INVESTIGATION OF THE ROLE OF THE PARENT IN THE INITIAL EVALUATION FOR
SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES: INCREASING COLLABORATION WITHIN K-12
SCHOOL DISTRICTS TO CREATE A POSITIVE WORKING RELATIONSHIP

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION

COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

BY

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DENTON, TEXAS

DECEMBER 2023

DEDICATION

To my devoted parents, Michael and Elizabeth Brandt, who have always believed in me,

supported me, pushed me and encouraged me! Thank you for laying my educational foundation

to put me where I am today; I will forever love you both!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

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SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES: INCREASING COLLABORATION WITHIN K-12
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The purpose of this study is to investigate how K-12 school districts can create and increase a positive working relationship with parents and guardians who have students that are actively going through the initial evaluation process to determine if their student meets eligibility criteria to receive special education services. A phenomenological study was conducted to address two research questions: (RQ 1) What is the parent experience from the start of the initial evaluation to the placement of their child receiving special education services? (R Q2) What types of collaborative involvement parents experience with the school district during the initial review process? This qualitative study was conducted with $n = 10$ research participants to discover their personal responses on how to create positive working relationships with campus level staff who are conducting initial evaluations on students to determine if the student qualifies to receive special education services. Parents continue to voice their concern regarding their involvement with the local school district and the role of the parent involvement is being further researched to identify positive ways to build a positive working relationship between the parent and the school district.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARD: Admission, Review, and Dismissal Committee

FIIE: Full Individual and Initial Evaluation

IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IEP: Individualized Education Program

MTSS: Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

NPS: Notice of Procedural Safeguards

RTI: Response to Intervention

504: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973

SpED: Special Education Services

SPPI: State Performance Plan Indicator

TEA: Texas Education Agency

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Prior to receiving special education services, students must first participate in an evaluation process (The Legal Framework, 2022). The evaluation process can be initiated through several different methods including parent request for initial evaluation, recommendation from the campus or district, or even a recommendation for evaluation from an outside source, such as a medical practitioner from the student's family (The Legal Framework, 2022). The evaluation process includes gathering both formal, as well as informal data throughout the initial evaluation window (i.e., 45 school days from receiving the written consent to begin the evaluation timeline; The Legal Framework, 2022). Examples of informal measures can include, but are not limited to teacher feedback, classroom observations, vision/hearing screening from the campus nurse, parent input form, observations from campus staff, student attendance records, and discipline records. Examples of formal and informal measures can include but are not limited to standardized achievement and cognitive testing, state testing records, district testing records, and campus report cards (The Legal Framework, 2022). Before any type of decision can be implemented regarding decisions within special education, parents are entitled to receive all proposed recommendations for their child in writing, prior to implementing these changes; this is called informed consent (The Legal Framework, 2022). An example of providing informed consent to parents is to always provide guidance and recommendations of what the school district is proposing, in writing, before implementing those decisions as outlined within the individualized education program (IEP; The Legal Framework, 2022). The role of the parent during an initial evaluation to determine if their child qualifies to begin receiving special education services is a vital component to the multidisciplinary

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evaluation team. Parents provide critical background information prior to any assessments being conducted that serve to inform the evaluation team. Background information provided by parents may include many different facets regarding the student, both historical accounts as well as current observations/needs. Areas that may be addressed on a parent information form may include but are not limited to health/medical history, sociological background, behavior/discipline of the student (e.g., both at home as well as at school), academic, cognitive functioning, as well as speech/communication. This type of information can provide the assessment team with valuable data about the child that is to be evaluated and contribute to the determination related to the qualification or non-qualification for special education services (The Legal Framework, 2022).

According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), parent involvement is a component that is recorded and tracked within each school district (TEA, 2022). The purpose of tracking parent data is that it provides a means to ensure that parents are provided with meaningful participation within their child's IEP decision-making and processes with the school district (The Legal Framework, 2022). Parent participation is a primary focus of legislation that focuses on special education within the United States (Cooc & Bui, 2017). Burke and Sandman (2015) write that while a parent has a child that is receiving special education services, the parent(s) experience many barriers when it comes to voicing their concerns to school officials. An example of one of these barriers is the parents' collaboration with the professionals within the school district (Burke & Sandman, 2015). It is reported that parents feel disempowered and unable to openly discuss or share their concerns with the school professionals who comprise their student's IEP committee (Burke & Sandman, 2015).

A way districts can track and record input regarding meaningful parent participation is a component of the State Performance Plan Indicator (SSPI) 8. This state indicator is a measurement tool to record meaningful parent participation through parent surveys, from school, family and community engagement surveys, family resources tailored for students receiving special education services, as well as measures from student and family engagement (TEA, 2022). The SSPI is implemented by the TEA, so that it can track the percentage of parents who have a child enrolled in a K-12 school in the State of Texas that is receiving special education services who indicate that the school and officials have extended an opportunity for parent involvement as a means to improving the services being provided, along with the growth for children who have been identified with disabilities (TEA, 2022).

The parent's role and their participation are outlined within the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004). In accordance with IDEA, which ensures that parents who have children being served through special education, are able to participate in meaningful opportunities of the educational process for their child at school as well as at home (The Legal Framework, 2022). Examples of ways to ensure parents are receiving meaningful participation is to have scheduled meetings at a mutually agreeable date/time with the families of the student receiving special education services, in addition to receiving a written notice of the scheduled meeting a minimum 5 school days prior to the scheduled meeting date (The Legal Framework, 2022). Parents should be included in all steps of the educational process for their child who is being evaluated for special education services or has already been placed and served through the individualized programs (The Legal Framework, 2022). Parent participation can occur in many ways: conferencing with campus staff during the referral process, providing background information about the student, as well as sharing input regarding a drafted plan on how the

student will be supported in the school setting. Throughout the process, parents may encounter barriers while collaborating with the campus staff (Burke & Sandman, 2015). They continue to share how parents have reported that they feel disempowered, which in turn impacts their comfort and ability to openly share their concerns with school officials (Burke & Sandman, 2015). Other emotions that parents have experienced are feeling uncomfortable when they express their concerns with professionals within the school setting, especially the IEP committee members (Burke & Sandman, 2015). This feedback reinforces the value and importance of creating positive, meaningful participation between the parents and the rest of the IEP team to create a positive, respectful collaborative meeting which focuses on the support and growth of the student's current needs.

Within the many different components of the IEP (e.g., the assessment, addressing student needs within the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, drafting measurable annual goals, implementing comprehensive specialized services and accuracy in progress monitoring for the student), addressing each of these with accuracy and fidelity will help to improve the relationship between the parents and school officials who are working together to develop the child's IEP (Yell et al., 2016). In this current dissertation research study, parents shared their perception of a lack of understanding of the overall special education processes and legalities that were reviewed and discussed during the initial referral and initial placement meeting. The readability of the legal documents provided to parents in comparison to national literacy data indicates a disproportionate burden of literacy comprehension compared to the general population (Mandic et al., 2012). Feedback from participants in this current dissertation research study indicated that the legal paperwork that was provided to them was unfamiliar, and they did not fully comprehend fully the information being

conveyed. Providing information to parents in a more simplified format for higher comprehension of the material can increase a parent's participation, in addition to increasing their comfort level while participating in the IEP process.

Statement of the Problem

Parents may experience frustration regarding areas within the educational programming being provided to their child in a K-12 school setting after going through the initial evaluation (e.g., identifying ways for their student to learn before even conducting the initial evaluation, decisions being made before, during and after the initial referral process, along with the quality of education/services/supports the student is receiving following the placement to begin receiving special education services; Dever et al., 2016). Students can be referred to special education by their classroom teacher, who should be referring students for an initial evaluation based on current observations and identified concerns (Dever et al., 2016). However, teacher referrals for students to be evaluated for special education often are not data-driven by standardized assessments (Dever et al., 2016). School districts may have an intervention system in place on each campus to address multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), which focuses on developing a tiered system for supporting students, based on their needs, for academics, behaviors, as well as social/emotional needs (The Legal Framework, 2022). This data is tracked and recorded over a period of time to discuss provided interventions and the effectiveness of the support systems in place, based on recorded data (The Legal Framework, 2022). However, it is often observed that a student's behavior is more likely to initiate the referral process than a student's academic deficits (Dever et al., 2016). Three points discussed that are critical for campuses to address are: 1) what kinds of opportunities to learn are being provided to the student prior to initiating the referral for special education; 2) identifying what the communication and

collaboration looked like among the campus staff and the parent(s) during and after the initial

referral was discussed; 3) identifying a credible reason to move forward with the initial referral

for the student and the parent(s) (Dever et al., 2016). An identified significant issue that has been

discovered while conducting assessments for special education eligibility is the parent

involvement within the assessment process (Kim et al., 2000). Under the IDEA (2004) federal

law, there are many different categories that can classify an adult serving in the parental role to

be involved in a student's IEP planning and processes. The classification of the parent can be as

diverse as being a biological parent, a foster parent, a legal guardian, as well as the child having

two divorced parents (Losinski et al., 2016). Federal law is expanded to cover the role of the

person serving as the parent for a student, even in the direst of circumstances, to ensure that

proper representation is afforded to support the decision making on the behalf of the child

(IDEA, 2004). Parent participation is addressed at the federal level as well as being documented

at the state level in Texas. As parents continue to voice their concern regarding their involvement

with the local school district, the role of parent involvement is being further developed by

districts to identify positive ways to build a productive working relationship between the parent

and the school district officials (IDEA, 2004). Continued throughout IDEA, parents are entitled

to opportunities to address any concerns or disagreements with the local school district in a

positive and constructive manner (2004).

  Even though a parent has been provided a written consent form to move forward with the

initial evaluation, that does not mean the parent is obligated to provide their signed permission to

move forward with the assessment plan. In the case of a parent requesting an initial evaluation be

conducted for their student, a school district is required to respond in writing to this request (The

Legal Framework, 2022). Just because the parent has been provided a written copy of the written

consent to offer to conduct an initial evaluation for their student, the parent has the right to decline this consent to move forward with conducting an assessment for special education; there is no obligation to sign their written approval to move forward with any type of evaluation. Once signed, written consent has been received by the parent to initiate a special education evaluation; however, it can be a timely process for parents. According to current Texas state timelines regarding evaluation, under Texas Assessment Code, 19 TAC § 89.1011(c), the local education agency (LEA) has 45 school days to complete the initial evaluation (The Legal Framework, 2022; see Appendix A). A hardship parents may experience is receiving the results of the evaluation and then having another waiting period until a proposed IEP is drafted and developed for the student. According to current Texas state timelines regarding the IEP process, under Texas Assessment Code, 19 TAC § 89.1011(d), the LEA has 30 calendar days to conduct a meeting to propose the drafted IEP to the student's family (The Legal Framework, 2022). During the initial evaluation window and IEP development period following the completion of the qualifying assessment, parents may be eager to have special education services based on the needs of their child. According to Johnsen and Bele (2013), "Parents who report that their children need special education without receiving it stand out from other parents with significantly more negative experiences of parent-school cooperation…" (p. 89). Reasons for parents to not speak up or share their concerns with campus staff are a result of being afraid of their children receiving sanctions against them in the school setting (Johnsen & Bele, 2013).

Significance of the Study

Research in parent satisfaction related to the evaluation process is important because creating positive working relationships among parents and campus staff can lead to meaningful and productive meetings by focusing on the data which supports a student's strengths, that also

address the child's unique needs (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). When information is shared and presented during an IEP meeting that is data driven, reflection of the student's current performance presents a stronger focus of having a child-centered meeting where the decisions being discussed are individualized based on the child's needs (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). Disagreements over decisions made for the services provided to a child during an IEP meeting can negatively influence a parent's satisfaction with the decisions made to develop the overall IEP for their child (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). Having positive parent participation and satisfaction aligns with the role of the parent as outlined within IDEA.

The following are identified factors to increasing parent satisfaction when working within an IEP committee: parents felt like a valued member of the committee, the parents felt the other members of the IEP committee valued their opinions, the parents felt the intent of the meeting was centralized and focused on their student, and the parents felt the committee members were respectful of the family's culture when information is shared and presented during an IEP meeting that is data driven, reflected of the student's current performance presents a stronger focus of having a child-centered meeting where the decisions being discussed are individualized based on the child's needs (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). Research shows that parents who are going through the initial evaluation and who are new to special education may not have experienced any possible negative situations with campus staff, such as an unwillingness to collaborate, disagreement over placement or services, or even decisions regarding behavior/disciplinary decisions When information is shared and presented during an IEP meeting that is data driven, reflected of the student's current performance presents a stronger focus of having a child-centered meeting where the decisions being discussed are individualized based on the child's needs (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). It was also reported to have greater satisfaction

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occurred when parents reported having a stronger family-professional collaboration within the broader IEP process, that serves the whole needs of the student (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). Another critical component that can increase parent satisfaction is when campus staff develop and nurture a strong partnership with the parents, outside of the IEP meeting (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify ways to provide and increase a more positive parent collaboration with school districts as initial evaluations are conducted for students to determine if they qualify for special education services. This study was executed by conducting parent interviews to seek feedback related to the initial evaluation for their student within the past 12 months to determine if criteria was met to begin receiving special education services in the school setting. The semi-structured interviews captured and reflected the lived experiences of each of the research participants that provided a direct reflection of their experiences from the evaluation team and campus staff during the initial evaluation period for their child. This first-person account provided the principal researcher with qualitative data that captured their account of those experiences. Information was recorded through questions presented during virtual interviews, and observations were recorded throughout the interview by the principal researcher. The concept of saturation within grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, which is a qualitative research method that focuses on researching sociological theory that is rooted from textual data that supports social phenomena (Hennink et al., 2017). Within grounded theory, *theoretical saturation* is categorized when after conducting the data collection in qualitative research, there are no additional issues or insights discovered from the research findings (Hennink et al., 2017). Common themes and shared feedback were reviewed and

deemed common for the study to reach saturation. Šukys et al. (2015) reported that when districts work to establish active participation with parents, the result is a significant and positive impact on children's education because a supportive environment is created at home. This article reported an increase in parent/teacher communication and actively engaging in the students' learning at home to better be able to identify the child's learning problems (Šukys et al., 2015).

Research Questions

This research will investigate common themes across participant responses that indicate how to increase a positive working relationship with parents and guardians who have students who are actively going through the initial evaluation process to determine if their student meets eligibility criteria to receive special education services. The two focused research questions for this study are:

RQ1: What is the parent experience from the start of the initial evaluation to the placement of their child receiving special education services?

RQ2: What types of collaborative involvement do parents experience with the school district during the initial review process?

Summary

The focus of this current dissertation research study was to review the role of the parent and collect data about their lived experiences as their child was evaluated for an initial evaluation to determine if they were found to be eligible for special education services within the past 12 months. The TEA ensures that parents are provided meaningful participation in their child's programming regarding special education services, as outlined in the IDEA (2004). This current dissertation research study also sought to identify different ways the school district staff collaborated with the families during the initial review process.

Definition of Terms

Admission, Review, and Dismissal Committee: "A committee composed of a child's parent, the child, when appropriate, and school personnel who are involved with the child. The ARD committee determines a child's eligibility to receive special education services and develops the individualized education program (IEP) of the child. The ARD committee is the IEP team defined in federal law" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Admission, Review, and Dismissal Meeting: "A meeting to annually review a student's special education program that includes an update of the student's progress, a review of the current individualized education program (IEP), and development of a new IEP for the upcoming year" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Complaint: "Written action taken to notify the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and a school district that special education regulations are not being followed by the school district. A complaint must include the name and address of the student, the violation that occurred, and offer a possible resolution to the complaint. It must be sent to both TEA and the school district superintendent" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Consent: "Written informed parental consent is required before the local educational agency (LEA) evaluates a child for special education services for the first time, provides special education services for the first time, and reevaluates the child to determine the continued eligibility for special education services. Informed parental consent need not be obtained prior to reevaluation if the LEA can demonstrate it has taken reasonable measures to obtain such consent and the child's parent has failed to respond. Written consent is also needed before the LEA can release personally identifiable information from a child's education records, with certain exceptions as provided in federal law including when releasing to other school officials with a

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legitimate educational interest and to another LEA because the child intends to or has enrolled in the LEA. Consent is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Disability: Child with a disability means a child evaluated in accordance with IDEA (2004) as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

Eligibility: "The determination that a student is a "child with a disability" as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and as a result of the disability, the child needs special education services to benefit from education" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Evaluation: "The collection of information to determine whether a child qualifies with an identified disability, and to determine the educational needs of the child. The team who collects or reviews evaluation data, referred to as the multidisciplinary team, must use a variety of assessment tools and strategies to gather relevant functional, developmental, and academic information, including information provided by the parent. An evaluation may include administering individual tests, observing the student, looking at educational records, and talking with the student, teachers and parents" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Full Individual and Initial Evaluation: "A comprehensive evaluation that consists of data gathered from multiple sources for each student being considered for special education and related services. It is a part of the district's overall general education referral or screening system. Prior to referral, students experiencing difficulty in the general classroom are to be considered

for all support services available to all students, such as tutorial, remedial, compensatory, response to scientific, research-based intervention, and other academic or behavior support services" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Individual Education Plan: Development of IEP—

> In developing each child's IEP, the IEP team must consider:
>
>> (1) The strengths of the child;
>>
>> (2) The concerns of the parents for enhancing the education of their child;
>>
>> (3) The results of the initial or most recent evaluation of the child; and
>>
>> (4) The academic, developmental, and functional needs of the child.

Individualized Education Program: "A written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed and revised by the admission, review, and dismissal committee, of which parents are active members. The IEP includes the student's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, participation in state and district-wide assessments, transition services, annual goals, special factors, special education, related services, supplementary aids and services, extended school year services, and least restrictive environment. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is now aligned with the important principles of No Child Left Behind in promoting accountability for results, enhancing the role of parents and improving student achievement through instructional approaches that are based on scientific research" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Informed Consent: "When the parent has been fully informed of all information relevant to the activity for which consent is sought in his or her native language or through another mode of communication. The parent understands and agrees in writing to the carrying out of the activity for which consent is sought, and the consent describes that activity and lists any records that will

be released and to whom. The parent understands that the granting of consent is voluntary on the part of the parent and may be revoked at any time. If a parent revokes consent, that revocation is not retroactive and it does not negate an action that has occurred after the consent was given and before the consent was revoked" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Initial Evaluation: General. Each public agency must conduct a full and individual initial evaluation, in accordance with IDEA (2004), before the initial provision of special education and related services to a child with a disability under this part.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: "The federal law that provides assistance to states for the education of children with disabilities is the IDEA. This law gives every child with a disability the right to a public education at no cost to the family. Part C of the IDEA requires services to begin at birth and extends until the child turns three. Early Childhood Intervention programs deliver Part C services. Part B of the IDEA requires services for children from ages 3 through 21. Most children receiving Part B services are in public schools" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support: "MTSS focuses on intervention for the student struggling in academics, behavior, and/or social/emotional areas. Tiers are based on student need and levels of support are provided based on progress monitoring data" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Notice of Procedural Safeguards: "The written document that contains a full explanation of parental rights as guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Act, written in the native language of the parents and written in an easily understandable manner. A copy of the Notice of Procedural Safeguards is available to the parents of the child with a disability and must be given to the parents only one time a year, except that a copy also must be given to the parents upon

initial referral or parental request for evaluation, upon the first occurrence of the filing of a due process hearing, and upon request by a parent" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Parent: "Refers to a biological or adoptive parent, a foster parent, a legal guardian, a properly appointed surrogate parent, or other person as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act who has legal authority to make educational decisions for a child with a disability or who is suspected of having a disability" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Referral: "A referral to special education may be considered for children experiencing difficulty in the general classroom after providing all support services available (i.e., RtI, MTSS, etc.) to all students, such as tutorials, remedial options, compensatory support, and other services" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Response to Intervention: "A process addressing the needs of all students through a continuum of services which provide high quality instruction and scientific, research-based, tiered intervention strategies aligned with individual student need; frequent monitoring of student progress to make results-based academic or behavioral decisions; data-based school improvement; and the application of student response data to important educational decisions such as those regarding placement, intervention, curriculum, instructional goals and methodologies" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973: "A federal law designed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education. Under Section 504, a free appropriate public education consists of the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the student's individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Special Education Services: "Specially-designed instruction at no cost to parents to meet the unique needs of the child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings, and includes instruction in physical education" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

State Performance Plan Indicator: TEA collects data from LEAs for the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR). LEAs are required to report data on 16 State Performance Plan Indicators (SPPIs) identified by the United States Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. State Performance Plan Indicator 17: State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP) is a comprehensive multi-year plan for improving results for children with disabilities.

Texas Education Agency: "The state department of education or state educational agency which is responsible for the public education of all students in Texas. The TEA works with local school districts to ensure that all public education laws, rules, and regulations are followed" (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Timeline for Initial Evaluation: In IDEA (2004) a written report of a full individual and initial evaluation of a student for purposes of special education services shall be completed as follows, except as otherwise provided by this section: not later than the 45th school day following the date on which the school district, in accordance with 20 U.S.C. Section 1414(a), as amended, receives written consent for the evaluation, signed by the student's parent or legal guardian, except that if a student has been absent from school during that period on three or more days, that period must be extended by a number of school days equal to the number of school days during that period on which the student has been absent.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate how K-12 school districts within the state of Texas can create and increase a positive working relationship with parents and guardians who have students that are actively going through the initial evaluation process to determine if their student meets eligibility criteria to receive special education services. When conducting a phenomenological study, it requires the researcher to obtain information from the research participants about their lived experiences, and identifies common themes or elements to make up the phenomenon (Marques & McCall, 2005). A goal when conducting phenomenological research is to consider factors, such as what the research participants experienced as well as accounting for how they experienced it (Neubauer et al., 2019). The use of phenomenology is a frequently used research method within traditions of qualitative research (Marques & McCall, 2005). This approach to research captures the lived experience in each of the research participants and how they experience a phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). This study addresses two research questions: (RQ 1) What is the parent experience from the start of the initial evaluation to the placement of their child receiving special education services? (RQ 2) What types of collaborative involvement parents experience with the school district during the initial review process?

Literature related to national and state guidelines addressing the initial evaluation processes within special education is abundant. In this chapter, researchers' qualitative methods designs are discussed. The TWUniversal database was searched for the purpose of this literature review. Search terms used for the literature review included: special education, initial evaluation,

parent participation, referral process, response to intervention, qualitative study, qualitative

research, DeDoose, data analysis, and the legal framework The information related to the

evaluation process is divided into the following sections: 1) response to intervention, 2) national

guidelines, 3) state guidelines, 4) process to conduct an initial evaluation, 5) role of the parent

during the evaluation process, and 6) qualifying criteria for special education.

Response to Intervention

Prior to receiving special education services, students must first participate in an

evaluation process. The evaluation process can be initiated through a number of different

methods including parent request for initial evaluation, recommendation from the campus or

district, or even a recommendation for evaluation from an outside source, such as a medical

practitioner from the student's family (IDEA, 2004). At the campus level, a multi-tiered system

response to intervention (RtI) may be in place to provide a targeted level of multi-tiered systems

of interventions for the student to address academic or behavioral/social/emotional needs. RtI is

an early practice for intervention to support students who have learning difficulties with

intensive instruction, while also being supported through accommodations in the school setting

(Raben et al., 2020). According to the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), RtI is specially

designed to target students who are struggling within the classroom and develop a targeted

intervention early that also supports identifying students who have disabilities (Frey, 2019).

Campus-based tiered interventions are designed to meet the observable needs of the students,

over a period of time. The different areas of focus for intervention can be academic, behavior as

well as social/emotional needs of the student (The Legal Framework, 2022). The individualized

tiered plans are developed, designed, and reviewed by campus staff who are working directly

with the identified student which are created based on the intensity of the need of the student

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(The Legal Framework, 2022). School systems may have integrated a developed system of their RtI to support students who are struggling while in school.

Research has shown the value and benefits that RtI contributes to both special education and general education students (Alahmari, 2019). RtI is based on research strategies that focus on tiered interventions that are provided to students that utilize various measures to track and record student progress over a duration of time, based on the needs and progress as developed by the campus staff (Alahmari, 2019). The effectiveness of the intervention is dependent on the quality of the instruction as well as the implementation that each student receives at the various tiered levels while in school (Alahmari, 2019).

To create an effective RtI model within a school setting, research shows integrating quantitative data, in conjunction with qualitative data, paired with relevant information about the students, combined to create informed decisions about supporting the needs of the learners (Hoover, 2011). The RtI level of support often takes place at every grade level and includes interventions that can be implemented within the general education classroom or a systematic approach to supporting students by several staff members on a campus. RtI interventions can include strategies such as: Tier 1-intervention by differentiating classroom instruction, Tier 2-intervention by creating small group instruction within the classroom (groups of four to six students), and Tier 3-intervention by providing an alternate curriculum or even individualized instruction for longer durations compared to Tier 1 or Tier 2 interventions (Hoover, 2011). Possible program interventions may also include a student receiving instructional or behavioral accommodations. It is important to note that RtI strategies are often conducted prior to obtaining consent to begin a special education initial evaluation (Hoover, 2011). While RtI strategies are taking place for a student, data tracking and collaborative meetings are used to monitor student

performance and review the results of the provided interventions. Should the interventions be deemed effective for the student, many times further evaluation for special education services may not occur. However, should the RtI strategy prove ineffective for the student, then it may be decided that evaluation for special education services should take place if there is a need for an alternate curriculum and/or instructional interventions that are delivered in a smaller instructional setting (Hoover, 2011).

Should RtI strategies prove ineffective for a student, the parent/guardian may request for signed consent to initiate the evaluation process for their student to have an initial evaluation conducted by the campus evaluation team. If the special education referral is initiated by the campus staff, Maki and Adams (2022) has shown that multidisciplinary teams (MDTs) undermine the validity of these decision-making processes that should be developed on procedural adherence as well as guidelines to effectively make decisions about needs for students. These types of practices can impact the time lapse before consent is offered to initiate the referral process. Through both methods of initiating the evaluation process, written/signed/electronic parental consent is required prior to the student being evaluated in any way (Kim et al., 2000). There are both national and state guidelines that must be adhered to throughout this process to protect both the child and their family. For example, students can qualify to receive special education services if it is discovered that a student has a disability that is impacting his or her academic performance (IDEA, 2004). Additionally, state guidelines include At any point during the initial evaluation process, if the parent/guardian wishes to withdraw their consent, a revocation of consent can be signed and the evaluation will terminate immediately. The conduct of the evaluation only proceeds so long as the parent/guardian maintains their written consent for the assessment to be conducted.

In alignment with IDEA (2004), a student may qualify for special education services under one of these 13 disability categories: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury and visual impairment. A qualifying student is deemed as one who needs and qualifies for specially designed instruction that can only be provided through special education services. Related services (i.e., speech language services, physical therapy, occupational therapy, etc.) may also be provided to students with qualifying criteria to support school-based needs. Specialized instruction is provided by a fully certified educator who has been deemed highly qualified and trained in the targeted area of instruction. Persons providing related services, have additional training, formal education, as well as professional experience to provide related services to students for intense intervention. The student may also qualify for specific accommodations and/or modifications which are individualized within the student's IEP to meet their educational and instructional needs.

National Guidelines for Evaluation

According to national guidelines for evaluation procedures, as outlined within IDEA (2004), there are specific processes and procedures to follow when conducting an evaluation to determine a student's eligibility to receive special education services. The student must be evaluated by a public agency of trained professionals in evaluation and assessment, in all suspected areas of disability for the student (IDEA, 2004). Prior to evaluation, the public agency must provide notification to the parents/guardians of the child, about the specific evaluation that will take place and only after parental consent is received can the evaluation commence (IDEA, 2004). Secondly, detailed guidelines outlining the evaluation process such as the type of

assessment tools being used to conduct the evaluation to address academic, developmental, and

functional needs of the student must be provided to parents/guardians (IDEA, 2023). Evaluation

measures typically include formal achievement and cognitive testing, and their areas include

medical history of the student, social/emotional/behavioral evaluation (formal or informal

measures), parent/guardian input, testing observations, along with classroom-based observations.

The evaluation process can also include work samples and input from teachers. In addition, the

student's educational history should also be considered and reviewed as part of the evaluation

(IDEA, 2004).

National guidelines note that a one single measure of the evaluation cannot make

determination for eligibility criteria for a qualified program for a student with a disability, rather

the evaluation team will consider multiple evaluation mechanisms to determine a student's

qualification for special education services (IDEA, 2004). National guidelines also require that

sound instruments are used to gather performance feedback on cognitive and behavioral factors

when evaluating a student as well as when making placement decisions. A sound instrument is

one that has been researched, normed and tested for accuracy with the administration, as well as

the conclusions that are observed. National criterion is also in place that states that assessment

materials must not contain, nor be administered, with a bias (IDEA, 2004). An example of the

safeguards against bias that are put in place to protect students includes assessments

administered in a student's native language or in another mode of communication that allows

recorded assessment data to accurately reflect the student's performance abilities. Administered

assessments must be valid as well as have established reliable measures for conducting

evaluations; for example, any given assessment used in the evaluation process must have been

deemed valid and reliable with indicators such as interrater reliability. Furthermore, validity can

be constructed by defining the purpose of the evaluation instrument, what information the assessment is tracking to record, as well as identifying any type of variance observed from the recorded results of the conducted evaluation.

In addition to multiple valid and reliable measures, those administering the assessments must be thoroughly trained in conducting and evaluating the information that is being reported. A trained assessment administrator could receive their formal training on how to properly administer an instrument through guided practice from trained personnel (IDEA, 2004). Lastly, the assessments will be administered to maintain the standards and expectations as outlined by the producers of the assessments. For example, the Woodcock-Johnson IV (WJ IV) should be administered when: 1) evaluation is conducted only when there is an educational need; 2) when a child has other impairments, the assessment measurement accurately reflects the child's aptitude/achievement, regardless of their sensory impairments; 3) all suspected areas are evaluated accordingly; 4) as a student transfers districts amidst an evaluation, the receiving LEA will complete the evaluation to entirety; 5) each evaluation will be conducted in entirety, whether it is determined a disability is confirmed or found to be disqualified; and 6) assessment tools and strategies will be used to make educational decisions in the best interest of the needs of the child (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

State Guidelines

Two factors to consider when determining if a student requires special education services in the State of Texas: 1) is there a qualifying disability; and 2) is there an educational need for individualized instruction. According to the TEA, the State of Texas considers the following eligibilities as areas of disabilities in K-12 schools: autism, deaf-blindness, auditory impairment, emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other

health impairment, learning disability, speech impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment and noncategorical (The Legal Framework, 2022).

When conducting an initial evaluation, the assessment will be completed within 45 school days from receipt of signed consent from the parent/guardian of the student, or adult student. An evaluation may be conducted through the following methods: parent/adult student requests initial consent for the evaluation, the student is due for a reevaluation to make eligibility determination decisions, the IEP committee makes a special request for additional assessment, or the campus staff can even make a request for additional assessment to be conducted (The Legal Framework, 2022). The process includes an evaluation conducted by a qualified assessment personnel and is followed by an IEP team meeting to review the results of the evaluation. The process can be long and strenuous from the start of the referral for the student to finalizing the eligibility determination placement meeting, for the students and their families (Frey, 2019). This IEP team is composed of the following professionals: assessment personnel, a special education teacher, general education teacher, the LEA representative, along with the parent/guardian (The Legal Framework, 2022). As an aside, an adult student may also be a voting member if they are over the age of 18 years old.

If the evaluation team states the student has met qualifying criteria to receive special education services, the IEP team will then develop a personalized IEP based on the student's identified needs from the evaluation with input from the student's parent/guardian, as well as teachers who are supporting the student throughout the school day. During the IEP meeting, the following topics will be discussed: present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) for the student (this is a review of current levels of academic, communication and behavioral updates to demonstrate current performance). Transition planning

(if the student is 14 years or older) supports planning and discussions about future planning with the student and their family, all based on feedback and interest surveys. Classroom accommodations and supports, proposed IEP goals, schedule of services, along with district and state assessment accommodations. The proposed IEP is drafted, discussed, and if agreed upon will be implemented based on the recommendations from the IEP committee (The Legal Framework, 2022). The Legal Framework is a tool for educators and families to reference all issues pertaining to special education rules and regulations. When reviewing the document, it has a side-by-side comparison of national law compared to Texas state law that includes similarities, along with differences, that are outlined.

Process to Conduct an Initial Evaluation

Various reasons can lead a parent requesting an initial evaluation from the local school district. Often academic struggles can be a common reason to initiate the evaluation process, not just the sole reason for the student exhibiting signs of being a slow learner (IDEA, 2004). An example of an identified significant learning gap would be of their child not academically performing at grade-level standards to be successful, compared to their general education peers (IDEA, 2004). Additionally, district level summative assessments given at the campus can indicate where the student is performing academically. It is beneficial when school districts provide the same types of benchmarks at different grade levels to show a student's vertical growth from year to year. Furthermore, quantitative assessments can provide teachers and parents/guardians with useful data to demonstrate a student's academic performance each given year, as well as any possible expected growth from year to year.

When evaluating a student for special education services, there must be an educational need for specialized services that only be provided through individualized instruction by special

education staff. An educational need can also include a student's social, emotional, and behavioral development while they are enrolled in school. Identifying gaps in development in the areas of academic performance, behavioral needs and social and emotional development are all areas that are reviewed and considered when proceeding with an initial evaluation (IDEA, 2004). If the student's safety creates an urgency to the campus to jumpstart the initial evaluation process, instead of going through a tiered system of campus-based interventions, it may be recommended to move forward with offering written consent to the parent/guardian of the student. When conducting an initial evaluation with stronger emotional and behavioral needs, the campus may request additional assessment personnel be part of the evaluation, such as a school psychologist. The itinerant support staff (school psychologist) are often assigned to a campus for support and a vital member of the evaluation team. All members of the assessment team are either trained in the evaluation process, providing specialized services to those who qualify, can be knowledgeable about the general education curriculum, along with having awareness about available resources for the child and are an active member of the IEP team for students they support (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Role of the Parent During the Evaluation Process

Parents and students alike often experience multiple stressors leading up to the evaluation process to determine qualification for special education services. Each campus and district may have different processes outlined and in place, prior to completing the evaluation process (Alahmari, 2019). An example of a possible process option would be for the campus to implement RtI as a tiered intervention prior to signing consent for an initial evaluation. This tiered intervention may look very different across different campuses, outlining specific tiered

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interventions that are provided to the student over a period of time to track and record data (Alahmari, 2019).

During the virtual interview with research participant 002, she expressed a frustration once the signed consent is provided to initiate the evaluation process. Concerns were first shared by the classroom teacher who began to identify areas of concern regarding her child in the classroom. Her frustrations continued throughout the total time to conduct and complete the evaluation. Only to then to be stalled by another duration before being able to review results to gain answers for the student's struggles by the IEP committee. A way for the assessment team to establish trust among parents during the initial evaluation assessment window is to create, as well as maintain, various ways of working towards improving the relationships with the parents of the students being evaluated (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). This communication can be established as progress reporting regarding updates about the initial evaluation. A way to establish a parent's trust by an educational professional is to exercise a practice of frequent, effective communication with the parents, active listening skills, as well as sharing honest feedback while being open to resolution for problem-solving needs for the student (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Higher levels of trust were established as parents received in-person communication from the school's professional education staff that pertained to the needs of their student (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). A way to establish positive outcomes for students, families and schools is to establish trust with families frequently throughout the school year by campus professionals that are open, honest, and genuine (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023).

According to current Texas state timelines regarding evaluation, under Texas Assessment Code, 19 TAC § 89.1011(c), the LEA has 45 school days to complete the initial evaluation (The Legal Framework, 2022). Another hardship research participant 007 shared was her experience

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in waiting to receive the results of the evaluation and then having another waiting period until a proposed IEP is drafted and developed for the student. According to current Texas state timelines regarding the IEP process, under Texas Assessment Code, 19 TAC § 89.1011(d), the LEA has 30 calendar days to conduct a meeting to propose the drafted IEP to the student's family (The Legal Framework, 2022). This can be a stressful and strenuous waiting period for families. Input from several research participants within this study confirmed the parent's desire to be an active participant in creating a plan to support their student during the school setting.

Parent involvement is a key component for completing a thorough evaluation for a student (Applequist, 2009). It can be a challenging acceptance for a parent to acknowledge their student has academic, behavioral, or possibly emotional areas of growth that may require such intense intervention that only special education can provide, due to feeling isolated from extended family, friends and even the community (Applequist, 2009). Prior to receiving confirmation of an identified disability, some parents may not aware of available options of early intervention (Applequist, 2009). Some factors that may affect a parent's decision before agreeing to begin the evaluation process would be receiving information from school officials to support them being able to make an informed decision (Applequist, 2009). Often, as a parent is presented with a new label that identifies their student, it can be isolating for the parent to hear this about their child, whom they love deeply and have raised with a loving heart (Applequist, 2009). Another factor to consider in the family dynamic is stress and strained family situations that have occurred, regardless of the severity of the child's problematic behaviors (Andersson et al., 2014).

Several different areas are evaluated when conducting an evaluation for special education services, which can include, but not limited to academic, cognitive, social and emotional/behavioral, medical history, along with the student's communication (The Legal

Framework, 2022). Due to the extensiveness of the evaluation, data is recorded, observed, and gathered from many different sources throughout the assessment period. In this article, the authors capture input from parents regarding their experience from the evaluation as,

> Regarding the time elapsed from the first assessment session to the concluding conference, 23 parents (68%) expressed ''satisfaction'', nine (26%) found the time ''too long'', and two (6%) ''too short''. Twenty-six parents (84%) were positive about receiving input from preschool, 4 (13%) doubted the contribution of that information, and one parent (3%) found it to be negative. (Andersson et al., 2014, p. 3396)

The role of the parent is a pivotal force to creating a successful plan to support student growth and achievement while in school. Having the parent's satisfaction and approval during this process is a key component for unity and shared vision for the student's trajectory.

As students are going through the initial evaluation process, there are circumstances when a child does not qualify to receive special education services in the public school system. Federal guidelines currently in place are that a qualifying child may begin receiving specialized instruction that only special education staffers are qualified to provide, starting on the child's third birthday. Services can remain in place for a student, if there is a qualifying need, up until their 22nd birthday. If a student turns 22 while still receiving services in a public school setting, they will 'age-out' meaning they are able to finish out that current school year but will no longer be allowed to enroll in that public school setting (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Parent Satisfaction

It is noted that parents are seeking information and support to help their children develop to their fullest potential from the school districts (Applequist, 2009). Parents are seeking information to empower their ability for decision making for the needs of their child (Applequist,

2009). Feedback shared from several research participants in this study was their request to have information from school districts presented to them in a common, understandable, and relatable language to further their understanding of the information being presented to them about their child. It was also noted that parents are disapproving of conversations with professional education staff that focus on the legal paperwork and educational jargon, instead of the educational needs of the child (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023).

Qualifying Criteria for Special Education

There are two qualifying criteria set forth for a student to receive special education services: having an identifying eligibility and having an educational need for specially designed instruction that only special education can provide (The Legal Framework, 2022). If a student does not meet both criteria, they do not qualify for special education services and a meeting is conducted to review the results of the evaluation (The Legal Framework, 2022). Parents may feel frustrated or defeated because their child, who is struggling in some way or another, has no other means to support their student while in school. There are other options available that can provide services to students in a public school setting that are not special education. Using detailed data about the student's academic strengths, areas of growth, along with behavioral supports as well, can allow for staff to formulate targeted needs for student intervention within the IEP. Going through these alternative program options are not as individualized or intense with support, but they are tiered levels of intervention available in the public sector to supporting students with their needs. If a parent does not agree with the results of the evaluation that was conducted for their child, they have the right to request an additional evaluation to be conducted again for their child, and it is at no cost to the parent or family (The Legal Framework, 2022). The process of

the evaluation will continue to follow national and state guidelines, just as the initial evaluation was conducted (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Parent Training Resources

As students qualify for special education services, resources are available from the district to support parent training, in addition to supporting needs for the child within the home (Cooc & Bui, 2017). An effective tool to increase overall parent participation within the child's IEP is to create outreach programs available to families that foster self-efficacy within the family (Cooc & Bui, 2017). Having collaborative programs within the community and as resources for families can establish communication and partnerships with the schools (Cooc & Bui, 2017). Parent centers are available in each state across the United States that can support a families' knowledge of IDEA and how it applies within the school setting for children with identified disabilities (Cooc & Bui, 2017).

Summary

This current dissertation research study evaluates input from parents shared about their voice explaining their experience from campus staff while their child was receiving an initial evaluation to determine if they would qualify for special education services. School districts may have RtI in place to support tiered interventions for students on many different levels of functioning and performance-based tasks (Alahmari, 2019). A developed relationship between the researcher and participant can directly positively affect the information provided during the current dissertation research study through the interviewing process (Berger, 2015). These tiered interventions that are provided through RtI are research-based strategies to target specific skills to raise a student's particular level of performance (Alahmari, 2019). Once it has been determined that written consent will be offered/provided to a parent to seek their permission to

move forward with conducting an initial evaluation to determine if their child qualifies for special education, a timeline will begin to complete this assessment by qualified district and campus staff (The Legal Framework, 2022). For a child to qualify for special education services in the State of Texas, the child must have a qualifying area of eligibility meeting the state standards, in addition to having an educational need for individualized instruction within their school day (The Legal Framework, 2022). Simply qualifying with an eligible disability does not warrant qualification for specialized services. A documented education need for individualized instruction must also factor into qualifying criteria.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

For this qualitative phenomenological study, the principal researcher used a self-designed demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) to obtain background information for each research participant. The demographic questionnaire was introduced to the research participant that focused on pivotal background information to share about the child who was evaluated, the family, members within the house, ages, residence, and so forth. When conducting a demographic questionnaire, according to Kennedy et al. (2022), it can lead to better results than anticipated. This background information provides a clearer picture of not only the student being discussed for this dissertation research study, but also for the entire family and their family unit. Additionally, the potential for confirmation bias can be reduced by developing pre-existing answer categories. The demographic questionnaire contained open-ended questions to allow the researcher to collect qualitative data that was shared by each of the research participants during the interview sessions. Before conducting the research for this phenomenological study, the principal researcher obtained research study approval from the Texas Woman's University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Following the completion of all the virtual interviews with the research participants, member-checking was completed by the principal researcher. As the social media post was made to recruit interested research participants, it was noted there that the interviews would be conducted in a virtual platform. Each dissertation research participant was able to successfully access the virtual meeting through a Google meeting that was electronically provided to them in their email accounts. Member-checking consisted of the principal researcher conducting a follow-up meeting with each research participant, to review and discuss the recorded feedback

that was provided during the virtual interview. This process allowed the principal researcher to receive feedback from each of the research participants about the accuracy of what was transcribed from the virtual interview. After member-checking was completed, the interrating process began. Interrating was conducted by a fellow research team member to verify accuracy of the information captured and recorded, in addition to completing coding and thematic analysis of the data. This process was able to fulfill an interrater reliability for this current dissertation research study. Interrating was conducted by reviewing 20% of the written transcripts that were documented from the virtual interviews. Codes and themes were identified after completing a thorough review of each of the transcripts from each research participant. Interrater reliability can be conducted by selecting a sample of the total transcripts to analyze (Beletto, 2018). When integrating inter-rater reliability within this current dissertation research study, it strengthens transparency, creates consistency within the collected qualitative data analysis and creates rigor within the identified codes that have been gathered from the collected interviews from research participants (Cole, 2023). It is important for the researcher to have awareness of bias during the bias in research, in the conduct and analysis of the study, as well as when reporting in the research study findings (Cook, 2014).

Research Tools

An approved questionnaire and survey were administered to each research participant to gather and collect the data. Each interview was recorded with video, as well as audio recorded. Transcriptions of each interview were completed to be used to support coding and thematic analysis of the captured responses of each research participant. After reviewing each transcript, codes and themes were identified and analyzed through an electronic software program called DeDoose. This analytical software can support qualitative research coding, assessing interrater

reliability, in addition to merging and integrating qualitative data with quantitative data (Huynh, 2021).

Participants and Recruitment

To begin the data collection for this current dissertation research study, a social media post was made to initiate recruitment of research participants in local social media parent groups on Facebook and local neighborhood social media groups on Facebook (see Appendix C) to seek volunteer research participants who met qualifying criteria to participate in this current dissertation research study. Once an interested research participant responded to the principal researcher's social media recruitment post, direct communication was made to the interested research participants to verify they met qualifying criteria to participate in this current dissertation research study. This communication was done through Facebook Messenger initially to begin introductions and provision of the premise of the research for the potential research participant. Once it was confirmed the interested participant met the qualifying criteria to participate within this current dissertation research study, the participant provided a personal email address to the researcher so the research consent form could be sent, reviewed, and signed. Prior to conducting any formal research interviews, a signed consent to participate in the study was obtained from each research participant (see Appendix A). A social media post was made in Facebook parent groups that focused on North Texas (Prosper, Texas and Celina, Texas). A screen shot was posted online in the social media groups (see Appendix D). A convenience sample was collected for the purpose of nonprobability sampling techniques based on a subject from a given population (Etikan, 2016).

Demographic Questionnaire

The purpose of the demographic questionnaire was to obtain background information about the research participant, the family as well as educational experiences pertaining to special education during the initial evaluation and initial IEP planning. The demographic questionnaire was developed by focusing on the background information of each research participant. The demographic questionnaire included questions that identified information about the parents/guardians within the home, age, race, and home language of each of the research participants, along with information regarding the specialized services for the student who experienced an initial evaluation to determine eligibility for special education. During the first recorded virtual meeting, I read aloud each question in the demographic questionnaire and the research participant responded to each question after it was read to them (see Appendix C).

Survey Questions

The instrument used for this current dissertation research study was developed by the Hurst-Euless-Bedford Department of Special Education as a parent survey. The purpose of this current dissertation research study is to gather and collect information from parents/guardians regarding feedback about their experiences while undergoing an initial evaluation for special education to determine if their child would qualify for special education services in a K-12 school setting. The survey begins with gathering background information about students within the family home who had an initial evaluation conducted within the past 12 months to determine if the child qualified to receive special education services. The survey also identifies the number of years all children within the home have received services from special education, in addition to identifying the current campus where services are being provided (see Appendix E). Next are an array of questions identifying the research participants' level of satisfaction for special

education services being provided to their child, level of programming within the school as well as their level of parent participation within the development of the IEP. The next section identifies the parent understanding from the start of the evaluation, the area of eligibility the student qualified for special education, the parent understanding of the testing results, their role within the decision making for providing services for the student, as well as their understanding for all required components to address during an initial IEP meeting.

Interviews

A phenomenological approach was the focus while interviews were being conducted with the research participants. An element to phenomenology is the appearance of modes within the conducted research (Bevan, 2014). What this means is that modes of appearance can be different among each of the research participants though they are asked the same questions (Bevan, 2014). The commonality that each of the research participants has experienced (initial evaluation for their child), can be perceived in many ways by one or many of the persons being interviewed (Bevan, 2014). Interview questions were chosen to allow each of the research participants to reflect on their feedback, experiences, and insight about their personal experiences while their child was undergoing the initial evaluation process to determine if they met eligibility criteria to begin receiving special education services. When conducting an interview with a research participant, the phenomenological method should align with the process, and remain practical (Bevan, 2014). These factors are important to building methodological consistency, in addition to creating trustworthiness within the research study (Bevan, 2014).

Conducting Virtual Interviews

Virtual interviews were conducted with each participant at a mutually agreeable date and time to conduct the initial meeting between the research participant and the principal researcher.

Prior to conducting each interview, the research participant reviewed and digitally signed the informed consent to indicate their agreement to participating within the current dissertation research study. Each interview was recorded by utilizing two different methods: audio recording and by capturing a video recording of the conducted interview. The recording was used to support completing a transcription of each of the interviews. The principal researcher took handwritten notes during each virtual interview to capture and record responses for each of the questions within the questionnaire and the survey. Following each virtual interview, the principal researcher completed a written transcription of the entire recording. After the completion of all the written transcripts, another research team member completed interrater validity to ensure accuracy of 20% of the transcription samples. At the start of each interview, the principal researcher explained the overall process of completing the questionnaire and the survey. The principal researcher then went on to explain how the recorded responses would be transcribed and then a final appointment would be scheduled to conduct member-checking. The research participant would confirm the recorded information for accuracy from the principal researcher. Member-checking was also conducted through a virtual meeting platform on a mutually agreeable date and time. After all member-checking was completed, coding for themes and analysis of the transcripts began.

Data Analysis

Three principal methods of data analysis were used to conduct this research, they were coding, thematic analysis, and interrater reliability. Each of these three principal methods are common within the field of conducting qualitative research (Belotto, 2018). Data analysis was initiated very early upon receiving IRB approval to begin the current dissertation research study when the virtual interviews began with the research participants. The demographic questionnaire

was completed by the principal researcher to begin gathering pivotal background information to determine if the research participant met qualifying criteria to participate in this current dissertation research study. Each of the virtual interviews were recorded by video and audio recordings, along with a written transcription was conducted of each interview as well by the principal researcher. The purpose of the transcription was to accurately reflect information that was shared during each of the virtual interviews. As each written transcription was completed, the coding began, which is a review of common words, concepts, and ideas amongst each of the responses recorded from each of the research participants (Belotto, 2018). Upon the conclusion of coding of each of the completed transcriptions for this current dissertation research study, interrater reliability was conducted. After completing a statistical analysis of all transcriptions, a specified TWU research team member served as an interrater to assess transcripts for accuracy as well as identified coding, as well as thematic analysis. Interrater reliability established trust within the collected research data in conducting the analysis of the coding and themes within the findings (Belotto, 2018). The interrater reliability conducted within this current dissertation research study utilized a sample collection of the transcriptions for accuracy within the data. Lastly, the completed coding was able to support the identification of the primary theme that appeared among the written transcriptions, as well as secondary and tertiary themes as well. The analysis of these themes was able to directly connect back to the focus of this current dissertation research study to directly answer the research questions.

The interview transcripts from the questionnaires and the surveys were all analyzed using an analytical software program DeDoose to identify common codes and themes, based on the information collected from the demographic questionnaire, as well as from the survey. The researcher was able to identify the code presence, in addition to the code application. The

recorded information was categorized into two different categories, based on RQ1: What is the parent experience from the start of the initial evaluation to the placement of their child receiving special education services? and on RQ2: What types of collaborative involvement do parents experience with the school district during the initial review process? Common themes and codes were viewed based on similarities from the responses by each of the research participants.

Open-ended questions gathered from both the demographic questionnaire and the survey were also included within the coding and theming for further analysis. Coding was conducted by reviewing the research participants' level of satisfaction from questions within the survey. These questions were about: their satisfaction about the special education program within their child's school, the special education support services their child receives, the regular classroom instruction their child receives, and their degree of participation in the decisions regarding their child's special education services and placement (see Appendix E). When qualitative transcripts are coded, this allows for interpretation of large portions of recorded text/data to be analyzed and viewed in new ways (Belotto, 2018). Additional questions for the research participants on the survey were also documented into how well the parent understands the special education process (see Appendix E). Coding was conducted within the DeDoose software programming by highlighting participant responses to the correlating questions. Identified codes and themes will be outlined from the recorded qualitative data, as reported within Chapter 4.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological current dissertation research study was to examine parent feedback to understand methods to increase collaboration between parents/guardians and K-12 school districts that creates a positive working relationship while conducting an initial evaluation to determine if a student is eligible for special education services. The intent of this study was to document each participants' lived experiences that occurred within the last 12 months to use their feedback to generate feedback on what their positive experiences were to cultivate a process for implementing best practices for school districts when parents/guardians experience the evaluation process for their child.

Throughout each virtual interview, the research participants shared their input on various areas of growth for improvement in areas, as well as creating and improving a positive and meaningful parent participation while students are undergoing an initial evaluation. Participants in this study completed a 25–35-minute virtual interview with open ended questions related to their personal experiences of having a child go through an initial evaluation to determine if they qualified for special education services in a K-12 school setting. Participants also completed a survey with questions consisting of demographic information and a survey that included questions related to their level of satisfaction along with their understanding of the special education processes. Participants then completed a 15-minute follow-up interview to provide an opportunity to review and discuss recorded feedback about each of their lived experiences that were shared during the research interview. The findings are captured and documented throughout this chapter. Anonymity has been applied to conceal the identity of each of the research participants; included are direct quotes from their captured responses from the interviews.

Participant Demographics

A total of 10 research participants agreed to participate in this current dissertation research study. All research participants agreed to fully participate and complete the demographic questionnaire, research survey, and all completed the member-checking following the interview. All 10 research participants identified as female (100%) from this current dissertation research study (see Table 1).

Table 1

Gender

Gender	Number of participants	Percentage
Male	0	0%
Female	10	100%
Other	0	0%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%
Total	10	100%

Social media posts were made to local, private Facebook groups that primarily recruited female research participants (local moms' community page). Secondary recruiting posts were made to local, private Facebook groups that included residents within the surrounding communities (comprised of men and women). Only females who volunteered for this current dissertation research study met the participation requirements, to proceed with the actual virtual interviews.

All 10 of the research participants reported there were two guardians within the family's home (100%; see Table 2).

Table 2

Guardians in the Home

Number of guardians in the home	Number of participants	Percentage
0	0	0%
1	0	0%
2	10	100%
Total	10	100%

All 10 (100%) of the research participants shared the other guardian in the home was their spouse and identified as a parent/guardian of the child being discussed for this current dissertation research study.

For this current dissertation research study, a qualifying indicator for each participant was to have a child who experienced an initial evaluation to determine if the child met eligibility criteria to receive special education within the past 12 months, from the date of the virtual interview. A total of eight (80%) participants had a student being served on an elementary campus who underwent an initial evaluation within the past 12 months; for the middle school level, there were two (20%) participants represented in this study; and lastly for high school, there was a total of one (10%) that had a student at this campus level. There was one (10%) research participant that had two students that were evaluated for an initial evaluation to determine if they were eligible for special education services that participated in this current dissertation research study. According to the research participants in this dissertation study, the following are grade level breakdowns each child was in when their initial evaluation was conducted: Kindergarten (two students), second grade (one student), third grade (two students), fifth grade (two students), sixth grade (one student), eighth grade (one student), and ninth grade (one student). Within this dissertation research study, approximately 80% of the students

discussed were receiving instruction at an elementary level. The areas evaluated for the elementary population of these students ranged from academic concerns, speech and language communication, along with areas of concern with emotional and behavioral needs. The campus level captured for this participant was elementary and middle school (see Table 3).

Table 3

Campus Level

Campus level	Number of participants	Percentage
Elementary	8	80%
Middle School	2	20%
High School	1	10%
Two or More Campuses	1	10%
Total	10	100%

The feedback from the eight (80%) research participants whose child was receiving the initial evaluation at the elementary level indicated their desire for early interventions and identified supports early in their student's educational career. Of the two (20%) research participants whose child was being evaluated for their initial evaluation at the middle school level, one (10%) indicated her concern was solely academic concerns for her child and other parent (10%) indicated both academic needs, in addition to emotional/behavioral needs for her student. The one (10%) parent whose child received her initial evaluation while she was enrolled in high school indicated that her daughter's medical needs, combined with her academic challenges, led the campus to conduct this assessment for her student.

The gender of the children who were evaluated for an initial evaluation for this current dissertation research study were reported by each research participant. The number of male

students reported by participants were four (40%), the number of female students reported by participants were seven (70%), and a single research participant one (10%) reported that both of her male and female children were reflected within this study (see Table 4).

Table 4

Gender of Child(ren)

Gender of child(ren) evaluated for special education	Number of participants	Percentage
Male	4	40%
Female	7	70%
Two or More Children Reported	1	10%
Total	10	100%

The age of the children who were evaluated for an initial evaluation for this current dissertation research study were reported by each research participant. There were two participants reported their child's age of 5 (20%), one participant reported their child's age of 7 (10%), two participants reported their child's age of 8 (20%), three participants reported their child's age of 10 (30%, one participant reported their child's age of 12 (10%), one participant reported their child's age of 14 (10%), one participant reported their child's age of 15 (10%), and a single research participant (one; 10%) reported that both of her children (ages 8 and 14) were reflected within this study (see Table 5).

Table 5

Age of Child(ren)

Age of child(ren) evaluated for special education	Number of participants	Percentage
5	2	20%

Age of child(ren) evaluated for special education	Number of participants	Percentage
7	1	10%
5	2	20%
8	2	20%
10	3	30%
12	1	10%
14	1	10%
15	1	10%
Two or More Children Reported	1	10%
Total	10	100%

The number of different ages represented in Table 5 spans a total of seven different categories each child was when their initial evaluation was conducted within a K-12 school setting. The participants each reported where they each lived as a family, at the time of the survey. The number of participants living in Celina, TX was eight (80%), the number of participants living in Aubrey, TX was one (10%), and the number of participants living in Prosper, TX was one (10%; see Table 6).

Table 6

Cities

Cities lived in	Number of participants	Percentage
Celina, TX	8	80%
Aubrey, TX	1	10%
Prosper, TX	1	10%
Total	10	100%

The social media recruiting post for this current dissertation research study was focused on the cities of Prosper, Celina, and Aubrey (Texas). Each of the research participants were

residents of these three cities, with the majority of the eight (80%) of the families residing in Celina, Texas.

The participants each reported their race during the demographic questionnaire. The number of participants that reported their race as white was nine (90%), the number of participants that reported their race as non-white was one (10%; see Table 7).

Table 7

Race

Race	Number of participants	Percentage
White	9	90%
Non-White	1	10%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%
Total	10	100%

The one (10%) research participant who identified her race as non-white (she identified herself as Mexican).

The participants each reported their ethnicity during the demographic questionnaire. The number of participants that reported their ethnicity as white was nine (90%), the number of participants that reported their ethnicity as Hispanic was one (10%; see Table 8).

Table 8

Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of participants	Percentage
White	9	90%
Hispanic	1	10%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%
Total	10	100%

The participants each reported their age during the demographic questionnaire. The number of participants that reported their age as 35 was three (30%), the number of participants that reported their age as 37 was two (20%), the number of participants that reported their age was 39 was one (10%, the number of participants that reported their age as 42 was two (20%), the number of participants that reported their age was 43 was one (10%), and the number of participants that reported their age was 49 was one (10%; see Table 9).

Table 9

Age of Research Participant

Age of research participant	Number of participants	Percentage
35	3	30%
37	2	20%
39	1	10%
42	2	20%
43	2	20%
49	1	10%
Total	10	100%

The number of different ages represented in Table 9 spans a total of six different categories each parent was when their child received an initial evaluation that conducted within a K-12 school setting.

Survey Responses

A total of 10 parents fully completed the survey. The recorded information captures the lived experiences of each of the research participants, as the data displays their voice, their opinions, and thoughts of the initial evaluation process for their student in special education. The results reported below are based on data from information recorded from each research participant from the completed survey (see Tables 10 and Table 11). Table 10 documents the

level of satisfaction each research participant shared about the individualized program and

instruction their child is receiving in the school system, along with their degree of participation

regarding those decisions made to discuss programming within the IEP meeting. The results

from this survey indicate that at least nine (90%) of the research participants indicated they were

satisfied to some degree, based on the results from their virtual interviews.

Table 10

Results From Survey Satisfaction

Survey question Are you satisfied with:	Very satisfied	Somewhat satisfied	Somewhat unsatisfied	Very unsatisfied
the special education program in your child's school?	7	2	0	1
the special education support services your child receives?	6	3	0	1
the regular classroom instruction your child receives?	6	3	1	0
your degree of participation in the decisions regarding your child's special education services and placement?	7	3	0	0

Note. Numbers represent number of participants that selected each answer

Table 11 documents the level of understanding each research participant shared about the

various aspects of information shared about their child's reason for being referred to special

education, eligibility testing results, along with the informed decisions made during the IEP

development and discussion among the committee members. The results from this survey

indicate at least eight (80%) of the research participants indicated they understood, to some

degree, based on the results from their virtual interviews.

Table 11

Results From Survey Items

Survey question	Completely understand	Somewhat understand	Do not understand
Do you understand:			
why your child is eligible for special education?	9	1	0
the special education "referral for services" process?	7	3	0
why your child was referred for special education testing?	9	1	0
your child's testing results?	7	3	0
how your child's test results will be used to decide his/her educational plan?	8	2	0
your role as a parent in the process of providing special education services for your child?	6	4	0
your role in developing the Individual Education Program (IEP)?	8	2	0
how decisions are made regarding your child's placement and how and where special education services are provided to your child?	6	4	0
the role of state mandated testing (STAAR) for students in special education?	7	1	2

Survey question	Completely understand	Somewhat understand	Do not understand
Do you understand:			
the role of the ARD (Admission, Review and Dismissal) Committee?	8	2	0
the explanations provided to you during the ARD meeting?	10	0	0
that if your child is 14 or older, transition needs and services are to be included in the ARD/IEP?	2	1	0

Note. Numbers represent number of participants that selected each answer. Only three participants had a child who's plan address transition needs and services within the IEP.

The following were open-ended survey questions also included in the survey that each participant also addressed:

1. What could be done to increase your understanding of the special education process?

2. What is/was your best source of information regarding special education?

3. What is/was your least helpful source of information regarding special education?

4. What would be the best (most helpful) way to get information to your regarding special education?

An analysis of interview questions, survey questions and open-ended responses that generated commonalities within the data, that evolved into codes, which developed into themes throughout the study.

Table 12

Major Themes

Major themes	Codes	Quotes from interviews
Total Time to Complete Initial Evaluation -Too long	-Referral process -Testing results -Child's eligibility	So to have better communication because they just send it and then it's like, "Here you go. Just read it an figure it our yourself." Participant 008 It wasn't smooth, but we got there and the right people were in place to help. Participant 002 All the things. And they push back and they say, "We're not going to do an IEP. We don't agree. Let's collect nine weeks of data while she's here at a new school and we can always reconvene and see where we're at." Participant 006
Communications from Campus Staff -Progress updates -Regular communications	-Program for child in school -Special education services -Regular classroom instruction -Role in developing the IEP	Oh. So that one, I guess obviously varies for everybody, but email communications are good. Conversations following up on the information received I think are are better. Participant 002
Understanding of Special Education (Legal Paperwork) -District resources -Available support	-Explanations provided during ARD meeting -Role of the state mandated testing -How decisions are made regarding placement -Role of the ARD committee	I feel like they should be able to give the parents more like pamphlets or something like that where they can go back and reread over and over because the only thing that I was the information via email from the people that were doing the process. There was no map laid out that was given to me until at the end basically. Participant 009

Theme 1: Total Time to Complete Initial Evaluation

This theme focuses on the total time to complete the initial evaluation to determine if the child meets eligibility criteria to begin receiving special education services. Participant 007 shared her account of waiting for the initial evaluation to be completed once signed consent was provided to the campus:

> It was slow, I feel like, from when I requested the evaluation to getting results. Most of it to me seemed it was just like a waiting game, just waiting for them to do the actual evaluations. And then once it was done, I mean, it was mostly just chatting with his teacher and the evaluators about what we can do to help him in the classroom to be successful.

Sub-Theme 1A: Time Lapse Before Gaining Consent to Initiate the Referral Process

Participants in this study shared their reflection about the total time it took for the campus staff to agree to proceed with providing written consent to initiate the special education evaluation process until the time of the evaluation being completed. RtI is often composed of three different tiers within the school setting. In the article by Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014), they describe the three tiers as the following: Tier 1 supports are evidence-based instruction to all students and monitoring students who also need additional support; Tier 2 supports provide with additional support, along with applying more frequent progress monitoring updates; and Tier 3 delivers more intense, individualized interventions and may include collaboration with special education staff. Participant 006 shared about her experience working with campus staff regarding the concerns she had regarding her child's progress while at school,

They push back and they say, "we're not going to do an IEP. We don't agree. Let's collect nine weeks of data while she's here at a new school and we can always reconvene and see where we're at."

As the local multidisciplinary team works to gather data to determine if an educational evaluation is warranted for each parent request or campus referral, there are factors to consider when selecting an appropriate evaluation. It is recommended that when assessment teams are deciding which types of assessment measures to use, the following be considered. According to Sims et al. share that multidisciplinary team members should select assessments that are appropriate for the development of the child, suitable for the targeted population, as well as administering the assessment for its intended use (2023).

An experience shared by Participant 002 included,

To say, the process was seamless. No, there was a lot of back and forth. And of course, them trying to help me understand everything and then make sure that at the end of the day, it was a good representation. So we did end up getting there. It wasn't smooth, but we got there and the right people were in place to help.

It is recommended that the campus carefully review and consider each request and recommendation for an initial evaluation. There are strategies that local education agencies can install prior to proceeding with an initial evaluation. Sims et al. (2023) recommended having in place prevention efforts, such as strengthening universal services/screeners, as well as intervention services that are provided through a tiered model of systematic delivery. It is also recommended that LEAs, in addition to the MDTs, work towards creating a consistent practice when considering whether or not to move forward with a request to conduct an initial evaluation,

which can often support reducing the number of evaluations that are not granted (Sims et al., 2023).

Parent 002 shared during our interview that information in her child's initial evaluation report captured information from a first-grade teacher when concerns were first identified; however, the evaluation was conducted and completed during his second-grade school year. While campus staff were conducting observations of her student, they were not observing the concerning behaviors the first-grade teacher was reporting, which was conflicting information being reported within the evaluation. Participant 005 shared about the lengthy experience across several different grade levels during the pandemic before her student was evaluated for special education:

> Like I said, this school year we enabled a 504 accommodation in her third-grade year. That was the year that we kind of came back from COVID. So it was a very inconsistent year for data. So that's when we started implementing some of the 504 accommodations. And then we moved from Denton ISD to Celina ISD at the beginning of her fourth-grade year. We kind of solidified that 504 accommodation documentation and collected data to see if special education services was going to be a better path for her, especially in preparation for her transition into middle school.

Sub-Theme 1B: Parent Desire for Status Updates During Evaluation Timeline

During the virtual interviews for this study, a theme that was shared by many participants was their desire to receive updates and progress communication while their child was being evaluated by campus staff. Research has shown higher parent involvement when the parent and teacher perceive the relationship in a similar/positive perception. Adversely, when parents and teachers are not in the same alignment with their perception about their relationship, the

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communication is lessened and may impede the overall functioning and progress of the student (Šukys et al., 2015). Participant 008 shared she would have preferred. "To have better communication because they just send it and then it's like, 'Here you go. Just read it and figure it out yourself."

This was the first child of Participant 008 to have participated in an initial evaluation to determine if she would be eligible to receive special education services. Much of the process was unfamiliar and overwhelming due to the complexity of the terms, the language, the meanings, etc. Participant 008 continued to share:

I don't know if it goes along with this question, but our only issue was that they would send us all this paperwork, 30 pages long of the evaluation and they're like, Here, read this. But there's no one to go over every single... I know we could ask our questions, but when they send the... I don't know if it's twice a year when they evaluate her, I don't know what it's called, sorry. And then send over that, and they're like, Here's where she's at. And then they give you all these numbers and stuff, they're like, Let me know if you have questions. And I'm like, Yeah, we don't know what any of this means. So I feel like sometimes it's just like they just throw it out there. They are good about going over it with us if we ask, so that's fine.

Participant 009 shared about her experience working with the evaluation staff at her child's campus:

She sent me the documents and she showed me everything to me, like what they tested him on and all of the process that they went through to make this determination. Showed me his responses and things to certain tests that they had given him to make their determination. And I had to provide to them all of the documentation that I had from his

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doctor's office and his therapist, and things like that, that they could include that in the IEP.

Participant 007 shared the following about her child's initial evaluation timeline:

It was slow, I feel like, from when I requested the evaluation to getting results. Most of it to me seemed it was just like a waiting game, just waiting for them to do the actual evaluations. And then once it was done, I mean, it was mostly just chatting with his teacher and the evaluators about what we can do to help him in the classroom to be successful.

Theme 2: Communication From Campus Staff Regarding Progress and Planning

This theme focuses on the development and planning of creating the initial IEP for the child. This captures the understanding of the research participant during the initial ARD meeting and their understanding of the different components captured throughout the meeting, along with the development of the IEP. Participant 006 shared her account of requesting support from the campus to close out her child's 504 plan to transition to the initial IEP and shared her experiences and frustrations with scheduling delays:

So let me back up. So I asked on December 15th, when we were closing the 504, I said, "Here's the list of accommodations I would like added, based on the date of the homework that's been sent home. Can we do an amendment?" Nope, let's have a brief. Okay, fine, we can do that. So now we've gone all of the third nine weeks from January through, with her not having these accommodations. We didn't do an amendment, which can be done, because we were not changing schedule of services. And then we have the ice storm. The diag says, "Hey, we got to cancel, ice storm. I'll call you next week. We'll

reschedule." I don't hear from her. I don't hear from her for another week. I reach out, I say, "Hey, where are we?" I get the runaround. And she tells me, March 1st.

I said, "That's nine weeks. This is not okay. Nine weeks. And I asked for a brief, why aren't we doing an amendment?" Unfortunately, that's not going to work for me, I need sooner. And I'm told that they only do ARDs on Wednesdays, they only do ARDs on Wednesdays, they do 504s on a different day. Teachers have to have their planning and conference on two days and they have something else on another day. And I was not happy because as a teacher who my conference happens when it happens, given my role at the school, it's not like ... Come on, like I get it.

"So I said, "That's not going to work." So we scheduled it for, it was supposed to be February 21st at 3:15 pm. And unfortunately, the diag had a family emergency, family member passes away. I ask for a diag to step in from a different school throughout the district, they tell me they can't accommodate. But then I find out from a friend across the street who had me read her kid's initial paperwork to kind of support them, that they did that for her the next day. So what I asked for, so become very frustrated that they were able to accommodate for the other families, but they couldn't do that for me. So I reached out to the assistant principal, have a conversation with her. She says, "I'm sorry, don't know what to tell you. We'll get it scheduled when the diag returns." So we finally had it today, which was the original date that she wanted. I did have [my daughter] attend her ARD meeting, we talk all the time, [my daughter] knows her accommodations, she's learning the new ones.

Sub-Theme 2A: Preferred Form of Communication Regarding Progress Updates

While interviewing the research participants, the topic of communication came up during their lived experiences. Some participants shared that yes, they did receive communication from teachers and campus staff regarding progress monitoring and updated reporting; however, the emailed communication of the data was not sufficient. It left the participants still feeling overwhelmed and not fully understanding the information that was being delivered to them. Burke and Sandman reinforce in their article that the role of the parent is written into federal law IDEA as procedural safeguards to ensure their student, who has been identified as a student with a disability, is receiving appropriate services to meet their individualized needs while at school (2015). Participant 002 shared from her experience "So that one, I guess, obviously varies for everybody, but email communications are good. Conversations following up on the information received I think are better."

Her preference to have a verbal conversation regarding the information being emailed to her helps her to better understand the data, the proposals, and all the information being delivered regarding her child. Consideration and understanding the situation of the parent going through the initial process for placement into special education by campus staff may help to improve the early communication regarding programming, planning, and placement.

Sub-Theme 2B: Regular Communication from Teachers and Service Providers

Throughout the conducted virtual interviews for this current dissertation research study, it was clear each of the parents had a strong desire to be involved and serve in an active role in developing and supporting their child's IEP. Each parent understood why their child was being evaluated and what the areas of growth were that campus staff were observing, which led to conducting the initial evaluation. It continues to be reinforced through federal and state laws that

parents serve a pivotal role in ensuring that their child, who has been identified with a disability, has access to receive their Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE; Losinski et al., 2016). Actively serving in her role as parent, Participant 006 shared her feedback on her experiences working with the campus staff who were supporting her daughter's IEP "I felt like I was, not being lied to, but things were being hidden, I wasn't being given the full picture." Participant 006 continued "They kept saying, We're meeting her needs,' and I'm like, 'We're not." This feedback displays the importance of direct and regular communication with the service providers at the campus and district level to ensure there is a clear, two-way form of communication occurring to discuss the progress monitoring for the student.

Theme 3: Understanding the Special Education Paperwork and What It All Means

This theme is addressing the overall understanding of the terms, the guidelines, the procedures, and the meaning behind the decisions being made to develop the child's IEP. The decisions made and the implementation of the agreed plan is how the student is supported during the school day. Day-to-day classroom accommodations, schedule of services, as well as long-term goals are addressed within the special education planning document. Participant 008 reflected on how unfamiliar it was to receive the information in the legal format for the first time:

> Yeah. I think it would just be what I said before about when they send the information instead of saying, "Let me know if you have any questions," because obviously we don't understand what they just sent. So there's so many numbers, just having someone go over line by line instead of just saying, "Oh, this is what it does," I think would be so much better because, yeah, we had no idea what. Especially the 30-page one. You have to just

sit there and read it and you're like, "What?" I didn't even realize the term special needs. I was like, "Wait, my child is special needs?"

Sub-Theme 3A: District Resources Available for Parents Within Special Education

An area that was discussed during the virtual interviews with the research participants was having more district resources available to the parents to help them better understand the programming available within special education. Feedback presented from Participant 009 was:

I feel like they should be able to give the parents more like pamphlets or something like that where they can go back and reread over and over because the only thing that I was given was the information via email from the people that were doing the process. There was no map laid out that was given to me until at the end basically.

Participant 004 shared that this was her third child to undergo an initial evaluation through special education. She reflected how different of an experience this was compared to her experience with her first child when they were evaluated. She shared:

Well, I personally don't use the special ed resources, the classes and everything. But again, if it were first time, I would find that very beneficial.

Sub-Theme 3B: Available Support at the Home Campus to Families Served Through Special Education

Participant 004 added during her interview:

So I think it makes a huge difference that she has a phenomenal teacher who honestly already had put all of these accommodations into place even before the IEP was completed. And then just getting that additional support of, obviously the special ed and the speech therapist has helped, that wasn't occurring before. But all the different things

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that she could do within the classroom, as well as the communication back and forth with us made a huge difference.

Summary

At the conclusion of conducting all the virtual interviews, it was evident the passion and advocacy each parent displayed in wanting their child to succeed upon qualifying and begin receiving special education services that directly supported the child's educational experience. The first theme that appeared from the collected data was the timeline that was enforced for the initial evaluations to be completed. Multiple research participants noted how the RtI process, and the evaluation timeline spanned across different grade levels due to initiating during the spring semester and being completed in the fall semester of the following school year. A second observed theme that appeared from the collected data was the communication from the campus staff regarding progress updates and planning for next steps, upon the completion of the initial evaluation. A final observed theme that appeared from the collected data was to understand, process, and interpret/analyze the documented legal paperwork, along with the findings, to fully comprehend what was being shared and recommended for their student. Multiple research participants shared their challenges for reading and truly understanding the legal paperwork and what it truly meant for their child and their educational support while in the school setting.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal for this current dissertation research study was to investigate the experience of the parent in the initial evaluation for special education services which leads to increasing collaboration within the K-12 school setting to create a positive working relationship. The current study's goal was to see how this current dissertation research study aligns with recent completed research. During the initial evaluation process, parents serve as an expert on all things pertaining to the student, which identifies them as a pivotal member of the evaluation and assessment team; their role is crucial (Burke & Sandman, 2015). This current dissertation research study also focused on what types of collaborative involvement the research participants experienced with the school district during the initial evaluation process. A phenomenological study was conducted that focused on exploring ways in which K-12 school districts could create and increase a positive working relationship with parents and guardians who have students that are actively going through the initial evaluation process to determine if their student meets eligibility criteria to receive special education services.

The data collected from the 10 research participants (parents) represented the feedback provided based on the lived experiences of each of the research participants. The results of the collected data mostly aligned with the findings of current research conducted; however, there were some findings that did fully align and therefore create an opportunity for K-12 school districts to increase the parent collaboration during the initial evaluation for special education services process. The findings of this current dissertation research study support conducting further research on creating positive, meaningful opportunities for parent participation and school district officials while an initial evaluation is being conducted within special education. A

qualitative research method was applied to this current dissertation research study, focusing on the lived experiences of each of the research participants. Overall, the majority of the data collected revealed the total time to complete the initial evaluation for their student, the communication from campus staff regarding progress and planning, in addition to understanding the legal jargon contained within the special education paperwork and what it all means. When conducting phenomenological research, the principal researcher begins to analyze the data to create the patterns of generalities as well as common patterns within the recorded information (Williams, 2021).

Theoretical Background

Current research shows that when a parent is involved in their child's schooling, the benefits for children are the development of the student's cognitive and metacognitive skills (Šukys et al., 2015). These benefits are linked to developing the overall achievement of the child, which is a direct result of the level of involvement within the school setting (Šukys et al., 2015). The phenomenological research theory is based on qualitative research. A leader in qualitative research was Dr. John Creswell, who was a professor in educational psychology since 1987 (Charli et al., 2022). One of Creswell's classical traditions to inquiry within qualitative research is phenomenology (McDonald et al., 2019). Research gathered from qualitative data comes from a 'natural' setting, meaning the data can be verbal responses from participants, observed actions, videos, documents or other materials that capture and record how people draw conclusions within their lives (McDonald et al., 2019). Creswell wrote when considering a research design, first start with the nature of the basis of the research problem, the issues that are sought to be solved by the research, while also considering the role of the research participant as well as the targeted research audience (Charli et al., 2022). For this current dissertation research study, it

was observed that 70% of research participants shared they were very satisfied with the special

education program in their child's school. This current dissertation research study also indicated

that 70% of parents were very satisfied with their degree of participation in the decisions

regarding their child's special education services and placement. Likewise, the other 30% of

research participants indicated they were somewhat satisfied with their degree of participation in

the decisions regarding their child's special education services and placement. A common

practice for Creswell while conducting qualitative research is the data collection, the analysis,

reporting of the findings, and the rigor of the research (Clark, 1999). Phenomenological research

provides insights into what life is as the participants are experiencing it (Van Manen, 2017).

Supporting Themes

Conducting thematic analysis begins with clustering items of the collected data that are

similar in response (Belotto, 2018). Since coding was conducted prior to conducting the thematic

analysis, relating the topics of the data collected to the research questions, leads to the patterns

emerging for the identified categories for this current dissertation research study (Belotto, 2018).

Primary themes were revealed, which then lead to the secondary as well as the tertiary themes

for this current dissertation research study. Direct research participant quotes were also used

within each of the themes and subthemes as textual evidence for each of these categories to

support the information being presented.

Theme 1: Total Time to Complete Initial Evaluation

The first theme outlined within this current dissertation research study is total time to

complete initial evaluation. Though the initial evaluation timeline is established by TEA, which

is 45 school days, care, communication, and attention can still be provided to parents to receive

updates pertaining to the evaluation (The Legal Framework, 2022). Research participant 004

discussed the total amount of time that lapsed from when she made her request for her child to receive an initial evaluation to determine if she met qualifying criteria to begin receiving special education services.

> So it wasn't like she was just sitting there for however many months. I mean, I think we signed on December 2nd, so I had submitted this in May, at the end of the end of last school year, so before she even headed into kindergarten. So I know it takes a long time, and then they have to evaluate and so forth. So I'm glad we didn't have ... I mean, half the school year would've been lost if nothing would've been put into place. So I feel like it was A) I knew going in, we would need to get it for her, and then B) just talking to the teacher up front and her being willing and open to be proactive on these was very beneficial.

Participant 004 had the agreement and participation from the campus she was making this request to who agreed to move forward with her request to begin conducting an initial evaluation, which satisfied her timely request.

A way for the assessment team to establish trust among parents during the initial evaluation assessment window is to create, as well as maintain, various ways of working towards improving the relationships with the parents of the students being evaluated (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). During the initial evaluation window of 45 school days, this can be a very long and strenuous process for the parents to wait for the conclusion of the assessment to learn the results, as well as the recommendations. Depending on when the signed, written consent is obtained from the parent, the initial evaluation timeline may span close to a 5-month long waiting period (if signed in the end of May, the initial evaluation due date could be in mid-October). Regarding the initial evaluation process and determining the level of support for her

child, participant 007 advocated continuously for the level of behavioral support she felt her student needed at his campus:

> And then for [my son], it was mostly just talking to his kindergarten teacher about what
> she sees while he's in the classroom, and what we can do. Or, well, the... Not urging, but
> when I had brought up getting him tested, agreeing that yes, that would probably be a
> good idea, and that kind of stuff.

Participant 007 utilized her persistent voice to initiate the initial evaluation to be conducted for her son. The ongoing conversations with the campus before gaining written consent only delayed being able to begin the actual assessment, which ultimately led to providing individualized support for her student while at school.

 Parents prefer in-person communication regarding updates to their child's performance, as well as having telephone conversations help to establish trust with the special education staff who are working directly with their student (Belotto, 2018). The current guidelines to complete an initial evaluation are set in place; however, how to establish relationships through continuous communication and updates are possible to build rapport with parents, which is beneficial in many different facets to the parents' experiences.

Sub-Theme 1A: Time Lapse Before Gaining Consent to Initiate the Referral Process

Sub-Theme 1A is time lapse before gaining consent to initiate the referral process. Areas that are not thoroughly researched are special education referral concerns, assessment team members who determine eligibility for qualification, and reviewing specific sources of assessment data (Maki & Adams, 2022). From the time that a parent provides written consent to request an initial evaluation conducted to determine if their child meets criteria to receive special education services, the school district has 15 school days to respond to the parent's request in

writing; deciding to proceed with the evaluation or to decline their request for the assessment (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Participant 007 had ongoing conversations with her daughter's campus regarding them conducting an initial evaluation to determine if she would be eligible for individualized services through special education "Nine weeks of data, and we come back in October and I said, 'This isn't good. We're pulling Cs now, which is much more accurate. We're failing in a couple things and I'm not leaving without an IEP." The vocalization and the advocacy that was shared by participant 007 was powerful, and ultimately, resulted in receiving signed consent from the home campus to initiate the evaluation for her child.

 It is valuable for the assessment personnel who are directly involved in the decision making to continue to have direct communication with the parents making the request for the initial evaluation, as it can be a lengthy process of time passing without immediate action. During the 15-day window from the time that a campus receives a parent's request for special education testing to be conducted, it is beneficial of the campus to begin collecting and gathering data to determine if there is educational data to support the parent's request to move forward with conducting the initial evaluation to see if the child meets eligibility criteria for special education services.

Once consent has been obtained to initiate the assessment for the student, any possible interventions can be provided to the student through general education. This process can support the student receiving interventions for any identified needs, based on data that has been collected thus far within the school setting. A campus can decide how to develop MTSS to begin supporting the student, tracking and recording effectiveness of provided interventions, as well as developing any new strategies prior to the completion of the initial evaluation.

Sub-Theme 1B: Parent Desire for Status Updates During Evaluation Timeline

Sub-Theme 1B is parent desire for status updates during evaluation timeline. A way to establish a parent's trust by an educational professional is to exercise a practice of frequent, effective communication with the parents, active listening skills, as well as sharing honest feedback while being open to resolution for problem-solving needs for the student (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Due to the initial evaluation timeline being 45 school days and then the window to conduct an IEP meeting to review the results of the evaluation and propose a drafted IEP could be up to 30 calendar days following the date of the evaluation, providing progress to parents can be valuable to the overall communication and relationship building between the campus and the family (The Legal Framework, 2022). Participant 008 shared her account from her personal experience of not receiving updates and communication from her daughter's assessment team, which was not until after the report was already finished and so much information was not personally discussed with her:

> I don't know if it goes along with this question, but our only issue was that they would send us all this paperwork, 30 pages long of the evaluation and they're like, 'Here, read this.' But there's no one to go over every single... I know we could ask our questions, but when they send the... I don't know if it's twice a year when they evaluate her, I don't know what it's called, sorry. And then send over that, and they're like, "Here's where she's at." And then they give you all these numbers and stuff, they're like, "Let me know if you have questions." And I'm like, "Yeah, we don't know what any of this means." So I feel like sometimes it's just like they just throw it out there. They are good about going over it with us if we ask, so that's fine.

The experiences for research participant 008 could have been very different if the campus evaluation staff had conducted updates regarding the process, the results, the findings as well as recommendations being drafted for her student. To receive those updates once the evaluation was completed and sent to her with minimal feedback, explanation, and responses to any questions she had regarding the information being reported about the progress and performance documented within the report.

Theme 2: Communication From Campus Staff Regarding Progress and Planning

The second theme outlined within this current dissertation research study is communication from campus staff regarding progress and planning. It can be challenging for a parent to acknowledge their student has academic, behavioral, or possibly emotional areas of growth that may require such intense intervention that only special education can provide, due to feeling isolated from extended family, friends, and even the community (Applequist, 2009). Having open and honest communication with parents, reporting about a student's present level of academic achievement, and functional performance may be challenging, but communication crafted in a respectful manner can lead to a positive outcome for the parents and ultimately the child. Participant 006 has the professional background and training of being a certified special education in her child's school district. Her persistent communication to advocate for her desired request for inclusion supports in her child's general education classroom is the feedback she shared about her experiences:

And it came down to, I said, "Let's do inclusion. Can we give her some inclusion minutes?" Well, inclusion, and I'm not used to elementary school, inclusion in elementary school is a para, they are not somebody that is K-12 SPED certified or things. I'm like, "But it's extra support." Well, they could just be sitting next to her and we don't want her

singled out, that's not inclusion, you can't do that. And so it really felt like I was

educating them on what special education services were like and what they could and

couldn't do, and that was very frustrating.

Parents serve a role and purpose in developing the proposed IEP plan for their student. Equally,

the campus provides representation for the general education representative, special education,

LEA (administrator), as well as an assessment team member (The Legal Framework, 2022).

Additional committee members may also be in attendance if there is an educational need for their

participation in the child's IEP development.

Sub-Theme 2A: Preferred Form of Communication Regarding Progress Updates

Sub-Theme 2A is preferred form of communication regarding progress updates.

Communication can be established as progress reporting regarding updates about the initial

evaluation. Higher levels of trust were established as parents received in-person communication

from the school's professional education staff that pertained to the needs of their student (Hamm

& Mousseau, 2023). Participant 002 shares how the information reflected in the teacher

feedback, along with the observations from the assessment staff was reflected in the final copy of

the initial evaluation that she received once it was completed:

But anyway, when they did the final writeup and sent that across, I guess there's some

automated filling in that happens when they check certain boxes. So where there was a lot

in his evaluation that just didn't line up with him. If the teacher had put, he cries easily.

Okay, well, situationally, he's upset now he's being questioned, which he kind of clams

up a little bit, results in crying. On the form that comes across as depression. And so there

were a lot of things in the form that the way that it came across, just from all those boxes

that were checked from that first-grade teacher, that the system pulled in, everything else

that came in with that section.

Though it may be challenging to connect and have direct communication with parents, there is

value and is quite beneficial to create times to meet and discuss progress updates with parents;

perhaps start with the parent to inquire about their preferred method to meet, communicate and

discuss these matters, and then search for a mutually agreed upon date and time.

If the evaluation team had reached out to participant 002 after receiving the teacher

feedback about her child's behaviors during the school day, after they completed their own

personal observations and the information, this would have been an opportunity for the

assessment personnel to have a direct conversation to learn and discover background information

about the student, their emotionality as well as their behaviors in various situations. Frequent

communication with parents to review and discuss progress monitoring helps to address areas of

growth consistently while the student is at school, as well as advocating for support from home

as well.

Sub-Theme 2B: Regular Communication From Teachers and Service Providers

Sub-Theme 2B is regular communication from teachers and service providers. A way to

establish a parent's trust by an educational professional is to exercise a practice of frequent,

effective communication with the parents, active listening skills, as well as sharing honest

feedback while being open to resolution for problem-solving needs for the student (Hamm &

Mousseau, 2023). A way to establish positive outcomes for students, families and schools is to

establish trust with families frequently throughout the school year by campus professionals that

are open, honest, and genuine (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Creating intention opportunities to

provide parent updates and feedback about student performance helps to build rapport and

discuss a shared vision on supporting growth outlined within the student's IEP and annual goals. Participant 006 shared the value and importance the relationship is between the service provider and the student being served:

> And just really cares about [my daughter]. [Her teacher], unfortunately, I don't think the personalities match very well, she's very direct and stern, [my daughter] is quiet and soft and needs more nurturing. And so we find out that [my daughter] is not doing the best that they have a contract, and so we're going to start pulling [my daughter] out in her win time, which is like 30 minutes every day, and we're going to do extra math because she's failing. So we're pulling her out. Well, now it becomes an issue of we're pulling her out so much that she doesn't have extra time to receive her extra time for her supports and her accommodations for all of her different classes. Well, again, [my daughter] is coming home every day upset, "I don't have this done. I'm getting docked for points. I have extra time, but I'm not getting my extra time." All the things.

Even though her daughter was receiving the services, having insight, and listening to the feedback her child was providing about how her daughter felt about when being supported by the special education staffer and how it impeded the learning was significant to participant 006. Parents receiving regular communication from staff who are directly providing special education services for students can hear feedback on how the student is progressing with the individualized instruction throughout the school day.

This current dissertation research study has shown that parents are requesting direct communication from those who are working with and supporting their child, whether it be from the members of the evaluation team or from the special education staff providing instructional or related services within the school setting for their student. Verbal communication can be

achieved through a parent phone call or through a virtual meeting platform to discuss progress reporting and updates with the parents. Routine conversations sharing positive feedback to parents can help support having those crucial conversations when challenging information is discussed, because of the established relationship that has been formed between the staff member and the parent.

Theme 3: Understanding the Special Education Paperwork and What It All Means

The third theme outlined within this current dissertation research study is understanding the special education paperwork and what it all means. The readability of the legal documents provided to parents in comparison to national literacy data indicates a disproportionate burden of literacy comprehension compared to the general population (Mandic et al., 2012). Participant 008 reflected on how unfamiliar it was to receive the information in the legal format for the first time:

> Yeah. I think it would just be what I said before about when they send the information instead of saying, "Let me know if you have any questions," because obviously we don't understand what they just sent. So there's so many numbers, just having someone go over line by line instead of just saying, "Oh, this is what it does," I think would be so much better because, yeah, we had no idea what. Especially the 30-page one. You have to just sit there and read it and you're like, "What?" I didn't even realize the term special needs. I was like, "Wait, my child is special needs?"

A way to simplify how the information is delivered to parents within the full individual evaluation (FIE) is to have common, understandable, and relatable information in the summary to notate the information being delivered to ease the reading comprehension of the recorded assessment results.

Sub-Theme 3A: District Resources Available for Parents Within Special Education

Sub-Theme 3A is district resources available for parents within special education. As students qualify for special education services, resources are available from the district to support parent training, in addition to supporting needs for the child within the home (Cooc & Bui, 2017). It is recommended that parents be connected to parent email lists to begin receiving information about accessible resources available to support their student. It is also recommended for parents to also research within the special education department for training materials, seminars, parent training sessions, etc. to help support any identifiable needs. As shared by participant 009, she welcomes information being shared with her from the local school district regarding special education: "Probably my email or even mailing it to me in my mailbox."
Participant 004 shared the types of resources she has received from her child's district:

> I would probably say, even though I don't use it, but the special ed resources that the ...
> And it's hard to say. I mean, from the little bit that I'm reading in emails, it sounds like
> the district does a good job of providing classes for the parents. And I think I could be
> wrong, but I think they provide somebody that's kind of like a liaison to help the parents
> through the IEP/ARD process.

By joining the district's mass email distribution list, information was able to be sent directly to participant 004 that she could review and access at her leisure.

District resources are a source of support for parents that can span several different targeted areas of need for parents. Functional and independent living, areas of eligibility, self-help skills, toilet training, and social skills' development are some examples of ways that districts can provide resources and training available for parents within the local school district. Having printed materials that are published on district websites, mass email communication

being sent out to parent support groups as well as advertised parent trainings that are free of

charge are a way to connect with parents with research-based strategies to help support identified

needs for their students within the home setting.

Sub-Theme 3B: Available Support at the Home Campus to Families Served Though

Special Education

Sub-Theme 3B is available support at the home campus to families served through

special education. An effective tool to increase overall parent participation within the child's IEP

is to create outreach programs available to families that foster self-efficacy within the family

(Cooc & Bui, 2017). Increasing parental involvement can be an effective tool to support the

needs of the student. Regarding support available to parents to learn from and implement with

the child while at home, participant 004 shared the value of information that came from the staff

at her child's campus:

> The way to get information? I mean, I've been in contact with her school. I mean, her VP
>
> is very open. I know her principal very well because he was the VP at the previous school
>
> that my now middle schooler goes to. So I mean, I have open communication with them,
>
> like I said, the special ed, the general ed, even the special ed, so I feel like I'm able to go
>
> to any of them directly.

Having this open line of communication with the campus staff to receive support for children

both in the school setting, as well as within the home setting is invaluable. Likewise, as parents

begin to see changes in their child outside of school, having this open relationship with staff

benefits the child and observable changes need to be addressed in a timely manner.

Parent Understanding

Data reported from this current dissertation research study indicated that 100% of the study's 10 research participants completely understood the explanations provided to them during the ARD meeting. It was reported that 90% of the study's 10 research participants completely understand why their child is eligible for special education along with why their child was referred for special education testing. Pertaining to the initial evaluation, 80% of the study's 10 research participants reported they completely understood how their child's testing results would be used to decide his or her educational plan; 80% of the study's 10 research participants, reported they completely understood their role in developing the IEP their child. Current research supports that a child is more likely to be successful while in school when the performance and work completion of the child at school is also being supported while at home as well (Šukys et al., 2015). The understanding of what the child is learning and how they are being supported at school is a key indicator of helping to support the child outside of school, which is beneficial to the academic growth of the student.

Limitations

There are limitations within the current dissertation research study that should be considered when reviewing, evaluating, analyzing, and interpreting the recorded findings. The first limitation noted for this current dissertation research study is the interviews with each research participant were only conducted in a virtual meeting platform. This may limit the number of participants due to accessibility with technology and scheduling availability.

A limitation to this current dissertation research study is a small sample size (10 research participants) that was needed to reach saturation. The nature of qualitative research focuses on the richness within the data collected through the feedback provided by the research participants

and lacks measurable, quantifiable data as a basis for the findings. The time involved to conduct qualitative research may also be very consuming from scheduling each of the virtual interviews, completing oral transcription of each recording, conducting member-checking to verify accuracy of recorded data, as well as having interrater reliability completed as well by a fellow research team member.

Another limitation for this current dissertation research study is that Facebook groups will be the primary source to recruit research participants, which will be female only groups, limiting access to male parents and guardians from participating for this current dissertation study. The secondary Facebook groups that will be used are local, neighborhood groups, which will have a mixture of both males and females; however, the group size is much smaller compared to the primary groups that will be used.

The region that each of the research participants currently reside in is an affluent area within North Texas. A noted limitation for this dissertation research study would be to look at other populations that are identified in a low socioeconomic residential area to determine what those findings would be.

A final limitation to this study is that each family reported a two parent actively resided within each household. Many households have different family arrangements living within the home. All research participants identified there was a second adult living within the home that was identified as another parent to the child being discussed for this dissertation study.

Implications

The findings in this current dissertation research study support the investigation of the role of the parent in the initial evaluation for special education services: increasing collaboration within K-12 school districts to create a positive working relationship.

Implications for Researchers

This current dissertation research study is important to the field of evaluation and assessment within special education because it will provide information on how school district personnel can increase positive parent experiences through the initial evaluation process to determine if students have an identified disability to meet criteria to begin receiving special education services.

Duplication of this current dissertation research study may be difficult because the data was based on the lived experiences from each of the research participants pertaining to the desired topic to focus on. As virtual interviews were conducted with each of the research participants, common themes began to emerge based on their lived experiences in what they wanted and how their own experiences could have been better. Areas of improvement and growth were reviewed and discussed with the principal researcher. Many parents shared their account of challenges they faced with receiving the agreement from their child's campus to agree to move forward with the initial evaluation for their student. Several parents also shared their account of how they felt to receive an abundance of information presented in a very formal format, delivered with unfamiliar language and legal jargon to affect their overall understanding and comprehension of the information being delivered to them by the campus assessment team who conducted the assessment.

Another consideration for future research is also to consider the demographic background of the current research participants for this dissertation study. Most of the research participants (90%) identified themselves as the same race and ethnicity (white/Caucasian). Similar responses received from the research survey allowed for saturation to be reached within this dissertation

research study. Conducting future research with a different demographic background may yield different results.

Implications for Practitioners

Following the completion of this current dissertation research study, the findings were shared with leadership teams of local school districts to increase their parent experiences and involvement of families going through the initial evaluation process, which can grow their parent meaningful participation, which is tracked and recorded by TEA. The findings from this current dissertation research study indicate the value and necessity of building strong communication skills with parents as the initial evaluation process begins. Establishing trust amongst the parents who are having their child being evaluated to determine if they meet eligibility criteria to receive special education services is a key factor for creating positive experiences between parents and campus/district staff to foster collaborative working relationships. This study is meant for assessment team members within a school district that are directly involved in conducting initial evaluations to determine if a student meets eligibility criteria to begin receiving special education services. The findings within this study can also be valuable to share with itinerant assessment teams amongst school districts as well, to communicate and discuss the research behind creating positive experiences for parents who have a child going through the initial evaluation process and the long-term effects of creating those positive experiences.

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Summary

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For this current dissertation research study, a phenomenological research design was used with participants to investigate a lived experience from their role as the parent in the initial evaluation for special education services. Results from this current dissertation research study

indicate there is a correlation between a positive working relationship with campus staff and creating a positive experience during the initial evaluation process for their child.

Limitations to the current dissertation research study include that the interviews with each research participant were only conducted in a virtual meeting platform. Another limitation for this current dissertation research study is that Facebook groups will be the primary source to recruit research participants, which will be female only groups, limiting access to male parents and guardians from participating for this current dissertation study. Small sample is a limitation for this current dissertation research study (10 research participants), though saturation was able to be reached following the responses received from the background questionnaire, in addition to the survey discussed during each virtual interview. Lastly, another limitation noted within this current dissertation research study was the amount of time involved to conduct each virtual interview with each of the research participants, completing the member-checking with all involved, along with the interrater reliability with another research team member, as well as completing the coding and thematic analysis for each of the data pieces.

Future research studies should examine ways to proactively increase effective and positive communication with parents as an initial evaluation for special education is being conducted, which can focus on: (a) establishing clear, two-way communication with parents throughout the initial evaluation window, providing updates of progress, as well as address any questions or concerns, (b) providing information that is understandable and relatable to the parents' comprehension of the legal terminology, and (c) creating a collaborative and equitable experience for parents when meeting with campus staff involved in the initial meeting to review the evaluation, along with any proposed planning documents for an IEP. Practitioners can adapt their communication, methods, and delivery to the parents they are working alongside with in a

K-12 school setting. Based on the positive feedback and results of this current dissertation research study, there is a benefit for creating positive and meaningful experiences for parents who have a child undergoing an initial evaluation for special education in the K-12 school setting.

Another area for conducting future research would be for single-parent households. For this dissertation research study, all participants identified having a second parent living within the same household. Conducting future research within single parent house may render different results and findings.

Lastly, future research could be conducted within school districts that are within a rural setting, that utilize a cooperative to provide special education assessments across multiple school districts in this targeted, smaller communities. Focusing on school districts that work with a cooperative assessment team and noting the differences compared to larger districts that have their own special education assessment personnel is an area to focus on for future research.

Conclusion

The goal of this current dissertation research study was to investigate the role of the parent who has a child going through the initial evaluation to determine if their child met eligibility criteria for special education. The collected data focused on ways to increase collaboration within K-12 school districts to create a positive working relationship with these parents who are going through the initial evaluation process for their child. Special education assessment itinerant staff should work towards creating and establishing personal and direct communication with families as initial evaluations are being conducted for their caseloads at work. Research participants also revealed their request when receiving copies of the legal paperwork, that they receive updated communication regarding the contents and meaning behind

the jargon-heavy documents to better support their knowledge and understanding of the

information being conveyed. A common language approach was shared and requested during the

virtual interviews to the principal researcher.

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Timeline | Child-Centered Special Education Process
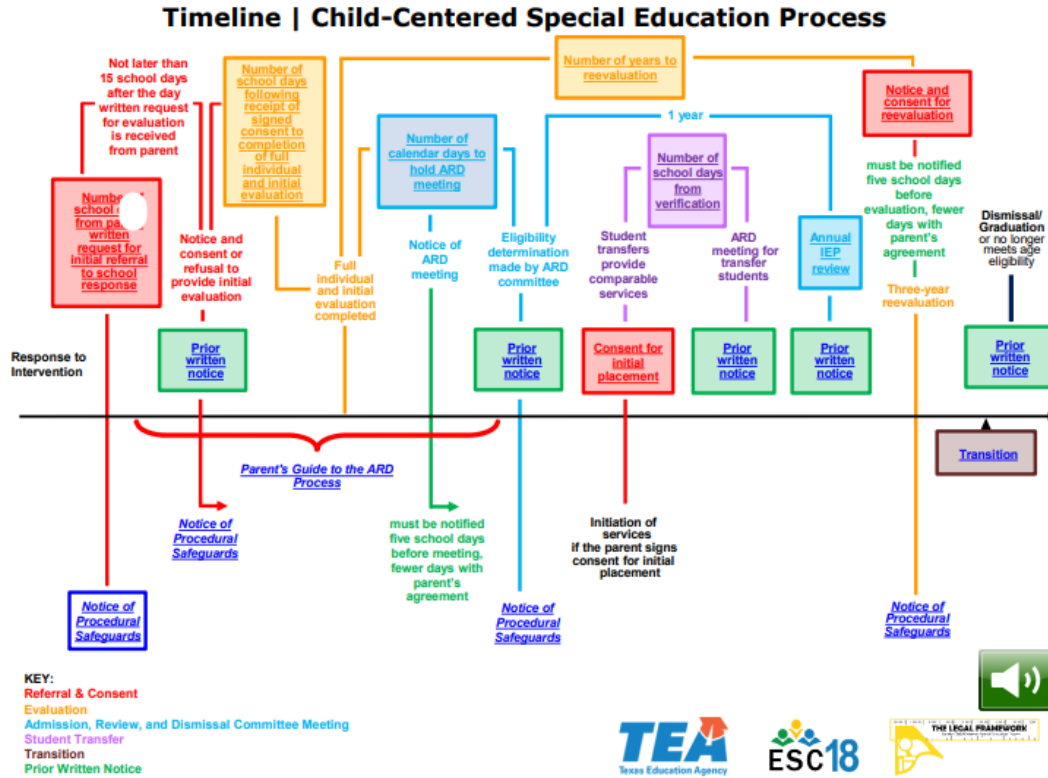
APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Research Title: Investigate The Role of the Parent in the Special Education Initial Evaluation:

Increasing Collaboration within K-12 School Districts to Create a Positive Working

Relationship.

Principal Investigator: Amy Brandt-Bersosa; abrandt1@twu.edu; 469-878-7755

Co-Principal Investigator: Randa G. Keeley, Ph.D.; rkeeley@twu.edu; 940-898-2278

Summary and Key Information about the Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study by Amy Brandt-Bersosa at Texas

Woman's University. This research project is to better prepare assessment personnel within

school districts to provide evidence-based strategies to create a positive working relationship

with parents/guardians of students who are receiving an initial evaluation to determine eligibility

to receive special education services. The research team is investigating the role that a parent has

during a child's initial evaluation that can create a positive working relationship with the LEA

conducting the evaluation. You have been invited to participate in this study because you have a

student in your home who has undergone an initial evaluation to determine if they meet

eligibility criteria to receive special education services in a K-12 school setting.

As a participant, you will be asked to take part in a virtual interview, which consists of

completing a demographic questionnaire prior to completing interview questions. The entire

process will be completed via Google Meet and have your delivery of instruction recorded to use

for analysis for this study. The interviews will be recorded, and the researcher will use a code

name to protect your confidentiality. The total time commitment for this study will be 2 hours

and 20 minutes for one interview, which includes completing a demographic questionnaire, interview questions, along with completing a follow-up post-interview discussion (member-checking) to verify accuracy about recorded information from the conducted interview. The greatest risks of this study include potential loss of confidentiality and anonymity. We will discuss these risks and the rest of the study procedures in greater detail below. The interview questions will be gathering and collecting information regarding your role as the parent during your child's initial evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services. The interview questions will be targeting your feedback regarding your experience with the campus assessment and planning team.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are interested in learning more about this study, please review this consent form carefully and take your time deciding whether or not you want to participate. Please feel free to ask the researcher any questions you have about the study at any time.

Description of Procedures

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to spend 90 minutes of your time in an interview with Amy Brandt-Bersosa. The interview will be recorded and then written down so that the researcher can be accurate when studying what you have said. In order to be a participant, you must be at least 18 years of age or older and be the legal parent or guardian of a student who has received an initial evaluation to determine if they meet eligibility criteria for special education services, within the past 12 months.

Risks

There is a risk of loss of confidentiality. Confidentiality will be protected to the extent that is allowed by law. There are always risks in research and this study has the team confidential information like your name and your scores. The fact that the research team has confidential information about you could cause some worry or someone might see that the information we collected is your information, but we will protect your private information as much as the law will allow us to. Researchers will keep all information in a password protected drive on a password protected computer. Researchers will destroy all data collected from you after three years from the end of this study. The research team will take out any information that might be able to identify you for all of the materials we gather (ex: name). After the researchers take out all of the information that might identify you they may use the information from this study for future research or they may give the information to another researcher for future research and they will not ask for additional consent. However, there will remain a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings, and internet transactions.   There is an increased risk of loss of confidentiality because the principal investigator will be using their personal device(s) to collect and store data.

As you approach any demographic questions or interview questions, no question requires a response, and you can skip any question. This desire to skip a question will need to be communicated to the principal investigator.

Because this study is an online platform through Google Meet, there is a risk of virtual meeting disruption. Steps to minimize include the use of a passcode to join the virtual meeting, or to call into the virtual meeting, along with providing a waiting room feature that requires the principal investigator to permit entry access for all research participants to join the virtual meeting.

Participation and Benefits

Your involvement in this study is **completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time**. Although there are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research, your participation could help teacher education programs around the US to improve pre-service teacher preparation using virtual instructional practices.

The researchers will remove all of your personal or identifiable information (e.g. your name, date of birth, contact information) from the audio recordings and/or any study information. After all identifiable information is removed, your audio recordings and/or any personal information collected for this study may be used for future research or be given to another researcher for future research without additional informed consent.

If you would like to participate in the current study but not allow your de-identified data to be used for future research, please initial here _____.

The researchers will try to prevent any problem that could happen because of this research. You should let the researchers know at once if there is a problem and they will try to help you. However, TWU does not provide medical services or financial assistance for injuries that might happen because you are taking part in this research.

Questions Regarding the Study

You may print a copy of this consent page to keep. If you have any questions about the research study you should ask the researcher; their contact information is at the top of this form. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this research or the way this study has been conducted, you may contact the TWU Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 940-898-3378 or via e-mail at IRB@twu.edu.

By clicking on the "I Agree" button below, you are providing your consent to participate in this research study.

- o I Agree
- o I Do NOT Agree

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1) Please clarify your role: are you a legal guardian or parent to the student?

2) Name of research participant?

3) Date of birth of research participant?

4) Preferred contact information for research participant?

5) Email address for research participant?

6) How many parents/guardians live inside the family home?

7) What is the primary language spoken in the home?

8) How many children reside in the home that have been evaluated for special education

services (are the children older or younger children)?

9) What is the gender of the child(ren) that have been evaluated for special education services?

10) What is the age of the child(ren) that have been evaluated for special education services?

11) What is the age of parents/guardians within the home?

12) What city(ies) have you lived in?

13) What is your race?

14) What is your ethnicity?

15) What is the suspected disability for which your student was evaluated for special education?

16) If your student qualified for special education, what was their area(s) of disability(ies)?

17) What is the continuum of services & placement for your student as outlined within their IEP?

18) What accommodations and/or modifications does your student receive, as outlined within their IEP?

19) How many minutes of service received for special education services are there within your students IEP?

20) What content area(s) are those minutes recorded within your student's IEP?

21) Are there other Instructional or Related service providers that your student receives special education services from?

22) Tell me about your overall experience from the time your child was identified to be evaluated for special education services and transitioning into the special education program.

APPENDIX D

SOCIAL MEDIA POST

Recruiting for Study of Parents of a student recently evaluated for possible eligibility of Special Education Services.

Parents/Guardians

Seeking parents/guardians of a K-12 aged student who has been evaluated for Special Education.

Looking for participants who:

-18+ years old

-Participation is voluntary

-Student's Initial Evaluation was conducted within the past 12 months

-Student is currently enrolled in a K-12 school setting

-Will participate in virtual interviews

You are being asked to participate in a **research study** conducted by **Mrs. Amy Brandt-Bersosa**, a student in the Professional College of Professional Education at Texas Woman's University, as part of her dissertation research. There is a potential risk of loss of confidentiality in all email, downloading, electronic meetings, and internet transactions.

If you are interested in participating or learning more about the study, please feel free to contact Mrs. Amy Bersosa with any questions or concerns you may have.

Note: if you know others who meet the criteria for participation, please feel free to forward this email to them.

Thank you,

Amy Brandt-Bersosa, M.Ed.

Graduate Student, Texas Woman's University

Ph.D. Candidate, Special Education

Abrandt1@twu.edu

Department of Special Education

The Hurst-Euless-Bedford Department of Special Education wants to learn about your understanding and satisfaction with special education services. Your answers will help us provide better support for you and your student.

1. How many of your children currently receive special education services? _____ (Number of children)

2. How many years have your child/children received special education services? _____ (Number of years per child)

3. Campus where my child receives special education services: _____
   (please list all if more than one child)

4. Please indicate your level of satisfaction with the following. Circle the best response.

Are you satisfied with:	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
the special education program in your child's school?	VS	S	U	VU
the special education support services your child receives?	VS	S	U	VU
the regular classroom instruction your child receives?	VS	S	U	VU
your degree of participation in the decisions regarding your child's special education services and placement?	VS	S	U	VU

5. Please indicate how well you understand the following special education processes. Circle the best response number.

Do you understand:	Completely Understand	Somewhat Understand	Do not Understand
why your child is eligible for special education?	1	2	3
the special education "referral for services" process?	1	2	3
why your child was referred for special education testing?			
your child's testing results?	1	2	3
how your child's test results will be used to decide his/her educational plan?	1	2	3
your role as a parent in the process of providing special education services for your child?	1	2	3
your role in developing the Individual Education Program (IEP)?	1	2	3
how decisions are made regarding your child's placement and how and where special education services are provided to your child?	1	2	3
the role of state mandated testing (TAKS, SDAAII, LDAA) for students in special education?	1	2	3
the role of the ARD (Admission, Review and Dismissal) Committee?	1	2	3
the explanations provided to you during the ARD meeting?	1	2	3
that if your child is 14 or older, transition needs and services are to be included in the ARD/IEP?	1	2	3

6. What could be done to increase your understanding of the special education process?

_____

7. What is/was your best source of information regarding special education?

_____

8. What is/was your least helpful source of information regarding special education?

_____

9. What would be the best (most helpful) way to get information to you regarding special education?

_____

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey.
Please return the completed form to the diagnostician at your child's school by Friday, May 20, 2005.

Figure 1. Parent survey from the Hurst-Euless-Bedford Department of Special Education.