained will provide a review of how IEP meetings are conducted and provide direction to keep them aligned with parents’ needs.

This survey should only take you 10-15 minutes to complete. Research participants will be asked to complete the following survey questions centered around three main themes: who is involved in the (IEP) meeting, decisions made during the meeting, and timing and or scheduling of the meeting. Participation in the study will be anonymous. However, if you are interested in participating in a later interview on this topic at the end of the survey you are asked to contact me directly by email at mlewis@cisdv.bc.ca.

Consent Form and Confidentiality Agreement:  
Your participation in this survey is voluntary. At any time you may exit the survey and you are able to decline any question you wish not to answer. All survey information will be stored on the Survey Monkey secure server until it is deleted.

Risks:  
The information collected during the survey is likely to be uncontroversial, and thus the research poses only a very small risk of harm to participants. There is some risk that some of the questions asked may cause emotional distress. If this happens, I recommend that you exit the survey. You may wish to contact one of the support services that follows: Cowichan Family Life Association (250-748-8281) or Vancouver Island Counselling (250-746-6900).

Management of Data:  
Your participation in this survey is anonymous. As such, there is no way for me or anyone else to access any identifying information or record of your participation. This survey is conducted on Survey Monkey and all questions and responses will be stored in their Canadian Data Centre which utilizes Amazon Web Services (AWS). This is the privacy and security policy of SurveyMonkey,
https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/legal/privacy-policy/. The survey account and all data provided will be deleted October 30, 2018.

The results of this study will be published in my Masters thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and published in peer-reviewed journals.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study by exiting the survey. You may omit any question(s) you do not wish to answer. However, once data has been submitted, you will be unable to withdraw, as the data is unidentifiable.

Contact:
If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca.

* 1. I consent to the data I provide being used for the research study as described and to my answers being quoted? Yes / No

Parental Perceptions of the Individual Education Plan Process

2. How often do you communicate with the educators at your child’s school?
   - once a day
   - only during IEP meetings
   - once a week
   - never, this was my first IEP meeting once a month

3. Do you feel that your relationship with your child’s educators is a positive one? Yes / Sometimes / No

4. Who in your child’s school do you communicate the most with?
   - the Principal / Vice Principal
   - your child’s classroom teacher
   - a specialist teacher (for example the PE or French teacher)
   - the Educational Assistant who works with your child
   - Other (please specify)

5. What is the most common reason you communicate with the educators in the school?
   - to give educators a ‘heads up’ about challenges that may arise with your child due to mood/lack of sleep/or another unexpected event
   - to share how your child is progressing
   - to problem solve about challenges your child is having
   - Other (please specify)

6. Are you satisfied with the amount of home-school communication educators provide about your child? Yes / Somewhat / No

7. How much notice did you receive about the most recent IEP you attended for your child?
   - less than a week
   - one to two weeks
   - two to three weeks
   - a month or more

8. When you arrived at the IEP meeting did you feel welcome?
   - Yes
   - Somewhat
   - No

9. Did your child attend his/her IEP meeting with you? Yes / no / yes, but he/she only stayed for part of the meeting

10. What is the age of the child you attended the meeting for?
    - 5 to 6 years old
    - 7 to 8 years old
11. How long was the meeting from start to finish?
less than 15 minutes
15 to 30 minutes
30 to 45 minutes
45 to 60 minutes
more than 60 minutes

12. Did you feel the length of the meeting was sufficient? If no, please explain. Yes / No
Please explain why you did not feel the length of the meeting was sufficient.

13. Who attended the meeting besides yourself? (check all the boxes that apply)
the Principal and or the Vice Principal of the school
your child's classroom teacher(s)
a specialist teacher (for example a PE or French teacher)
the Educational Assistant who works with your child
a professional not employed by the school district (for example a Child Psychologist)
another member of your family besides your child (for example your spouse or a grandparent)
Please list anyone else who is not mentioned above who attended the IEP meeting.

14. How satisfied were you with the outcome of the meeting? Very Satisfied / Somewhat Satisfied

15. In your opinion, who in the meeting spoke the most?

16. In your opinion, who in the meeting spoke the least?

17. In your opinion what was the main focus of the meeting? Check all that apply.
a discussion of your child's challenges academically
a discussion of your child's challenges socially
a presentation of the IEP goals to you
a discussion of your child's diagnosis
a discussion of your child's recent assessment
a review of the IEP goals and or evaluating the progress your child is making
a discussion of your child's achievements both academically and socially

18. Did you feel like an equal partner in designing the IEP for your child? Yes / Somewhat Satisfied / No

19. Do you feel that you have a clear understanding of the services your child is, or could be, receiving at the school?
Yes / Somewhat / No

20. What was the main tone of the meeting in your opinion?
positive - can do attitude
informative - you are told what has been decided
collaborative - a team approach, all input is valued equally
you against them attitude - the meeting seemed full of conflict / disagreements about what your child needs to succeed

21. Do you think there was sufficient time allotted during the IEP meeting for parent input?
Plenty of time / Not enough time

22. Do you feel that your relationship with educators in your school is a positive one? Yes / Sometimes

23. Did the educators seek your input throughout the meeting? Yes / Sometimes
24. Do you feel your input influenced the outcomes of the IEP meeting?

Yes, a strong influence / Somewhat / No

25. Did the goals set in the IEP meeting match your own priorities for your child at this time? Yes / Somewhat / Not at all

26. Do you feel that any of the decisions made during the meeting were influenced by a lack of funds? Yes / Somewhat / No

27. Do you feel that you have a clear understanding about special education legislation in your province? Yes / Somewhat / No

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

If you are interested in volunteering to take part in a face to face interview to share your experiences in more depth, please contact me at mlewis@cisdv.bc.ca, providing your name, child’s school, and contact details. Thank you!

Marie Lewis
Appendix B: Interview questions

1. How many IEP meetings would you expect in a year?
2. Did you feel welcome at the meeting when you arrived? Why or why not?
3. At any time during the meeting did you feel uncomfortable? Why?
4. Did your child attend the meeting with you? Why or why not?
5. If not when if ever will your child attend their IEP meeting?
6. Was the meeting length adequate to cover the topics necessary?
7. Was anyone missing from the meeting? A spouse? A teacher? A specialist?
8. Who chaired the meeting?
9. Who spoke the most during the meeting? Why?
10. What was the main focus of the meeting? How did you feel about the chosen focus?
11. Did you feel that you were heard and respected at the meeting? Why or why not?
12. Did you feel like an equal partner in your child’s planning? Why or why not?
13. Can you explain the services your child currently receives in their school with regards to their IEP?
14. Are there any additional services you would like for your child? If so what?
15. Do you understand the IEP process?
16. Do you feel that the goals set in the IEP are goals in the classroom?
17. Do you feel that every educator in the school who has contact with your child should be aware of the IEP, your child’s challenges, and the goals set by the IEP?

Please note that this is a list of possible interview questions, the interview may be led in another direction by parents during the process which would eliminate some of the above questions or add to the above questions with previously unthought of queries.
Appendix C: Parent Recruitment Letter

Parental Perceptions of the Individualized Education Plan Process

**Principal Investigator**
Marie Lewis  
Master of Education in Special Education student  
Vancouver Island University  
[mlewis@cisdv.bc.ca](mailto:mlewis@cisdv.bc.ca)

**Student Supervisor**
Mary Ann Richards Med, PhD  
Vancouver Island University  
Education Faculty Supervisor  
[MaryAnn.Richards@viu.ca](mailto:MaryAnn.Richards@viu.ca)

Hello, I am involved in a very exciting study and I would like to invite you to participate.

I am a student in the Master of Education in Special Education program at Vancouver Island University (VIU). My research, entitled “Parental Perceptions of the Individualized Education Plan Process,” is a study that will research individualized education plan (IEP) meetings within Island Catholic Schools from the parents’ viewpoint.

Research participants are asked to participate in a short survey that should take 10-15 minutes. The survey will be administered by an on-line survey instrument, Survey Monkey, with no personal identification collected. Upon completion of the survey participants will be asked to contact the researcher if they are willing to participate in a semi-structured face to face interview, from all the positive responses 3-5 participants will be randomly chosen to be interviewed.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and participation in the survey is anonymous. Your choice in whether or not to participate in this study will have no impact on the services provided to your child within the Island Catholic Schools district. Your participation or lack of participation in the survey is completely anonymous unless you choose to volunteer for the follow up interview.

Though it is not anticipated that the survey questions will be controversial or challenging, there is a possibility of some mental/emotional distress if a participant recalls a negative or difficult situation or experience. If the participant chooses to participate in the interview and distress is evident during the interview, the researcher will immediately stop the interview and give the respondent the contact information of counseling support services available locally.

The survey questions are designed to investigate parent’s personal experiences attending IEP meetings specifically targeting the dynamic and complex interaction that exists between parents.
and educational professionals when participating in IEP meetings. The survey questions are centered around three main themes: who is involved in the (IEP) meeting, decisions made during the meeting, and timing / scheduling of the meeting.

The results of this study will be become part of my Master’s thesis, and may also be used for conference publications, presentations, and or published in peer-reviewed journals. I will provide you with a copy my thesis at its time of completion.

Feel free to contact myself or my faculty supervisor, Mary Ann, if you have any concerns or need further clarification about this project.

If you would like to participate in this study please complete the survey online at https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/CFFXW9Z by November 30th, 2018 as after that date the survey will be deleted from the website.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and consider your participation in my research.

Marie Lewis

If you have any concerns about your treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the VIU Research Ethics Board by telephone at 250-740-6631 or by email at reb@viu.ca.