

THE PERCEPTIONS OF INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS OF  
PARENTS WHO HAVE USED A PARENT TRAINING AND INFORMATION  
CENTER

by

David Blaiklock  
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Committee:

*D. Early* Chair

*Joseph Maxwell*

*Fredrick J. Byham*

*Gary R. Galluzzi* Program Director

*Mark A. ...* Dean, College of Education  
and Human Development

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Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

by

David Blaiklock  
Master of Education, 2008  
George Mason University  
Bachelor of Science  
Virginia Commonwealth University, 1997

Director: Penelope Earley, Professor  
College of Education and Human Development

Spring Semester 2014  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA



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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated first and foremost to my wife Sabrina for her love, support, guidance, and cheerleading every step of the way. You have been there for me every step of the way on this journey. Your dedication and commitment to my completion of this endeavor has been greatly appreciated. I could not have done it without you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE PERCEPTIONS OF INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS OF PARENTS WHO HAVE USED A PARENT TRAINING AND INFORMATION CENTER**

David Blaiklock, Ph.D.

George Mason University, 2014

Dissertation Director: Dr. Penelope Earley

This study examined the perceptions of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings of 11 parents of children with disabilities who used a Parent Training and Information center (PTI). The purpose was to examine parental perceptions of the effectiveness of a PTI. The characteristics of all children whose parents contacted the PTI were also examined. Each parent participated in an individual interview and the characteristics data were provided by the PTI. The characteristics data are presented using descriptive statistics and indicated parents of children with Autism (25%) or who suspected their child had a disability (19%) had the highest usage. The interview data were analyzed to identify common themes representing the perceptions of a majority of the participants. The themes prior to interaction with the PTI were (a) lack of understanding, (b) trust, (c) acquiescence, (d) lack of participation, (e) negative emotions, and (f) long-term. Themes related to the PTI were (a) special education rights, (b) special education concepts, (c)

IEP meeting strategies, (d) validation, and (e) empowerment. Themes after the PTI were (a) better understanding, (b) treated differently, (c) effective advocacy, (d) active participation, and (e) power. These themes provide insight to how the participants believe the PTI impacted their participation in IEP meetings.

## **CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA) is a federal law designed to provide an education to students with disabilities. In 2009, approximately 6.4 million elementary and secondary students were receiving services through IDEA representing 13.2% of the entire student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Prior to the original version of IDEA enacted in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), only 20% of students with disabilities were educated in the United States' public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

### **IDEA Implementation**

IDEA is translated into practice through the code of federal regulations (Yell, 2012). State education agencies develop regulations based on the federal regulations and Local Education Agencies develop school district regulations based on the state regulations (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). The implementation of IDEA occurs with collaboration between parents and school personnel in determining eligibility for special education services and developing the Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Therefore, the implementation of IDEA occurs at the federal, state, local, and school levels with school personnel having the majority of responsibility for determining eligibility, developing IEPs, and providing special education services (Yell, 2012).

IDEA is implemented at the school level through the interactions of the IEP team. The IEP teams are composed of a school administrator, special education teacher, general education teacher, related service providers (e.g. counselors, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, etc.) parents and the student (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act Regulations, 2006a) though all are not always involved. Parents are welcome to include outside professionals on the IEP team such as advocates or educational consultants (Hallahan & Kaufman, 2006; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

The IEP team meets to develop and modify educational programming for the student with a disability. The team works together to make eligibility determinations and develop the IEP for the student. A student is referred for special education services through the eligibility process. The initial eligibility process includes evaluations of the student to determine a specific eligibility category. When the student is identified as a student requiring special education services, an IEP is developed for them (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The IEP documents the student's present levels of performance, goals to address deficits, related services to help access the curriculum, classroom accommodations, supplemental services, and for older students, a transition plan. The least restrictive environment for the student to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) is also part of the IEP (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). The IEP is the guiding document that details the special education services the school will provide for the student with disabilities (Yell, 2012).

## **Parent Training and Information Centers**

One of the core principles of IDEA is the existence of procedural safeguards that guarantee parents' right to participate in special education decisions. When parents disagree with the educational program being offered by the school, the procedural safeguards of IDEA provide the right to due process and civil suit to resolve conflicts between parents and schools. However, parents may not understand special education concepts (Childre & Chambers, 2005), may not be aware of available services (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005), and there may be barriers to their ability to file a due process claim (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Aceveda-Garcia, 2012).

Parents have struggled with special education concepts since the original passage of IDEA (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1978; Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978; Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981; Poland, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Mirkin, 1982; Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978). Parents were able to learn about special education from parent centers that were associated with advocacy groups such as The Association for Severe Handicaps (TASH). Other groups have self-organized and meet to share information with each other and bring in guest lecturers (Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2010).

The U.S. Department of Education originally funded five parent centers known as Parent Information Centers (PIC) as a pilot program in 1976 for parents to help parents with special education concepts. In 1978, the Office of Special Education (OSEP)

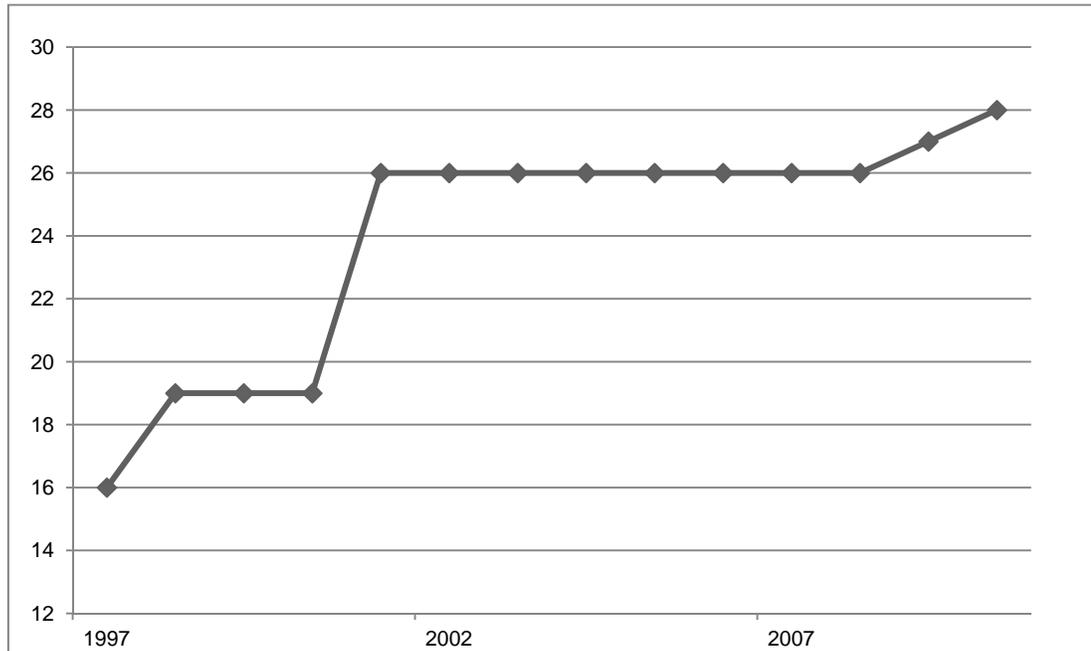
awarded grants to two Parent Training and Information centers (PTI) from the Division of Personnel Preparation. These parent training centers were in Virginia and Minnesota. Other parent centers existed at this time based on the parent-helping-parent model but were funded through state and local resources. Between 1979 and 1983, OSEP began to fund more PTIs and the original PICs became PTIs. The Education for All Handicapped Children Amendments Act (1983) authorized funds for PTIs to expand the parent helping parent model (PACER, n.d.).

The intent of developing the PTIs was to provide information about special education to a large number of parents of students with disabilities. According to the Education of All Handicapped Children Amendments Act (1983) the purpose of the PTIs was to help parents understand the needs of their child with a disability, provide support for the child's educational program, communicate effectively with school personnel, participate in educational decision making related to the IEP, obtain information about programs and services, and understand the relevant provisions in the EAHCA. The grants for parent training centers were retained in the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 though the language was changed from helping parents communicate to helping parents collaborate with schools (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

There are currently two types of parent centers. The first type is Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) which are designed to serve large geographic regions. The second type is Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) which are designed to serve smaller communities and to include families from culturally and linguistically

diverse backgrounds (Brick & Markowitz, 2004). The CPRCs were added as a pilot program during the 1997 reauthorization and were expanded in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA (PACER, n.d.). Prior to the proposed federal budget for 1999, there was a line item in previous budgets under the Office of Education and Rehabilitative Services for parent training. In the proposed budget for 1999, the name of the line item was changed from parent training to parent information centers with estimated and actual funds allocated to that line item beginning in 1997 (U.S. Government Printing Office, n.d.). Therefore it is difficult to determine the funding history of the PTIs prior to their existence as an independent line item in the federal budget.

The funds allocated for the parent training centers are specified within the federal budget. Figure 1 displays the amount of funds (in millions) allocated to parent training centers from 1997-2010. Figure 1 displays an increasing amount of funding to the parent training centers from their inclusion in IDEA in 1997 to present day. The amount of funding has almost doubled which potentially demonstrates that members of the U. S. Congress recognizes the importance of the parent training centers for parents of students with disabilities.



*Figure 1.* Allocations in Federal Budget (millions) for grants to organizations for PTIs and CPRCs from 1997-2010 (U.S. Government Printing Office, n.d.)

Currently, the parent centers funded under Part D of IDEA include both PTIs and CPRCs and serve the families of children with disabilities from birth to 26. Some of the specific goals are to help parents better understand the child’s disability, and understand the rights guaranteed to them through the IDEA. The parent centers help parents resolve conflicts with school personnel and connect parents to additional resources. Parents can also be educated at the parent centers on the special education process, programs and services that may help provide FAPE, and how to collaborate with the school. This education on process, services, and collaboration is intended to help provide parents with the information they need to participate in IEP meetings. The parent centers provide

these services through websites, workshops, publications, and one-on-one support (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Opportunities for parental participation in IEP meetings are required by IDEA. The programs offered by the PTIs under Part D of IDEA 2004 are intended to educate parents about special education concepts to improve their ability to participate in IEP meetings. Despite the presence of these programs, the majority of the research on parental participation in IEP meetings continues to demonstrate parents do not understand what is being discussed (e.g. Childre & Chambers, 2003), are unaware of their rights (e.g. Park, Turnbull, & Park 2001), and believe their input is not valued (e.g. Fish, 2006). Recent data on the PTIs indicate that in the 2009-2010 school year 800,884 parents received assistance from the PTIs (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2011). For the 2010-2011 school year 744,881 parents received assistance from the PTIs (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2012). However, these data should be reviewed with caution as it is not clear how many students with disabilities these parents represent (i.e. two parents of one student with a disability or one parent of several students with disabilities). It is estimated that there are 6.4 million students with disabilities in the public schools, this suggests the number of potential users for the centers is between 10 and 12 million people. The usage documented above indicates a small percentage of parents of students with disabilities meaning parents are either unaware of their existence or their services are not necessary.

The complexity of an IEP may vary for children with different disabilities based on a need for different related services and unique educational programming (Spann, Koehler, & Soenksen, 2003). Therefore, a parent with a child with a low-incidence disability may have a greater need for the services provided by the PTI. The outcome data for the PTIs for the 2010-2011 school year shows that 8.09% of the parents who used their services had children with a specific learning disability (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2012). This is a disproportionately low representation of the children with specific learning disabilities when compared to the national data which indicates approximately 2.4 million or 37.5% of children with disabilities have a specific learning disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Each PTI collects demographic data and reports it to the national center. The demographic data may only be collected from parents who call the PTI and even then they may not be willing to share the demographic information (S. Bowers, personal communication, September 4, 2013). Therefore, it is difficult to understand the characteristics of the children whose parents contact the PTI by looking at the national outcomes data for a single year.

Though the funding for the parent centers has nearly doubled since 1997, there is no research beyond internal evaluations on their ability to improve the quality of parental participation in IEP meetings. It is unknown beyond internal evaluations if the parents who do use the parent centers believe they are effective in helping them participate in IEP meetings. The U.S. House of Representatives expressed concern for the effectiveness of the parent centers during the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 (H.R. Rep. 108-77, 2003c).

Policy makers and special education personnel should be interested in the impact of the parent center programs on parents' perceptions of IEP meetings.

### **Significance of Problem**

Approximately 6.4 million students receive special education services representing approximately 13.2% of the entire student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Each student in special education requires at least one annual IEP meeting to discuss goals and services for the upcoming year. IDEA requires that school personnel attempt to get parents to participate in each IEP meeting (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Parents who believe they were not able to meaningfully participate in IEP meetings may file a due process claim, which arguably could be costly in money, time, and stress. Due process also has potential to create a contentious relationship between the parent and school personnel. The utilization of the parent centers is intended to improve parents' abilities to effectively collaborate with schools, which, it is argued, could potentially decrease the need for due process and spare the aforementioned cost in money, time, and stress associated with filing due process.

### **Research Questions**

The goal of the study is to explore parent perceptions of the effectiveness of a selected PTI and to determine the characteristics of the children whose parents use the selected PTI. The PTIs were established to inform parents about special education rights and services so that they can actively participate in special education decision making. Since 1997 the funding for the centers has almost doubled though there has been limited to no external evaluation of the PTIs.

The research questions of the proposed study are:

1. What are the characteristics of the students whose parents use a selected Parent and Training Information center?
2. What are the perceptions of IEP meetings of selected parents who have used a selected Parent Training and Information center?
3. What are the parental perceptions of selected parents of a selected Parent Training and Information center?

### **Background and History**

The PTIs are intended to help parents participate in special education decision making (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). There are very specific procedural requirements for how special education decision making occurs (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Therefore, to study the perceptions of IEP meetings of parents who have used the parent centers, it is important to review the background and evolution of IDEA. This section reviews the history of IDEA, discusses the primary principles of IDEA, and presents the evolution of parental roles in special education decision making.

The political context surrounding the original passage of the EAHCA fits within the Kingdon (2003) Multiple Streams model. According to the Kingdon Multiple Streams model, policy makers have an opportunity to act when a policy window opens. When the policy window is open, if they can align their policy stream with both the political stream (interest groups) and problem stream (their ability to apply their policy to a problem), then they will likely be able to get their policy passed. For the EAHCA, the

policy window was the passage of the Equal Protection Clause in the Civil Rights legislation. The Equal Protection Clause of the Civil Rights movement allowed the policy window to open because the federal government has no authority over educational issues making this a Civil Rights issue. The policy problem was that public schools were not adequately funded to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Yell (2012) described the issue as “School districts continued to argue that sufficient funds did not exist, that facilities were inadequate, and that instructional materials and adequately trained teachers were unavailable” (p. 51). Though states were passing their own laws to ensure the education of children with disabilities the opportunity varied between states (Yell, 2012). Students with disabilities were not receiving an appropriate education resulting in an inability to gain employment and potential to become institutionalized (U.S. Office of Special Education, n.d.). The consequence of unemployment and institutionalization made students with disabilities tax burdens (Ong-Dean, 2009). The policy solution was to provide federal funding to offset the excess costs of providing procedural safeguards and to create programs where students with disabilities could have equal access to the education available to their nondisabled peers. By receiving an education, students with disabilities would have a better chance at becoming employed, changing them from tax burdens to tax contributors (Ong-Dean, 2009). The political stream aligned with the policy and problem streams when the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) won a court case in 1972 against the state of Pennsylvania, which determined students with intellectual disabilities in Pennsylvania could not be excluded from public schools simply because they had disabilities. Several similar court

cases followed which set the precedent for future cases that prevented the exclusion of students with disabilities from public schools (Yell, 2012). This alignment of the problem, policy, and political streams, when the Civil Rights policy window was open created a policy climate that allowed EAHCA to become law.

The EAHCA was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1975 to provide educational opportunities to all students with disabilities. The four primary goals of the EAHCA were to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students, provide procedural safeguards for parents, provide federal funding to states to support the cost of educating students with disabilities, and develop an evaluation system for the previous three goals. Providing a FAPE to students with disabilities means the student has access to specialized supports and related services designed for their individual needs (U.S. Office of Special Education, n.d.). The procedural safeguards protect the rights of parents by guaranteeing their right to participate in special education planning, allowing access to records, and requiring them to be informed prior to changes in services or placement. The procedural safeguards also provide parents with the right to due process and other conflict resolution mechanisms when they disagree with the school regarding their student's special education program (Yell, 2012). The EAHCA has been amended four times and the name of the law was changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990 (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006).

IDEA requires a FAPE to be provided to students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). The LRE means the setting where students will have the greatest amount of access to

their nondisabled peers while still being able to receive a FAPE. The LRE is a continuum of education placement options whereby students with disabilities receive their education. At the least restrictive end of the continuum, the student receives their education in a general education classroom with supports. The most restrictive end of the continuum includes residential placements where students live at a facility with no access to nondisabled peers and receive their education at the residential program (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006).

Reauthorizations of the IDEA have included additional disability categories along with subsequent regulations having broader definitions of some disability categories. When the EAHCA was first passed in 1975, 3.7 million students were identified as having disabilities representing 8.3% of the school population. For the 2008-2009 school year, 6.5 million students were identified as having disabilities representing 13.2% of the school population. The proportion of the school population for some disability categories has remained relatively stable since the original passage of EAHCA. For example, students with emotional disabilities represented 0.6% of the school population in 1975 and 0.9% of the school population in 2009. Conversely, the proportion of students identified as having specific learning disabilities has increased with 1.8% of the school population identified in 1975 and 5% of the school population identified with a specific learning disability in 2009 (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Hallahan (1992) argued the increase in the proportion of learning disabilities is due to a combination of increased risk factors and the improved abilities of schools to appropriately identify students. The disability categories of Autism and Traumatic Brain Injury were added to

IDEA in the 1990 reauthorization (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990).

The proportion of the school population identified with Autism has been gradually increasing with 0.1% of the school population identified in 1990 and 0.7% of the school population identified in 2009. The increase in the proportion of the school population identified with disabilities means both the number and proportion of students participating in special education have increased resulting in more parents, students, and school personnel being involved in special education.

The most recent reauthorization of the legislation, IDEA 2004, aligned the special education law with the general education law No Child Left Behind. The 2004 reauthorization was also intended to reduce bureaucratic processes that shifted resources away from providing direct service (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004) and to develop trust between parents and schools (H.R. Rep. 108-77, 2003). The bureaucratic process refers to the assurance that the detailed requirements of the procedural safeguards were being met. Due to the litigious nature of due process, schools expended an abundance of energy to ensure they had evidence supporting their decisions in a due process hearing. This practice placed the focus of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings on procedural compliance rather than discussion of the educational needs of the student (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995). A potential consequence of failing to discuss the educational needs of the child is that it impedes the parents' ability to actively participate in the IEP meeting. The lack of participation may lead to parental disagreement with the proposed IEP and subsequently result in a due process claim over the disagreement.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Though the original passage of IDEA fits within the Multiple Streams model (Kingdon, 2003), the evolution of IDEA pertaining to parental involvement in the special education decision process fits within Datnow and Park's (2009) theory of co-construction as demonstrated in Figure 2. Within this framework, the top-down model of IDEA implementation trickles down from the federal level, to state, to local, to school, to parents of students with disabilities who are the policy recipients of IDEA. The implementation of IDEA at the school level is based on the individual student's needs and the collaboration of the members of the student's team represents a series of contextualized layers that must align for the team to agree on the best educational program for the student (Datnow & Park, 2009).

Despite the top-down, multi-layered model described above, the tension created by conflict between parents and schools has influenced change in IDEA. The influence of the tension on the law demonstrates the law is not only top-down but also bottom-up making it bi-directional. For example, parents who are not satisfied with the outcome of a due process hearing have the right for their claim to be heard at the district court level. Parents have the right to continue appealing court decisions to the U.S. Supreme Court (Manasevit & Maginnis, 2005). Federal court decisions potentially influence future reauthorizations of the law (Mead, 2009).

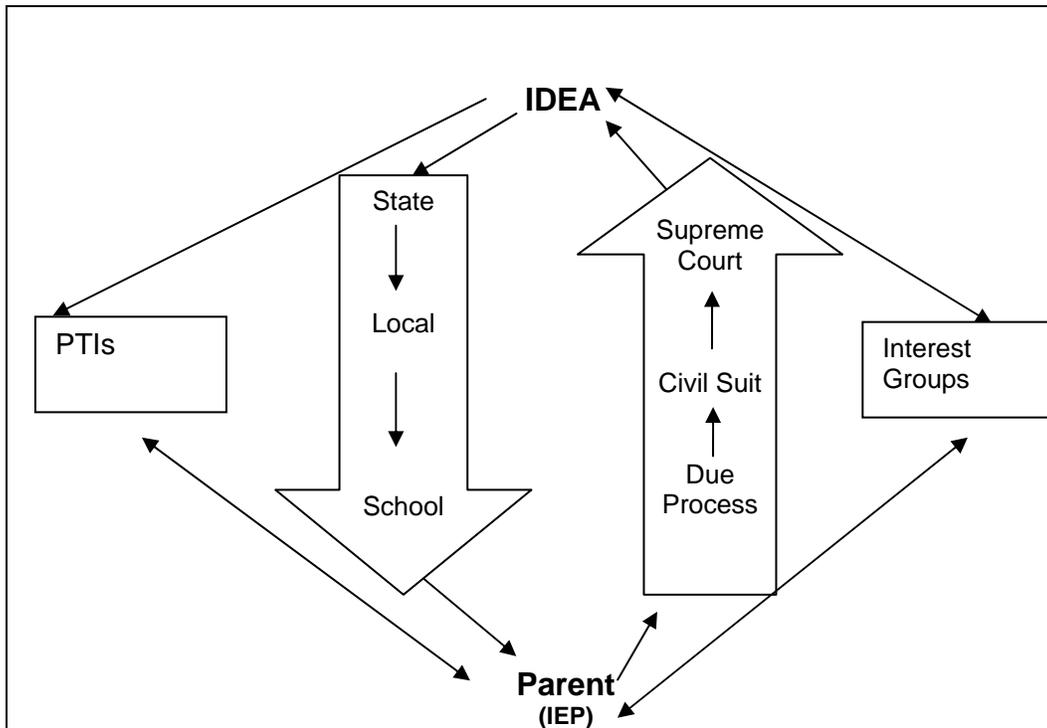


Figure 2. Co-constructive Framework of IDEA

Beyond the school level implementation of IDEA and the parent influence through due process, there are also bi-directional relationships between the parent centers and parents and disability organizations and parents. The PTIs have the potential to influence IEP meeting by providing parents with information about special education. Informed parents may also help the PTIs by volunteering to help other parents. Disability organizations may also provide information to parents on special education. Parents make donations and provide information to disability organizations that serve as interest groups to influence reauthorizations of IDEA. A description of the PTIs and the implementation of IDEA are provided above. The rest of this section focuses on parents

and IDEA, the impact of due process, and the influence of disability organizations, to show how the PTIs may influence parents in a manner that may influence future reauthorizations of IDEA.

**Parents and IDEA.** The role of parents in IEP meetings has evolved since the original passage of EAHCA. When EAHCA was first implemented, school personnel did not have a clear understanding of parents' role in IEP meetings. School personnel were uncertain as to whether parental participation meant the parent's role was to receive information, provide information, or participate in decision making (Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978). Special education directors lacked a clear understanding of when either parental consent or participation was required (Poland, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Mirkin, 1982). Litigation regarding parental participation in IEP meetings has contributed to an increased role of parents in IEP meetings (Mead & Paige, 2008).

The original EAHCA was written to include parents as having both the right to be a member of the IEP team and to participate in decisions about their child. The school was mandated to inform parents of their intent to either evaluate the child or make changes in their educational program. Parents had the right to resolve disagreements about the educational program for their child through due process and civil suit (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Parents also had the right to deny evaluations or special education services, have evaluations explained to them, invite individuals to participate on the IEP team, and to receive written copies of the IEP and student progress. The intent of EAHCA was for parents to meaningfully participate and collaborate in all IEP decisions (Mead & Paige, 2008).

These procedural safeguards were intended to ensure parents of students with disabilities participate in the special education process (Yell, 2012). If the parent disagrees with the school's decision, the procedural safeguards provide the parents with the right to impartial due process and if necessary, a civil suit to resolve the disagreement (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). The Local Educational Agency is required to provide a copy of the procedural safeguards to parents at least annually (Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act, 2004). The amendment to EAHCA in 1983 included funds that created PTIS for parents of students with disabilities. The Handicapped Children's Protection Act was an amendment to the EAHCA that allowed parents to recoup attorney's fees when they prevailed in either due process or civil suit (Handicapped Children's Protection Act, 1986).

Exercising due process as one of the parental rights in the procedural safeguards created adversarial relationships between parents and schools (Zirkel, 1994). The time, effort, and money, required to exercise due process requires access to social capital that some families of students with disabilities may not possess. The lack of access to social capital may exclude some parents from being able to exercise due process. Therefore, the lack of collaboration between schools and parents can result in litigation that is costly in time, money, and effort, that is shifted away from direct service to students with disabilities (H.R. 108-77, 2003b; Hehir, 2009).

Members of the U.S. Congress addressed the problem of conflicts between the schools and parents during the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA. Mediation was offered as a nonadversarial resolution to conflict. States were required to offer mediation as a

voluntary option for parents but parents had the right to refuse mediation and exercise due process (H.R. Rep. 105-95, 1997). A report by the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) recommended an increase for support of programs that helped parents better understand the special education process. Members of Congress recognized the tension between parents and schools during hearings for the reauthorization of IDEA in 2003 (S. 7836, 2003). A pre-resolution session was added to the due process procedure to facilitate amicable conflict resolution (H. R. Rep. 108-77, 2003a). An additional goal of IDEA 2004 was to decrease litigation by improving trust between schools and parents to allow them to work together in a collaborative manner (H. R. Rep. 108-77, 2003).

Throughout each reauthorization of IDEA, parental participation in the special education process has been mandatory and legislation has increased the role of parents in special education (Mead & Paige, 2008). The findings provisions in both IDEA 1997 and 2004 state children with disabilities can be educated more effectively when the role of the parent is strengthened and the parent is able to participate in the education of the child (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004a). Currently, parental participation is required in IEP meetings focused on special education eligibility and placement (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004f; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004h; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act Regulations, 2006c; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act Regulations, 2006d). School personnel are responsible for ensuring at least one parent of a student with a disability can be present at the IEP meeting and has

the opportunity to participate (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act Regulations, 2006b). The school personnel can proceed with the IEP meeting if they are unable to convince the parents of their need to participate (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act Regulations, 2006). Parents who do not believe they have been able to meaningfully participate in the IEP process or do not agree with the proposed educational program continue to have the right to file due process (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004g).

The IDEA requirement of parental participation is not analogous to parental consent. Parental consent is only required for the initial evaluation of a child for special education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004b), the initial placement and services for the student (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004c), reevaluation of the student (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004d) excusal of an IEP team member (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004e), and changing the educational setting during due process (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004j). Once a student is determined to be eligible for special education, IDEA requires parents be informed of changes in educational programming through prior written notice but does not require consent (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004i). If parents disagree with the changes then they have the right to convene an IEP meeting to discuss the changes. If the parents continue to disagree, they have the right to pursue resolution through mediation or due process (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004g; Yell 2012). However, the requirements of some states for

parental consent exceed the requirements of IDEA. For example, in addition to the consent requirements of IDEA, school personnel in Virginia are also required to obtain parental consent for changes in a student's services and for termination from special education (Virginia Department of Education, 2010). Thus, when parents sign, they have participated in an IEP or eligibility meeting, they may not understand they have given consent.

**U.S. Supreme Court on Parental Participation.** Parents and school personnel who are dissatisfied with the outcome of a due process hearing are guaranteed the right to appeal the hearing officer's decision through the federal courts. The case is appealed at the district court, then circuit court, and then the Supreme Court level (assuming the Supreme Court will hear the case). The federal court holdings, particularly the Supreme Court, are significant because they set precedent for how the lower courts will decide in the future when presented with similar cases (Yell, 2012). Since the initial implementation of IDEA, the U.S. Supreme Court has heard several cases that have either expanded or limited parental rights in regards to their participation in special education decision making (Mead & Paige, 2008). Decisions made by the U.S. Supreme Court may also identify gaps in the law which may influence change in the law during the subsequent reauthorization (Mead, 2009).

The process of working through litigation at the district, circuit, and Supreme Court level can take several years. For example, in *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley* (1982), the family first filed a due process claim in late 1978 while the child was in first grade. The parents were not satisfied with the hearing

officer determination and appealed with the U.S District Court. The United States District Court for the Southern District of New York heard the appeal in September and October of 1979 and ruled in favor of the parents in January of 1980 (*Rowley v. Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District*, 1980). The school district then appealed to the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit where the case was heard in May of 1980. The Second Circuit affirmed the lower court's ruling in July of 1980 (*Rowley v. Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District*, 1980a). The school district appealed to the United States Supreme Court where the case was argued in March of 1982 and the lower courts' decisions were reversed and remanded in June of 1982 (*Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley*, 1982).

The Supreme Court decisions have created boundaries around the rights for parents of students with disabilities granted by IDEA. Parents are guaranteed the right to participate in special education decisions and programming as outlined in *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley* (1982), *Irving Independent School District v. Tatro* (1984), and *Honig v. Doe* (1988). The Supreme Court also granted the right to the substantive requirement of FAPE in *Winkelman v. Parma* (2007). The decision in *Smith v. Robinson* (1984) helped identify the issue of reimbursement for attorney's fees that members of Congress were able to clarify by allowing the reimbursement of those fees in Handicapped Children's Protection Act of 1986. Despite the ability to receive reimbursement for attorney's fees, the inability for parents to receive reimbursement for expert witness fees as decided in *Arlington v. Murphy* (2006) may

make due process challenging for some parents particularly since parents bear the burden of proof that FAPE is not being provided as decided in *Schaffer v. Weast* (2005).

**Contribution of Interest Groups.** Advocacy groups have been involved in special education policy since before the passage of EAHCA in 1975. The efforts of groups such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and The ARC helped convince members of Congress of the need to educate students with disabilities and helped influence the passage of EAHCA (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) was founded in 1977 to help connect parents to resources that will help them advocate for their children (National Center for Learning Disabilities, n.d.). The Association for Severe Handicaps (TASH) was also founded in the 1970s to support the families of students with disabilities (TASH, 2011). The Autism National Committee was founded in 1990 to protect the rights of families of children with Autism (Autism National Committee, 2011).

There are many other organizations in addition to The ARC, CEC, TASH, NCLD, and the Autism National Committee, that advocate for the rights of the families of students with disabilities by influencing policy development both when IDEA is being reauthorized and by supporting other policies that enhance the rights of families of students with disabilities. Groups such as Autism Speaks, and Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD), demonstrate support for parental collaboration by providing information on their websites. Providing information to parents about their rights and informing them of the collaborative process helps supplement the activities of the parent training centers by existing as an additional

resource for information. Organizations such as the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf and the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities demonstrate support for increasing parent/family collaboration in educational decisions as part of their policy agendas (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2008; Conference of Education Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf, 2005). Having these issues on their policy agenda demonstrates the associations' recognition of the importance of parental collaboration and an intention to attempt to influence policy makers on the issue.

For example, parental involvement is receiving support from interest groups through the IDEA Fairness Restoration Act which was considered by both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. The purpose of the IDEA Fairness Restoration Act is to address the issue raised in *Arlington v. Murphy* where the parents spent in excess of \$29,000 to prevail in their due process hearing. Reimbursing parents make the process more equitable because it allows parents with fewer resources access to the ability to build a stronger case for their opinion (H.R. 1208, 2011; S. 613, 2011). The ARC for People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, CHADD, and TASH are supporting the bill (Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, 2011).

**Parental Participation in IEP Meetings.** Despite the guarantee for parents to participate in the IDEA Procedural Safeguards and the procedural requirement for parents to participate in developing IEPs, parents are not always able to actively participate in IEP meetings. The IDEA did not have a clear definition of the requirements for parental

participation. School personnel may not have a clear understanding of parental participation when EAHCA was originally passed in either IEP meetings (Yoshida, Fenton, Kaufman, & Maxwell, 1978) or eligibility meetings (Poland, Thurlow, Ysseldyke, & Mirkin, 1982). Consequently, the parents of students with disabilities did not have a clear understanding of their role (Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981) or the content discussed and decisions made during IEP meetings (Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978) and in some cases participated minimally in the IEP meeting discussion (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1978).

Members of the U.S. Congress attempted to increase parental roles and participation in IEP meetings during the reauthorizations of IDEA. One mechanism for increasing parental participation was to provide funding to PTIs to educate parents about special education. Parents of students with disabilities continue to report they do not understand special education jargon (Childre & Chambers; 2005) and do not understand the decisions made in the IEP meeting (Simon, 2006). The IEP meeting continues to be confusing (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005) and parents struggle with understanding the IEP document (Fish, 2008). Some parents continue to report the perception their input is not valued (Fish, 2006). Parents continue to report they do not understand the rights granted by IDEA (Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001) and the procedural safeguards are written with complex language that may make it difficult for the average parent to understand (Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012).

**Summary.** The PTIs are intended to help parents participate in the IEP meeting by educating them about special education rights and concepts and ideally a parent who

has been in contact with a PTI may have a better ability to exercise their right to Due Process by having someone from the PTI help them navigate the process. If a PTI helps a parent file a due process claim, it may eventually be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court which could potentially influence future reauthorizations of IDEA. The education provided by a PTI to a parent may influence them to provide support to disability advocacy groups allowing them to participate in those groups in a manner that influences future reauthorizations of IDEA.

### **Definition of Terms**

**IEP Meeting:** A convening of the IEP team in whole or in part to discuss the consideration of a child not identified as having a disability as having a disability, testing to determine a child's eligibility for special education, and the development or revision of the IEP.

**IEP Team:** A group of individuals composed of a parent of a child with a disability, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, a representative of the local education agency, an individual who is able to interpret educational evaluations, related service providers, the child with a disability (when appropriate) and at the discretion of the parents or local education agency, other individuals who have expertise regarding the child (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

**Parent:** A natural, foster, or adoptive parent or assigned guardian who is legally responsible for a child's wellbeing (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

Parent Training and Information Center (PTI): Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs) and Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRC) that are federally funded and authorized under Part D of IDEA 2004 whose purpose is to help parents engage in the procedural safeguards and actively participate in IEP meeting decisions (ALLIANCE Parent Training and Advocacy Centers, 2011; Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

Social Capital: The social networks both within the family and in the community that are of value for raising the child (Coleman, 1987).

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

The perceptions of IEP meetings of parents who used a selected PTI were explored in this study. It is assumed that the school personnel with whom they interacted in the IEP meetings conducted IEP meetings to best of their ability in compliance with the requirements of IDEA. It is also assumed that the information provided by the participants is truthful to the best of the participants' ability. In some cases, the participant was recalling experiences that occurred many years ago. Another limitation is the lack of generalizability of the findings of this study. Given the qualitative nature of the interview data, the findings of this study are relevant solely to the participants and should not be generalized to all parents who have used the PTIs.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 2 is literature review where literature on due process, parent knowledge of special education, PTIs, and parental participation in IEP meetings is summarized. Chapter 3 describes the methods used in the study to include site selection, participants,

data collection, data analysis, and validity. The results of the data analysis include the themes regarding participants' perceptions of PTIs and IEP meetings are presented in Chapter 4 along with the demographic data of the students whose parents have contacted the selected PTI. Chapter 5 includes the limitations, the implications for practice and policy, and recommendations for further research on this topic.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of selected parents about the effectiveness of a selected Parent Training and Information center (PTI) funded under Part D of IDEA 2004. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature on conflict sources and resolution, issues surrounding parent knowledge in special education, available literature on the PTIs, and parental perception of participation in IEP meetings. This chapter also includes discussion of how the literature reviewed justifies the research questions for this study.

### **Conflict Sources and Resolution**

The Procedural Safeguards in IDEA guarantee the parental right to participate in IEP meetings. Parents who either disagree with the school's decisions or who believe their opportunity to participate in the IEP meeting are guaranteed the right to Due Process through the Procedural Safeguards (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004; Yell, 2012). This section reviews research on causes, trends, and potential barriers for parents regarding Due Process.

Several studies reviewed the sources of conflict between parents and schools that may result in a due process claim. Lake and Billingsley (2000) explored the factors contributing to conflicts between parents and schools regarding special education. Telephone interviews with open ended questions were conducted with 22 parents (of 28

students with disabilities), 16 school administrators, and six mediators in Massachusetts. The parents were recruited based on their participation in the mediation process. The participants reported parental lack of knowledge as a source of conflict between parents and schools. The school administrators reported it was their responsibility to provide knowledge to the parents and parents reported frustration over the imbalance of knowledge regarding special education between them and the school. Parental lack of knowledge became apparent when the parent had their first disagreement with the school and had to seek dispute resolution. Parents reported feeling devalued and believed they were not seen as equal members of the student's IEP team. Additional themes identified as sources of conflict between parents and schools were discrepant perspectives on student needs, the nature and type of services for the student to access the curriculum, communication, and fiscal constraints as a barrier to particular services. Finally, parents reported difficulty with communication and trust when working with the schools.

The sources of conflict identified by the participants in Lake and Billingsley (2000) provide information for the impediments to parental participation in IEP meetings that may lead to a due process complaint. The reauthorizations of IDEA in 1997 and 2004 attempted to increase parental roles in IEP. The data for Lake and Billingsley were collected prior to the implementation of IDEA 1997 and IDEA 2004. During the reauthorization of IDEA 2004, members of Congress hoped modifications to the law would decrease the amount of conflict between parents and schools regarding special education (H. R. 108-77, 2003).

Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008) explored the sources of parental conflict that contributed to due process litigation. Eight parents and 18 school personnel from two small school districts in California participated in semi-structured interviews. Additional data were collected through observations and document analysis. The results indicated there was a lack of special education leadership in the districts, the school districts were not current in their knowledge of special education law, and parents were being excluded from the special education process. Parents and school personnel both reported that parents were not perceived as equal partners in special education decision making resulting in contentious relationships between parents and schools. Parents also reported their lack of knowledge about special education hindered their ability to participate. For these two school districts, the lack of awareness of the requirements of IDEA combined with a failure to include parents in special education decisions may have resulted in an increase in due process complaints.

Though Mueller et al. (2008) demonstrated an example of parents being excluded from special education decision making, the authors recognize the qualitative method of inquiry is not generalizable to a larger population. An additional limitation is the interviewing of more school personnel than parents. The parents in this study were specifically chosen by the special education directors, which may have further biased the results. Interviewing more parents who were selected through a different method may have provided a different perspective of parental experiences.

There are a variety of sources for disputes between parents and schools that will result in parents filing a due process claim. Parents in the research reviewed above filed

due process claims when they believed they were excluded from the special education process, the IEP was not being properly implemented, they lacked the appropriate knowledge to participate in the IEP meeting, and differing perspectives of the student's needs. Conflicts resulting in due process also occurred when parents felt their role was devalued and had difficulty communicating with the school. Finally, disagreements over the eligibility, appropriate services, and the least restrictive environment were also identified as sources of conflict that may result in a due process claim (Government Accountability Office, 2003; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller Singer, & Draper, 2008). Given that IEP meetings focus on discussion and agreement regarding services, appropriate educational programming, and the least restrictive environment, any IEP meeting may potentially result in a dispute that will result in a parent filing a due process claim. The next section focuses on the prevalence of both due process claims and adjudication.

Ahearn (2002) analyzed the number of due process hearings from years prior to the 1997 IDEA reauthorization to the year 2000. Results indicated the number of due process requests increased by 10.4% each year from 1996 to 2000 with 7,532 requests made in 1996 and 11,068 requests made in 2000. However, the percentage of due process complaints that were adjudicated from 1996 to 2000 decreased an average of 4% a year with 47.2% of the complaints being adjudicated in 1996 and 27.3% of the complaints being adjudicated in 2000. Though the number of complaints being filed increased, the percentage of complaints adjudicated decreased over the same period of time.

Ahearn (2002) suggests two reasons for the decrease in the percentage of due process claims being adjudicated from 1996 to 2000. The first reason is that parents and schools are able to informally resolve their differences prior to the due process hearing. Hehir (2009) argues that school administrators are more willing to resolve differences with parents when there is the potential for a due process hearing. The second reason for the decrease in adjudication is the introduction of voluntary mediation in IDEA 1997 as a dispute resolution technique. However, Ahearn does not provide any explanation for the dramatic increase in the number of due process claims being filed from 1996 to 2000. Ahearn also lacks discussion of changes in the number of students receiving special education services during the time period of her study having any influence on the trends on both due process claims and adjudication.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2003) explored the issues that result in formal disputes between parents and schools, the use of formal dispute resolutions mechanisms, the role of mediation and alternate dispute techniques in resolving conflict, and the timeliness in which Local Education Agencies receive the complaints from State Education Agencies. To do this, school officials at the state and local level were interviewed in California, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Texas. The local level school officials were from one urban and one rural school district in each state. The results from the school personnel indicated disputes leading to due process complaints focused on whether a student was eligible and the type of eligibility, the type of special education and related services the student required to access the curriculum, if the school was properly implementing the IEP, and whether the student was placed in the

appropriate environment to receive instruction. Using the data from Ahearn (2002) the number of due process claims being made from 1996-2000 increased significantly while the number adjudicated decreased for the same time period. However, the majority of those due process claims being adjudicated were concentrated in five states and the District of Columbia. Mediation and less formal dispute resolution techniques were less expensive and helped preserve the relationship between the parents and school personnel. The timeliness of the state agency reporting complaints to local agencies did not appear to have an impact on their ability to respond.

Zirkel and Gischlar (2008) extended Ahearn's research and surveyed states for the number of adjudicated due process hearings from the years 2001 to 2005. The results from Ahearn (2002) were included to analyze the longitudinal trend in due process adjudications from 1991-2005. They found that the decreasing trend identified by Ahearn did not continue and the number of due process hearings remained steady as a plateau of approximately 3,000 cases being adjudicated each year from 1996 to 2005. Zirkel and Gischlar (2008) disaggregated their data by state and found the majority of due process hearings were isolated to several states with New York and New Jersey representing 56% of all due process claims adjudicated from 1991-2006. Zirkel and Gischlar also calculated a per capita estimate of adjudicated due process claims based on 10,000 students with disabilities. The per capita calculation demonstrated the same upward trend as Ahearn calculated, with approximately 125 cases per 10,000 students with disabilities being adjudicated in 1991 and 185 cases per 10,000 students with disabilities being adjudicated in 1997. The per capita cases being adjudicated decreased

and remained stable with approximately 145 to 180 cases per 10,000 students with disabilities being adjudicated from 1998 to 2005 (Zirkel & Gischlar, 2008). Therefore, despite any changes in the number of students receiving special education services, the proportion of due process claims being adjudicated declined slightly and remained stable.

Unlike Ahearn (2002), Zirkel and Gischlar (2008) collected no data on the number of due process claims filed that were not adjudicated. Knowing the total number of claims filed may provide insight into the number of parents who perceive they are not able to actively participate in IEP meetings. Furthermore, Zirkel and Gischlar estimated for missing data for several of the years. The estimation of data may not be accurate and may skew the trend of adjudicated due process hearings from the total number that actually were adjudicated from 2001-2005.

The proportion of due process claims being adjudicated has fallen slightly and remained stable since the implementation of IDEA 1997 (Zirkel & Gischlar, 2008). However, the proportion of due process claims either being filed or adjudicated is not an appropriate metric for parental participation in IEP meetings. The ability to file a due process claim assumes that every parent who is dissatisfied will choose to file a claim, has the access to social capital to file a claim (Hehir, 2009), and is able to understand the procedural safeguards when they receive them each year. Several studies focus on barriers for parents that may prevent them from understanding the procedural safeguards which may prevent them from being able to file a due process claim.

Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) studied the readability level of procedural safeguards based upon initiatives for government documents to be written in simple

English. Procedural safeguards from 49 states were analyzed based on commonality of the words, number of syllables in the words, and font size. The analysis of word commonality revealed the procedural safeguards were written on a reading level ranging from fifth to sixteenth grade with a mode of 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The procedural safeguards ranged in length from two to 47 pages and used font sizes ranging from five to 72 point with a mode of 11 point. The analysis of the procedural safeguards by syllable indicated they were written on a reading grade level ranging from 7.2 to 17.4 with a median of 13. Overall, only 4 to 8% of the procedural safeguards were written below the recommended seventh grade reading level and at least 92% were written at a reading grade level above ninth grade. Furthermore, 20% of the procedural safeguards were written at a collegiate reading level. The complexity of language in the procedural safeguards may render them unavailable for parents who are unable to understand them. Parents unable to understand the procedural safeguards may be prevented from using due process as a vehicle for conflict resolution as guaranteed by IDEA.

Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, and Acevedo-Garcia (2012) extended the research of Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) by determining the readability of procedural safeguards using a different readability estimate and comparing the results to the estimated reading level of the target population. The readability of the procedural safeguards from all 50 states and the District of Columbia were analyzed using the SMOG technique. Mandic et al. reported the SMOG technique to be more accurate than the readability estimates used in Fitzgerald and Watkins. The results indicated the mean and median reading level for the procedural safeguards was grade 16 with a range from the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level to a

graduate/professional reading level. The majority of the distribution fell within the collegiate reading level range. Mandic et al. reported data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) indicate that 55% and 62% respectively of parents of students with disabilities could read at a maximum of a twelfth grade level. Therefore, the readability estimates presented in this study indicate the typical parent of a student with disabilities would be unable to read the procedural safeguards and therefore would not be aware of their rights to due process.

Mandic et al. (2012) confirm the findings of Fitzgerald and Watkins (2006) that procedural safeguards are written at a level that makes them inaccessible to many parents of students with disabilities. However, it is possible the specific sections analyzed in both studies were written at a higher level than other portions of the document. Further, the Mandic et al. study assumes that the SMOG technique is able to accurately determine reading level. Both studies could be improved by interviewing parents about their interactions with the procedural safeguards to determine if the readability plays a role in parental inability to exercise their right to due process.

**Summary.** The procedural safeguards in IDEA ensure the right for parents to participate by guaranteeing parents the right to due process when they disagree with the school regarding the IEP (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Conflict between parents and schools that may result in due process can be caused by parents feeling devalued, communication, and disagreements about the special education services, the appropriate setting, and the educational program (Government

Accountability Office, 2003; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller Singer, & Draper, 2008). The number of due process claims being filed increased substantially from 1996 to 2000 while the number of claims adjudicated decreased over the same period (Ahearn, 2002). However, the number of due process claims adjudicated remained relatively stable from 2000 to 2005 according to a per capita analysis that accounts for the increase in the number of students in special education (Zirkel & Gischlar, 2008). However, the guarantee to participate through the procedural safeguards in IDEA assumes every parent or guardian has the ability to access due process. The ability to file a due process claim requires access to social capital that some parents may not possess (Hehir, 2009). The readability of the procedural safeguards also serves as a barrier for some parents because of the complexity of the language (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012). Parents who are unable to read the procedural safeguards may not be able exercise their right to due process when they disagree with the school and are thus being denied their right to participate in special education decisions.

### **Parent Knowledge**

The lack of knowledge of special education concepts and jargon may prohibit some parents from being able to actively participate in IEP meetings (Childre & Chambers, 2005). Though information is available on special education, some parents may lack the social and cultural capital to access it (Trainor, 2010). This section reviews research on parental access to special education resources.

Trainor (2010) explored parents' use of social and cultural capital in navigating special education processes. Thirty-three individuals from 27 families with 36 students

with disabilities participated in focus groups and individual interviews. The participants were from a small Midwestern city and represented diverse socioeconomic, racial, and cultural, backgrounds. Regardless of racial or socioeconomic background, the parents in the study who were able to acquire and use social and cultural capital to form relationships and access information had a better understanding of disability categories, jargon, and the services available for their student(s) with a disability. The use of cultural capital included accessing books, identifying information on the internet, and consulting with professionals outside of the school. Social capital included networking with other parents of students with disabilities to learn how to navigate the system. The knowledge they gained through their social and cultural capital allowed them to actively participate in IEP meetings, effectively challenge recommendations, and make specific requests of the schools. Conversely, the parents who lacked the social and cultural capital to develop relationships and access information reported being frustrated with their inability to obtain services and accommodations for their student with a disability. Therefore, the parents in this study with more social and cultural capital were able to participate more actively in the IEP process.

The need to acquire and use social and cultural capital helped the parents in Trainor (2010) obtain the accommodations and services they believed were appropriate for their students. However, there was only one person analyzing the data and there is no discussion of mechanisms to determine the validity of the analysis. Though the demographic characteristics of the school district are presented, neither the demographics of the sample or how the sample was created are discussed. Finally, it is not clear when

the data for the study were collected or when the parents had interacted with the IEP process. During the discussion of issues regarding eligibility, there is a reference to the student having now graduated from law school. Having graduated from law school implies a long period of time had elapsed between the parent's involvement in special education processes and data collection. The significance of the amount of time that had elapsed is IDEA has likely been reauthorized at least once since the parent participated in IEP meetings. The more recent reauthorizations of IDEA may have resulted in changes to the eligibility process that may have yielded a different experience for that particular parent. Given the lack of clarity in data collection and when the students were in school, other parents in the study may not have been involved in the IEP process prior to recent reauthorizations. Their experiences in IEP meetings and their understanding of special education processes may have been different if they were participating in special education as designed by IDEA 2004.

Trainor (2010a) explored school personnel expectations of parental social and cultural capital regarding participation in IEP meetings. School personnel perception of their role in providing parents with information regarding special education to increase their social and cultural capital was also explored. Seventeen educators representing general education, special education, and related services, participated in focus groups. School personnel reported a preference for parents to have adequate knowledge of special education to actively participate in IEP meetings. It was recognized that active participation required the ability to read and an understanding of special education concepts and jargon. Parents were expected to prepare for the IEP meeting by reviewing

a draft of the IEP prior to the meeting. The school personnel reported they helped parents acquire the social and cultural capital necessary to understand special education concepts by referring parents to related service providers and parent support groups. Advocacy groups were listed on the school district's informational brochure. However, Trainor noted that parents from minority and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds may either be unwilling or unable to meet with the related service providers or the advocacy groups. The school personnel in this study both supported and provided resources to increase parental social and cultural capital regarding special education to facilitate their active participation in IEP meetings.

School personnel in Trainor (2010a) expect parents to prepare for IEP meetings and are willing to connect them to resources to help them better understand special education processes. However, the author struggled to obtain participants for the study and consequently half of the participants came from the same school. Secondly, there is minimal discussion of the techniques used to establish validity in this study. The author analyzed the data independently creating the potential for their bias to influence the results. Despite the lack of generalizability and issues with validity, Trainor provides some insight into both educator expectations of parents and strategies to help parents develop social and cultural capital regarding special education.

Mueller, Milian, and Lopez (2010) explored the experiences of Spanish speaking families with support groups for families with children with disabilities. Eight mothers of students with severe disabilities participated in open ended interviews. The mothers were recruited from a Spanish speaking family support group in the Rocky Mountain region.

All of the participants reported they were satisfied with the special education services their children were receiving. The participants also reported the support group served as a source of information as the school district did not provide them with information regarding the special education process. Professionals attended as guest speakers to provide information. The group also shared their experiences in working with the schools to help provide practical knowledge for interactions with special education professionals. Participants also reported the group felt like a family and provided emotional support. The participants in this study were able to acquire knowledge about special education both from professionals and from other group members who shared similar experiences. Though the results of this study cannot be generalized, it does provide an example of a resource for parents to access information that will help them participate in the special education process.

**Summary.** The parents in Trainor (2010) who had social and cultural capital were better able to navigate the special education process and advocate for their students. School personnel attempted to help parents increase their social and cultural capital by explaining special education to them, referring them to related service providers, and referring them to advocacy groups. Educators expected parents to be knowledgeable regarding the special education process. However, parents from minority and/or low socioeconomic backgrounds may be less susceptible to accessing resources recommended by the school (Trainor, 2000a). Some parents have been able to organize effective support groups that have been able to provide them with the information they need to actively participate and advocate for their students with disabilities (Mueller,

Milian, & Lopez, 2010). In addition to the school personnel and self-organizing support groups helping parents learn about special education, the parent centers funded under Part D of IDEA are also designed to educate parents about special education so that they can meaningfully participate in IEP meetings.

### **Parent Centers**

A comprehensive search of the literature was conducted to identify and evaluate research on the PTIs. The comprehensive search was conducted by searching the research databases *ERIC*, *PSYCInfo*, and *JSTOR*, for the following terms, *pti*, *parent center*, *special education information*, *special education parent resource*, and *special education guidance*. The search yielded no articles in the peer-reviewed literature about the effectiveness of PTIs in helping parents participate in IEP meetings and navigate the special educate process.

The National Parent Technical Assistance Center collects data for an annual report on the demographics and outcomes of individuals who use PTI services at any of the PTIs across the country. The PTIs are responsible for reporting the number of people who used each of their services, and the school level and disability type of the children whose parents contact them. The outcome data are collected by a third-party provider through a telephone survey. The sample consists of 25 randomly selected parents who received technical assistance from each center and 25 randomly selected parents who had attended a parent center workshop from each center for a total of over 5000 participants. Outcome data were also collected using an online survey (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2011, 2012). This section presents the demographic information and

outcomes presented in the National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011) report for the 2009-2010 school year and the National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2012) report for the 2010-2011 school year.

The National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011) evaluation indicated that during the 2009-2010 school year, approximately 801,000 parents had received individual assistance and 174,000 parents had attended trainings or presentations held by the PTIs. Parents of all students with every disability category were represented with the highest (22.13%) being parents of students with autism and the second highest (12.87%) being parents of students with learning disabilities. The ages of the students ranged from birth to beyond high school with the largest percentage being for students between the ages of 6 and 11 (34.25%). The PTIs distributed approximately 5.7 million newsletters, had approximately 14 million visits to their websites, made contact with 25 thousand parents through media activities and 901 thousand parents through poster session and resource fairs. Representatives from the PTIs provided assistance by attending 11,615 IEP meetings, facilitated 382 IEP meetings, and helped with 323 mediations and 338 resolutions (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2011). The outcome data for parents who received individual assistance and parents who attended workshops is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Summary of 2009-2010 Outcome Evaluation*

Parent Center Outcome	To a Great/Some Extent (percentage)		Yes (percentage)	
	Individual	Workshop	Individual	Workshop
Help Children more Appropriate Services	-	-	80	79
Parents more knowledgeable about how to work with schools	94	97	-	-
Help Address Child's Critical Needs	-	-	89	88
Provide Relevant Information to Make Decisions	-	-	93	94
Parents Share Information with Received with Other Parents	83	88	-	-
Provide Useful Information to Parents (Very Useful/Not Useful)	-	-	95	97
Materials are High Quality	-	-	97	97
Help Resolve Disagreements with Schools	-	-	84	-

National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011)

The National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2012) evaluation indicated that during the 2010-2011 school year approximately 748,881 parents had received individual assistance and 219,278 parents had attended trainings or presentations held by the PTIs.

Though parents of all students with every disability category were represented, the highest percentage (24.05) were parents of students with autism and the second highest (8.9%) were parents of students with learning disabilities. The ages of the students ranged from birth to beyond high school with the largest percentage being for students between the ages of 6 and 11 (33.67). The PTIs distributed approximately 5.9 million newsletters, had approximately 14 million visits to their websites, made contact with approximately 103,00 parents through media activities and 692,000 parents through poster session and resource fairs. Representatives from the PTIs provided assistance by attending 11,565 IEP meetings, facilitated 693 IEP meetings, and helped with 392 mediations and 334 resolutions (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2012). The outcome data for parents who received individual assistance and parents who attended workshops is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2

*Summary of 2010-2011 Outcome Evaluation*

Parent Center Outcome	To a Great/Some Extent (percentage)		Yes (percentage)	
	Individual	Workshop	Individual	Workshop
Help Children more Appropriate Services	-	-	82	81
Parents more knowledgeable about how to work with schools	95	97	-	-
Help Address Child's Critical Needs	-	-	88	90
Provide Relevant Information to Make Decisions	-	-	92	94
Parents Share Information with Received with Other Parents	84	88	-	-
Provide Useful Information to Parents (Very Useful/Not Useful)	-	-	95	97
Materials are High Quality	-	-	97	97
Help Resolve Disagreements with Schools	-	-	84	-

National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2012)

Both of the National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011, 2012) reports concluded that the PTIs were beneficial to the parents who used the services. The overall

goal of the PTIs is to help educate parents of their rights, teach them how to participate in IEP meetings, and to inform parents about alternative conflict resolution strategies (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Though the data from both outcome evaluations suggest the parent centers are effective, there are issues with the data and how they are being reported. Despite the large sample for the evaluation, there is an assumption that every parent of a child with a disability knows the PTIs exist and how to access them. The second issue with the evaluation was though they used a third party to conduct the survey, the final report was written by the national parent center resulting in a risk to the objectivity of the report. The third issue is that in reporting the survey data, two parts of the scale appear to be aggregated (to a great extent/to some extent).

Each PTI reports the disability and school level of the children whose parents contact them. Some parents are not willing to share this information with the PTI (S. Bowers, personal communication, September 4, 2013) meaning the data reported may not accurately reflect the proportion of disability categories and ages of the children. The data on age and disability in the National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011, 2012) reports is collected separately from the telephone survey. The percentages of each disability and age category does not include the number of children those percentages represent. For example, the National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011) report indicates 8.25% of the parents who contacted them were parents of children identified for special education as Other Health Impaired. However, it is unknown how many children that percentage actually represents.

In addition to the aforementioned issues, there was no description of how the survey was developed, administered or how the questions were framed. The time of day the calls were made may have influenced who was able to respond to the survey (i.e. working parent versus stay at home parent). Though the sample consisted of over 5000 parents, there was no response rate recorded in the evaluation. The manner in which the questions were posed may have also influenced parental response in favor of the parent centers. Without the proper introduction to the survey, parents may have felt pressured to report positive interactions due to fear that negative reports would adversely affect the parent centers. Parents who had negative perceptions of the PTI may have been less likely to participate in the survey.

**Summary.** The PTIs have been responsible for conducting their own evaluations. The PTIs engage in a variety of activities and disseminate information to educate parents of their rights in special education and how to actively participate in IEP decisions (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2011, 2012). However, the evaluations of the PTIs have methodological issues regarding how data were collected and analyzed. Though the evaluations indicate the PTI helps parents in IEP meetings, the survey method used does not provide a full understanding of how the PTI may have an impact on the parent's perception of the IEP meeting. The lack of a number of children represented in each disability and age category also makes it difficult to understand the characteristics of the children whose parents contact the PTIs.

The purpose of the parent centers is to help parents better understand special education rights and services so they can actively participate in IEP meetings. Therefore,

given the existence of the PTIs and the increase in funding they have received over time, it would be expected that research on parental perceptions of IEP meetings conducted would demonstrate that parents were able to understand the content of the meeting and actively participate. The next section reviews the peer-reviewed research on parent participation in IEP meetings to help determine if there has been improvement since the inception of the PTIs.

### **Family Perceptions of IEP Meetings**

One of the goals of the PTIs is to help parents participate in special education decisions during the IEP meeting (20 U.S.C. 1471 (b)(4)). The research on parental participation in IEP meetings focuses on issues related to special education decision-making to include parents' perceptions they are not able to participate and a lack of understanding of the content of the meeting. This section reviews research published soon after EAHCA was passed and discusses current research on parental perceptions of their ability to participate in IEP. None of the research reviewed on parent perceptions reports either parental use or knowledge of the PTIs.

**Early Studies.** Participation of parents in IEP meetings was initially studied soon after EAHCA was passed. Most early research on parental participation in IEP meetings focused on parental role, perceptions of participation, and parental understanding of the content of the meeting. Parents may have perceived they participated in the IEP meeting but did not understand the decisions that were made (Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978). Parents were satisfied with the outcome of the meeting but observation indicates parents participated minimally (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1978). This

section reviews the research on the participation of parents in IEP meetings from right after the five parent centers were piloted by the U.S. Department of Education to the mid-1980s.

Gilliam and Coleman (1981) studied the perceptions of IEP participants regarding importance, contributions, and influence in the IEP process. A survey was completed by 130 participants (parents and school personnel) from 27 IEP meetings from three medium sized school districts in southeastern Michigan. The perceived importance of roles was completed prior to the meeting and the perceived contributions and influence portion regarding diagnosis, planning, placement, implementation, and due process was completed after the meeting. The survey required participants to rank order the different roles from one (most important) to fifteen (least important) for the survey before the IEP meeting and a Likert scale was used to evaluate contributions and influence. Special education teachers were perceived as the most important members of the team in importance, contributions, and influence. Parents were ranked sixth on importance in the pre-meeting survey but were ranked tenth on contributions and eighth in influence in the meetings. The special education teacher, special education consultant, psychologist, special education supervisor, special education director, guidance counselor, regular education teacher, and principals all ranked higher in regards to making contributions to the meeting than the parent. Though the individuals surveyed in this study perceived the parent as important in the IEP process, they did not perceive the parent as either making contributions or having influence in the IEP meeting.

Gilliam and Coleman (1981) provide some perspective into the disparity of the recognition of parental roles with their minimized participation and influence in IEP decisions. However, there are several issues with how Gilliam and Coleman report the study. Several of the roles on the survey overlap and may be served by the same person (i.e. special education supervisor and special education director). If one of the identified roles was not represented at the meeting (i.e. other administrators) then they would be perceived as contributing less which would decrease the rank order. Knowing the average number of participants at each IEP meeting would help provide a better understanding of which roles were most frequently representing in evaluating the rank order data of contributions. Given 130 surveys were completed from 27 meetings means an average of 4.8 surveys were completed from each meeting. Gilliam and Coleman do not discuss which members completed the surveys despite the disparity between the 4.8 surveys per meeting and the 15 different roles identified by the author. Finally, the study looks very similar to Gilliam (1979), which involves the exact same sample size but there are different rank orders between the two studies.

Lusthaus, Lusthaus, and Gibbs (1981) studied both parents' perceptions of the role they serve and the role they would like to serve in special education decision making. Parents from eight elementary schools in a middle class suburban school district were randomly selected to receive a questionnaire. The role parents served and the role parents wanted to serve in decisions was measured on discipline, placement, evaluation, records, grouping, medical service, transportation, transfers to other schools, and provisions of resources. The questionnaire was completed by 98 parents who chose from

the options of giving and receiving information, having decisional control, or no involvement, in each of the aforementioned areas. When the options were tallied, giving and receiving information was selected most, having no involvement in decisions was second, and having decisional control was third. Parents reported their desired role was to give and receive information in the meetings. However, parents reported they wanted to be involved in decisions regarding recordkeeping, medical services, and transferring to another school. Though the parents in this study did not perceive themselves as being involved in making decisions about special education, they did not perceive their involvement in most of the decisions as necessary. Lusthaus et al. speculate that as parents learn more about educational programs they will want to have a greater role in decision making. The Gilliam and Coleman (1981) and Lusthaus et al. studies were done shortly after the federal government began appropriating funds for the early PTIs and there is no mention of whether or not parents were aware of the centers and their services or not.

Vaughn, Bos, Harrell and Lasky (1988) studied parental participation and perceptions of the IEP meeting. The initial eligibility meetings for 26 students in a large school district were observed to measure the number of questions parents asked, the number of comments initiated by parents, and the amount of time during the meeting parents spent talking. The parents were interviewed immediately following the meeting to determine their perceptions. Parents did not ask many questions, did not initiate conversation, and overall spent very little time talking during the meeting. The interview data revealed that 69% of the parents reported feeling satisfied with the meeting, 23% of

the parents reported feeling nervous about the meeting, and 8% reported feeling overwhelmed or confused by the meeting. Parents were asked to verify the amount of time their child would be spending in special education based on the decision from the meeting. The data also revealed 68% of the parents were able to accurately report the team's decision for the amount of time in special education, 16% of the parents reported an inaccurate number, and 16% reported they did not know the team's decision.

A potential reason for the limited participation is that parents did not know enough about disabilities to actively participate in the meeting. Parents expressed concerns about how to explain the disability to the child, how to convey the meeting outcome to their spouse, and how they could support the child in the home. The research supports the assertions that parents are not adequately informed about special education services to actively participate in IEP meeting decisions and they are not aware of their lack of knowledge resulting in satisfaction with the IEP meetings.

There are some issues with the research methods for the studies in this section. Both Lusthaus et al. (1981) and Goldstein et al. (1978) used surveys but did not report the reliability of their instruments making it difficult to determine if they were accurately measuring parents' attitudes and perceptions. Likewise, the interobserver agreement reported in Vaughn et al. (1986) is unclear making it difficult to determine the accuracy of the observations. Goldstein et al. questioned the reliability of their survey when a parent who had walked 1.5 miles each way in below freezing weather for a six minute meeting reported a high level of satisfaction with the meeting. Gilliam and Coleman (1981) and Lusthaus et al. (1981) fail to report how they analyzed their data. Though

Vaughn et al. used triangulation to address the threats to validity; Hoff et al. (1978) did not address threats to validity in analyzing the interview data. Future research on parental participation in IEP meetings should use reliable instruments, describe how data were analyzed, and address threats to validity.

*Summary.* Despite the issues with the research design, early research on parental participation in IEP meeting decision making provides evidence that parents who participated in the studies did not understand the decisions being made in the IEP meeting (Hoff et al., 1978; Vaughn et al. 1988), participated minimally in IEP meetings (Goldstein et al., 1978), and did not perceive their role as important in the meeting (Gilliam & Coleman, 1981). Some parents reported that participation meant giving and receiving information though they did want to be involved in some decisions (Lusthaus, Lusthaus & Gibbs, 1981). However, despite the minimal amount of participation, parents reported being satisfied with their role (Lusthaus, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1981) and with the outcome of the meeting (Goldstein et. al, 1978). Researchers speculated that lack of knowledge about special education was the reason parents were satisfied with a passive role in IEP decision making (Lusthaus et al. 1981; Vaughn et al., 1988). Therefore, as parents learn more about special education rights and services, they may be less satisfied with passively participating in IEP meetings (as the recipient of information) and have a stronger desire to become an active participant on the IEP team (actively involved in decisions).

**Parental Experiences.** If the PTIs were able to help parents actively participate in special education decisions in IEP meetings, then research should demonstrate

improved parental perceptions of their participation in IEP meetings after establishment of the PTIs and federal legislation to address parental involvement in these meetings. This section reviews the research on parental perceptions of participation in IEP meetings after 2000. The research presented below recruited participants from a variety of sources. The first section presents studies that involved recruiting through general means such as through a school district. The second section focuses on studies that recruited participants from different parent support groups.

*Participants recruited from general population.* The studies presented in this section recruited participants through school district offices or other general means. The recruiting in these studies was not done through any sort of support group. Therefore, the parents in these studies may or may not have any affiliation with an advocacy or support group.

Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004) studied IEP team members' perceptions of their participation in IEP meetings and if that perception was different based on the presence of different members. A questionnaire was given to 1,638 members from 393 IEP meetings for students with mild to moderate disabilities over a three year period. The meetings were held at middle, junior high, and high schools, in five school districts in a southwestern state. The questionnaire asked the participant to select their role from a checklist and respond to 10 questions regarding participation on a four point scale ranging from not at all to a lot. Questions on the survey focused on parents understanding of what was said in the meeting, their comfort with talking and making contributions, understanding the reason for the meeting, and the perception they helped

make decisions. Parents reported an average perception of participating between some and a lot on each of the 10 survey items. When the student attended the meeting, parents reported significantly higher scores on their perceptions of knowing the purpose of the meeting, of their understanding of what was being discussed, and felt more comfortable expressing their thoughts. Therefore, the 310 parents completing a questionnaire in this study perceived they were active participants in the IEP process, particularly when their student was present.

The Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004) study was extended in a study by Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, Gardner, Christensen, Woods, and Lovett (2006) to determine who participates during IEP meetings and the IEP team members' perceptions of their participation. Specifically, the focus was on student participation. Observations were performed during 109 IEP meetings that included 627 IEP team members from seven school districts in a southwestern state. Each IEP meeting was observed in 10 second increments with the speaker being noted at the end of each increment. An extension of the survey was used to measure perceptions and consisted of 44 items to be rated on a three point scale. The results indicated that family members participated for 15% of the 17,804 total increments measured in the IEP meetings. Family members spoke the second most with special education teachers speaking for 51% of the total increments. The student and family perceptions were aggregated and demonstrated perceptions they participated in the meetings. The results of the questionnaire were consistent with the observations. Therefore, the family members in this study did not only perceive they

were participating but were also observed to participate more than the majority of the IEP team.

The majority of participants in Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004) and Martin et al. (2006) were parents of students with mild to moderate disabilities in middle or high school. Students with severe disabilities may require more complex IEPs with more services. The more complex IEP may result in a greater amount of debate between the parent and school resulting in parents perceiving they are not participating (Stoner et al., 2005). Parents of students with disabilities in middle, junior, and high school, have likely been attending IEP meetings since the child was in elementary school. Therefore, these parents may have more experience and knowledge about special education based on attending IEP meetings each year.

Childre and Chambers (2005) explored the perceptions of six families in a rural southeast area regarding the IEP process. The students of these families had either an intellectual disability and/or an orthopedic impairment. Interviews about IEP meetings were conducted prior to the IEP meeting, a student centered approach was implemented during the IEP development process, and follow-up interviews were conducted after the IEP regarding family perceptions of the student centered approach. The initial interviews indicated parents did not actively participate in IEP meetings, perceived their role was to listen and receive information, believed the IEP and agenda were determined prior to the meeting, and did not understand special education jargon. The follow-up interviews revealed the student centered approach facilitated family participation in the IEP meeting.

The student centered approach to developing IEPs in Childre and Chambers (2005) provided a vehicle for parents to move from a passive to an active role in IEP development. Completing the student centered forms prior to the meeting and reviewing the forms in the meeting alleviated the perception that both the IEP and agenda were predetermined prior to the meeting. However, Childre and Chambers did not report on an improved perception of understanding special education jargon. Though the parents in the study had improved perceptions of their participation in the IEP meeting, there was no indication the parents had a better understanding of special education jargon. Research on how parents obtain information regarding special education and become active participants in IEP meetings can help better inform how to effectively improve parents' understanding of special education rights, services, and processes.

Krach, Ochoa, and Palmer (2005) examined the perception of communication and decision making regarding the IEP for White and Hispanic parents of students with disabilities. A survey was mailed to 5,108 parents from 76 different school districts in Texas. The survey was adapted from an existing survey and included demographic characteristics and 10 items on a six point Likert scale regarding communication and decision making. Of the 1,000 surveys returned 461 were omitted from the study because the parents were of another ethnicity beyond the scope of the study, the surveys were incomplete, or the student was identified as having a low-incidence disability. After the omission of the surveys for the aforementioned reasons, 539 surveys were included for analysis. The average scores of the responses indicated parents agreed the school district explained appropriately explained special education services to them and they had the

opportunity to review and help develop the IEP. There was no difference between the responses of White and Hispanic parents. Parents of students with disabilities in high school reported significantly better perceptions on items under both communication and decision making than parents of students with disabilities in elementary and middle school. The results indicate the parents surveyed in the study were receiving information from the school and able to participate in IEP decisions as guaranteed by IDEA 1997.

Though the results of Krach, Ochoa, and Palmer (2005) indicated the parents surveyed perceived schools were communicating with them and they were participating in IEP meetings, there are several issues with the study that call the results and conclusions into question. The omission of surveys from parents of students with low incidence disabilities may have also skewed the results. Though surveys from parents of students with low incidence disabilities were disproportionately represented with 20% of the returned surveys being from this population, students with low incidence disabilities may require more services and unique educational programming (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Given the potential for the increased complexity of IEPs for students with low incidence disabilities, their parents may disagree with the school more particularly when agreeing to the appropriate services for low incidence disabilities.

Despite the reliability and response rate issues mentioned above in Krach, Ochoa, and Palmer (2005), the parents whose surveys were analyzed reported the school districts explained special education services to them. If school districts are taking the responsibility for educating parents about special education services, then the parents who are being educated by the school districts may be able to actively participate in

special education decision making. The parents whose surveys were analyzed in Krach, Ochoa, and Palmer reported that they were both educated about special education by the school district and able to actively participate in developing the IEP. The school districts may be serving the same role as the PTIs.

Simon (2006) studied school personnel and parental perceptions of IEP requirements to determine if their perceptions were the same. A survey was completed by 98 special education teachers and 143 parents from a large southern school district. The survey used a 5-point Likert scale and focused on tracking services, team processes, maintaining services, and availability of services. Parents were also allowed to provide narrative feedback on the IEP process. The results indicated parents were less able than the special education teachers to identify the services for the students, were less likely to perceive IEP development as a collaborative process, and were not always able to maintain what they believed was an adequate level of service. One parent indicated the service was determined by the school prior to coming to the meeting. The perceptual disparity between the parents and the teachers indicates school personnel may not be aware of parental perspective of IEP meetings. Simon discusses the frequency with which special educators attend IEP meetings as an explanation for their better understanding of the IEP process.

The intent of Simon (2006) was to study the perceptions of school personnel and parents of the requirements of IEP meetings. Though Simon was able to demonstrate a difference in perceptions between parents and school personnel, there is no report of whether parents perceived they were participating according to the IDEA requirements

for IEP meetings. A potential reason for the difference between the parent and school personnel perceptions is lack of parental knowledge of the IEP requirements. Parents who have received training from the PTIs may be more engaged and report perceptions of the IEP process that are comparable to those of school personnel.

Hammond, Ingalls, and Trussell (2008) explored the perceptions of parents of students with disabilities regarding their first IEP meeting. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 212 parents of students with disabilities in a Southwest region over a four year period. The majority of the parents (72%) reported being anxious, overwhelmed, and shocked during the initial IEP meeting. Approximately half (58%) of the parents reported understanding IEP terms and issues and the remainder (42%) reported they understood either some or none of the IEP terms and issues. Many of the parents reported having the opportunity to voice their concerns (83%), felt comfortable sharing their opinion (65%), and believed their child was receiving appropriate services (74%). Hammond, Ingalls, and Trussell identify lack of parental knowledge as a limitation to this study. Being the initial IEP meeting, the parents in this study may not understand their rights and knowledge of both their rights and special education services may have resulted in different responses. However, the results indicate that though many families expressed the meeting was uncomfortable for them, they also indicated they were able to participate and understand what was being discussed.

Hernandez, Harry, Newman, and Cameto (2008) studied parent knowledge of district sponsored parent centers, parent perceptions of their participation, and satisfaction with the special education process. Parents of 4,000 students with disabilities from the

Los Angeles Unified School District were selected through stratified random sampling and asked to participate in a telephone survey. The survey was conducted in two waves with a 70% response rate in the first wave and a 72% response rate in the second wave. The overall results indicated 75% of parents reported participating in developing IEP goals, 83% of the parents reported receiving a copy of the Procedural Safeguards, 64% of the parents reported receiving an explanation of the procedural safeguards, and 62% of the parents reported the services in the IEP were sufficient. The disaggregated results indicated 55.3% of African American parents, 32.8% of Latino parents, 25.9% of White parents, and 53.6% of parents from other racial backgrounds wanted their level of participation in the IEP process to increase. Further, 66.3% of African American parents, 79.3% of Latino parents, 64.5% of White parents, and 61.3% of parents from other racial backgrounds, were either only somewhat or completely dissatisfied with the IEP process. Though three-fourths of the parents in this study reported participation in developing IEP goals, many parents expressed their students were not receiving the appropriate services and wanted to increase their participation in the IEP process.

The parents in Hernandez et al. (2008) reported dissatisfaction with the IEP process and wanted to increase their participation. The school district had sponsored workshops to help educate parents about special education rights and services. However, they failed to report the parental responses regarding either their awareness or the effectiveness of the district sponsored parent centers. It is unknown if the parents in this study had access to a PTI and whether access would have helped these parents increase their participation in the IEP process.

SRI International (2005) examined parental involvement in the IEP process as part of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2). A nationally representative sample of parents of 9,230 students with disabilities aged 13-17 participated in either telephone interviews or responded to a written survey. The report indicated 88% of the parents surveyed reported they had participated in an IEP meeting either in the current or previous school year. Regarding IEP development, approximately 45% of the parents reported the IEP goals were developed by the school prior to the IEP meeting. Approximately two-thirds of the parents reported they were satisfied with their level of participation in developing the IEP whereas the remaining third reported a desire to increase their participation in IEP development. Also, 88% of the parents reported the IEP goals for their student were appropriate and of the 12% who reported the IEP goals were not appropriate, 76% of those parents expressed they would like to increase their participation in developing the IEP. Though the majority of the parents surveyed in the NLTS-2 reported satisfaction with their level of participation in IEP development, many also reported a desire for increased participation.

Despite the SRI International (2005) report that the majority of parents are satisfied with their level of participation, one-third of the parents reported a desire for increased participation in IEP development. However, there are two issues with the report that make it difficult to generalize to children with disabilities as a whole. The first issue is that the reliability of the survey is not reported meaning the survey may not have been accurately measuring parental attitudes regarding their participation in IEP meetings. Second, the scope of the study and the sample focused on secondary students

with disabilities. Parents of secondary students with disabilities may potentially have been attending IEP meetings since their student was in elementary school, which provided them with IEP meeting experience. The knowledge they have gained from that experience may have allowed them to have increased participation in IEP meetings as they learned more about the process from their experience. Therefore, experience rather than access to resources such as the PTIs may have helped these parents to actively participate in the IEP meeting.

The participants in several of these studies reported they were actively participating in the IEP meetings (Hammond, Ingalls, & Trussell, 2008; Hernandez et al., 2008; Krach, Ochoa, & Palmer, 2005; Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin et. al, 2006; SRI International, 2005). The exceptions to this were Childre and Chambers (2005) and Simon (2006) where the parents believed they did not possess the knowledge necessary to participate. The majority of the participants in several of the studies where parents perceived they were participating were parents of children with mild to moderate disabilities (Krach, Ochoa, & Palmer, 2005; Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin et al. 2006). However, in some studies where parents indicated they were participating, the parents also reported they would like to be more involved with the development of the IEP (Hernandez et al., 2008; SRI International, 2005).

***Recruited from parent support groups.*** This section focuses on parent perceptions of IEP meetings in studies where the parents were recruited from a parent

group. These groups included advocacy and support oriented groups<sup>1</sup>. None of the support groups were affiliated with a PTI.

Fish (2006) explored measures that could improve parental input in IEP meetings. The parents of seven students with Autism in northern Texas were interviewed about their perceptions of the value of their input and the atmosphere of IEP meetings. All of the families were associated with an advocacy center. The parents were sampled from a family resource center that was not affiliated with a PTI (W.W. Fish, personal communication, November 15, 2011). The results indicated parents did not believe their input was valued in IEP meetings. Parents reported that IEPs were often written and predetermined prior to the meeting. Schools did not educate parents about available special education services and as parents learned more about special education law and services, they were better able to advocate for their students. Ideas from the IEP meeting were not always included in the final IEP. Parents who brought advocates to the meeting believed they were treated better by the schools than when they did not bring an advocate. The experiences of these parents indicate that for the seven students and their families in this study, there was initially difficulty participating in the IEP process. However, as the parents learned more about the law and services, they were better able to advocate for their students and more actively participate.

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike the federally funded parent centers that are the subject of this dissertation, a family resource center is a self-organized, self-funded entity with the goal of serving as a support group for families who have children with disabilities. These groups may be associated with advocacy centers which promote protecting the rights of families with disabilities. Family resource centers may also be associated with some of the larger disability rights associations such as the Council for Exceptional Children or the National Center for Children with Learning Disabilities.

The results from the Fish (2006) study may be biased based on every parent being connected to an advocacy center. The fact that the parents were able to actively participate once they became knowledgeable of special education law and services may help support the need for the PTIs. However, the parents in Fish were able to learn about special education law and services through a local advocacy center which demonstrates the existence of other resources for parents.

Fish (2008) studied the perceptions of parents of students receiving special education regarding the IEP meeting. The parents of 51 students receiving special education services completed a survey that focused on demographic information, IEP meeting experiences, knowledge of the IEP process and special education law, relationships with educators, IEP outcomes, and recommendations. The majority of the items on the survey used a 5-point Likert-type scale. The survey also contained two open-ended questions for recommendations about improving IEP meetings. The parents were sampled from a family resource center that was not associated with a PTI (W.W. Fish, personal communication, November 15, 2011). The survey data were analyzed by reporting the percentage of parents who indicated the specific value on the scale for each item on the survey. Fish interpreted the results to indicate parents had positive experiences in IEP meetings, were knowledgeable of special education law, had good relationships with educators, and believed the IEP outcomes for their students were appropriate. The parents recommended IEP administrators follow the appropriate protocol for IEP meetings and that the IEP was not predetermined prior to the meeting. These results indicate parents in this study have a firm understanding of the IEP process

and feel they are active participants in IEP decision making. Parents being active participants in IEP decision making is consistent with the intent for parental roles in IDEA 2004.

Fish (2008) used the percentages on the scale of agree and strongly agree to support the conclusions. Though 63% of the parents indicated they understood the IEP process, 37% indicate they did not understand the IEP process. When asked about a desire to receive more information about special education processes and law 58% of the parents indicated they would like to learn more. Regarding how parents learned about special education law, 44% reported they self-educated about the law, 24% reported they learned from school personnel, and 16% reported they learned about special education law from an advocacy center. In addition, 31% of the parents strongly agreed they wanted to learn more about special education law. The fact that approximately one third of the parents desired to learn more and approximately half of the parents in the study self-educated on special education law demonstrates evidence for a need for a more structured format for providing information about special education law and services to parents of students with disabilities. PTIs are authorized to serve as a structured source of information; however the parents in this study did not appear to list them as a resource. Either the parents in the study did not know about the PTIs or they were ineffective in educating parents.

Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008) explored parental perceptions of their IEP meeting experiences to develop strategies to promote parental participation in meetings. An initial survey and a follow up survey were sent to each of the 14 parent members of a

special education advisory committee for a school district in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. Nine parents responded to the initial survey and seven parents responded to the follow up survey. The survey asked parents to describe positive and negative experiences in IEP meetings. A notable finding was parents reported they would like to be more involved in the organizational activities of developing the IEP that occur prior to the meeting. Another notable finding was parents reported their participation in IEP meetings could be improved if school personnel solicited their feedback at points during the meeting. Though the parents in this study were able to identify positive attributes of IEP meetings, IEPs were being developed prior to the meeting and parental feedback was not being actively solicited in the meetings

Esquivel et al. (2008) is limited by the sample. Members of the school district's special education advisory committee tend to be parents who are knowledgeable of the special education process and requirements. Involvement with the advisory committee may also be perceived as a position of authority by school personnel resulting in being approached differently than parents who are not involved with the advisory committee. Despite the level of special education knowledge the parents in Esquivel et al. may have had, if the IEP is developed prior to the meeting and parental feedback is not solicited during the meeting, then parental knowledge may play a more limited role in the parents' ability to participate.

Stoner et al. (2005) explored parental perceptions of their interactions with educational professionals regarding their student's disability. Parents of four young students with either an autism spectrum or developmental disability were interviewed

three times over a period of nine months. The parents were recruited from a parent support group which was not associated with a PTI (J.B. Stoner, personal communication, April 22, 2012). A notable finding was all of the families referred to the IEP process within the schools as confusing and traumatic. Parents had difficulty obtaining services for their child and lost trust in educational professionals when school personnel would not agree to the services being requested. Once the trust was diminished, parents became more vigilant in ensuring schools were providing them with the appropriate services and following through with the IEP. Because the parents had to fight for services, trust was diminished which prevented a collaborative relationships from developing between the parents and the schools.

Stoner et al. (2005) used a variety of techniques to help ensure the validity of their findings. They identified the appropriate limitations including small sample size. The most noteworthy limitation of the generalization of these findings is that all parents were recruited from a support group meaning they may have more knowledge of special education rights and services than the average parent of a student with a disability. The support group provided the information the parents needed in order to advocate to obtain appropriate services for their students with disabilities. In this case, the support group provided the parent education required to actively participate in IEP meetings.

Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) studied parental involvement and perceptions of special education services. Specifically, frequency and quality of communication between home and school, perceptions of the IEP process, and overall satisfaction with special education services were studied. Fifty-seven parents of 45

students with autism or developmental delays aged 4-18 participated in a telephone survey. All of the parents belonged to an autism support group that served six counties in a Mideastern state. The parent support group was not associated with a PTI (S. Spann, personal communication, July 20, 2012). The majority of the parents reported good communication with the school with 82% reporting communication with the school at least several times a week. The results of special education knowledge were mixed. Regarding knowledge of the IEP document, 36% reported high, 37% reported moderate, and 27% reported low knowledge. The results indicated that 59% of the parents reported moderate involvement in the IEP process with 28% reporting high involvement and 13% reporting low involvement. For overall satisfaction with the IEP process, 13% reported high satisfaction, 79% reported moderate satisfaction, and 14% reported low satisfaction. Overall the majority of parents reported being at least moderately knowledgeable of the IEP process and satisfied with the results.

The major limitations of this study are acknowledged by Spann et al. (2003). Students in different disability categories may have different experiences in special education and the sole focus on Autism in this study may not generalize to students with other disabilities within the sampled area. Based on the reported activities of the group it can be assumed that the parents in this study are better informed about the IEP process and the legal requirements than the average parent of a child receiving special education services. The parents in Spann et al. were able to gain the information they needed to participate from the advocacy group rather than from a PTI.

Several of the studies that recruited participants from advocacy groups indicated parents had negative experiences in IEP meetings (Esquivel et al., 2008; Fish, 2006; Stoner et al., 2005). The participants in other studies reported positive perceptions of the IEP meeting (Fish, 2008; Spann, Koehler, & Soenkson, 2003). However, given the parents in all of these studies were associated with a support group they may be more educated about the IEP process than parents who are not. The existence of these support groups demonstrates they may serve the same purpose as the PTIs.

**Summary.** The research reviewed on parental participation in IEP meetings has mixed results. Several of the studies reported parents were able to participate and had a positive perception of their level of participation in IEP meetings (Fish, 2008; Krach, Ochoa, & Palmer, 2005; Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin et al., 2006). However, some of these studies were either sampled from parents of older students who may have had more experience with IEP meetings (Martin Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin et al., 2006), had flaws in their interpretation of the data (Fish, 2008), or had difficulty with their sample (Krach, Ochoa, & Palmer; 2005). Conversely, several studies reported parents not being able to participate in IEP meetings either due to lack of knowledge, their feedback not being solicited, or IEPs being developed prior to the IEP meeting (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Fish, 2006; Simon, 2006; Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005; Williams, 2007). Some parents also expressed a desire to increase their participation in IEP meetings (Hernandez, Harry, Newman, & Cameto, 2008; SRI International, 2005).

Several of the studies reviewed were sampled from advocacy groups that were not associated with one of the PTIs (Fish, 2006, 2008; Spann, Koehler, & Soenkson, 2003; Stoner et al. 2005). These advocacy groups serve the same purpose as PTIs in the members help educate parents in special education to help them participate in IEP meetings. Several of the studies sampled from advocacy groups reported negative perceptions regarding parental participation in IEP meetings.

Parents reported not understanding the jargon (Childre & Chamber, 2005; Fish, 2006), having to fight with the school for services (Fish, 2006; Simon, 2006; Stoner et al, 2005), and did not understand enough about special education rights and services to actively participate in the meetings (Fish, 2008). The research also indicated schools and did a poor job of educating parents about special education (Fish, 2006).

The early research on parental participation in IEP meetings demonstrated parents did not understand the decisions being made, did not participate, and were not perceived as making contributions to the IEP meeting (Gilliam & Coleman, 1981; Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1978; Hoff, Fenton, Yoshida, & Kaufman, 1978; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988). Recent research on parental participation in IEP meetings yields similar results to the early studies. Parents struggle with understanding the content of the meeting (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Fish, 2006), do not understand their rights and available services to participate (Fish, 2008). Despite the authorization of the parent centers in 1983, and the increase in funding since their authorization, according to the peer-reviewed literature, the parent centers have not impacted parental perceptions of their participation in IEP meetings.

## **Synthesis**

The right to participate in IEP meetings is guaranteed in the Procedural Safeguards of IDEA. The guarantee of participation comes through the right to due process when the parent disagrees with the school on the IEP (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Since the implementation of IDEA 1997, the number of complaints filed has increased and the number of complaints heard has decreased (Ahearn, 2002; Zirkel & Gischlar, 2008). However, looking at the trends in due process complaints filed and adjudicated as a proxy for parent participation assumes every parent who is dissatisfied with their level of participation files a complaint and that each complaint filed represents a legitimate claim that the parent was unable to participate. Lack of parental participation in the IEP meeting has been identified as a source of conflict that may lead to a due process complaint (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008). One goal of the PTIs is educate parents about special education to help them be able to participate in IEP meetings (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004).

According to internal evaluations, parents who have used the PTIs report being more knowledgeable regarding special education and are able to participate in IEP meetings (National Parent Technical and Assistance Center, 2011, 2012). However, the internal evaluations lacked the rigor of peer-reviewed research making the results questionable. Given the limitations of the survey, it would be beneficial to have a deeper understanding of the parents' perceptions of the PTIs.

The National Parent Technical and Assistance Center (2011, 2012) reports also fail to report the total number of students represented when presenting the demographic characteristics of the students whose parents contact the PTIs. The lack of this information makes it difficult to compare the utilization of the PTIs to the proportion of students receiving special education services. Therefore, it would be beneficial to know both the number of students and the proportion of disability type and school level for an individual PTI to gain an understanding of the types of children whose parents need their services.

Given the focus on increasing parental participation in IEP meetings in IDEA 1997 and 2004; and the increased funding of the PTIs to help parents participate in IEP meetings, it would be expected that the peer reviewed literature would report positive perceptions of IEP meetings. However, the results of recent peer-reviewed research are mixed with some reporting positive perceptions of their participation (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin et al, 2006) and others reporting negative perceptions of their participation in IEP meetings (Fish, 2006; Simon, 2006). Though some of the research reviewed focused on the perceptions of parents who used advocacy centers (Fish, 2006; Spann, Koehler, & Soenksen, 2003; Stoner et al., 2005), none of the peer reviewed research focused specifically on the perceptions of participation in IEP meetings of parents who used a PTI. Therefore, it would be beneficial to know the perceptions of IEP meetings for parents who have used a PTI.

The literature reviewed above identifies the benefit in knowing the impact of a PTI on parents' perceptions of IEP meetings. The literature also identifies the benefit of

knowing the parents' perceptions of a PTI. Knowing the characteristics of the students who use a particular PTI would be beneficial when studying that program to provide the context for the types of individuals the program serves. Therefore, the research questions of the proposed study are:

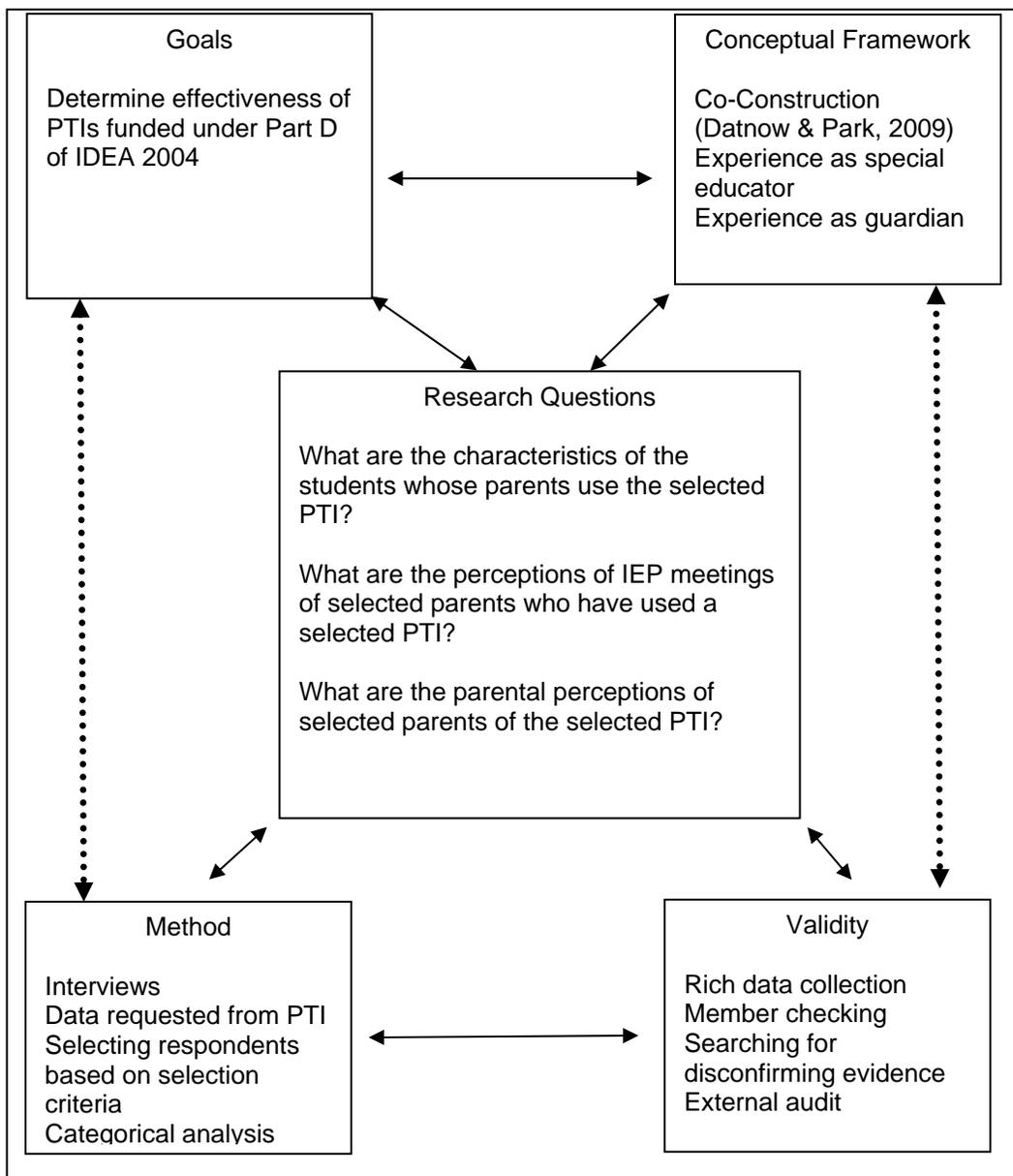
1. What are the characteristics of the students whose parents use a selected Parent and Training Information center?
2. What are the perceptions of IEP meetings of selected parents who have used a selected Parent Training and Information center?
3. What are the parental perceptions of selected parents of the selected Parent Training and Information center?

## CHAPTER 3 METHODS

This study used qualitative methods and descriptive statistics to accomplish the research goals. This chapter describes the methods for recruiting participants, collecting data, analyzing data, and addressing threats to validity. The study attempted to explore the effectiveness of a Parent Training and Information centers (PTI) funded under Part D of IDEA 2004. Specifically, the study attempted to answer the research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the students whose parents use a selected Parent and Training Information center?
2. What are the perceptions of IEP meetings of selected parents who have used a selected Parent and Training Information center?
3. What are the parental perceptions of selected parents of a selected Parent and Training Information center?

The study was a qualitative interview study of parents who used a particular PTI. The demographic characteristics of the students whose parents used the PTI were gathered directly from the parent center. The perceptions of IEP meetings of parents who use the PTI were explored through interviews. Maxwell (2013) describes an interactive model for conducting qualitative studies. Figure 2 provides a graphic representation of the interactive model for the study.



*Figure 3.* The application of the Maxwell (2013) interactive model of qualitative research to the present study. The goals, researcher questions, and conceptual framework influence each other while the research questions, method, and validity influence each other. The conceptual framework also impacts validity and the goals impact the method.

## **Research Site**

The PTI chosen for the study was the Parent Education Advocacy Training Center (PEATC). I chose PEATC because it was one of the original PTIs. PEATC was also chosen because it serves the state where I live which facilitates my ability to collect data from participants in person. It was my first choice as a research site for these reasons though I was prepared to reach out to other PTIs if I was unable to work with PEATC.

PEATC was founded in 1978 and was in the second wave of PTIs funded by the U.S. Department of Education. It provides information to families about special education through their website, trainings, and will offer guidance to families who call them with specific questions. These services are offered in both English and Spanish (Parent Education Advocacy Training Center, 2014).

Using connections in the special education field, I found individuals who introduced me to the Executive Director of PEATC. I e-mailed a letter of introduction (Appendix A) to the Executive Director that explained the goal of the study and requested a meeting for further explanation. During the meeting, I described the study in detail including how the study could benefit PEATC. The Executive Director enthusiastically agreed for PEATC to participate in the study and the remainder of the meeting was spent discussing the demographic data and negotiating how recruiting would occur. Further, the Executive Director offered to help in any way possible to include translating some of the recruiting materials to Spanish.

The demographic data included the children's disability type of the parents who contacted PEATC for assistance. The method through which the demographic data are

collected is discussed further below under Data Collection. The children's of the parents who contacted PEATC are displayed in Figure 4. These data are presented to provide an understanding of the type of children whose parents contact PEATC.

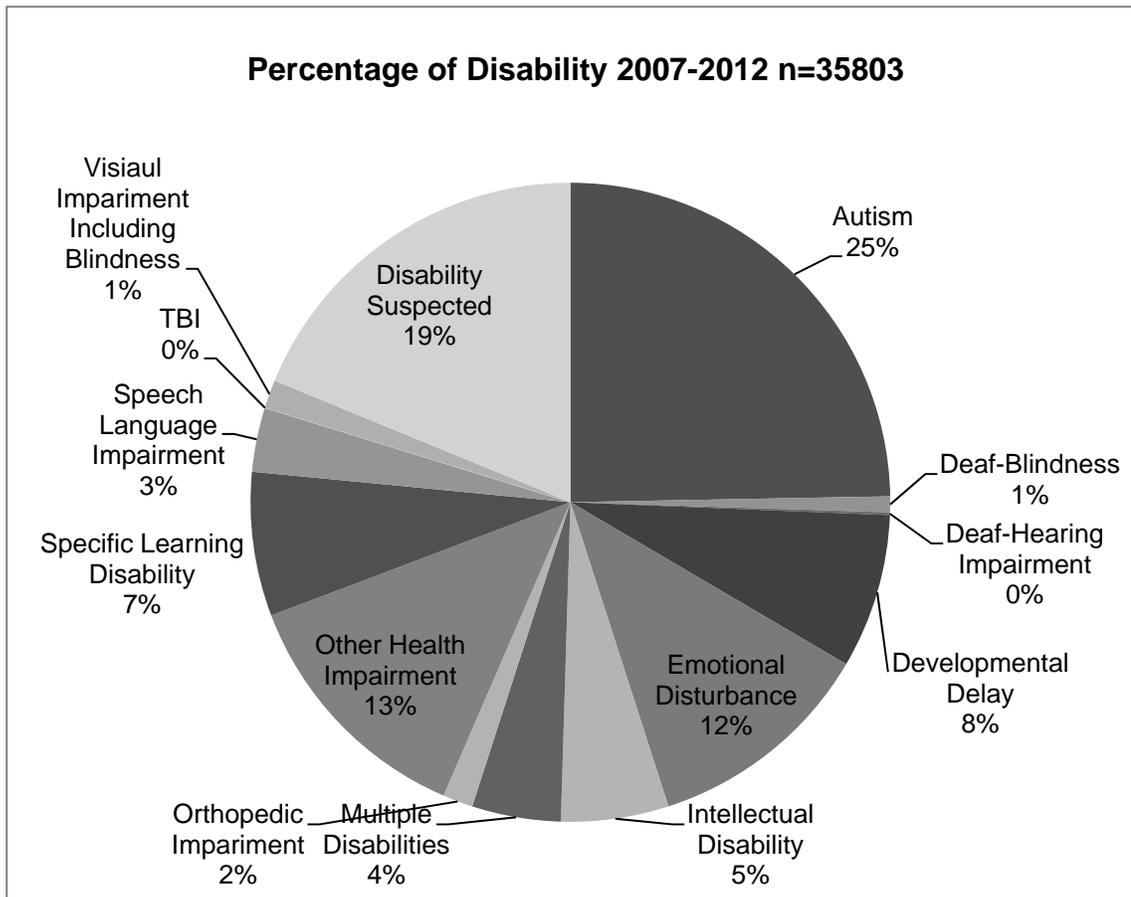


Figure 4. The percentage of children's disabilities whose parents contacted PEATC from 2007-2012

## **Participants**

The initial goal was to gain the perceptions of a cross-section of the disability population by developing a sample of participants who were parents of students with disabilities based on incidence of disability, school level, amount of PTI usage, and culturally and linguistically diverse background. However, due to the limited number of responses and the appropriateness of the respondents to participate in the study I realized there would not be enough participants to choose from to match the desired sample. Further, the participants interviewed used the parent center in different ways through different mediums which made it difficult to identify low and high usage. Finally, the data collected by the parent center on culturally and linguistically diverse status were comprehensive and included parents with professionals, such as special education teachers or administrators, making it impossible to determine what the proportion of usage by parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Therefore, each person who responded, had used PEATC, and was willing to participate, was included in the study for a total of 11 participants.

I hoped PEATC would provide the names and addresses of those parents who had used their services so that a recruiting letter could be mailed to each parent to recruit participants. However, to protect confidentiality, PEATC was not willing to provide this. PEATC was willing to post the recruitment flyer on their website, distribute a recruiting message via an e-mail to their distribution list, and post a recruitment message of their Facebook page. The recruitment materials were distributed in this manner both in English and Spanish (Appendix B). A 20 dollar gift card was offered to each participant

(or family) as a recruitment incentive. The e-mail was distributed to the listserv monthly and the Facebook message was occasionally moved back to the top of their Facebook page. After a month and a half these methods yielded four participants who met the criteria for inclusion.

I broadened the audience who would receive the recruiting materials by posting the recruiting materials on the Facebook pages of other disability organizations and e-mailing different disability organizations to request they distribute the recruiting materials via their e-mail listservs. Broadening the search beyond the PEATC listserv provided two benefits. The first is that I was no longer reliant exclusively PEATC for distributing recruiting materials. The second was PEATC's listserv may only be comprised on parents who have had positive experiences with the parent center. A parent who did not find PEATC helpful or who had a negative experience may be less likely to sign up with the parent center's listserv. However, parents who had negative experiences may be on other disability listservs and broadening the reach through this message increased the probability that the recruiting materials would reach these parents.

The recruiting materials were distributed over a four month period and a total of 22 parents responded to the recruiting materials. The respondents received a follow up telephone call to determine if they met the criteria for being included in the study. Of the 22 respondents, seven did not meet the criteria for the study (had never used the parent center) and two did not respond to my contact. One parent did schedule an interview but subsequently cancelled it without rescheduling. This left 11 participants<sup>2</sup> who met the

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<sup>2</sup> All of the participants were female.

criteria to be included in the study and who participated in interviews. The participants were parents whose children represented a wide range of age, disability, school district type, and geographic location. Table 3 shows the pseudonyms of the participants and their children, the child's age, the child's disability, and the category of the school district based on the National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.).

Table 3

*Characteristics of Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Disability</b>	<b>Child Age</b>	<b>School District Type</b>
Sally	Mary	OHI	12	(Rural, Remote)
Laura	Jenny	MD	18	(Rural: Distant)
Susana	Rodrigo	ID	12	(City: Large)
Lisa	Bill/John	OHI	10	(Rural: Distant)
Bonnie	Megan	LD	20	(Suburb: Large)
Caroline	Sadie	Autism	13	(City: Midsize)
Beth	Whitney	OHI	25	(Suburb: Large)
Katie	Tom	DD	4	(City: Midsize)
Amanda	Fred	Not identified	8	(Suburb: Large)
Julie	Cindy	Blind	19	(City: Large)
Alexis	Harold	ID	27	(City: Midsize)

The children's disability of the parents who contacted PEATC from 2007-2012 is displayed in Figure 4. Figure 5 shows a higher percentage of parents of children identified for special education under OHI at 37% compared to 13% in the overall demographic data Figure 4. Conversely, the percentage of parents whose children are identified for special education under Autism is much lower in Figure 5 at 9% when compared to the demographic data in Figure 4 which shows 24% of the parents who contact PEATC have children identified for special education with Autism.

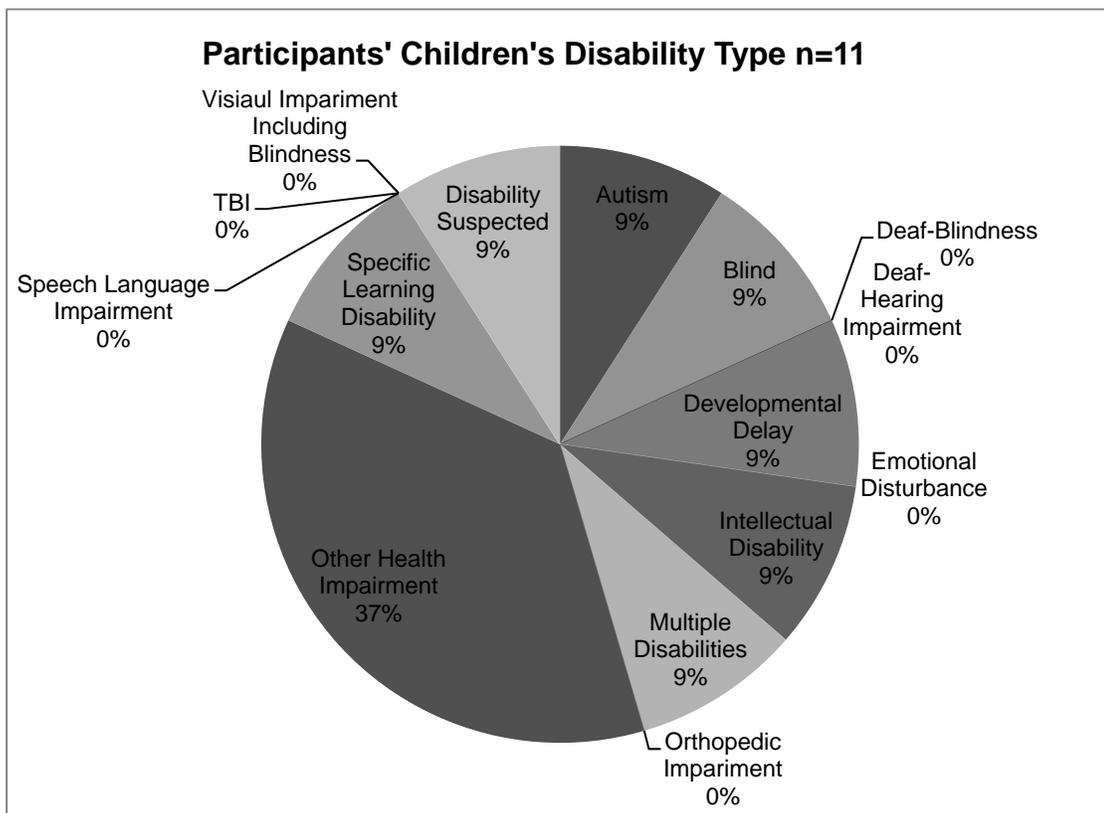


Figure 5. Children's disability type of the parents who participated in the study

## **Data Collection**

The data for this study are from two sources: (1) the characteristics of the students whose parents contacted the parent center and; (2) perceptions of selected parents who have used the PTI. The characteristics of students were identified based on demographic data collected by the parent center. The parental perceptions were collected through interviews of the 11 participants presented in Table 3.

**Demographic.** Demographic data was provided by PEATC that included the school level and disability of the children whose parents had contacted the parent center from the years 2007 to 2012 ( $n \approx 37,000$ ). The demographic data were only collected from parents who had called PEATC looking for help. These data were collected by the PEATC staff during those telephone conversations and as such were self-reported. The data were not collected from parents who had visited the website, e-mailed the parent center, or who had attended the trainings. Further, not every parent who called the parent center was willing to identify the age and disability of their child (S. Bowers, personal communication, September 4, 2013). These data are used to understand the types of children whose parents utilize the service at PEATC.

**Interviews.** When potential participants contacted me in regard to the recruiting materials, I communicated with them by either telephone or e-mail to determine if the participant met the criteria to be included in the study. During those communications, I explained the purpose of the study, provided some information about his background in special education, asked a few questions to ensure they met the criteria for the study, and

scheduled a convenient time for the interview. For participants being interviewed by telephone, I explained that I would be sending the informed consent document (Appendix C) and that it would need to be signed and returned prior to the interview. For the interviews taking place in person, I asked the participant to recommend a coffee shop near their home to make the interview convenient for the participant.

When I met with each participant at the agreed time, I explained the purpose of the study again and answered any questions. If the interview took place in person then I had the participant read and sign the informed consent form prior to the start of the interview. Once all questions were answered and the informed consent form was signed, the interview began.

The interviews were semi-structured and utilized open ended questions. The questions focused on the participant's experiences during the initial eligibility process, perceptions of IEP meetings prior to using the parent center, how they found the parent center, a description of the activities they engaged in at the parent center, and their current perceptions of IEP meetings since using the center. An interview guide (Appendix D) ensured all topics relevant to the study were covered during the interview. The semi-structured format allowed additional questions and prompts to allow the interview to flow as a conversation. As the participant was talking, I checked the questions off the interview guide. If a question was not covered by the participant then I asked the question from the guide. At the end of each interview, I debriefed with the participant and offered special education guidance as appropriate. I informed the participant I would contact them in the future to conduct a member check of the

conclusions. The 20 dollar gift card was given to the participant at the end of each interview. Several participants attempted to refuse the gift card but I insisted they take it. The gift card was mailed to participants who were interviewed by telephone. Each participant was also told they were welcome to contact me at any time with any follow up questions.

Each interview was recorded electronically. Skype was used for the interviews conducted by telephone. Skype is a service that allows an individual to call a telephone over the internet using a computer. The Skype interviews were recorded with Callburner. Callburner is software that connects to Skype, records a Skype conversation, and turns it into an mp3 format to be played back on another device. The interviews that took place in person were recorded using an electronic recording device that generates mp3 files. Notes were taken during each interview of salient points and body language. After each interview, I generated a memo of the overall impression of the interview.

Each interview was conducted in the parent's native language which was English for 10 participants and Spanish for one participant. The Spanish interview was conducted with an interpreter. I asked questions through the interpreter and the interpreter translated the responses. In some cases the responses were paraphrased. I transcribed the English portions of the interview and identified paraphrased statements that were relevant to the study in the transcript and noted the time during the interview when they were said. The interpreter then listened to the recording again and translated those statements verbatim to capture exactly what the participant said.

The length of each interview ranged from 42 to 74 minutes with the average length of each interview being 59 minutes. Four of the interviews were conducted by phone and the remaining seven were conducted in person. Table 4 outlines the language, location, and length for each interview.

Table 4

*Interview Descriptions*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Language</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Length</b>
Sally	English	Telephone	1:03:29
Laura	English	Coffee Shop	56:44
Susana	Spanish	Telephone	1:14:09
Lisa	English	Telephone	1:04:31
Bonnie	English	Coffee Shop	1:09:21
Caroline	English	Telephone	54:04
Beth	English	Coffee Shop	1:02:04
Katie	English	Coffee Shop	43:51
Amanda	English	Coffee Shop	42:21
Julie	English	Coffee Shop	1:06:39
Alexis	English	Coffee Shop	53:21

## **Data Analysis**

**Demographics.** The demographic data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The specific demographic data are the number of parents who contacted the PTI by their child's disability and the number of parents who contacted the PTI by their child's school level. The descriptive statistics were used to present the characteristics of children whose parents utilized PEATC's services.

**Perceptions.** The themes were developed through the use of a categorization strategy. Maxwell (2013) stated, "Categorization analysis begins with the identification of units or segments of data that seem important or meaningful in some way" (p. 107). The categorization process described below was applied to the transcript for each of the 11 participants. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously which meant that categories were being developed prior to all of the data being collected. This allowed the categories from the earlier interviews to inform some of the questions posed in the later interviews.

After each interview was conducted, I transcribed each interview verbatim. Pseudonyms were given to each participant and all identifying information was removed. I read each transcript immediately after the entire interview was transcribed and also reviewed the field notes and memo associated with the participant. I wrote a memo summarizing the participant's experience and identifying salient points from the interview.

Organizational categories were developed prior to and during data collection. Maxwell (2013) defined organizational categories as "broad areas or issues that you want

to investigate, or that serve as useful ways of ordering your data” (p.107). The six organizational categories used in the study were who they are, early perception of IEPs, resources they used, how and why they used the parent center, what they believed the parent center did for them, and perceptions of IEP meetings after using the parent center.

For the first few interviews, I coded each transcript by identifying meaningful pieces of data. While open coding I focused on the organizational categories but also attempted to identify meaningful data that did not fit into the organizational categories. The purpose of identifying relevant data outside of the scope of the organizational categories was to ensure findings outside the scope of the organizational categories were not ignored. This allowed additional categories to be developed as the coding occurred. Each meaningful piece of data was highlighted in the transcript and a comment was added defining the relevance of the data. Some pieces of data were sorted into more than one category.

The data were then sorted into documents specific to each organizational category. Next, the data were open coded in the documents for the organizational categories to develop substantive and theoretical categories (Maxwell, 2013). Transcripts were repeatedly reviewed to identify data that may fit into any categories that were being developed. During the initial coding of the latter transcripts, some data was directly sorted into the appropriate substantive or theoretical category. Once again, some data may have been sorted into more than one category.

The transcription and categorization process was ongoing and occurred concurrently with data collection. The intention was to have each interview transcribed,

coded, and categorized prior to the subsequent interview. However, due to the rate at which the participants responded, and my concern that participants would withdraw from the study if interviews were scheduled too far in the future, completing the transcription, coding, and categorization for each interview prior to the next was not possible. Nonetheless, each interview was reviewed prior to the next interview and the transcription, coding, and categorization process was ongoing to allow emerging concepts identified in earlier interviews to be explored in depth in the latter interviews.

During data collection and analysis, several different types of memos were written. The first type presented a summary of the participant's experience during her first IEP meetings, how she interacted with PEATC, and what her IEP meetings were like after PEATC. The second was written to describe and develop substantive and theoretical categories. The third focused on how the categories were connected to each other. In writing the connection based memos, a framework was developed that presented a visual display of the parental perceptions and how they were connected to each other. The memos and the data in the substantive/theoretical categories were used to develop the themes of the study.

I built a matrix that included the themes and the data from each transcript that either confirmed or disconfirmed those conclusions by participant. Once the matrix was built, each transcript was reviewed one more time to identify any additional data for each of the categories. Then, for every blank cell, I went back through the transcript for that participant to see if there was any confirming or disconfirming evidence for that specific theme. If neither could be found for that participant, then the cell was filled with my

perception of why that particular conclusion may not apply to that participant. This process was repeated until every cell in the matrix was completed.

### **Validity**

The two primary threats to validity in this study were reactivity and researcher bias. Reactivity is the manner in which I may have reacted to participants during the interview that may have influenced what they reported. Researcher bias occurs based on how my prior experiences and education influence the manner in which I analyzed the data and developed the conclusions of the study (Maxwell, 2013). Maxwell (2013) states that eliminating threats to validity cannot be guaranteed by using specific methods; rather, it is the evidence yielded by those methods that helps rule out the threats to the validity of the conclusions of the study (p. 121). This section will discuss the techniques used to address the threats to validity and the evidence yielded by those techniques.

Regarding reactivity, I had a strong suspicion at the beginning of the study that parents would report school personnel violating their rights in IEP meetings. As both the guardian of an individual with disabilities and an IEP administrator, parental rights is a topic I am very passionate about. A personal concern I had was that I would either respond to the participant in a way that would lead them to alter their account of their experience or that I would offer advice during the interview that would divert the conversation away from the participant's account. During the interviews, I attempted to keep a calm and professional demeanor to help prevent any reflexivity from occurring.

The rich data (Maxwell, 2013) helped me address both the reactivity and researcher bias threats. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim which

allowed me to review not only what each participant said but also how I responded to her. In reviewing the transcripts, there were several instances where I indicated during the interview I could offer some guidance after the interview but I did not engage the direct questions or offer any advice during the interview itself. The offer of guidance after the interview did not appear to influence how the participant responded to future questions. There was one interview where I attempted to clarify the parent's understanding of the special education issues she was facing and in that interview transcript, there was some advice/guidance that was offered. However, in reviewing the transcript, the advice/guidance offered during the interview did not appear to change the parent's tone or account of her experiences during IEP meetings.

Member checking helped address both reactivity and researcher bias. Above it was discussed that there were a few instances of either stating advice would be offered or that advice was offered during the interview. After reviewing the transcripts, I concluded that the participant was not influenced by this occurrence. In performing the member check with each parent, the conclusions of the study were reviewed along with the quotes that either confirmed or disconfirmed the conclusion (Maxwell, 2013). In addition, if the conclusion did not apply to the parent, that was also discussed during the member check. With the exception of one or two quotes being misinterpreted, very little was changed during the member checks. Given the data being reviewed by all the participants several months after the interview and the parents believed I interpreted their experiences accurately provided evidence that any reflexivity that may have occurred during the interview did not influence how the parents reported their experiences.

Researcher bias was also addressed by identifying my assumptions about the outcome prior to the beginning of data collection. The bias was borne out of both my preconceived expectations of the study's results and my personal and professional experiences in dealing with this issue. Prior to collecting the data I assumed the study would yield a negative outcome for the parent center. I anticipated that the results would demonstrate the parent center was not helping parents. Prior to the first interview I realized that I had to be open to whatever the parents reported and that the initial assumption may not only bias how the interview proceeded but also how I analyzed the data. If I entered the study with the expectation the parent centers would fail, I may only focus on the negative data when coding.

The other source of bias came from an expectation that school personnel would always be trying to take advantage of the parent and provide as few services as possible. This was based on a combination of my professional experience and the literature review. In my professional experience, parents had to fight and overcome bureaucratic barriers within the school system in order to secure certain services for their children. In many cases, they did not know what to do when their requests are denied and did not pursue them any further. The literature review cited many studies where I determined the parents felt the school was taking advantage of them because they did not understand what was occurring. Once again, prior to the first interview, I realized the possibility that not all school personnel would behave in this manner. I realized I had to let the parent tell their story about their experiences and that I should approach that data with an open mind. This was reaffirmed during the second interview where though the parent had

some difficulty understanding what to expect from special education, the school had for the most part treated her well and included her in developing the educational program for her child.

The third assumption I had prior to data collection was that parents contacted the parent center in response to some sort of crisis. During the second interview, the parent revealed that she received e-mails from the parent center that would prompt her to visit the website where she would learn more about different issues. She did not find out about the existence of the parent center until her daughter was in high school and only used the center to gather information rather than to consult for any type of crisis. Though she wished she had found the center earlier she found the information on the website to be sufficient in helping her navigate the special education process and access the appropriate services for her daughter.

The final way I attempted to minimize the impact of my bias on the results was through an external audit. This allowed me to review the findings and the supporting evidence with someone with a different background than my own to determine if they would draw the same conclusions. Further, this helped identify if there were any alternative or divergent conclusions that could come from these data. Three external auditors confirmed my interpretation of the data that supported each of the categories.

## **CHAPTER 4 RESULTS**

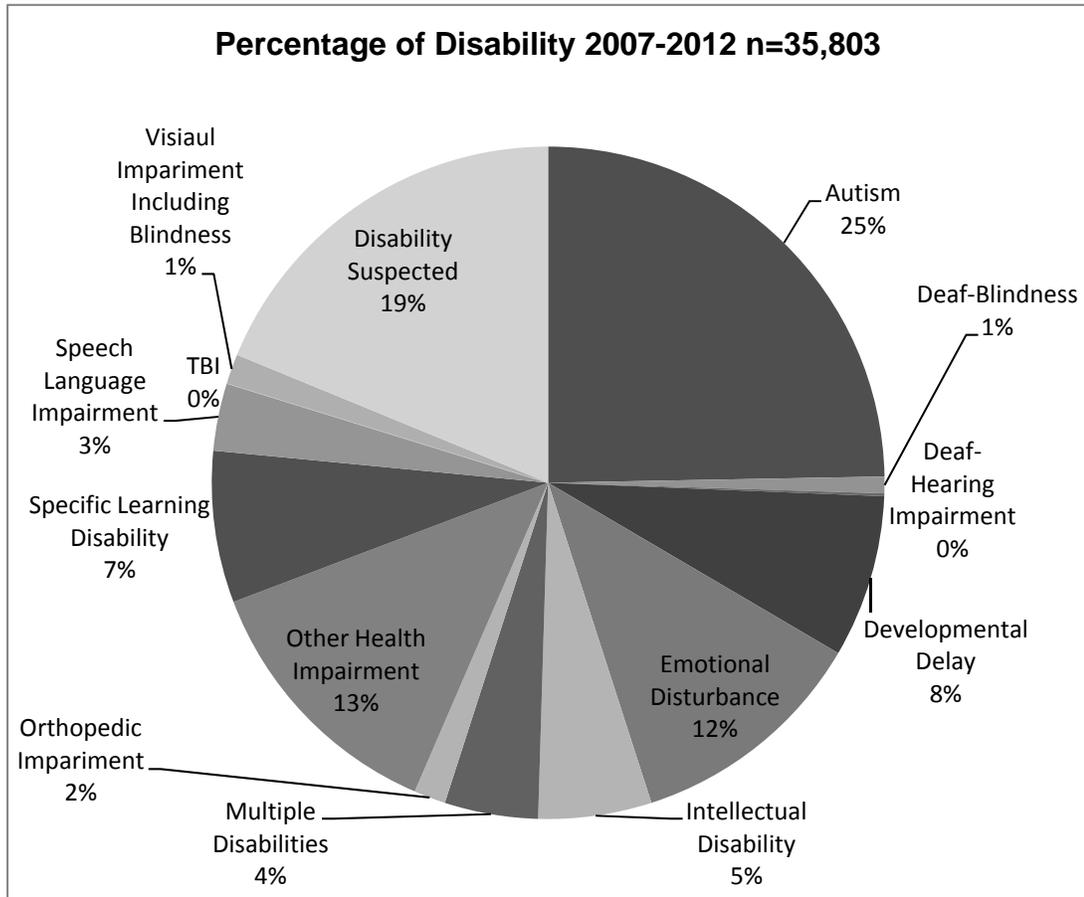
The central research question for this study is: What are the perceptions of IEP meetings of selected parents who have used a selected Parent Training and Information center? The secondary questions are: What are the parental perceptions of selected parents of the selected Parent Training and Information center? and What are the characteristics of the students whose parents use the selected Parent and Training Information center? Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study. The findings are presented in four sections: (a) the school level and disability of the children whose parents have used the Parent Training and Information center (PTI); (b) a description of the participants, how they have used the PTI, and why they used it; (c) the participants' perceptions of IEP meetings and their perceptions of the PTI; and (d) unexpected findings. It is important to note that the data collected in this study solely represent the perspective of the parents when discussing the participants' perceptions of IEP meetings and do not take into account the perspective of school personnel

### **Student Demographics**

Though the demographic characteristics of the students whose parents use the Parent Education and Advocacy Center (PEATC) is a secondary question, the demographic data are presented first. These data are presented first to provide the context of the types of children whose parents use the services provided by PEATC.

When parents contact PEATC for assistance, PEATC staff attempt to gather data on the age and disability of the child. PEATC staff indicated the parent is not always willing to share this information. The age and disability of the children are not collected from parents who attend the trainings or who visit the website. This section presents the data shared by PEATC on the demographic characteristics of the students whose parents have contacted them from 2007-2012. The section specifically focuses on the age and disability as defined under IDEA of the children.

**Disability.** From the years 2007-2012, PEATC staff collected data from the parents of 35,803 children on their child's disability. The percentage of the children's disability is presented in Figure 5. As shown in Figure 5, the disability with the highest percentage was Autism with roughly 25% followed by parents who suspected their child had a disability with 19%. It is worth noting that parents of children with learning disabilities and parents of children with speech language impairments represented 7% and 3% of the PEATC contacts respectively. These proportions are substantially different from the general population of children receiving special education services.



*Figure 6.* Percentage of disabilities of children whose parents contacted PEATC from 2007-2012.

The disability data were provided by disability for each school year. Table 5 presents the number of parents who contacted PEATC for each school year by disability. The total for each school year and the mean number of contacts by disability per school year is also provided. The range of usage was from 3,501 parents during the 2007-2008 school year to 10,690 parents during the 2010-2011 school year. The mean number of parents who used PEATC was 7,160.6 parents over the five year period.

Table 5

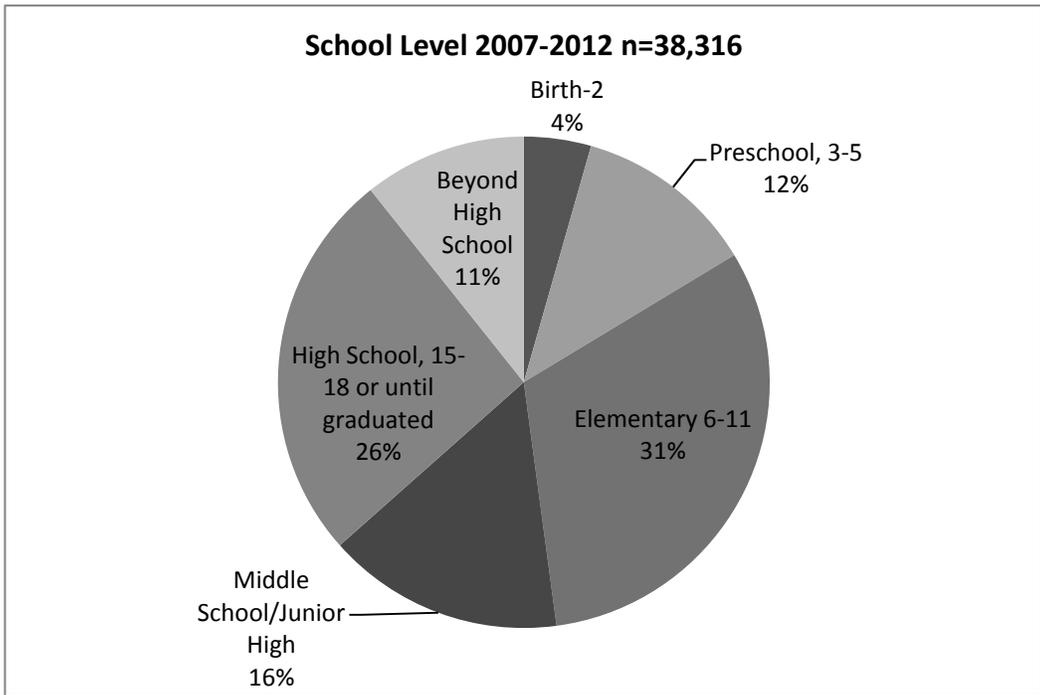
*Number of Parents who Contacted PEATC by Child's Disability*

Educational Disability	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	Total	Mean
Autism	900	1,948	1,754	1,935	2,308	8,845	1,769
Deaf-Blindness	49	53	0	184	0	286	57.2
Deaf-Hearing Impairment	12	35	0	0	0	47	9.4
Developmental Delay	271	649	957	0	923	2,800	560
Emotional Disturbance	234	1,018	957	1,475	462	4,146	829.2
Intellectual Disability	382	439	319	461	346	1,947	389.4
Multiple Disabilities	173	334	159	829	115	1,610	322
Orthopedic Impairment	123	158	80	184	0	545	109
Other Health Impairment	493	1,018	1,715	645	692	4,563	912.6
Specific Learning Disability	296	369	837	645	462	2,609	521.8
Speech Language Impairment	173	334	199	461	0	1,167	233.4
Traumatic Brain Injury	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Visual Impairment	148	53	80	0	231	512	102.4
Disability Suspected	247	772	797	3,871	1,039	6,726	1,345.2
Total	3,501	7,180	7,854	10,690	6,578	3,5803	7,160.6

The 2010-2011 school year had the highest number of parents contact PEATC. During this school year the number of parents with suspected disabilities increased more than threefold of the next highest year.

**School Level.** From 2007-2012 PEATC staff collected data on the child's school level from 38,316 parents. This number is different than the total number of parents reporting a disability. It is important to reiterate here that the PEATC staff members were not able to consistently gather this information from the parents when they called. The percentage by school level is presented in Figure 6. Parents of students in elementary school had the highest percentage (31%) of contact followed by parents of students in high school (26%). Parents of children from birth to two years old were the lowest percentage of parents to contact PEATC (4%).

The number of parents who contacted PEATC by school year were also provided. Table 6 presents the number of parents who contacted PEATC by school level for each of the school years. The total for each school level, school year, and the mean number of parents by school level are presented. These data have a range from 3,393 parents during the 2007-2008 school year to 11,245 parents during the 2010-2011 school year. The mean number of parents per school year was 7,663.2 for these data.



*Figure 7.* Percentage of parents who contacted PEATC by school level from 2007-2012

Table 6

*Number of Parent who Contacted PEATC by School Level*

School Level	2007- 2008	2008- 2009	2009- 2010	2010- 2011	2011- 2012	Total	Mean
Birth-2	218	299	353	225	596	1,691	338.2
Preschool 3-5	395	1,065	1,789	1,068	255	4,572	914.4
Elementary 6-11	1,539	3,063	2,873	1,968	2,638	12,081	2,416.2
Middle School/Junior High	738	1,340	1,210	1,574	1,106	5,968	1,193.6
High School 15-18 or until graduated	1009	1,101	1,512	5,004	1,277	9,903	1,980.6
Beyond High School	94	909	756	1,406	936	4,101	820.2
Total	3,393	7,777	8,493	11,245	6,808	38,316	7,663.2

**Participants**

There were 11 participants in this study who used PEATC in different ways and for different reasons. Initially, the participants were recruited directly through the PEATC website, e-mail listserv, and Facebook page. Due to a low response rate, the recruiting materials were eventually distributed through the listservs and Facebook pages of other organizations. The criteria for inclusion in the study were: (a) the parent responded to the recruiting materials; (b) had used PEATC; and (c) was willing to participate in the interview. The interview questions focused on parental experiences in the IEP meeting prior to using the services at PEATC, the services they used at PEATC, and their experiences after using the services at PEATC. Questions also focused on why

parents needed to use PEATC services. Table 3 found on page 83 in Chapter 3 provides information on the age, disability, and size of the school district for each participant. The school level and disability category of the children whose parents participated in the study are not representative of the distribution of school level and disability in the annual data from PEATC and presented above. This section provides a brief description of each participant and how they used PEATC.

**Sally.** Sally is the mother of Mary, a 12 year old girl identified for special education services under the disability category of Other Health Impairment (OHI). Sally has a bachelor's degree and reported finding information on the IEP process on the internet. She also attended workshops on special education rights. Sally is involved in an organization that consults with the school district on special education issues and originally contacted PEATC for some guidance on the organization. She found PEATC through a reference on another website during her internet research. When she was having difficulty with Mary's educational program, Sally reported contacting PEATC for guidance and advice on Mary's IEP. She has communicated with PEATC by phone and e-mail for help in dealing with conflicts with the school over Mary's IEP. Her perception was that PEATC has provided her with a wealth of knowledge that has helped her in IEP meetings.

**Laura.** Laura is the mother of Jenny, an 18 year old girl identified for special education services under the disability category of Multiple Disabilities. Laura has a bachelor's degree and explained that she read many books on special education rights and services. She is involved in an organization that consults with the school on different

special education issues. It was through that organization that Laura found PEATC. Laura signed up for PEATC's e-mail listserv when Jenny was in high school. She reported that when she receives e-mails from PEATC, she goes to the website and learns about different topics. She refers to content on the PEATC website when she is in IEP meetings. Laura expressed that she wished she had known about PEATC when Jenny was younger as she believed the information would have been helpful to her.

**Susana.** Susana is the mother of Rodrigo, a 12 year old boy identified for special education services under the disability category of Intellectual Disability. She has a master's degree and initially educated herself about special education using the internet. She belongs to a group of Hispanic mothers of children with disabilities. Susana reported that she learned about PEATC through a lecture at a local hospital. She attended lectures given by PEATC staff and met with one of their staff members to review information prior to IEP meetings. Susana believes she has a stronger understanding of special education rights and services because of her interactions with PEATC.

**Nancy.** Nancy is the mother of Bill and John who are 10 year old twins identified for special education services under the disability category of OHI. Nancy has taken some college classes and learned about PEATC from a flyer in a hospital. She attended a multiple day workshop presented by PEATC staff that provided her with information about special education rights and services. She reported she used the information from PEATC to argue with the school over the services that she believed Bill should be receiving. Nancy also became involved in other special education advocacy organizations. She believes that attending the workshop helped provide her with

information that allowed for her to effectively advocate for the appropriate special education services.

**Bonnie.** Bonnie is the mother of Megan, a 20 year old woman identified for special education services under the disability category of Learning Disability. Bonnie has a bachelor's degree and initially learned about special education through the Parent Resource Center at her local school. It was through the Parent Resource Center that Bonnie learned about PEATC. Bonnie reported having difficulty obtaining services for Megan. She attended lectures and meetings at PEATC and through them was able to find an advocate. Bonnie was able to get services for Megan when she was in the fifth grade which she attributed to having the help of an advocate. Bonnie believed that PEATC helped her understand the components of the IEP and also educated her about what the advocate should be doing in the IEP meeting.

**Caroline.** Caroline is the mother of Sadie, a 13 year old girl identified as being eligible for special education services under the disability category of Autism. She has a bachelor's degree and her husband is a special education teacher in the district where Sadie attends school. Caroline is involved in an organization that consults with the school district on special education issues. She invited PEATC staff to speak at the organization's meeting, is on PEATC's e-mail listserv, and frequently visits their website. Caroline reported she visits the PEATC website while preparing for IEP meetings to become educated on the topics to be discussed at the IEP meeting. She believes she has gained information from the PEATC website which has helped her participate in IEP meetings.

**Beth.** Beth is the mother of Whitney, a 25 year old woman identified for special education services under the disability category of OHI. Beth has a master's degree and was educated as an early childhood special education teacher. She was involved with PTIs in 2 other states in addition to participating in advocacy organizations. Beth has an abundance of knowledge about special education rights and services and taught classes to other parents before moving to Virginia. In addition, she reported her professional experiences in parental advocacy have helped educate her in parental rights in special education decision making. When she moved to Virginia she felt it was important to contact PEATC and took a few of their classes.

Beth is an extreme case in terms of her expertise in parental rights in special education and her work in special education advocacy. She is also an extreme case because Whitney has been out of school for a number of years. Even though she had an abundance of knowledge and had worked with other PTIs, she connected with PEATC when she moved to the area. She was included in the study because her need to connect with PEATC provides insight on the experiences of parents who believe they are already knowledgeable about special education concepts.

**Katie.** Katie is the mother of Tom, a 4 year old boy identified for special education services under the disability category of Developmental Delay. Katie has a master's degree and educated herself about special education by reading books and finding information on the internet. She found PEATC through the internet and she exchanged phone calls and e-mails with the PEATC staff. Katie believes the PEATC staff helped her understand the IEP process and her rights in the IEP meeting. She

explained that having a better understanding gave her confidence and she felt she was able to better advocate for Tom in IEP meetings.

**Amanda.** Amanda is the mother of Fred, an eight year old boy who was in the process of being considered for special education services at the time of the interview. Amanda has a bachelor's degree and learned about special education concepts by finding the special education laws and regulations on the internet. She reported it took several meetings before the school personnel would consider Fred for the eligibility process. Amanda called PEATC for some help on a letter she wrote to the school requesting an evaluation. When asked about how she used the services at PEATC, she said the PEATC staff provided some guidance to her on the tone of the letter. Amanda contacted PEATC prior to each subsequent meeting for PEATC to help her understand what would be discussed at each of the meetings. She feels having the knowledge of the meetings has given her more confidence which has improved her ability to participate.

**Julie.** Julie is the mother of Cindy, a 19 year old woman identified for special education services under the disability category of Blind. Julie has a bachelor's degree and obtained an associate's degree in developmental disabilities in an attempt to better understand the special education process. She has been involved with different advocacy organizations for individuals who are blind. Julie reported learning about PEATC through a friend from one of the advocacy groups when Cindy was in high school. She attended a multi-day workshop presented by PEATC. After the training she used the PEATC website for information about special education. She believed the workshop helped validate her expectations of the school in the services they provided to Cindy and

the information on the website helped her file a due process claim. She expressed that she wished she had learned about PEATC earlier in Cindy's educational career.

**Alexis.** Alexis the mother of Harold, a 25 year old man identified for special education services under the disability category of Intellectual Disability. Alexis has a bachelor's degree and educated herself about special education concepts through the library. She learned about PEATC through someone else and contacted the PEATC staff prior to Harold starting elementary school. She had attended a meeting with Harold's preschool staff and said she did not understand the content of the meeting. She believed it was important to become educated so that she could effectively advocate for Harold. Alexis reported PEATC staff educated her about special education rights and services through direct instruction. She believed the education provided by the PEATC staff helped her advocate for what she believed to be appropriate educational programming for Harold.

Alexis is also an extreme case in that Harold has been out of school for several years and that she worked for PEATC for a period of time. However, the interview focused on her experiences as a parent before working for PEATC and after she had left. It was also important to include data from this interview because it includes the experiences of a parent navigating the special education process before the proliferation of information available on the internet. Finally, the interview with Alexis provides some insight into how PEATC impacted parents many years ago.

## **Interview Results**

The themes identified during the analysis of the interview data are presented in this section. These themes represent the parents' perceptions of IEP meetings and PEATC. A framework was developed for how the themes fit together. The framework is presented below in Figure 8 and each theme is discussed in the subsequent sections. The sections are divided into three overall categories: (a) IEP meetings before PEATC; (b) PEATC; and (c) IEP meetings after PEATC.

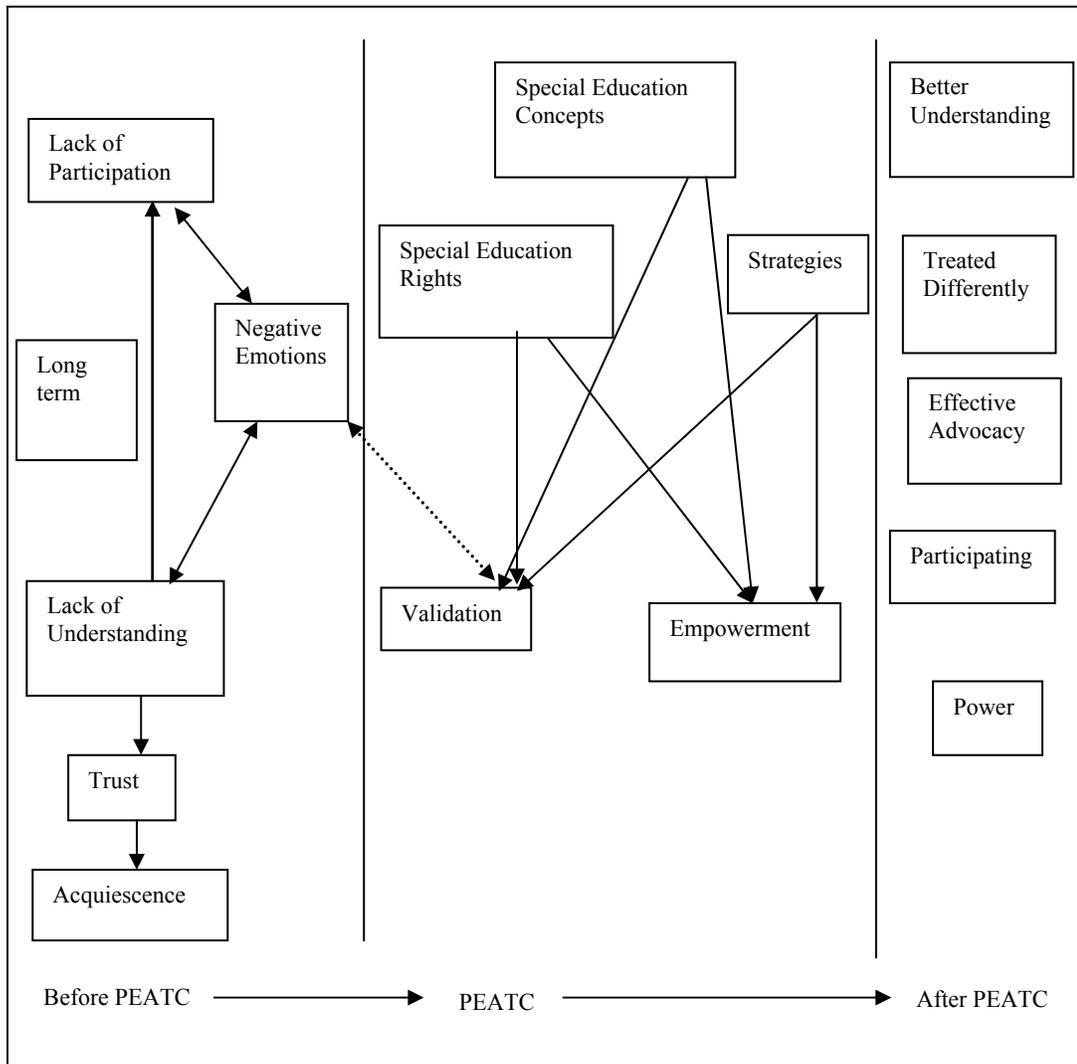


Figure 8. Framework of Themes and Relationships.

**Before PEATC.** This section focuses on parental perceptions of IEP meetings prior to their interaction with PEATC. Eight of the parents reported being educated through other mechanisms prior to their interaction with PEATC. Five of the parents said they did not come into contact with PEATC until after they attended IEP meetings for many years. The themes presented in this section are: (a) lack of understanding, (B) trust, (c) acquiescence, (d) participation, (e) negative emotions, and (f) long term.

***Lack of understanding.*** Ten of the parents reported that they had difficulty understanding both the language and the process associated with the IEP meeting. They stated that school personnel used jargon that was unfamiliar to the parents making it difficult for them to understand what the school personnel were saying. Beth reported her experience as a special educator helped her understand the IEP meetings. Sally discussed her difficulty with the language “when we first went into the IEP meetings it was just so foreign to me, all the acronyms they used and LE, and LRE, and you know LEA, and this-that-the-other, and fair and appropriate.” Nine parents said they were also unfamiliar with the procedure of the IEP meeting making it difficult for them to understand if and when they are able to provide input during the meeting. The IEP meeting has specific parts to it and the parents who were unfamiliar with the process reported they neither understood the individual components of the IEP meeting nor did they understand their role in the meeting. Laura described her early IEP meetings as “the whole thing is, is a blur, and a state of confusion, ‘cause you don't know if, if you've never been through it you don't know what you're supposed to do and not do.”

The parents reported the school personnel would start the meeting and talk to each other without any attempt to determine if the parent understood the discussion. Katie reflected on her early meetings with the school personnel and reported, “they know what's going on, they know what they're doing and they know what they're saying to me, I have no idea what's going on except for I'm trying to get help for my kid.” Katie reported attempting to ask clarifying questions and for the school personnel to explain the content to her in layman’s terms. However, she also indicated that the school personnel

were unable to explain the content of the IEP discussion in language she could understand:

so I understand the words that are coming out of their mouth but have no context and no meaning, because I've actually asked before I want it at a eighth grade level, fine, fifth grade level and they still have an inability to communicate with people in a normal way, in a way that's standard English so that you walk away understanding what they're talking about...

*Trust.* Six parents reported that they trusted the school personnel would develop an IEP that would maximize the education of their child. This is related to the aforementioned theme that parents said they did not understand the jargon and process of the IEP meeting. Because the parents did not understand what was being discussed or what was available, they said they relied on the expertise of the school personnel to make the best decisions. Julie expressed her thoughts on trusting school personnel.

We really, really trusted that the people around the table with all their big titles and their education, at that time I didn't even have, I just had a high school diploma um we really felt like they knew better for my daughter than I did and what she needed so I kind of put my trust in them, I put my faith in them and I let them write the IEP.

Four parents trusted the school personnel would make the best decisions regarding the IEP because they believed the school personnel had the goal of helping the student. They believed the school should be focused on doing whatever they possibly could to help their child. Sally trusted the school personnel in the early years because she

“entered the setting thinking that the school system was there to help my child to the fullest extent they could.” The school personnel lost her trust when she came to believe it was not their intent to provide everything they could for Mary. Sally commented, “it was almost like a game with them, they weren't going to give me what she really needed unless I asked for it.”

Though they did not overtly express it, three of the parents implied they never trusted the school system. Susana, Katie, and Caroline reported that they constantly questioned and challenged the school personnel in the IEP meetings. Caroline believed the reason the school personnel did not explain anything was to maintain control over the meeting. Her experiences were that school personnel

don't explain anything, assume you know it, or you know they want, they don't want you to know what, what they know or they don't want you to know anything, I think in some way it makes them feel like they're in control.

From Caroline's perspective, by not explaining anything, the school personnel were able to develop the IEP they wanted and the parent was not able to know what services or options were available for their child. Alexis had reported she had received guidance not to trust what the school was offering. The issue of trust was not discussed during Beth's interview.

*Acquiescence.* Six of the parents reported acquiescing to what the school personnel were proposing in the IEP meeting. Sally expressed regret about having consented to an IEP with which she did not agree “I still wasn't as empowered when I left that meeting, um, I did sign her IEP at that moment and when I drove out of the parking

lot I just felt like I shouldn't have signed that.” The feeling of acquiescence to the proposed IEP was related to both parents’ perceptions of not understanding the special education process and having trust that the school personnel develops an IEP that maximizes benefit to the child. Laura expressed that she did not believe she could say no and that she had to trust the school personnel as the experts.

When I went to an IEP then, that it was done telling me that I, that, that this is what they're gonna do and that I really passively all's I could do is say yes I agree or disagree but I didn't feel like I could say, no I want you to do this instead or can we try this too, it was more of you're the experts this is what you said so I have to listen to you.

However, Katie recognized that she did not have to consent to the IEP at the meeting and did not immediately acquiesce to the school’s proposed IEP. When she talked about not signing the IEP at the meeting she indicated the school personnel were, “taken aback and not very happy with someone being so resistant to falling in line with what they wanted to say.” Before she would agree to the proposed IEP Katie “wanted to have a chance to go to sleep and think about categorize everything that happened.” Katie wanted to make sure she had time to think about everything that was discussed in the IEP meeting to make sure she agreed to what was being proposed. Caroline and Bonnie always felt like they were fighting and never acquiesced to the school personnel. Both Beth and Alexis reported they were able to negotiate for what they believed were the appropriate services for their children and did not need to acquiesce.

***Lack of Participation.*** Eight of the parents perceived that though they attended IEP meetings, they did not feel they were meaningfully participating in the discussion. The parents perceived the school personnel would discuss the IEP in front of them but did not incorporate any input provided by them into the IEP. In discussing her input at the meeting Amanda stated “I was pretty much dismissed.” In Nancy’s case, she believed her input was documented in the IEP to satisfy the procedural requirement of parental input but was not incorporated into the educational program.

Their expectation was you're gonna walk in, you were given, you know do you have any concerns about your child, you had like a minute to talk and after that they were expecting you just sign the paper and you'd leave and the next parent would come in...

Julie reported the school personnel as being friendly to her but not allowing her the opportunity to provide input “I felt that they were very friendly and they put me at ease but when they got down to the nitty-gritty of it um I don't think that they really gave me an opportunity to to talk.”

Three of the parents did feel they were able to participate in the IEP meeting. However, one of these participants has a background in education, one had a spouse who was a special educator, and one was educated as a special educator. Susana reported she was outspoken in IEP meetings prior to her interaction with PEATC. When asked directly about her ability to participate in the IEP meeting Susana responded that she believed she was participating. She believed her experience as an educator helped her understand the IEP meeting “because I am a teacher. I understand somewhat how the

system works.” Laura reported having difficulty participating in some of the early IEP meetings but as she educated herself she felt her participation improved.

*Negative emotions.* Ten of the parents reported experiencing negative emotions during their IEP meetings prior to their interactions with PEATC. Beth reported having some negative experiences in early IEP meetings but was excluded from this theme because her early IEP meetings occurred in another state. In several cases, the parents reported they felt negative emotions came from a belief that the school personnel did not respect them. Susana became angry when she believed school personnel tried to rush through the meeting. “I did get mad with their attitude. And then I don’t know if they are tired, but yeah well we will finish with this stupid girl.” Three parents reported that they experienced negative emotions when they thought school personnel were being condescending toward them. Amanda reported trying to repeatedly advocate for the school to begin the eligibility process for Fred with the school personnel denying the request each time “my request was just dismissed and I was condes[cended], really condescended to.”

The lack of knowledge experienced by parents referenced above contributed to the negative emotions parents reported. Four parents reported becoming frustrated when the school personnel would not explain decisions to them in language they could understand. Sally was trying to increase the amount of speech language therapy her daughter, Mary, was receiving. The school personnel denied her request and when she asked about the reason the increased services were denied

the principal of the school looked at me and said increased access to speech does not increase access to education and I was like, what? I'm like I don't understand what you're saying, you know, speak English, so she repeated the same statement.

Four parents became frustrated with the school personnel when they believed the school personnel were not forthcoming with the available options for their child's educational program. The parents did not believe the school personnel provided information on what services and programs were available so the parent could make an informed decision about what was being proposed. Further, the parents became frustrated when they thought the school personnel did not provide any rationale for why they were proposing certain services and programs in the IEP. Katie attempted to question school personnel about what was available and their rationale for the number of hours of special education services they were proposing:

it was very confusing, a very frustrating process where I'm constantly trying to figure out what are we doing, how does it work, what could we do, what is the scope of the things that could happen, which ones are appropriate for him, why did you decide that that's what was appropriate for him, all of...

A lack of knowledge regarding special education was intimidating for four parents when they were in the IEP meeting. These four parents include one parent who had been frustrated by not understanding the special education jargon and the school personnel not being forthcoming with available options. Alexis describes the intimidation she felt due to her lack of knowledge "I didn't know what people were saying, I didn't understand the terminology, um, and so I felt extremely intimidated."

Parents also reported that the lack of knowledge combined with being in a room full of special education experts was intimidating. Laura shared her feeling of intimidation in her first IEP meeting:

the 10 people around the room that are the experts, you know the, the OT, the PT, the special ed teacher, the, the director, the, the principal and all these, you feel like all these people are, at least in my mind, the first IEP meeting was so intimidating 'cause you don't know what you're doing and you have all these quote experts staring at you and it is intimidating.

Three parents experienced negative emotions in the IEP meeting when they were having difficulty obtaining what they believed to be appropriate services for their child. In talking about her struggle to get services for her daughter, Megan, Bonnie said,

I got really mad but what can I do I mean that was kind of before I had an advocate and they just kept denying, denying, denying and it was like you know this is such a colossal waste of all of our time, we do this every year...

Sally experienced negative emotions during IEP meetings when discussing her perception that the school personnel lacked the knowledge to develop an appropriate IEP for children with certain disabilities. She discussed her experience in working with the school:

it's just more of the frustration that holding the school accountable for what they're supposed to be doing and educating the school because I find that even the school doesn't know what they're supposed be doing with the kids with, with like Mary that has severe needs.

Finally, six of the participants said they felt alone as the parent of a child with a disability. Two of them reported an overall feeling of loneliness of being the mother of a child with a disability. Julie talked about her experiences with her daughter, Cindy,

I just felt like in the general population nobody really understood I think that they all kind of pitied us a little bit and I know that sounds terrible but they weren't invited I know I wasn't invited by the moms to do play dates and things like that.

Four of the parents felt isolated in the IEP meeting. They believed they were the only parents having this experience and did not know any other parents who were going to IEP meetings. Sally described this isolated feeling, "I would just say you know you you feel when you enter the realm of special ed and child with disabilities you you feel like you're the only one there."

***Long-term purpose.*** All of the parents talked about their perception of how the educational program will impact their children after they have left school. There was concern about ensuring the IEP had the appropriate goals and services to ensure the child's success either later in their school career or after they have graduated. The parents believed the school personnel only focused on the one year duration of the IEP rather than how the IEP would help prepare the child for life after they left school. The parents implied the differences in perspective of the school personnel who focused on the short-term focus of the IEP and the parents who focused on the long-term implications of the IEP was a source of conflict between the parents and the school personnel related to developing the IEP.

Caroline perceived the appropriate educational program was necessary to create opportunities for Sadie. In discussing her argument in an IEP meeting for Sadie to have what she believed to be an appropriate educational placement she said, “she has to be able to get a diploma so that she can go to college or get a job.” Bonnie recalled her concerns about the consequences of not being able to obtain what she perceived were the appropriate services for Megan “I just would sit in those meetings and think to myself when she's 15 years old is she gonna run away from home and run away from school and become pregnant, addicted to drugs because nobody's doing anything now.”

Susana perceived the school personnel were not developing IEPs that were appropriate for her son Rodrigo. She expressed that Rodrigo was more capable than the school personnel believed he was and the school personnel were proposing IEPs that developed skills she believed would be too easy for Rodrigo to master. Susana believed the school personnel was more focused on pushing Rodrigo through school rather than challenging him to develop to his potential. She was concerned about how the lack of skills would impact Rodrigo when he left school.

The system I feel much of the times does nothing for my son. And I have told them that the objective like I am telling you is that for my son to get out of school, it doesn't matter if he learns or not, or if my son does anything in the future. I feel that that it is not important to them. No, not that they feel, that I feel that they don't give my son any importance all they want is for my son to pass the year so he can leave the school and it's done...

Beyond the perceived lack of opportunity or access to appropriate services and goals, parents perceived the IEP as a mechanism to help the child with different skills. Beth believed the IEP placement in an inclusionary setting benefitted Whitney “that really helped to reinforce my desire to have Whitney in a regular setting so that she could have those social skills and when she was older.” Finally, Katie perceived the development of an IEP that included the appropriate services early in Tom’s educational career could potentially mean that the services would only be required for a few years “if we pay attention to it now and provide the appropriate services which would include occupational therapy then we can um we can avoid having problems when he is in school.”

**Summary.** Prior to their interaction with PEATC ten of the parents in this study said they had difficulty understanding the IEP meeting. Specifically, these parents reported having difficulty understanding the special education jargon and the IEP process. Because of their lack of knowledge, six of the parents said they assumed that the school personnel, who were experienced in IEP development, would develop and implement an IEP that was in the best interest of their child. Based on this expectation, six of the parents believed they acquiesced to the proposed IEP because they did not understand what recourse was available when they disagreed with it. Four of the parents perceived the lack of knowledge made it difficult for four of the parents to effectively participate in the IEP meeting because they did not understand their role in the meeting. When four parents did offer input during the meeting, they perceived it was either disregarded or did not impact the IEP. The lack of knowledge and the difficulty with

participation resulted in seven of the parents experiencing negative emotions during the IEP process. Finally, the parents reported approaching the IEP meeting from a perspective of how the educational program as defined by the IEP would impact the child long-term.

**PEATC.** This section focuses on the interactions parents had with PEATC. It is important to reiterate that the parents interacted with PEATC through different mediums and for different purposes. Nonetheless, there were universal experiences in the type of knowledge that was gained and how that knowledge impacted the parent. The themes presented in this section are: (a) special education concepts, (b) special education rights, (c) strategy, (d) validation, and (e) empowerment.

***Special Education Concepts.*** Ten of the parents reported that PEATC staff taught them about special education concepts. Specifically, the parents learned about each of the components of the IEP to include goals, services, and the least restrictive environment. Bonnie talked about learning the overview of the different parts of the IEP:

there's the people, um, explaining what an IEP is, you know just the basic, I mean because they don't explain that to you when you go to an IEP meeting, you're supposed to already know what an IEP is so they're very good at educating you as to what an IEP is and the different parts of it and the pieces of it.

Four parents reported that they benefitted from the education PEATC staff provided on special education jargon. Alexis described how “PEATC helped me do was kind of sort through what would be a good fit for him and help me understand the terminology I mean just simple basic stuff because I, I couldn't, I couldn't get it.” Nancy

was able to identify a relatively obscure concept in IDEA the school was unaware of in developing Bill's IEP, "we were having a lot of problems on the bus and I said that my child required travel training, they said, travel training, literally they said what's that, okay it is only one sentence in IDEA."

Even Beth who reported being knowledgeable when she moved to the state thought it would be beneficial to attend some of PEATC's workshops. She described the content:

just the typical things of like what goal should be about, um, that you, the first placement that needs to be looked at is the regular classroom with supports and then you move into slightly more restrictive if that doesn't, doesn't seem like it will work...

In discussing the quality of the workshops, Beth went on to say "the two, the two or three workshops I went to were good, like I said it wasn't much new but helps to be reminded."

***Special Education Rights.*** Ten of the parents discussed the importance of learning about the rights granted to parents by IDEA. Parents believed learning their rights helped them know how to interact with the IEP meeting. The eleventh parent reported educating herself on special education rights prior to contacting PEATC. Susana discussed how knowing her rights helped her focus on where to argue in the IEP meeting, "when PEATC came in and they came in and spoke and explained, I realized it was necessary to know the rights. what is it I am going to fight for." Prior to their interaction with PEATC, two parents were unaware that they did not have to sign the IEP

until they had time to thoroughly review it to determine if they agreed with the content. Caroline described her approach.

I sorta learned from PEATC also not to sign anything at the time of the IEP meeting, I took it home and read it and had um two people that I work with pretty closely in the special ed arena look at the IEPs before I would sign them.

Before her interaction with PEATC, Katie was unaware of her rights in the IEP meeting. She believed being unaware of her rights inhibited what she would do and say in the meeting because she was unaware of her options. She describes what she learned from PEATC in regards to her rights:

...telling me you're the parent, you can do all these things, they can't do anything to you, they're not gonna kick you out of the meeting be like sorry you can't have any services because you haven't done what we want you to.

Six parents talked about learning their rights in the context of learning what the school was required to do and how they could hold school personnel accountable. For example, Nancy describes the rights she learned from PEATC,

I learned wait a minute you can't just not have half the IEP team here because you've got them doing other things today you have to ask me and in fact they, if they're, I have a right to ask for their observations that they take, I have a right to ask for that which they were going to bring to the meeting.

Amanda learned about the timelines required for the eligibility process. She talked about the PEATC staff member providing her with information about her rights when she called them “PEATC pointed me to a couple of other um like timelines and um

rules that I, I hadn't, I had forgotten about or seemed kind of muddled in the, in the, in the rules.” Even Beth, who had previously taught classes on parental rights in special education to other parents, attended a workshop on parental rights and the IEP. She recounted a presentation on how the school had to schedule IEP meetings “they kinda talked about the whole thing that you have to get uh written notice beforehand uh at a time that's convenient to you.”

**Strategy.** Ten of the parents reported strategies they learned from PEATC. Rather than being focused on the content of the IEP and parental rights, the strategies reported by the parents focused on different ways the parent should prepare for and behave in the meeting. The eleventh parent reported being knowledgeable about IEP meeting strategies prior to her interactions with PEATC. In talking about how she used guidance from PEATC to help her in the IEP meeting Nancy stated,

I was ragged, tired mother of twins with a lot of behaviors happening and absolutely I would like roll out of bed and just show up at the meeting, but you learn that you really need to you know look like you're going to a professional business meeting so that to be taken seriously.

Amanda talked about guidance she received in the manner she was communicating with the school personnel. She drafted a letter and had PEATC review it for feedback. Amanda reported,

I used PEATC to actually read my initial e-mail with the, with all the statutes to them first and I had, it was [PEATC staff member] that that I had worked with at

first and she, she was like well you know this, this, you've certain, obviously done your homework you just need to tone it down a little...

Five parents described how they learned about how to ask questions and gain clarity in meetings, particularly when they did not agree with what was being proposed. They stated they learned to politely ask direct questions about the proposed IEP during the meeting. There was emphasis on asking questions or engaging in the IEP discussion without being confrontational. Caroline describes the approach she learned from PEATC:

on the PEATC website I saw someone recommended that you have to be a combination of Ms. Manners and Columbo so that you're very nice and appropriate and courteous but you always ask questions like you are Columbo the detective, like you don't understand the words, can you show me, that sort of thing...

Parents also discussed learning from PEATC staff members the importance of researching the topics to be discussed in the IEP meeting in advance. They believed this allowed them to understand what was being discussed during the meeting and they were able to interact with the conversation. Julie talked about her experience of doing research in advance of the meeting "I learned how to gather information and use the school's policies to my advantage." Several of the parents also reported going over the proposed IEP with staff from PEATC and practicing what they were going to say in the meeting in preparation. Susana would meet with a member of the PEATC staff to discuss what she would say in the IEP meeting:

I always want to go to the IEP prepared. And then I would tell her what I was going to do, what I was going to ask for. Then she would tell me she was prohibited to go to an IEP but I can assess you before you go. And then she would explain all I could by right demand for my son.

Another strategy presented by Bonnie was for the parent to develop a relationship with a specific staff member who could help advocate for the needs of the child. Bonnie discussed developing the relationship “PEATC kinda taught me that when you find that case manager teacher whatever it is that clicks with your child, utilize that person as an advocate within the school for you.” Finally, four of the parents discussed learning about either recording the meeting or bringing a friend to the meeting to take notes while the parent was participating in the meeting. The parents believed this strategy allowed them to interact with the conversation rather than focusing on trying to capture the discussion so that they could refer to it later. Nancy talked about how recording the meeting changed how the school personnel interacted with her in the meeting “I would have my recorders out, it would definitely change how they were gonna talk in the meeting because those recorders were out.”

**Validation.** Nine of the parents reported feeling validated by their interactions with PEATC and the topic was not discussed for the remaining two participants. Prior to their interaction with PEATC these parents reported having little to no external network regarding parents of students with disabilities. They did not have any other parents they could utilize as a sounding board or check and balance for what they were experiencing in IEP meetings. The parents believed the validation they received from PEATC

counteracted the loneliness described in the Before PEATC section of this chapter. Julie discusses how her interaction with PEATC counteracted the loneliness:

the best part about that whole program was knowing that after I left that conference room that week that not only did I have that knowledge but I had people that I could reach back to, I had people that were in the room that had the same experiences that I did and I didn't feel so alone.

Prior to her interaction with PEATC, Alexis did not know what to expect in the IEP meeting. She was anxious about her first IEP meeting and was worried her inability to successfully advocate would result in lost opportunities for Harold. PEATC staff explained the IEP process to her which helped quell her anxiety related to the meeting:

helping me to separate what's real and what isn't in terms of my own anxiety and my own heightened emotional chaos that I was feeling um into well how to, how's that gonna help and, and is that really a concern or is that just you know you being worried...

Five parents reported finding validation in knowing they could continue to call someone at PEATC whenever they had questions or did not understand something. They believed knowing there was a group of people they could contact and use to discuss whether or not their perspective was realistic was very helpful to them. Sally describes the validation from being able to contact PEATC:

when you find someone who says I know that too but this is my experience, it just makes you know that you have someone to stand beside you and that you're not the only one going through and I think knowing you know how I feel in my heart

that this is not right what they're doing this, they should be doing more or the service should be in place and knowing that I can call someone, they say yeah you're right.

Bonnie believed her validation came through her interaction with the other parents at PEATC meetings. Hearing the stories of other parents helped her realize that her own feelings and beliefs about the special education process were validated “because they were having similar problems it was like same church different pew I mean we’re all having the same essential problems.” Finally, Laura felt validated in her beliefs by reviewing information on the website. Seeing information on the PEATC website that was aligned with her own perspective, Laura explained, “PEATC does help me again validate that yes, you are right, you don't, you, you do have a voice to say, no this isn't working or yes this is working or I want it this way.”

***Empowerment.*** All of the parents talked about feeling empowered in IEP meetings after their interactions with PEATC. They believed the knowledge they gained about their rights and the special education process gave them the confidence necessary to speak in the IEP meetings. Caroline described how the information she obtains from the PEATC website helps build her confidence, “I feel more confident in what I'm saying and, and my participation in the process because I feel more informed than I used to.” The rest of the parents also indicated that the information they gained from PEATC empowered them in the IEP meetings. Sally expressed how the knowledge she gained from PEATC gave her confidence:

having this knowledge and to be able to spout off acronyms and and appear like I know what I'm doing I'm getting some of that verbiage from the PEATC people who can tell me well this is the term you want to use and this is you know these are the goals you want to say and so it's having that and having the language that I need to go into a meeting and appear like I at least think I know what I'm doing so that would be what's empowering.

Julie described similar validation to that reported by Sally. Julie felt PEATC empowered her at IEP meetings “it gave me confidence, it made me, um, understand that I’m not a crazy demanding mom that my requests were not unreasonable you know the stuff that I was asking for.” The interaction with PEATC empowered Katie by helping her understand her role in the IEP meeting. Prior to her interaction with the PEATC staff she stated she did not understand what was acceptable on her part making her hesitant to interact in a manner with which she was comfortable. She reported she believed the PEATC staff empowered her by explaining what she was allowed to do in an IEP meeting “it made me feel a lot more empowered to talk to them because then I knew what I could do instead of just being given stuff.” As a person who was typically confident in her professional interactions Katie expressed the PEATC staff helped her gain her confidence in the IEP meeting “they gave me my mojo back.”

Laura found referring specifically to PEATC to be empowering for her. She believed PEATC was recognized as an authority and if she specifically cited them as a source of information the school personnel were more willing to listen to her “it does give me some empowerment, and, and, and I'll also say, did you see this on the PEATC

website, no but let me go look at it, so, just, just, yeah just using the PEATC name does.” Even Beth, who was educated as a special education teacher and had been active in other PTIs expressed how PEATC helped her confidence by knowing she could go back to them if she had a problem with the school:

it's a great, um, is you have a backup, it's great, it just gives you more confidence if you know that you have people you can call who know what they're doing and can help you if you're in a situation where you can't handle it yourself.

*Summary.* Overall, the parents in the study found the PEATC services to be very helpful. The parents believed PEATC helped them learn about special education concepts which then helped them understand the content of the IEP. The parents also discussed learning about their rights which helped them understand what they were allowed to do in the IEP meeting. Eight of the parents reported the strategies they learned from PEATC helped them negotiate with the school. These strategies helped the parents approach disagreements without being confrontational which facilitated collaboration between the parent and the school. In addition to the content they said they learned from PEATC, parents stated they were also validated in their feelings and expectations from the school personnel. The validation helped counteract the loneliness that four of the parents reported experiencing prior to their interaction with PEATC. Parents believed the knowledge gained from PEATC also empowered the parents and helped them feel confident in the IEP meetings.

**IEP meetings after PEATC.** This section describes parents’ perceptions of IEP meetings after using PEATC services. The parents reported overall that their perceptions

of IEP meetings were much more positive after they had used PEATC. Specifically, they reported: (a) having a better understanding of the IEP meeting, (b) being treated differently when they appeared knowledgeable about special education, (c) they were able to advocate for what they wanted, (d) they felt like they were participating in the meeting, and (e) they believed they had power in the IEP meeting.

***Better Understanding.*** All of the parents reported that they had a better understanding of the IEP meeting after they had used PEATC as well as a better understanding of the jargon and the process. Bonnie reported the IEP meeting being easier because she had a better understanding of what each part of the IEP meant “it was a lot easier because you sort of knew what all these stupid pages were, do you know what I mean you sort of could break it down.” Katie discussed the IEP meeting being easier because she had a better understanding of the language used in it, “I feel more comfortable with the process, I feel less intimidated by the jargon and the people I interact with.” Susana reported having a better understanding of the role of each member of the IEP team so she knew who to address when discussing the different aspects of Rodrigo’s education “before, I did not know what specifically what to ask for from the psychologist or the social worker or the teacher or the therapist of speech or occupational. Now I centered, I am directing myself specifically to their area.” Julie’s experience in having a better understanding of the IEP meeting meant she understood the educational program that was being proposed for Cindy “I didn’t feel like it was that it was a big secret what they did with my child and how they educated her, I knew exactly what was going on.”

Beth reported the importance of PTIs in helping parents have a better understanding of the IEP meeting. She thought it was important to contact PEATC because of the positive experiences she had with other PTIs “because I’ve had such good experience with other PTIs uh I think PTIs are incredibly valuable um especially for those parents who don’t know anything even a little bit of knowledge helps them they can keep building on it.”

Laura discussed that she had been fairly knowledgeable about IEP meetings prior to her interaction with PEATC. She had developed a collaborative relationship with the school in developing IEPs and seldom ran into any contentious issues. However, she expressed that she wished she had encountered PEATC earlier in Jenny’s educational career. Laura believed that had she known about PEATC earlier, she would have been knowledgeable about the IEP meeting earlier in Jenny’s school career which would have helped her develop better IEPs “I think it would've like I said help me find my voice and maybe gotten a little bit better results or better goals or made me feel more comfortable.”

***Treated differently.*** Seven of the parents stated they perceived they were treated differently by school personnel when they appeared knowledgeable in the IEP meeting. The parents reported the staff were more attentive in the meeting and were more likely to agree to their requests than their earlier IEP meetings when they were not knowledgeable about their rights or the IEP process. Julie reported noticing the change in the way she was treated in the IEP meeting:

I felt like they were listening to what I was saying where before I had been to IEP meetings where they’re distracted, the principal would be sitting there and people

would come in and keep talking to the principal, um, I felt like I was asking questions that helped them understand that I knew the process and I knew what my rights were.

Julie also reported that when the school personnel recognized she was knowledgeable that the meeting became a collaborative discussion in which she was an active participant “when you start asking people what they think or what their observations are and you get that feedback then you truly are having a conversation it's not somebody talking to you but you're actually exchanging ideas.” In early IEP meetings, the school personnel were dismissive of Susana and tried to rush through meetings. When Susana presented herself as knowledgeable about the IEP she believed the school personnel were more respectful to her “they realized that I am reading the stuff of the IEP. That I am reading my rights, and then they are on alert. And saying and want to explain to me and saying yes ma'am.”

Bonnie believed she was treated differently in the IEP meeting because she brought an advocate to the meeting. She reported the school personnel were much more focused on procedural compliance because of the presence of the advocate. She also believed that she was more likely to have senior leaders of the school attend the IEP meetings because she brought the advocate with her:

because there was an advocate, you got even more documentation because they were making sure that they did everything on the up and up so what used to be a little bit oh we already did this became you have to sign this, you have to do this, here's your piece of paper that says we informed you and this meeting is, you

know all that kind of stuff, but it also made people much more attentive to my child I felt like they were now really paying attention.

Conversely, Caroline did not believe the school personnel treated her any differently when she presented herself as knowledgeable in the IEP meeting. When she and her husband, who is a special education teacher, attended IEP meetings the school personnel did not value their input. Caroline believed the school personnel were deliberately deceptive with information about special education in order to maintain control of the IEP meeting. Though Caroline researched topics to be discussed at the IEP meeting on the PEATC website in order to be educated for the meeting, the school personnel treated her in a similar manner as before she was knowledgeable. She also believed the school personnel were dishonest with her about how they were interacting with Sadie in order to place her in a program they believed was best for her but with which Sadie disagreed:

it made more sense to me what they were asking, it didn't necessarily mean that they were more forthright were accurate in what they were telling me, it just sort of revealed to me that the information they gave me was not necessarily accurate.

Katie reported she had not experienced an IEP meeting before she became knowledgeable about special education so she was unable to determine if she was treated differently. For the remaining two parents, the topic of how they were treated after their interaction with PEATC was not discussed during the interview.

***Effective advocacy.*** Ten of the parents reported that they believed they were able to effectively advocate for what they wanted for their child after their interaction with

PEATC. The only exception was Beth who learned to advocate prior to her contact with PEATC. The parents believed they had the skills to obtain the goals and services they believed were appropriate in the IEP. Alexis was able to advocate what she believed was the appropriate placement for Harold “I felt great relief, um but I felt victorious and I wasn't looking for you know victory but I was looking for placement that I thought would really be appropriate for him and the whole team agreed with me.” Julie discussed how she was able to get the appropriate amount of tutoring for Cindy:

so I told them you write the IEP for tutoring so that it's one hour instruction at the site I don't care how long it takes them to get there or how long it takes them to get home and I said I want this tutor because I hired her before on my own and she's really good and they already have a relationship and they were like okay what else.

Caroline discussed how she was able to use the research from the PEATC website to help maintain the amount of occupational therapy Cindy was receiving:

I went in and looked up everything I could get my hands on, on occupational therapy, you know why it's important, what it does for children with autism, the whole sensory diet thing, it's not just about handwriting, all that sort of stuff and took it with me to the meeting, they did not reduce her time.

***Participating.*** In the section above on participation, parents reported that initially they did not believe they were effectively participating in the IEP meeting. However, six of the parents reported that their perceptions of their level of participation had changed. They were able to offer ideas and input into the IEP meeting discussion and it was

impacting how the IEP was developed. At the time of the interview, Amanda reported the eligibility process had just begun for Fred and though it required multiple meetings she believed the information she received from PEATC helped her participate better in the conversation related to moving forward with the eligibility process.

Nancy stated that her early IEP meetings for Bill only lasted about 15 minutes. She recalled she would enter the room and be asked what her concerns were regarding Bill's education. Her input would be entered into a parental concerns box but would not impact any of the goals or services he received. After her interaction with PEATC, Nancy believed she was more knowledgeable and insisted that her input be incorporated into the entire IEP:

I started to see the IEP developed and, in a, in a way that included my ideas so for example I asked for my child to have OT, uh, and eventually they get it so now it's part of the IEP, how great is that, um, you know I asked for him to have an aide and you know he gets it and so these things, I'm actually seeing things come to fruition.

Katie believed the level of her participation increased when she learned what her rights were in the meeting. Prior to her interaction with PEATC she reported not understanding what she could and could not do in the IEP meeting. Learning her rights helped her understand how she could participate and that her input would be heard in the meeting:

you can do all these things, they can't do anything to you, they're not gonna kick you out of the meeting be like sorry you can't have any services because you

haven't done what we want you to, oh, okay, all right now I can say whatever I want, they don't have to like it but we can work it, you know work it out.

Four parents believed they were appropriately participating in IEP meetings prior to their interaction with PEATC. Susana had a background in education and Beth was educated as a special educator. Bonnie's husband was a special educator which helped facilitate her participation in the IEP meeting. Though Laura had no background in special education she reported she had read many books on special education and had developed a collaborative relationship with the school personnel which she believed her ability to participate in IEP meetings. However, Laura also believed that her participation in IEP meetings would have been improved if she had known about them sooner:

reading through the PEATC literature and even searching for you know how to handle an IEP or how to handle certain issues within you know within that website, it, I think it would've like I said help me find my voice.

**Power.** Ten of the parents reported they believed they had power in the IEP meeting after their interactions with PEATC. The exception was once again Beth based on her knowledge and experience prior to her interaction with PEATC. By having power, parents felt like they had overt control over the IEP meeting and its outcome.

Amanda discussed how she was able to use her knowledge of the law to make the school personnel do what was required. She had attempted on several occasions to get an evaluation for Fred but the school system would not adhere to her request. It was not until she wrote a letter that cited specific areas of the law that they were willing to

conduct the evaluation “I've been requesting accommodations or at least some kind of test, evaluations for him for three years and it's only because I, I've bullied them into making the initial evaluation that they're finally responding to me.”

Alexis believed she was perceived as an equal member of the team. She attributed this equalization of power to PEATC preparing her for the meeting. She believed the school personnel did not expect her to be so well prepared “the power was with me, I think people were a little intimidated by me um it was a different time um maybe it was because I was well-prepared I don't know but I just I felt like an equal member.”

Five parents reported they believed they had more power in the meeting because they knew their rights. By expressing knowledge of their rights, the school personnel were more likely to allow them the ability to provide input and incorporate it into the IEP. For example, Sally talked about how knowing her rights gave her power in the IEP meeting “I felt like I had the upper hand, that I understood that I understood by law you need to give me this and this is one way I can get you to give me this.” Two parents discussed refusing to sign the IEP if they did not agree with it. Refusing to sign the IEP is an expression of power that puts pressure on the school to develop an IEP the parent will sign. Prior to their interaction with PEATC six of the parents did not realize they could refuse to sign an IEP with which they disagreed. Learning their rights gave them the power to refuse to consent to the IEP being proposed by school personnel. For example, Susan discussed how she expressed this power “and I told them I knew my rights and I knew the rights of my son and then that I was not going to sign anything until

they accepted.” Finally, five of the parents expressed an overall knowledge of the IEP process in addition to their rights helped give them power. Caroline expressed this succinctly by saying “the whole knowledge is power thing comes into play.”

**Summary.** The parents reported their experiences in IEP meetings were better after they had interacted with PEATC. Ten of the parents believed they had a better understanding of the IEP meeting to include the jargon and the process. Beth reported having a good understanding of these topics prior to her interaction with PEATC. Seven of the parents perceived they were treated differently by school personnel when they appeared knowledgeable about special education. Bonnie reported that even though she was knowledgeable, the school personnel continued to treat her the same way they had prior her interaction with PEATC. Katie reported educating herself prior to the first meeting so she did not have an understanding of how she would have been treated if she had not presented herself as knowledgeable. For the remaining two parents, the topic of how they were treated by school personnel after their interaction with PEATC was not discussed during the interview. All of the parents believed that they were able to effectively advocate for what they believed was the appropriate IEP for their child. Six of the parents believed they were actively participating in the IEP meeting. These six parents perceived they had not been meaningfully participating prior to using the services at PEATC. A seventh parent was still in the initial eligibility process and believed PEATC helped her participate in the IEP meeting in a manner that pushed the eligibility forward after several previously failed attempts. Four parents believed they were meaningfully participating in IEP meetings prior to their interaction with PEATC. Ten of

the parents reported they felt they now had power in the IEP meeting and could control the outcome of the IEP. Beth perceived she had the power in the IEP meeting prior to her interaction with PEATC.

### **Unexpected Findings**

There were several unexpected findings related to this study. These unexpected findings lead to limitations discussed in Chapter 5. All of the participants were mothers. Though two of the individuals who responded to the recruiting materials were men, neither of them fit the criteria to be included in the study. Six of the participants discussed their husbands being with them during IEP meetings but they did not participate in the study. Another unexpected finding was the level of education of the participants. Two of the participants had master's degrees, eight had bachelor's degrees, and one had attended some college. Eight of the parents were active in other advocacy oriented groups either prior to or after their interaction with PEATC.

Eight of the parents attempted to educate themselves from other sources prior to contacting PEATC. An additional two participants were either educated as a special education teacher or their spouse had a background in special education. This leaves only one participant who did not attempt to learn about special education prior to her interaction with PEATC. For nine of the participants, it was through either searching for information on special education or their activities in advocacy that exposed them to the services offered by PEATC. Nine of the parents reported PEATC was not an easily found source of information. Ten of the parents reported learning about PEATC either through another organization or while attempting to learn about something else.

## **CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS**

This study explored the perceptions of Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings of parents who used the services of a Parent and Training Information center (PTI). Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of the students whose parents use a selected Parent and Training Information center?
2. What are the perceptions of IEP meetings of selected parents who have used a selected Parent and Training Information center?
3. What are the parental perceptions of selected parents of a selected Parent and Training Information center?

The limitations of this study will be discussed later in this chapter; however, it is important to note the results and discussion focus on the perceptions of the 11 participants in this study. The participants were recruited through the PTI website, e-mail listserv, and Facebook page. Participants were also recruited through the Facebook pages and e-mail listservs of other disability organizations. Parents who had positive experiences in IEP meetings may not have had a need to contact the selected PTI and parents who had negative experiences with the PTI may have been less likely to respond to the recruiting materials for this study. This chapter also discusses unexpected findings, implications for practice, implications and policy, and future research.

## **Limitations**

Many factors contribute to the limitations of this study to include the method, the recruiting strategy, and the participants. The qualitative method used to collect and analyze the data in this study prohibits the results from being generalized beyond the participants in the study. Though the participants' reported experiences were consistent with some of the literature, the findings of this study apply only to these participants. Further, the results present the parents' reported experiences without providing the perspective of the school personnel who participated in the meetings discussed by the participants. The results focus solely on the parents' account of their interaction with the school personnel which may have been different from how the school personnel perceived the interactions.

**Gender and education.** The level of education and gender of the participants in the study further limit the generalizability of the results. All of the participants were women and 10 had completed at least a bachelor's degree. Participants of another gender or who were less educated may have reported different experiences in IEP meetings. Further, the level of education implies the participants had the access to social capital necessary to not only navigate the IEP process but may have been better able to identify and utilize resources such as the PTI than their less educated peers. The ability to recognize the difficulties these participants reported experiencing and to identify how the PTI reportedly helped them may have been influenced by both gender and level of education.

**Recruiting.** The manner by which the participants were recruited also limited the type of participants in the study. Parents who had positive experiences in IEP meetings may not have needed the services at PEATC and, therefore, would not have met the criteria to be included in the study. Initially, the recruitment materials were distributed by PEATC through their website, e-mail listserv, and Facebook page. The message approved by the George Mason University Institutional Review Board for recruiting through these means implied that the study was seeking participants who only had positive experiences with PEATC. This was exacerbated by the PEATC staff who added to the message when they distributed it stating the study was seeking individuals who had been helped by PEATC. The materials were eventually distributed through other e-mail listservs and the Facebook pages of other disability organizations. Given the majority of the participants were recruited directly through PEATC and the positive experiential tone of the recruiting materials, there was little likelihood of being able to recruit anyone who had negative experiences. Beyond the positive tone of the recruiting materials, parents who had negative experiences with PEATC may have ignored any messages related to PEATC. There was an attempt to counteract this problem by asking each participant if they knew anyone who had a negative experience with PEATC. Each participant responded “no” to this question. Finally, given the recruiting materials were distributed through a variety of internet based sources parents who do not have internet access would not have been able to receive the recruiting materials.

Every parent, who responded to the recruiting materials, met the criteria to be included in the study, and was willing to participate, was included in the study. The

recruiting took place over a four month period of time and only yielded 11 participants. The low response rate may be attributed to several factors. The materials were initially distributed toward the end of the school year. The end of the school year and summer may have been a busy time for parents making it difficult for them to participate in the study. Parents may have also been reluctant to respond to the materials due to fear that what they reported in the interview may be learned by the school which could result in a negative impact on their child. Another reason is that caring for a child with a disability requires considerable effort and the parent may not have had the time or energy to participate in the study. The final reason is that the recruiting materials were written in regard to positive experiences and parents who had negative experiences with PEATC may have either not wanted to participate or believed they were not the target of the recruiting materials.

**Sample not representative of special education population.** The size of the sample and the characteristics of the students whose parents were interviewed contribute to the limitations of this study. The majority of the students whose parents were interviewed in this study had other disabilities beyond their educational disability. The potential result was that these children had more complex needs resulting in the need to develop a more complicated IEP than students with high incidence disabilities. The disability types of students whose parents were interviewed were disproportionately representative of low incidence disabilities making the sample not representative of the special education population as a whole. Further, these parents reached out to a PTI in search of information meaning the information they had was insufficient.

A larger sample or different recruiting methods may have yielded a group of parents more representative of the special education population resulting in a smaller proportion of parents having complications in developing the IEP. Martin et al. (2006) studied the meetings of 109 students which included their parents. The students in this sample were much closer to being representative of the proportion of students with disabilities than the parents who utilize PEATC (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). The parents in Martin et al. (2006) had better perceptions of the IEP meeting than those in studies with smaller samples (i.e. Fish, 2006).

**Site specific.** The findings associated with conducting the study through PEATC may be different if the study were replicated at another PTI. Each PTI is autonomous in the services they offer and the manner in which they apply for funding. The differences in services and how each PTI is managed may impact other PTIs' ability to provide the level of service discussed by the participants in this study. "Beth," who had used four different PTIs, discussed how PTIs in some states were more effective than others. She attributed the differences to the amount of resources each PTI had and their ability to meet the needs of parents with those resources.

Each state also implements IDEA differently meaning the parents in Virginia may have different issues with the IEP meeting than parents in other states. An example of this is that the Virginia special education regulations require parental consent for any IEP to be implemented. In the District of Columbia, the parent signs that they participated in the IEP meeting but it does not mean they agree to the proposed IEP. The school

personnel make the decision and parents who disagree with the school personnel are required to exercise due process for a third party hearing officer to resolve the disagreement. Therefore, a PTI in the District of Columbia may be more focused on educating parents about how to file a due process claim than the effective negotiation strategies the participants in this study talked about learning from PEATC.

**Parents used multiple sources of information.** The parents in this study reported having better experiences in IEP meetings after using PEATC. They reported having a better understanding of the IEP meeting and being able to advocate for what they believed was the best educational program for their child. Several of the parents reported that the school personnel treated them differently when they presented themselves as knowledgeable. Finally, the parents perceived they were participating in the discussion at the IEP meeting and that they had the power to control what was occurring in the meeting. Though the experience for these 11 parents improved after they had used the services at PEATC, there are a few things to consider that may have also contributed to the improved experience.

In addition to using the services at PEATC, all of the parents in the study had used other sources for information to help them in IEP meetings. These information sources ranged from finding information on the internet to reading books to attending workshops on special education. The education the parents received prior to their interaction with PEATC may have contributed to the improved experience in the IEP meeting. Parents may have been receiving the same treatment by school personnel but

because they were more knowledgeable of special education after PEATC, they may have perceived they were treated differently.

Another factor that may have contributed to the improved understanding of the IEP meeting is that at the time of the interview parents had attended multiple IEP meetings. Simon (2006) studied the perceptions of IEP meetings of both parents and school personnel. One of the explanations offered for the better understanding of IEP meetings by school personnel was that they attended more IEP meetings than the parents. This finding implies that repetition will also help provide an understanding of the IEP meeting. Using Simon's argument for the present study, the attendance of multiple IEP meetings may have also contributed to the improved understanding and participation in IEP meetings.

Finally, the contact with PEATC itself, rather than the information may have contributed to the improved experience in IEP meetings. This potential placebo effect is supported by the data related to validation. Several of the parents overtly stated during the interview that just knowing PEATC existed was helpful for them. This issue is described further in Chapter 4 under validation. However, the knowledge that PEATC staff were there to help them and that other parents had similar experiences may have contributed to the improved perception of IEP meetings.

**Services were appropriate.** The present study assumes that all of the services the parents advocated for were appropriate for their child. Disagreements between the parents and the school personnel may have been caused by the school personnel's opinion that the services requested by the parent were not appropriate for the child.

However, further exploration of whether these services were appropriate for these children is beyond the scope of this study.

**Demographic data.** PEATC is not able to collect the student's disability and school level data from every parent who uses the service. Therefore, though the demographic characteristics are presented there are data missing. Having the data on all of these students may yield different results related to the characteristics of students whose parents use PEATC.

### **Unexpected findings**

Two of the unexpected findings discussed in Chapter 4 were that all of the participants were women and 10 were educated with at least a bachelor's degree. The participant without a bachelor's degree had attended some college. It could be argued that the IEP process should be easier to navigate for parents with this level of education. The ability to obtain a bachelor's degree requires access to social capital which all of the participants demonstrated they possessed through their ability to identify and utilize different sources of information. However, given the limitations of the sample discussed above, it cannot be assumed that all parents who use PEATC have this level of education. In reviewing the literature of parental participation in IEP meetings, participant level of education is not taken into account as a factor. In the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 related to parental perceptions of IEP meetings, Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008) was the only study that reported parental level of education as a demographic characteristic. However, there was no discussion regarding how the parent's level of education impacted parents' perceptions of IEP meetings.

It is possible that parents with less education were less willing to participate in the study because they may have limited understanding of the research process and how it may inform future practice. Parents with less education may have been somewhat unfamiliar with the required confidentiality of the research. Being unaware of confidentiality may have resulted in them being reticent to share their experiences due to concern their local school would learn what they said and it would have a negative impact on their child. The parents in the study discussed how having a child with a disability can be very hectic. Parents with fewer years of education may have found it more challenging to allocate time to participate in the study making them less likely to respond to the recruiting materials.

All of the people who responded to the recruiting materials that met the criteria to be included in the study were women. In scheduling the interview, I offered to interview both parents at the same time but they all indicated they would participate in the interview alone. Six of the women reported their husbands came to the IEP meetings with them though it was unclear how involved their husbands were outside of attending the IEP meeting. Two of the women indicated that the father was no longer present in the child's life. One possible reason why the study comprised of only women is that mothers may be more involved in the child's education than the father.

The literature on parental perceptions of IEP meetings has not explored the impact of gender on perceptions of IEP meetings. The studies that did include information on parent gender were Childre and Chambers (2005) which included four mothers, one grandmother, and one father; Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008) which included eight

women and one man, and Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008) which included five mothers and one father. Simon (2006) reported that most of the sample for her study was female and Stoner and Angel (2006) interviewed both parents for each of the four couples in the study. Other research related to parental perceptions referred to the participants as family members without identifying the gender (i.e. Fish, 2006; Hammond, Ingalls, & Trussell, 2008; Martin, Marshal, & Sale, 2004). However, the studies that report gender do so as a demographic characteristic and do not explore the impact of gender on parental perceptions of IEP meetings.

The responsibility for interacting with the school personnel on the daily management of the child may be placed on the mother making her more knowledgeable of the issues the parent faces in the IEP meeting. For the mothers in the present study, several of them talked about participation in the study as therapeutic as they were happy to share their experiences with someone willing to listen. They also perceived participating in the study as a potential way to correct a system they believe treated them poorly. Several of the mothers in the study attempted to refuse the recruitment incentive or tried to give it back because they wanted to emphasize how participation benefitted them independent of the incentive.

### **Implications for Practice**

Despite the limitations discussed above the results of this study yield several implications for practice. These implications should be considered with the limitations of the small sample, the study's lack of generalizability, and the participants were recruited from an organization they may not have contacted if they had different experiences in

IEP meetings. Nonetheless, the results present some factors to be considered in parent-professional interactions in IEP meetings. These factors include: (a) student characteristics, (b) parents struggled with early IEP meetings, (c) parental knowledge and due process, (d) effective negotiating strategies, (e) short term versus long term focus, and (f) improved perceptions of IEP meetings.

**Student Characteristics.** The demographic data provided by PEATC indicated that from 2007-2012, 25% of the parents who contacted them had children identified for special education services under the disability category of Autism. The proportion of parents who contacted PEATC is consistent with the proportion reported for PTIs nationally in National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2012) which reported 24.05% of parents who contacted the PTIs nationally were parents of children with Autism and National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011) which reported 22.13% of the parents who contacted PTIs nationally were parents of children with Autism. Conversely, 19% of the parents who contacted PEATC had children who were suspected of having a disability compared to 7.57% in National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2012) and 5.54% in National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011) reports. Finally, the number of parents who contacted PEATC whose children were identified with a Specific Learning Disability was consistent with the National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2012) and National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011) reports at approximately 7%.

The proportion of parents of children identified for special education under the disability category of Autism who used PEATC is inconsistent the proportion of all

children identified for special education services. Students identified as having Autism represent approximately 5% of all children identified with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). The proportion of parents who used PEATC whose children were identified as having a Specific Learning Disability was also inconsistent of students identified with that disability in the special education population. Students identified with Specific Learning Disabilities make up approximately 37% of the special education population (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

It may be possible that parents of children with Autism may be more likely to contact either PEATC or any of the PTIs because the IEP of a child with Autism may be more complex than the IEP of a child identified with other disabilities. This belief is consistent with Spann, Koehler, and Soenkson (2003) who studied the experiences of parents of children with Autism in IEP meetings and implied that parents of children of different disability types may have different experiences in IEP meetings. The present study and the Spann, Koehler, and Soenkson study focus on the perspectives of parents associated with some type of support group demonstrating the parents had access to social capital. The access to social capital of the parents who contacted PEATC and in Spann, Koehler, and Soenkson may not be typical of parents of children with either Autism or any other disability.

**Parents struggled with early IEP meetings.** All of the parents in the study reported difficulty with IEP meetings prior to their interactions with PEATC. The parents reported an overall lack of understanding with the special education language and

process. Several parents reported they acquiesced to the proposed IEP even though they did not agree with it due to their lack of understanding. Other parents reported trusting though they did not understand the IEP meeting; they trusted the school personnel would develop the IEP with their child's best interest in mind. The lack of understanding also led to the parents feeling as though they were not able to participate in the IEP discussion. These factors contributed to what the parents in the study reported as negative feelings to include anger, frustration, and isolation in the IEP meeting.

The lack of understanding and difficulty with participation is consistent with other research conducted in this area. Childre and Chambers (2005) found that parents had difficulty understanding special education jargon and that the parent believed they were not actively participating in the IEP meeting. The parents in Stoner et al. (2005) reported that they found the IEP process confusing and traumatic as they struggled to advocate for what they believe were the appropriate services for their children. Hammond, Ingalls, and Trussell (2008) interviewed 212 parents many of whom reported being anxious, shocked, and overwhelmed by the first IEP meeting. Approximately half of the parents in Hammond, Ingalls, and Trussel also reported having difficulty understanding the special education jargon.

Both Fish (2006) and Simon (2006) reported in their studies that parents were not able to participate in developing the IEP because it was developed prior to the meeting and the school personnel did not allow parental input to influence the IEP. This is consistent with the early experience "Nancy" reported where her input was entered into an area of the IEP and she was then asked to sign the IEP. Fish (2006) found that parents

did not believe their input was valued during the IEP meeting which is consistent with what was reported by eight of the parents in the study. Conversely, Martin et al. (2006) found that parents were satisfied with their overall participation in the IEP meeting.

Members of the U.S. Congress reauthorized IDEA in 2004 with one goal being school personnel and parents would develop collaborative relationships in working with students with disabilities (H. R. Rep. 108-77, 2003). Though the findings of this study are not generalizable they are consistent with other research related to parents' perceptions of IEP meetings. The lack of understanding, lack of participation, and negative emotions, reported by the parents in this study served as barriers for nine of the parents to developing a collaborative relationship with the school. Therefore, it may be beneficial for school personnel to focus on educating parents about special education concepts and processes prior to the initial IEP meeting. Though resources such as Parent Resource Centers are available in the school district, parents may not be aware of their existence. By explaining special education concepts and processes both before and during the IEP meeting parents may be more likely to trust the school personnel and the collaborative relationship can be established.

**Parental knowledge and due process.** Ten of the parents in the study reported that the lack of knowledge about special education resulted in negative feelings about the IEP meeting. Parents also reported that they did not feel as though they were at, but not participating in the IEP meeting. Lake and Billingsley (2000) studied the sources of conflict that lead to a due process claim and found the parent's lack of knowledge and feeling as though they are not an equal part of the IEP team were contributing factors to

the due process claim. Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008) also studied the factors contributing to due process claims and found parental lack of knowledge and a parent feeling as though they are not participating in special education decision making also contributed to parents filing a due process claim.

The parents in the present study reported that PEATC educated them about special education rights and services which gave them a better understanding of the IEP meeting. After their interaction with PEATC, the parents felt like they were at least equal to, if not had more power than, the school personnel in the IEP meeting. It is possible that the service provided by PEATC helps mitigate the issues presented by both Lake and Billingsley (2000) and Mueller, Singer, and Draper (2008). If the services provided by PEATC help remove the factors that could contribute to a due process claim then it is possible that PTIs may have the ability to help parents and schools avoid having to experience a due process hearing to settle their disputes. Avoiding due process will help save the school district and the parent the time and money associated with adjudicating a due process claim. Avoiding due process to solve disagreements could arguably prevent the relationship between the parent and the school personnel from becoming contentious thus helping foster a collaborative relationship.

**Effective negotiating strategies.** Ten of the parents discussed learning specific strategies from PEATC to help them interact with the school personnel. The parents reported these strategies focused on helping them keep calm and be able to appropriately ask questions when they disagreed with what the school personnel were proposing. It is possible the use of these strategies helped the parents to effectively negotiate with the

school personnel. The parent remaining calm during the meeting may have contributed to a more productive conversation between the parent and the school personnel. These strategies may have also helped the parent develop a collaborative relationship with the school personnel so that they were working together on developing the IEP.

**Short term versus long term focus.** All of the parents in the study discussed their focus on how the IEP being developed would impact their children either later in their school career or later on in life. They felt pressure that if the child did not have the appropriate educational program at the beginning of their school career then the child would not be successful later in life. These beliefs ranged from a fear that the child would run away at the age of 15 and become pregnant if she was not able get services in elementary school to the fear that the child's life would be ruined if a mistake was made at the IEP meeting in kindergarten. The parents were focused on how the IEP would help the child be successful once the student left school.

Conversely, school personnel develop IEPs one year at a time. IDEA requires that the IEP be reviewed at least annually and it is possible for different people to be developing the IEP from year to year. The school personnel may focus on the progress they believe the student will make in a year and will report on that progress quarterly.

Sources of school conflict include parental lack of knowledge and the parent's belief they are not participating in special education decision making (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008). It is possible that the difference between the long term perspective of the parent and the short term perspective of the school personnel may be another source of conflict between the parent and the school

personnel. This difference becomes manifested in a difference between needs and expectations between the parent and the school personnel. The parent needs the child to have an education focused on their specific abilities to help them be as independent as possible. In the case of the participants of the present study, this did not mean full inclusion in the general education setting rather it meant focusing on specific skills for each child to increase their independence when they enter adulthood. As a result of the parental need, the parent expects the IEP to be developed with postsecondary issues addressed at an early age. However, the school personnel have a need to focus on procedural compliance and how they can implement an IEP within their current structure. The school personnel may expect that the IEP will run for a year at a time and because it will be revised each year there may be less focus on the postsecondary needs of the student. Therefore, it is this difference in needs and expectations of the IEP that may have resulted in conflict between the parents in this study and the school personnel.

**Improved perceptions of IEP meetings.** Ten of the parents in the study had better perceptions of IEP meetings after their interactions with PEATC. Specifically, they believed they understood the content of the meeting, were able to effectively advocate for what they believed was an appropriate educational program, they were able to participate in the IEP meeting, and they had power in the meeting. Though the majority of these parents had used other sources of information to become educated about special education, they attributed the improved outcomes to their interactions with PEATC. The participants may have felt obligated to say this because they were participating in a study about PEATC. However, many of them talked about how the

parent-helping-parent model was particularly beneficial to their education. They reported that sharing their experiences with other parents who had similar experiences helped empower them and give them the confidence to actively participate in the IEP meeting. However, the feeling of empowerment may have also come from just knowing PEATC existed, other parents have had similar experiences, and they can advocate for their child as well.

The parents' perceptions that PEATC helped them advocate for what they believed to be an appropriate educational program for their child is an important finding of this study. Though there are many factors that limit both the generalizability of these findings and the actual influence PEATC had in helping these parents advocate, the parents believed it was PEATC who influenced this phenomenon. Parents being able to effectively advocate for an educational program demonstrates the school personnel and parent are collaboratively developing the IEP. The findings of Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008) and Stoner et al. (2005) indicated parents had difficulty obtaining what they believed was appropriate for their child. The participants in the present study reported they had better experiences after they used the services at PEATC.

### **Policy Implications**

Though many factors contribute to the limitations of this study the results have several policy implications. These implications are: (a) broader study of the PTIs, (b) the efficiency of the PTIs in their current form, (c) impact on IDEA, (d) educating school personnel, and (e) building awareness of PTIs.

**Broader study of the PTIs.** The goal of this study was to explore parent perceptions of a selected PTI. All of the parents in this study reported their beliefs that PEATC was beneficial to helping them navigate the IEP process. Prior to their interactions with PEATC, ten of them talked about their struggles in the IEP meetings and their difficulty securing what they believed were the appropriate services. After their interaction with PEATC they reported being more knowledgeable, having the ability to participate, having the ability to effectively advocate, being able to actively participate, and having power in the IEP meeting. Though these results come from a small sample it does provide some evidence for the effectiveness of PTIs.

The results of this study are consistent with the reports that the National Parent Technical Assistance Center has generated. The National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2011) report found a majority of the parents who used the PTIs across the nation were able to help their child obtain a more appropriate education, were more knowledgeable about how to work with schools, provide parents with relevant information to make decisions, and help parents resolve differences with the school. The National Parent Technical Assistance Center (2012) report had similar findings to the 2011 report. However, there are significant issues with the methods for how data was collected and analyzed for these reports which are discussed in Chapter 2.

Given the limitations of both the present study and the reports generated by the National Parent Technical Assistance Center it is recommended that the U.S. Congress authorize a comprehensive study of the effectiveness of the PTIs. The results of this study may help inform the development of a survey which would facilitate data collection

from a larger and potentially more representative sample than composes the present study. A more comprehensive study will provide the members of the U.S. Congress with a better understanding of how the PTIs operate and if they benefit all parents in the same manner as the findings in this study.

**Efficiency.** The parents in the study reported how PEATC provided them with information about special education concepts, rights, and services. However, the majority of this information seemed to be consistent with IDEA at the federal level without any specificity to what was required in Virginia. For example, parents attended workshops that either focused on IDEA or meeting other parents of children with disabilities. Several parents called and exchanged e-mails with PEATC which were focused on special education rights as provided by IDEA.

There are currently 104 PTIs across the country receiving a total of \$30 million a year to help support their operation. If the PTIs are going focus on what is required in IDEA it may be possible to develop a more cost efficient manner to deliver the parent-helping-parent model that is unique to the PTIs. For example, there could be one national call center with personnel knowledgeable in how several different states interpret IDEA. There could also be regional centers with the same focus that also conduct workshops and trainings to educate parents about special education. Though the parents in the study were pleased with PEATC, a more streamlined approach to the PTIs may help ensure the service quality reported in the present study is consistent with all PTIs.

In addition to reviewing the efficiency of how PTIs are currently run it is also important to note that in some cases parents have self-organized into parent-helping-

parent groups to help share information. Mueller, Milian, and Lopez (2010) studied how parents used a support group they started to help them learn about special education. One of the parents in the present study was a member of a similar group and it was through this group that she learned about PEATC. Therefore, the information shared through self-organized parent support groups may be as beneficial as the information provided by a PTI.

**Impact on IDEA.** In Chapter 1, Figure 2 presents a co-construction model of how PTIs are authorized by IDEA, how PTIs influence parents, and the manner through which parents can influence subsequent reauthorizations of IDEA either through due process or membership in advocacy organizations. The parents in the present study were all very active in the special education community and eight of them were members of advocacy oriented groups. The child of the ninth parent had just received special education services and she wanted to become more involved in the special education community. Some of the parents were active prior to their interaction with PEATC but others became active in the community after their interaction with PEATC.

The parents in the present study all reported having bad experiences in IEP meetings, benefitted from the services at PEATC, and believed their subsequent IEP meetings were better. These parents lost their trust in the school personnel and in some cases believed the school personnel were deliberately deceiving them to implement the IEP they desired. Given the level of involvement in advocacy groups these parents are likely to share their experiences with others to include some of the disability groups that may be able to influence the next reauthorization of IDEA. These parents may make

recommendations to the disability groups about how school personnel should interact with parents in IEP meetings in an attempt to codify how parents should be treated to prevent other parents from having similar experiences. During her interview, “Nancy” specifically talked about the importance of her advocacy setting precedent for other children with disabilities in the county where she lived at the time. Since the interview she had been appointed to the local Board of Education where she is living. This is an example of how these parents may attempt to influence the law in the future as presented in Figure 2 in Chapter 1.

**Educating school personnel.** Simon (2006) studied the perceptions of school personnel regarding parental participation in IEP meetings. The school personnel perceptions were paired with the parental participations of their participation in IEP meetings and though the school personnel believed the parents were participating, the parents believed they were not. The disparate perspectives reported in Simon demonstrate that school personnel may not be aware of the negative perceptions of IEP meetings being reported by parents. It may be beneficial to provide additional training to special educators to help them understand the parental experience in IEP meetings. Given that approximately 25% of the parents who contacted PEATC were parents of children with Autism, and this proportion is consistent with the national reports of parents who use PTIs (National Parent Technical Assistance Center, 2011, 2012) special educators who work this population may particularly need addition guidance in working with parents.

The training for school personnel could come in the form of increasing the focus on parental collaboration in teacher preparation programs. Trainings could be provided for current professionals to help improve their interactions with parents in IEP meetings. The focus of the training should be on educating the parents on special education concepts and processes. There should be an emphasis on avoiding jargon when talking with the parent as the lack of understanding of the jargon can lead to negative feelings and impedes the parent's ability to participate in the IEP meeting. The training should also focus on soliciting feedback from the parent throughout the course of the meeting to help ensure they are engaged in the conversation. Given that the parental lack of knowledge and a feeling that they are not participating can lead to a due process claim (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008) helping improve the ability of school personnel to interact with these parents in these areas may help prevent conflicts and due process.

**Building awareness of PTIs.** Though the results are not generalizable, this study shows that a small sample of parents found the PTI to be beneficial. The feature that seemed to be most helpful to them was the parent-helping-parent model. Though several of the parents had received similar information to what PEATC provided, it may be that they needed to hear the information from a peer in order for it to be meaningful. The other unique service the parents reported PEATC provided that they believed to be beneficial was the ability to call or e-mail PEATC for specific questions or guidance. PEATC provided resources to parents that the parents were able to bring to the IEP

meetings. The parents believed these resources helped contribute to them being able to effectively advocate for their child.

However, for the majority of the participants in the study, PEATC was not an obvious resource for them. Many of them found PEATC accidentally while looking for something else. Though not every parent of a child with disability will need the services provided by PEATC, those that do need their services are not likely to find them. PEATC staff should work towards building an awareness of their program so that parents who need their services are able to access them. Given less than 20% of parents with children with disabilities access any of the PTIs (National Parent Technical and Assistance Center, 2012) this may be a problem other PTIs are experiencing.

### **Future Research**

The present study provides some insight into the perceptions of IEP meetings of 11 parents of children with disabilities who used a PTI. Given the limitations of this study additional research will be needed to provide a better understanding of this issue. This section discusses additional research that could help contribute to the knowledge of the impact of PTIs on parents' perceptions of IEP meetings.

**Replication and extension.** The results of the present study are only generalizable to the participants. This study included 11 women all of whom had a college education and used at least one of the services at PEATC. Replicating the study and changing the PTI, the level of education, or the gender of the participants may yield different results. Therefore, replicating this study with either a different type of participant or a different PTI would add to the existing knowledge of PTIs.

**Survey of parents.** As discussed above the present study only provides information on the perceptions of 11 parents who used a single PTI. The utilization of either a different PTI or interviewing different parents may have yielded different results. However, the results of the present study could be used to develop a survey that could be distributed to all parents who have used a PTI. Having a larger sample and surveying parents who used different PTIs would provide a better understanding of perceptions of IEP meetings of parents who have used a PTI. Though this approach would also have limitations it would build on the existing knowledge of this topic.

**PTIs and due process.** Lack of knowledge and participation as factors leading to a due process claim and the potential for PTIs to mitigate those issues are discussed above. Additional research should be conducted to learn more about the interaction, if any, between PTIs and due process claims. Specifically, parents who have used PTIs and have filed due process claims should be interviewed to determine if the PTI had a role in filing the due process claim and if so, what that role was. This will provide a better understanding as to whether or not the use of PTIs either prevent, facilitate, or have no impact on parents filing a due process claim.

**School personnel perception.** The effectiveness of the PTIs can also be determined by interviewing school personnel. School personnel could be interviewed regarding their perspective on parental participation in IEP meetings. The study could focus on school personnel perceptions of parents who have either used or not used a PTI. The school personnel would report on their perceptions of the parent's participation,

knowledge of special education, and overall ability advocate for their child, to see if the PTI had any influence over the parent who had used it.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Letter of Introduction**

David Blaiklock  
3034 Mission Square Drive  
Fairfax, VA 22031  
703-941-8810

Suzanne Bowers, Executive Director  
100 N. Washington Street Suite 234  
Falls Church, VA 22046

Dear Ms. Bowers,

I am writing to ask for your help in understanding the perceptions of parents who use your center in their ability to participate in IEP meetings. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University and my dissertation is focused on the impact of parent centers like yours on helping parents participate in special education decision making. I would like to interview 12-15 of the parents who have used the resources at your parent center and share the benefits of using centers like yours with both the special education community and policy makers.

Participation in the study would be completely voluntary by the parents and all information will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used in the final reports of the project. The study has been approved by the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board.

At your convenience, I would like to schedule a time to meet to discuss the specifics of the study and how we may be able to work together on this project. Please call me at 703-568-2055 or e-mail me at [dblaiklo@masonlive.gmu.edu](mailto:dblaiklo@masonlive.gmu.edu) to let me know when you may be available to meet.

As the guardian of an adult sibling with a disability, I know that navigating systems to obtain the appropriate services can be very challenging. Even as an experienced special educator, it has been challenging to gain the knowledge necessary to learn what is available.

I greatly appreciate your time and consideration.

Many Thanks,

David Blaiklock  
Doctoral Candidate  
George Mason University

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Recruiting Message**

Greetings!

My name is David Blaiklock and I am working on my dissertation at George Mason University. My study is focused on how parent centers such as the Parent Education Advocacy Center (PEATC) help parents participate in IEP meetings. I am recruiting parents to participate in interviews. If you know anyone who either has or you think has used the services at PEATC, then please forward this to them. Interested participants can contact me at 703-568-2055 or [dblaiklo@masonlive.gmu.edu](mailto:dblaiklo@masonlive.gmu.edu).

Thanks!

Me llamo David Blaiklock y estoy trabajando en mi disertación en la Universidad de George Mason. Mi estudio se concentra en cómo los centros de padres, tales como PEATC ayudan a los padres a participar en las reuniones de IEP. Estoy reclutando a padres para participar en las entrevistas. Si conoce a alguien o si piensa que conoce a alguien que ha usado los servicios que PEATC ofrece, por favor envíele este mensaje. Los participantes que están interesados pueden comunicarse conmigo, 703-568-2055 o [dblaiklo@masonlive.gmu.edu](mailto:dblaiklo@masonlive.gmu.edu).

¡Gracias!

## **APPENDIX C**

### **Informed Consent**

*Parental perceptions of the impact of parent centers on their ability to participate in Individualized Education Plan meetings*

#### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to learn from parents who have used parent centers to help them with special education. We want to learn how you feel about your ability to participate in IEP meetings. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to be interviewed for one hour. There may also be questions after the interview.

#### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

#### **BENEFITS**

There are no direct benefits for participating other than to further research on the impact of the parent centers on parents' ability to participate in IEP meetings.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. Each interview will be recorded. The recording will be transcribed by the researcher. The transcripts and recordings will be kept on the researcher's computer. The computer will be password protected. Your name will be changed in the final report of the study. The audio recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study.

#### **PARTICIPATION**

Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time. You may withdraw from the study for any reason. If you decide not to participate there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. A \$20 gift card for each family whose parent(s) participate in the study.

#### **CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by David Blaiklock in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. He may be reached at 703-568-2055

for questions. He may also be reached to report a research-related problem. The research is being supervised by Dr. Penny Earley in the College of Education and Human Development at George Mason University. She may be reached at 703-993-3361. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

I agree to be audio taped

I do not agree to be audio taped

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Signature

## **APPENDIX D**

### **Interview Guide**

1. How was your child originally found eligible for special education services?
2. What did you do when the school contacted you about special education?
3. How much did you know about special education the first time you met with the school about it?
4. Did you look for information on special education when the school first contacted you and if so, how did you look for it?
5. How did you participate in the first IEP meeting?
6. Describe your experience in the first IEP meeting?
7. Why did you seek out the parent center?
8. How did you find the parent center?
9. What services from the parent center have you used?
10. How many times and how often did you use the parent center services?
11. What other resources do you use to help with information about special education?
12. Has your participation in IEP meetings changed since you started using the parent centers and if so, how?
13. What was your experience in IEP meetings after you started using the services at the parent center?
14. Did the parent center help you participate in the IEP meeting, if so, how, and if not, why were the services not helpful?

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

David Blaiklock graduated from Randolph-Macon Academy, Front Royal, Virginia, in 1993. He received his Bachelor of Science from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1997. He has 15 years of experience in the special education field in a variety of capacities to include being a director of residential services, special education teacher, and education program coordinator. He received his Master of Education in Special Education from George Mason University in 2008.