

INDEPENDENT EDUCATIONAL EVALUATIONS: WHAT NON-SCHOOL BASED  
LICENSED PSYCHOLOGISTS HAVE LEARNED

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BY

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## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to four people who have been important in my life. First, to my father, Gary Carter, who instilled in me the value of working hard and being persistent towards completing my goals in life. My mother, Gay Carter, for teaching me the values of empathy and having an unconditional positive regard for others that steered me towards a profession which focuses on helping others. My sister, Cari Beth Dunlap, who provided me invaluable guidance and support over the years. Lastly, to my uncle, Steve Carter, for getting me interested in the sciences at an early age. Without the impact they had made in my life, this dissertation would not be possible.

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## ABSTRACT

CHRISTOPHER W. CARTER

### INDEPENDENT EDUCATIONAL EVALUATIONS: WHAT NON-SCHOOL BASED LICENSED PSYCHOLOGISTS HAVE LEARNED

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The purpose of this study was to examine the essential experiences that licensed psychologists (LPs) had when conducting Independent Educational Evaluations (IEEs). Three LPs participated in in-depth one on one semi-structured interviews with the researcher. All three LPs identified as clinical psychologists who have not been employed by a school district or received graduate training in school psychology. Saturation was achieved during these three interviews and five common themes emerged from the interview data. Among these five broad themes, 15 subthemes also emerged from the interview data. The five broad themes that emerged were: collaboration, familiarity, experiential learning, the need for training, and the outside evaluator. Implications for graduate training, public schools, Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSPs), and LPs wanting to conduct IEEs were provided based on the results of the study, as well as areas for future research.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	x
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
<b>Maintaining Ethical Standards of Practice.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The Quality of IEEs.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Psychoeducational Evaluations Versus Psychological Evaluations .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Qualified Versus Competent.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Protecting the Welfare of Children with Disabilities and the Field of School Psychology.....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Accountability of Training .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Potential Danger with Taking the Outside Expert Role.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Research Questions .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>List of Terms and Acronyms .....</b>	<b>15</b>
II. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	19
<b>Special Education Law and Eligibility .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>The Development of IDEA .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Independent Educational Evaluations .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Special Education Eligibility Criteria and Labels .....</b>	<b>23</b>

	Autism .....	24
	Emotional Disturbance .....	26
	Other Health Impairment .....	28
	Specific Learning Disability .....	30
	<b>The Training and Roles of Psychological Practitioners .....</b>	<b>31</b>
	<b>Licensed Psychologists .....</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>Licensed Specialists in School Psychology .....</b>	<b>34</b>
	<b>Differences in Roles of LSSPs and LPs .....</b>	<b>34</b>
	<b>Ethical Obligations for School and Clinical Psychology</b>	
	<b>Practitioners .....</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>APA Ethical Guidelines .....</b>	<b>36</b>
	<b>NASP’s Principles for Professional Ethics .....</b>	<b>38</b>
	<b>APA and NASP Standards Relating to Psychological</b>	
	<b>Evaluations .....</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>School-based Psychoeducational Evaluations .....</b>	<b>40</b>
	<b>Independent Educational Evaluations .....</b>	<b>41</b>
	<b>In-group Versus Out-Group Assessment</b>	
	<b>Evaluators .....</b>	<b>42</b>
	<b>Professional Development Training .....</b>	<b>43</b>
	<b>Formal Versus Informal Training .....</b>	<b>44</b>
	<b>Experiential learning .....</b>	<b>45</b>
	<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>46</b>
III.	<b>METHOD .....</b>	<b>47</b>
	<b>Qualitative Research Process .....</b>	<b>47</b>
	<b>Research Question .....</b>	<b>50</b>
	<b>Rationale for the Qualitative Study .....</b>	<b>50</b>
	<b>Researcher Qualifications and Bias .....</b>	<b>52</b>
	<b>Researcher Qualification.....</b>	<b>52</b>
	<b>Researcher Bias .....</b>	<b>54</b>
	<b>Data Collection .....</b>	<b>55</b>
	<b>Participants .....</b>	<b>55</b>
	<b>Recruitment .....</b>	<b>56</b>
	<b>Survey Data Collection.....</b>	<b>57</b>
	<b>Interviews .....</b>	<b>58</b>
	<b>Security, Confidentiality, and Potential Risks .....</b>	<b>60</b>
	<b>Data Analysis .....</b>	<b>61</b>
	<b>Transcriptions and Notes .....</b>	<b>62</b>
	<b>Coding .....</b>	<b>62</b>
	<b>Forming Meaning .....</b>	<b>64</b>
IV.	<b>RESULTS .....</b>	<b>66</b>

<b>Rigor and Verification</b> .....	67
<b>Rigor</b> .....	68
<b>Trustworthiness</b> .....	69
<b>Participants</b> .....	69
<b>Findings</b> .....	71
<b>Collaboration</b> .....	74
<b>Familiarity</b> .....	81
<b>Experiential Learning</b> .....	84
<b>Need for Training</b> .....	86
<b>The Outside Evaluator</b> .....	89
<b>The Essential Experiences of LPs Conducting Their First IEE</b> .....	91
<b>Summary</b> .....	98
V. <b>DISCUSSION</b> .....	99
<b>Summary of the Study</b> .....	99
<b>The Researcher’s Reflections on the Qualitative Research Process</b> .....	101
<b>Discussion of Findings</b> .....	102
<b>The Essential Experiences of LPs Conducting Their First IEE</b> .....	103
<b>Licensed Psychologists’ Preparedness for Conducting Their First IEE</b> .....	108
<b>Conceptualizing the Licensed Psychologist’s Role When Providing a School-Based Service</b> .....	111
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	112
<b>Conclusions Based on Common Themes</b> .....	112
<b>Implications for Practice</b> .....	115
<b>Implications for LPs</b> .....	115
<b>Implications for LSSPs</b> .....	117
<b>Implications for School Districts</b> .....	117
<b>Strengths of the Study</b> .....	118
<b>Limitations of the Study</b> .....	118
<b>Recommendations for Further Research</b> .....	119
<b>Summary</b> .....	120
REFERENCES .....	122
APPENDICES	
A. Prescreening Items .....	133
B. Demographics Questionnaire .....	135

C. Semi-Structured Interview Guide .....	138
D. Transcribed Interviews .....	140

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Summary of Qualitative Research Phases in Relation to the Proposed Study .....	48
2. Research Aims and Their Respective Interview Questions .....	59
3. Demographic Data of Participants .....	71
4. Themes and Subthemes .....	73
5. Research Aims and Themes .....	103

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Pedagogical philosopher and educator, Paulo Freire (2000), once wrote, “Leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people... they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (Freire, 2000, p. 115). While this statement may initially present as harsh and accusatory in tone, according to Freire (2000), oppressors may not realize that they are oppressing those that they are trying to assist due to an understated power differential. Within the topic of special education, this ideology of oppressors and the oppressed can be manifested in several ways. One form of oppression that can take place in special education is by the school district appearing as the primary experts on the child, having a significant knowledge gap related to the special education law, and not considering the parent’s opinions or input during the meeting (Fish, 2008). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA; 2004), parents and selected school personnel are all members of the team that decide whether a child is eligible for special education services and what accommodations or modifications to that student’s educational programming are most appropriate. Parents may not, at times, feel as though they are part of the decision-making process since they may feel that educators dominate this process, which pressures the parents to feel obligated to agree with a decision they are not sure about (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Fish, 2008; Reiman, Beck, Coppola, & Engiles, 2010).

Educators, mental health professionals, and lawmakers have been cognizant of this perceived oppression with parents and students with special needs, which is why the federal law, the IDEA (2004), has made attempts to alleviate any perceived power differential by providing parents procedural safeguards in order to inform them of the rights of their child and their rights as parents (Fish, 2008; Reiman et al., 2010). One such method of alleviating the power differential in the special education eligibility decision-making process is by allowing parents and educators the opportunity to seek an outside evaluation from a third party to determine the presence of a disability. This third-party evaluation is called an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE; IDEA, 2004; Wright & Wright, 2014). An IEE is conducted by a professional who has, at least, the same level of training that the school district requires a professional to have in order to conduct the evaluation. IEEs are one of the essential components of the IDEA (2004) that ensure that a student with a suspected eligibility is receiving a fair and comprehensive evaluation that measures all areas of a suspected disability. More information regarding the language and criteria of IEEs will be further explored in the literature review.

These outside evaluations can be requested by a parent or school district for a variety of reasons. First, a school district may lack the qualified personnel needed to conduct the requested evaluation (Davis, McIntosh, Phelps, & Kehle, 2004). When this occurs, school districts may contract out the evaluation to a local provider who meets the minimum qualifications to complete it. This evaluator will then complete the comprehensive evaluation based on the school district's requirements for the evaluation.

The school district will provide payment for the evaluation at no cost to the student's family. When reviewing the results of the evaluation, the IDEA (2004) requires the presence of a qualified person to attend the eligibility team meeting and interpret the results. Under the IDEA (2004), an outside evaluator is determined to be a qualified person by the school district if he or she meets, at least, same criteria that the school district uses for its school-based evaluators (IDEA, 2004). Due to a lack of available personnel, in this instance, the outside professional who conducted the IEE may be asked to communicate the findings to the team, as well as share any relevant recommendations to assist in the education of the student.

A second reason an IEE may be conducted is if the parent(s) and/or the school district agree that a previous evaluation was improperly conducted, that evaluation did not measure all areas of a suspected disability, or when the integrity of the evaluation data is called into question (Wright & Wright, 2014; Yell & Drasgow, 2007). This reason assumes that an outside evaluation is needed due to significant human error from the school district that may negatively impact the accuracy of the team's decision. This may occur for a number of reasons, such as the school district's noncompliance with federal timelines to conduct the evaluation, the data of the evaluation was purposefully tampered with to suggest the presence (or lack) of a disability, numerous errors were made in the evaluation's report, and/or potential bias was noted in the evaluation results (Wright & Wright, 2014).

A third reason an IEE may be conducted is if the parents or other IEP (Individualized Education Program) team members cite reasons that the most current

evaluation data may not properly reflect the abilities of the student (Wright & Wright, 2014). This most often occurs when there is an assumption that there is an error with the instrumentation rather than human error. It can be understood that the data collected from an evaluation provides a snapshot of the student's functioning at the time. At times, however, the instruments used when conducting an evaluation may be overly sensitive or too conservative to measure an area of suspected disability and may provide false readings (Miller, 2010; Wright & Wright, 2014; Yell & Drasgow, 2007). This may also be due to several biopsychosocial factors such as fatigue, social, and environmental factors (i.e., recent changes in the family system, personal stressors, academic stressors, and/or environmental instability).

As stated, an IEE allows the evaluation data to be gathered by a qualified outside professional at the financial expense of the school district, thereby reducing any potential factors that may negatively, and significantly, impact the special education eligibility decision-making from the school district such as the influences of potential bias in the evaluation data, a lack of qualified personnel to conduct the evaluation, or an inaccurate portrayal of the student's ability. The IEE is essentially a means of controlling for any potential error from a school district's evaluation of a student when determining the presence of a disability, thus reducing the likelihood of falsely confirming or denying a student's disability. To reduce any potential harm to a student, the qualifications and training of the professional conducting the evaluation are therefore shifted from the school district and onto the professional conducting the IEE (IDEA, 2004).

There has not been any recent research investigating the training and expertise of professionals conducting IEEs. Since the information found pertaining to this topic is based on past research, it may not be reflective of present day practices. The lack of current research on this topic may be due to the fact that training and expertise might be assumed under the IDEA (2004) based on a school district's definition of a qualified evaluator and also post-licensure professional development credits that are required by state licensing boards (TSBEP, 2019). One may assume that a licensed psychologist (LP) in the state of Texas will have the requisite competence to conduct a psychoeducational evaluation, similar to a LSSP. When a psychoeducational IEE is requested from a school district, a non-school-based licensed psychologist may be asked to present the evaluation data in order to help the team determine if a student is eligible for special education (Yell & Drasgow, 2007). While the practice of conducting a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation may be based on the legal criterion that defines "qualified" individuals to conduct evaluations for a school district, the training and experiences that these qualified professionals have in conducting school-based evaluations has not been specifically explored (Hanson & Kerkhoff, 2011; Roberts, Borden, Christiansen, & Lopez, 2005).

Understanding the training, knowledge and experiences of these outside evaluators is important to not just the field of school psychology, but also to the broader profession of psychology. First, it promotes ethical standards of practice in the applied psychology field. Second, in the state of Texas, it highlights the importance of the roles of the Licensed Specialists in School Psychology (LSSPs) as professionals who are

knowledgeable in special education law; this emphasizes LSSPs as having the potential roles of being educators and trainers for non-school based LPs. Last, and most importantly, it provides an additional protection for the student with disabilities that are served in the special education system.

### **Maintaining Ethical Standards of Practice**

#### **The quality of IEEs**

In the state of Texas, the independent school districts may provide their own requirements that outside providers must comply with in order to complete an IEE (Region 4 Education Service Center, 2015). This allows individual school districts a degree of quality control over how these evaluations are conducted. In addition to requiring examiners to be equally qualified to conduct the IEE, a school district may require an examiner to observe a student in multiple structured and unstructured academic settings, interview relevant school personnel, include examples of a student's academic work, and follow the school district's model for determining a learning disability (Region 4 Education Service Center, 2015; Schrank, Miller, Caterino, & Desrochers, 2006). While this appears to minimize any potential omission or misrepresentation of the evaluation data, two potential problems may arise from this present model. The first potential problem arises when an outside evaluator fails to gather systemic qualitative data from teachers and classroom observation. In 2014, Ruth E. Ryder, the Acting Director of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), noted that IEEs are most likely to be dismissed in due process hearings when the evaluator fails

to gather qualitative data from teachers and/or conduct an observation in the academic settings (Ryder, 2014).

A hearing officer who ruled for the due process hearing, *Student v. Pittsfield Public Schools & Central Berkshire Regional School District* (2008), made a statement in his decision that the raw data, the evaluation's recommendations, and the evaluation's diagnostic conclusions from an IEE loses its credibility when the evaluation lacks data from the school and may appear to be biased in favor of the school district or parents. The hearing officer concluded that statements from teachers, a review of educational records, and relevant work samples provided by the school district were more credible than the IEE that was conducted since the academic records provided by the school district were able to describe the student's academic functioning more accurately than the outside evaluation that was publicly paid for by the school district (*Student v. Pittsfield Public Schools & Central Berkshire Regional School District*, 2008). At times, however, outside evaluators are limited to how an IEE is conducted due to their being given limited access to students and/or sensitive student information. Such limitations are based on how strictly the school districts follow the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA), which protects the privacy of student education records.

The second potential problem is the availability of qualified practitioners in a geographic region. While school districts located in large cities may have a greater selection of outside providers from which to choose when an IEE is needed, this is not likely the case in less populated or rural areas. Limited choice in selecting an outside practitioner could lead parents to question the qualifications of the practitioner and the

impartiality of the IEE process. Another concern presented by a limited choice of qualified practitioners within more rural or less populated geographic region is that it may limit the number of LPs who are available to conduct more specific assessments that vital for the requested IEE (i.e., neuropsychological batteries, assessments for non-English speaking students, assessments for students with physical disabilities, and/or assessments for students who are deaf-blind).

**Psychoeducational evaluations versus psychological evaluations.** The purpose of psychoeducational evaluations are to help determine the presence of any cognitive, academic, social, emotional, behavioral, language, or adaptive functioning deficits that may impede a student's performance in the school setting (Dombrowski, 2016). These evaluations are conducted through a systemic lens, meaning that the evaluation investigates the functioning of an individual in the assessment environment and the home, community, and school settings. In comparison, a psychological assessment may only take into consideration the standardized assessment data, qualitative information from parents via an intake interview, observations and opinions from other medical providers, and in vivo observations from the clinic-based assessment setting (Dombrowski, 2016). In addition, LPs practicing in clinical settings tend to utilize the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision, Clinical Modification (ICD-10-CM; World Health Organization) for their diagnostic decision making, whereas LSSPs rely on IDEA (2004), to determine special education eligibility (Dombrowski, 2016). Although many diagnostic labels in

the most recent DSM and ICD editions require symptoms of a disorder to occur in multiple settings, psychologists may focus on data that was collected in the clinic setting, which may lead to some inconsistencies in the diagnostic conclusions. In short, the purpose of a psychoeducational evaluation is to help determine eligibility for special education, whereas the purpose of a psychological assessment is to provide a clinical diagnosis and recommendations that are used to assist with treatment planning.

**Qualified versus competent.** When thinking of the terms *qualified* and *competent*, one may assume that the two terms are interchangeable; however, they are, in fact, two terms which measure different aspects of one's ability to perform well at a task. For the purposes of illustrating this point, under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) the term qualified refers to the formal training (e.g., obtained collegiate degree, licensure, or professional title) that a person may possess, which demonstrates that he or she is able to work in a particular position or carry certain responsibilities as opposed to those who do not possess the same qualifications (OSHA, 1970). Following the definition of qualified persons, OSHA (1970) defines the term competent; however, as the degree of applied training and experience that an individual may have obtained in their career compared to other qualified persons. Competency is also established in the work environment through performance assessments from supervisors as well as self-assessments (OSHA, 1970).

The term competency is not operationally defined in the Texas Occupations Code and appears to switch meanings depending on what the term is referring to. For instance, "competency" was used, similarly to OSHA's competency definition, to denote specific

areas of training and experiences a psychological professional may have with certain settings or professionals (Tex. Penal Code § 501.003, 1999). As noted in the Competency Requirements section of the Texas penal code, competency, appears to be related to one's ability to practice in the field of psychology from a determination of evaluating a professional's physical and mental wellbeing (Tex. Penal Code § 501.158, 1999). The latter expression of the term competency appears to refer the standards to one's health, which may impact his or her ability to practice psychology as a profession. While this meets the definition of a competency, since it's based on the evaluation of one's performance, it does not provide details related to the scope of the psychological practice provided by an individual based on the professional's specific training and experiences.

Under IDEA (2004), the term qualified appears on numerous occasions. For instance, throughout IDEA (2004), the law requires teachers to be highly qualified and for evaluation examiners to be qualified to administer and interpret the results of the evaluation. While the definition of a highly qualified teacher is defined in both IDEA (2004) and in the Every Student Succeeds Act (EESA; 2015), the definition of a qualified evaluator is left ambiguous in the legislation (for more detailed information about IDEA (2004), please refer to Chapter 2). An evaluation for special education eligibility can encompass several areas of concern related to a child's functioning, such as a child's mental health.

While IDEA (2004) does not provide a specific definition of a qualified mental health professional, a brief definition is found under the United States code (USC) title 42, chapter 6a, which defines a "qualified mental professional" as a provider "of mental

health services reimbursed under the Medicare program... [and] has additional training in the treatment of mental illness in children and adolescents or who have additional training in the treatment of mental illness in the elderly” (U. S. C. 42 §§ 254c-16, 2003). The Texas Occupations Code, section 501, provides a more detailed definition of who can provide psychological evaluations. In relation to who is able to assess and interpret results, the Texas penal code states that an individual is qualified to provide psychological evaluations if they possess a Texas license that includes “psychologist,” “psychological,” “psychology,” or an individual who is formally supervised by an individual who holds one of the former titles (Tex. Penal Code § 501.003, 1999). This definition in the Texas Occupations Code provides the minimum qualifications for an individual to conduct a psychological, psychoeducational, or neuropsychological evaluation. The code also states that the psychological professional can only provide consultation services with “other mental health professionals, physicians, school personnel, or organizations within the scope of training with respect to services provided for a specific individual” (Tex. Penal Code § 501.003, 1999). Since IDEA (2004) uses the terms qualified and competency can be defined in different ways in this context, this study will focus instead on the knowledge and experiences that LPs, who have conducted IEEs, have received that prepared them to conduct psychoeducational assessments in public school settings. In the state of Texas, LPs are qualified to conduct IEEs if they have a similar foundational knowledgebase and training requirements as LSSPs. According to the TSBEP (2019) rules, LSSPs must have graduated from a regionally accredited university, passed the Jurisprudence Examination, have training in

psychoeducational and socio-emotional assessments, had documented supervised experience in the public schools, and/or hold the Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential. In addition, LSSPs are required to have had graduate coursework in general psychological foundations, research and statistics, educational foundations, knowledge of delivering evidence-based interventions, coursework on professional ethics and legal issues (TSBEP, 2019).

### **Protecting the Welfare of Children with Disabilities and the Field of School**

#### **Psychology**

Paulo Freire, who was quoted at the beginning of this chapter, provided additional insight regarding the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed in academic settings. According to Freire, professionals who maintain cognizant and are self-aware of their training experiences and the gaps of their training can reduce the likelihood of oppressing others (2000). Therefore, Freire states that a professional's lack of self-awareness of his or her own ignorance can be detrimental to his or her own professional image and to those they are supposed to protect. Although Freire's book was in relation to the education of students in South America, some parallels can be made regarding LSSPs and LPs serving student with disabilities in the school system. In the applied field of psychology, a LSSP and a LP must strive to be aware of his or her own lack of training in a particular area in the field.

**Accountability of training.** LSSPs and LPs in Texas hold themselves accountable to not only receive training, but to also be cognizant of what training they need (Neimeyer, Taylor, & Wear, 2009; TSBEP, 2019). Outside of licensure renewal

requirements, there are few ways to hold LSSPs and LPs accountable for their professional development training beyond their own personal morals and adopted professional ethics (Fagan, Ax, Liss, Resnick, & Moody, 2007). This can, consequently, provide a potential disservice to a child with a disability since special education case rulings, special education law, special education research, and the encompassing political climate of the nation can change. Without this valuable knowledge, student with potential disabilities may not receive the correct services and may receive less effective academic programming and accommodations for their disability. According to TSBEP (2019) rules, licensees are required to have twenty hours of professional development a year. Out of these 20 hours of professional development, three of these hours must be related to ethics or professional responsibility, and another three hours must be related to cultural diversity. In addition, out of the 20 total hours, at least 10 of the professional development hours must be by a provider that is approved by the TSBEP (2019). Licensees who disregard the need for training and/or demonstrate a lack of familiarity or knowledge of a relevant topic that impacts their practice may be subject to disciplinary procedures which may require a remedial continuing education program (TSBEP, 2019). Therefore, it is vital for a licensee to hold themselves accountable for their professional development and professional development.

**Potential danger with taking the outside expert role.** While taking into consideration the potential lack of recent training in special education, outside evaluators are often called into IEP, or Admission Review and Dismissal (ARD), meetings to present their findings to the student's IEP team. Lasser and Klose (2007) noted that when

outside experts are brought into ARD meetings, there is a tendency for these experts to exert a sense of superiority with their knowledge-base. In addition, if the outside expert's knowledge is more advanced than that of the other members of the team, the team may be more likely to side with the outside expert's opinion and recommendation than have the meeting be a dialogue between members about the student's academic functioning.

According to Meshi, Biele, Kom, and Heekeren (2012), when an individual is confronted with an expert that appears to demonstrate advanced knowledge outside his or her understanding, the individual tends to be more accepting of the new information or difference of opinion. Using neural imaging, the researchers were able to determine that certain areas of the reward centers of the brain, such as the ventral striatum, were activated prior, during, and after the expert provided advice. This means that the potential influence of bias towards the opinions of outside experts can significantly influence decision making prior to the expert sharing his or her opinion. Lasser and Klose (2007) noted that experts should deflate any sense of knowledge superiority by acknowledging the expertise of the other members of the ARD team to minimize the effects of any expert bias.

Overall, the roles and responsibilities that LPs have in special education eligibility determinations are important. Not only do the LPs have to conduct the psychoeducational evaluation, but they also must communicate to the ARD committee why they concluded that a student has a disability and provide specific recommendations to assist with the student's educational programming. According to federal and state law, LPs are qualified to conduct psychoeducational evaluations (IEEs) for school districts;

however, those trained as LSSPs are likely to have more specialized training and knowledge regarding students, special education law, and the public school environment (Grapin & Kranzler, 2018). When LSSPs are not available to the school district to conduct an evaluation or when their evaluation has not been deemed acceptable by the school district or the student's parents, LPs are contracted to conduct the evaluation on behalf of the school district. It is unknown if LPs in Texas have received training in the understanding of special education law or eligibility criteria, since the Texas state licensing board for psychologists, the Texas State Board of Examiners of Psychologists (TSBEP), does not require LPs to undergo specific post-licensure training in special education; however, they still need to practice within their area of competence (TSBEP, 2019).

### **Research Questions**

There is only one principal research question that guides this study: What are the essential experiences of non-school based LPs who are conducting IEEs? Furthermore, the principal research question will be answered by investigating the three main research aims of the study:

1. Identify essential experiences of non-school based LPs conducting their first IEE.
2. Characterize non-school based LPs perspectives of their preparedness to conduct their first IEE.
3. Discover how non-school based LPs conceptualize their role in providing a school-based service.

## **List of Terms and Acronyms**

The terms in this section directly relate to the relevant topics within this research study and include, but are not limited to, topics pertaining to special education law, the training and credentialing of LPs, and various professional bodies, as well as organizations related to the field of psychology.

**APA.** Refers to the American Psychological Association, which is the largest professional organization for psychology in the United States. The in-text acronym will be used exclusively for the American Psychological Association. The American Psychiatric Association will be spelled, since it is used less frequently, in order to avoid confusion.

**ARD.** This is an abbreviation of the Admission, Review, and Dismissal teams and team meetings. In the state of Texas, ARD meetings are conducted to review a child's academic progress, IEP (see term), review evaluation results, and determine if a student is eligible for special education services. The ARD team members consist of an array of school professionals (i.e., an administrator, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, support staff, and an individual to interpret evaluation results) and the student's parent/caregiver. Other states may refer to these meetings as IEP meetings or eligibility meetings.

**Clinical psychologist.** For the purposes of this study, the term clinical psychologist refers to any LP who did not graduate from either a doctoral or

masters/specialist school psychology program. The word clinical psychologist denotes the environment in which the psychologist works, rather than the degree they have received in their graduate training.

**FIE.** This acronym refers to a student's Full and Individual Evaluation. This is a comprehensive evaluation document that is used by the ARD committee to help determine special education eligibility, the student's present levels of academic and functional performance, and helps in developing a student's IEP. This document may include data and findings from most recent/past psychoeducational evaluations, relevant medical data, academic achievement data, and evaluation data relevant to speech and occupational assessments (if applicable).

**IEE.** This term refers to an Independent Educational Evaluation, which is defined in IDEA. These are evaluations that are conducted by qualified professionals at outside agencies to help the school determine special education eligibility. The evaluations are requested and paid for by the contracting school district. For the purposes of this study, IEEs refer to psychoeducational evaluations that measure a variety of a student's functioning such as: academic achievement, intellectual ability, neuropsychological ability, behavioral functioning, and emotional functioning. The data for these psychoeducational evaluations are typically collected from the student, the parents, the school staff, numerous behavioral observations, and a review of relevant history and academic records.

**IEP.** This term refers to an Individualized Educational Program. An IEP is a document that is developed for each child who receives special education services under

IDEA (2004). A student's IEP contains specific goals and learning objectives that help the student meet his or her educational goals more easily than they otherwise would. The IEP is developed by the ARD committee and is tailored to the individual student's needs based on his or her disability. The IEP describes how the student learns and helps his or her ARD committee determine the least restrictive environment that the student requires to learn.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide relevant background information regarding the roles and training differences, as well as the similarities, of LSSPs and LPs trained in clinical psychology. As can be expected, source material related to the training that non-school based LPs have had related to special education or special education law is scarce. There is, however, a body of literature discussing the ethical principles and responsibility of LPs seeking post-licensure training in order to ensure they practice within their area of training.

This chapter covers four main areas of the current topic. The first section will provide an overview of special education law and compare the special education eligibility criteria with the diagnostic criteria provided in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The second section will compare and contrast the graduate training and post-licensure professional roles of LPs and LSSPs. The third section will compare the ethical principles of assessment and diagnostic decision making between LSSPs and LPs using the ethical codes from their respective professional associations. The last section will explore the ethical considerations of practicing within one's knowledgebase and training and the professional responsibility of a practitioner seeking additional training.

## **Special Education Law and Eligibility**

### **The Development of IDEA**

When Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1972) (i.e., Public Law 94-142) it allowed all students with special needs to have access to a free and appropriate public education, regardless of their disability (Osborne & Russo, 2014). Parents and students were provided procedural safeguards in order to protect them from potential mistreatment in public schools. This law was put into place shortly after a congressional investigation in 1972 found an overwhelming number of student across the nation with special needs who were not receiving educational services at all.

Since 1975, the law had been amended and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990) and was reauthorized in 2004 as IDEA (2004; Osborne & Russo, 2014; Yell, 2019). The most recent reauthorization of the educational law sought to provide an education that meets a child's specific needs, provide post-secondary transition services, prevent overrepresentation of minorities in special education, and further protect the rights of students and their families. The IDEA (2004) was also aligned with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which required all students to achieve state and federally mandated academic goals and objectives. Within IDEA (2004) were six main elements for providing special education services: an IEP, a Free Appropriate Public Education, a least restrictive environment, appropriate evaluation, parent-teacher participation, and procedural safeguards (Wright & Wright, 2014; Yell, 2019).

According to IDEA (2004), a student is determined to have a disability if he or she meets IDEA qualifying criteria for an intellectual disability, hearing impairment, a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment, an emotional disturbance, an orthopedic impairment, autism, a traumatic brain injury, a specific learning disability, or other health impairment. A student is determined to have special education need if their disability causes them significant impairment with their academic, social, and/or behavioral functioning in the school setting (Osborne & Russo, 2014; Wright & Wright, 2014). If a student is determined to have a disability that does not appear to have a significant impact on the student's functioning at school, the student may qualify for disability services under Section 504 the Rehabilitation Act (1973) if it is deemed appropriate (Osborne & Russo, 2014; Wright & Wright, 2014; Yell, 2019).

Under subpart D of IDEA (2004), an evaluator assessing the student must use a variety of technically sound assessment tools in order to help determine if the student meets the eligibility criteria and, when the ARD determines the student is eligible, the content of the student's IEP. The assessments being used during the evaluation must be specific to the suspected area of disability and the evaluator must assess all areas of suspected impairment. During the evaluation, prior evaluation data and academic records are reviewed in order to support a lack of academic progress (IDEA, 2004; Wright & Wright, 2014). More importantly, the determination of eligibility is not dependent on the evaluator, but rather a team of individuals consisting of, at least, the student's teachers, an administrator, an assessment interpreter, the student's parents, and other professionals

who might be able to assist with the decision-making (IDEA, 2004; Osborne & Russo, 2014).

### **Independent Educational Evaluations**

Psychoeducational evaluations in public schools provide important data when determining the special education eligibility of a student in the public school system. The evaluation helps the ARD committee determine special education eligibility and determine what accommodations and modifications will be required in a student's educational programming. State and federal regulations, as well as district policies, provide standards and assurances to parents regarding the quality of their student's evaluation. At times, however, the school may make use of an outside evaluator, such as a clinical psychologist, to complete an evaluation (IDEA, 2004). If the school district approves of the IEE, the psychoeducational evaluation will be conducted by the outside evaluator at no cost to the parents (IDEA, 2004).

An IEE is an outside evaluation initiated by either the school district or the parents of the student (IDEA, 2004). Upon the school district and parents' approval in requesting an IEE, the school district will provide to the parents a list of providers approved by the district to complete the evaluation. The outside evaluators completing the IEE for a psychological evaluation do not necessarily have to have special education training or a school psychology degree, nor do they have to have experience working in the public schools. The federal law states that an individual conducting IEE must be "minimally as qualified as [the school district's] evaluators" (IDEA, 2004; Wright &

Wright, 2014, p. 123). Further, the psychologist conducting the evaluation must be competent to conduct those services as required by their license to practice.

The district is required to consider the results of the IEE as well as the evaluation's recommendations; however, the district is not required to accept the results from the IEE (IDEA, 2004). Herein lies a potential problem for school districts, students, parents, and LSSPs: the psychologist conducting the IEE may have the minimal amount of knowledge or experience related to special education eligibility or school-based evaluations necessary to conduct the IEE. The potential problems related to a poorly conducted IEE that is not accepted by the school is that the evaluated student has missed instructional time, the student will have to make up work, and the referral questions related to the student's disability remain unanswered for the school district (Davis et al., 2004; Dombrowski, 2016). The other potential dangers of having outside evaluator with minimal special education training or experience working in the schools include an increased risk for misidentification of special education eligibility, recommendations that may be unrealistic for the school to utilize, data analysis and interpretation that varies, and procedures for conducting the evaluation that differ from the school district's standards (Davis et al. 2004; IDEA, 2014).

### **Special Education Eligibility Criteria and Labels**

As noted in subpart A of IDEA (2004), a student suspected of a disability that warrants special education programming must be eligible based on the criteria laid out by the federal law. Based on Child Find, a student with a suspected disability can be evaluated for special education eligibility regardless of whether they are attending a

public or private school (Wright & Wright, 2014). According to IDEA (2004), Child Find mandates that schools identify all students who have disabilities and require special education services. Children and students from birth to 22 years of age are all covered by Child Find (IDEA, 2004; Osborne & Russo, 2014; Yell, 2019). The determination of whether a student has a disability may require data from formalized evaluations that are requested from the school. Once the evaluations begin, the evaluator has 60 calendar days to conduct the evaluation and help the school determine if a disability exists and if the student qualifies to receive special education services (IDEA, 2004; Yell, 2019).

While IDEA (2004) mentions a number of potential disabilities protected by law, the focus of this section will be to define the special education eligibility labels that will be referred to a LSSP or a clinical psychologist conducting an IEE.

**Autism.** A student is eligible to receive special education services under the special education eligibility label of autism if he or she has had significant impairment with the development of verbal and nonverbal communication skills prior to the age of three (IDEA, 2004). In addition, students with this special education eligibility label typically engage in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, have difficulty coping with change, and are hypersensitive to sensory stimuli (IDEA, 2014). In the academic environment, these deficits significantly impact a student's social and behavioral functioning. In addition, IDEA (2004) criteria for the autism label does not deviate from the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The DSM-5 provides a more detailed diagnostic criteria for identifying students on the autism spectrum such as identifying the severity of the disorder and symptoms,

providing specifiers and comorbid conditions associated with individuals on the autism spectrum, and presenting a more in-depth description of the communication deficits and the behavioral rigidity associated with autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Based on this information, evaluations to determine the eligibility for autism may not vary significantly between a LSSP and a clinical psychologist due to the stringent diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5. Individuals diagnosed with autism typically shows signs of the disorder before they turn three years old and the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 are operationally defined in order to help the evaluator arrive at a more accurate diagnostic conclusion. It should be noted, however, that LSSPs tend to have slightly different ways and methods of diagnosing a student with autism spectrum disorder.

A national survey conducted by Akshoomoff, Corsello, and Schmidt (2006) found that LSSPs were more likely than LPs to include school and home-based observations, as well as teacher reports. Even though the LPs did not utilize a more systemic approach with their evaluations, they relied less heavily on the scores obtained on the Autism Diagnostic Observation System (ADOS), which is a standardized observation assessment that is used to help with the identification of individuals on the autism spectrum, the LPs were more likely to integrate multiple autism checklists and behavioral assessments in order to support an autism diagnosis. The LSSPs appeared to be more reliant on the results obtained on the ADOS for the autism eligibility label even though they had other measures in their test battery that focused on autism identification (Akshoomoff et al., 2006).

After reading this article, one might assume LSSPs and LPs rely on different means to achieve the same result when determining a student's eligibility for the diagnostic label of autism. However, since this article was published prior to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the authors did not differentiate children who were higher on the autism spectrum from those on the lower end of the spectrum. Since the DSM-5 includes severity levels for autism spectrum disorder, it would be much easier to analyze the data based on clinicians who assessed students with autism spectrum disorder levels one through three. In addition, students with a previous diagnosis of Asperger's disorder or pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) now fit under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorder. There is currently no literature available that updates the present study (Akshoomoff et al., 2006) with DSM-5 criteria and includes individuals with varying degrees of severity.

**Emotional disturbance.** According to IDEA (2004), 34 e-CFR § 300.8, emotional disturbance is characterized by:

... an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors; an inability to form or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers and teachers; inappropriate types of behavior or feelings in normal circumstances; a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems; symptoms of psychosis or schizophrenia that significantly impact a student's academic progress.

A student experiencing emotional disturbance is primarily characterized by a mental health, social, and behavioral impairment, as defined by IDEA (2004). For the DSM-5, emotional disturbance is not a term that is used at all, and can be seen as more of an umbrella term that comprises many mental health disorders found in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). As an umbrella term, emotional disturbance is, at times, more difficult to identify due to the varying degrees of symptomatology students exhibit (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2014). Not all students may exhibit depression or anxiety nor do all students with depression and anxiety meet the eligibility criteria for emotional disturbance. Students identified with emotional disturbance may be ineligible for certain professions after graduation such as law enforcement, military service, or becoming a park ranger; therefore, it is important for the special education eligibility label to be accurate (Wright & Wright, 2014; Yell, 2019).

IDEA (2004) eligibility criteria for emotional disturbance cannot be situational (i.e., a student feels depressed and withdrawn after their parents filed for divorce). If behavior, related to emotional disturbance, was deliberate, planned, and within the control of student, the student would qualify for social maladjustment rather than emotional disturbance (Cloth, Evans, Becker, & Paternite, 2014). Unlike emotional disturbance, social maladjustment is not a disability protected by IDEA (2004; Yell, 2019). At times, a student exhibiting signs of social maladjustment may, in fact, meet the eligibility criteria for emotional disturbance (Cloth et al., 2014; Sullivan & Sadeh, 2014). For example, a student, with a prior diagnosis of bipolar I disorder, who yells and argues with his teacher and peers, may appear to be socially maladjusted due to the apparent

oppositional and aggressive behavior; however, since bipolar I disorder is a psychiatric disorder, the student's actions may not be intentional. In this case, the student may be eligible for special education under the emotional disturbance label.

Since emotional disturbance is a difficult special education eligibility diagnostic label to pinpoint, LSSPs have specialized in distinguishing between emotional disturbance and social maladjustment due to their expertise and knowledge in both psychological services and in special education law (Fisher, Doyon, Saldaña, & Allen, 2007). However, emotional disturbance can be easily misidentified without this expertise and knowledge due to broad criteria and widely varied presentation (Sullivan & Sadeh, 2014). Psychological practitioners unfamiliar with either the emotional disturbance and/or social maladjustment terminology may have difficulty differentiating the two terms, as well as diagnostically parsing out their differences, more-so than a practitioner with more training and experience with individuals with emotional disturbance (Fisher et al., 2007).

**Other health impairment.** Other health impairment (OHI) is another umbrella term regarding special education eligibility labels. While the term may mean a number of different medical related difficulties such as narcolepsy, a traumatic brain injury, or a seizure disorder, it also includes the medical diagnosis of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD; Schnoebelen, Perez, & Stavinoha, 2008; Wright & Wright, 2014). The DSM-5 describes ADHD as a “persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 61). After the release of the DSM-5, the age of onset at which a

child can be diagnosed with ADHD was expanded to the age of 12 years (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals must display some symptoms before the age of 12. This number differs greatly from the age of onset stated in the prior edition of the DSM, which was an age of onset before 7 years of age (Taylor, 2011). The rationale of increasing the age of onset was due to data supporting the initial identification of ADHD symptoms in individuals that appeared to occur past the age of 7 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Students diagnosed with ADHD appear to have significant deficits in adaptive functioning in comparison to their peers (Barkley, 2014; Dawson & Guare, 2012). This deficit in adaptive functioning has been shown to be anywhere from 1.5 to 2 standard deviations below the mean. Barkley (2014) states that the difference between children with ADHD and typically developing children may be due to the disparity of a child's ability and performance since adaptive behavior measures assess a child based on typical behavior of that age rather than cognitive abilities.

Because of this important diagnostic change, student who may not exhibit some of the more overt ADHD symptoms at an early age can still receive the diagnostic label if symptoms have been observed during late elementary school. Barkley (2014) noted that the symptom presentations of ADHD between girls and boys were significantly different. He stated that boys tended to be identified more than girls due to boys exhibiting more externalizing and observable symptoms compared to girls. Barkley (2014) found that girls tend to be diagnosed at an older age than boys since their symptoms related to impulsivity are more easily identified when their schooling is more structured and the coursework is more rigorous. While a LP may be able to easily identify a student with

ADHD, an accurate diagnosis may require investigating the age of onset of symptoms by collecting data from the parents and the child's school (Barkley, 2014; Miller, 2010; Wright & Wright, 2014).

**Specific learning disability.** Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) have received a considerable amount of attention over the past decade with the popularity of the evaluation approach identified as Response to Intervention (RTI). Under IDEA (2004), SLD is characterized as a disorder in which a student has difficulty processing and/or producing written language, spoken language, following the rules of language, mathematical calculation, following mathematical procedures, and/or having the presence of an aphasia. In addition, these impairments are not the result of any visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, as well as other special education eligibility labels, such as emotional disturbance (Herr & Bateman, 2013). Of all the categories of disability defined in IDEA (2004), the category of SLD is the only one for which specific evaluation procedures and criteria are provided (Wright & Wright, 2014). In the past, school districts would identify students with an SLD when they had a significant discrepancy between their IQ and academic achievement scores; however, IDEA (2004) did not define "severe discrepancy" very well, which led to many students being overidentified with an SLD (Herr & Bateman, 2013).

In 2006, federal law was altered so that states can provide alternate means to identify SLD other than measuring a severe discrepancy. Therefore, IEP planning teams can use one of the three following criteria to determine SLD in a student: the child has not achieved in his or her academic ability based on age or state grade-level standards,

there is a lack of academic progress with the student's overall achievement, and/or the student exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in his or her performance (Herr & Bateman, 2013; Yell, 2019). Due to the confusion and varied state regulations regarding IDEA (2004) SLD identification, many procedural errors have since occurred nationwide (Herr & Bateman, 2013).

The DSM-5 changed the diagnostic criteria for a SLD so that a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation is required for diagnosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), a comprehensive evaluation consists of looking at not only obtained assessment scores, but also factoring in the student's developmental, family, and academic history. This is a significant improvement from the DSM-IV's diagnostic criteria for SLD, which required a significant discrepancy between IQ and achievement (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

### **The Training and Roles of Psychological Practitioners**

Minke and Brown (1996) compared the curriculum of both clinical and school psychology APA accredited doctoral programs across the nation. They found that clinical and school psychology doctoral students shared similar training and expertise in working with children in the broad domains of assessment and intervention. Clinical psychology students were more prepared to intervene with students who had severe psychopathology; however, school psychology students were much more competent in consultation, program evaluation, special education, general education, and systems-based services. Minke and Brown (1996) found that clinical psychology graduate

students were more likely to receive school-based training and experiences during the pre-doctoral internship or postdoctoral fellowship. Although the results from this publication are approximately two decades old, it does provide insight into the training that many LPs, who are still practicing today, received prior to practicing independently.

Since Minke and Brown's study was published in 1996, a more recent study in 2015 examined the characteristics of internship applicants between school and clinical psychology programs; the study did not include counseling psychology programs in its analysis. Mahoney, Perfect, and Edwinston (2015) found that at the pre-internship stage, there were no significant differences between the clinical skills of school and clinical psychology students. They noted that, despite similarities in clinical skills, clinical psychology pre-doctoral interns tend to have double the number of eligible accredited internship sites to apply to than school psychology pre-doctoral applicants based on an analysis of the Association of Psychology Postdoctoral and Internship Centers (APPIC) internship directory. In addition, the researchers looked at the direct and indirect services hours between school and clinical psychology interns. They found that clinical psychology doctoral interns had significantly more direct intervention hours; however, school psychology pre-doctoral interns wrote significantly more integrated assessment reports (Mahoney et al., 2015). This study claims that clinical and school psychology graduate training are more similar than what was depicted from the Minke and Brown (1996) study. It should be noted, however, that the clinical experiences received during internship may significantly impact the training and expertise of the pre-doctoral intern.

## **Licensed Psychologists**

In order to become licensed as a psychologist in Texas an individual must hold a doctoral degree in psychology from an accredited institution, pass the Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology (EPPP), pass the state Jurisprudence Examination, provide 2 years of documented supervised experience from a licensed psychologist, and provide documentation of completing a formal psychological internship (TSBEP, 2019). LPs are eligible to provide a variety of services, including assessments, clinical interventions, consultation, and research, provided they have competence in that area of expertise (APA, 2019). They can work in a variety of settings, such as clinics, universities, hospitals, or private practice; however, they can also be employed by public school systems to provide psychological services to students if they have also received the LSSP credential (TSBEP, 2019).

LPs with doctoral degrees in clinical psychology, with a pediatric focus, specialize in working with children, have specified knowledge and experience related to the diagnosis and treatment of developmental disorders, and are trained to work with severe psychopathology in children, which is categorized in the DSM-5. The word “clinical” psychologist denotes the environment in which the psychologist works, rather than the degree they have received in their graduate training. Clinical psychologists typically do not receive formalized training in special education, educational law, or receive applied experience in school-based practicum settings while in their graduate training program (Rodriguez-Menendez, Dempsey, Albizu, Power, & Wilkerson, 2017).

## **Licensed Specialists in School Psychology**

School psychology is an applied field that is predominantly made up of specialist-level practitioners. This means that practitioners have had at least 60 credit hours of graduate training plus a one-year school-based internship placement prior to licensure. LSSPs have specialized knowledge of school wide practices, are able to collaborate with families and school personnel, and remain current with changes in legal or ethical standards in the field of school psychology and special education (Fagan & Wise, 2007). Professionals in school psychology have specific and unique knowledge of educational programming, district policies, state laws, and federal regulations regarding special education. This specialized and narrow focus is what sets LSSPs apart from LPs (Grapin & Kranzler, 2018).

In Texas, the standards of practice and licensure for a Licensed Specialist in School Psychology parallel the requirements set forth by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) for the Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) credential (NASP, 2010a; TSBEP, 2019). In the state of Texas, LPs can be dually licensed with their LSSP as well if they meet the licensing requirements set forth by the state licensing board (TSBEP, 2019).

## **Differences in Roles of LSSPs and LPs**

It should be noted that an evaluation conducted by a LSSP and one conducted by a LP may differ in purpose and conceptualization. When LSSPs conduct psychoeducational assessments, their goal is to understand the student's present level of academic performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and understand the academic

and behavioral functioning of a student from a systemic lens (Dombrowski, 2016). Recommendations are made to enhance a student's educational programming and improve the student's performance within the system by using evidence-based practices that are realistic, promote a least restrictive environment, and support a free appropriate public education.

A LSSP's psychoeducational evaluation is focused more-so on whether the student meets special education eligibility for the purposes of helping a system understand the academic needs of the child rather than providing a clinical diagnosis (Fagan & Wise, 2007). When LPs conduct school-based psychoeducational evaluations, they are having to conduct the evaluations in the same manner as that of an LSSP might conduct the school-based evaluation, which may differ to how they conduct an evaluation in a clinical setting (Dombrowski, 2016). According to psychologist and author, Jerome Sattler (2008), a sufficient psychoeducational evaluation consists of considering a student's behavioral and academic functioning in multiple settings and at various points of time. The evaluator conducting the school-based evaluation is required to consider a student's behavioral functioning based on multiple observations in various settings (Fagan & Wise, 2007).

### **Ethical Obligations for School and Clinical Psychology Practitioners**

Various divisions within the applied fields of psychology have provided ethical guidelines to which psychological practitioners should adhere in order to improve their trade. These codes of ethics have been put in place to protect the people with whom psychological practitioners work. According to Bersoff (2012), maintaining an ethical

code in the field of psychology creates a set of standards or rules that psychologists must abide by to uphold the professionalism and responsibilities of the field. Ethical codes can serve as a guide to help practitioners resolve moral dilemmas while, at the same time, reflect the moral integrity of the field to the public. APA and NASP have their own sets of ethical codes that they expect psychological professionals to abide by. While both sets of codes are, in many ways, similar to one another, the NASP ethical codes (NASP, 2010a; NASP, 2010b) pertain more to the field of education, whereas the codes set forth by APA provide a general ethical guideline for the entire profession of psychology (APA, 2019).

### **APA Ethical Guidelines**

LPs who conduct IEEs follow the APA ethical guidelines to help them maintain fair and ethical practices in their work. The APA ethical guidelines were developed around the five General Principles where ensure that all psychological professionals practice in an ethical manner (APA, 2019). These five General Principles are: beneficence, fidelity, integrity, justice, and a respect for people's rights and dignity (APA, 2019). In addition, the APA ethical guidelines consist of ten ethical standards for practice that help LPs, and other psychological practitioners, make moral and ethical decisions that uphold the five General Principles. For the purposes of this study the second of the five ethical standards will be discussed. This ethical standard was chosen to highlight the standards of training and experience of psychological practitioners set forth by APA, regardless of specialization.

The second ethical standard highlights the need for LPs to practice in settings that

they have had sufficient experience and training in (APA, 2019). Subsection one, paragraph (a), states that LPs should only practice within areas in which they have been formally educated, trained, supervised, or have formal experience. This post licensure training can come in the form of professional development, consultation, or other areas in which the individual can improve their training and knowledge (APA, 2019). In addition, subsection four states that one's level of competence is also based on one's ability to make professional judgments by applying prior learned knowledge of the field. Under this ethical standard, LPs, who conduct IEEs have had sufficient training and experiences assessing children and working with school districts.

Based on subsection one paragraph (d) in the APA ethical guidelines, in regard to training, LPs that are asked to perform a specific service in which they are not competent, but which loosely relates to their prior professional experiences, can provide services with the expectation that they will receive training prior to performing the service (APA, 2019). Based on this subsection of the APA ethical standards, a LP who performs pediatric psychological evaluations in a private practice, can perform psychoeducational evaluations in the schools, as an independent evaluator, if they are practicing within their area of competence; meaning that they have knowledge of special education law and understand public education. According to the TSBEP (2019) acts and rules, a licensee can, “only provide services for which they have the education, skills, and training to perform competently” (465.9 (a)). Furthermore, the TSBEP (2019) acts and rules note that when licensees perform psychological services in an unfamiliar area, they must first undergo training, supervision, and/or consultation from another professional who is

competent to provide services in the unfamiliar area. If a licensee determines that they are not competent to perform a service, they must withdraw and refer the needed service to a professional who is competent to perform the service (TSBEP, 2019). Therefore, it is up to the LPs to determine if they are competent to conduct an IEE. If they determine that they are not competent, then they must seek additional training opportunities and consult with a competent practitioner, such as a dual licensee with their LSSP, in order for them to gain competence. This section highlighted the ethical standards, set by APA, for LPs practicing in settings where they have demonstrated competence in. LPs who wish to conduct IEEs and lack competence to do so, must acquire the sufficient training and supervised experience in order to become competent.

### **NASP's Principles for Professional Ethics**

Whereas the APA ethical guidelines were established to create a standard for most licensed psychological practitioners, the Principles for Professional Ethics, written by NASP (2010a), provide a foundational framework for practicing LSSPs as well as specific guidelines for working in the schools. These ethical guidelines consist of four broad standards of practice, which are also divided into ethical principles that LSSPs are to follow. The four standards of practice consist of respecting the dignity and rights of all persons, professional competence and responsibility, honesty and integrity in professional relationships, and responsibility to schools, families, communities, the profession, and society (NASP, 2010a). LPs conducting IEEs can refer to the NASP ethical guidelines as a reference to how LSSPs define competence, training, and experience in the school settings.

Under the competence and responsibility principle from the NASP ethical guidelines, a set of standards informs LSSPs to recognize the strengths and limitations of their training experience (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2007). These ethical practices are similar to the competency standards from the APA ethical guidelines. It should be noted, however, that the NASP ethical guidelines have standards under this principle that specify how a LSSP should select assessment instruments for the evaluation (NASP, 2010a). Under subsection three of the competence and responsibility standard, LSSPs are directed to select statistically sound assessments and utilize a variety of different types of information from various sources when conducting a psychoeducational evaluation. In addition, prior to recommending a special-education disability label for a student, a LSSP is also ethically obligated to consider the potentially harmful effects of having such a label on the student's academic record. The ethical guidelines also note the importance of using prior academic and psychoeducational records when making a diagnostic decision for special education eligibility (NASP, 2010a).

The first principle under the fourth standard of practice in the NASP ethical guidelines states that LSSPs must be highly knowledgeable of the school setting, organization of the school system, the culture of public schools, and the laws and regulations which bound and guide LSSPs in practice (NASP, 2010a). Since LSSPs have a familiarity with and knowledge of the school system, their training is enhanced when working with students in a school-based setting (Dougherty, 2014; Fagan & Wise, 2007). LPs who conduct IEEs can benefit from referring to the NASP ethical guidelines since

they are conducting a school-based evaluation in lieu of a school-based practitioner, LSSP.

### **APA and NASP Standards Relating to Psychological Evaluations**

When comparing the assessment standards of the APA and NASP ethical guidelines, the NASP ethical guidelines are narrowly focused to provide LSSPs with a detailed and structured set of guidelines for practice within the schools. The APA guidelines, in contrast, are intended as broad guidelines for best practice for any type of psychologist. Because school psychologists are primarily employed in schools and one of their primary duties is assessment of students, the NASP guidelines communicate the standards for a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation that is based on special education law (IDEA, 2004; NASP, 2010a). These ethical guidelines provide a distinct standard for psychological professionals who are conducting a psychoeducational evaluation in the school setting.

### **School-based Psychoeducational Evaluations**

Unlike private practitioners, school districts must annually report the number of eligibility evaluations they conducted, the number of grievances with parents that occurred, whether the evaluation was conducted within the specified timeline, and if the evaluation was compliant with IDEA (2004). With the standards set forth by IDEA (2004), the states, school districts, and NASP, school-based psychoeducational assessments appear to be held to a very high standard. A school-based psychoeducational evaluation looks at the student's academic and behavioral performances through several ecological lenses (Sattler, 2008). The evaluation takes place across multiple school days

rather than one all-day testing session. The LSSP communicates with teachers, and other school staff, to coordinate potential direct observation opportunities and opportunities that allow the student to leave the classroom environment and continue testing. In addition, the LSSP reviews prior academic records and standardized test data from the student's cumulative folder (Fagan & Wise, 2007). This allows the LSSP to identify patterns of performance, identify downward or upward trends in academic progress, and to identify when the student first began having difficulty.

Best practices for school-based evaluations suggest gathering data from the student's various systems such as his or her teacher(s), the parents, and the student in order to better understand the perceptions of these individuals towards the student and the suspected disability (Sattler, 2008). The school evaluator will then consult with other evaluators on the multidisciplinary team and integrate their findings with results from the psychoeducational evaluation. During the IEP eligibility meeting, the LSSP will present the evaluation results and provide a diagnostic recommendation to the team regarding whether the student requires special education programming. If the parent disagrees with the evaluation, he or she has the right to object to the results and request additional assessment.

### **Independent Educational Evaluations**

As part of the procedural safeguards, parents have a right to an IEE if they disagree with the results of their child's psychoeducational evaluation (IDEA, 2004). As previously noted, an IEE is an evaluation conducted by a qualified examiner who is not employed by the district (IDEA, 2004). The district must pay for the IEE if the school-

based evaluation was not sufficient or if a due process complaint has been filed to show that the school district's evaluation was inappropriate (Zirkel, 2009). The school district will not pay for an outside evaluation if the evaluation is considered to be comprehensive and sufficient to answer the referral question. After the parent has been granted permission to have an IEE for his or her child, the school district may provide the parent with a list of evaluators they have used in the past, or the parent is free to choose their evaluator with the stipulation that the outside evaluator is not a biased source (Zirkel, 2009).

**In-group versus out-group assessment evaluators.** Part of the culture of school districts reflects an in-group and out-group mentality regarding how school staff interact with outsiders to their schools (Fagan & Wise, 2007; Sattler, 2008). Fagan and Wise reported that building-based LSSPs establish more cohesion and rapport with teachers and other school staff than LSSPs that are not based at the campus. The idea of an outside professional coming into the school may influence how the evaluator interacts with the teachers (Sattler, 2008). Without establishing proper rapport, "outsider" LSSPs may unintentionally bias their assessment data when talking to teachers, paraprofessionals, or administrators since they have yet to establish a working relationship with that individual. During behavioral observations, a teacher may not act naturally within the classroom setting, therefore potentially invalidating the observation (Sattler, 2008).

A LP conducting an IEE is even more of an outsider (Hurewitz, & Kerr, 2011). Private practitioners with no school-based experience may have a basic level of

knowledge of special education law so they can conduct evaluations for the schools; however, their knowledge of schools and special education law are not typically at the level of expertise of an LSSP. According to Zirkel (2009), judicial outcomes in eligibility hearings often side with the LSSP as the expert witness rather than with the LP. While this is true, however, federal and state laws view outside evaluators as sufficient to evaluate a student for special education eligibility and to conduct a school-based psychoeducational evaluation (IDEA, 2004; TSBEP, 2019).

### **Professional Development Training**

After licensure, LPs and LSSPs are required to maintain their knowledge and training through professional development (Lichtenberg & Goodyear, 2012; Wise et al., 2010). Although the APA Ethics Code notes that maintaining one's training and education is a professional and ethical obligation, there is very little guidance on how this is measured, other than LPs and LSSPs submitting professional development credits to TSBEP in order to maintain licensure. The Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards (ASPBB) noted that many accredited professional development opportunities for psychological practitioners lack the post-training outcome measures (i.e., self-assessment, self-study) that other professional bodies, such as medical boards, require for their licensed practitioners (Hunsley et al., 2016). An ASPBB meeting in 2009 noted that even when a self-evaluation is provided, psychological practitioners are typically provided their professional development for their training before an assessment of their knowledge is given. This poses the ethical dilemma of whether psychological practitioners have retained the knowledge of a specific topic when they have been

presented foundational information over a topic with which they were not familiar prior to their training (Knapp & Strum, 2002; Roberts et al., 2005).

**Formal versus informal training.** APA's final report from the task force on professional competence and training provided guidelines and definitions for what constitutes formal and informal training in professional development. As noted from the final report, clinicians are asked to seek post-licensure training opportunities from more structured formalized training (APA, 2006). Formalized training is defined as accredited workshops, classes, or webinars that apply the latest research findings or information provided from (an) expert(s) in the applicable research field or practice. Formalized trainings are typically standardized in their structure and training objectives. At the end of the formalized training, individuals will be assessed in some fashion in order to demonstrate their increased understanding of the training's subject area (i.e., pre-posttest survey, written exam, post-training self-study, or a follow-up survey). Formalized training is considered the standard when it comes to professional development training since it demonstrates learning and understanding (APA, 2006; Knapp & VandeCreek, 2012).

Informal training is a continuing of knowledge and training that builds upon the learning objectives that one gained from formal training experiences (APA, 2006). These experiences can be based on anecdotal experiences in the applied psychology field, reading from peer-reviewed journals, attending unaccredited workshops or webinars, reading books related to the subject, seeking peer supervision, or asking an expert in the field a specific question related to the subject matter (APA, 2006). Shapiro and Smith

(2011) noted that LPs who were unaware of their professional obsolescence typically relied more on informal training modalities, rather than formal training, when they were seeking knowledge outside their area of competence. Private practice LPs typically seek out informal training opportunities for specialized topics, such as special education, because they either lack the funding for the formalized training, they feel they do not have time to complete formalized training, and/or the informal training resources are more readily available to them (Wise et al., 2010).

**Experiential learning.** In addition to formal and informal training modalities, the individual experiences that LPs have had in the clinical setting may enhance their understanding and learning on how to function in a particular system. Experiential learning is the theory that a learner can form understanding of a system or situation through firsthand experience, reflection of one's prior knowledge, and the evaluation of one's firsthand experience that relates back to the prior knowledge (Kolb & Kolb, 2010; Kuk & Holst, 2018). Experiential learning plays a large role of the development of clinical skills in clinical and school psychology graduate students through various practica and externship experiences (Heath, Holmqvist, & Gosselin, 2017). During these experiences, graduate students have to apply the prior learned experiences of their graduate coursework to applied settings. During the reflection and evaluation stages of the experiential learning process, the graduate student is provided supervision by an experienced licensed practitioner who aids and evaluates the graduate student in developing their skills in these applied settings. Heath et al. (2017) noted that licensed psychologists can utilize experiential learning as a means of maintaining professional

competency through professional development by collaborating and consulting with professionals who are knowledgeable and experienced in the field.

### **Summary**

This chapter reviewed the topics that are included in this study. First there was an overview of special education law as it pertains to psychoeducational evaluations in public schools. There was a brief comparison of special education eligibility criteria and diagnostic criteria found in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The second section compared the graduate training and professional licensure of LPs and LSSPs as well as their roles in conducting psychoeducation evaluations. The ethical principles of APA and NASP were used to highlight the differences and similarities between the two professions regarding assessment and diagnostic decision making. The final section offered a brief exploration of the ethical considerations of practicing within one's knowledgebase and training and the professional responsibility of a practitioner to seek training as needed.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an introduction and overview for the qualitative study used to investigate the training and professional experiences that LPs have had regarding IEEs and special education law. This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section describes the rationale for using a qualitative methodology and a description of the qualitative research process. The second section discusses the researcher's qualifications and bias to conduct the proposed qualitative study. The next section explores the recruitment strategy and description of the participants that was used in this study. This is followed by confidentiality assurances and potential risks. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's analysis approach.

#### **Qualitative Research Process**

Moustakas (1990) identified six specified procedural steps of the qualitative research process. The six phases are as follows: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. The initial engagement consists on the development of one's research interest and an initial research question. During this phase, the researcher also explores his or her own biases. The second step is called immersion, in which the researcher encounters experiences that provide knowledge and understanding towards the research questions and aims. Within the immersion phase,

the researcher conducts interviews, engages in self-discovery and indwelling (Moustakas, 1990).

The third and fourth steps are related to incubation and illumination. The researcher is tasked to take a step back from the information that has been collected in the study and return to the data to look at it with a fresh perspective. The illumination phase is when a breakthrough occurs through the incubation stage. An example of the incubation stage is related to the pre-coding process when the researcher begins to observe patterns in the responses. The next phase Moustakas (1990) mentioned was the explication phase. During this phase, the researcher is tasked to provide coding labels to meaningful chunks of information. As recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), the researcher will keep notes and journal entries of personal reactions that can also aid in the coding process. Lastly, the creative synthesis phase of the study is explored when the researcher has obtained an intimate understanding of the components and core themes of the phenomenon of the study. The aim of this phase is for the researcher to present an amalgamation of the knowledge in a way that can be understood by others (Moustakas, 1990). Table 1 further illustrates the qualitative research process as described by Moustakas (1990).

Table 1

*Summary of Qualitative Research Phases in Relation to the Proposed Study*

Moustaka’s Suggested Steps	Completed Actions	Date
<u>Initial Engagement</u>		
Discover an interest	Chose a topic of interest as a basis of the research study	Spr-17

Form a question and aims of the study	Committed to studying the experiences of LPs who conduct IEEs	Spr-19
Intuitively turn inwards and reflect experiences related to the topic	Researcher self-identifies biases and qualifications to complete the study.	Spr-19
<u>Immersion</u>		
Maintaining focus to the numerous possibilities for gaining understanding to the research question	Recruit and interview participants	Jun-19 – Jul-19
Form a question and aims of the study	Keep a personal log of experiences throughout the analysis process	May-19 – Jul-19
<u>Incubation</u>		
Retreat from intense absorption and focus on the research question	Review transcriptions after interviews	Jun-19
Experience breakthrough of the qualities inherent in the question and return to the data	Begin to recognize patterns in the responses and potential codes for the responses	Jun-19
<u>Illumination</u>		
Experience breakthrough of the qualities inherent in the question and return to the data	Begin to recognize patterns in the responses and potential codes for the responses	Jun-19
<u>Explication</u>		
Fully examine the research material again	Begin to recognize patterns in the responses and potential codes for the responses	Jun-19 – Jul-19
Develop a comprehensive understanding of dominant themes of the experience	Create a coding scheme using the transcriptions	Jun-19 – Jul-19
	Complete the cross-coding process	Jul-19

	Establish 90% intra-coder reliability. Coded all transcripts with integrated categorization system	Jul-19
<u>Creative Synthesis</u>		
Develop individual depictions for each participant	Create individual depictions	Jul-19
Develop a composite depiction	Create a composite depiction	Jul-19
Develop a creative synthesis of the experience	Create a creative synthesis of the experience	Jul-19

### **Research Question**

There is only one principal research question that guided this study: What are the essential experiences of non-school based LPs who are conducting IEEs? The principal research question was answered by investigating the three main research aims of the study:

1. Identify essential experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE.
2. Characterize LPs perspectives of their preparedness to conduct their first IEE.
3. Discover how LPs conceptualize their role in providing a school-based service.

### **Rationale for the Qualitative Study**

A qualitative methodology was chosen to investigate the research aims by exploring the personal experiences that non-school based LPs have had regarding conducting IEEs and their training in special education law. One of the founding principles of qualitative research is that it focuses on the importance of exploring and interpreting individual

experiences rather than determining a cause and effect, describing facts, or determining a population distribution (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rather, qualitative research is interested in uncovering the meaning of specific phenomena that is comprised by many differing realities that are colored by the perceptions and interactions of the individual (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, this methodology was selected to provide greater insight into what each of the previously discussed factors may mean to each participant. The strength in qualitative research lies in its responsiveness and flexibility to situation-specific factors. With qualitative research there is more freedom to alter the line of questioning based on the data that you are receiving at that given moment. This methodology significantly differs from that of quantitative research, which relies more on the standardization of the instrumentation and sufficient population sampling for the study to yield significant results (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). More specifically, quantitative research methods generally employ standardized instruments, which minimizes the depth in which individuals can choose to respond (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study required both the flexibility to alter the trajectories of interviews and freedom to explore in greater depth the issues that are most salient to the population of interest.

The impetus for this study stemmed from the fact that the literature regarding IEEs is sparse and the studies focusing on IEEs are relatively old or may be presented from a school district, parent, or school psychology perspective (Fish, 2008; Schrank et al., 2006). Understanding the knowledge and experiences that LPs have in conducting IEEs are important for other LPs seeking to contract with a school district to conduct

IEEs. In addition, it was the goal of the researcher to also help school-based providers, such as LSSPs, understand the experiences of LPs who conduct IEEs. The researcher hoped to increase LSSPs understanding of the “outsider looking in” experiences of LPs who provided school-based services can help promote communication and understanding between both parties and ensure that students are receiving comprehensive psychoeducational evaluations.

### **Researcher Qualifications and Bias**

**Researcher qualifications.** Because potential biases can affect the data collection process with qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), it is best practice to disclose researcher qualifications and biases when conducting a qualitative study. As the primary researcher in this study, I am currently a doctoral candidate at Texas Woman’s University working to earn my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in School Psychology. I also attended Abilene Christian University where I earned my Bachelor of Science (BS) degree in psychology and a Specialist in School Psychology (SSP) degree.

While pursuing my academic pursuits, I have been employed over the past ten years in a variety of settings in the psychological field, including school districts, outpatient clinics, community mental health centers, and residential settings. My accrued supervised experiences have allowed me to view the field of psychology from the lens of a school psychology practitioner that has had clinical experiences. Most of my applied experiences have been in school-based settings; however, over the past 6 years my experiences outside the schools have included clinical neuropsychology assessments,

group therapy with children and adults, and individual psychotherapy with children and adults. As a practicum student, clinical extern, and psychometrician I have completed a number of pediatric psychological and neuropsychological assessments having a variety of referral questions, with some of the referrals being IEEs.

In regard to research experiences, all of my research experiences have been quantitative in nature; however, some of the research studies in which I have participated have taken a mixed-methods approach by utilizing some qualitative responses from participants, parents, and teachers regarding the effectiveness of video self-modeling (VSM). Knowing that this is my first in depth attempt at qualitative research, I have sought out resources to further my knowledge on qualitative research such as reading books and articles on how to conduct and analyze a qualitative study and I have also consulted with experienced qualitative researchers regarding my research design and implementation. In the spirit of the qualitative research process, in which that insight towards the research question can evolve as the study progresses, I developed my knowledge and understanding of qualitative research by seeking ongoing consultation and literature to enrich my knowledge.

**Researcher bias.** I am invested in my current research topic due to my past experiences as a supervisee of several LPs in non-school based clinical settings. My non-school based supervisors practiced in the private practice setting and had significant training and expertise in clinical psychology and neuropsychology; however, their experiences related to their understanding of special education eligibility criteria (i.e., conducting IEEs) was minimal in their knowledge. Nevertheless, all of my non-school

based supervisors demonstrated and modeled good ethical practice by reading about the topic or consulting with others who had more knowledge regarding special education eligibility criteria when those issues arose in supervision.

After these experiences, I began to wonder if other non-school based LPs who conduct IEEs were as self-aware of their need for training in special education law, specifically related to special education, as my supervisors were. This line of thinking was inherently biased since it assumed that all LPs have not had training in special education eligibility criteria or law. Why was this bias towards LPs occurring? After much reflection, I determined that there were two reasons that reinforced my bias. First, it was due to my desire to advocate for children with disabilities to make sure they receive services from trained professionals. Secondly, I also had an implicit bias towards LPs who conduct psychoeducational evaluations and who have not had training in school psychology.

I addressed this potential bias in my study by structuring my questions in a manner to allow disconfirmation. I used a semi-structured open-ended interview format that offered the participants autonomy in the way they chose to answer the provided questions. Therefore, the responses from the participants determined the course of the interviews. The interviews were structured to ensure that the participants will feel comfortable asking questions and freely discussing relevant issues that pertain to their experiences.

## Data Collection

### Participants

A nonprobability-based sampling, otherwise known as criterion-based sampling, was used for this study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Criterion-based sampling is often used when a researcher aims to discover, understand, and gain insight regarding phenomena from individuals that share common characteristics or attributes. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) there are various types of criterion-based sampling that can help maximize the quality of the information gathered in the study (e.g., typical, unique, maximum variation, convenience, and snowball sampling). For the purposes of this study, snowball sampling was used to increase the response rate and the number of potential participants based on the following criteria: the individual must be an LP with an active license in the state of Texas, the individual does not have the LSSP credential, the individual's practice is not based in a school setting, and the individual has been contracted to conduct IEEs by a school district in the past 5 years.

**Recruitment.** The study initially sought five participants who are LPs and were willing participate in a semi structured interview either by phone or online video conferencing (i.e., Skype or Google Hangout). According to Creswell & Poth (2017) five to 20 participants are considered sufficient for an exploratory phenomenological study; however, the researcher can deviate slightly from these recommended numbers if the population is small in number. The initial pool of participants were gathered from a database search of Texas Psychological Association members and the members from all active Texas regional psychology associations (i.e., Dallas Psychological Association,

Capital Area Psychological Association, Houston Psychological Association, Psychological Association of Greater West Texas, etc.). The search criteria that was used, on the respective psychological association websites, was if the LP conducted educational evaluations, worked with children and adolescents, and if he or she has an active license as a psychologist. Out of these search criteria, the researcher was able to generate a list of 156 emails of LPs in Texas who met these criteria. Out of the 156 LPs that were emailed, three LPs responded with interest in participating in the study; however, only two of the three qualified for the study. Additionally, the LPs that participated in the interview portion of the study were asked at the end of the study if they could provide the contact information of other LPs who would be interested in participating in the study. This snowball sampling method garnered an additional LP who consented to participate in the study. Three participants were considered sufficient for this study based on the recommended sample size by Creswell and Poth (2017) and also due to the fact that the population size being investigated was very specific and small in number.

This study was conducted in three phases. Phase 1 consisted of recruiting qualified potential participants to participate in Phases 2 and 3. This phase required potential participants to sign and complete the consent form and the pre-screening questionnaire. Phase 2 consisted of participants answering a basic demographic questionnaire and scheduling the interview with the researcher. Finally, Phase 3 consisted of participating in an interview with the researcher.

**Survey data collection.** The researcher initially emailed 156 LPs who met the criteria for the study. This recruitment email contained a link to the PsychData website where potential participants were directed to complete Phase 1 of the study. Phase 1 consisted of reading and accepting the informed consent, then answering pre-screening questionnaire (see Appendix A). Information collected in the pre-screening questionnaire was conducted in a confidential manner and participants were given the option of providing their names or other identifying information. LPs who either did not accept the informed consent or did not meet the selection criteria in the pre-screening questions were exited from the survey and thanked for their time. Those who continued in Phase 2 were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). The purpose for the demographic questionnaire was to ensure diversity and to include LPs with a wide range of professional backgrounds (i.e., years of professional experience, professional identity, geographic region, etc.).

At the end of the demographic questionnaire, the LPs were informed of Phase 3 of the study (an interview conducted by the researcher) and were given the opportunity to provide contact information if they are interested in participating. All three participants who were informed of Phase 3 indicated interest in continuing with the study via an emailed response. Although all three participants were chosen to be interviewed, in order to adhere to the procedures that were approved for this study by the Texas Woman's University's IRB, participants who agreed to be considered for Phase 3 were informed that there was no guarantee they will be chosen for an interview.

**Interviews.** Interviews were scheduled based on the availability of the interviewee and interviewer. Each of the interviews were approximately 30 to 45 minutes long to complete. Prior to the interview, 5 to 10 minutes were reserved at the beginning of the session to build rapport with the participant. Before starting each interview, the interviewer informed the interviewee of his or her freedom to ask questions pertaining to the study, that included the informed consent or potential risks of the study. When the semi-structured interview portion of the session began, the interviewer started an audio-recorder in order to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions of the responses from the interviewees. When the audio recording began, the researcher reviewed the informed consent and policies related to confidentiality that the participant agreed to earlier during the pre-screening process. The participant then was asked to acknowledge if he or she understood the information in the informed consent that was signed back in Phase 1. Afterwards, a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix C) was utilized to ensure that all participants received similar review questions. After each interview, the interviewer made notes that related to the interview that pertained to initial key phrases or important information shared by the interviewee. After all of the interviews were conducted, the researcher then transcribed and reviewed all of the individual transcripts. Detailed notes were kept for each interview throughout the research process in order to help identify themes during the coding process and also monitor any potential shifts from the initial study design. Table 2 provides more information regarding how each interview question was associated with the study's research aims.

Table 2

*Research Aims and Their Respective Interview Questions*

Research Aims	Interview Questions
1. Identify essential experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me about your first experiences conducting an Independent Educational Evaluation.</li> <li>2. What was familiar about the IEE process for you?</li> <li>3. What was new or different about the IEE process for you?</li> </ol>
2. Characterize LPs perspectives of their preparedness to conduct their first IEE.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In what ways did you feel prepared conducting your first IEE?</li> <li>2. In what ways did you feel underprepared?</li> <li>3. What advice would you provide other licensed psychologists when preparing for their first IEE?</li> <li>4. Did you pursue additional training after conducting your first IEE?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. If yes, what type of training did you pursue?</li> <li>ii. If no, what types of training would you have liked to have received?</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
3. Discover how LPs conceptualize their role in providing a school-based service.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do you perceive your role in the special education process?</li> <li>2. In your experience, how have public schools treated outside evaluators?               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Prompt: What could schools change in order to make outside evaluators feel more connected/valued?</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. What, if anything, should schools change in order to make conducting IEEs easier for outside evaluators?</li> </ol>

## **Security, Confidentiality, and Potential Risks**

Precautions were made to ensure that participants had minimal risk for emotional discomfort or fatigue during this study. To address any potential discomfort, participants had the option to choose to not answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable, request short breaks, or quit the study at any time without penalty. Informed consent and potential risks were reviewed verbally prior to each interview. Each interview was audio recorded in order to ensure an accurate transcription was made after the interviews. Following the interviews, the audio recordings were transferred from a digital audio recorder to the researcher's personal computer. In order to ensure further protection of all audio recorded interviews, the researcher also copied the audio recordings on an encrypted external hard drive as secondary storage. All files were password protected and interview transcriptions were de-identified. Participants were given pseudonyms to de-identify themselves and to protect confidentiality. The principal researcher was the only person to have access to audio recordings. After interview transcripts were made, the audio recordings were deleted to help protect the confidentiality of each participant. Other than basic demographic data, all identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts. The participants understood that the transcripts may be included in the dissertation, can be reviewed by members of the primary researcher's dissertation committee as well as other interested parties, may be used in future studies, and will be reviewed by an unaffiliated researcher to perform a second round of data analysis coding.

Within this study, there was a potential risk of loss of confidentiality due to email exchanges, telephone calls, downloading, and internet transactions. Participants had a

choice of face-to-face, phone, or Skype interviews. Therefore, the researcher had access to personal phone numbers, email addresses, and Skype usernames. Additionally, those who decided to participate through Skype were at risk at being identified through facial recognition. The principal researcher kept confidential information password protected on the researcher's personal computer. Information was de-identified and stored under the participants' pseudonyms. In the event of a data breach, participants would have been notified about the potential loss of confidentiality. During the study, two of the participants chose to participate by phone and one chose to participate via Skype.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative research methods utilize observations, documents, and words to describe and interpret data allowing researchers to capture stories, investigate processes, and understand individuals' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This study analyzed the emergent data that originated from the transcribed interviews. According to Patton (2015), all data collected from a qualitative data analysis is inductive and comparative in the service of developing common themes, patterns, or categories across the data. Colaizzi (1978) noted a more stepwise approach to qualitative analysis which included reading the interview transcripts multiple times, highlighting significant statements from the participants' responses, and group the responses into subthemes and broader themes. The following qualitative data analysis methodology was derived from Moustakas (1990) and Colaizzi's (1978) approaches to analyzing the data that was collected in this study.

## **Transcriptions and Notes**

Following the conclusion of an interview with a participant, the researcher transcribed the interview using Microsoft Word while listening to the audio recording of the interview. Upon completing the transcription, the researcher read through the interview and wrote observer comments related to the participant's responses (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This allowed the researcher to provide a preliminary critical analysis of the participant's responses and helped with the later step of coding responses and shaped how future interviews were conducted. Any field notes collected during the study were transcribed from handwritten notes on a notepad to digital footnotes on the participant's transcribed interview file. Any emails that were exchanged between the researcher and the participant were saved and archived in a separate Microsoft Word file.

**Coding.** In qualitative research, coding is used as a systematic way of organizing and managing data in a meaningful way (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Saldaña, 2013). According to Patton (2015), a code is a key word or phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, or essence capturing, attribute to a portion of language-based data. For instance, interviews can be coded by demographic variables or based on similar styles numerous participants responded with to a particular question. During this process, it is expected that the data will initially yield a significant number of broad codes; however, the codes will become more specific as the transcription process continues (Saldaña, 2013). In order to help the researcher manage and organize the codings of the study, the ATLAS.ti coding software was used. The software assisted the researcher by organizing

the responses and analyzing the themes as well as the convergence and divergence of the data (Friese, 2014).

***In vivo coding.*** In vivo codes denote the key terms or phrases that research participants provide during the interviews (Saldaña, 2013). Identifying and recording these terms is important because they play the role of symbolic markers of the research participants' views and meanings (Patton, 2015). Possession of the research participants' meaning and interpretation of the phenomenon makes them a good platform for guiding an integrated analysis of an underlying theme. Codes that are frequently occurring or co-occurring with other codes may potentially yield richer information regarding phenomena and the presence of potential themes in the study (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2013).

***Holistic coding.*** Holistic coding was used in the study as a second cycle coding method. This second cycle of coding was used to help reorganize, and condense, initial analytical details of the data (Saldaña, 2013). Holistic coding applies a single code to a larger unit of data, which enables the researcher in capturing a sense of the overall contents and possible categories, or themes, that may develop (Saldaña, 2013). Holistic coding allows the researcher to form a more representative understanding of phenomena (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015).

***Cross-coding.*** The analysis portion of this study was also refined via the use of cross-coding. Cross-coding is a method of triangulation in which a second researcher independently reviews the interview transcripts and re-codes the data. The intention of this process is to assure corroboration between examiners of the application of the thematic codes to transcript data. Another benefit of this process relates to ensuring that

the data obtained is trustworthy (Stubblefield & Murray, 2002). It is recommended for the second researcher to maintain a 90% coding accuracy with the original researcher in order to validate the codes established in the study. For this study, the researcher sought the assistance from an outside analyst who was a former fellow graduate student, and person the researcher viewed as a close colleague. The cross-coder was a recent graduate of the Texas Woman's University's School Psychology doctoral program. At the time of this study, she was completing her post-doctoral training at a psychological private practice that specialized in clinical neuropsychology and psychoeducational evaluations. While the cross-coder's research experience was quantitative in nature, she had some prior experience coding qualitative research data during her specialist level graduate training. Based on feedback from the cross-coder, additional codes were generated.

**Forming meaning.** The final phase of the qualitative research process is what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe as forming meaning from coding that was presented in the study. While understanding coding frequencies are important in the final analysis phase of qualitative research, the purpose of the final data analysis stage is to form an understanding of the experiences of the individuals, and to focus on the experiences that may best represent the experiences from a broader chosen group (i.e., LPs who work in non-school based settings). The researcher has a duty to share these findings and experiences with the participants to not only ensure the accuracy of the findings, but to also help enrich the awareness of the participants. Lastly, the final analysis focused on the researcher's journey from what Moustakas (1990) calls the heuristic inquiry. By use of the coding analysis, the researcher's own field notes, and the researcher's relevant

journal entries, the researcher's understanding and knowledge of the research topic evolved. This deeper understanding, experienced by the researcher, provided insight on the research question by restating, describing, and exploring the aims of the research study.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This study investigated the essential experiences that LPs had when conducting IEEs. More specifically, it investigated the experiences of LPs who have not been employed by a school district or received education in a school psychology program, but had been contracted to engage in one or more IEEs for a school district. These specifiers helped the researcher obtain a research sample that is more representative of LPs from non-school based settings to provide deeper insight into the experiences non-school based LPs may have when conducting their first IEE.

Data collection included the transcription of the interview data; reading, rereading, and analysis of the data; and coding (in vivo and holistic). The transcribed interviews were then analyzed using a qualitative research software program. Significant statements from the participants were examined closely and, from these statements, meanings were derived. Analysis continued with the formation of themes and subthemes. Themes were established using deductive and inductive holistic coding methodology. Finally, a description of the essence of the experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE was written.

This chapter presents findings of the three interviews conducted during the study. As noted, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three LPs regarding their perceptions and experiences in conducting IEEs. The first section of this chapter will

outline findings on the demographic characteristics of the research participants. The second section will outline key findings from the interviews with the LPs. The third section of this chapter will outline key concepts and categories that emerged from the in vivo and holistic categorizations during the coding process.

Utilizing a qualitative methodology in conjunction with a phenomenological research strategy, the researcher gained an understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences of conducting IEEs through the interviews by use of immersion, acknowledging one's potential bias, reflection via field notes, and an analysis of each participant's demographic questionnaires. The data from the individual interviews with each LP were analyzed to gain a rich, contextualized understanding of their perceptions of conducting IEEs in the schools. The researcher used in vivo and holistic coding strategies when analyzing the raw data in order to answer the research aims.

### **Rigor and Verification**

Similar to quantitative studies, the quality of qualitative research studies is determined by the rigor, or strength, of the study and its findings (Stubblefield & Murray, 2002). It is also important that the results of a study be accurate and believable. Verification refers to the process of testing to measure the validity of the results. In quantitative research, the validity and reliability are used as a means of verification of a study's results. One way this is measured is in the degree of validity and reliability of the research instruments. The validity of a study refers to the degree to which the instrument measures what it is intended to measure; reliability, on the other hand, refers to how consistently a measurement tool yields the same results each time (Creswell & Miller,

2000). Validity and reliability are usually represented by numerical figures. In a qualitative research study, on the other hand, this cannot be measured numerically because the focus of qualitative research is on exploring human phenomena that is analyzed with words rather than numbers (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Just like quantitative studies, the reliability and validity of qualitative research studies need to be thoughtfully addressed (Stubblefield & Murray, 2002).

Stubblefield and Murray (2002) used the terms rigor and trustworthiness to conceptualize reliability and validity in phenomenological studies. The rigor, or robustness of the study, is defined as the confirmability and dependability of the codes and themes obtained in the study and the participants' credibility to provide accurate responses (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The trustworthiness of a phenomenological study refers to the dependability and transferability of the codes and themes that the researcher has developed over the course of a study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

### **Rigor**

The rigor of the findings of this study were examined by assessing the transferability and dependability of the findings obtained from the study. In the context of qualitative research, transferability refers to the ability to use knowledge gained in one environment and apply it to a different one. In qualitative research, the phenomena uncovered during the study should be evaluated for use in other settings. The current study elicited rich descriptions of the phenomenon of LPs conducting IEE evaluations in public schools as an outside evaluator and their perceptions of their roles in the evaluation process. These phenomena can also be applied to conducting evaluations in

other non-clinical educational settings such as private schools, charter schools, Montessori schools, residential schools, and universities.

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of the study was achieved by the researcher documenting an audit trail during the data analysis process, self-reflection, and engaging in a peer reviewed cross-coding as a method of auditing the results (Creswell & Miller, 2000). For the cross-coding process, the researcher sought the assistance from an outside analyst who was a former graduate student, and person the researcher viewed as a close colleague. Since the cross-coder graduated from a school psychology program, there was potential for bias since a lot of her knowledge and experiences are based on being a school-based evaluator. However, her experiences in non-school based settings provided her with the perspectives and the insights of non-school based LPs. The participants were notified of her involvement prior to the interview and in the informed consent letter. After receiving the outside analyst's list of codes for the three interview transcripts, the researcher discovered that nearly all of the outside analyst's codes were identical to the researcher's. The additional coding that the outside analyst identified was "LSSP trained." After applying the new coding to the first transcript, the researcher added the "LSSP trained" code to the fourth and final draft of the list of codes. The researcher found that the new code was very applicable to the broad theme labeled "training."

### **Participants**

The sample consisted of three participants who were LPs licensed in the state of Texas and have not been ever employed by a school district. The LPs included in the

sample consisted of two females and one male. Two of the participants identified as Caucasian and one identified as Latina. Two of the participants reported that they practice out of the Houston and Greater Houston regions and one participant reported practicing out of Dallas. All three participants reported that they were currently practicing in a private practice setting; however, Julia noted that she also worked in a community mental health setting.

All participants reported that they were trained in clinical psychology doctoral programs and that they professionally identify themselves as Clinical Psychologists. Two of the participants had a PhD in clinical psychology while the third participant had earned her PsyD in clinical psychology. Clint has had his license as a psychologist the longest out of the participants, having graduated in 1997 and earning his licensure in 2000. Julia had been practicing as an LP the second longest having graduated in 2003 and earning her licensure in 2004. Becky was the most recent graduate and licensee, having graduated in 2014 and earning her licensure in 2015.

In regard to pre-doctoral and post-doctoral experiences, Clint reported that his pre-doctoral internship training took place in a hospital setting and he completed his post-doctoral training in a private practice setting. Becky reported that her predoctoral internship was in a private practice and a hospital setting. Julia reported that she completed her pre-doctoral internship at a Veterans Affairs outpatient clinic and her post-doctoral training at a community mental health center (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Demographic Data of Participants*

	Clint	Becky	Julia
Gender	Male	Female	Female
Ethnicity/Race	Caucasian/White	Caucasian/White	Latina/White
Current Practice Location	Dallas County	Houston/Harris	Greater Houston region
Current practice setting	Private practice	Private practice	Community mental health/private practice
Degree obtained	PhD	PhD	PsyD
Doctoral training focus	Clinical Psychology	Clinical Psychology	Clinical Psychology
Pre-doctoral internship setting	Hospital	Private practice/hospital	Veteran's Affairs (VA)
Graduation year	1997	2014	2003
Post-doctoral setting	Private practice	Hospital/university setting	Community mental health
License obtained	2000	2015	2004
Professional Identity	Clinical Psychologist	Clinical Psychologist	Clinical Psychologist

**Findings**

Three licensed psychologists were interviewed in order to provide a better understanding of the essential experiences they had when conducting their first IEE. The overarching research question that guided this research study was: what are the essential experiences of non-school based LPs who are conducting IEEs? In order to appropriately address and conceptualize these phenomena, the researcher addressed three aims of the study. First, identify the essential experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE. Next,

characterize their preparedness to conduct their first IEE. Lastly, describe how do LPs conceptualize their role in providing a school-based service.

The phenomenological data analysis method utilized in the study was based on the seminal work of Colaizzi (1978). Colaizzi's method was appropriate for use in the current study as it is a stepwise approach to learning about the essence of a phenomenon, in this case, the experiences LPs have conducting IEEs, by collecting descriptions of the phenomenon from the participants, determining the significant statements, and organizing them into themes and meanings that lead to an exhaustive description.

According to Colaizzi (1978), the first step of analysis required the researcher to transcribe and review each interview. During this step, the participant's descriptions are read and re-read to develop an understanding. Next, the researcher is to extract significant statements from the transcripts and provide formulation of meanings into themes. The researcher applied the coding methodology described by Saldaña (2013) in order to make sense of the raw transcribed interview data. At the conclusion of the transcription of the last interview, data from all interviews were analyzed by the researcher using Atlas.ti 8.4.3 qualitative data analysis software (Friese, 2014). This program provided an organized method of analyzing the textual material by linking codes with significant statements, noting the frequency of each code, and identifying themes and subthemes from the more frequently occurring codes.

Upon the first run of the data with the Atlas.ti 8.4.3 software, there were 128 codes assigned to significant statements made by the participants. Continued reading of the interviews and analysis of data initially narrowed those codes into 15 thematic

categories. Further synthesis of the thematic categories resulted in five major themes, with a number of subthemes, revealed in this study that described the factors relating to the experiences LPs had conducting their first IEE. These major themes were: collaboration, familiarity, experiential learning, need for training, and outside evaluators. Table 4 lists the themes and subthemes that emerged during the research.

Table 4

*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
1. Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Collaboration with the schools</li> <li>b. Collaboration with school contacts</li> <li>c. Collaboration with the parents</li> <li>d. School restricting access</li> <li>e. Reasons for conducting IEEs</li> </ul>
2. Familiarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The process of conducting a psychological evaluation</li> <li>b. Understanding of assessment instruments</li> <li>c. Evaluating the child using a systemic lens</li> </ul>
3. Experiential Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Understanding the importance of IDEA (2004)</li> <li>b. Understanding the school system</li> </ul>
4. Need for Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Identified the need for further training.</li> <li>b. The importance of graduate training in IDEA (2004)</li> <li>c. Using LSSPs as a resource for training and knowledge</li> </ul>
5. The Outside Evaluator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Perception of being the outside evaluator for the school</li> <li>b. Perception of being the outside evaluator to the family</li> </ul>

The following sections of this chapter describe these major themes and subthemes found in analysis of the data. Specific quotes were selected to vividly illustrate each

theme and subtheme, based on how well they portrayed that particular theme. For more information related to the full transcribed interviews, please refer to Appendix D.

### **Collaboration**

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the essential experiences that LPs have had related to conducting their first IEE. Collaboration is important to protect the validity of the findings of a psychological evaluation (Dombrowski, 2016). Without a collaborative relationship between the evaluator and the client (i.e., the school), the results of the evaluation can, and often is, disputed (Sattler, 2008; Student v. Pittsfield Public Schools & Central Berkshire Regional School District, 2008). The subthemes in this section include: collaboration with the school system, collaboration with the school contacts, collaboration with families, the school restricting access, and identifying the need for IEEs.

While the participants addressed their collaborative relationship with the school throughout the interview, the second and tenth interview questions specifically asked the participants what their first IEE experience was like and how the schools treated them as outside evaluators. All of the participants recalled having a “collaborative” relationship, for the most part, with their contracted school during their first IEE. The following comments are examples of this viewpoint.

We have pretty good working relationships with all the districts that we contract with. And I just, you know, I really wasn't afraid to ask stupid questions... Sometimes I had to get in touch with those folks directly and say, “look, you know, I'm not real sure what the school system wants me to do in this case. Here are my thoughts...” and we problem solve a solution together that was going to those who work for them and meet the needs by answering the question. (Becky)

Personally, I feel that a lot of the school districts have been very accommodating to me since I am bilingual in English and Spanish. (Julia)

So, I feel like that [IEEs] are more impactful and schools are pretty good at reviewing the recommendations that you have and letting you know which are realistic and which are not. (Clint)

The IEE process is a collaborative relationship between the LP and the school system (Dombrowski, 2016). Like any relationship, there are times of cohesion and also times of having to identifying the differences of expectations which may lead to experiencing negative feelings, such as “frustration.” It should be noted, however, that all three participants expressed broad feelings related to frustration with the IEE process and the policies with the public schools. Some participants expressed this more than others, and for different reasons. Clint and Julia expressed frustration regarding the school restricting relevant resources for their evaluations.

I feel like if you're contracting somebody to perform a service, I feel like that you should be able to allow that person the freedom to perform the service and get the job done as well as it would be under normal circumstances. (Clint)

I am the psychologist coming in to do this evaluation, but they're kind of restrictive in what I can access. I, at times, have difficulties accessing educational records or even scheduling an interview with the teacher. (Julia)

Becky noted that she was frustrated regarding experiencing miscommunication in expectations and procedural policies, in what she repeatedly referred to as the “unspoken rules” that school districts had regarding conducting IEEs.

I would love each district to have their policies freely available so that IEE providers can discuss with them any differences to that policy that they think need to be made. Districts have policies on everything from test selection to how invoices for billing of services are to be turned. If I don't find the invoice, they won't pay. Some districts want, you know, the report

and the invoice sent [to] the financial department. Some other district wants the report sent to the special ed. director, and then we send the invoice to their financial department. I think it would be really helpful if that information was clearly laid out from the get-go. That would be very helpful. When I do talk to districts and say, “Why won't tell me about your policies or how do you this invoice?” They do sort of look at me like I've got two heads because they just think that their way is the way everyone else does it. (Becky)

While the theme relating to the collaboration between the school and the LP is broad in nature, it is more beneficial to examine the multiple subthemes within the theme of collaboration. Collaboration during the IEE process is viewed from the multiple working relationships that the evaluator establishes over the course of the evaluation. For example, the LP not only has to work with and gather evaluation data from the school, but also from the family of the student as well. Since the parents are part of the evaluation process and ARD committee, they are included in this collaboration section (Childre & Chambers, 2005). These next four subthemes will focus on the essential experiences working with these systems during the IEE process.

**Subtheme: Collaboration with the schools, as a system.** While analyzing the data from the interviews, the patterns of responses regarding the LPs' collaborative relationship with the schools differed significantly depending on whether they were discussing their collaboration with the school system or with a specific school employee who acted as a contact person for them during the IEE process. The responses pertaining to LPs collaborating with the school system were generally met with a slightly more negative response relating to the IEE process or a perceived negative bias towards the LP.

Schools also, at times, have a negative bias towards my findings as an outside evaluator because I'm not an LSSP... You know I have had some experiences where districts just shut the door before we even tested. They

were like, “Oh, no, you're not an LSSP, you couldn't possibly do that work” and they won't even entertain returning an email or a phone call, you know, once they learn that you do not have your LSSP. (Becky)

I really feel like that school districts, in general, vary of how they how they treat outside evaluators. I think that larger school districts in general are maybe a little bit more litigious and maybe a little bit more, you know, “just stay within arm's length” kind of protocol, but overall, I really feel like that school districts do treat evaluators well, but I feel they do, kind of, have this distance that they want to keep in order to protect themselves. (Clint)

... I feel like I'm there as a fresh perspective and also an unbiased third party that's coming in... Well, for some, it's sometimes hard to stay unbiased when you feel that the school is pushing for a particular outcome...(Julia)

**Subtheme: Collaboration with school contacts.** It was revealed in the interviews that all three participants sought assistance when conducting their first IEE from a school employee that was either assigned to them in their contract, were affiliated with special education services, or were members of the ARD committee for that evaluation. All of the participants recalled their experiences consulting and working with these “contact person(s)” during their first IEE, in a positive manner.

The people I talked to were great help. They were great at suggesting recommendations, talking to the teachers for me, and helping with some ideas for workarounds of the ISD's restrictions. So, without them I would almost feel like a tourist in a foreign county! Long story short, the IEE turned out well because of their assistance. (Clint)

I spoke with a person from the special education department, who helped me tremendously with information with school resources, who to send the report to, and making recommendations (Julia)

I often do things, you know, like get in touch with someone at the school like one of the teachers or the special education director to see what the school is looking for in the IEE recommendations to make changes to the child's IEP. They are usually very helpful since they provide some insider view of what the school is really wanting. (Becky)

Overall, the participants' attitudes towards the school system and their school contact were different. While the school system was associated with more negative perceptions of restriction, confusion, or discrimination, the participants viewed the individual school contacts more positively. They viewed their school contacts as resourceful, helpful, and insightful.

**Subtheme: Collaboration with families.** All three participants noted that they define their role in the IEE process, including their limitations, to the parents in order to limit ambiguity and to foster further collaboration with them.

In my informed consent to families, I discuss my role as an outside evaluator conducting the IEE for the school district, rather than a typical private pay evaluation. That way there is very little misunderstanding of the roles. (Becky)

Sometimes it's also hard when you hear that the parents are wanting a particular outcome because they want what's best for their child, but the school is refusing the parents for one reason or another. So, because of these potential moral conflicts, I have to be aware of my personal feelings during the evaluation and make sure my emotions are not influencing the outcome of the report I am writing. I tell this to the parents and the schools prior to the evaluation and they seem to respect me for it. (Julia)

I openly inform the family that I am actually hired by the school to perform the evaluation. But, I also inform both them and the schools that I want to be unbiased when conducting the evaluation. (Clint)

In addition, all three LPs noted that they typically collaborate with the family to obtain any vital academic records for the IEE in the event that the school is does not to share its resources.

We request records both from the school and from the family. The families respond a little faster than the schools, so at times we tend to bank more on the families to provide this information. (Becky)

I tend to just ask the parents for help in accessing those records instead of going through the school because I know it can be kind of a hassle... (Clint)

I feel like the parents are having to bend over backwards, at times, when they're already frustrated with the school system and have to access these educational records for me. (Julia)

**Subtheme: Schools restricting access.** All three participants reported that they felt “frustrated” and “restricted” during their first IEE because the schools were not allowing the LPs to have access to certain data such as academic records or to conduct clinical observations in the school.

Out of all of the places that I’ve done evaluations for, I felt the most restrictive in the school setting... My initial reaction is that I felt that this was a lot slower and limiting in the schools. I requested academic records from the school and they did not reply to me until, like a week later denying my request. (Clint)

When contracted by a school district you are very much under their contract. Meaning, you only test what they tell you to test. It is very limiting. So, there are times, you know, that it might mean telling the parents you know, “I’m sorry, we can’t test for what you want me to test. It’s outside the scope of this evaluation”. It’s frustrating at times. It might mean, you know, disappointing the family that’s in my office that desperately wants this kid to not have intellectual disability because they suspect something else is going on, right, you know other times it’s disappointing the district who is the client. (Becky)

In addition, a key phrase in Becky’s interview was that she felt that many school districts had “unwritten rules” related to the IEE process (i.e., assessments accepted by the school and logistical concerns pertaining to the school system). These “unwritten rules” (i.e., being unclear of a school district’s expectations) were also experienced by Clint and Julia.

What was new, and something that I kind of learned the hard way, was that different districts have different policies that are either written or unwritten, but they're certainly unshared with IEE providers. (Becky)

I feel like that school districts' rules and regulations tend to vary of what they can and cannot provide to outside evaluators. (Clint)

Another thing that has been different, and has been definitely a learning curve for me, has been also getting to know the different school districts and what their requirements are for IEEs since each school district has a different required requirement for their evaluations. It's a little frustrating to maneuver around when you are unfamiliar with public schools and how they are structured. (Julia)

**Subtheme: Reasons for conducting IEEs.** All three participants stated that they identified a need for conducting IEEs for the schools. From the perspective of the LP, their reasons for of conducting IEEs are based on their personal reasoning, professional goals, and sense of advocacy.

I wanted to reach out to school districts because I knew there was a high need [for conducting IEEs]. (Clint)

I saw that it was such a need that IEEs are all that I conduct nowadays. (Julia)

... [W]e need more providers to conduct IEEs in rural districts and charter schools who need help completing the FIEs. There is a huge need. (Becky)

The three participants also noted wanting to conduct IEEs in order to help promote advocacy for student receiving special education services.

Well, what really made me want to conduct IEEs was that it was a way for myself, as a clinical psychologist, [to] help children in public schools receive educational supports that they need to be successful. (Julia)

Oh, yeah, but once we started doing [IEEs] it was a neat way to meet and help other families who maybe don't know how to advocate for their kids needs in the school and a lot of the rural districts that we work with. (Becky)

Well, my initial reasoning of wanting to conduct IEEs was because I feel like that they are very vital and beneficial to the wellbeing of children with disabilities. (Clint)

All three participants also noted that they wished to conduct IEEs with the schools in order to expand their practice or their client networks.

I have seen some kids that were grossly underserved [in the schools]. So, it's a way that we can kind of give back to their families.... [A] lot of the families we see for IEEs wouldn't ordinarily pay to come in our clinic doors for our services. (Becky)

[W]hen I originally started to do IEEs I was wanting to reach out to school districts and kind of establish a broader client referral network for my private practice. The networks that are traditionally used in my practice have been, of course, through insurance panels or private payers. (Clint)

I am able to reach a broad spectrum of children who may not otherwise receive my services in the school districts. (Julia)

Out of the three participants, Julia was the only one who identified herself as bilingual. She stated that she also sought to conduct IEEs with schools due to the increasing need for non-English evaluators.

I think that there are many psychologists in Texas [that] are aware of the growing need for more bilingual psychologists but are still unaware of how this shortage impacts more vulnerable populations, like kids. I see it every day. (Julia)

### **Familiarity**

Another prominent theme that was explored in each interview was the participants' familiarity with the school-based evaluation process during their first IEE. Subthemes included: the process of conducting psychological evaluations, the understanding of the assessment instruments, and evaluating the child through a systemic lens.

The third question that was asked on the semi structured interview pertained to the participant's familiarity with the IEE process. This question framed what prior learned knowledge and skills the participant used when conducting their first IEE. All three participants noted that IEEs were familiar in structure and procedure to other evaluations that they have completed. Julia's response was an exemplary summative representation of all three participants' responses.

It's pretty much the same process of completing a typical psychological evaluation: you are to investigate and answer the referral question to the best of your ability, you conduct clinical interviews, you use standardized assessments, you write the report, and go over the results with the client.  
(Julia)

**Subtheme: The evaluation process.** All three participants noted familiarity with conducting a psychological evaluation in the clinical setting such as: obtaining informed consent, gathering relevant historical data, conducting observations, conducting interviews, administering norm-referenced assessments, writing the report, providing a diagnostic conclusion, forming relevant recommendations, and reviewing the results with the client (Dombrowski, 2016). All three participants mentioned conducting interviews, observations, records, norm-referenced assessments, report writing, and providing a diagnostic conclusion. Clint and Julia referenced their familiarity communicating the IEE results at an ARD, or due process hearing, to participating as an expert witness or being at a court hearing.

Well, the standardized assessment [was most familiar]. And report writing. I was trained in a kind of an old-school neuropsych and school psychology way. So, for me my reports were already lengthy [and] contained a lot of information on the background sociological factors things that I see are sometimes skipped over. (Becky)

I also feel like a familiar part of the IEE process was the evaluation and also providing the results of the report at the ARD meeting. ARD meetings are interesting though, sometimes it feels like a typical feedback session with educators and other times, particularly during due process, it feels like a court hearing. (Clint)

Yeah, well I guess I've utilized my resources in feeling prepared in that department, I can tell you that much. My husband is a defense attorney and so he has helped me prepare as an expert witness in the past. (Julia)

**Subtheme: Understanding the assessment instruments.** During the interview, the participants mentioned their familiarity with a variety of norm-referenced assessment instruments that have been used to conduct IEEs.

Well, what was really familiar with me, and I'll just give this really straight off, were obviously the assessments that the schools required you to administer. So, you know, like Woodcock-Johnson tests, Weschler tests, BASC-3's, you know, the standard affair. (Clint)

So, I do determination of intellectual disability evaluations as well, and in those evaluations, the Stanford-Binet is preferable because it does a better job catching those lower cases and higher cases of IQ. But in the school system, the Stanford-Binet, at least in the districts that I've contracted with, is not preferred because it has the older norms, so, you know, they make you test using something like the WJ-IV which is not preferable to lower IQ children. (Becky)

So, I mean, when a child is needing testing and only speaks Spanish, you know, the schools may call on me because they might lack some of the tests that have the necessary Spanish speaking norms. (Julia)

**Subtheme: Evaluating a child using a systemic lens.** Participants 1 and 2 noted that they adhered to a more systemic theoretical perspective prior to conducting their first IEE.

The assessment process was also pretty straightforward as well and also accessing multiple parties like doing a phone or email interview with the teacher and also conducting an interview with the parents and the child that was pretty straightforward as well. (Clint)

In my typical clinical report, I always want teacher report forms or information from the teachers when possible but with an IEE it's taking it even a step farther for a school observation and interviewing multiple teachers. (Becky)

Julia, however, stated that she had learned to evaluate the child by using a systemic lens while conducting her first IEE. She noted that her supervisor helped her frame the written report from a more systemic lens than she was used to.

I was taking more of a clinical perspective rather than a systemic perspective. And I think that really did not do much for the schools and my supervisor caught that mistake... (Julia)

### **Experiential Learning**

After the participants were queried on the familiarity of the IEE process, they were then asked about how the process was unfamiliar or new to them.

Clint provided an exemplary example of gaining experiential knowledge throughout the process and how it impacted how he conducted future IEEs. Within his brief statement, he informed the researcher of his self-reflection and discovery that special education was more complex than he initially assumed. He noted that, with experience, he became more knowledgeable and experienced in understanding IDEA (2004) and believed that his ability to conduct IEEs had improved.

There's a lot of information out there that needs to be learned when conducting IEEs. So, first thing's first, understanding IDEA is very important. In the beginning I was unfamiliar with IDEA, but as I started to learn it, I started understanding how complex the special education process is. The recommendations in my reports changed, as did how I formulated any diagnostic conclusions I had. (Clint)

**Subtheme: Understanding the importance of IDEA.** All three participants expressed gaining a deeper understanding of IDEA (2004) while conducting their first

IEE. Becky noted she felt initial her lack of understanding important IDEA (2004) terms, such as FAPE, had negatively impacted her ability to effectively communicate with the schools and advocate for the student that she worked with.

I had to learn for myself that if I wrote a letter to the school that said the best placement for this child is a small class setting that I was barking up the wrong tree. I was asking for things that they're not legally obligated to provide, and so the more I learned about being able to help my individual therapy clients, and clients that were seeing me for clinical testing, the more I learned about the process and became comfortable with the IDEA. (Becky)

Julia noted that IDEA (2004) was mentioned briefly during her graduate coursework; however, she did not understand the importance of knowing IDEA (2004) until she conducted her first IEE.

I really didn't pay much attention to IDEA back then. I went over it a little bit during my postdoc, and it was briefly mentioned in my graduate work where it was touched on, but not discussed in depth. And so, I went back, and I looked at IDEA a little bit more... (Julia)

**Subtheme: Understanding the school system.** Out of all of the experiential learning subthemes, the knowledge gained regarding LPs understanding of the school districts appeared to exhibit the most significant reaction. All three participants expressed frustration or feeling restricted when discussing their experiences in the school systems.

Throughout the interviews, the participants used the words “restrict” and “frustrated,” twenty times in total. All of these instances were in reference to the participants’ attitudes of working with the school districts during their first IEE.

Out of all of the places that I’ve done evaluations for, I felt the most restrictive in the school setting. (Clint)

I am the psychologist coming in to do this evaluation, but they're kind of restrictive in what I can access. (Julia)

It's frustrating at times. It might mean disappointing the family that's in my office, that desperately wants this kid to not have intellectual disability, because they suspect something else is going on, [and] other times it's disappointing the [school] district who is the client. (Becky)

It's a little frustrating to maneuver around when you are unfamiliar with public schools and how they are structured. (Julia)

### **Need for Training**

Some of the important prerequisites of identifying the need for additional training is acknowledging and being aware of gaps in one's training which requires one to exhibit humility, honesty, and a sense of self-awareness (Bersoff, 2012; Neimeyer et al., 2009).

LPs are required to seek training and further assistance when they are aware of knowledge or training gaps that may negatively impact their work with clients. As noted in the previous subtheme, all of the participants acknowledged some degree of unfamiliarity with the IEE process. The subthemes included: IDEA (2004) training, school system training, the importance of graduate training in IDEA (2004), and using LSSPs as a resource for training and knowledge. In regard to the training and understanding of the IEE process, the participants acknowledged that understanding the special education process, IDEA (2004), and IEEs can be complex to learn.

In the beginning I was unfamiliar with IDEA, but as I started to learn it, I started understanding how complex the special education process is. (Clint)

The IEE process, as you know, is a huge learning curve... I actually teach a didactic on interfacing with the school system to clinical psychologists. Really that's all I have are interns and psychiatry residents... I can't teach all of the process or IDEA in the two hours. My goal during the training is to open their eyes. (Becky)

... using the legal jargon from IDEA rather than the diagnostic classification from something like the DSM-5 or ICD-10 [was difficult]. Also learning a lot of the educational jargon too, like IEPs, TEKS, and RTIs. That is something that is very different for me having to learn new terminology. I had no idea what these terms meant when I first started out. (Julia)

**Subtheme: IDEA training.** All three participants received some form of training before, during, and after the conclusion of their first IEE. Becky disclosed that she was the parent of two children who receive special education services. She stated that she applied her knowledge and experiences of IDEA (2004) and the special education process from her personal experiences when she was conducting her first IEE.

I probably felt better prepared than those other clinical psychologists. I imagine [I] might because I was very familiar with the school system and just working with children. In my internship I did a lot of IEEs for schools, but I already had a lot of experience maneuvering through the schools because of my kids. (Becky)

Julia reported experiencing ongoing training on IDEA (2004) from her former supervisor while she was conducting her first IEE. She noted that her former supervisor was an LSSP and had extensive experience working in the schools.

So, yeah, I feel like the training from my former supervisor helped me feel more prepared with the IEE process. My supervisor had a special education law book that I read through during my first IEE. (Julia)

Clint stated that majority of his training occurred after his first IEE, where he read books and participated in didactic trainings pertaining to IDEA (2004).

There's a lot of information out there that needs to be learned when conducting IEEs. So, first thing's first, understanding IDEA is very important. I admit I could have read more [after my first IEE]. I did a little bit of reading in regard to some of the special education labels because I feel like that that would be a little bit more beneficial for me to put in my report the next time I have an IEE, but I did not receive any training, or I

did not pursue any training outside of that. I truly did not understand IDEA until several years later. (Clint)

**Subtheme: The importance of graduate training.** All three participants expressed the benefits and importance of learning about IDEA (2004) during their graduate school training. Julia stated that she had been introduced to IDEA (2004) in her graduate school program; however, it was not presented in depth and, at the time, and she did not see the importance of understanding it.

I feel like that my work in graduate school could have provided more training in IDEA or special education. I feel like I had a lack of training when it came to the schools, and especially with understanding education laws like IDEA. You had to take an elective class with the school psychology students to get that information. I feel like IDEA is a very important piece of legislation that all clinical psychology students, who are hoping to pursue [a career] working with children, should learn. (Julia)

Clint and Becky stated that they would have benefited from receiving more formal training on IDEA (2004) in graduate school. Becky went so far as to call her lack of training in IDEA (2004), a “blind spot” in her training. Clint noted the importance of having an early exposure to IDEA (2004) in his graduate work would have reinforced its importance to him at the time.

As a graduate student, I feel like I would have held IDEA to a higher level of importance than I did back then if I was introduced to it at an earlier period of my training. We all need to understand the basics of special education law, whether you, you know, work in the schools, conduct IEEs, or strictly do clinical work. (Clint)

Being able to learn IDEA language is so vital when working with school-age children. I mean just the idea that there are books and other resources out there to teach me about an important topic I never received in graduate school is incredible to me. This was definitely a blind spot in my training. (Becky)

### **Subtheme: Using the LSSP as a resource for training and knowledge.**

Throughout the interview process with each participant, LSSPs have, generally been viewed as knowledgeable in special education law, helpful, resourceful, and familiar with the education system.

I had to talk through certain people and have them refer me to other people such as the vice principal and the LSSP. The people I talked to were great help. They were great at suggesting recommendations, talking to the teachers for me, and helping with some ideas for workarounds of the ISD's restrictions. (Clint)

Generally, I feel that school psychologists have the best understanding of IDEA, so I would try to consult with one pertaining to any questions you might have with it. (Clint)

I had consulted with an advocate who is also an LSSP, because, as a therapist and consultant, working with children as my primary population, when they had problems in school, they weren't being served appropriately. (Becky)

So, yeah, I feel like the training from my former supervisor helped me feel more prepared with the IEE process. Oh yeah, I failed to mention that she had worked for some years in the public schools as a school psychologist. (Julia)

I feel like I had a lack of training when it came to schools and especially with understanding education laws like IDEA. You had to take an elective class with the school psychology students to get that information. (Julia)

I also went to a couple of seminars that some school psychologists were putting on from the local school district that helped tremendously as well. This information was so helpful. It was very important, as a resource, for me to understand the educational system a lot better. (Julia)

### **The Outside Evaluator**

During their first IEE, all three participants recalled feeling like “outsiders” during the evaluation process. The term outsider in this instance refers to the participant's acknowledgement that they were not employees of the school district, being

viewed as strangers, and feeling distrusted. Clint provided an amusing analogy by comparing himself to a character from a western.

Well, it's kind of like *Fistful of Dollars* where Clint Eastwood's character, you know, he's kind of like this third party in this feud that's going on, right. So, he's hired by both parties to make sense of the problem. So, when there is a disagreement or a problem with an evaluation, the school contracts me to make sense of the situation, right, and I conduct my own evaluation as an outside perspective. But, unlike Clint Eastwood's character though, I openly inform the family that I am actually hired by the school to perform the evaluation. (Clint)

**Subtheme: Perception of being the outside evaluator for the school.** All three participants identified positive and negative perceptions of being an outside evaluator for the schools. Becky and Julia identified that being an outside evaluator for the schools allows them to enact on their sense of justice, or advocacy, by making sure that students are being served well in the schools.

When the district doesn't have all the resources that they need or that families are pursuing their legal rights by getting the independent educational evaluation, I offer a second opinion to the school district and the family. In my informed consent to families, I discuss my role as an outside evaluator conducting the IEE for the school district, rather than a typical private pay evaluation. That way there is very little misunderstanding of the roles. (Becky)

I see myself as an outside consultant, or an outside specialist. I'm not part of the school, but I'm here to help the school and the parents fulfill the goal of doing what's best for the child in question, which is a very important role. (Julia)

I feel that schools may be more accommodating to me than a non-bilingual psychologist because they recognize that I can provide a vital service for the kids, who are only Spanish speaking. (Julia)

**Subtheme: Perception of being the outside evaluator to the family.** All three participants noted that being viewed as an outside evaluator hired by the school district can potentially impact the working relationship with the family.

The drawbacks to being an outsider are that I am usually unfamiliar with the school that contracts with me and they are unfamiliar with me. The schools all have their own policies and restrictions to outside evaluators. I also feel that it can impact the family's trust in me, if there was a bad relationship with the school already and they find out that I actually work for the school. But at the same time, I feel like that is a valuable asset because I am providing an outside perspective of evaluating their child. That is something that is unique about my position rather than someone working in the schools. (Clint)

... It's frustrating at times. It might mean, you know disappointing the family that's in my office... (Becky)

Sometimes it's also hard when you hear that the parents are wanting a particular outcome because they want what's best for their child, but the school is refusing the parents for one reason or another. (Julia)

Becky reported that she makes attempts to assist the family, despite her contractual obligations. She noted that she may provide recommendations to the family to use in the home.

I also feel like I can step a little bit outside of that consultant role and I have the ability to make more recommendations that are specific to the family, versus keeping all the recommendation to a school-based setting. (Becky)

### **The Essential Experiences of LPs Conducting Their First IEE**

The final step of the qualitative data analysis process is what Moustakas (1990) called the creative synthesis. During this final phase, the researcher takes all of the themes and relevant data that was gathered over the course of the study and develops an aesthetic rendition of the data that acts as a creative means of summarizing the results in a representative manner. Upon reviewing all of the data and themes, the researcher wrote a

description of the essential experiences of LPs conducting their first IEEs in the public schools. The following is a modeled exemplary depiction of the essential experiences that a non-school based LP may have when conducting his or her first IEEs in the public schools based on the data gathered from the three participants.

1. What made you want to conduct independent educational evaluations for school districts?
  - a. I first recognized that there was a high need to conduct IEEs in the public schools. Some rural school districts contact me because they have an apparent shortage of LSSP's to conduct the evaluations. School districts also contact me to conduct the evaluation if they do not have the appropriate assessments to complete their evaluation, such as if the evaluation required a neuropsychological assessment or if an assessment needs to be conducted in a different language. I am also contacted to complete the evaluation if the parents and/or the school disagree on the initial results of the evaluation.
  - b. I also wanted to conduct IEEs because I wish to improve the business of my practice by reaching out to families who would not otherwise receive my services at my office. Since the district is paying for the evaluation, these families are able to seek my services for their child.
  - c. The last, and most important, reason for wanting to conduct IEEs is to promote advocacy for student receiving special education in the schools. I understand that the school is the client; however, by conducting IEEs, I

feel that I can help the district provide appropriate accommodations and/or modifications to a student's educational programming from a third-party perspective.

2. Tell me about your first experiences conducting an Independent Educational Evaluation.
  - a. When I conducted my first IEE, I made some mistakes that I would not have made now. There was a lot for me to learn before, during, and after the evaluation. Before the evaluation started, I needed to consult with those who were familiar with the school and conducting IEEs. I also had to gauge how open and forthcoming the school would be with sharing its resources with me, such as getting copies of relevant academic records or other historical data to use in the evaluation.
  - b. In addition, I needed to seek the assistance of certain school employees to act as a point of contact between myself and the school district. These individuals are very helpful and can be a great resource to help me learn about what recommendation would be appropriate to include in the report, what resources the school has to offer students with disabilities, and who to send the report to. Working with school districts can be a frustrating process; however, these contact people enhance the experience.
  - c. I felt frustrated when I felt like the school was restricting my access to, in my opinion, valuable information. Sometimes, teachers or other relevant staff are not available to conduct an interview with. In addition, I am, at

times, unable to conduct a classroom observation, which I believe hinders my ability to conduct the evaluation properly.

- d. When I wrote the report for the evaluation and presented the findings at the ARD meeting, I noticed that the ARD meeting was a very structured process. The ARD committee members were less interested in the DSM diagnostic classifications in my report and were more interested in my diagnostic conclusions based on IDEA (2004) eligibility criteria. The school district was also looking for specific educational recommendations that were relevant to the student and were realistic for the school.
  - e. I felt that some of the pushback I received during the ARD meeting may be due to me not having my LSSP credential.
3. What was familiar about the IEE process for you?
- a. The first thing that was familiar to me was the psychological evaluation process. I felt like the steps necessary to complete the evaluation, such as receiving the referral, signing consent, conducting norm-referenced assessments, and going over the results, was a familiar routine to me.
  - b. I also felt like the feedback session portion of the IEE process was, for the most part, familiar to me as well since I was able to communicate the results of the evaluation and go over recommendations with the ARD committee.

4. What was new or different about the IEE process for you?
  - a. I felt like my understanding of the school system was new since this evaluation was more focused on the child's school functioning rather than the clinical diagnosis and the broad recommendations that I typically use in a psychological evaluation. In addition, I felt unsure who to contact regarding getting teacher information or to get a better understanding of school resources, so I can make realistic recommendations for the report.
  - b. In addition, I felt that the emphasis of IDEA's (2004) special education eligibility criteria and an under emphasis of DSM-5 was another aspect of the IEE process I was unfamiliar with since I have been taught to use diagnostic labeling from the DSM since graduate school.
5. In what ways did you feel prepared conducting your first IEE?
  - a. I felt prepared due to my knowledge of child psychopathology and developmental disorders. I also feel like a specialization in working with children also helped me with conducting the IEE. I also believe that utilizing my consultation skills throughout the IEE process to effectively communicate with educators helped me feel more prepared as well.
6. In what ways did you feel underprepared?
  - a. While conducting my first IEE, I discovered that I did not have a good understanding of IDEA (2004) and wish I could have learned more about it. IDEA (2004) has a lot of important terms that the school uses, such as

FAPE and LRE, which are helpful in guiding the recommendations in the report.

7. Did you pursue additional training after conducting your first IEE?
  - a. Yes. Prior to the IEE, I sought consultation from school staff, such as an LSSP, and also other colleagues who have conducted IEEs in the past. This helped me gain understanding of what to expect during the IEE process and also recommend who to contact during the IEE.
  - b. During the evaluation I continued consulting with my contacts; however, I also began reading more about IDEA (2004) from books and researching unfamiliar terms such as FAPE, LRE, and the special education eligibility criteria terms.
  - c. After self-reflection on my first IEE experience, I concluded that I needed to seek further training and understanding of IDEA (2004). I sought training through various didactics, books, and research articles that I could find. I also continued seeking assistance from colleagues.
8. How do you perceive your role in the special education process?
  - a. I see myself primarily as an outside consultant and evaluator. I see this as an advantage since I can provide the school and the family with an unbiased evaluation, one that does not favor the family or the school. At times, however, remaining unbiased may be difficult because the school is the client and I want to remain on good terms with them. I also find myself, at times siding with the family since I may view a particular

situation unfair for the child and I feel a sense of wanting to advocate for the child.

9. In your experience, how have public schools treated outside evaluators?
  - a. I feel that schools have treated outside evaluators well, for the most part. I do believe that schools should be more open in sharing their resources to the outside evaluator, such as access to classroom observations, student records, and communication with the teacher. When this occurs, I typically ask the parents to provide a copy of the child's student records.
10. What, if anything, should schools change in order to make conducting IEEs easier for outside evaluators?
  - a. I believe that schools need to be more upfront with their expectations, requirements, and openness to outside evaluators. Schools should inform outside evaluators of what resources they are willing to share. The schools should also be clearer on the logistics of how to conduct the IEE, such as who to send the report and invoice to.
11. What advice would you provide other licensed psychologists when preparing for their first IEE?
  - a. I would recommend that LPs learn IDEA (2004). If you are in graduate school, I would recommend taking an elective class on the subject or doing your own personal research on it. I would also seek trainings, or didactics, related to IDEA (2004) and conducting IEEs. I also recommend consulting with professionals who are familiar with IEEs and IDEA

(2004) such as other LPs or LSSPs. LSSPs are a great resource for understanding IDEA (2004) and the school system, so I would recommend consulting with one prior to your first IEE.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the analysis of the data collected from three LPs in order to better understand the essential experiences LPs have when conducting their first IEE. Colaizzi's (1978) stepwise phenomenological data analysis method, as well as Moustakas' (1990) creative synthesis process was utilized in order to better understand the experiential data gathered. Five major themes were presented, along with subthemes and exemplars representing each. The overall data yielded a description of the essential experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This study utilized a qualitative approach to explore the essential experiences that LPs have when conducting their first IEE. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to meet the following research aims:

1. Identify essential experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE.
2. Characterize LPs perspectives of their preparedness to conduct their first IEE.
3. Discover how LPs conceptualize their role in providing a school-based service.

#### **Summary of the Study**

This chapter summarizes the study, including a brief description of the methodology, and presents a discussion of the findings as they relate to the fields of school psychology and clinical psychology. The researcher perspective of the experience with qualitative research will be presented, followed by a review of methods of rigor and verification used in the study. Conclusions and implications of the study findings are addressed, followed by the strengths and limitations of the study. Finally, recommendations for school psychology professionals, psychology graduate programs, special education administrators, and other professionals and researchers with interests in special education and school psychology will be made.

Upon receiving approval from the Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board (IRB), recruitment of participants was initiated. An email was drafted and

sent to LPs who have conducted IEEs and who have never been employed by a school district. The IRB approved email was also sent to potential participants through Facebook and LinkedIn social networking websites in order to improve the researcher's odds of recruiting participants for the study. The participants were also recruited through suggestions from those participants who had already completed the interviews themselves. The recruitment email included a link to a PsychData online survey. This survey included the informed consent, exclusionary criteria questions, and a brief demographics questionnaire. The study's sample included 3 participants who were LPs and self-identified as clinical psychologists, given the pseudonyms Clint, Becky and Julia for this study.

The interviews, consisting of 11 open-ended and semi-structured questions (see Appendix A), were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Following Colaizzi's (1978) and Moustakas's (1990) phenomenological data analysis methods, the transcripts were read and re-read to gain a deeper understanding of the data. A qualitative research software program, Atlas.ti 8.4.3 (Friese, 2014), was then utilized to organize and analyze the textual material into significant statements, themes, and subthemes. These themes and subthemes were then confirmed by a cross-coder who analyzed the data. Upon completing the interviews and analyzing the coded data, it was determined by the researcher that saturation had been achieved. Finally, a composited depiction of the phenomenon was written.

### **The Researcher's Reflections on the Qualitative Research Process**

The qualitative researcher recognizes the impossibility of being totally objective; after all, the researcher is an intricate part of the entire process. In the particular case of this study, the researcher had a personal interest in the subject, having participated in conducting IEEs and observing non-school based LPs understand the expectations of conducting school-based evaluations. Questions that the researcher had asked himself and the experiences that he has had over the course of his training and education were an impetus for conducting this study. Scientific research, however, requires a focus on the participants without interference and biases from the researcher. Through the lens of phenomenological qualitative research, the researcher engages in a form of self-reflection, to remove any preconceptions or presuppositions that might influence the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The self-reflection process was also utilized during the interviews to avoid leading the participant in the direction of expected answers based on information obtained in the previous interviews. Therefore, the researcher created a list of open-ended semi-structured interview questions, which all used neutral language in order to avoid leading the participants in a particular direction. During the interviews, the researcher had set aside any thoughts or verbal comments about how other participants may have answered the question to avoid any spoiled responses.

The experience of conducting the interviews with the participants was a rewarding and positive experience for this novice qualitative researcher. Although somewhat hesitant and nervous in the beginning, the researcher became more

comfortable and confident with each interview. This resulted in the researcher being able to establish rapport and gain valuable data from each participant. In addition, the researcher was also able to mentally identify themes during the interviews and key words that drew the attention of the researcher.

It is the perception of the researcher that the LPs who participated in this study exhibited an overall sense of advocacy towards student with disabilities. They appeared to be forthcoming with their experiences related to conducting IEEs regardless of whether their experiences were positive or negative. Their opinions and descriptions of their experiences did not appear to be filtered or biased due to the researcher's affiliation with a school psychology program. Their participation in the study appeared to be driven by their understanding that the study is meant as a means of helping other LPs conduct their first IEE.

Transcription of the interviews also provided another time for bracketing, as the long process of transcription allowed the researcher to spend a large amount of time listening to the recordings and processing the meanings of the phenomenon to each participant. The researcher continually set aside any preconceived notions or thoughts that would interfere with the ability to see the phenomenon through the eyes of the participant. The time during transcription also provided a time to look back upon each interview and picture the participants and how they responded to the questions.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The analysis of the data revealed 5 major themes and 15 subthemes. This section discusses the themes in relation to the limited literature on the subject. The first

research aim addressed identifying the essential experiences that LPs had conducting their first IEE. The theme of collaboration is discussed and placed within the theoretical and research literature on school-based collaboration. The second aim focused on characterizing perceived preparedness LPs had when conducting their first IEE. In relation to this aim, the study themes of familiarity, experiential learning, and identifying the need for training are examined in terms of the current applicable literature on these topics. Finally, the third research aim, which addressed the perceptions on how LPs conceptualized their role in providing a school-based service, is discussed within the theme of the outside evaluator. Table 5 categorizes the themes within the research aims of the study.

Table 5

*Research Aims and Themes*

Research Aims	Themes
1. Identify the essential experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE	a. Collaboration
2. Characterize LP's preparedness to conduct their first IEE.	a. Familiarity b. Experiential Learning c. Need for Training
3. Discover how LPs conceptualize their role in providing a school-based service.	a. The Outside Evaluator

## **The Essential Experiences of LPs Conducting Their First IEE**

The overall purpose of this research study was to examine the essential experiences that LPs had when conducting their first IEE by examining their perceptions and experiences with their first IEE. Both collaboration and consultation has been identified by NASP as a core domain of school-based service delivery that “permeates all aspects of service delivery” (NASP, 2010a; p. 2). It is for this reason that the LPs found collaboration with the school, parents, and the various school contacts to be vital during the IEE process. Without, the collaboration of these parties during the IEE process, the evaluation would largely be limited to administering assessments and interpreting the results of the assessment data. In essence, an LP acts as an investigator of the child’s functioning by identifying functioning in all relevant systems in the child’s functioning. Collaboration with these systems acts as a basis for making the IEE comprehensive and the results valid (Dombrowski, 2016; Miller, 2010).

**Theme: Collaboration.** All three participants in this study mentioned the importance of collaboration with multiple parties when conducting an IEE. All of the participants recognized that the evaluation process extends past the testing session with the student and that historical and relevant systemic data need to be gathered in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation. Not only was collaboration used as a tool for the evaluation, but it was also used as a means of relationship building and earning trust with the respective systems.

Collaboration with the schools, a subtheme in this area, was related with how the LP interacted with the school as a system. They noted feeling frustrated and restricted

when requesting records or other information pertaining to the student. This frustration stemmed from what one participant called the unwritten rules, or the school system's specific policies related to the protection of student information. These unwritten rules and policies are based on the school district's interpretation of FERPA (1992), which all districts have to follow; however, some districts are able to provide additional safeguards to protect student information from outside agencies (Tonsager, 2017). Although LPs are contracted to perform a school-based service, the privacy of the student's private information, such as academic records, may, in the perspective of the school district, put the district in jeopardy since they have limited control of what happens to the student's information outside of the school system's jurisdiction. Therefore, some school systems may have adopted additional policies that are specific to their district (Weeks, 2001).

In addition to restricted access to relevant student information, participants noted that they were unfamiliar with the hierarchical organizational structure of the public-school districts with whom they worked. Those unfamiliar with the school district structure have difficulties related to communicating effectively with the school personnel in order to promote positive student changes (Pratt, 2014). In addition, school districts may be structured differently based on the size of the school district and whether or not the district is considered urban, suburban, or rural (Pratt, 2014). Due to these potential significant differences, LPs may have difficulties effectively contacting the individuals necessary for completing the evaluation and sending the completed report. Some of the participants noted that they consulted with other LPs during the process; however, if the participant was provided information regarding the school organization, based on that

LP's prior experience from a different school district, it does not necessarily mean that the information will translate well to all school districts. Therefore, it is important for an LP to maintain frequent communication with their school district contacts in order to avoid any setbacks.

In contrast with the LPs' perceptions of their collaboration with the school districts, their collaboration with the individual school employees appeared to be viewed much more positively. These individuals were either sought out by the LPs or were provided to them by the school district. These school-based contacts included special education personnel, LSSPs, and school administrators. Establishing a school contact and maintaining a professional working relationship with the school have been shown to enhance the outsider's ability to move within a school system more effectively (Cohen, Linker, & Stutts, 2006). The participants noted feeling that these school contacts provided them with knowledge of the school district including hierarchical organizational information, the school's policies and procedures regarding school-based evaluations, and potential recommendations to be used in the written report that the school could view as reasonable and realistic.

In addition, the participants noted the importance of collaborating with the student's family during the participants' first IEE. They noted that maintaining a working relationship with the family was important during the IEE process. The IEE process can be confusing for parents. On one hand, they have the right to choose their child's outside evaluator, but on the other hand, they are not considered the client when their child is evaluated by that individual; the school is considered the client (Fish, 2008;

IDEA, 2004). Despite any confusion surrounding who the client in an IEE might be, it is clear that input and collaboration with family members are important in the IEE process. During the IEE process, the LP maintained contact with the family in order to not only understand the student's functioning in the family system, but also as a secondary source for acquiring relevant academic records. Although the LPs sought resources from the family, they had to be aware of maintaining a relational balance between the family and the school. Since the student's family and school are seeking an outside evaluator to conduct the evaluation, there may be disagreements regarding the results of prior evaluation data and both parties may be wanting different outcomes for the IEE (Dougherty, 2014; Zirkel, 2009). In these situations, the participants highlighted the importance of defining one's role in the IEE process to both parties as a third-party evaluator and the school as the client for the evaluation.

The final subtheme within the broader theme of collaboration, pertained to the LPs' reason for wanting to conduct IEEs. The collaborative consultation process is a 2-way road where the purpose of the collaboration is the fulfillment of mutual goals that benefit both parties (Dougherty, 2014). From the perspective of the school system, school personnel seek an outside evaluator who meets the IDEA (2004) criteria to conduct an IEE (Jacob & Hartshorne, 2007). From the perspective of the LP, their reasons for conducting IEEs are based on their personal reasoning, professional goals, and sense of advocacy.

## **Licensed Psychologists' Preparedness for Conducting their First IEE**

The second research aim investigated the perception on how prepared LPs felt with conducting their first IEE. This research aim investigated a number of facets related to the understanding of the IEE process. The responses from the participants led to an understanding of the IEE process as a temporal process. The themes that were identified in the data analysis related to prior learned knowledge (i.e., familiarity), one's ability to learn in the moment (i.e., experiential knowledge), and the understanding of one's need for ongoing training after the conclusion of the IEE.

**Theme: Familiarity.** The familiarity of the IEE process stemmed from the participants' prior learned knowledge and training in the applied field of psychology. The participants in this study noted that they were familiar with the psychological evaluation process from their graduate training and their applied experiences in the field of psychology. This prior learned knowledge of psychological evaluations generates a basic concept of how IEEs are conducted. Each participant's current conceptual understanding of IEEs appeared to have evolved over time with their individual experiences and attained knowledge. This understanding of IEEs as a concept is similar to the research pertaining to the knowledge-base of novices and experts (Ohst, Glogger, Nückles, & Renkl, 2015). Ohst et al. (2015) noted that novices will attempt to find understanding of a concept by falling back on a general heuristic of the concept in question. For the purposes of this study, all of the participants initially prescribed to a broad heuristic model of psychological evaluations, as presented in graduate coursework and in the clinical settings where they gained early evaluation experiences. Providing

psychological evaluations in the school setting was new to them and thus their working definition of a psychological evaluation did not completely fit during their first IEE.

**Theme: Experiential learning.** After conducting their first IEE, the participants recalled feeling frustrated because the psychological evaluation process was no longer familiar. All three participants noted earlier in the interview that they were familiar, or very familiar, with the evaluation process; however, working with public school systems appeared to challenge their existing model of what an evaluation should be, which elicited feelings of frustration.

Richey et al. (2019) found that when feelings of frustration occur during the learning process, the learner may actually have greater learning outcomes. The benefit of experiencing frustration during the learning process is due to the learner being presented with an erroneous model of a subject they have prior knowledge of. This erroneous model then challenges the learner's understanding and knowledge-base of the concept in question. With this in mind, the "frustrating" experiences of schools withholding relevant information, difficulties contacting teachers, the "unwritten rules" of school districts, not accepting DSM diagnoses, the structure of ARD meetings, and the evaluator's unfamiliarity with the structure of the school system provides an erroneous model of conducting an evaluation. This is because all of these perceived challenges are related to the school district, who happens to be the client.

The participants noted that their heuristic model of IEEs continued to change during their first IEE. Based on their responses, the participants appeared to have gained valuable insights about the IEE process through first-hand experience, continued

consultation with their school-based contacts, and self-reflection. This experiential learning process, as noted by Kolb and Kolb (2010), views the learner as an individual who seeks to become a natural part of the environment that he or she is learning from. The participants in this study noted that they had to gain a self-awareness of how their prior knowledge and experiences interacted with the environment (i.e., the school) in order to gain an understanding of what training was needed in order to adapt to the manner in which school-based evaluations were conducted.

**Theme: Need for training.** The broad theme of a need for training stemmed from the self-awareness the participants gained after reflecting upon their first experiences in conducting IEEs. According to Knapp, Gottlieb, and Handelsman (2017) ethical psychological professionals identify the need for additional training through the practice of self-reflection of their own limitations and open-mindedness to change. This self-reflective process typically occurs after an event takes place and acts as a catalyst for furthering knowledge about a particular subject. The participants in this study noted that they sought additional knowledge and training pertaining to IDEA (2004), conceptualizing the evaluation results to using special education eligibility criteria, creating realistic educational recommendations, and developing a better organizational understanding of the public-school system. The participants noted that they sought didactic trainings, relevant literature, and ongoing consultation with school-based professionals or other non-school based professionals who were familiar with IEEs and IDEA (2004).

## **Conceptualizing the Licensed Psychologist's Role When Providing a School-Based Service**

The third research aim focused on the perceived role that LPs believed that they had when providing a school-based service, such as conducting an IEE. All three participants in the study noted that they felt that it was their role to provide an unbiased second opinion to a child's evaluation. According to the participants, an unbiased evaluator must maintain objectivity, fairness, and have a capacity for taking a systemic view of the child's functioning. During the evaluation process and the evaluator's pursuit to maintain these goals, they may be perceived as an outsider to the school and the student's family.

**Theme: The outside evaluator.** The participants of this study reported perceptions of being an outside evaluator, which carried its own advantages and disadvantages. As already noted, the advantages of being an outside evaluator is that it is possible to provide a second opinion to a prior evaluation in an unbiased and objective manner. The problems related to the outside evaluator identity stem from the in-group versus out-group mentality related to trust. According to Henry Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, a person's sense of themselves is based on the summation of their individual group memberships (Voci, 2006). This lack or presence of group membership, or group identity, creates a sense of *in-group* and *out-group* perceptions. The perceptions an in-group member may have towards an out-group member are typically met with negative bias or suspicion (Voci, 2006). For the purposes of this study, the perceptions that participants had regarding being considered an outside evaluator was also met with

suspicion from the school district and from the family. According to the responses, families may treat LPs with suspicion since the LPs are contracted by the school, which is considered to be an out-group to the family. In addition, the LPs feel they are outsiders, or the out-group, to the school district because of the school system's restrictive access to valuable resources that are reserved for school-based evaluators such as relevant academic records, classroom observations, and teacher interviews.

### **Conclusions**

The qualitative research process in this study involved reporting the individual perceptions of three LPs in relation to conducting their first IEE. Individuals often have unique perspectives; therefore, there will be differences as well as commonalities amongst them. It is the responsibility of the qualitative researcher to present all views, even if there are some perspectives that differ from the majority. The following set of conclusions presented is based on the findings of the commonalities in this research in addition to some points that were important to note but may have not been reported by all of the LPs interviewed.

#### **Conclusions Based on Common Themes**

1. The LPs identified a personal and professional desire to conduct IEEs related to their recognition of the high need for outside evaluators to conduct IEEs, their desire to advocate for children, and their desire to increase referrals to their practice.

2. All of the LPs were familiar with the psychological evaluation process, child psychopathology, and developmental disorders when conducting their first IEE. This

foundational knowledge was acquired from graduate training and supervised experiences (i.e., internship or post-doc) in clinical settings.

3. All three LPs that were interviewed noted that they were unfamiliar with the structure and policies of the school systems where they conducted their first IEE. The policy and procedures were noted as not being clear to evaluators. Information that was missing or unclear included who to send the report to, what relevant resources are shared with the LPs, who is allowed to share these resources with the LPs, and how the LPs invoice for their services.

4. All of the LPs recommended developing an understanding of IDEA (2004), prior to conducting the IEE, is important. The LPs noted that they initially gained exposure to IDEA (2004) in graduate school and/or supervised experiences. The LPs noted that they were not aware of their need to learn more about IDEA (2004) until they began the IEE process and/or after their first IEE had concluded. All LPs noted that clinical psychology graduate programs need to increase the emphasis and importance of learning IDEA (2004).

5. During the IEE process, all of the LPs noted the helpfulness of having a contact person in the schools. These individuals included LSSPs, special education staff, and school administrators. These individuals were reported to be helpful to LPs in navigating the school system, helping to generate realistic recommendations for the written report, and understanding the school district's policies and procedures.

6. During their first IEE, the LPs integrated the evaluation data and reached a diagnostic conclusion by using a systemic lens.

7. The LPs identified the importance of being perceived as an outside evaluator on the basis of maintaining objectivity throughout the evaluation process. LPs noted the importance of informing the school and the family of their role in the evaluation process in order to limit potential bias during the evaluation and establish trust.

8. The LPs noted their perceived identity as the outside evaluator may garner distrust from the school and family, regardless of informing the parties of their role in the evaluation process. The school system may perceive the LPs as outsiders and limit resources and data gathering opportunities (i.e., classroom observations) or other data that would be afforded to a school-based evaluator since the LPs are not regarded as school employees. In addition, the family may wish to have an LP evaluate their child for a different disorder than what was on the referral paperwork. Failure to investigate the potential disability or problem may result in the family believing that the LP is in favor of the school's position.

9. The LPs noted the knowledgebase that LSSPs have regarding school-based evaluations and IDEA (2004). They noted the importance of LSSPs helping to train LPs who are unfamiliar with the IEE process and those who do not have a working foundational knowledge of IDEA (2004).

Other conclusions offered by individual participants:

10. Schools want LPs who also have their LSSP credential to conduct their IEEs more than LPs without their LSSP. LPs can be denied a contract with the school district on the basis of not having the LSSP credential since they are assumed to not have the knowledge or expertise to conduct a school-based evaluation.

11. There is a high need in the state of Texas for LPs who are bilingual to conduct IEEs to Spanish speaking students. With the rising Latino population in Texas, the need for bilingual outside evaluators will increase significantly.

12. Schools need to be more forthcoming on their policies and procedures when working with outside evaluators. These “unwritten rules,” such as the district’s policy on identifying SLD or district resources, are at times not communicated with outside evaluators.

In summary, participants revealed their lived experiences related to conducting their first IEE. Perceptions of conducting their first IEE demonstrated both commonalities and differences, yet common themes emerged across all interviews.

### **Implications for Practice**

Implications useful for LPs, LSSPs, and special education personnel can be drawn from this study. The study highlights a number of themes that can impact an LPs ability to conduct their first IEE successfully.

#### **Implications for LPs**

LPs who have never conducted an IEE should be aware that IEEs are not like a typical psychological evaluation. In addition to foundational knowledge of psychological evaluations (the evaluation process, child psychopathology, and developmental disorders), conducting an IEE also requires a basic background knowledge of special education law, school systems, and developing diagnostic conclusions using a systems-based lens. This seems to be a reason why some school districts prefer contracting with LPs who are also LSSPs. It helps establish that they have that foundational knowledge of

special education law and the education system. LPs wishing to conduct IEEs need to have self-awareness of their knowledge and to go into the IEE with the thoughts that it will be a similar, yet different experience in conducting a psychological or psychoeducational evaluation when compared to conducting one in the clinical setting.

After being contracted to conduct their first IEE, LPs should reach out to someone in the school district to act as a contact person to help them become familiar with the school district's policies, acquire relevant student records, discuss the ARD process, or help with the formulation of recommendations that are relevant and realistic for the district to utilize. After the conclusion of the evaluation, this contact person can help with identifying who to send the report or invoice for services to.

Understanding the IEE process involves a knowledge of school systems and special education law. LPs who conduct IEEs need to maintain a sense of self-awareness related to their need for additional training in these important knowledge areas. LPs can access learning materials and didactic trainings to help reduce any perceived knowledge gap in training. This may entail reading books on special education law or psychoeducational evaluations, consulting with a colleague who is familiar with the IEE process, participate in didactic trainings on IEEs and special education at conferences or regional trainings. After conducting the first IEE, the LP should ask for feedback from a relevant educator in order to improve their ability to conduct IEEs and also improve self-awareness of any need for training. Self-awareness of one's own knowledge-base and comfort-zone when conducting a clinical service are important components to ethical service delivery (Bersoff, 2012). In addition, it is recommended that clinical psychology

programs, with a child psychology focus, place a greater importance on teaching graduate students IDEA (2004). Graduate students learn to use the DSM-5 in clinical settings; however, the clinical populations they work with may also attend public education and receive special education services.

### **Implications for LSSPs**

LSSPs can be a vital resource for LPs wanting to conduct IEEs. In general, LSSPs should strive to be collaborative with LPs conducting IEEs in their school district. As a school-based contact, LSSPs can provide the LP with insight into any district policies and procedures that may impact the LP's service delivery as an outside evaluator. In addition, an LSSP can provide LPs with guidance through the IEE process from the perspective of another psychological professional by providing insight into diagnostic conclusions such as determining SLD or ED. LSSPs can also be seen as a valuable resource by LPs due to their knowledge of IDEA (2004) and helpful academic recommendations that the LP can use to ultimately help the student that is being evaluated. LSSPs can also share their knowledge and expertise in IDEA (2004) and school-based evaluations by hosting or conducting trainings that can target LPs in a specific region. During these trainings, LSSPs can answer any general questions or share insight to LPs who wish to conduct IEEs.

### **Implications for School Districts**

Special education personnel or other school staff can better assist outside evaluators by maintaining open and transparent communication with them throughout the evaluation. It is recommended that school districts provide a list of district requirements

for an IEE. Some of the larger education service centers across Texas provide outside evaluators with a list of requirements already (Region 4 Education Service Center, 2015). In addition to the evaluation requirements, school districts should be transparent in their communicating what relevant resources and records they allow outside evaluators to access during the evaluation. This will help the outside evaluators be aware of any potential limitations their evaluation may have. By understanding the school's limitations towards outside evaluators, LPs can plan ahead and seek any relevant information from other sources, if possible, such as from the student's family.

### **Strengths of the Study**

The strengths of this study relate to the theoretical framework and the phenomenological qualitative research approach. Due to the limited literature on the experiences of LPs conducting their first IEE, the phenomenological approach provided a richer set of data from which to draw conclusions. The semi-structured interviews with the LPs provided an opportunity for LPs to self-reflect on their experiences in conducting IEEs and identify growth in their training and identify potential training opportunities for future LPs who wish to conduct IEEs in the future. Quantitative research instruments would not have provided the type and depth of information as was obtained in this qualitative process.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Generalizations from this study are limited, in that it was an exploratory, phenomenological study. Phenomenological studies are primarily used to better understand the experiences of people, and, as such, they tend to have a smaller sample

size when compared to other qualitative research approaches (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The findings of this phonological study represent the perceptions of the participants in this study only. The findings provide a basis for further inquiry in future studies of this same topic. Because of the nature of the phenomenological research process and the collection of the interview data, the sample size was small, with only three participants, which was smaller than what was expected (i.e., five participants). In addition, since the participants were all from large urban settings, it may not be a representative population for non-school based LPs who were from more suburban or rural regions in Texas. This study also did not explore whether or not the LPs had conducted other psychological services in school districts such as counseling services, behavioral interventions, crisis intervention, consultation, and/or didactic trainings. Many of the exclusionary criteria in the study's design significantly limited the number of potential participants in the study. The study may have benefited from looking at the perceptions of non-school based LPs from multiple states rather than only looking at those in Texas.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Because of the paucity of research on LPs conducting IEEs, there are a variety of directions in which research could shed light on this topic. Further qualitative research should focus on the perceptions of conducting IEEs from LPs and LPs with their LSSP. This research can provide a comparative analysis on their perception of school-based cooperation or bias. In addition, the research can also investigate methods that LPs and LPs with their LSSP use to generate diagnostic conclusions for school-based evaluations. Do dually licensed LPs place a higher emphasis on certain data in IEEs than other LPs

when conducting IEEs? The findings from this study can identify any knowledge gap between practitioners and potential bias towards practitioners who are perceived as not having sufficient training or experience.

An exploration of school districts perceptions on outside evaluators should also be made. A quantitative research analysis focusing on district personnel's perceptions on outside evaluators can investigate the qualities valued most when contracting for an outside evaluation. This can highlight any potential need for additional training for LPs to conduct evaluations in the schools.

A quantitative study on the familiarity of the IEE evaluation process can be conducted by LPs who have never conducted IEEs before. An assumed familiarity with the IEE process can be obtained the start and then a reflection of their familiarity with the process can be gathered at the conclusion of the IEE. In addition, the experiential learning process of conducting an IEE at the beginning, middle, and end of the process can be examined. Findings related to the familiarity and experiential learning can further enhance the training LPs receive for understanding IDEA (2004) or conducting IEEs.

### **Summary**

The researcher sought to understand the essential experiences non-school based LPs had when conducting their first IEE. The research aims were explored through semi-structured interviews using a qualitative research design. The findings of this study noted the importance of graduate training experiences, professional development, experiential learning, and maintaining a collaborative relationship with the school district (i.e., the client) when one is conducting their first IEE. LPs conducting their first IEE may find

that they may not have access to certain data from the school or that the IEE process is, in some ways, different than the process of conducting a psychological assessment in the clinical setting. It is important for LPs to consult with school officials, such as a LSSP, during the IEE process regarding any district policies and procedures that may potentially assist or hinder the LP with the completion of the evaluation. In addition, the LSSPs, in general, be a vital source of knowledge pertaining to IDEA (2004) and conducting psychoeducational evaluations in the school settings. This knowledge can be provided to LPs during the IEE process via consultation or by hosting professional development training opportunities. School districts can further assist LPs prior to the IEE process by clearly stating the district's policies and requirements for conducting an IEE. Overall, successfully conducting an IEE requires the communication from multiple parties: the evaluator, the school district, the school staff, and the parents. While having a basic knowledge of special education law is very important, the success of an IEE ultimately relies heavily on how well the school staff and the outside evaluator collaborate together to ensure that the IEE fairly and accurately communicates the academic needs of a student with a suspected disability.

In conclusion, the three LPs, who provided their experiences for this study, noted that they all enjoyed conducting IEEs in the public schools. While they noted challenges that arose while conducting their first IEE, they were able to identify ways on how to circumvent these difficulties. They noted that, after conducting IEEs over the years, the process has become more familiar for them and they were able to identify the knowledge and training that helped them become successful at conducting IEEs. From their

experiences the researcher was able to better understand what non-school based LPs may experience when conducting their first IEE and identified various recommendations in hopes to help other LPs feel more prepared to conduct their first IEE.

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APPENDIX A  
Pre-Screening Items

### Pre-Screening Items

1. Are you currently licensed as a psychologist in the state of Texas?
  - Yes
  - No [end survey]
2. Are you currently employed full-time or part-time by a public school district?
  - Yes [end survey]
  - No
3. Have you been contracted by a public school district (Pre-K through 12th grade) in order to conduct a psychoeducational evaluation on their behalf?
  - Yes
  - No [end survey]
4. Were you ever enrolled in a school psychology graduate program?
  - Yes [end survey]
  - No
5. Do you also have the Licensed Specialist in School Psychology (LSSP) credential?
  - Yes [end survey]
  - No

APPENDIX B

Demographics Questionnaire

## Demographics Questionnaire

*Please provide answers to the following items:*

1. What is your gender? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is your ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What city/county do you practice in? \_\_\_\_\_
4. In what type of setting do you primarily practice? (i.e., private practice, hospital, community mental health, etc.)  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What is the highest degree you have obtained? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What year did you obtain your degree? \_\_\_\_\_
7. What year did you obtain your license as a psychologist? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How do you professionally identify yourself? For example: psychologist, clinical psychologist, neuropsychologist, child psychologist, etc.:  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Please indicate the primary training focus of your doctoral training:
  - Clinical Psychology
  - Counseling Psychology
  - Industrial Organizational Psychology

For the following two questions, please indicate the type of setting you were trained in (i.e., public school, hospital, community mental health center, VA, etc.). If your pre-doctoral internship or post-doc experiences took place in multiple settings, please indicate these below.

10. In what type of setting(s) was your pre-doctoral internship? \_\_\_\_\_
11. In what type of setting(s) was your post-doctoral training?  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. If you are selected to participate in the interview portion of this study, do you prefer phone or video conference (i.e., Skype, Google Hangout)?  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. What is your name? \_\_\_\_\_
14. Please provide a preferred email address so that you can be contacted to set up an interview if you are chosen for one: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

## Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your first experiences conducting an Independent Educational Evaluation.
2. What was familiar about the IEE process for you?
3. What was new or different about the IEE process for you?
4. In what ways did you feel prepared conducting your first IEE?
5. In what ways did you feel underprepared?
6. What advice would you provide other licensed psychologists when preparing for their first IEE?
7. Did you pursue additional training after conducting your first IEE?
  - i. If yes, what type of training did you pursue?
  - ii. If no, what types of training would you have liked to have received?
8. How do you perceive your role in the special education process?
9. In your experience, how have public schools treated outside evaluators?
  - i. Prompt: What could schools change in order to make outside evaluators feel more connected/valued?
10. What, if anything, should schools change in order to make conducting IEEs easier for outside evaluators?

APPENDIX D

Transcribed Interviews

## Clint Interview Transcript

(The researcher and the participant spent the first few minutes rapport building prior to starting the interview recording.)

**Researcher:** Ok Dr. \_\_\_\_\_, just for your information, I have started the recording.

**Clint:** That's fine.

**Researcher:** First, I want to say thank you again for agreeing to participate in my interview that is for my dissertation. This really means a lot and I really appreciate your assistance in this matter.

**Clint:** Sure thing. I just hope that you get the information that you need from me.

**Researcher:** I'm sure I will but, again, I just want to just let you know that we are doing a research study looking at the training experiences and also overall essential experiences of licensed psychologists who have completed and independent educational evaluations. And from the questionnaire that you gave, you stated that you have given these evaluations, yes?

**Clint:** Yes, that is correct. I have completed psycho-educational evaluations and neuropsychological evaluations for school districts around the Dallas Fort Worth area.

**Researcher:** That's great. Sorry, before we get started talking about your experiences, I'm going to go back over the consent form you filled out earlier. Do you agree to what the consent form was talking about in regard to confidentiality and also the risks that the potential risks that are involved in the study?

**Clint:** Yes, I agree to the terms of the informed consent. Sure.

**Researcher:** Thank you, sir. So anyways, I guess the first question I have to ask is what made you want to conduct independent educational evaluations, which from here on out we will call IEEs

**Clint:** Well, my initial reasoning of wanting to conduct IEEs was because I feel like that they are very vital and beneficial to the wellbeing of children with disabilities. So, when I originally started to do IEEs I was wanting to reach out to school districts and kind of establish a broader client referral network for my private practice. The networks that are traditionally used in my practice have been, of course, through insurance panels or private payers. But in this case, I wanted to reach out to school districts because I knew there was a high need.

**Researcher:** How were you aware of the need for IEEs?

**Clint:** Well, I learned more about IEEs during my post-doctoral fellowship. We saw an influx of referrals from ISDs throughout my post-doc tenure. These school districts paid very well and quickly for the services provided, compared to insurance, or private pay. So, I requested to do IEEs after I finished my first one. Before that, I learned about school evaluations from things like Sattler's textbook and didactics, but I had not conducted any school evaluations before my post-doc. At first, I was confused at the referral paperwork since it came from an ISD rather than from an insurance panel. My supervisor, at the time, provided me with the client paperwork that included the name of the child and a contact person for Dallas ISD. I really wanted to conduct these evaluations because, first of all, I heard that they pay pretty fast, but also it allowed me to extend my services

beyond my office and work directly in a child's environment that they spend most of their lives in.

**Researcher:** Okay, I see so it sounds to me like you are reaching out to school districts in order to not only improve business for yourself, but also you wanted to kind of assist children in the school environment as well and assist with their programming in that environment rather than the home environment, which I would assume that a lot of the recommendations from your evaluations tended to assist in.

**Clint:** Well, yes, and no, I mean the recommendations from your typical private practice psychological or neuropsychological evaluation is much broader in spectrum. We try to tackle all of the facets of functioning that might be impacting the child across multiple environments. However, I feel like that those recommendations we make for the specific environments, are maybe a little bit broader than what some may like because you don't want to have a million recommendations in an evaluation. You want to have only a few really good points, maybe per area of concern that you have highlighted in your evaluation. So, it was really hard for me to focus on some of the more academic needs that a child may have or maybe some behavioral concerns that may be better attended to in a more clinical setting. I was taught to write psychological reports for other medical professionals. So, I feel like that [IEEs] are more impactful and schools are pretty good at reviewing the recommendations that you have and letting you know which are realistic and which are not. You can sometimes gage it from the reaction on their face. If your recommendations are too far-fetched and specific, you may not receive another call from that ISD.

**Researcher:** Okay. So, tell me about your first experience conducting an IEE. You said that it was in Dallas ISD. Is that correct?

**Clint:** The first IEE I did was back in 1999. Anyways, it was a learning disability IEE and it also required a neuropsych test battery as well. I still do a lot of neuropsych evaluations in schools. So, I went in there and it was a 2nd grade kid. Basically, the school district wanted me to re-evaluate to see if he still met criteria for SLD. For confidentiality reasons I don't want to get into the finer details of why I was contracted to conduct the IEE, only know that it was for a due process hearing.

**Researcher:** Sure.

**Clint:** So obviously the parents disagreed with the school somewhere along the way and I felt a lot of pressure to appease the school and the parents. Anyways, I had very limited resources to go by because of the school's reluctance of providing me necessary information to conduct the evaluation.

**Researcher:** Like what kind of information?

**Clint:** Oh, it was like things like, the student's [Full and Individual Evaluation] (FIE), the student's attendance record, and the behavioral record. They wouldn't let me come in to observe the student in the classroom or talk to his teachers. So, I felt a little stunted in regard to conducting my first IEE and maneuvering through this red tape was kind of unfamiliar territory for me. Out of all of the places that I've done evaluations for, I felt the most restrictive in the school setting.

In hospitals, you know, you have a shared record on the child's FACE sheet, you have access to their care providers and access to their medical history or other important data.

If you need to request those records, you get a signed release and the information is sent to you within a day. It's pretty routine. My initial reaction is that I felt that this was a lot slower and limiting in the schools. I requested academic records from the school and they did not reply to me until, like a week later denying my request. So, I had the mother sign a consent form and had her release the information I requested, in order to do a workaround and provided me access to the child's records, since I couldn't enter the school. And so, other than that, it was really was just kind of felt like a paint-by-numbers evaluation: the school told me exactly what they wanted me to evaluate and what tests they wanted me to administer. I did have a contact person there, and it was the school psychologist and I also had access to the school's vice principal who was also a contact person for me that point. Yeah, so my first IEE that I conducted felt a little off-kilter to what I was used to based on my experiences providing psychological evaluations for children.

**Researcher:** Okay, thank you very much for that insight into your first IEE experience. So if you don't mind telling me like what was familiar about the IEE process for you?

**Clint:** Well, what was really familiar with me, and I'll just give this really straight off, were that obviously the assessments that the schools required you to administer. So, you know, like Woodcock-Johnson tests, Weschler tests, BASC-3's, you know, the standard affair. The assessment process was also pretty straightforward as well and also accessing multiple parties like doing a phone or email interview with the teacher and also conducting an interview with the parents and the child that was pretty straightforward as well. I also feel like a familiar part of the IEE process was the evaluation and also

providing the results of the report at the ARD meeting. ARD meetings are interesting though, sometimes it feels like a typical feedback session with educators and other times, particularly during due process, it feels like a court hearing.

**Researcher:** That's great. So, you're kind of leading into my next question. So, my next question would be what was new or different about the IEE process for you?

**Clint:** Well, I feel like I kind of touched on that a little bit of that already, I believe but I feel like that the IEE process was a little different in that the client is the school system. I think that's the first difference from what I would typically experience in a more traditional clinical or private practice setting. The other thing is that the lack of information, and I guess confusion of how the school is ran. Like, who are the people in charge or who are my go-to people for certain information? I feel like that was I to do a little bit of investigative work that way and I had to talk through certain people and have them refer me to other people such as the vice principal and the LSSP. The people I talked to were great help. They were great at suggesting recommendations, talking to the teachers for me, and helping with some ideas for workarounds of the ISD's restrictions. So, without them I would almost feel like a tourist in a foreign county! Long story short, the IEE turned out well because of their assistance.

**Researcher:** How else was it different for you?

**Clint:** Well, in regard to diagnosis, with my first IEE, I used the DSM-IV as the basis of providing a diagnosis of some kind. Well, I found out later that schools used the diagnostic labels from IDEA, which seem to me to be more legal terminology than diagnoses. My DSM diagnosis was acknowledged, but they wanted to know if an SLD

existed in IDEA terms since the DSM's criteria is very basic compared to IDEA's criteria for SLD. My report did not really convey that well and I did not really understand the differences until I actually took time to read IDEA. After reading the first time there were still some things I was unclear on in the IDEA classification system, such as: what constitutes emotional disturbance? Sometimes I still need to get consultation on that one when it comes up. So those are the biggest differences in my opinion.

**Researcher:** All right. Excellent. It sounds like the diagnostic aspect of the IEEs were new to you due to your unfamiliarity to IDEA at the time?

**Clint:** Yeah, I would say so.

**Researcher:** I see. So, in what ways did you feel prepared during your first IEE?

**Clint:** Being a clinical psychologist, I feel like I have had a lot of experience with evaluations. So, like I said, the evaluation process was very familiar and straightforward to me. I also feel like that creating recommendations for the reports that were appropriate for the school was familiar as well. I feel like I had quite a bit of experience in that area. So that was something that was pretty easy to do for me. I also felt very confident in my ability to tailor my diagnostic impressions based on all of the data that I had collected. So that was something I can convey very well in the meeting and also in the report too.

**Researcher:** Awesome. Well, in what ways did you feel under prepared?

**Clint:** Well, I definitely felt underprepared during my first IEE. In regard to the ARD meeting, the meeting itself. I felt like the meeting structure was something I was not prepared for. It was a very structured very standardized process. Like I said, it was kind of like a courtroom hearing. I feel like that that was something I was not prepared for. I

was also not prepared for the school to not be as open to me as I feel like it should have been at that time. I felt like that if they're going to contract me to perform this service, they should at least have its doors open for me to the same level as somebody who would have conducted the evaluation, like a school psychologist, because I feel like that would provide a more accurate portrayal of the child's functioning because I feel like there might be missing data that would be valuable for the evaluation.

**Researcher:** What information do you feel like you would need in the evaluate and their evaluation?

**Clint:** Well now after having conducted many IEEs and consulting with my colleagues with school psychology training, I know that the child's academic record is something that is highly sought-after and is very important for the evaluation. It's something you would definitely need in order to establish a trend in academic, or psychological concerns. It's definitely a priority. And also, I feel like their attendance records and behavioral records and other notable records, in general, are things I need and or maybe like maybe examples of like their assignments or classroom work something like that would be very beneficial too. But again, I know how to circumvent that now by having the parent provide copies of this information for their IEE evaluation rather than rely directly on the school district.

**Researcher:** Okay. Awesome. Well, my next question is what advice would you provide other licensed psychologists when preparing for their first IEE?

**Clint:** That's a good question. Well, I feel like the first thing I would tell them is get in touch with their contact person for the school and then ask the contact person the basic

organizational questions about the school. Like what are recommended assessments that are accepted by the schools, how do you contact teachers and other people at the school, who are the case managers, how much access do you get with academic records, and who do you send the reports to? Also, off the top of my head, are you able to conduct an observation in the school? Are you able to have free access to the child's teacher and regards to doing an interview or having access to the child's work? If not, I would add comments sections for strengths and weaknesses that the teachers can utilize in your semi-structured interview.

**Researcher:** Yeah. Those are some really great points. I can see those as being really helpful for someone unfamiliar with the IEE process. Can you think of any other information someone would need when preparing for their first IEE?

**Clint:** Yeah. Absolutely. There's a lot of information out there that needs to be learned when conducting IEEs. So, first thing's first, understanding IDEA is very important. In the beginning I was unfamiliar with IDEA, but as I started to learn it, I started understanding how complex the special education process is. The recommendations in my reports changed, as did how I formulated any diagnostic conclusions I had. Generally, I feel that school psychologists have the best understanding of IDEA, so I would try to consult with one pertaining to any questions you might have with it. If you don't know IDEA, it will be reflective in your reports and when you go over the results in any meetings you're invited to. So, I feel that schools may not be as accepting of your report since you are leaving them to guess if the child meets special education requirements. So, then you may be less likely to be contacted by that school district. So, I

would say do your due diligence and get yourself trained in IDEA. Know it well enough in case you are called to a due process hearing. You may be asked about your reasoning behind your diagnostic conclusions or some specific recommendations you made in the report.

**Researcher:** Did you pursue any additional training after conducting your first IEE?

**Clint:** I did a little bit of reading. I admit I could have read more at the time. I did a little bit of reading and regards to some of the special education labels because I feel like that that would be a little bit more beneficial for me to put in my report the next time I have an IEE, but I did not receive any training, or I did not pursue any training outside of that. I truly did not understand IDEA until several years later though.

I went to this didactic on IDEA that was put on by UT Southwestern. It was really great. I think a lawyer and a professor from UT Southwestern presented on IDEA, I'm not sure who they were affiliated with. It's not important. But, after that presentation got a better understanding of important IDEA terms and guidelines, like FAPE, Least Restrictive Environment, and IEPs. FAPE and LRE is something that is not talked about in clinical psychology. When we put recommendations in the reports, we look at the best possible outcome for the child. Well FAPE does not always mean the "best possible" out of something and Least Restrictive Environment means making sure the child's education is not restricting their access to opportunities that other children have. You try to balance out what does the child need to learn in their environment without their disability impacting them.

**Researcher:** So, is learning IDEA important to conducting IEEs?

**Clint:** Yeah, I would say so. When I first read through IDEA, I apparently glanced over the other important stuff like FAPE. I admit, at the time I was treating IDEA like another diagnostic manual rather than a law. I know that I'm not the only psychologist to make that mistake.

**Researcher:** All right. Well what so if you had to have some kind of training some other kind of training and regards to special education, whether it's now or maybe in your graduate training or something like that, what would you have liked to have received?

**Clint:** That's a good question. I feel like that the psychoeducational evaluations for children are very important, especially in this day of age with IDEA, and also the push for standardized tests being so important in the education of a child. So, I would say that I would have highly benefited from receiving some sort of training back in my graduate work. I feel like this would be a great topic of interest for graduate students since we work with children with disabilities and the schools are where kids spend the majority of their time. And because of that, these children with disabilities are being evaluated on the basis of IDEA rather than the DSM-5.

As a graduate student, I feel like I would have held IDEA to a higher level of importance than I did back then if I was introduced to it at an earlier period of my training. We all need to understand the basics of special education law, whether you, you know, work in the schools, conduct IEEs, or strictly do clinical work. I feel like that I would have been more prepared for my first IEE if I had that additional training early on.

**Researcher:** Awesome. So, another question I had was how do you perceive your role in the special education process?

**Clint:** Well, in my view I definitely view myself as an outsider of to the school district. The word outsider comes to mind very much during this process because it's, kind of putting it an analogy to this, but have you ever seen the movie *Fistful of Dollars*?

**Researcher:** No, but I've heard of it.

**Clint:** Well, it's kind of like *Fistful of Dollars* where Clint Eastwood's character, you know, he's kind of like this third party in this feud that's going on, right. So, he's hired by both parties to make sense of the problem. So, when there is a disagreement or a problem with an evaluation, the school contracts me to make sense of the situation, right, and I conduct my own evaluation as an outside perspective. But, unlike Clint Eastwood's character though, I openly inform the family that I am actually hired by the school to perform the evaluation. But, I also inform both them and the schools that I want to be unbiased when conducting the evaluation.

The drawbacks to being the outsider are that I am usually unfamiliar with the school that contracts with me and they are unfamiliar with me. The schools all have their own policies and restrictions to outside evaluators. I also feel that it can impact the family's trust in me, if there was a bad relationship with the school already and they find out that I actually work for the school. But at the same time, I feel like that is a valuable asset because I am providing an outside perspective of evaluating their child. That is something that is unique about my position rather than someone working in the schools.

**Researcher:** All right. Well, that's a pretty great analogy. I appreciated that very much. So, how do you feel like that public schools have treated outside evaluators?

**Clint:** Well, that's another good follow question. I feel like that school districts' rules and regulations tend to vary of what they can and cannot provide to outside evaluators. So for example, an evaluation that I just recently finished for Richardson ISD was able to allow me to come in and observe the student with another observer in the classroom. I also was able to have access to the student's classwork and access to interviewing multiple teachers, so that was very much a welcome change. So, I really feel like that school districts, in general, vary of how they how they treat outside evaluators. I think that larger school districts in general maybe a little bit more litigious maybe a little bit more, you know, just stay within arm's length kind of protocol, but overall, I really feel like that school districts do treat evaluators well, but they do kind of have this distance that they want to keep in order to protect themselves. That's just my view.

**Researcher:** So, what could schools change in order to make outside evaluators feel more connected or feel less like these "outsiders" so to speak?

**Clint:** I honestly think that psychologists will always feel like outsiders, unless you are a school employee or a school psychologist. So, this is my honest opinion. To answer your question, I think that schools being restrictive of contracted evaluators accessing educational records needs to be more streamlined. I also feel like, in general, that schools need to allow outside evaluators the same resources that the school's evaluator would have access to. I feel like if you're contracting somebody to perform a service, I feel like that you should be able to allow that person the freedom to perform the service and get the job done as well as it would be under normal circumstances.

**Researcher:** So, I just have one last question for you. What if anything should schools change in order to make conducting I easier for outside evaluators?

**Clint:** Well, I mean, I think it's a really good question. I feel like that it's kind of going with the previous question that you just asked but I feel like really providing if you're hiring sent your content hiring a contracted worker to conduct a specialized service. But if the tools and information needed for the specialized service to do the best quality job is locked behind your cabinet doors. You should provide them access to what's inside that cabinet to some degree. I think another should be protocol of allowing access to these records which is why I tend to just ask the parents for help in accessing those records instead of going through the school because I know it can be kind of a hassle and with the educational privacy laws. But yeah, anyways, that's my take on the records. Make it easier for evaluators.

**Researcher:** Alright, Thank you sir! Before we conclude the interview, I was wondering if you would know any other psychologists that you feel like would want to participate in my study? I'm trying to recruit additional participants through the psychologists I interview.

**Clint:** Sure, I can forward the email that you sent to other colleagues that I know around the area. I'm sure that a few of them can provide an interview.

**Researcher:** Again. Thank you. Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ for your help.

**Clint:** Sure. Good luck with your dissertation.

**Researcher:** I appreciate it.

**Clint:** Goodbye.

**Researcher: Bye.**

## Becky Interview Transcript

(The researcher and the participant spent the first few minutes rapport building prior to starting the interview recording.)

**Researcher:** The recorder has started. I know you agreed to the consent form in the survey I sent out. Do you still agree to the consent and also reach in regard to the confidentiality and also the risks that are that were provided in the consent regarding the study? Yes. All right. Perfect. Just had to get that there. So anyways, so it sounds like you've done a lot of IEEs, which is great.

**Becky:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** All right! So, I my first question I have for you. Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ is what made you want to conduct independent educational evaluations for school districts or schools in general?

**Becky:** Well really nothing. They just started contacting me. And once I had done some I'd seen some kids that were grossly underserved. So, it's a way that we can kind of give back to their families. I met a keeper service clinic and a lot of the families we see for IEEs wouldn't ordinarily pay to come in our clinic doors for our services. So, it's a nice balance statement some more specific help and expertise in areas of their child's needs because of course, we don't take lightly but they're just those that that were able to conduct here that are within our bounds competent and we can kind of give back to families that we wouldn't ordinarily be able to help

**Researcher:** Perfect. I so it sounds to me like you perform these school-based services in order to reach out to these underprivileged families that otherwise would not receive testing.

**Becky:** Actually, the school districts reached out to us. Oh, yeah, but once we started doing and it was a neat way to meet and help other families who maybe don't know how to advocate for their kids needs in the school and a lot of the rural districts that we work with. We've seen some pretty horrific stuff in terms of how kids are served in the public-school system. Oh, yeah, you know able to help remedy that is nice.

**Researcher:** Absolutely. So, I my next question would be what was it like for you to conduct your first IEE, or the first either you can recollect? What was that like for you?

**Becky:** I probably felt better prepared than those other clinical psychologists. I imagine might because I was very familiar with the school system and just working with children. In my internship I did a lot of IEEs for schools, but I already had a lot of experience maneuvering through the schools because of my kids. I have one that was diagnosed with ADHD and went through the 504 and IDEA hoops. Another one of my kids has a reading SLD and receives special education services. As a parent with kids who get special education services, I had to be a strong advocate for them and learn how to deal with the roadblocks put in their path by communicating with the school. So, because I knew how the schools are structured, I felt better about maneuvering through the IDEA process.

**Researcher:** It sounds like living the role of being a mother with kids in the special education system provided you with great foundational knowledge to conduct IEEs. How do you think you would have felt if you did not have these experiences?

**Becky:** Honestly, it probably would have been a lot different. [In graduate school] I wanted to take a class on IDEA and special education, but it was only offered in another college. Well, it was for a school psychology only, I think, licensure program. When I applied to graduate programs I wanted to seek out clinical psychology because I didn't want to be limited by the placement of school psychology being only being in the schools, right? But then in clinical psychology training, like my graduate program, they don't really talk a whole lot about the school and, especially in Texas our school system, and IDEA eligibility criteria is a bit different; particularly for learning disabilities. So, hypothetically speaking, I would of sought additional training or some sort of consultation prior to the IEE taking place.

But that was information that I already had living with children with special needs and working with children in practice. When kids aren't doing well in school, I found I had to learn to navigate the school system to be able to help my clients. I wasn't a school psychologist, that was stuff I had to learn so I partnered with an educational advocate in our office, where I did my internship, so I received a lot of that training during internship. I'm also a parent of two special needs kids. So, I had kind of done it from the parent-side. Both of my boys are in public school, I went to a public school; I'm a big advocate for public education.

**Researcher:** Wow! I think that that's pretty unique position to be in.

**Becky:** Yes, and I think it's a huge limitation though because we need more providers to conduct IEEs in rural districts and charter schools who need help completing the FIEs. There is a huge need. I also contract and do IEEs as well for the Texas Virtual Academy.

However, it's such a limiting factor that you have to be an LSSP to work for the school system because clinical psychologist can learn so many specializations like becoming experts in forensic psychology and they can learn law to do expert testimony and witness. There's no reason a clinical psychologist can't learn IDEA and to be able to conduct an IEE. Yet many districts, especially in the city, don't allow clinical psychologists, but I was able to obtain a contract with a number of districts due to my experience.

**Researcher:** So, I know you spoke a little bit on this. But what was very familiar about the IEE process for you?

**Becky:** Well, the standardized assessment. And report writing I was trained in a kind of old-school neuropsych and school psychology way. So, for me my reports were already lengthy contained a lot of information on the background sociological factors things that I see are sometimes skipped over. I don't like modern clinical psychology reports, particularly a neuropsychology reports, that are, like, five pages long and are not applicable outside of the medical settings. It was not in line with my training to be able to report like that. I often do things, you know, like get in touch with someone at the school like one of the teachers or the special education director to see what the school is looking for in the IEE recommendations to make changes to the child's IEP. They are usually very helpful since they provide some insider view of what the school is really wanting.

**Researcher:** And what do you feel was new or different about the IEE process for you?

**Becky:** There's definitely a bigger emphasis on teacher input. In my typical clinical report, I always want teacher report forms or information from the teachers when possible but with an IEE its taking it even a step farther for a school observation and interviewing

multiple teachers. What was new, and something that I kind of learned the hard way, was that different districts have different policies that are either written or unwritten, but they're certainly unshared with IEE providers. So, for example, the CTOPP doesn't really have a test retest interval that's written in the manual. In clinical practice, administering the CTOPP and retesting someone nine months apart would be considered standard practice. The researchers and test authors say to not do it less than 6 months apart, but I had an instance where we did the CTOPP eleven months and two weeks from when it was last administered. So basically, two weeks shy of a year, and that school district had a policy that the CTOPP couldn't be used less than a 12-month timeframe. So, they refused to accept the entire report. The entire report! They put a stop on that. So, we learned it the hard way, other little-known kinks and things. So, I do determination of intellectual disability evaluations as well, and in those evaluations, the Stanford-Binet is preferable because it does a better job catching those lower cases in the higher cases of IQ. But in the school system the Stanford-Binet, at least in the districts that I've contracted with, is not preferred because as the older norms, so, you know, they make you test using something like the WJ-IV which is not preferable to lower IQ children.

**Researcher:** I see.

**Becky:** Just like there's preferences for any specific language that has to go into the determination of intellectual disability or other types of evaluations. That are based on legal criteria not diagnostic criteria. The IEE process, as you know, is a huge learning curve as well.

**Researcher:** Absolutely. And so, going more into this. How would you what advice would you provide other licensed psychologist when they're preparing for their first IEE? Assuming they've had no school-based experiences.

**Becky:** Absolutely get consultation, because the most important thing is the provide the products that your client, which is the school district, expects and to provide the help to the student. Which is what's expected as well. So, you know, sometimes we find for the district. Sometimes, we find for the student in terms of, what you know, the argument or disagreement is, but the job is to provide a quality product to the school system because that's the, you know, the client that is an accurate representation of the child and is going to help that child get the support that the law says they're entitled to. There's, you know, if I know clinical psychologists who wanted to do IEEs and they say things like the, "kids are not getting the best possible education", they're probably not ready to conduct an IEE because we're not looking for best education. We're looking for a free and appropriate one. Those sort of things in their language would tell me whether or not they have the knowledge that could be able to do that, but I certainly think it's something that we could teach other clinical psychologists.

**Researcher:** Absolutely. And kind of going on to that a little bit more so during the IEE process. I know you have come with a background knowledge of public school districts beforehand, but did you pursue additional training after conducting your first IEE?

**Becky:** So, it was really beforehand. I had a consulted with an advocate who is also an LSSP, because, as a therapist and consultant, working with children as my primary population, when they had problems in school, they weren't being served appropriately or

they were being bullied. I didn't know how to help them. So, I had to take their documents, or take their cases, to get consultation. I had to learn for myself that if I wrote a letter to the school that said the best placement for this child is a small class setting that that I was barking up the wrong tree. I was asking for things that they're not legally obligated to provide, and so the more I learned about being able to help my individual therapy clients, and clients that were seeing me for clinical testing, the more I learned about the process and became comfortable with the IDEA.

With my first IEE, I actually consulted the district quite a bit. We have pretty good working relationships with all the districts that we contract with. And I just, you know, I really wasn't afraid to ask stupid questions. So, I even got to know the secretary's well. I guess the person that's in charge of special education for the district is someone you need to know. Sometimes I had to get in touch with those folks directly and say, "look, you know, I'm not real sure what the school system wants me to do in this case. Here are my thoughts..." and we problem solve a solution together that was going to those who work for them and meet the needs by answering the question.

**Researcher:** Absolutely because school districts are all different in Texas. And I think that that's really important, because even determining a disability like SLD may change from district to district. So, some may adhere to a strengths and weaknesses approach while others may still follow a discrepancy approach.

**Becky:** Yeah. Absolutely. That's definitely the hardest one to learn. I actually do I teach a didactic on interfacing with the school system to clinical psychologist. Really that's all have are interns and Psychiatry residents from the University of Texas Health Science

Center at Houston. Psychology internship program and their residency in Psychiatry and I just give him the Bare Bones basic overview and one of the biggest things that I find they've never been told before is just because you have a DSM diagnosis of specific learning disability does not mean that you're eligible for special education is a student with a learning disability. That's completely novel. I would say to 75% of people in the room.

**Researcher:** Wow.

**Becky:** So we talked a lot about eligibility versus diagnostic category. We talk about bullying we talk about language to use with the school system that if you want a client. To have help or support or to get a change in the help or support that they receive you have to take the word best out of your vocabulary. Certainly. I can't teach all of the process or IDEA in the two hours. My goal during the training is to open their eyes if they look you can interface with the schools. You just need to realize they speak a different language. And here's how you can learn that language. So there's a couple of us that we spend the Houston area that train or help other clinical psychologist And then, you know the folks that that I go to for help are often duly licensed. And I've been doing I he's longer than I have.

**Researcher:** So, thinking about your own training and education, and possibly getting in the shoes of those at your didactics, what types of training would you have liked to receive and when would you have liked to receive that training?

**Becky:** I think that even from good didactic training, having coursework available as an option in graduate school would have been very helpful, you know, even something like

school psychology since the clinical psychologist, right? Would be a very appealing.

Kind of introduction into that world. Because I would say it took me a good three or four years of just consultation client cases and to be able to feel comfortable at a level. That is I know what I don't know and I know when I need to reach out for help. Absolutely.

**Researcher:** I think those are really good points. That was also a good point to introduce clinical psychology graduate students to IDEA in their programs.

**Becky:** Well, you're learning the DSM and ICD, or whatever, in those classes. Being able to learn IDEA language is so vital when working with school-age children. I mean just the idea that there are books and other resources out there to teach me about an important topic I never received in graduate school is incredible to me. This was definitely a blind spot in my training.

**Researcher:** So, the very existence and importance of knowing IDEA was something you wish you learned in graduate school?

**Becky:** Absolutely! I was fortunate enough to get consultation from a psychologist who is very familiar with those about IDEA. And in exchange she was getting into IEE and so I consult with her and help her with obtaining IEE referrals.

**Researcher:** That's a nice trade off.

**Becky:** So, it's been a nice trade off when you know of a place where she's teaching me something new and I can ask those basic questions and then vice versa. Recently I thought, "Well, I chose not to be a school psychologist. I'm not going to deal with schools." That was a conscious decision. I made this decision going into graduate school, but I quickly learned just like I didn't really want to deal with adult plans and problems of

daily living, if you deal with children you deal with everything going on in their lives because they're in school and if school not going well for them because they may be being underserved or bullied, you know they may not improve with the therapy if I do not address their functioning in school.

**Researcher:** And so I guess kind of looking at more like this systems-based view that we're talking about here; which brings me to my next question: How do you perceive your role in the special education process?

**Becky:** When contracted by a school district you are very much under their contract. Meaning, you only test what they tell you to test. It is very limiting. So, there are times, you know, that it might mean telling the parents know, "I'm sorry, we can't test for what you want me to test. It's outside the scope of this evaluation". It's frustrating at times. It might mean, you know disappointing the family that's in my office that desperately wants this kid to not have intellectual disability because they suspect something else is going on, right, you know other times it's disappointing the district who is the client. So, I could see that there could be a tendency or a concern, you know to always find in favor of the school in you know, I mean, there's some some ethical concerns there. Schools also, at times, have a negative bias towards my findings as an outside evaluator because I'm not an LSSP. I have to not only use my consultation skills during these situations, but also my business sense to negotiate the terms of the IEE contract. So, I mean, it's I see myself as a consultant and as a helper. When the district doesn't have all the resources that they need or that families are pursuing their legal rights by getting the independent educational evaluation, I offer a second opinion to the school district and the family. In my informed

consent to families, I discuss my role as an outside evaluator conducting the IEE for the school district, rather than a typical private pay evaluation. That way there is very little misunderstanding of the roles.

**Researcher:** That's a good way of making your role clear for the families.

**Becky:** I'm like, "You picked me, but really the client is the school district", right. You talk to them about the limitations of the current scope of the evaluation, what its like, and what to expect. I also feel like I can step a little bit outside of that consultant role and I have the ability to make more recommendations that are specific to the family, versus keeping all the recommendation to a school-based setting.

**Researcher:** That's great. So, in your experience how have public schools treated outside evaluators?

**Becky:** Actually, for the most part quite well.

**Researcher:** That's great.

**Becky:** You know I have had some experiences where districts just shut the door before we even tested. They were like, "Oh, no, you're not an LSSP, you couldn't possibly do that work" and they won't even entertain returning an email or a phone call, you know, once they learn that you do not have your LSSP. So, I guess in those instances that would be poor but it's only in those few districts. We don't then continue doing business with those districts in that case. It does not really hurt business since there are so many schools requesting IEEs. Of course, you know, I'm always drafting a texas-style email thanking them for their opportunity to help them think about their students, but it's been very cordial and kind. So, I might expect in some cases especially given that they're having to

pay out money and that this is dealing with a family that's in disagreement and under the circumstances. It could be a lot more and or difficult than it is.

**Researcher:** You mentioned before the limitations related to the scope of the referral question. Have you noticed any other restrictions as an outside evaluator, or have the schools been open and helpful to you and your office when conducting IEEs? For instance, I know some school districts around the DFW area are more open to allowing outside evaluators to come in and conduct classroom observations whereas some others are more restrictive and do not allow outside evaluators in the school building.

**Becky:** Yes, I feel like its more of those unwritten rules.

**Researcher:** Okay.

**Becky:** Like about which test, you know, test selection and things like that that are not law but might be used in a district. It's just, you know, district policy. "We don't use test with norms over 5 years old". You know, so obvious ones are don't repeat a measure that they've given, unless it's hit the 12 month test retest marker. We also have had multiple instances of not receiving all the data. So, like you said that you know, sometimes we put one time we had an IEE report that was about to go out and the parent it via email. They had not mentioned this in any of the interviewing or any of the testing sessions. But via email. They said something about an evaluation that we didn't have that was the school had just done and it like an Autism evaluation, but we didn't have it. We request records both from the school and from the family. The families respond a little faster than the schools, so at times we tend to bank more on the families to provide this information. So usually we get everything. But, in this instance I'm not sure how we could be expected to

conduct a thorough IEE without being given all of the FIE data from the least the 12 months prior.

**Researcher:** That's seems really frustrating.

**Becky:** So in response, we've gotten better at digging. Yeah and many of the districts that we work regularly with, probably because they are open with sharing, are forthcoming, and appreciative we get the information that we need to do the full job. Although we still come across some of the districts that are, you know, have a little more of those unwritten rules, but we work a little less with them.

**Researcher:** I see. It sounds like these unwritten rules that you mention, have hindered your ability to better serve the school district and, the child.

**Becky:** I would love each district to have their policies freely available so that IEE providers can discuss with them any differences to that policy that they think need to be made. Districts have policies on everything from test selection to how invoices for billing of services are to be turned. If I don't find the invoice, they won't pay. Some districts want, you know, the report and the invoice sent the financial department. Some other district wants the report sent to the special ed. director, and then we send the invoice to their financial department. I think it would be really helpful if that information was clearly laid out from the get-go. That would be very helpful. When I do talk to districts and say, "Why won't tell me about your policies or how do you this invoice?" They do sort of look at me like I've got two heads because they just think that their way is the way everyone else does it

**Researcher:** That's a good point.

**Becky:** And I don't think that some of the people inside the district recognized how much variability there is. Between you know, the different methods of determining SLD criteria, and whether I will be able to

**Researcher:** And what has that process been like for you?

**Becky:** I've presented at ARD meetings and I've also been to due process. So the only thing I really love more than testing is talking about testing results. I like to do that. I feel almost incomplete delivering the report without that conversation because do the parents have questions or does the school have questions. So I appreciate the opportunity to present the findings and to have questions either be asked by the school or the family. I have gotten some interesting push back regarding my results. I would say it's about 50/50.

**Researcher:** Oh really? Wow.

**Becky:** Yeah.

**Researcher:** Before we go, I was actually thinking if you know of any other licensed psychologists who would who may be interested in participating in this interview?

**Becky:** Yeah, I shared your study with my friend and colleague. Her name's Dr. \_\_\_\_\_. I know you probably can't tell me if you've heard from her, but she was interested and said she would reach out to you.

**Researcher:** Thank you so much! Well, Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ I really appreciated your time right now and it was really a pleasure talking about with you.

**Julia:** Definitely! I'm really excited about what you find in your study. I'm not sure if you're allowed, but I would really like to know how your dissertation turns out. I could definitely apply it to the trainings I do, like I mentioned to you earlier.

**Researcher:** Yeah, I'll see what I can do in that area, but I'm not sure if I need to reach out to IRB or what since this is a university study. But, if I can, you will be the first person on my list!

**Becky:** Okay, very good.

**Researcher:** It was very nice talking to you Dr. \_\_\_\_\_.

**Becky:** Good luck to you, and have a good day. Alright. Take care.

**Researcher:** Good bye.

## Julia Interview

(The researcher and the participant spent the first few minutes rapport building prior to starting the interview recording.)

**Researcher:** All right, I have started the recording. I think we're okay now to start the interview and first of all, Dr. \_\_\_\_\_, I just wanted to let you know that I'm really appreciative of you joining me today for this and it really means a lot for you to help me with my dissertation project.

**Julia:** Sure thing.

**Researcher:** So, the first question I have is do you agree with the consent form in regard to confidentiality possible loss of confidentiality and also the risks involved with the study.

**Julia:** Yes. I remember the consent. I agree.

**Researcher:** Okay good. Alright, so, you know, I talked a little bit before about this, but you work with a lot of rural districts around Houston. Is that right?

**Julia:** Yeah. I'm contracted with some of the cities around the Greater Houston area such as Beaumont and Sugarland.

**Researcher:** That's really cool. So, what made you want to conduct independent educational evaluations for school districts?

**Julia:** Well, what really made me want to conduct IEEs was that it was a way for myself, as a clinical psychologist, help children in public schools receive educational supports that they need to be successful. I am able to reach a broad spectrum of children who may not otherwise receive my services in the school districts. I saw that it was such a need that

IEEs are all that I conduct now a days. I do not even have an office. My office is my car for now. I travel to the different school districts and homes of children in order to conduct the evaluations.

**Researcher:** Awesome. So, it sounds like you saw a need for IEEs and decided to make it the focus of your practice?

**Julia:** Yeah, that's what I did. And I've been loving it ever since.

**Researcher:** That's great! So, tell me about your first experience or experiences that you can recollect conducting independent educational evaluations.

**Julia:** Okay, let's see. I would have to say my first IEE experience that I can remember would have to be during my postdoc where I was working in a community based mental health facility I was working primarily with children with social and emotional disorders, and we would conduct evaluations not just for private paying families but also for the school districts as well. In my first IEE, I had a student who we ended up classifying as emotionally disturbed on the report, but I was taking it from a from a completely different perspective than how I would take it now. I was taking [the IEE] from more of a clinical perspective rather than a systemic perspective. And I think that really did not do much for the schools and my supervisor caught that mistake and told me that the school districts not going to look at DSM language, but rather they're going to look at more of the legal terms that are found in IDEA. So, I referenced back to IDEA because back when I was new to IEEs. I really didn't pay much attention to IDEA back then. I went over it a little bit during my postdoc and it was briefly mentioned in my graduate work where it was

touched on, but not discussed in depth. And so yeah, I went back, and I looked at IDEA a little bit more used my supervisor's recommendations.

**Researcher:** Great.

**Julia:** And by the way, I still have a hard time understanding what emotional disturbance means. It still kind of seems like a catch-all term to me.

**Researcher:** I think what constitutes emotional disturbance is what a lot of educators and LSSP's argue about today, so I do not think you are alone.

**Julia:** Yeah, okay. I still think that they should re-define or operationalize emotional disturbance a little more. Just for the sake of clarity. Anyways, back to my story. So, we ended up having two reports for my first IEE. We had one report that's more of a typical clinical psychoeducational evaluation, for the parents, and one that was more education-related for the school districts. We had more school-based recommendations in the school report. I had some difficulty, I guess, specifying what the recommendation should be since I was not really used to what school districts were looking for. Since then I am much more familiar with what certain districts are looking for when it comes to recommendations.

**Researcher:** All right. Well, that's great. It sounds like that. You had a great learning opportunity during your post-doc on how to conduct IEEs.

**Julia:** Yes, I had a wonderful supervisor and mentor.

**Researcher:** It seems like you had a great postdoc supervisor. My next question is, what was familiar about the IEE process for you?

**Julia:** I think the assessment process was the most familiar for me. It's pretty much the same process of completing a typical psychological evaluation: you are to investigate and answer the referral question to the best of your ability, you conduct clinical interviews, you use standardized assessments, you write the report, and go over the results with the client. Working with the child with something that was pretty new because the child came to our office and it was a typical clinical, you know session we're at sorry clinical testing session. Of course, it felt routine on the surface.

**Researcher:** Okay, that makes sense. So, the fourth question I have for you is what was new or different about the IEE process for you?

**Julia:** Well, I mean, the first thing that comes to mind are that the stakeholders are different. Whereas with psychological evaluations or neuropsychological evaluations, the client is typically the person who comes in for the intake. With IEEs, the client is the school itself. That's the main difference right there. Another thing that was a little different for me was I guess is having limited access to relevant resources from the school. I am the psychologist coming in to do this evaluation, but they're kind of restrictive in what I can access. I, at times, have difficulties accessing educational records or even scheduling an interview with the teacher. I feel like the parents are having to bend over backwards, at times, when they're already frustrated with the school system and have to access these educational records for me.

**Researcher:** That seems very frustrating for you. So, what else was different for you?

**Julia:** Like I mentioned before, using the legal jargon from IDEA rather than the diagnostic classification from something like the DSM-5 or ICD-10. Also learning a lot

of the educational jargon too, like IEPs, TEKS, and RTIs. That is something that is very different for me having to learn new terminology. I had no idea what these terms meant when I first started out.

**Researcher:** Educational terminology was something you were unfamiliar with?

**Julia:** That is, I still have difficulty understanding what response to intervention means because it's implemented so differently in different school systems, but everybody is recommending it right now. Another thing that has been different, and has been definitely a learning curve for me, has been also getting to know the different school districts and what their requirements are for IEEs since each school district has a different required requirement for their evaluations. It's a little frustrating to maneuver around when you are unfamiliar with public schools and how they are structured.

**Researcher:** It seems like it was a very frustrating and very uphill process for you.

**Julia:** Absolutely.

**Researcher:** Okay. Well in what ways did you feel prepared conducting your first IEE?

**Julia:** Well I'm pretty familiar with most of the tests that were requested before I started giving IEEs. I also have conducted forensic evaluations for the state and I felt that these types of high stake reports that I've written in the past have helped me for some of the IEEs that I've written for more litigious school districts, or cases that were going to due process hearings. Having to defend my data and findings in front of others didn't bother me in the slightest.

**Researcher:** That's pretty amazing. Many may find that one of the more challenging aspects of the IEE process.

**Julia:** Yeah, well I guess I've utilized my resources in feeling prepared in that department, I can tell you that much. My husband is a defense attorney and so he has helped me prepare as an expert witness in the past.

**Researcher:** Wow! Having a husband practice law is a pretty great resource for those situations. So, how else have you felt prepared for IEEs?

**Julia:** I mentioned my postdoc supervisor before. She was great in teaching me some of the ins and outs of conducting IEEs. I feel like that I would not pursue making IEEs a major part of my professional career without her guidance and influence. She was great. She helped me with writing reports in a more systems-based perspective rather than a more linear style that you see in a lot of clinical reports. So, yeah, I feel like the training from my former supervisor helped me feel more prepared with the IEE process. Oh yeah, I failed to mention that she had worked for some years in the public schools as a school psychologist.

**Researcher:** Hey! That's pretty awesome! A little representation from the school psychology side!

**Julia:** Yeah! I feel like without her influence I would not have been able to establish the great relationships with some of the schools that I work with now.

**Researcher:** Tell me more about that.

**Julia:** I think she helped me establish my consultation and interpersonal skills more in order to help me communicate ideas to educators and parents in an effective manner. I definitely felt more comfortable reaching out to the school districts for consultation.

**Researcher:** Nice. So she helped you in developing some of those soft skills necessary to work in a system like a school?

**Julia:** Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

**Researcher:** Okay. And what ways did you feel not prepared to conduct IEEs?

**Julia:** I feel like that my work in graduate school could have provided more training in IDEA or special education. I feel like I had a lack of training when it came to schools and especially with understanding education laws like IDEA. You had to take an elective class with the school psychology students to get that information. I feel like IDEA is a very important piece of legislation that all clinical psychology students, who are hoping to pursue working with children, should learn.

So, standing off my soapbox, I would also have to say like looking at the evaluations from more of a systemic approach was also something that I was unfamiliar with as well.

That was something that was a little difficult for me because usually I have more of a clinical mindset, you know. However, in the schools it's a very suspicious systemic perspective where you're considering the family, the child, the school, and any other social factors that may be causing difficulties in the child's day to day functioning.

Something as easy as, you know, where their seat in the classroom is located; do they need to be placed in the front of the classroom or near a teacher? Those have much bigger implications than what I had originally thought of because my typical window or view into a child's functioning has been that five to six hours of testing in the clinical setting and maybe what I've read from some prior psychological reports or medical records. And that's it. So, this was a much different take on evaluations. And after I first

gave my first few IEEs, it changed my entire perspective of how I conduct evaluations. I now write more systemic reports and it's longer and a lot more arduous of a process than a clinical report, but it provides better information in my opinion.

**Researcher:** Well, that's great. I'm really appreciative of you of telling me about that. It seems like you learned a lot after your first IEE. So, what advice would you provide other licensed psychologist when preparing for their first IEE?

**Julia:** The first thing that comes to mind for me is learn IDEA. I cannot stress that enough; learn IDEA. Go to workshops, read books, go to seminars, whatever you need to do to learn IDEA. Also, consult with somebody from the school where you're conducting your IEE and maintain a contact person throughout the process. Have that person provide you any information about how to maneuver through the school district and who to send the invoicing and reports to. That is essential. The other thing I would also recommend trying your best to conduct your assessment and your evaluation and then putting all the information together without looking at the DSM-5. Try to go off of only IDEA, if possible. I think that would be a huge challenge for a lot of clinical psychologists. But I think that challenge will kind of break away from the routine of following the classification systems they have probably memorized over the years.

Also, regarding recommendations, I would start talking to the school early on and determining what are some appropriate recommendations for learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, autism, and other classifications. Some school districts have specialized programs for those special education classifications. It wouldn't hurt to talk to

your contact person or, a school psychologist in that district, to learn more about these programs.

**Researcher:** That's excellent advice! Let's see. Did you pursue any additional training after conducting your first IEE?

**Julia:** Yes. As a matter of fact, I read a number of books. My supervisor had a special education law book that I read through during my first IEE. I also went to a couple of seminars that some school psychologists were putting on from the local school district that helped tremendously as well. This information was so helpful. It was very important, as a resource, for me to understand the educational system a lot better.

**Researcher:** Excellent. So how do you perceive your role in the special education process?

**Julia:** I see myself as an outside consultant, or an outside specialist. I'm not part of the school, but I'm here to help the school and the parents fulfill the goal of doing what's best for the child in question, which is a very important role. As you know, there are school psychologist that could definitely fill the role just as well as I can, but I feel like I'm there as a fresh perspective and also an unbiased third party that's coming in. Schools tend to value the unbiased perspective, since you can see bias in a report. Biased reports typically do not go over well in due process hearings and you will be questioned on why you didn't include other data, which may contradict some of the data you have.

**Researcher:** What do you mean?

**Julia:** Well, for some, it's sometimes hard to stay unbiased when you feel that the school is pushing for a particular outcome. Sometimes it's also hard when you hear that the

parents are wanting a particular outcome because they want what's best for their child, but the school is refusing the parents for one reason or another. So, because of these potential moral conflicts I have to be aware of my personal feelings during the evaluation and make sure my emotions are not influencing the outcome of the report I am writing. I tell this to the parents and the schools prior to the evaluation and they seem to respect me for it.

**Researcher:** Excellent. So, the next question I have for you is in your experience how have public schools treated outside evaluators?

**Julia:** That's a really good question. I feel like that it varies it varies from district to district. There are some school districts that were very open and were very happy to accommodate outside evaluators, like myself. Then you have other districts that were more restrictive. Maybe they were maybe a more litigious district, I'm unsure. Those larger districts probably see more due process hearings than maybe some of the other school districts and I feel like that those have been the most restrictive when it comes to sharing access to resources such as teachers, records, or test results. These districts have been typically larger districts, but then again, some large districts have been helpful towards third parties conducting IEEs. There is a lot of inconsistency between school districts.

**Researcher:** I see. So, how do you think the schools treat you as an outside psychologist, personally?

**Julia:** Personally, I feel that a lot of the school districts have been very accommodating to me since I am a bilingual in English and Spanish. So, I mean, when a child is needing

testing and only speaks Spanish, you know, the schools may call on me because they might lack some of the tests that have the necessary Spanish speaking norms. Not so much in Houston proper, but in the surrounding cities, there is a need for bilingual evaluators to do IEEs in the schools. I think that schools not only have a lack of psychologists needed to conduct IEEs in Spanish, but I feel that they may lack the testing materials. The majority of the kids in the schools are English speaking or have ESL. So, to answer your question, I feel that schools may be more accommodating to me than a non-bilingual psychologist because they recognize that I can provide a vital service for the kids, who are only Spanish speaking. Also, since the Greater Houston area hosts a large number of refugees, I can imagine that psychologists who speak other languages are just as highly sought after.

**Researcher:** You know, as an English only speaker, it hasn't really been on the forefront of my mind that schools would seek out multilingual psychologists to conduct the IEEs. I mean, I am aware of the need, but you know, it's something that I do not really dwell on much. That was really enlightening. Thank you for that.

**Julia:** You're very welcome! I think that there are many psychologists in Texas are aware of the growing need for more bilingual psychologists but are still unaware of how this shortage impacts more vulnerable populations, like kids. I see it every day. And I also see some psychologists have become more aware of this need, as the Latino population grows here, and they are saying things, "I refused more Spanish speaking referrals than I have accepted English ones". It's crazy like that in here in Greater Houston. I sometimes receive referrals to do educational evaluations through the Refugee

Services of Texas. So, I see so many youths who relocate with their families and come to Texas and are expected to perform well in these new schools, in a new culture, and I see that the schools often wait for these kids to struggle before doing anything about it. It's frustrating to say the least. Sorry, I can go on a rant about this for hours, but you probably have more questions for me.

**Researcher:** No, you are fine. So, as you know, I'm investigating your experiences conducting IEEs and this is the reality for many kids in Texas. One that I feel that needs to be talked about more. You really helped me become more aware of the experiences of conducting IEEs for children who are non-English speakers. Thank you for that.

**Julia:** You're welcome.

**Researcher:** So, my last question is, what should schools change in order to make conducting IEEs easier for outside evaluators.

**Julia:** I think the main thing with that is I think that they need to be more upfront of what they're going to allow the outside evaluator to access. I think that is the number one thing that, I would say, would make things a lot easier. Also, being a little bit more uniform about how the invoices and reports for IEEs are processed, because it becomes confusing when you are working with a dozen school districts. Also, I would like to see some sort of background check or consent for outside evaluators be provided so that outside evaluators can come in and conduct the evaluation just like a school psychologist since I feel like it's a disservice to the child by restricting access to certain data. So that's what I would say about that.

**Researcher:** Awesome. Well, Dr. \_\_\_\_\_, I really appreciate your time and effort you have any other questions for me right now?

**Julia:** No, not this time. Good luck on your dissertation.

**Researcher:** Sorry, before you go, do you mind providing me the contact information for any other licensed psychologists who might be interested in participating in my study? I'm trying to recruit additional participants.

**Julia:** Yes, I shared your study with a few colleagues of mine through your LinkedIn post. I can also email you some contacts that I think might be interested in your study. Would that help?

**Researcher:** Absolutely! Thank you so much for your help Dr. \_\_\_\_\_. Have a nice day.

**Julia:** You too. Bye