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Parental Perceptions of Inclusion of Autism Spectrum Disorder Students in the Educational Process

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Robin D. Waltman

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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Parental Perceptions of Inclusion of Autism Spectrum Disorder Students in the

Educational Process

by

Robin D. Waltman

EdS, Rowan University, 2005

MA, Rowan University, 2004

BS, Rowan University, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

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Abstract

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex biological disorder that encompasses a wide range of symptoms and varies in degree of severity. Parents and caregivers rely on programs offered by school districts that encourage parental participation in the educational process and have differing views on inclusion in educational decisions. The purpose of the current study was to ascertain the views of parents of children with ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process. The research question addressed the lived experiences and perceptions of parents of students with and ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process. A case study methodology was utilized, with data sources consisting of interviews and case files. Participants were parents of children diagnosed with ASD receiving special education services. These 9 participants volunteered from a list of eligible parents. Data were analyzed using hand coding. The results indicated overall satisfaction with children's inclusion. However, the parents in the study expressed concerns about multiple barriers to their inclusion. Recommendations include stability of support staff and training in symbolic interactionism theory. This study contributes to social change by providing information that parents can use to become more involved in the educational decision-making process. Insights on parents' perceptions may also inform school district leaders on how to include parents in the educational process. Greater involvement by parents, staff, and agencies may assist students with ASD to become better prepared for life and ensure that they have received the best possible services throughout their educational years leading to positive social change.

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Dedication

This dissertation research study represented a commitment and dedication to the memory of my mother, Loretta Shideler, and my brother, Jon Shideler, who supported me emotionally and financially while I completed this dissertation. They were always so proud of what I was achieving in school. Most of my family never graduated from high school; however, they encouraged me to go as far as my mind would take me.

To Carlos (Charlie) Lopez, when my mother passed away, you kept motivating me and encouraging me. You helped me through some tough times and I appreciate you so much.

To my children, Sean and Anthony, words cannot express my love and gratitude for understanding when I spent hours and days completing this dissertation. You have always been my biggest cheerleaders. I hope I have made you proud and have set a good example for what you can achieve in life if you set your mind to it.

To Jacqueline Cook-Jones, my academic advisor who went above and beyond to help me. She talked with me weekly and gave me the support and encouragement I needed to keep trying when I thought I might quit. She motivated me and made me believe in myself. Without her, this dissertation might never have been completed. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I also thank God for giving me the strength, motivation, and determination to complete this task.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Teachers and administrators in the United States are mandated to include parents in the educational planning process for students with disabilities (Mandlawitz, 2002). However, inclusion of parents is not always practiced or effective (Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011). Parental involvement benefits the students, parents, and community. Research has shown, for instance, that parental involvement is related to different student achievement indicators, including better grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Smith et al., 2011). In Chapter 1, I explore the perceptions of parents of children with ASD on their inclusion in the educational process and address the barriers they encounter in inclusion. This chapter includes the problems statement, nature and purpose of the study, theoretical framework, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

Background

ASD is a developmental disability that is manifest on a spectrum. The number of diagnoses is increasing each year in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in 2010, roughly 417,000 students between the ages of 3-21 received services in the category of autism under the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). ASD encompasses a range of complex severities of the disorder. This disability is diagnosed using levels to delineate the severity of symptoms (APA, 2013).

Parents play an important, but sometimes inadequately addressed, role in ensuring educational success for children with ASD. Parental involvement with all students is

related to student achievement (Smith et al., 2011). In addition to increased academic success, parental involvement has social and financial benefits, including improved health, decreased welfare dependence, and reduced crime (Smith et al., 2011). The earlier parental involvement begins in a child's education, the more powerful the beneficial effects (Bracke & Corts, 2012). Yet, U.S. school districts have not always encouraged parent involvement in the planning and implementing of educational programs for children with ASD (Boshoff, Gibbs, Phillips, Wiles, & Porter 2018). Special education legislation and court cases have expanded the rights of children with disabilities and the rights of parents to be included in the educational process, yet they have also placed restrictions and expectations on the part of parents and school staff. These restrictions and expectations may have the potential to create an adversarial relationship that will stand in the way of an equal partnership (Fish, 2008). Parents have described advocacy as an important coping strategy that allows them to direct their emotions into action (Boshoff et al., 2018).

Although there is research on the relationship between parents and educators (Mandlawitz, 2002; Miller & Zwaigenbaum, 2012), there is little research on the perceptions of parents of children with ASD and their views on their inclusion in the educational process, according to my review of the literature. Partnerships that include parents in the educational process in a meaningful and substantive way are imperative to ensure that parents have access to involvement in the decision-making process. In the current research study, I explored parental perceptions of their involvement in the educational process.

Problem Statement

There is increasing interest in studying the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities. However, there is limited information and studies completed that concern parents of children with ASD and their inclusion in the educational process. Studies have shown differing results in parents' satisfaction with their inclusion in the educational process (Lindsay, Ricketts, Peacey, Dockrell, & Charman, 2015). The majority of the scholarly research has focused on the school districts' perceptions of inclusion of parents and the best practices for inclusion (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Cook, et al., 2014). The perceptions of the parents have not been thoroughly investigated. I addressed this gap in research as the inclusion of parents in the educational process has been acknowledged as vital to successful programs.

Services for children with ASD are imperative for emotional and social growth (Miller & Zwaigenbaum, 2012). The rate of children being diagnosed with ASD has dramatically increased to an estimated one in 105 children in the United States (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009). This rapid increase has challenged U.S. school districts to find ways to educate children with ASD in ways that address deficits in the least restrictive environment. Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are the framework with which districts design educational programs for children with ASD (Odom, Collet-Klingenberg, Rogers, & Hatton, 2010).

Educational services and programs are a key aspect of successful development for children with ASD. Parental involvement in the educational process is necessary in order to ensure proper educational goals (Miller & Zwaigenbaum, 2012). The roles that parents

have played in planning and implementing services for children have evolved from an institution/agency approach to a family-centered approach (Karst & Vaughn Van Hecke, 2012). Because of this, it has become imperative to encourage parent involvement. However, districts have not always encouraged parent involvement in the planning and implementing of educational programs for children with ASD (Karst & Vaughn Van Hecke, 2012).

Wang and Sheikh-Khalil (2014) asserted that much of the current research concerning parental attitudes toward the special education process focused on inclusion. This research has involved parents of children with a variety of disabilities. Researchers asked the parents about their opinion regarding what they wished for their children and not about their personal experiences and perceptions (Valle, 2011). Marder and deBettencourt (2012) proposed that more research is needed that is specific parents of children with ASD and their perceptions of their current inclusion in the educational process, specifically in special education.

In order to work effectively with parents, it is imperative that school districts understand parental perceptions of their role in the educational process. There is limited information on parental perceptions regarding their inclusion in the educational process and decision-making process for their children with ASD (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2010; McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson 2011). Most of the research on inclusion has been of the perspectives of the school staff. The perspectives of the parents have largely been unaddressed. I am addressing this gap in the research as inclusion of parents in the educational process is now a federal mandate.

The role of the parents regarding their role in the education of their child with a disability has not been completely defined. This is a significant gap considering the importance of parents as the primary caregivers of their children. Parents' unique knowledge of their children can provide more effective tools and methods to assist educators in ensuring their children's academic success (Valle, 2011). Parents are knowledgeable about their children's behaviors outside of school, whereas teachers would not have this knowledge. Therefore, this study can assist teachers in making better decisions to respond to students' needs by providing them with more information.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions of parents of children with ASD regarding their inclusion and decision-making abilities in the educational process using the case study design. I conducted this study in order to gather information about the lived experiences of parents of children with ASD in regard to their perception of involvement in the educational process. The sample included caregivers of nine children with ASD. The children were elementary and middle school students in a rural southern New Jersey city. Parents were interviewed using open-ended questions regarding their experiences. These parents had children enrolled in the school district at the time of the study. These children had been receiving special education services for at least 2 years.

I used a single case study design as it offered a richer depth of information related to perceptions of parents. Information included perceived barriers, encouragement in decision-making, and any differences in perceptions between elementary and middle

school experiences. The goal was to use the information gathered in the study to better understand how parents can be involved in meaningful ways in special education. The results of this study may assist parents and educators to work together in order to effectively ensure the best educational programs for students with ASD.

Research Questions

The research question (RQ) for this study concerned the perceptions of parents of children with ASD on inclusion in the educational process using multiple case studies. The primary RQ was, What are the lived experiences and perceptions of parents of students with and ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process? I also sought to answer the following four subquestions:

- 1 What barriers are encountered for inclusion?
- 2 What steps does the school district make in inclusion of parents?
- 3 How are parents included when decisions are made regarding educational programs and services?
- 4 How can parents and schools ensure parental participation?

Theoretical Framework

For the theoretical framework for this research, I used symbolic interactionism theory. According to symbolic interactionism, humans give meanings to objects and social interactions and interpret their use (Konecki, 2018). They do this by defining the object, society, and self (Konecki, 2018). People form symbolic meaning through social interaction (Totkova, 2019). These meanings are important in how individuals act. They act according to their beliefs rather than what is expected in an objective sense. People

interpret others' behavior, and these interpretations serve to form a social bond between individuals (Hughes, 2016; Totkova, 2019). Therefore, the overall feature of symbolic interactionism is the inseparability of people and the context in which they live (Handberg, Thorne, Midtgaard, Nielsen, & Lomborg, 2017).

Symbolic interactionism is a microsocial perspective that focuses on individual-level interactions in groups such as families and schools. Symbolic interactionism is associated with George Mead and Herbert Blumer (Lee, 2015; Seligman & Darling, 2007). The construct of symbolic interactionism is based on the proposition that the empirical world is the natural world of human group life. The problems are embedded in this natural world, and studies are conducted, as well as interpreted in this natural world (Salvini, 2019). Symbolic interactionism is a useful framework for understanding opposing points of view that can pose obstacles in decision-making processes (Salvini, 2019). By using symbolic interactionism as the theoretical framework for this study, I had a key resource to guide the research process, maintain focus, and enhance the quality throughout the study (see Handberg et al., 2017).

Nature of the Study

I used a single case study methodology to conduct this research. This method provided in-depth information regarding the lived experience of the participants with respect to their inclusion in the educational process related to the special education programming. The purpose of a case study is to describe the phenomenon in a particular context (Giorgi, 2008). Yin (2015) stated that case studies are ideal for understanding

complex social phenomena. The design allows the researcher to retain the meaningful characteristics of real-life events.

I used a case study approach in order to describe the meaning of lived experiences of several individuals (Yin, 2015). Interviews can provide the realistic views of participants which will contribute to the current research. In addition, case studies are holistic (well-developed), empirical (naturalistic and field oriented), interpretive (researcher relies on intuition), and emphatic (value commitment). Leedy and Ormrod (2013) asserted that problem identification is needed to determine RQs before determining appropriate case design. Ethnology, phenomenology, and case study were research designs considered for this study.

Ethnology is an immersion into a society or culture (Leedy & Ormrod 2013). Investigation of the society is accomplished through either observation or participation, or a combination of both. As the goal of this study was to explore participation of parents of students with ASD in the educational process, immersion into this population could not be accomplished. Therefore, ethnology was not an appropriate method.

Phenomenological methodology explores the lived experiences of a population (Leedy & Ormrod 2013). This methodology is ideal for investigation of emotional situations. Common experiences are needed in order to utilize phenomenology (Yin, 2015). This study does not seek to describe the meanings of the participants' common experiences; phenomenological methodology is also not appropriate for this study.

Case study methodology allows researchers to explore situations in detail using either a quantitative or qualitative approach (Yin 2015). Case studies allow for improved

contextual identification and measurement. Case studies also allow researchers to identify hypotheses and variables, along with causality (Yin, 2015).

Since this research sought to explore reasons why parents may not feel included in the educational process and to gain a better understanding of parents' perceptions of their inclusion in the educational process, a case study methodology was an appropriate choice.

Researchers conduct case studies to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and in its real-world context (Yin, 2013). A descriptive case study design was found to be suitable for this research. It allows for parents to detail their experiences in the educational process. Interviews and document review from the students' case files are used to triangulate the data of this study.

The sample of this study included the parents of 9 students with ASD who receive Special Education and Related Services. These students are in elementary and middle school in a rural southern New Jersey city. This sample was chosen randomly and the sampling was provided by the director of the Special Education department.

Definitions

Prior to the review of the literature in Chapter 2, it is important to define two terms:

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD): ASD has been used in many different ways to describe varying degrees of the disability. There was a diagnostic criterion for autism in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV TR, American Psychiatric Association, 2000)*. Clinicians described autism

along a spectrum, from severe to high functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In addition, Asperger's syndrome was another classification in the *DSM-IV*, and it was often confused with high-functioning autism. The latest edition of the *DSM*, which is the *DSM-V*, has combined some of the developmental disabilities under the category of autism spectrum disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). I discuss the criteria for this disability in further detail in Chapter 2.

Parental involvement: Parental involvement can mean different things to different people. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 defined parental involvement as parents playing an important role in assisting their children's learning by being partners in the educational process. Wong (2008) defined parental involvement as the extent to which parents are interested in, knowledgeable about, and willing to take an active role in the everyday activities of their children. Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler (2007) asserted that parental involvement consists of two subtypes: home-based and school-based involvement. Home-based involvement involves working with children when they are at home (Green et al., 2007). School-based involvement means supporting their children in the school environment (Green et al., 2007). I took into consideration the differing interpretations of parental involvement as I attempted to uncover the factors that contributed to or impeded parental involvement in the educational process.

Assumptions

Assumptions made for this study included the following:

- The responses given by participants were truthful to the best of their knowledge.

- Parents interviewed are currently advocates for their children in the educational process.
- The in-depth interviews were appropriate to explore the parents' perceptions on their inclusion in the educational process.
- Parents wish to be involved in all aspects of the education process.
- The interview questions assisted in collection of correct information to address the RQs.
- The semi structured interview questions were phrased in a way that parents in the study were able to understand.
- The results of the study may lead to positive social change.

Scope and Delimitations

In order to be chosen as a participant, the parent must have a child classified as eligible for Special Education and Related Services under the criteria for autism. In addition, the parents must have attended at least one individualized education program (IEP) meeting in the last 2 years. This allows the parents to have a background in order to relate their experiences. Because of the delimitations that the parents in this study reside in one city, the results of this study may not be generalizable to the same population that live in other geographical areas. Another delimitation for this study is that the parent interviewed might be biased due to certain cultural or demographic factors that are inherent in perceptions, along with biases from perceived exclusions from the educational process. The last delimitation to the current study involves the choice of the school district from which the parents are chosen. The selected district has a large number of

programs for students with ASD. Along with a behavioral specialist and staff trained to assist the parents. This level of support assists in determining their knowledge of the services available based on their participation.

Limitations

There are potential weaknesses to the study which will be controlled. First, a limit to the generalization of this study is that the focus will be on one school district. The findings may not be the same in a different district with a different population background. However, the results of this study may be beneficial to areas close in proximity and similarities in the background of population. Although this is a limitation, the findings cannot be controlled by the generalization of other districts. Another limitation is the time at which the study was conducted and interview questions asked. Participants may give different answers at a later point in time; however, this is a glimpse of what the participants perceive in that particular moment. Finally, the small number of participants may limit the study in its ability to be generalized to a larger population. However, the stratification within the participant pool (gender, age, income level, education and occupation) occurred and may be able to be generalized to districts in similar areas with similar populations.

Significance

The research on the topic of ASD may be influenced by the findings of this study. While there is a large amount of literature on ASD, there is fewer literature addressing parental involvement and perceptions in the area of ASD. This study is significant can be used by parents and administration of schools to address any areas where parents are not

involved, and empower the parents to feel they are fully involved in all aspects of the process. After this study, parents may be able to better advocate their need to be included in the decision-making process more fully and determine if other parents share the same experiences. School districts can hopefully determine areas that need to be addressed based on parental input and will be able to implement effective strategies to include parents in the educational process.

This study contributes to social change by assisting parents to be able to become more involved in the educational decision-making process. School districts will be more informed on how to include parents in the educational process using the perceptions of parents. The perceptions of parents are imperative in understanding their needs for inclusion. Involvement by all parents, staff, and agencies will assist students with ASD become better prepared for life and ensure that they have received the best possible services throughout their educational years.

Summary

This chapter presented an introduction to this study, outline the problem being studied, along with the purpose of this study. Background information was presented in order to explain the necessity for the study. The social change that can be addressed through the use of this study was explored. Finally, the qualitative design was discussed in addition to the assumptions, delimitations, and limitations of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this single case study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions of parents of children with ASD regarding their inclusion and decision-making abilities in the educational process using the case study design. This chapter will include a description, examination, and synthesis of important aspects of previous related research. Included in this chapter is an historical overview of autism, along with the clinical definition of ASD. I also examine the history of parental involvement in schools and the legislative history of special education law, including important court cases. In addition, I present research on parental and administrative views on parental involvement and how these views sometimes differ from one another. I examine differing parental involvement models. Finally, this literature review includes the theoretical framework that will be used in this study.

Teachers and administrators are mandated to include parents in the educational planning process for students with disabilities (Mandlawitz, 2002). However, inclusion of the parents is not always practiced or effective. Parental involvement is an important aspect of the educational success of every student. Research has shown parental involvement leads to academic success (Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006). Research has shown that parental involvement is related to different student achievement indicators, including increased letter grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Smith et al., 2011).

In addition to increased academic success, parental involvement in their children's education also has social and financial benefits for the child, including improved health, decreased welfare dependence, and reduced crime. Research has shown that the earlier parental involvement begins in a child's education, the more powerful the beneficial effects (Bracke & Cortis, 2012). However, the process of including parents as active participants in the educational process has not always been effective. School districts have not always encouraged parent involvement in the planning and implementation of educational programs for children with ASD (Wehman, 1998). Special education legislation and court cases have furthered the rights of children with disabilities and the rights of parents to be included in the educational process, yet they have also placed restrictions and expectations on the part of parents and school staff. These restrictions and expectations may have the potential to create an adversarial relationship that will stand in the way of an equal partnership (Fish, 2008).

Although there is research into the relationship between parents and educators (Miller & Zwaigenbaum, 2012), there is little research on the perceptions of parents of children with autism, specifically, and their views on the inclusion in the educational process, according to my review of the literature. I conducted a case study to gather information on the lived experiences of parents of students with ASD and how these experiences relate to their ability to be involved in the educational process and the barriers they perceive in this process. I interviewed parent participants using open-ended questions about their experiences in the educational process and barriers to involvement.

This chapter includes a review of literature relevant to the topic of parental involvement for students with disabilities with a specific focus on students with ASD.

Literature Search Strategy

The databases used for this literature review were Questia, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Proquest, Sage, and Education Research Complete. I used the following keywords: *parental involvement, autism, history, parents, special education, legislation, and sociocultural theory*. The peer-reviewed journals that I identified and searched for most frequently through the electronic searches included *Autism, Council for Exceptional Children, Developmental Psychology, Educational Research, Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, and Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. I obtained most of the articles used for this literature review electronically through the Walden University Library. The majority of the peer-reviewed studies were published between 2014 and 2019; however, I obtained some relevant articles from classic studies that are older. I also accessed published books.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical perspectives provide the basis for research to further social sciences (Graves, 1913). The theoretical framework for this research was symbolic interactionism theory. The philosophy of educational care (Noddings, 1984) informed this study from the vantage point of design, implementation, and implications of the research for professionals. Noddings's (1984) philosophy of educational care asserts that educators must have a receptive, reciprocal, and motivational relationship with their students and

their families. These theories represent a proactive means to alleviate cultural insensitivity and prevent family isolation in the educational forum. In addition, the theories advocate for an open and inclusive model of parental involvement in education (McKenna & Millen, 2013).

Symbolic interactionism is a microsocial perspective that focuses on individual level interactions in groups such as families and schools. Symbolic interactionism is associated with George Mead and Herbert Blumer (Seligman & Darling, 2007). Blumer proposed three major premises as fundamental to symbolic interactionism theory. These are meaning (individuals act toward things based on the meanings they ascribe to these things), language (meanings come from the social interaction individuals have with each other), and thought (meanings are handled in and modified through an interpretive process used by the individual in dealing with things encountered) (Blumer, 1969).

Symbolic interactionism places meaning, identity, and the experience of everyday life at the center of its explanation of the social world. Individuals' self-concept is developed by observing how others interact with them (Blumer, 1969). By examining words, gestures, rules, and roles, researchers are able to study individual decision-making. Meanings emerge from symbolically laden interactions. How individuals behave and interact with others creates a common understanding of what those acts represent (Hewitt, 1988). Symbolic interactionism is a useful framework for understanding opposing points of view that can pose obstacles in decision-making processes.

Understanding of these theories is necessary for effective inclusion of parents in the educational process. If a child's social and cultural backgrounds are not taken into

consideration by the educators, the parents' input will not be utilized to its fullest potential. Pressures and limitations in parents' lives may cause a disadvantage that will negatively impact their ability to engage in educational experiences. These barriers must be acknowledged by educators in order for changes to be made that adapt to the parents' needs (Rodriguez & Elbaum, 2014).

Historical Overview of Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Origin. The term *autism* was first used by psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler in 1908 to describe a patient with schizophrenia who had withdrawn into his own world. Nearly 40 years later in 1944, child psychiatrist Leo Kanner completed a study of 11 children who displayed difficulties in social interaction and adapting to changes in routine. They had good memories, were sensitive to stimuli, exhibited echolalia (the tendency to repeat words), and difficulties in spontaneous activity (Autism Speaks, 2014).

In 1944 Hans Asperger studied a group of children who resembled Kanner's descriptions; however, these children did not display echolalia but spoke like grownups. The children were also clumsy and displayed deficits in fine motor skills. These children were diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome (Daily, 2010). After the discovery by Kanner and Asperger, it was believed that if certain psychological bonds between parent and child fail to form, the child will have autism. Thus, the hypothesis was that autism was caused by "frigid mothers." This theory fit into Freudian psychology and remained popular in the 1950s and early 1960s (Daily, 2010).

A researcher on the history of ASD, Dailey (2010) found that based on the psychological theories of the time, children were sometimes removed from the home and

placed in foster care in the hope that they would recover. When this was ineffective, Dailey noted that attempts were made to bring them through different psychological states that were missed by being raised in a dysfunctional family. This strategy was also unsuccessful; however, there was no universal adoption of methods of treatment.

Education. The parents of children with autism have historically had a limited view about their roles in the cause of autism. Because of the widespread belief in the 1960s that parents' treatment of children caused autism, parents have historically had to defend themselves as parents. When evidence showed this hypothesis to be untrue yet not widely known, parents had to act as their own advocates. Parents still at times find themselves in a position of having to explain that the cause of autism does not lie with them since the general public's information is still dated and incorrect (Daily, 2010).

Since that time, many changes have been made in the perception and prevalence of the disorder. In 1960, autism was reported in four to five cases per 10,000 individuals. In 1990, the prevalence had risen to five to 31 cases per 10,000 individuals. At this time, autism was added as a category under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA); (Daily, 2010). In the 1991-1992 school year, over 5,000 students were educated under that category. This number increased to over 65,000 during the 1999-2000 school year. Along with the increase in the prevalence of autism, the nature of the diagnosis has evolved from a disorder that includes an amount of mental retardation, to the spectrum of disorders considered to be similar to autism (Yell, Katsiyannis, Dragsow, & Herbst, 2003).

The education and treatment of children with autism has also undergone extreme changes since 1943. At that time, specialized schools or psychiatric facilities were utilized to provide the education to children with autism. Along with increased knowledge of the disorder, came the ability of the public school system to provide an appropriate learning environment for these children. Practitioners and parents have not always agreed on the qualifications of an appropriate learning environment. Ivanonne, Dunlap, Huber, and Kincaid (2003) stated that IDEA and related legislation have resulted in litigation regarding the education of students with ASD to be more common than any other type of legislation.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder Overview

ASD is a severely incapacitating developmental disorder of brain function. It involves three major classes of symptoms: deficits in verbal and nonverbal communication, impaired social interactions, and limited interests.

Description. The symptoms of autism generally appear during the first three years of childhood and continue throughout the individual's lifetime. It is the most severe disorder within a group called Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) or Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDDs). This larger group covers a wide range of behaviors and symptoms, all of which are related to differing degrees to impaired social and communication skills (Children's Health, 2014).

Demographics. In 1960, autism was reported in 4 to 5 cases per 10,000 individuals. In the 1970s autism affected ten in every 10,000 individuals. In 1990, the prevalence has risen to 5 to 31 cases per 10,000 individuals (CDC, 2015). According to

the CDC (2015), pervasive developmental disabilities were estimated to occur in two to six individuals per 1,000 births in 2003 with autism being the most prevalent PDD, affecting an estimated one in 250 births. As of 2015 autism spectrum disorder is now diagnosed in one in every 68 births, making it the fastest-growing serious developmental disability in the United States (CDC, 2015).

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that the world population of individuals with ASD is approximately 1%; however, WHO does not specifically maintain global statistics on the prevalence of ASD. Mental and neurological disorders have been underestimated as traditional tracking methods globally focus on mortality, not on disability rates. Because of this, the percentage of incidences is probably much higher (WHO, 2015).

Autism Spectrum Disorder is four times more likely in boys than girls. The new ASD prevalence of one in 68 translates to one in every 42 boys and one in every 189 girls (CDC, 2015). White children are more likely to be identified with ASD than Black or Hispanic children. The statistics of prevalence changes for Black and Hispanic populations as one in 81 Black children and one in 93 Hispanic children are identified with ASD. In addition, Black and Hispanic children identified with ASD are more likely to have an intellectual disability than White children (CDC, 2015).

Almost half (46%) of individuals identified with ASD had average or above average intellectual ability. This equates to an IQ greater than 85. Most children are not diagnosed with ASD until after the age of 4, even though children can be diagnosed as early as the age of 2 today. In addition, less than half (44%) of children diagnosed with

ASD were evaluated for developmental concerns by the time they were three years old (CDC, 2015).

Causes. While understanding of autism has grown a great deal since it was first described in 1943, no single known cause has been identified. Research has shown that ASD results from specific abnormalities in brain function or structure. Brain scans have shown that the structure and shape of the brain in individuals with ASD are different than neuro-typical individuals. Researchers have investigated several theories and have now established a link between heredity, medical problems, and genetics. In addition, it has been found that there are no known psychological factors in the development of the individual that lead to the development of ASD (CDC, 2015).

The genetic link is supported by data that shows a pattern of ASD in families. While no gene has been identified as causing autism, researchers are attempting to find irregular segments of genetic code that individuals with ASD may have inherited (Children's Health, 2014). Autistic Spectrum Disorder also occurs more frequently in individuals who have medical conditions that include: fragile X syndrome, tuberous sclerosis, congenital rubella syndrome, and untreated phenylketonuria (Children's Health, 2014).

Treatment and prognosis. Although there is no cure for ASD, appropriate treatment may promote relatively normal development and lower the incidence of undesirable symptoms. Pharmacological treatments are also used and educational and behavioral therapies emphasize highly structured and intensive skill-oriented training (Children's Health, 2014). Individuals with ASD have normal life expectancies.

Symptoms in many children improve with treatment. Adolescence can worsen behavior problems, and treatment must be adjusted for the individual's changing needs (Children's Health, 2014).

Educational statistics. Approximately 80% of children identified with ASD receive special education services in school. This means that the remaining 20% of children identified with ASD have not yet been classified by the schools (CDC, 2015). The CDC (2015) reported that one in 50 school-age children have ASD. Because many children are not being diagnosed until after the age of four, they miss valuable opportunities for instruction developed for their disability. This is especially troubling as these are important developmental years. It is possible that these children are struggling academically and socially and would greatly benefit from access to appropriate services. ASD is the fastest growing classification in special education (CDC, 2015).

Because of the complex nature of ASD, designing appropriate treatment and educational programs for children can be difficult. Educational programs are many times the only opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for adult independence (McMahon & Cullinan, 2016). While there are numerous treatment and educational programs for children with ASD, they cannot always be effective as each child has unique needs that cannot easily fit into existing programs (Simpson, 2008). The lack of consensus on appropriate programs can lead to conflict between parents and professionals regarding appropriate educational placements and programs for children with ASD (Heflin & Simpson, 1998).

Special Education Legislation

The field of special education has an historical precedent for establishing ethical practices for professionals. These have evolved through legal mandates. There have been legislative mandates and amendments throughout the years to address problems in the education of children with special needs. Special education has been scrutinized since its inception (Seligmann, 2001). An important aspect of these ethics is the inclusion of parents as equal partners in the special education process (Trussell, Hammond, & Ingalls, 2007). Parental involvement has been defined as “any parental attitudes, behaviors, style, or activities that occurs within or outside the school setting to support children’s academic and/or behavioral success in their currently enrolled school” (Young, Austin, & Grove, 2013, p. 3). There is also a mandate for students to be included in the regular education classroom whenever possible. This mandate has been difficult at best to implement. Lack of parental involvement has had a direct impact on a child’s ability to receive instruction in a regular education classroom (Waitoller & Thorius, 2015). An examination of special education legislation is necessary in order to understand the legal mandates for the education of children with special needs and the inclusion of parents in this process.

No Child Left Behind Act. The NCLB Act was legislation that addressed all student; it was signed into law in 2001. The NCLB Act was an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. There are six principles of NCLB. These are accountability, highly qualified teachers, scientifically based interventions, local flexibility, safe schools, parent participation, and choice (Turnbull,

Huerta, & Stowe, 2006; NCLB, 2004). The purpose of the NCLB Act was to improve the education of students, including those with disabilities, in all public schools. (Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2006). This law also provided more choices for parents (Tekin, 2011). The intent of this legislation was to clarify how educators should instruct students, including those with disabilities (Meade, 2011).

Education for All Handicapped Children Act. Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was enacted in 1975. This was the first piece of legislation regarding special education and was eventually renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Public Law 101-476. In 1997, IDEA underwent significant amendments that included the expansion of the definition of students with disabilities by adding developmentally delayed as a category (Meade, 2011). Public Law 105-17 also gave parents protection during due process.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. In 2004, Congress amended IDEA with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, now known as IDEIA or Public Law 108-446. The six major principles of IDEIA are zero reject, non-discriminatory evaluations, appropriate education, least restrictive environment, procedural due process, and parent participation (IDEA, 2004; Seligmann, 2001). This act mandated that parents of children with disabilities were required to monitor their children's IEP to ensure it was in line with state standards for achievement (Bracke & Corts, 2012; Tekin, 2011; Trussell et al., 2007; Valle, 2011).

When EAHCA was first enacted, more than one million children in the United States were denied access to public schools and many of them lived in state-run facilities

where there were very little educational opportunities. By 2006, more than six million children in the United States were receiving special education services through IDEA (West et al., 2000). This accounts for about thirteen percent of a total school population of forty-eight million children in school (Seligmann (2001). Since Public law 94-142 was signed into law 35 years ago, multiple opportunities have now been given to students with disabilities (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). In addition, these laws have granted parents many rights. Finally, there have been several Supreme Court rulings that have addressed and expanded parental rights and expectations.

Case Law Regarding Special Education Issues

Court cases. In 2005, the Supreme Court heard the *Schaffer v. Weast* case which involved the parents of a child with special needs. The parents wanted the school system to pay for their son to attend a private school. The parents felt that the public school lacked the smaller classrooms and intensive services that their son required (Meade, 2010). The court ruled in favor of the school system, stating that the school system showed more of a burden of persuasion (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). Although the Schaffers lost their case, it was brought to the forefront that parents were entitled to take their concerns to the Supreme Court due to IDEA and its provision for due process.

In 2006, the Supreme Court heard the *Arlington Central School District Board of Education v. Murphy* case. This case was similar to the Schaffer case in that, the parents wanted the school system to pay tuition for their child with special needs so that he could attend a private placement (Meade, 2010). The district court had ruled in favor of the

Murphys and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit agreed with the lower court's decision (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). After the hearing, the Murphys sought to be reimbursed for their attorney fees and also for a consultant that they had hired for the case. That case went through the district court and circuit court, both ruling in the Murphys' favor. The Supreme Court then heard the case and overturned the previous rulings. The parents were denied legal fees reimbursement; however, they were awarded the tuition reimbursement. In both cases, the parents were able to go before a court to hear their complaint as it was their right under IDEA (Meade, 2010).

In 2007, the Supreme Court ruled on *Winkelman v. Parma City School District*. In this case, the parents of a child with autism felt that the school district did not develop an effective IEP. Because of this, their son was not receiving a free and appropriate public education (FAPE; Meade, 2010). The district and circuit courts ruled in favor of the school district (Yell et al., 2009). In addition, the Bar Association initiated an investigation against the parents. It was the Bar's position that the parents did not have a right to represent their son in court as they were not lawyers. The parents filed an appeal with the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court agreed to hear the case, but only after the Solicitor General shared the administration's position on this matter (Yell et al., 2009). The Solicitor General stated that "the words and actions of the Sixth Circuit Court were not consistent with the principles and purpose of IDEA" (Yell, et al., 2009, p. 72). According to IDEA (2004), the principles and purpose of the Act regarding procedural safeguards was to encourage parental involvement in their child's education. The

Supreme Court eventually heard the case and ruled in favor of the parents. It was the court's position that IDEA grants parents the right to represent their child in the early stages of due process (Yell et al., 2009).

Parental rights. All of these cases reinforced the notion that parents have certain rights in their involvement in their children's education. Furthermore, Yell et al. (2009) asserted that the Supreme Court's rulings expanded the definition of FAPE by ruling that (a) the IDEA mandates parental involvement, (b) parents have enforceable rights under the law, and (c) parental participation in the special education process is crucial to ensuring that children with disabilities receive a FAPE (p. 72).

Based on the intent of IDEA and court rulings, parents and schools must remember that legislation mandates parental involvement in the educational process. Schools are accountable for developing effective programs that encourage parental involvement (Ferrara, 2009). Additionally, when Goals 2000 was passed into law, it mandated that every state was to develop policies that assist local schools and agencies in increasing parent-school relationships (Tekin, 2011).

Most of the findings of the literature show the majority of the responsibility on the schools to involve the parents; however, this literature varies on how to accomplish this task (Stoner, et al., 2005). Some authors argue that parental involvement should be addressed by administrators (Shammari & Yawkey, 2008). Other authors state that teachers should reach out to parents in order to include them in the educational process (Trussell et al., 2007). An examination of the history of parental involvement and the

perspectives of parents and administration in their involvement may shed light on the possible reasons for these differing opinions.

The importance of school districts to promote parental inclusion in the special education process should be established early in the process as the parents' first encounter will have a lasting impression that will set the tone for the following experiences. Many parents do not understand the purpose of the IEP meeting, the technical language used by staff members, and the complexity of the process (Barclift, 2010). Even the assistance documents which are known as procedural safeguards and are written to assist parents in understanding the process, are written in a manner so complex that most parents are unable to understand the contents (Mandic et al., 2012).

Historical Overview of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in the schools began in the beginning of the 20th century (Tekin, 2011). This involvement initially started in nursery schools. By the middle of the 20th century, parents began to see their role as necessary in the educational process. Middle class parents regarded their visible role in their children's success as a part of their lifestyle (de Carvalho, 2001). Parents were always welcomed in the classroom at this time. The notion was that parents knew what their children needed and what they wanted for them educationally; therefore, they should be involved. However, parental involvement was limited mostly to stay-at-home moms in middle class families (Tekin, 2011).

Culture. Anglo-American cultural values have historically been dominant in educational practices in the United States. Cultural differences have been perceived as a

source of risk (Diken, 2006). Involving parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, along with culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds began during the Depression and grew during World War II. These programs focused on parent self-development and training and included the Head Start Program in the 1960s and 1970s (Wright, Stegeli, & Hartle, 2007). Head Start was a program that was initiated to target particularly disadvantaged families. Even so, educators had difficulty tolerating parents they viewed as lacking knowledge and skills (Wright, Stegeli, & Hartle, 2007).

Programs. Eventually, Head Start began to treat parents as equal partners along with educators in their children's education. Parents began to decide on the level of involvement that best suited their lives. Through different initiatives, Head Start was able to encompass the parents in all aspects of education (Tekin, 2011). Chapter I of the Title I initiative, called Even Start, was a family-centered educational program that funded local efforts to improve children's educational opportunities, emphasizing a family-centered literacy program (Tekin, 2011).

Along with these two programs that focused on parental involvement, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 which was previously discussed, mandated parental involvement. Parents were required to be involved in the planning process for their children's education (Tekin, 2011). While school districts are mandated to initiate programming that encourages parental involvement, parental involvement practices have often reached only a narrow audience and is mostly restricted to a few types of parental involvement (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003; Ferrara, 2009). Extensive research has been completed to study ways to improve parental involvement

(Duckworth & Kostell, 1999). Although the importance of parental involvement is widely recognized, its practical application has been weak (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willem, 2003).

Staff and Parental Perceptions of School Relationships

Perceptions of school personnel and parents on involvement in education play an important role in the educational process. Perceptions can be powerful and can affect students without the person even realizing it. Children's schooling can be shaped by teachers' perceptions of the parents' roles more than by the actual classroom performance of the student (De Carvalho, 2001). The goal of special education programs has been to include students with disabilities to remain in regular education classrooms if at all possible (Danforth & Jones, 2015). It is imperative that perceptions not influence behavior of educators and parents. Successful family-school relationships are dependent on agreement of the purpose of education, along with the teaching component. Trust and respect between educators and families are also imperative (De Carvalho, 2001). This can be difficult to accomplish when perceptions skew the reality. Scholars have shown increased interest in parental involvement as research has shown a correlation between achievement and parental involvement. However, even with legislation mandating parental involvement in the educational process, educators are still finding parental involvement difficult to achieve (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Malone, 2015). There is a poor understanding and limited agreement between parents and educators on what constitutes parental involvement (Robles, 2011). The views on what parental involvement includes are also complicated by cultural, ethnic, and social class differences. These

differences can be challenging to address in order for parental involvement to be fostered (Malone, 2015). In addition, indicators utilized for educational success do not account for students with disabilities (Gold, Simon, & Peralta, 2013).

Culture, ethnicity, and social class. Culture is a factor in parental involvement. The population of culturally diverse students has risen enormously over the past ten years (Camerato, 2007). In 2010, approximately 36.3% of the United States population belonged to a racial or ethnic minority group (Malone, 2015). Because of this, schools must examine the needs and perspectives of culturally diverse families. Cultural differences must also be taken into consideration when planning programs for parental inclusion (Meade, 2010).

Social class, ethnicity, and gender play important roles in the perception of parental involvement (Wolfe & Duran, 2013). Middle class parents have historically played a visible role in their children's education. Thus, the current definitions of good parenting fall in line with the views of the middle class (De Carvalho, 2001). Middle class parents have access to resources, basically economic, that allow for involvement in the education process. In addition, home-school relations are specifically built into gender-specific parenting roles. The view is that mothers are usually the sole responsible parent for children during their preschool years, before and after school, and during school breaks. Although this view is no longer applicable to today's society, schools tend to retain this viewpoint (De Carvalho, 2001). This myopic view has led to minorities suffering disproportionately from inadequate education, unemployment, and social and economic hardships (Freeman-Nichols, 2013). Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, and

Polychronopoulou (2016) found that less educated parents can feel stressful, weak, and frightened in front of what they view as educationally superior school staff.

Traditionally, different ethnic groups have had a different view of parental involvement from the Anglo-American view. These beliefs differ from one ethnic group to another and makes sensitivity of cultural differences more difficult to understand (Malon, 2015; Stanley, 2013). When considering cultural influences on parental participation, Rodriguez, Blatz, and Elbaum (2013) noted that parents should not have to take the initiative to guarantee inclusion. Programs need to be implemented that address inclusion with or without initiative on the parents' part (Rodriguez & Elbaum, 2014).

Bartel (2010) found that lack of acceptance of cultural differences was stressed in parents' experiences with the school. Parents' inability to follow expected school protocols, not understanding their roles, not knowing how to help, and letting their own negatives school experiences impede all impacted parental involvement (Bartel, 2010). In addition, parents with a low level of education have difficulty assisting their children with school work. They require assistance from the school (Vellymalay, 2012). However, school personnel continue to request parental involvement with no consideration of the family ethnic and/or economic background (Smith, 2006; Soutullo, Smith, Sanders-Smith, & Navia, 2016).

School staff and parents respond differently to questions regarding parental involvement (Ferrara, 2009). There is a very narrow understanding of parental involvement which needs to be broadened for parental involvement to become a systemic, important foundation for education (Ferrara, 2009). Research has found that the

least vocal group in discussions on parental involvement is the parent. Conversely, the most vocal opinions on this topic come from teachers and administrators (Ferrara, 2009). Parental involvement is implemented primarily by teachers; however, administrators are instrumental in making policies that affect parental involvement (Young, Austin, & Grove, 2013). Epstein (2001) found that parents are unsure of their roles in the education process. This feeling intensifies as children move to higher grades. Deplanty et al., (2007) found that parental involvement in education declines at the secondary school level. In addition, teachers tend to develop their ideas of parental involvement based on their own cultural backgrounds. These skewed perceptions are magnified by the fact that teachers receive very little training in working with parents (Ferrara, 2009). This is the core of the problem of incorporating parents in the education of their children. Some educators have reported not feeling they are adequately trained in order to address cultural differences in parental involvement (Malone, 2015). Without effective training, educators cannot encourage effective parental involvement that addresses cultural influences (Malone, 2015).

The cultural backgrounds of teachers affect their views on parental involvement. Schools and teachers base the pedagogy of teaching on their perception of a parental model. The way schools are organized, teachers not only need parental involvement, but they also make decisions concerning the students based on stereotypes of the parents (De Carvalho, 2001). Additionally, parent involvement activities reach a narrow audience, primarily middle class, and are usually restricted to certain types of involvement (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems, 2003). Lower resource families tend to react differently to

parental involvement than their counterparts who have greater resources (Young, Austin, & Growe, 2013). Children from middle-class families which have more formal education received more advantages than those from working-class families due to differing parental involvement. Ethnically and linguistically diverse parents participated less because they believed their needs were largely ignored because of the staff's lack of cultural knowledge (Bartel, 2010).

Various researchers have attempted to show that cultural differences have impeded parental involvement in the schools. Isk- Ercan (2010) investigated well-educated Turkish-American in the children's elementary school education in the United States. Turkish families used their backgrounds to determine their teaching methods in the home. They reinforced methods that they believed in from their experience and ignored all others. Their lack of understanding the American school culture made them rely heavily on their experiences that were drawn from their own backgrounds (Isk- Ercan, 2010). These findings suggest a need for educators to shoulder the responsibility to provide information and training on the curriculum.

In another study (Galindo & Medina, 2009), it was found that, although families engaged in parental involvement in the schools, they embraced their cultural backgrounds when participating in the school experience. When the families' views differed from the educators, the families' views were not well-accepted by the school and educators did not feel the families were participating, even when the families believed they were (Galindo & Medina, 2009). Emphasis on training school staff should include cultural views on

attitudes on involvement so educators can recognize cultural differences in parental involvement.

Research has shown that White, middle-class parents are disproportionately involved in the children's lives which add to the importance of cultural knowledge in ideas to promote parental involvement (Bush, 2018). Urban schools have used innovative ideas to include parents as these settings are uniquely diverse. Smith et al. (2011) examined twelve urban charter schools across six U.S. states and the usage of Epstein's model of family involvement. While the model was successfully used, strategies implemented were innovative. The study schools offered wrap-a-round services, incentives, and contracts to ensure parental involvement. Parental involvement in decision-making processes was also utilized and these strategies were linked to increasing parents' self-efficacy and comfort level in participation in the educational process.

Barnyak and McNally (2009) examined the practices and beliefs of staff in an urban school district one year after the implementation of an action plan to include parents. The theoretical framework used for the action plan was derived from Bandura's social cognitive theory of self-efficacy. The results showed a distinct mismatch between teachers' and administrators' beliefs and practices. While they had strong beliefs in the importance of parental involvement, their practices for including parents with differing cultural beliefs were not congruent with their beliefs.

Hispanic populations have increased in the United States and are projected to continue to grow. Latinos represent the largest ethnic population in the United States and

are the fastest growing ASD populations (Magana, Lopez, & Machalicek, 2017). A needs assessment found that the majority of Hispanic parents need more information on ASD and more social support (Magana, Lopez, & Machalicek, 2017). Understanding of this culture is important in order to increase parental involvement. A study by Niemeyer, Wong, and Westerhaus (2009) found that Hispanic students rated their parents' involvement to be more at-home than at-school, while Caucasian students perceived their parents' involvement to be equal in both areas. Language barriers and cultural differences were found to be determining factors on explaining why Hispanic parents were more involved in the home. Carranza, You, Chhuon, and Hudley (2009) found that Hispanic students' achievement in school was correlated to acculturation. The more they were able to acculturate into the existing United States, the higher their academic achievement.

Lee et al. (2012) conducted a study on 9,841 parents to investigate the relationships between three predictor variables (i.e., attitude toward school, parent-child communication, and school commitment action) and the criterion variable (parent involvement) in order to explore whether the relationships were consistent across English speaking Caucasian families, English speaking Latino families, and Spanish speaking Latino families. The results indicated English speaking parents in Caucasian and Latino families were more involved in school than Spanish Speaking Latino families. These results were consistent with findings from other studies that language is one of the largest barriers to parental involvement.

Immigrant parents bring their culture, values, language, religion, and educational backgrounds to school in other countries. While language can be a barrier to parental

inclusion, the inability of educators to recognize educational tasks can have culturally divergent interpretations can impede the ability to include the parents successfully. Not understanding culturally different views of education are actually the root of perceived noninvolvement by parents. Schools must become learning organizations where educators expand their patterns of thinking and include differing ways to be involved (Guo, 2012). Poza and Brooks (2014) asserted that educators have often complained of parents' indifference to involvement because of their lack of attendance at school functions and little face-to face communication. However, educators fail to understand that involvement takes a different form in Latino cultures and fail to give credit for those forms of involvement. This deters further parental involvement as parents do not understand why their involvement has not been recognized and why educators do not acknowledge their efforts to understand the interactions with schools in conventional ways.

Another minority group that has increased over the past several decades is the African-Americans. Researchers have reported that this group has underperformed academically compared to other groups (Pinder, 2010). While there have been debates over the causation for this underperformance, cultural differences and parental involvement have been addressed as leading factors. A history of racism, along with this race being involuntary immigrants has caused a difference in the culture of the African-American population. This racism dates back over 100 years and has negatively impacted on this group's ability to achieve. In addition, cultural mismatches between teachers and students have arguably caused African-American students to feel alienated (Pinder,

2012). Trask-Tate and Cunningham (2010) examined 206 African-American students in order to identify the role of parental involvement on achievement. They found that high levels of school support along with parental involvement, led to the development of high academic expectations.

Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) investigated the barrier of socioeconomic status in students. The data was from 596 participants in 15 high schools. The study included interviews with teachers, counselors, and focus groups. The researchers found that parents do wish to participate in the education of their children; however, this participation was found less with parents who did not attend college.

Archer-Banks and Behar-Horenstein conducted a study investigating factors that influence parental involvement. Nine parents were interviewed as well as two focus groups. Many of the parents reported that job responsibilities and financial situations impeded on their ability to be involved in school issues.

Williams and Sanchez (2012) conducted a study of 25 parents and school personnel within a predominantly African-American inner-city high school. They found that four themes emerged to describe parental involvement barriers: 1) lack of access, 2) lack of financial resources, 3) time restraints, and 4) lack of awareness.

Rah, Choi, and Nguyen (2010) explored perceptions of barriers that refugee parents may experience in regard to school involvement. Interviews with school practitioners found that language barriers, time constraints, and parents' deferential attitudes to school practitioners seem to be barriers among the 180 Hmong refugee students. This was a similar finding in a study conducted by Hornby and Lafaele (2011).

The researchers discuss their findings to clarify barriers in parent and family factors. Parents' lack of confidence, the way they perceive invitations from the school, and current life contexts can create barriers to involvement.

Hardin et al. (2009) conducted a study on Latino focus groups on parental involvement in education. They found that lack of information, language barriers, and communication barriers impeded on parents' ability to become involved in the educational process. Wolfe and Duran (2013) further found that in addition to the findings previously stated, a closely related theme is also insufficient information. This includes parents 'lack of knowledge regarding IEP meetings and the belief that they are uninformed about their child's disability or educational program options.

Freeman-Nichols (2013) conducted an investigation of black parents' participation in special education decision-making. The researcher interviewed parents from black middle-class backgrounds regarding their perceptions concerning their involvement in the special education process. The study found that parents perceive educational professionals in having more decision-making power than parents.

While many studies have found underperformance by African-American students and the correlation to parental involvement, other studies have found that parental involvement is lacking in this group due to varying reasons. Racism, low socio-economic standing, and single parent statuses all contribute to the lack of parental involvement in this group (Hayes, 2011). The difficulty in addressing family differences in parental involvement is the myriad of differing variables that can apply to families. Culture, ethnicity, and socio-economic status all contribute to differences in families. In addition,

the number of parents in the home can also affect the ability for parental involvement. Training will have to include all the variables that could apply to families and will require extensive training (Fan, Williams, & Wolters, 2012). More research is needed in order to understand the variables involved in culture. In addition, these studies included regular education students and their families. Less research has been conducted on the relationships between culture, disability, and parental involvement.

Perceptions of school staff. School staff's views on parental involvement not only impacts school guidelines, but also the ability for parents of all backgrounds to become involved in their children's education. Principals utilize various resources when implementing policies for parental inclusion in the educational process (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Cook, et al., 2014). Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) found that administrators at the secondary and high school levels did not hold the strong beliefs in parental involvement as administrators at the elementary level. Because of this administrators, while viewing parental involvement as necessary, did not support this belief in their actions. Another study conducted on administrators; perceptions found that administrators wanted parents to be actively engaged, parents supporting the school, parents as advocates, parents being knowledgeable, and parents communicating with schools. The desires of the administrators for parental involvement are all concepts related to effective parenting. This can be a multi-faceted concept; therefore, administrators would need to utilize one definition and not individual perspectives (Young, Austin, and Growe, 2013). Hodges, Joosten, Bourke-Taylor, and Cordier (2019) found that one difficulty in the inclusion of parents in the educational process is the

communicative process. School staff continues to believe that communication should be through the institutional communicative methods while parents want more personal for invitations to participation. Staff must increase communication between themselves regarding how to include parents. More personal methods of communication, including one-on-one conversations with parents need to be utilized in order to gain acceptance from parents (Halsey, 2005).

Omoteso (2010) conducted a study on secondary teachers' view of parental involvement. He found that teachers felt that parents were not volunteering in school, were not interacting well with the staff, and were not participating in academic activities. The teachers' perceptions of the roles parents should have in schools showed that they wanted parental encouragement to their children, assistance in homework, teaching their children after school, and attendance at school events. These perceptions do not seem to take in account the needs of the parents. The teachers identified some barriers to parental involvement. The teachers believed that parents do not get involved because they do not have the time. Lack of skills and knowledge were also perceived as barriers to involvement. They also felt that parental attitudes are that school is not their job; therefore, they do not need to be involved. In addition, they perceived that parents do not get involved in formal bodies, such as the PTA because the parents may view them as formal and closed. They may be intimidated by the type of people on these committees. Finally, teachers perceived that parents may not be involved because there is a lack of communication and parents may not know about important dates (Omoteso, 2010).

Young, Austin, and Growe (2012) conducted a study on 100 participants who were administrators, teachers, and parents to find perceptions of what parental involvement means. While educators defined parental involvement as helping in the school and with homework, parents saw it as getting children to school on time and solving issues in the home. These studies illuminate the discord between what parents believe involvement is compared to school staff perceptions. It is difficult to determine how to involve parents when it is evident that agreement must be reached first on what parental involvement means to all parties.

This was also found in a study by DeVance Taliaferro, DeCuir-Gunby, and Allen-Eckard (2009). These researchers examined the attitudes and beliefs of school and community personnel regarding parental involvement through the development of child and family team meetings. DeVance Taliaferro, DeCuir-Gunby, and Allen-Eckard (2009) found that school personnel held differing beliefs regarding the parents' desire and ability to become involved. Hall, Hughes, and Thelk (2017) asserted that mentorship programs between clinical faculty and teachers may address these differing beliefs.

Lin, Isernhagen, Scherz, and Denner (2014) surveyed rural educators in three states in order to examine their perceptions of parental involvement in their schools. While the educators' believed their use of different methods were mostly successful in achieving parental participation, a disparity was found in the educators' use of more traditional approaches for engaging parents, when they were looking for more contemporary outcomes from their efforts to include parents. In rural areas where the educators are mostly from the dominant culture, the educators need to examine the

existing concepts used to include parents and address existing assumptions about engaging parents, especially when addressing parents from culturally diverse backgrounds who have differing concepts than the educators. Avissar, Licht, and Vogel (2016) found that not all policy makers agree on inclusion equating to equality relating to students with special needs. Inclusion has been conceptualized in different ways. It has been difficult to find one effective plan for inclusion because of the various factors that must be considered, including culture and socioeconomic status (Boldt & Valente, 2014), (Thompson, 2015). Even when students with disabilities are included in the regular education classrooms, they may still be treated differently by teachers. Parents may believe that inclusion prevents this from happening. Parental participation would help in ensuring equality in the classroom (Sun, 2014).

Ramirez (2002) asserted that many educational journals show negative stereotypes of parents through cartoons. These beliefs were held by many teachers who want parents to become involved but do not make the necessary changes needed for the parents to become involved. Most importantly, there is a lack of teacher training for promoting parental involvement in teacher education programs. Administrators and teachers must realize the limitations experienced by parents in today's society and attempt to overcome these barriers. In this way, parents will be able to become active participants in their children's education and work as partners with the school staff.

Teachers and administrators have agreed that training for them in how to involve parents has been lacking. Machen, Wilson, and Notar (2013) proposed that staff training should include EBPs, along with sound instruction in order to ensure positive outcomes.

The training should address creation of opportunities for positive communication, reduction of barriers that prevent parental involvement, and formal educational workshop for parents that increase their ability to be aware of the student potential (Russo-Campisi, 2017).

The importance of training was also the recommendation of Ferrara (2009) who found that survey questions given to teachers, classified staff, parents, administrators, and preservice teachers on the perceptions of parental involvement led to a very narrow understanding of what parental involvement should look like and what it should entail. There are also differing opinions on the perceptions of parental involvement within the classroom between special education teachers and regular education teachers when in co-teaching situations. This can lead to confusion for the parents (Randhare, 2014).

School-family partnerships have been implemented in many schools and studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of increasing parental involvement. Daniel (2015) conducted a longitudinal study of family-school partnerships in the early years of school in Australia. Partnership between home, school, and community declined as the children moved through the early years of school. The differences in socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds also presented challenges to effective partnerships (Daniel, 2015). Hornby and Witte (2010) surveyed rural elementary schools in New Zealand regarding their practices on parent involvement. Analysis of the data found many weaknesses including: a lack of written policies on parental involvement; minimal parent education by the schools; lack of ideas to include diverse families; minimal focus on inclusion of parents of students with disabilities; and limited

professional development for teachers. More studies are needed in the areas of policy effectiveness.

The literature on staff views of parental involvement suggests that, while administrators and teachers believe that parental involvement is necessary and should be encouraged, the methods used to encourage this involvement differs significantly. Much of the literature suggests that staff have strong beliefs in parental involvement, but do not show this belief in their actions (Broomhead, 2013). Lloyd-Smith and Baron (2010) clearly note that administrators believed that parental involvement was necessary; however, did not attempt to propose policies for inclusion of parents. The literature also suggests that there are differing perceptions on the reasons for lack of parental involvement. Omoteso (2010) found that staff believed that parental involvement should include parental encouragement to their children, assistance in homework, continued education at home, and participation in school activities. Young, Austin, and Growe (2012) also found that staff believed in the standard parental involvement. The majority of the literature suggests that staff does not take into account the needs of the parents when they enact policies based on their beliefs (Burke, 2017). Ramirez (2002) found that staff did not take into account the limitations of parents in today's society.

The literature also agrees on the differing beliefs in the barriers preventing parental involvement. Omoteso (2010) found that staff believed lack of communication was a major barrier in involvement. DeVance Taliaferro, DeCuir-Gunby, and Allen-Eckard (2009) found that school personnel felt there was a lack of parental desire and ability to become involved. Ferrara (2009) found that staff believed a lack of training for

both themselves and parents was a barrier to involvement. Because of this disparity in beliefs, parental involvement has been difficult to achieve,

Studies have also been conducted on parental involvement throughout the years of school. Parental involvement has been found to decrease as children become older (Cremin, Healy, & Gordon, 2017). Skaliotis (2010) examined parental involvement in a longitudinal study in England and found that half of parents became less involved as the student became older. However, some studies have found that involvement remains stable over time. Sy, Gottfried, and Eskeles Gottfried (2013) also conducted a longitudinal study on parent involvement in the United States. They found that those parents who were involved in the child's early years, remained involved throughout the years. More research is needed in parental involvement throughout the entire school years in order to determine stability. In addition, it is evident that parental involvement policies should begin early in the child's education and continue through high school. Research has shown that applying theoretical perspectives to program decision-making will increase the likelihood of success. It is more difficult to determine how this can be accomplished (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Perceptions of parents. Parents' level of self-efficacy has been found to be related to their level of involvement in their children's education. When parents believe they have the knowledge and skills to assist their children, they are more likely to become involved in the education process (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Research has shown that minority families and those with low incomes have very little skills and knowledge; therefore, their involvement tends to be low. In addition, they do not have flexible

schedules that allow them to get to school during school hours. Other challenges to this group's commitments to younger children include limited access to transportation, language barriers, and feeling uncomfortable in the school setting (O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams, 2008). A number of studies have found that parental education has a direct impact on parental involvement (Scorgie, 2015). The higher the education of the parent, the higher their academic aspirations are for their child and their involvement in their education (Vellymalay, 2012). These factors can directly affect parents' levels of stress. Low awareness about ASD and treatment is related to higher stress experienced by parents (Patra, Arun, Singh Chavan, 2015).

While little research could be found on studies on parental views on involvement, studies have found that barriers to effective parental involvement policies include parental beliefs (Hodge 2015). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) found that parental beliefs that act as barriers to parental involvement include: the way parents view their role in their child's education; the parents' belief in their own ability to assist their child in success at school; and the parents' belief in their child's intelligence as well as how children learn and develop abilities. Parents have differing opinions on the definition of their inclusion in the educational process which can be a barrier in and of itself (Kaczkowski, 2013; Lautenbacher, 2014). In addition, Gonzalez-DeHass and Willems (2003) proposed that meaning parental participation is adversely affected by parents who lack the confidence and desire to participate, staff who lack the willingness to encourage parental involvement, parents' ability to schedule time during school hours, conflicting ideas on how parents should be involved, and lack of administrative support. Dunn, constable,

Martins, and Cammuso (2016) found that many parents did not receive an explanation of the initial special education process. Instead, they were handed a packet and expected to read and understand it on their own.

Griffin and Galassi (2010) conducted a qualitative study on 29 parents from a rural middle school in the school in order to explore parent perceptions of barriers to academic success. They found that parents believed they have access to limited resources in order to assist their children. Other themes were questions on responsibility for learning and whose role it was, self-efficacy, perceptions of a warm, inviting school, and unavailability due to work demands. The parents also had opinions about what has to occur in order for their children to be successful in school and what roles they and the staff need to play in this endeavor. The parents recommended increased communication between themselves and the school, teachers paying attention to children's individual needs, and greater availability of school resources. The parents firmly believed that they must play an active role in their children's education; however, the school has a responsibility to make it possible for parents to accomplish this goal.

Research conducted by Jeynes (2011) found that different components are viewed by parents as important to involvement. Parental expectations of their children were found to be more important than attendance at school functions. Communication about school between parents and children was also found to be an important component of involvement. Parental style was also considered a facet of involvement. Children from homes with love and support, along with structure and discipline, did better in school. Jeynes (2011) also asserted that school staff that are loving, supportive, and encouraging

to parents promoted more parental involvement than school guidelines and workshops offered to parents. There is very little research to be found on parents' views on parental involvement. More research needs to be completed in order to obtain parental perceptions in order to effectively develop policies for inclusion.

A study was conducted by Slade, Eisenhower, Carter, and Blacher (2018) on 142 parents of children with ASD between the ages of 4 and 8 years old in order to examine parents' satisfaction with their children's IEPs. Satisfaction was positively associated with parent-school communication and family economic status. These findings demonstrate the importance of parent-school relationships and highlight the socioeconomic disparities.

Parental involvement and school partnerships are a constantly evolving process, regardless of the culture or country. Some countries are more successful at parental involvement than others (Colley, 2014). The Republic of Gambia has been successful in the inclusion of parents in the educational process. This is because the practices are based on local customs and traditions. In addition, it includes the participation of all the stakeholders in the government, schools, and community working with the families at the local level (Colley, 2014). McKenna and Millen (2013) assert that educators' expectations and understanding of parental involvement in the United States is disconnected from the reality of the families' lives. Further, educators lose valuable opportunities to understand the families because the perceptions of aren't involvement are not expansive enough to appreciate the nuances of differing cultural and economic values.

The literature on parent views of parental involvement suggests that parents' beliefs and self-efficacy are the biggest barriers to their involvement. Much of the literature suggests that parents believe that their knowledge and skills directly affect their ability to become involved (Lee, McCoy, Zucker, & Mathur, 2014). O'Donnell, Kirkner, & Meyer-Adams (2008) found that, when parents believe they have the knowledge and skills to assist their children, they are more likely to become involved in the education process. The researchers also found that minority families with low income do not have these skills. Therefore, education is important in the needed knowledge. Vellymalay (2012) found that parental education has a direct impact on parental involvement. The higher the education of the parent, the higher their academic aspirations are for their child and their involvement in their education. Gonzalez-DeHass and Willems (2003) proposed that meaningful parental participation is adversely affected by parents who lack the confidence and desire to participate. This is also directly affected by lack of education and beliefs. Research shows that school practices directly affects parents' ability to advocate for their children (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013).

Perceptions of parents of children with disabilities. Parents of students with disabilities face additional challenges. These children have many educational needs that must be met and the parent is responsible to ascertain that these needs are being met. Historically, there have been negative interactions between parents of children with disabilities and school staff. While the reasons for this are varied, it is important to understand all the reasons in order to successful include these parents (Trussel et al., 2007; Valle, 2011). In many cases, parents are afraid of participating in the educational

process because of the fear of how they will be received (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). In addition, many parents of students with ASD who are from a lower socio-economic status or a racial minority are less likely to participate in studies due to obstacles such as lack of transportation and distrust of scientific research (Robertson, Sobeck, Wynkoop, & Schwartz, 2017). This can lead to difficulty in designing programs for inclusion.

Parents with children that have developmental disabilities such as ASD, must contend with additional difficulties such as stress, along with economic difficulties. Many of these children require extensive and expensive treatment. This puts a financial burden on the parents. It can also lead to increased stress levels. Mothers of children with autism have reported higher stress levels and lower parent competency than mothers of children without disabilities. School professionals must understand and evaluate the stress levels experienced by the parent and have strategies for coping with a parent experiencing stress (Lessenberry & Rehfeldt, 2004).

Cultural values can also affect the way a family perceives a disability. If a professional and a parent have different views on the nature and needs of a disability, it may lead to less effective services to the children. Professionals must understand the parents' perceptions about the disability and understand that these views may be guided by their cultural values and beliefs. As these perceptions shape the parents' attitudes toward the intervention and education processes, understanding different cultural beliefs is imperative (Diken, 2006).

Sukys, Dumciene, and Lapeniene (2015) found that more highly educated parents devoted more time communicating with teachers than parents with a lower level of

education. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) examined family involvement in and perception of their inclusion in special education services. Forty-five families of children with autism were interviewed. These families were a part of a parent support group. The researchers found that while the families felt they communicated with the school on a regular basis and were involved in the IEP process, there were needs for their children that were not being addressed by the school. Fish (2006) also conducted a case study of families who belonged to a family support group chapter in north Texas. Findings revealed that the parents did not believe the educators valued them as equals and families were not properly trained regarding special education law.

Coffey and Sears (1996) conducted a study with 81 parents of children with disabilities and 31 professional service providers in Alabama in order compare parental and professional prioritization of educational goals for these children. They found that professionals and parents hold similar goals for the children throughout the years of school. Based on this information, it would appear that parents and professional have the same goals for these children. Based on this information, it is important for staff and parents to work collaboratively in order to best meet the needs.

IEP meetings can be especially stressful for parents of children with disabilities. Parent involvement in this process is mandated as this process determines the education projections for the child. However, parental roles have not increased in the IEP process despite the intent of the law (Fish, 2006). Many parents do not feel they are knowledgeable enough in special education to address the needs of their children. In addition, educators still tend to dominate the decision-making process in the meetings.

Fish (2006) conducted a qualitative study utilizing seven families of a support group in Texas. He found that all of the parents viewed their initial IEP experience as negative. Five of the parents disagreed with the educators regarding the proposed services for their children. Most of the families felt that they had previously had negative interactions with the educators during the meetings. Some of them felt that the educators blamed them for their children's lack of progress. All the parents agreed that they believed the educators required increased awareness of the background and needs of the child. How parents feel can also affect their perceptions regarding their involvement. The amount of monitoring on their child's education was also mediated by their trust in the staff members.

There have been numerous studies conducted on ways to enhance parental involvement in children's education. Urban charter schools are using innovative ways to include parents in the educational process based on Epstein's model. Schools offer wrap-around services, incentives, and contracts. They also utilize technology for advertising volunteer opportunities and involve parents in the decision-making process, along with governance of schools (Smith et al., 2011). Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, and Hernandez (2003) found that learning about constructs of "individualism" and "collectivism" enhanced teachers understanding of their own cultures, the culture of schools, and cultures of their students.

The literature on the views of parents of children with disabilities views on parental involvement suggests that parents' beliefs and limited capacity to become involved and the schools' views about them are the biggest barriers to their involvement. Much of the literature suggests that parents believe that the staff does not understand their

needs and the limitations they have due to family commitments. Lack of trust by the parents toward the staff was a recurring theme in the literature, as in the case of parents in general that has been previously discussed. Fish (2006) found that parents had a negative experience in the educational process which led to mistrust. Spann, Kohler, and Soenksen (2003) found that staff did not view the parents as equals which impeded on their ability to be involved in the IEP process. In addition, the literature suggests that staff does not appreciate the cultural differences and economic pressures that are important aspects of the families lives. Lessenberry & Rehfeldt (2004) found that parents have a high level of stress associated with caring for a child with a disability, along with economic hardships. Diken (2006) found that the lack of understanding of the family's culture affected the parents' perceptions of the staff and the educational process.

Parent Involvement Models

Parent involvement models have been developed in order to better understand parent involvement in the educational process. Although there are several of these models, Epstein and Hoover-Dempsey are two major figures in the field of parent involvement. A discussion of these models will give insight into what is needed for successful parent-school relationships.

Epstein (2001) recognized that all students have families and all schools serve children and families. Additionally, all families are different. Some children have two parents, some have only one parent; some parents work and others are unemployed; some parents speak English and some speak other languages. In fact, there are endless variations to families; however, they all come to school. Because of this, educators need

to understand the contexts in which the children live. Without this knowledge, the educator will never successfully educate the child or fully include the family in that process.

Epstein model. Epstein (2001) introduced six types of parent involvement: (a) parenting, (b) communicating, (c) volunteering, (d) learning at home, (e) decision-making, and (f) collaborating with the community. These six types should be utilized with implementing a program of school, family, and community partnerships (Tekin, 2011). Each of the six types is discussed below.

Parenting is the ability of all families to establish supportive home environments for children. A supportive home environment allows for children to have good attendance, awareness of the importance of school, and respect for their parents (Tekin, 2011). Communicating is the effective two-way exchange about school and the children's progress. This allows for the children to have awareness of their progress and understanding of school programs and policies (Tekin, 2011). Volunteering is assisting the parent to help and support at the school or other locations, including the home. Learning includes providing information to families so they are best able to help their children at home with their learning. This allows for higher homework completion rates, increased view of the parent as a teacher, and higher self-concept for the children (Tekin, 2011). Collaborating with the community allows for integrating resources from the community to improve school programs. This allows for many benefits for the family to which they otherwise may not have been able to access (Tekin, 2011).

The Epstein Model continues to be one of the more widely used frameworks for parental involvement (Bower & Griffin, 2011). However, it focuses on the educators' responsibilities and does not include those of the parent. Since the parent is the focus, the parent responsibilities should be discussed. The six parent involvement types must be implemented by the school staff (Tekin, 2011). The one model that emphasizes the parental aspect in relation to involvement is the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Model.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler parent involvement model. The Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler Parent Involvement Model emphasizes the perspective of the parent and their involvement is grounded in psychological and educational research. This model explores why parents are involved, how they choose the forms of the involvement, and how they feel the involvement makes a difference. They concluded that parental involvement is related to "role construction." This is how the parents view what is their role and what is not their role in the educational process (Tekin, 2011; Brack & Cortis, 2012). Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler suggested that parents become involved for three reasons: (a) they form a role construction regarding their participation in the educational process; (b) they develop positive self-efficacy for assisting in the children's success in school; and (c) they perceive opportunities for involvement (Tekin, 2011).

There is a five-level framework to analyze the parent involvement process. Level 1 addresses the four reasons parents become involved in their children's education: (a) parental role construction; (b) parental efficacy for helping their children learn; (c) parental perceptions of the invitations from the school for their involvement; and (d) parental perceptions of invitations to involvement (Tekin, 2011).

Level 2 has three factors that shape the choices of the parents to become involved. These are: (a) parents' perceptions of their own skills and abilities; (b) parents' perceptions of the other demands on the time and energy; and (c) Parents' perceptions of the invitations for involvement from the children, teachers, and school (Tekin, 2011).

Level 3 suggests that parents' involvement influences children's success based on certain mechanisms. These mechanisms are: (1) modeling of appropriate skills; (2) reinforcement of learning through reinforcement; and (3) instruction (Tekin, 2011).

Level 4 focuses on mediating constructs influenced by the level 3 factors to the extent that parents use developmentally appropriate strategies and the fit between the parents' choice of activities and the school's expectations. Level 5 address the outcome for the children (Tekin, 2011). Because this model focuses on parental perspectives and is based on a psychological perspective, it provides a useful tool for researchers who want to concentrate on the psychological factors of parental involvement (Tekin, 2011).

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of this literature review was to examine and synthesize the available research on the topic of autism and parental involvement. A plethora of literature was found, including factors associated with parental involvement, along with barriers to and perceptions of parental involvement. In addition, the ecological and sociocultural theories were researched and discussed in relationship to this study. By examining these theories which involve individuals' experiences within their environment and the effect the environment plays in learning, educators will gain a better understanding of the necessary factors of parental involvement and barriers to successful involvement. Although

extensive research was conducted, very little research was found that targeted perceptions of parents of children with ASD and those that work with them. Also, very little research could be found on the perceived barriers to parental involvement in secondary and high schools, especially in rural locations.

Because the aim of this study is to focus on a specific group that has a culture that is unique compared to others within a population, a case study is used in this research design. According to Creswell, (2009) “a case study involves the examination of an issue involving one or more cases within a bounded system” (p. 73). This system will encompass parents of children with autism within a school district. These students will be at the elementary and secondary school levels. Each of the willing participants will be an individual case and collectively make up a bounded system, sharing the boundaries of similar characteristics and place (Meade, 2011). Using detailed interview information, I will present a rich description of the collective cases using case-based themes (Creswell, 2009). A more in-depth discussion of the methodological approach incorporated by this study follows in the next section.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this chapter, I describe the qualitative research paradigm and case study approach and offer a rationale for their use. I also restate the RQs. I conducted a case study to gather information regarding the lived experiences of parents of children with ASD in the educational process. Parents were interviewed about their experiences using open-ended questions. The role of the researcher, researcher qualities, research setting, participants, and procedures for selecting participants are also discussed in this chapter. Procedures used to determine participants are included along with the measures taken for ethical protection of participants. The data collection, data analysis, and verification procedures are discussed.

ASD is a developmental disability on a spectrum. The number of diagnoses in the U.S. is increasing each year (CDC, 2010). It is imperative that educational programs be implemented to address the needs of these children. Teachers and administrators are mandated to include parents in the educational planning process for students with disabilities (Mandlawitz, 2002). However, inclusion of the parents is not always practiced or effective. Parental involvement is an important aspect of the educational success of every student. Research has shown that parental involvement leads to academic success (Howland et al., 2006). The numerous benefits of parental involvement extend to students, parents, and community members. Research has shown that parental involvement is related to different student achievement indicators, including better

grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Smith et al., 2011).

In addition to increased academic success, parental involvement also has social and financial benefits for the child, including improved health, decreased welfare dependence, and reduced crime. The earlier parental involvement begins in a child's education, the more powerful the beneficial effects (Bracke & Corts, 2012). However, the process of including parents as active participants in the educational process has not always been effective. School districts have not always encouraged parent involvement in the planning and implementation of educational programs for children with ASD (Wehman, 1998). Special education legislation and court cases have furthered the rights of children with disabilities and the rights of parents to be included in the educational process, yet they have also placed restrictions and expectations on the part of parents and school staff. These restrictions and expectations may have the potential to create an adversarial relationship that stands in the way of an equal partnership (Fish, 2008). Leaders of school districts need to identify the processes involved in the effective partnerships with parents. I concluded that a case study design best addressed this area. A case study allowed me to analyze participating parents' personal experiences and perceptions within the educational system.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research is consistent with exploring the lived experience of parents regarding barriers to and the importance of involvement in the educational process. Qualitative studies allow for the exploration of human and social problems (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2015). Researchers use qualitative methods to understand a social issue from the perspective of the individuals involved (Creswell, 1998). The lived experiences of people are the usual topics of qualitative research studies. Creswell (1998) identified five qualitative designs which include case study, biographical study, phenomenological study, grounded theory study, and ethnographic study. The data collections tools vary based on the type of study; however, all these designs are utilized to explore a social or human issue (Creswell, 1998). I used a qualitative approach for this study in order to explore the personal experiences of parents of children with ASD in the educational process. This approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the perceptions of parental experiences from the participants' point of view. The data were collected through an interview with each participant. The interview questions are found in Appendix A. In addition, a case file review of each student was completed, and the results of the data obtained are analyzed with the interview results in order to ensure triangulation.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the perceptions of parents of children with ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process using a case study design. I sought to answer the following RQ: What are the lived experiences and perceptions of parents of students with ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process? The subquestions I sought to answer were as follows:

1. What barriers are encountered for inclusion?
2. What steps does the school district make in inclusion of parents?

3. How are parents included when decisions are made regarding educational programs and services?
4. How can parents and schools ensure parental participation?

In conducting the research, I utilized the modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994). This method involves the use of semi-structured, audio taped interviews which are transcribed (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of a qualitative case study is to explore beyond what appears obvious and dig deeper in order to reveal common life experiences. This approach allows the researcher to delve into a phenomenon through a fresh perspective and allows an in-depth analysis of that phenomenon that cannot be achieved through quantitative design (Leedy & Ormond, 2001; Moustakas, 1994).

Case Study Approach

I used a case study approach to describe the meaning of lived experiences of several individuals. Case study research involves the study of an issue explored through cases within a bounded system which is a setting or context (Yin, 2015). This bounded system (case) is explored through detailed, in-depth data collection utilizing multiple sources of information such as observations, interviews, documents, and reports that enable the researcher to report a case description (Yin, 2015). The case study also enables the participants to provide realistic views from their interviews. I chose the case study design because it is holistic (well developed), empirical (naturalistic and field oriented), interpretive (reliant on the researcher's intuition), and emphatic (involving a value commitment on the part of the researcher), in addition to offering immediate interpretations (Yin, 2015).

Textural Description

Data analysis occurred through an analysis of the responses of the participants to the interview questions. Themes from the data analysis emerged as the participants shared their personal accounts of their experiences with the school staff regarding the educational process. The textural description was needed in order to understand the context in which the experience occurred, as well as the participants' beliefs and perceptions.

I drafted notes from a review of responses using content pattern matching analysis to generate themes by highlighting nouns and synonyms. These themes were then coded and counted to generate major themes that emerged. Data spreadsheets were generated to notate respondent count for each theme. Elements within the major themes were identified and coded within the data spreadsheets. I conducted the analysis by hand rather than using a software tool to better learn the process of comparative analysis.

Role of the Researcher

Currently, I work as a school psychologist on a child study team. I have been working in this capacity for 12 years. I work closely with students, parents, teachers, and administration in order to determine programs that best meet the needs of the students. I have observed the importance of parental involvement for successful programs. I have observed parents who are well informed in the areas of legal mandates and special education programs. I have also observed parents who do not fully understand these processes. The parents of children whom I currently work with were excluded as participants for this study. As a part of my career, I have developed a passion for working

with parents and teaching them the laws and programs in the special education process. I believe this has empowered parents and enabled them to become advocates for their children in the educational process.

To ensure that I was objective throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I sought to control any preconceptions and solely focus on what the data showed. I utilized a journal to record my thoughts and feelings regarding the process. This allowed me to reflect on my own opinions and not allow them to interfere with the study. In qualitative research, the researcher is an instrument in the data collection and interpretation. The researcher's involvement in the collection of data and in the development of a complete interpretation is congruent with the philosophical guidelines inherent in qualitative research (Creswell, 1998).

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Selection of the research participants was conducted through criterion sampling and was based upon information gained from the school district. I requested access to parent contact information for parents of students with ASD that received special education services at the time of the study within the same school district. Criterion sampling was used to select ten parents who meet the following criteria:

1. The parent had a child diagnosed with ASD or classified by the district under the classification of autistic.
2. The child was classified as eligible for Special Education and Related Services and was receiving special education services within the school district.

3. The parents had attended at least two IEP meetings since their child's eligibility determination meeting. This criterion allowed for the parent to have experienced interaction with the special education staff.

4. For this study, I collected data by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a purposeful sample of parents of children with ASD at the site of the study. I also gathered documents for review and analysis. In order to determine the participants, I asked permission from administrators within the school district to access information regarding parents who met the above criteria. Once the parents were identified, they were contacted and information regarding this study was shared with them. Using this information, the parents were then allowed an opportunity to reflect on the goals of this study and make a decision regarding whether they wished to participate. The parents that decided to participate gave their consent in writing for participation.

Maximum variation sampling was used to select parents of children with ASD across the spectrum (from mild to severe) in a variety of grade levels (K-8) and a variety of educational settings (ranging from full inclusion to self-contained special education classrooms). Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996) suggested that this strategy helps to increase the range of variation between participants who operate in different settings, and it facilitates identifying "themes, patterns, and outcomes" that are prevalent across lines of variations (p. 233).

Access to the population. In order to send invitations to parents for participation, I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University and I also received approval from the school district. The school district was asked to sign a

letter of cooperation as indication of their agreement for this study to be conducted and information regarding the participants that was to be shared.

The participant consent form outlined the goals and methods of the study and also provided my contact information in case of any questions or concerns. Parents were notified that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. A detailed description of the study, including how the participants were selected, how consent was obtained, the identified risks and benefits, along with a copy of the consent form were submitted to the Walden University IRB and the school district.

A list of parents was received from the school district and letters were sent to 20 families inviting participation in the study. Using further purposeful sampling to achieve maximum variation among parent participants with regard to age level, severity of ASD, and type of educational placement of their children, I selected nine parents representing nine children to participate in the study. These parents met sampling criteria for representing children at all levels on the spectrum, different age levels, and different educational settings.

Instrumentation

This study consisted of 15 interview questions related to the RQ. Parents were encouraged to expand on their answers in order to gain a thorough description of their experiences throughout the years their child has received special education services. These data provided in-depth information about the parents' perceptions on their inclusion in the educational process in order to explore the differences and similarities between the parents' regarding this process. A semi structured interview guide (Appendix

A) was used to answer questions about their experience. The semi structured interview was more formal than a conversational interview which enabled me to ensure all information was elicited in the same manner. Open-ended questions were utilized to allow the participants to describe their experiences without biasing the responses. This also allowed me to gain the information needed without leading the responses.

One question focused on the invitation to attend meetings and whether it was convenient for them to attend. Three questions focused on the parents' attendance at meetings and whether they attend in person or by phone. This question also included the reason if the parent did not attend. One question focused on whether the school staff use technical terms or whether they use language the parents understand. Many terms used by the Child Study Team professionals may not be understood by a layperson. Two questions focused on whether the school staff is understanding of cultural or family differences and utilize this information when determining educational services. Two questions focused whether the parents are asked their opinion and if their input is utilized when educational plans are made. One question focused on any barriers that the parents feel impede their ability to be included. One question focused on whether the school staff attempts contact with the parents. Two questions focused on whether the parents feel they have a positive relationship with teachers and special education staff Child Study Team. One question focused on whether the programs, law, and parental rights were explained to parents. The last question focused on whether any language concerns are addressed.

The interviews took place over the telephone. An audio-recording was utilized which was transcribed using Temi speech-to-text transcribing website. I then edited the

transcription to ensure accuracy. Each participant was assigned a random number to maintain anonymity. In addition to the interview questions, demographic data regarding the participants' race, income, education, marital status, relationship to child, and years child has received special education services was collected at the beginning of the interview. These data were obtained in order to determine possible themes based on demographics. School records were reviewed for background information. In addition, special education records were also reviewed in order to obtain objective confirmation of the demographic information and interview questions. These multiple sources of data ensured triangulation.

Procedures for Recruitment, Data Collection, and Participation

An email was sent to prospective participants explaining the study and requesting participation. Potential parental participants were identified through IEP Direct, which is a software program utilized by the school district for special education services. This allowed access to information without breaking any confidentiality ethics. As a school psychologist within this district, I am able to access this information as a part of my position. A second email was sent 10 days after the first mailing for those parents who did not initially respond. Letters were sent to potential participants that did not respond to the email or did not have an email address in the files.

A case study was conducted to gather information using an interview process. The interview process utilized open-ended questions regarding their experiences. The interviews will take place over the telephone due to recommendations from the CDC.

Interview sessions were individually scheduled to accommodate the schedules of the parents. The interviews were recorded for later transcription.

The interviews were conducted with the participant and myself. Interviews were approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. I used Temi Transcription Services to transcribe the interviews. A review of transcription was completed in order to ensure accuracy. Rapport was established with the participants prior to beginning the interview through a phone conversation for an appointment and to answer any questions. The participants were encouraged to speak openly and honestly about their personal experiences and confidentiality was stressed with the participant. A review of the transcript was also offered to the participant.

An interview guide (Appendix A) containing semi-structured and open-ended questions was utilized to explore the perceptions of parents of children with ASD in the educational process and the RQs that provides the framework for this study. I began by asking participants several broad demographic questions. Parents were asked to provide general information regarding their children including the age at which the child was diagnosed, the child's current grade level, type of educational placement, and any related services provided in the school setting and through outside therapists.

The interview guide included questions regarding participants' perceptions of the efficacy of inclusion in the educational process. I also asked participants to reflect upon the barriers and challenges they have faced in obtaining inclusion in decision-making

processes. Throughout the interview process, I encouraged participants to share stories and examples that illuminate their perceptions.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis procedures consisted of identification of the phenomenon to be studied, bracketing out the experiences, and collecting data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Cope, 2014). The researcher reduces the information obtained to significant statements and combines them into themes in order to analyze the data. The researcher then develops a textural description of what the person has experienced a structural description of how the person experienced the phenomenon in terms of the conditions, situations, or context. Finally, the researcher combines the textural and structural descriptions in order to convey the essence of the experience (Yin, 2015).

Yin (2015) described data analysis for qualitative research as a process of systematically sifting through interview transcripts, field notes, documents, and other materials gathered and continually comparing all of the data gathered during the study. I will utilize inductive coding techniques and the constant comparative method for data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After completing each interview, I transcribed the audio file verbatim. I analyzed the data beginning with a close reading of each interview transcript while making notes to generate initial impressions and categories. I then analyzed each transcript using line-by-line open-coding to distinguish and generate coding categories. Categories developed from the open-coding process were used to create axial codes that related categories along the lines of common themes. I then

utilized selective coding to combine the themes into patterns and developed an overall framework for the data.

After analysis of the interview transcripts was completed, I reviewed the case files of each student and incorporated findings into the case study data. I analyzed the documents for corroboration of the categories, themes, and patterns that emerge from the analysis of the interview data (triangulation). Also, I applied open-coding to documents to identify any new categories, themes, and patterns that might be discrepant from those that emerge from the interview data.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Validity

Validity is important in all studies. Validity ensures that the research results and data are legitimate and unbiased (Yin, 2015). Several steps were taken in this study in order to ensure validity. In order to ensure external validity, I did not include any participants that I currently work with in my position in the school district. I also included a rich description in the text of the study. Because external validity refers to the transferability of the findings of a study, the findings of this study can be applied to other locations that are similar to the area in which this study is conducted. The detailed description in the study will allow for this transferability.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the capability of the findings of the study to be able to be replicated in other studies in other settings. In qualitative research, reliability refers to the

consistency in which the data was collected (Yin, 2015). Reliability was established in this study by asking the same open-ended interview questions to each participant.

Ethical Procedures

The participants were informed of ethical protection through phone contact, correspondence, and consent form. I made phone contact with possible participants, which assisted in establishing a researcher-participant relationship. Any identifying information was excluded from this study. The goals of this study as well as confidentiality guidelines were explained. Data collection was initiated after consent was obtained. The participation invitation form is in Appendix B.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the research paradigm guiding this study, along with RQs. The role of the researcher was identified. The methods utilized for selecting participants was also discussed. Data collection procedure, data analysis procedures, and validity were also identified. The next chapter will present the findings of this study, focusing on themes identified through the interviews related to the RQs outlining this study. Chapter 5 will present analysis and interpretation of the findings. Implications of the findings, practical applications of the findings, and implications for further research will also be discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain information on the perceptions of parents of children with ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process. The number of children in the U.S. with ASD has been increasing every year. It is important for parents to be included in the decision-making process in special education services. The IEP is written to ensure children's educational needs are met. This study is intended to promote communication between parents and school staff regarding the special education services provided to children with disabilities.

The goal of this research study was to obtain information about the participants' satisfaction with their inclusion in the educational process of their children, including any barriers that inhibit their participation. Participants for the study were parents of children in elementary and middle school who have been classified as ASD and receive special education services. The qualitative case study design, as described in Chapter 3, included the following RQ: What are the lived experiences and perceptions of parents of students with and ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process? The four subquestions were as follows:

- 1 What barriers are encountered for inclusion?
- 2 What steps does the school district make in inclusion of parents?
- 3 How are parents included when decisions are made regarding educational programs and services?
- 4 How can parents and schools ensure parental participation?

The RQ was a guide for analyzing the participants' responses to the research instrument. The participants provided in-depth information regarding their experience of inclusion in the educational process. The participants addressed specific details of their past experience in inclusion and barriers they encountered that made it difficult for them to participate in the decision-making process for their child's educational needs.

Data Collection Process

I chose the participants from a list of children classified as ASD who are in elementary or middle school in School District A and receive special education services. This list was provided to me by School District A. I sent an email was sent to 50 parents in a rural southern New Jersey school district requesting participation in the study. A consent form was included with the invitation email sent to potential participants. This consent form included information on the goal of the study, assurance of confidentiality, and samples of questions that would be asked.

Participants willing to participate confirmed their consent via email. Due to the COVID-19 outbreak, none of the communication or interviews could be conducted in person. Three parents responded and agreed to participate. A follow-up email was sent 10 days after the original email. Four parents responded to the second request and consented to participate. Ten days after the second email was sent, the invitation and consent were mailed to the parents with a self-addressed stamped envelope. No parents responded to the letters. The director of special education in School District A provided a second list with 30 additional student names as participation from the initial list was limited. An email invitation was sent to these parents. Two parents responded with consent. A

follow-up email was sent 5 days later. I did not receive any responses to these emails. Once consent was received, I scheduled a telephone interview with the parents. After these attempts, nine participants agreed to participate in this study. My goal was to have 10 participants; however, after analysis of the data was completed, it was found that saturation had been reached and no further data were needed.

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, and I encouraged participants to expand on their answers to the RQs. To maintain confidentiality, each parent was assigned a number. During the interview, the child was not referred to by name, simply as he or she. I asked questions to ensure that parents understood the consent form. Informed parents they would receive a copy of the results. I followed up the interview with a thank you card with a \$20.00 Walmart gift card.

Sampling

I used purposive sampling to ensure that participants were able to provide concise, in-depth information relating to the RQ. All participants were parents of children with ASD. These children were in elementary and middle school in School District A. The child needed to have received special education services for at least 2 years.

I used the following procedure to obtain the sample population for this study. Permission to conduct the study and access student records with parental permission was obtained from the executive director of human resources in School District A. The goal of the study and interview guide was remitted to the district for review. I was granted access to contact information of potential participants. I emailed an invitation (Appendix B) to 46 potential participants. The final sample included nine participants.

Informed Consent

The potential participants received information via the informed consent regarding the possible risks and benefits of the study. They were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I included that while I was a school psychologist employed by School District A, the study had nothing to do with my employment and was not conducted for the district. The study was being conducted as a requirement of my degree program at Walden University. The parents who consented to participate gave me permission to audiotape the interview. Permission was received to access their child's school records as well as special education records.

Confidentiality

In order to ensure confidentiality, I assigned a numerical code to each participant based on the number of the row of the Excel sheet where the participant's contact information is located. The Excel sheet with the identifying information was kept in a secure location separate from the audio-recordings, interview transcripts, and analysis to ensure that no data can be traced to the participants' information. I kept the data in a password-protected file on my personal computer for the duration of the analysis. At the completion of this study, all files relating to the data were transferred to a flash drive and erased from the computer. All hardcopies of the data and the flash drive will be kept in a lockbox for 7 years and will then be shredded.

Setting

Participants were recruited from a rural southern New Jersey school district (School District A). A list of potential participants was provided to me by the special education department. An invitation with consent form was emailed to the potential participants. A second email was sent after 10 days. Limited responses were received; therefore, an additional list was provided in order to access further potential participants. Invitations were also sent by mail as many potential participants did not share email addresses. The study was to include 10 participants; however, only nine potential participants agreed to participate. After analysis of the data, it was found that no additional information was need in order to achieve saturation. Because of CDC recommendations on Covid-19, interviews were conducted via telephone.

Demographics

The demographic data included a total of nine parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in three elementary schools and one middle school. Each participant's child has received special education services for at least 2 years. The response percentages for each of the parent demographics are presented in Table 1 and discussed in the following section.

Table 1

Demographics

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Ethnicity		
African American	5	56%
White	1	11%
Hispanic	2	22%
Asian	1	11%
Household income		
< \$20,000	2	22%
\$21,000-34,000	2	22%
\$35,000-49,000	1	11%
\$50,000- \$74,000	1	11%
> \$75,000	3	34%
Education		
High school grad.	3	33%
College degree	5	56%
Graduate degree	1	11%
Marital status		
Single	3	33%
Married	3	33%
Divorced	3	34%
Years child in special education		
2-3	1	11%
4-5	1	11%
> 5	7	78%

The demographic characteristics percentages for the participants are presented in Table 2 and discussed in the following section.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics

Ethnicity	Income		Education	Marital status		Yrs. sp. ed.			
African American	56%	> \$75K	34%	College degree	56%	Married	34%	> 5	78%
Hispanic	22%	\$20K-\$34K	22%	High school	33%	Divorce	33%	2-3	11%
Asian	11%	< \$20K	22%	Graduate degree	11%	Single	33%	4-5	11%
Caucasian	11%	\$35K-\$49K	11%						
		\$50K-\$75K	11%						

A review of the demographic responses revealed the majority of participants were African American and Hispanic. Over half of the participants' household income was over \$75,000 and over 40% earned less than \$20,000 and between \$20,000 and \$34,000. Over 50% of the participants hold a college degree and the majority of the participants' children have received special education services for over 5 years. There was no difference in the participants' marital status.

Results

The data analysis from the interview questions resulted in seven major themes and one outlier. The seven major themes are attendance at meetings, family differences consideration, understanding of terms and explanations, parental input in development of plans, relationship with teachers, relationship with special education staff, and language barriers. The response percentages for each of these themes are presented in Table 3 and discussed in the following sections.

Table 3

Major Themes for Parental Perceptions on Inclusion in the Educational Process

Theme	Number	Percentage
Regular attendance at meetings	9	100%
Family differences consideration	8	89%
Understanding of explanations	5	56%
Input used in development of plans	5	56%
Positive relationship with teachers	8	89%
Positive relationship with child study teams	4	44%
Language barriers	0	0%

Regular Attendance at Meetings

Regular attendance at meetings was of particular importance to the participants. All attendance at meetings was in-person. All parents stated that they have had to

reschedule meetings and were offered participation via telephone, which they declined.

regular attendance at meetings theme has two subthemes (see Table 4).

Table 4

Subthemes for Attendance at Meetings

Subtheme	Number	Percentage
Advance notice of meeting	9	100%
Convenient time for meeting	0	0%

All parents stated they receive the invitations to attend meetings at least 15 days prior to the meeting date. Two parents had concerns regarding how they received the notification. One parent related,

A lot of times they put it in his backpack, which was a huge issue because I get home at 6:00 when he's with his grandma so I don't always check the book bag. I wouldn't see it until the last minute. Sometimes the teacher would forget to put it in the book bag. Lately, they have been mailing it since he started middle school which is really good because then I get it in time before the appointment.

These parents also felt that it was unprofessional and informal to send it with their child.

One parent stated that it made it seem like the school did not want to waste a postage stamp.

All nine parents stated that they haven't had a meeting scheduled at a time that was convenient for them. Because of this, they are inconvenienced because they either have to call to reschedule or they have to rearrange their schedule to accommodate the school. One parent commented,

I had to reschedule once and I had to wait 2 months for another appointment.

They always schedule meetings at the same time. It's around 9:30 and most of the time I have a kid that goes to school at 9:00 and I have to put him on his bus and then make it to the school by 9:30. It's ridiculous.

All the parents perceived that their time as not valued and the school could at least try to find out in advance what is the best time for the parent. They realize that the Child Study Team have an enormous amount of students that they case manage; however, they would like to be consulted prior to meetings. Perhaps, an information sheet could be sent at the beginning of the school year to ask what days and time blocks are best for parents to be able to attend meetings. The Child Study team could then consult this list prior to scheduling meetings.

Family Differences Consideration

Most of the parents stated that they believe the Child Study Team recognizes and considers cultural and family differences and takes that into account when recommending an educational plan. This study included racial and socioeconomic diversity. One parent believed it was difficult for her to address cultural differences and that her perception may not reflect other parents in the school district. The parent stated,

I mean, just being honest, because we're white, the whole system is kind of set up for us. So, you know, other people I'm sure have a much harder time getting their cultural needs identified or noticed.

Eighty-nine percent of the parents felt that they could share any issues that they may be experiencing in their home comfortably. According to the participants, the teachers and

Child Study Teams were always very understanding and used the information to assist their child.

One parent's perception was that the special education staff does not consider if the parent is poorly educated and has emotional issues. In addition, the child's background needed to be explained to the special education staff every year because the case manager changed frequently. The parent stated,

Each year you have to deal with a new set of people. So now you have to explain what the child's situation is and what his background is. When you are asked about his background, you have to look at his parents' background as well. If the parent doesn't understand, they need to know how to explain it to different people.

One parent did feel that the special education staff did not understand cultural differences. This parent stated,

Some of the people understand cultural differences and others don't. A lot of the kids are from different walks of life. My son is African American and Puerto Rican and we have teachers that are Anglo-Saxon and they don't understand the cultural differences. If you have a teacher that hasn't been around, uh, ethnic individuals, she doesn't engage because she doesn't understand where I am coming from and the environment that my son grew up around. So she might take something you're doing as negative, but it's really part of the culture. This was a couple of years ago. My son's teacher now gets it and it's not a cultural thing.

While most parents perceived that the school staff understands their differences and take them into consideration, some parents did not have the same experience. The negative experiences occurred years ago and they don't feel it is currently an issue; however, this negative experience is remembered years later and tempers their views on the special education experience. Family Differences Consideration Theme has one subtheme (see Table 5).

Table 5

Subtheme for Family Differences Consideration

Theme	Number	Percentage
IEPs not individualized	4	44%

Four of the nine parents felt that, while the Child Study Teams did take into consideration the cultural and family differences, their child's individual differences were not considered when planning an educational program. One parent related,

His IEP goals weren't beneficial to him. And a lot of how the IEP program was modified to meets his needs. It was like a cookie cutter. It was like a generic version. It was made to meet all of the kids' needs that were classified with autism. It didn't pinpoint to what my son needed.

These parents generally felt that the case manager did not consider their child's needs and wanted their child to work within their established programs. One parent stated,

The Child Study Team presents the program to me and I tell them that's unacceptable. Sometimes I'm presenting things my son needs but they want his

needs to fit into their program. Everything should benefit my son, not benefit the district.

Another parent went further, stating,

The Child Study team weren't really trying to understand my son's behaviors. They didn't try to figure out where the behaviors were coming from. He had behaviors because he didn't understand the material he was being taught in school and his speech delay. I had to get someone to come in and look to see if what my son needed was being done. The behavior plan in his IEP did not fit him. It was a basic one that they give everyone. It was directed to the entire autism program. I had to come up with the ideas for what he needed. I had to bring in his IEP from Michigan to show them what his behavior plan should look like. The plan from Michigan was developed by a lot of people coming together to make it and then a large team of ABA therapists, outside agencies, DDD worker, teacher, principal, and case manager would get together once a month to review if the behavior plan was working or if it needed to be revised. The Child Study Team just took the plan from Michigan and reworded it. They didn't meet to make a new one.

Most of the parents expressed their concern about the IEP not being individualized to meet their child's needs. They felt their child had to fit into the existing program and that the program should fit their child. This was the most important area to all parents and the area that they focus on when perceiving the education process. The parents want their child's IEP to be individualized to their needs. Some of the parents felt

that the IEPs are all the same and their child's IEP is the same every year. They feel there should be some changes from year to year; however, the educational plan stays the same.

Understanding of Explanations

While over half of the parents perceive that the Child Study Team explain everything in a way that they understand, forty-four percent stated that they have not always understood. These parents felt they had to educate themselves on programs and terms in order to better understand what was said in the meetings. One parent stated,

In the beginning I felt I didn't understand but I learned the terms and jargon. I also started bringing an educational advocate with me to meetings because she knew what they were talking about and how to address it.

Another parent said,

I think I mostly understand but if there's something I don't know; I'll ask them to explain it.

All the parents stated that they ask the staff at the meetings to explain anything they do not understand. In addition, most of the parents felt they had to educate themselves in order to effectively participate in the planning. Understanding of explanations theme has one subtheme (see Table 6).

Table 6

Subtheme for Understanding of Explanations

Subtheme	Number	Percentage
Differing information between case managers	4	44%

Four of the parents felt confused by the differing information they received by different case managers. They explained that one case manager would explain a program or law to them; however, the next year it would be a substantially different explanation by another case manager. The parents stated that these differing explanations confuse them and make it difficult to know which is the correct information. Because of this the parents perceive that the special education department, as a whole, do not know the laws or the programs.

Seven parents added in their interviews that they felt that the Child Study Team does not explain the special education process, programs, laws, and parental rights. They stated they had to try to learn the information themselves. They felt that they do not know the different programs offered. They also were never informed at the first meeting on what the special education laws are or their parental rights. One parent mentioned that the parents are given a booklet on parental rights but it can be difficult to understand when they are not knowledgeable about the subject. The parent wished the Child Study Team had explained the process and asked if they have any questions about it.

Input Used in Development of Plans

Over half the parents felt that the special education staff does ask for their opinion and incorporate their input into the educational plans. However, three parents stated that there have been disagreements on what should be included in their child's IEP. They also felt that the special education staff was not willing to listen to their reasoning and were unwilling to compromise. Two parents stated that they felt their only option was to obtain advocates or seek legal remedies. One parent related,

They'll present their recommendation to me and I tell them that it is unacceptable. The district is supposed to be providing A, B, and C and they aren't. Why aren't they? My son sees a neuro-developmental specialist. So I'm equipped that way. I'm not depending on the Child Study Team to come up with a plan. The neuro-developmental specialist helps me develop a plan for him based on his strengths and weaknesses. This is how my son gets a comprehensive IEP. I think another barrier, honestly, is that parents are not as informed as they should be as to what legally the school should be providing. I think sometimes schools will give you the bare minimum because maybe that's all they can afford, even though legally they should be doing more. That's why kids slip through the cracks, especially the higher functioning ones. I get what my son needs because I advocate for it. The social skills class was geared for lower functioning students and my son was placed in there without my knowledge about the level. I had to figure that out and advocate for a program that fit his needs.

Another parent stated.

When I first moved back, I would have my son's DDD caseworker come with me because there were a lot of problems. My son's IEP was not individualized. It seemed like they just wanted to write it and be done with it. They don't really care if my son is successful.

Further, a parent said,

I communicate with the case manager who is running the meeting but we don't communicate well. I told her that I was bringing in an educational advocate and

the concerns I had about my son. My advocate gave me advice and then I use the language she gives me. Then the case manager knew what I was talking about and the meeting went smoothly.

In addition, a parent related that she does not feel like the Child Study Team listens to her until she says she will file for due process. Due process is the legal avenue parents can file to seek remedy on occasions where they disagree on an educational plan for their child. It is noteworthy that all the parents have had good experiences with the special education staff.

Positive Relationship with Teachers

All of the parents, with the exception of one, feel they have an excellent relationship with their child's teacher. The one parent that did not state a positive relationship stated that the negative relationship involved only two teachers. The parent has had a positive experience for the remaining years. One parent stated,

I have always had a great relationship with the teachers. They will help in any way they can. They communicate with me regularly by email or phone. They always understand my son and work with him. The teacher he has now has a background in autism so she understands my son.

However, one parent was concerned that she received too many calls when the child was experiencing behavioral difficulties. The parent felt that the school should have staff that are trained in handling any issues that arise without calling. The parent stated,

I never receive any notices on events that they are having in school. They never call to say my son got student of the month or he is doing a great job. The calls

were always for something negative. The school has a social worker there and all these people who are trained in deescalating and redirecting. And you're calling me, a working full-time mom? I was stressed out and anxious all the time. Every time the phone rang, it was either the doctor's office for the kids or it was the teacher or principal calling me and telling me about a negative behavior. It wasn't like, your son is doing this behavior and we are going to work on it by doing X, Y, and Z. It was to tell me that my son's doing this and I need you to come to the school and get him. What is the point of having him in school? If you are going to call me all and let me know how horrible he is and make me feel like my kid is a monster. I never got the good calls until recently.

Overall, the relationships with the teachers has been a positive experience for the parents. They feel that teachers communicate frequently with them and therefore; they are able to know how their child is doing in school, especially since many of the children are nonverbal. Because their child can't speak, they rely solely on the teacher for information.

Positive Relationship with Child Study Teams

In contrast to the parent-teacher relationships, only 44% of the parents felt that they have a positive relationship with the Child Study Team case manager and team members. Based on the responses, this perception is due to case managers frequently changing and lack of communication. Positive Relationship with Child Study Teams theme has two subthemes (see Table 7).

Table 7

Subthemes for Positive Relationships with Child Study Teams

Subtheme	Number	Percentage
Lack of stability of case managers	7	78%
Lack of regular communication with case manager	9	100%

Seventy-eight percent of the parents related that they have a relationship with their case manager; however, they can't say if the relationship is positive as their case manager may change frequently and they also have very little communication with them.

One parent stated,

Every year it's a different case manager; like this year, it's a different one. They all have different personalities and different opinions.

Another parent stated,

There is a lot of changing of the case managers. I don't get a lot of interaction with my case manager. Basically, only if I initiate the communication. The interaction is very limited. Other than the introductory letter, I don't have much interaction, only if I have a question about something.

Further, a parent said,

We've had a different case manager every year and I just feel like they don't have any time to get to know the kids that they're helping. It would be nice if they would call once in a while to see how we are doing and if we have any questions.

Regular communication and stability are key concerns of the parents. Once they are familiar with their child's case manager, they feel they would have a good relationship.

Language Barriers

Although 16 invitations were sent to parents for who English is not their first language, none of none of them replied to the invitation with consent. The invitations and consent forms were submitted to them in Spanish. Because all of the parents participating in this study speak English, none of them expressed any language barriers. However, one parent did state,

I would like to say that I've observed in other areas of the Child Study Team process that the whole piece about the language barrier could be an issue for someone who doesn't speak English. They need, I think interpretation is needed. Language interpretation for those people that need it. Not for me personally, but I've witnessed it for other people. Like, I don't think it should be, you know, an aide or a secretary interpreting for the Child Study Team meeting or somebody else. It should be someone who's well versed in the language and the education system, and someone's who's a certified interpreter.

Research that includes Spanish speaking parents would gain knowledge on perceptions of language barriers.

As this study was being completed, observations and reflections were noted. Parents appeared to be very proud that they have been participating in their child's education for years and displayed confidence in their abilities. However, when speaking of areas where they perceive barriers, they became more upset. They expanded on their

answers more completely in areas they felt were lacking. They also began to think of other areas in which they unhappy.

I believe it is noteworthy that few Caucasian parents participated in this study. While School District A has a large Hispanic population, there is racial diversity in the district. In addition, most parents were well educated and earned higher incomes. The question I asked myself was, “why so few parents agreed to participate when I invited over 70 parents?” Does the lack of response have a correlation to lack of participation in the educational process? If parents who do not participate in the educational process did not response to the invitation because they don’t participate, what are their perceived barriers and how would you get them to participate? Also, I wonder why no fathers participated in the study. Perhaps it is because these mothers are single parents or the fathers are not involved in their child’s education.

Summary

This chapter included parental responses to interview questions to describe the perceptions of parents of children with ASD in regard to their inclusion in the educational process. The discussion included data collection and analysis, instrumentation, and sampling. The population sample was from a rural school district in southern New Jersey. The participants were parents of children with ASD who receive special education services in the elementary and middle schools. The conclusions and implications will be discussed in Chapter 5. The significance of this study will be discussed and recommendations for further research will be made.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of parents of children diagnosed with ASD in elementary and middle school regarding their inclusion in the educational process. I used a single case study methodology to give voice to participants who provided rich descriptions of their experiences with the school district processes. This study constituted an extension of the literature on ASD and parental experiences in the educational process and revealed the barriers encountered in inclusion.

Chapter 4 provided a detailed analysis of the participants' interview responses. In Chapter 4, I highlighted participating parents' responses and provided the results of the qualitative single case study. Chapter 5 includes the findings, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for school district administrators and future research based on the data analysis and literature. A focus in Chapter 5 is to present a clear understanding of the relationship between the resultant themes and the literature.

The RQ developed for this qualitative study was, What are the lived experiences and perceptions of parents of students with ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process? Data analysis led to the identification of themes and subthemes that provide valuable information on the participants' perceptions regarding barriers to their inclusion in the educational process and areas that they feel encourage their inclusion. The goal of this study was to yield information that could be used by district administrators to improve the process currently used for parent inclusion and to address areas of parental concerns. The implications of the findings include the potential for

improved plans for parental inclusion that may allow parents to fully advocate for their child.

Interpretation of the Findings

I examined the results using the symbolic interactionism theoretical model as the participants shared their perceptions of their inclusion in the educational process and the barriers that prevent them from this inclusion. Although there is legislation mandating parental involvement in the educational process, educators are still finding parental involvement difficult to achieve (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Malone, 2015). There is a poor understanding and limited agreement between parents and educators on what constitutes parental involvement (Robles, 2011). The views on what parental involvement includes are also complicated by cultural, ethnic, and social class differences. These differences can be challenging to address in order for parental involvement to be fostered (Malone, 2015).

Data Analysis of Themes and Subthemes

The purpose of analyzing data in a research study is for the researcher to explore whether the study data might add to existing knowledge (Creswell, 1998). Research data also have implications for professional practice. The data in this study may be useful to school administrators in making decisions regarding plans designed to ensure that parents can be involved in educational decisions that affect their child. The perception of parents is crucial in understanding which methods in place are successful as well as the barriers that need to be addressed in order to ensure parental involvement.

Implementation of successful models for parental involvement is especially important because teachers and administrators are mandated to include parents in the educational planning process for students with disabilities (Mandlawitz, 2002). However, inclusion of the parents is not always practiced or effective. Parental involvement is an important aspect of the educational success of every student. Research has shown that parental involvement leads to academic success (Howland et al., 2006). Research has shown that parental involvement is related to different student achievement indicators, including increased letter grades, attendance, attitudes, expectations, homework completion, and state test results (Smith et al., 2011).

In addition to increased academic success, parental involvement in their children's education also has social and financial benefits, including improved health, decreased welfare dependence, and reduced crime. Research has shown that the earlier parental involvement begins in a child's education, the more powerful the beneficial effects (Bracke & Corts, 2012). However, the process of including parents as active participants in the educational process has not always been effective. School districts have not always encouraged parent involvement in the planning and implementing of educational programs for children with ASD (Wehman, 1998). Special education legislation and court cases have furthered the rights of children with disabilities and the rights of parents to be included in the educational process, yet they have also placed restrictions and expectations on the part of parents and school staff. These restrictions and expectations may have the potential to create an adversarial relationship that stands in the

way of an equal partnership (Fish, 2008). The themes that emerged from the interviews are discussed in the following section.

Theme 1. All the parents attend all meetings held for their child. They regularly attend in-person; however, they will attend via telephone when necessary. In addition, all the parent participants stated that they receive meeting invitations well in advance of the meetings; however, they all added that the meetings have never been scheduled at a time that is convenient for them to attend and they have had to either call to reschedule the meeting or rearranged their schedule. Most of the parents expressed a desire for the meetings to be scheduled at a convenient time initially so they would not need to reschedule.

Only 22% of the parents earn less than \$22,000 per year. Middle class parents have historically played a visible role in their children's education. Thus, the current definitions of good parenting fall in line with the views of the middle class (De Carvalho, 2001). Middle class parents have access to resources, basically economic, that allow for involvement in the education process.

Hodges et al. (2019) found that one difficulty in the inclusion of parents in the educational process is the communicative process. School staff continues to believe that communication should be through the institutional communicative methods while parents want more personal for invitations to participation (Hodges et al., 2019). Staff must increase communication between themselves regarding how to include parents. More personal methods of communication, including one-on-one conversations with parents, need to be utilized in order to gain acceptance from parents (Halsey, 2005).

Parents in the study recognized that Child Study Team member positions have been reduced and each team member has large caseloads; however, the district could possibly ask the parents at the beginning of each school year to complete a survey where they can give days and time frames that would enable them to attend meetings. These forms can be updated throughout the year as needed. This would allow the staff to schedule times that are convenient for the parents and therefore, prevent them from having to frequently reschedule their meetings.

Theme 2. Eighty- nine percent of the parents perceived that the school staff considered their family differences. The literature and study findings were not cohesive in this area. Bartel (2010) found that lack of acceptance of cultural differences was stressed in parents' experiences with the school. Parents' inability to follow expected school protocols, not understanding their roles, not knowing how to help, and letting their own negatives school experiences impede all impacted parental involvement (Bartel, 2010).

While most of the parents did feel that the school staff considered their family differences, many of them felt their child's differences and needs were not considered. These parents perceived that consideration of their child's individualized needs were not discussed and their child needed to fit into the school's program. They believe that children have exactly the same program as all the other children and the accommodations and modifications were the same for most children and stayed the same over the course of years. Behavior plans are made for the program and given to all children. No behavior plans met their child's unique needs.

It is recommended that school staff thoroughly discuss each child's needs with the parent. Areas within the programs may require adjustment to meet the child's unique needs. Custom accommodations and modifications should address all areas of the child's needs. Because a child's needs change over time, adjustments should be made as needed at each meeting. According to Loefgren (2011), students with ASD have individualized symptoms; therefore, each child has individualized needs and should not be compared to other children with this diagnosis.

Theme 3. Over half of the parents believed that explanations of the special education process and programs were explained in a way that they understood. However, 67% of the parents in this study have a four-year degree and graduate degree. Because of the advanced education, parents are better educated and may be better able to understand the educational process without clarification. The findings of this study are cohesive with the literature. Parents with more education are better able to be involved in their child's education. Wolfe and Duran (2013) found that parents' lack of knowledge regarding IEP meetings and the belief that they are uninformed about their child's disability or educational program options are related to degree of education and culture.

All the parents did state that they will ask for clarification on explanations that they do not understand. However, three parents did say that they felt they needed to consult with advocates for advice on the process and further clarification. They stated that they no longer require the advocates to attend the meetings as they feel comfortable now with their level of understanding. Although parents feel that they understand the explanations, they stated that they felt they needed to seek assistance from outside

resources. In addition, six parents stated that the process was not thoroughly explained at the beginning of the process. They currently understand because of the assistance received from advocates. Further, 44% of the parents stated that the information they receive is different based on the case manager relating information. This is confusing to the parent and they feel it is difficult to understand when they receive conflicting information. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that the Child Study Team should thoroughly explain the educational process and programs to parents and confirm that they understand. Consideration should be made in these explanations to the parents' culture and educational level. Further, members of the Child Study Team should be knowledgeable in programs and the special education process so that parents receive correct information.

Theme 4. Fifty-six percent of the parents in this study perceived that their input is used in the development of plans. However, some of the parents stated that while they feel their input is being heard, it is not taken into consideration unless the parent threatens legal action or brings an advocate. The parents perceive that decisions are made prior to the input and therefore, their input is not included in the plan. Two parents stated that recommendations for the plan are made before they are even asked for their opinion. Therefore, while parents believe their input is used in the development of plans, they feel they have to be forceful in order for this input to be included in the decision-making process.

Understanding of the symbolic interactionism theory is necessary for effective inclusion of parents in the educational process. If a child's social and cultural

backgrounds are not taken into consideration by the educators, the parents' input will not be utilized to its fullest potential. Parental perceptions may cause a disadvantage that will negatively impact their ability to engage in educational experiences. These barriers must be acknowledged by educators in order for changes to be made that adapt to the parents' needs.

Symbolic interactionism places meaning, identity, and experience of everyday life at the center of its explanation of the social world. Our self-concept is developed by observing how others interact with us (Blumer, 1969). By examining words, gestures, rules, and roles, symbolic interactionism can be applied to studying individual decision-making. Meanings emerge from symbolically laden interactions. How individuals behave and interact with others creates a common understanding of what those acts represent (Hewitt, 1988). Symbolic interactionism is a useful framework for understanding opposing points of view which can pose obstacles in decision-making processes.

Because an understanding of symbolic interactionism theory is crucial to the decision-making process, it is recommended that district staff become knowledgeable in this theory and utilize it when working with the parent on educational plans. This can be accomplished through a workshop on this theory and how to apply it to the educational process. Child study team members should also be conscious of the importance of not giving the appearance that decisions have been made prior to hearing parental information.

Theme 5. Eighty-nine percent of the parents in this study perceived that they have a positive relationship with teachers. One parent did state difficulty with some teachers

but an overall positive experience. Frequent communication and responses to questions were the most important areas to the parents. They felt teachers genuinely care about their child. The teachers also addressed any concerns of the parents. Parents enjoyed contact from the teachers to relate positive information regarding their child. One parent did express concern that the only calls received were about the child's behavior. Calls regarding positive aspects of the day were not received. These findings were cohesive with the literature. Positive relationships with parents are crucial as parents feel they are included in the educational process and have a better educational experience. School staff should foster a positive relationship with the parent. Parents should not feel that they are only included when disciplinary issues arise with their child.

Theme 6. Only 44% of the parents in this study perceived a positive relationship with the Child Study Team. The barriers to a positive relationship were varied and included frequent changes of case managers and lack of communication. Because the literature states that positive relationships between school staff and parents is needed in order for parents to be involved in the educational process, this lack of positive relationships may be a barrier for parents to perceive they are involved in the process.

Most parents stated that their children have different case manager almost every year. This prevents the parents from fostering a relationship with the case manager. Stability of the staff involved in their child's education was very important. Parents felt that working with a different person every year made it hard for them to feel comfortable calling to express concerns. In addition, parents felt that they had no regular contact with

the members of the Child Study Team; therefore, they had no relationship with them other than talking to them when parents called with concerns.

It is recommended that Child Study Team members should stay on one team for a substantial length of time. In addition, a case manager should continue to work with a child while the child is attending that school. Further, case managers should call parents regularly to see if there are any concerns or questions and discuss their child's progress. These recommendations would result in a more positive relationship with parents. The parents will feel included and the relationship will be consistent.

Theme 7. None of the parents in this study encountered any barriers in language. All the parents spoke English and are able to communicate with the staff members. One parent stated that she has had discussions with other parents and was told that, at times, secretarial staff and aides translated at the meetings. That parent felt that a professional staff member who is certified in translation should attend the meeting.

No analysis could be completed in this theme as English was the native language of all the parents who participated in the study. Fifteen invitations were sent to Spanish speaking parents in Spanish. However, I did not receive any responses. This lack of response is noteworthy to consider the reason Spanish speaking parents did not reply to the invitation.

A study was completed with 142 parents of children with ASD to determine their satisfaction with their child's IEP (Slade, Eisenhower, Carter, & Blacher, 2018). The researchers found parental school involvement and parent-teacher relationships may contribute to parental experiences in the IEP process. Equitable involvement in decision-

making processes, problem-solving orientation at meetings, a transparent process, and parents' belief they are respected as equals may affect parental satisfaction in the educational process. Knowing parental perceptions of their involvement is important to ensure overall satisfaction through plans to address perceived areas of dissatisfaction.

Garbacz, McIntyre, and Santiago (2016) conducted a study of 31 parents of children with ASD. They found that parental access to sources of information on ASD was directly linked to parental involvement in the special education process. It is recommended that Child Study Team members should assist parental access to resource agencies and information regarding ASD early in the special education process. This may encourage parental involvement in the future. Parents who are knowledgeable are more likely to understand the importance of their involvement in the educational process.

Sharabi and Marom-Golan (2018) studied 107 Israeli parents of children with ASD to compare levels of involvement between mothers and fathers. They found that mothers reported higher levels of involvement in the educational process than fathers. Further mothers reported higher levels of involvement in all aspects of their child's care than fathers. This study is cohesive with the literature. All the participants in this study were mothers. Thirty-three percent of the mothers were married. The majority of child care, including educational involvement, may rest on mothers. This should be taken into consideration when planning models for parental inclusion. In addition, this increases the importance of scheduling meetings at convenient times for parents as these mothers may experience full schedules.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation for the current study was the limited geographical area. Because the study was limited to one rural southern New Jersey school district, this study would not be generalizable to other districts. In addition, the small population of the study limits its generalizability. However, the stratification within the participant pool (gender, age, income level, education and occupation) occurred and may be able to be generalized to districts in similar areas with similar populations.

Another limitation of this study was the exclusion of certain populations. Although invitations were extended to Spanish speaking parents, no responses were received. Addition of this population could possibly expand on the perceptions found within this study. This may be an area to consider for future research. The reasons for choosing not to participate are unknown.

The final limitation to this study was that the interviews were not conducted face-to-face. Due to the CDC guidelines pertaining to Covid-19 prevented in-person interviews and all interviews were conducted via telephone. Because of this, I was not able to see the parent and was unable to observe body language and facial expressions and had to rely solely on tone of voice and inflections to determine emotional distress of some questions. In addition, parents had to attend to children in the household during the interview and background sounds made it difficult at times to understand the parent.

Recommendations

This study resulted in recommendations for future academic research possibilities. The study participants were predominately African American, Hispanic, Caucasian, and

Asian participants represented approximately 50% of the sample combined. A study that evenly represents differing parental races may measure may provide additional information. In addition, a larger sample size would be more generalizable for similar districts.

The participant pool was selected from one school district in New Jersey. This district is socioeconomically disadvantaged. While this study may be generalizable to similar school districts, a study that includes other school districts with diverse populations where education, race, and income differ, could be generalized to include a larger population. In addition, future studies may target Spanish speaking parents for their perceptions. It is impossible to determine why Spanish speaking parents did not respond to the invitation. Perhaps stressors, language barrier fears, or lack of parental involvement prevent them from participating in a study regarding their child.

Parents all stated that they need to feel that their input is heard and valued in the educational process. According to the Symbolic interactionism theory, humans place meaning, identity, and experience of everyday life at the center of their explanation of the social world. Our self-concept is developed by observing how others interact with us (Blumer, 1969). By examining words, gestures, rules, and roles, symbolic interactionism can be applied to studying individual decision-making. Meanings emerge from symbolically-laden interactions. How individuals behave and interact with others creates a common understanding of what those acts represent (Hewitt, 1988). Symbolic interactionism is a useful framework for understanding opposing points of view which can pose obstacles in decision-making processes.

Because an understanding of symbolic interactionism theory is crucial to the decision-making process, it is recommended that district staff become knowledgeable in this theory and utilize it when working with the parent on educational plans. This can be accomplished through a workshop on this theory and how to apply it to the educational process. A future study may compare parental views on inclusion in the educational process before and after staff training in symbolic interactionism. The results could be utilized in future plans for ensuring parental involvement.

A study involving fathers can be beneficial in order to explore their perceptions of inclusion. Because no fathers participated in this study, research may reveal barriers that exist that are exclusive to them. In addition, this study explored parents of children in elementary and middle school. All the parents in this study attended all meetings. Future research may track parental participation from preschool through high school in order to determine if parental participation wanes over the years. If it does, the research can explore why this happens.

Implications

Numerous opportunities exist to make positive social change for parents of children with ASD. The findings from the current study can positively contribute to the existing body of literature used to examine parental involvement in the educational process. It is crucial for parents to be included in the educational process in order to assist their child in achieving academic knowledge that will ensure a positive outcome in adulthood.

One aspect of the current study revealed that parents want to feel knowledgeable about the special education process. They gain knowledge by seeking advocates and self-teaching. This may lead parents to believe that they are not included in the process. School staff should encourage questions and thoroughly explain the entire process to parents. They also need to ensure that the parents understand. If parents feel that they are included and knowledgeable about the process, they will be inclined to participate.

School staff should understand theories regarding human perceptions. This understanding will assist them in better relations with parents and the ability to understand each child and how to educate them. Educational models individualized to the child will ensure a better educational experience which will assist in adults that are better able to care for themselves. Independent adults have better self-esteem and less depression.

Parents who feel knowledgeable and valued in the educational process will feel they are instrumental in a good education for their child. They can be instrumental in the development of programs through knowledge of their child's needs. These programs will benefit all children with their educations. Parental satisfaction could lead to significant social change as these parents of children with autism will not feel excluded by the school staff and will develop higher levels of confidence in knowing they have contributed in a positive manner to their child's education and that their opinions have been heard. This may also encourage increased interaction in all aspects of their child's education through knowledge in advocating for their child. This will lead to a better education for their child and a sense of accomplishment for the parent.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was the exploration of the perceptions of parents of children with ASD in elementary and middle school regarding their inclusion in the educational process and barriers to that inclusion. This research added to the existing knowledge about how parents perceive their experience in their child's education. The study data suggested that the parents of children with ASD perceived barriers which they have to overcome in order to feel valued.

Although fathers and mothers were invited to participate in this study, only mothers responded to the invitation. Further, invitations in Spanish were extended to Spanish speaking parents; however, no response was received for any of these parents. Findings in this study share both similarities and differences from previous research conducted in the area. While the majority of the parents expressed satisfaction with the overall process of inclusion, there were significant barriers that made participation more difficult. Many parents felt that their input was not valued and that lack of knowledge made participation difficult. All the parents in this study reported a very positive relationship with teachers. This is consistent with previous research. However, findings that were inconsistent with previous research included lack of communication with case managers which inhibited positive relationships, difficulty scheduling times for meetings, and program dissatisfaction.

The central RQ was, What are the lived experiences and perceptions of parents of students with and ASD regarding their inclusion in the educational process? The themes developed as a result of data analysis addressed the RQ in the following manner.

Theme 1: Parents perceived that meeting times scheduled were not convenient for them to attend. They stated they almost always had to call and reschedule the meetings. The parents felt that meeting should be scheduled at a time that is convenient for them and they should not have to call to reschedule so frequently.

Theme 2: Parents believe that school staff understand family differences and take them into consideration when planning educational programs and in the classroom with their children. However, some parents did not feel that their child's individual differences were taken into consideration in planning educational programs. Programs that force their child to adapt were not accepted by the parents. Programs should be adjusted to fit the needs of their child. In addition, their child should not be given the same plan as other children in the program.

Theme 3: Parents uniformly agreed that they are able to understand explanations given to them in meetings. However, they did not receive the information needed to participate from the Child Study Team. They felt they had to learn the information themselves and seek guidance from advocates. Parents feel better equipped to participate in the educational process when they have the knowledge they feel is necessary.

Theme 4: Over half the parents felt that their input was utilized in planning their child's educational program. However, the parents did believe that their input was not always valued and they had to become forceful, bring an advocate, or threaten legal action in order to be heard. While this was not a barrier to participating in the educational process, it fostered a negative relationship with the Child study Team.

Theme 5: All the parents in this study perceived that they have a very good relationship with almost all their child's teachers every school year. They feel the teachers care about their child and make significant efforts to regularly communicate with the parents.

Theme 5: In contrast to theme 4, parents did not feel they have a positive relationship with Child Study Team members for varied reasons. Parents do not always believe that they are a valued member of the team planning their child's program. Also, their child's case manager changes frequently so they do not get to know them before they are changed. In addition, they do not have regular communication with their child's case manager. They stated that they do not talk to the case manager except at meetings.

Theme 6: No information could be gathered so there were no language barriers reported by the parents. All parents in this study spoke English. Future research may include Spanish speaking parents in order to obtain their perceptions.

Suggestions such as workshop in areas focusing on parental participation including theories such as symbolic interactionism theory. Understanding of the way humans make sense of the world would be beneficial for communication with parents. Recommendations for scheduling, regular communication, consistent staff, and dissemination of information were given to promote parental satisfaction and participation. Suggestions were also included that address ways to make parents feel that they are a valued member of the educational team.

Chapter 5 included the findings, conclusions, limitations, implications, and recommendations for school district administrators and future research based on the

results identified by data analysis and study results. A brief overview of the study findings was presented based on the RQ responses and analysis of the data. The study added to the literature by documenting the perceptions of parents in order to plan models that ensure participation of parents. This will lead to parental knowledge, a feeling of accomplishment by the parents, and a better educational experience for their child.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Section I: Demographic Information

Race	Yearly Household Income	Highest Grade Completed
<input type="radio"/> Caucasian/White	<input type="radio"/> Less than \$20,000	<input type="radio"/> Less than high school
<input type="radio"/> African American/Black	<input type="radio"/> \$20,000-\$34,999	<input type="radio"/> High school diploma/GED
<input type="radio"/> Native American	<input type="radio"/> \$35,000-\$49,000	<input type="radio"/> Vocational/Technical
<input type="radio"/> Asian or Pacific Islander	<input type="radio"/> \$50,000-\$74,999	<input type="radio"/> College Degree
<input type="radio"/> Hispanic/ Latino	<input type="radio"/> More than \$75,000	<input type="radio"/> Graduate Degree
<input type="radio"/> Other		

Marital Status	Relationship to Child	Number of Years Receiving Special Education Services
<input type="radio"/> Single	<input type="radio"/> Mother	<input type="radio"/> Less than 1 year
<input type="radio"/> Divorced/Separated	<input type="radio"/> Father	<input type="radio"/> 1-2 years
<input type="radio"/> Married	<input type="radio"/> Legal Guardian	<input type="radio"/> 3-4 years
<input type="radio"/> Domestic Partnership	<input type="radio"/> Other	<input type="radio"/> 5 or more years

Section II: Interview Guide

Time: Date: Place: Interviewee: Alpha Numeric Code:	
Information for Participants:	Inform participants about the research goals, strategies for ensuring privacy and confidentiality, approximate length of interview. Review Informed Consent. Recorder is turned on.
Question 1:	Was the last IEP meeting you attended scheduled at a time that was convenient for you? If not, did you call to reschedule and was it rescheduled to a time you could attend?
Question 2:	Do you regularly attend IEP meetings in person or by telephone?
Question 3:	If you do not attend, what is the reason?
Question 4:	Who attends the meetings with you?
Question 5:	Does the school staff use language that you understand?
Question 6:	Do you feel the school staff understand any cultural or individual differences within your family and use this information for services?
Question 7:	Do you feel the educational plans made are respectful of any cultural or individual differences?
Question 8:	Do you feel the school staff ask your opinion on educational plans?

Question 9:	Do you feel your input is utilized when educational plans are made?
Question 10:	What barriers do you feel impede your ability to attend meetings and give input?
Question 11:	Do you feel the school staff tries to accommodate your participation by phone if you are unable to attend in person?
Question 12:	Do you feel you have a positive relationship with teachers? Why or why not?
Question 13:	Do you feel you have a positive relationship with the Special Education staff/ Child Study Team? Why or why not?
Question 14:	Are there any language concerns in communication? If so, how are they addressed by the school staff?
Question 15:	Do you feel the school staff explain the laws, process, and parental rights to you?

Appendix B: Participant Invitation

Dear Parent/ Guardian,

I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree and I would like to invite you to participate. In addition to being a doctoral candidate at Walden University, I am also a school psychologist and case manager for the special education department with the district. However, my professional role in this district has no bearing on this study. I am completing this study solely as a student at Walden University. I believe the results from this study may benefit your child and other children. The purpose of this study is to gain information on parents' perceptions of their inclusion in the special education process, including any barriers that you feel inhibit your inclusion. The students included in this study have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. This study will be useful in determining ways to ensure parents are able to attend and participate in meetings addressing their child's educational program.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one audio recorded interview via telephone. This interview will last no more than 60 minutes and you will be asked questions regarding your perceptions on your inclusion in the educational process.

You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. Participation is voluntary and confidential. Your identity will not be revealed. You may withdraw from the study at any time. Taking part in this study is your decision. Only I will know whether you choose to participate and I will be fine with whatever decision you make regarding participation. As thanks for your time, I will be giving each participant a \$20.00 Walmart gift card at the end of the interview.

A summary of the study results will be forwarded to you upon completion of the study.

If you would like to participate, please read the attached consent form and reply via email to [redacted] that you consent to participate in this study. You may contact me at any time to answer questions or to address any concerns by email or by phone at [redacted].

Thank you so much for your time and consideration.

Robin Waltman
Walden University Ph.D. Candidate