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# Parents' Perceptions of Hardships Associated With Transitioning Their Child With Disabilities From Early Intervention to the Local Education Agency

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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2023

Abstract

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Developmental Psychology

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# Abstract

Children with disabilities require services that are covered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act to be successful in school. Early intervention, which is made available to all who qualify, provides services with a team that works directly with the family. However, when the child turns three years of age, the family is transitioned to their local education agency (LEA). The level of support at this point lessens as the school takes over services for the child. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of parents with children with disabilities during the transition from early intervention to their LEA. Data were collected from semi structured interviews with 10 participants who had a child who qualified for and received early intervention services. Coding analysis was conducted to identify themes to answer the research question. Parents expressed how they went from a supportive environment with early intervention to feeling unsupported in the school's individual education plan (IEP) environment. Results showed how parents felt unprepared and unaware of how the transition process would go. The results also indicated the lack of advocacy that was being done on parents' behalf for their children. The goal for social change would be for the school's IEP team to provide similar support to families who are transitioning their children with disabilities. Further goals for social change would be to provide additional education to parents so they feel prepared for the next steps as their children progress in school settings.

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# Dedication

First and foremost, this dissertation is dedicated to children with disabilities who do not receive the needed services to increase their learning and developmental abilities. May your minds and bodies continue to flourish as we strive to implement social change in this area.

When I began this doctoral journey, there were definite doubts and concerns of whether I was capable or worthy of completing such a great feat. This dissertation is dedicated to my family. I am most grateful and appreciative of my parents, Bennie and Renay Taylor, who have always been in my corner providing continued support throughout this journey. I would also like to thank my brother, Dr. Bennie Taylor, who unknowingly inspired the academic researcher whom I never thought I would be. With all my love,

Dr. Chelsea Theria Taylor.

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First and foremost, I would like to humbly thank my chair, Dr. Melanie Shores. When I reached this part of my doctoral journey, I felt intimated by the idea of having a dissertation chair and learning all that was going to be required of me. Throughout the process, she was a very present helper. She never hesitated to lend a helping hand, and she encouraged me when I felt unmotivated. Many times, Dr. Shores went out of her way to assist with areas that I struggled with. This journey was strenuous and taxing. However, I must say that this experience with Dr. Shores has been nothing short of amazing, and for that I am forever thankful.

I would also like to my committee members, Dr. Matthew Hertenstein and Dr. Livia Gilstrap, for all of your helpful input and assistance. Dr. Hertenstein, you are a professor who wishes nothing but the best for his students. Dr. Gilstrap, your advice on what changes should be made only enhanced the work. I could not have done this without you both. Lastly, I would like to thank all of my fellow Walden University colleagues who labored and provided support for me during my doctoral journey.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In this qualitative study, I conducted interviews with parents to address the gap in research regarding children with disabilities and the hardships that come with implementing services once they begin school. The goal of this study was to add to the recent literature regarding children with disabilities. Most children with disabilities start their journey in early intervention (EI). Children are transitioned into the local school system if chosen by the parents. Issues regarding this process have not been researched but are widely known among the EI community. In some cases, due to the inefficiency of this transition process, children are left without the needed services once they begin school.

Chapter 1 provides detailed background information for the study. Chapter 1also includes the purpose statement, research question, nature of the study, significance of the study, and the conceptual framework. Chapter 1 also provides definitions for frequently used terms throughout this study.

## Background

A wide range of disabilities allows a child to qualify for EI services, such as autism, cerebral palsy, and severe hearing loss or deafness. Curle et al. (2016) studied the transition process for deaf children in a North American urban school district and investigated factors that hindered the transition process for deaf children. The crucial factor that impeded the smooth transition was the lack of communication between EI workers and the school system. Curle et al. also found that notes and other paperwork from EI providers got lost in the transition. Fontil et al. (2020) investigated the same issue in Canada with children with autism spectrum disorder. The main factor that prohibited a smooth transition was the lack of support from the government and elementary school engagement. Fontil et al. (2020) emphasized that more funding would provide the necessary resources to aid this transition process. These funds should also be given to EI providers who do not specialize in just children with autism spectrum disorder. This will allow children receiving EI services to have a better transition to their local school systems.

Family factors that hinder transitioning, such as socioeconomic status, cultural background, and the nature or severity of the child's disability, have also been studied. Pang (2010) stated that depending on the nature of the disability, the transition can be very stressful for the family and the child. Pang also noted that parents with different levels of education can have an issue with the change in services. EI programs and school systems should use family systems theory to understand the family's involvement in the transition process (Pang, 2010).

There is also a need for transition support for families with children with autism (Fontil et al., 2020). Researchers discovered that children with autism in Canada are not receiving the necessary support to transition smoothly. Further studies should address multiple perspectives concerning transition support (Fontil et al., 2020). In addition, other studies should be done concerning the transition process but not be limited to the deaf or hard of hearing community (Curle et al., 2016).

Researchers were able to study the benefits of transitioning children into the public school system (Eapen et al., 2017). However, one of the limitations stated was that more critical data would have been obtained if more families had been involved in the transitioning process. Another study addressed parents' perspectives as their children transitioned into preschool from EI (Villeneuve et al., 2013). This study found that most parents expressed fears and concerns regarding the amount of care their child would receive. Villeneuve et al. (2013) also mentioned that more data would be needed in this area to be significant.

## Problem Statement

Approximately 120,000 babies are born every year with birth defects that often lead to disabilities or conditions that significantly affect development (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Having a child born with a disability can cause stress on the child's family. The thought of how much it costs to address and care for the child with a disability tends to weigh on the family. Most parents are not privy to the services that are provided for them if their child requires additional help to reach their developmental milestones. EI is a service that is provided by each state that comes at no cost to families. This service generally accepts Medicaid, although insurance is not required to receive EI. EI is provided to any child age birth to 3 years who is delayed in developmental milestones.

Assessments such as the Developmental Assessment of Young Children and the Early Learning Accomplishment Profile are administered to determine the child's eligibility and the services that they will need. These free services will provide a child with therapy based on their needs. Once the child turns 27 months of age, it is required by law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004) that families be informed of their options after their child turns 3 and is no longer eligible for EI services. Parents are provided the opportunity to continue their child's services through their local school system; this process is called transitioning. EI officials have discovered that parents are deciding to opt out of these services even if the child still needs therapy.

Many studies have addressed the transitioning process from the viewpoint of school officials and EI providers. For example, Fontil et al. (2020) discussed the need for continued services for children with autism once they age out of early intervention. This study looked into how school officials can provide families with the needed support for this transition. Another study looked into the transition process for deaf and blind children and focused on the importance of including all children who receive services (Curle et al., 2016). Many studies focused on the transition process of a particular population or from the perspective of the school staff and EI providers; none, however, sought to look into the perspective of the parents who are the main decision makers in the transitioning process.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to obtain a better understanding of the hardships that parents face when trying to obtain services for their disabled child from the local education agency. Identifying these barriers may allow researchers, school officials, and other stakeholders a chance to mitigate the concerns that parents might have.

## Research Question

What obstacles/hardships do parents with children with disabilities face when transitioning from early intervention services to those provided by the local education agency?

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems theory. This theory was used to discover how families engage in decision making for their children. In the ecological systems theory, there are many factors that play a role in this decision making for families. It is necessary to take into consideration the family’s socioeconomic status, culture, and other influences that can sway a decision by the family. My aim was to look into the family unit to understand decisions that are made. Many studies have been done looking into how family systems affect certain aspects of life. I used ecological systems theory as a framework to explore why parents are opting out of transitioning their children into their local school system.

## Nature of the Study

This study was qualitative in nature with the use of the narrative inquiry design involving semi structured interviews to explore the real-life experiences of parents who have children in early intervention. This format provided me with a guideline to follow during the interviews while also allowing participants time to add additional information regarding their lived experiences. The key to this study was to provide as much knowledge from the participants as needed to answer the research question.

All interviews were conducted via Zoom at hours that were convenient for each participant. Having 10 participants for this study provided enough information to ensure data saturation. Purposeful sampling was used in this study. It was essential to interview parents whose children were older than 27 months because this is the age when transitioning occurs from EI to the local school system.

## Definitions

*Developmental delay*: When a child is not meeting the expected targets of development according to their peer age group (Choo et al., 2019).

*Early intervention (EI)*: Support services provided to families with children ages birth to 3 years who have developmental delays or medical diagnoses that can delay overall development (Waters, C. L., & Friesen, 2019).

*Transition*: The process of moving from EI due to the child turning 3 years of age into their local school system for continued services (Curby et al., 2018).

## Assumptions

For this study, I assumed that participants would be forthcoming with information regarding the research topic. I also assumed that each participant was a parent of a child who had undergone the transition process and was fully aware of this topic. Lastly, I assumed that participants would provide as much of their lived experiences on this topic as possible for the purposes of answering the research question.

## Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers

One challenge of this study was the separation of roles. As a previous early interventionist, I needed to remove all biases from this study. This study was intended to offer participants a platform from which they could express the challenges that they encountered with the transitioning process. Also, a reliable recorder was used to collect the data, and a transcription service was also needed.

## Significance

Researchers have noted that the earlier a child can receive services to aid with their developmental delays or diagnosis, the better the outcome (The Importance of Early

Intervention for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Their Families, 2011). The current study provided a more in-depth look into the issues that parents face when attempting to advocate for their children. Often parents are not given the platform to voice their concerns and opinions on matters such as this. As someone who had assisted parents in the transition process, I had seen how intimidated parents can be when entering these meetings. With the utmost confidentiality, I provided a safe place for parents to discuss issues they faced without any concerns of the study affecting their child's current services.

## Summary

This qualitative study's main objective was to identify the hardships that parents deal with regarding their children who have disabilities or developmental delays when attempting to obtain services after the EI has ended. Research in this area lacked substantial information on this topic. I used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory to explore how families' decisions are formed regarding their child's transition process. I assumed that the parents interviewed would provide honest answers regarding their experiences with transitioning into their local school system from EI. The sample size of 10 was sufficient to ensure data saturation.

This study provided parents with the platform to voice their concerns regarding the barriers that make transitioning difficult. In Chapter 2, I review the literature regarding EI and the transition to the school system, as well as information from teachers and school officials that provide evidence of the difficulties of this procedure. I also show the lack of parental perspectives to support the gap in research that this study was conducted to fill.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of recent literature on transitioning children from early intervention to the local education agency (LEA). Literature regarding transitioning children with special needs, learning disabilities, or other neurological disorders is also included. A brief synopsis of EI and how service coordinators and LEA officials conduct transition meetings is also given. The chapter concludes by providing a review of literature on hardships that school officials have experienced during this process.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of parents with children with disabilities in a small rural town who decide to opt out of transitioning from early intervention services into the school system. Although researchers had conducted studies regarding the factors that influence the transition process as well as issues that may arise during this event (Kang et al., 2016), there had not been much research on families who choose not to go forward with transitioning their child from Part C to Part B services.

For decades, educators and caretakers of children with disabilities have fought to ensure that they are given the same chance at success as their more typically developing peers. Children with disabilities include those who are physically and mentally disabled. Often children with mental disabilities are overlooked because they do not match the stereotypical description for disabilities. Mental disabilities tend to present early in life, especially during the birth to 3 years brain change phase. During this time, when a child is suspected of having cognitive, physical, or neurological delays, there are services available to them under the realm of EI.

EI is a free service granted by the federal government that is covered in the IDEA of 2006 under the Child Find sector. Child Find is a network that is used to connect resources to families with children with disabilities. Through Child Find, parents are able to call EI specialists when they have concerns regarding their child’s overall development. These specialists usually consist of special instructors and service coordinators. These individuals are available to assist with the facilitation of developing the individualized family service plan.

## Literature Search Strategy

This literature review search was based on the following research question: What obstacles/hardships do parents with children with disabilities face when transitioning from early intervention services to those provided by the local school system? Walden University Library databases were used to conduct this literature search. The search included scholarly studies, peer-reviewed journals, books, written law, and other studies. I used SAGE Publications, Education Resource Information System (ERIC), EBSCOhost, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar to find studies and articles concerning the transition to kindergarten for children with disabilities. Various keywords were used to conduct this search: *early intervention, part c*, *part b, IDEA act*, *Individual Education Plan, 504 plan, children with disabilities*, *parent perspective, barriers*, *hardships, issues*, *special education*, *transitioning*, *transition planning*, *kindergarten readiness*, and *stigma*.

Several journals were also used to gather research, including *Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities*, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *Indian Journal of Health and Well Being*, *International Journal of Special Education*, *Educational*

*Sciences: Theory and Practice*, *International Journal of Inclusive Education, Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals, Early Childhood Education Journal*, *Early Child Development and Care*, *Journal of School Psychology*, *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *The Journal of Special Education*, *International Online Journal of Education & Teaching*, *Teacher Education and Special Education,* and *Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals*.

## Conceptual Framework

This study addressed the gap in the literature regarding parents' perspective of the transition process. Parents' decision on whether to continue their child's services or opt out of them is all based on related systems. Looking at the development of the child and their ecological background played a role in understanding family decision making. For this reason, Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory was used to assist in explaining this phenomenon.

Child development comprises many different systems that affect the overall outcome (Starr et al., 2016). The child's cultural background, socioeconomic status, race, laws, and customs are major factors that determine how well the child will develop. Taking these key concepts into consideration provided a sound conceptual framework for the current study. Being able to take into account these factors when obtaining information from subjects provided a more in-depth understanding of a family's decision-making processes when it pertains to their child's development.

Another theory that helped further understanding of this phenomenon was Bowen's family systems theory (Erdem & Safi, 2018). This theory was used to explain why parents are deciding to opt out of transitioning their child into the local school system. Family systems theory provided an intricate platform to understand how families make decisions for their members. One of the most important aspects of Bowen's family systems theory was understanding what culture is.

Previously, culture was seen as being related to an individual's background, ethnicity, or race (Erdem & Safi, 2018). However, the current definition of culture represents the shared life and experiences of a group of people (Raeff et al., 2020). One's culture or how one is raised dictates decision making. Being able to look at parents' perspectives using the ecological systems theory also provided a substantial foundation for the current study.

## Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Transitioning is the act of moving from one stage to the next. In the current study, I focused on children's transition from early intervention to prekindergarten classroom through their LEA. For neurotypical and developmentally on-track children, the transition to kindergarten can be a monumental adjustment. Going from a semi structured classroom in prekindergarten to a fully structured classroom can be a shock for most children. For this reason, most prekindergarten programs focus on school readiness. This term is used to describe where the child should be when they enter the kindergarten classroom. Some factors contribute to the child's level of school readiness.

School readiness refers to the child's ability to communicate verbally, control behavior effectively, and regulate emotions successfully (Brock et al., 2019).

Communication is deemed successful if the child is able to verbally communicate, engage in problem-solving activities, and build relationships with others (Brock et al., 2019). When these skills are lacking, teachers have a hard time assisting the child with transitioning. Another factor that contributes to school readiness and effective kindergarten transition is the level of family involvement.

Families are often involved in their child’s kindergarten transition process, and most are knowledgeable of what they should be looking for (Kang et al., 2017). Reports of increased parent–teacher communication during this time were also made (Kang et al., 2017). However, despite the frequent communication between parents and teachers or school officials, parents have reported that many improvements need to be made to the process of transitioning their neurotypical children. Another factor that contributes to whether the child has a successful kindergarten transition is their developmental stage. This is an important factor due to the fact that all children are not equal in this area. Some children’s development is affected by an underlying diagnosis that has hindered their growth and cognitive abilities. For example, children who have had recurring ear infections while in prekindergarten often develop speech delays and require speech therapy.

Others may have been diagnosed with neurological disorders such as autism spectrum disorder. Some children are physically impaired and require increased assistance to complete everyday activities. When these factors are added to transitioning to kindergarten, the process includes more steps than it would for a neurotypical child.

## IDEA

The neglect of individuals with disabilities has been a long-standing issue in the United States. Educators have been found to be negligent when it comes to providing education for two children and other individuals with disabilities. IDEA was enacted to address these issues. Under IDEA, individuals with disabilities have the right to obtain services and other assistance in school. IDEA also addresses inclusion in the classroom.

Previously, children with disabilities or severe diagnoses were separated from their peers in the classroom (Russo, 2019). This separation caused these children to be labeled “special ed.” This term has acquired a negative connotation over the years. In the *Meals v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* case, parents of children with disabilities filed a suit against the school district, claiming that school officials and teachers lacked the resources needed to properly educate their children (Russo, 2019). In this situation, school officials and teachers would exclude children with disabilities from classroom instruction.

This case facilitated children with disabilities being better served and strengthened the awareness of properly educating children with disabilities in the school system. Although IDEA has been enforced, there are gaps in the system that tend to fail individuals with disabilities. Under IDEA, school-age children are allowed options for services. The first option is considered an individual education plan (IEP). The second option is a 504 plan. Both provide services for children who struggle academically due to disabilities. When a child is school age, the school officials determine whether child qualifies for these services. These services can include one-on-one instruction, extra tutoring, preferential seating in the classroom, modified curriculum, or extra time on assignments.

IDEA not only provides resources for individuals with disabilities but also protects them and provides other procedural safeguards. According to Etscheidt et al. (2021), IDEA ensures that individuals are receiving the services that they need to be successful. IDEA states that families have the right to dispute any service or issue that they deem it is unacceptable for the child. Families have the right to due process, file complaints, mediation, and resolution if they feel that their child is being shorthanded in any way.

According to IDEA, any type of testing evaluation has to be done within a timely manner. IDEA also points out that parents are to be a meaningful part of developing the IEP for the child. Any form of modification that is done to an IEP has to be reviewed by the IEP team, including the parents or caregivers. Moreover, IDEA states that the transition from Part C to Part B services must be as fluid as possible to ensure the continuity of services. For this reason, children with disabilities whose families decide to transition should not have a break in services.

## EI

The Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (n.d.) website's early intervention section contains many key points. Under the IDEA act, children ages birth to 3 years with disabilities are given the opportunity to receive services prior to being school age. These services are known as EI services. By law, each state in the United States has to provide these services to children who qualify as being developmentally delayed. EI services or Part C services (Sands & Meadan, 2021) are free therapeutic services provided to children with disabilities and are covered under IDEA. Parents call on the services when they suspect their child might be developmentally delayed.

Developmental delays are assessed in five different areas: cognitive, social-emotional, adaptive, physical, and communication. If there is a delayed presentation, it is usually determined by two different assessment tools. One assessment tool is the Developmental Assessment of Young Children Second Edition, and the other assessment tool is the Early Learning Accomplishment Profile. These assessments are usually given simultaneously by two different early interventionists to determine whether the child has a sufficient developmental delay to receive services. These assessments are scored in five different developmental areas (cognitive, gross and fine motor, adaptive, social-emotional, and communication), which are broken down into receptive and expressive.

A developmental delay qualifies a child for these services, certain diagnoses satisfy the criteria automatically. Any diagnosis that is proven to delay development in any area is deemed an automatic qualifier. Diagnoses such as a traumatic brain injury, DiGeorge syndrome, and others allow for these children to receive services as well. Once a delay or diagnosis has been determined, the child is assigned a service coordinator who develop an individualized family service plan. This plan is written with the family to determine what services would best fit the child. These services can include special instruction, speech therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy. EI is a service that is provided in the child’s natural environment. According to the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services (n.d.), *natural environment* is defined as settings that are considered natural for children at that age group who do not have disabilities. Most of the time, natural environment is considered the child’s home, but it can also include their day care or wherever they tend to be on a regular basis. This service is convenient for busy families. Instead of having to transport their child to a doctor’s office or a therapy service, the services are provided to them in their home.

Although this service is free for families, if the child has Medicaid insurance, Medicaid is charged for the service. If the child has private insurance, any service that is listed on their individualized family service plan is covered. If there is any copayment that is required by the private insurance company, it is the responsibility of the EI provider to pay (Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, n.d.).

## Transition Planning

EI services are for children ages birth to 3 years. When a child turns three years of age, they are no longer eligible for EI services. For this reason, when the child is 27 months, service coordinators hold a transition planning meeting with the family to discuss the next step after EI. During this meeting, families are provided further steps in which they can continue their child services through the LEA.

When this is explained to families, the term “special education” is typically used. Parents are told that if they decide to transition their child, the child’s services will be given through the special education department of that LEA. Release forms are signed, and the LEA prepares an IEP meeting for the family. At this meeting, LEA officials, family members, special education instructors, and other stakeholders discuss the needs and concerns for the child.

This meeting also allows school officials to determine what services the child will need at this point, usually determined after testing has been done. Parents also have the choice to opt out of these services. If the decision is made to opt out of services, the child will no longer receive services after the age of 3. The LEA will not receive any documentation concerning the child from the EI program.

### Transition to Kindergarten for Typical Developing Children

The sole purpose of this study is to gather the thoughts and perspectives of parents when it pertains to the transition process from early intervention to pre-kindergarten through the LEA. However, before diving into this area, it is important to discuss the issues that present when transitioning a typically developing child into school. I believe that this is important to see the trends that are similar between typical and atypically developing children. According to (Curle et al., 2017), some issues arise when transitioning typical developing children into the formal setting of school.

Curle et al., (2017) indicated that one of the main factors that contribute to unsuccessful transitions would be the decrease in parent-teacher communication. (Curle et al., 2017) addressed how in pre-kindergarten years, parents were very much hands-on in their child's development, had strong connections with their child's teachers, and also the child experiencing a particular level of comfort in their classrooms. (Curle et al., 2017) further stated that the change in environment from one classroom to the other can also be very drastic in nature. What once was a semi structured learning environment became one of great expectations and structure. (Curle et al., 2017) further divulged that most parents voiced that they were not provided information regarding what level of learning was to be expected from their child upon entering the classroom. This information would be very beneficial to ensure that parents, as well as preschool providers, provide the right teaching tools for the child.

For children atypical developing children, their transition to pre-kindergarten included more assistance that came from the early intervention program. In this case, more assistance, however, did not necessarily mean increased ease for the families. (Curle et al., 2017) added that oftentimes parents felt that their opinions regarding what additional services the child should receive. This observation of what parents felt like during the transition process from early intervention is one of many. Curle et al. (2017) examined how parents who were interviewed about the transition process felt.

It was indicated that parents were provided with well enough information regarding the transition process that they felt comfortable enough to continue. Communication between the parents and the school officials was reported to be beneficial; however, there were some parents who reportedly feared addressing concerns due to the possibility of it affecting their child's services.

## Transition to Pre-Kindergarten From EI

Sands & Meadian, (2021) addressed transitioning to kindergarten with children who have disabilities. A study was conducted to determine what leads to a successful transition for children with disabilities. This study found that frequent communication with school officials, open communication with family members, and successful collaboration between all parties led to a successful transition process. (Sands & Meadian, 2021) further stated that being able to involve preschool officials, as well as the kindergarten team, proved to add much success to this process. From this perspective, new kindergarten teachers were able to gather information from past experiences concerning the preschool and the child's development and their level of achievement.

This process is even more difficult depending on the type of disability that the child has. (Fontil et al., 2020) discussed the barriers that come when transitioning autistic children into kindergarten. Because autism is a diagnosis that deals with the behavior, speech/communication issues, and social issues, these children tend to require more services when attending school. (Fontil et al., 2020) discovered that school officials and teachers were lacking the proper support and training that was needed to facilitate a successful transition for children with autism spectrum disorder.

One of the main issues concerning this was that teachers were not as educated on this disorder as assumed. Autism spectrum disorder presents in many different ways in different kids. Therefore, this is not a disorder that can be generalized when administering proper school support. Researchers concluded that teachers, school officials, and other stakeholders should be provided proper training in order to serve incoming students with autism spectrum disorder better.

Lo et al. (2020) studied transitioning services for preschool-age children with special needs in Hong Kong. Researchers found that one factor that led to a successful transition was ensuring that the environment from pre-K in the environment to kindergarten were similar. In other words, they urged that similar class sizes, similar curriculum, and similar teaching approaches were ideal for a successful transition. They also found that choosing the correct primary school for the child was ideal as well. (Haciibrahimoglu & Kargin, 2017) Actually discussed two separate transitions that occur with children who have disabilities. The first transition was from the hospital to the home with the family.

Although they discuss that this transition, in particular, was very crucial for the disabled child, they deemed the importance of transitioning from pre-K to kindergarten as one that determines long-term success. Researchers recognize that children with disabilities require and deserve additional support in order to succeed academically in school. They also deemed that the child's individual development should be taken into consideration independently instead of assuming that every child with a disability deserves the same type of services.

Socioeconomic status has also been associated with how well a child's transition to kindergarten will be. (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2018) Researchers thought to determine how African American mothers handle and prepare their children for the kindergarten transition. The main focus of this study was to see how Socioeconomic financial, and race statuses affect the transition to kindergarten. They found that parents had little to no information regarding the kindergarten transition, and the children experienced somewhat of a culture shock upon entering the kindergarten class. (Jarrett & Coba-Rodriguez, 2018)

**Family Involvement**

Outside of the socioeconomic status, family involvement has also been shown to produce a successful kindergarten transition. (Kang et al., 2017) Parents from this study found that positive relationships between professionals and themselves contribute to successful kindergarten transitions. (Kang et al., 2017) discusses how schools have attempted to build strong bonds with families to create a very fluid transition for new kindergarteners. Further implications of the transition to kindergarten being a process instead of one single event in time were also made. (Opoku et al., 2020) presented that parental involvement is very important in educating children with intellectual disabilities. This study focused on a group of intellectually disabled children from Ghana and how monumental family involvement is one of their successes. Discussions regarding being able to choose what environment the child would learn in are mentioned. Researchers point out the fact that not all countries allow parents to have a choice in the matter.

### Stigma

One could wonder about the different issues or factors that could impact a parent's decision on if they decide to transition their child from Part C to Part B services. One major factor would be dealing with the stigma associated with special education. (Algraigray & Boyle, 2017) discussed the way that labeling a child with special needs can greatly affect their abilities to be included with their peers.

It was mentioned how children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) provide disadvantages and hints that there is a weakness involved. (Algraigray & Boyle, 2017) aimed to point out the issues that (Becker, 1963) mentioned in relation to SEN children. Becker explained how this theory of labeling originated with SEN individuals—realizing that the act of labeling individuals with SEN further moves them away from what is considered to be the norm, thus causing continued isolation and separation from peers. This issue is the reason why inclusion in special education programs has been so important to lawmakers. Inclusion ensures that individuals with SEN will not be excluded from their peers but will still be able to receive the services which they need.

## Summary and Conclusion

From the research, it is clear that there are many different issues that arise during the transition process from Part C to Part B services. These issues included a lack of communication between the parents, school officials, stakeholders, and early intervention providers. Other issues that were mentioned to arise during the transition process dealt with concerns of inclusion and the possible stigma that comes along with Special Education. Researchers also mentioned that during this process, it is important for families to choose the right schools/programs for their children depending on their disability.

The IDEA provides an in-depth look and explanation into what all services children with disabilities can obtain. It also lays out the foundation for parents to be aware of their child’s rights when it pertains to special education services. Furthermore, it details how parents are able to advocate for their children if they see any injustice being done. With this information, there are parents who decide not to continue with special education services when they are still needed. This study aims to obtain the perspectives of parents who decide to opt out of these services and utilize Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory as well as Bowens Family Systems Theory to determine how family decision-making occurs in this manner.

# Chapter 3 Research Methodology

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore parents' perceptions regarding the transition process from EI into the local school system for their children with disabilities. In this chapter, I discuss the research design. This chapter also includes an in-depth discussion of participant selection, instruments used, and ethical procedures for this study.

## Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this qualitative research was to study the lived experiences of parents with children with disabilities. I explored and identified the hardships associated with transitioning from Part C to Part B services. Because the goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of these parents, a narrative inquiry design was the optimal choice. Semi structured interviews were conducted to gather information from the participants to answer the following research question: What obstacles/hardships do parents with children with disabilities face when transitioning from early intervention services to those provided by the local school system?

This study was designed to address the gap in the literature regarding the many hardships that are associated with transitioning children from EI into the school system. If the child is receiving EI services, the transitioning process will begin when the child turns 27 months of age. This age was set by officials to ensure enough time to set in place the child's services after EI. Due to this age, I interviewed parents whose children were older than 27 months. This ensured that I would obtain data from those who were currently going through the transition process and those who had completed the transition.

## Role of the Researcher

I was previously employed with the Alabama early intervention system as a special instructor and service coordinator. My role as a special instructor provided experience in working with children who had diagnoses such as autism spectrum disorder or cerebral palsy. However, my role as a service coordinator dealt with managing the child's services and ensuring the proper delivery of those services. As a service coordinator, my job was to assist with facilitating transition meetings between the family and the LEA. While working this job, I remember seeing many issues regarding the transition process. For this reason, I chose this as my research topic. Exploring the perceptions of parents and identifying hardships associated with this process would provide clear insight into issues that parents face. As a former early interventionist, I was able to interview parents who were previously involved with EI.

## Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of parents and to identify the hardship associated with the transition process from Part C to Part B services. The transitioning process occurs when the child is 27 months of age. At this time, EI service coordinators organize a meeting with an LEA to begin transitioning the child into the school system for further services after the age of 3.

I used purposeful sampling to obtain the perceptions of parents who had gone through or were currently going through the transitioning process with their child. This method of sampling was ideal for this study because it allowed me to narrow the type of participants selected. My plan was to obtain data saturation for this study to be significant in nature. Data saturation is reached when no new data information is being provided

(Faulkner & Trotter, 2017). The intention was to interview enough participants to reach this goal of data saturation.

Participant selection is crucial when conducting a study. Qualitative studies rely on the randomization of participant selection to guarantee that no biases are present. The sample size is another important factor to consider when gathering participants. Although the sample size is not fixed in qualitative studies, it is necessary for the sample size to be large enough to ensure substantial data are gathered (Sargeant, 2012).

## Participant Selection

Participants they were selected purposefully from the southeastern region of the United States. I reached out to different EI programs, social media groups for parents with children with disabilities, LEAs. For this narrative inquiry, I assumed that a total of 12 participants would provide enough data to attain data saturation. Participants included parents of children with disabilities who were older than 27 months of age and who were currently receiving or had received EI services.

## Instrumentation

For narrative inquiries, it is important to use instruments that can generate the amount of data needed in the study. A voice recorder was used to record the interviews with participants, as well as an interview guideline. I conducted semi structured interviews to allow participants to provide information regarding the topic of study. The interview guide included questions to elicit data from the participants but also allowed for the expansion of information (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Research Question and Interview Questions*

| Research question | Interview question |
|---|---|
| What obstacles/hardships do parents with children with disabilities face when transitioning from early intervention services to those provided by the local school system? | How did you first hear about early intervention? |
| | How did your child qualify for services?<br>How do you feel about the progress your child has made while in the program?<br>Please explain how, and when you first heard about the transition planning meeting.<br>Was the process explained in detail?<br>Please discuss any concerns that you may have had concerning the process.<br>So how has your overall experience been? |

## Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Walden Institutional Review Board (05-17-22-0980119), I began the recruitment of participants. I contacted various EI programs across the state to see if any families were interested in assisting with this study. I contacted other parents through social media outlets such as Facebook. Each individual received a letter of invitation through email or hard copy. The invitation provided in-depth instructions on how to be a part of this study. I provided my contact information as well. If individuals decided to engage in this study, I provided them with an informed consent form that detailed the extent of their privacy, ensuring their protection during the study.

The participants were parents who were located in the southeast region of the United States. Based on participants' location, some interviews were conducted via Zoom or Google Duo. For those who were nearby and felt comfortable meeting in person, a local library was used for the interview. I ensured that the library could provide a secure room where the participant could feel comfortable providing information. I planned on the interviews being no longer than 30 minutes each; however, interview could have been longer if participants had more information to provide. When initiating interviews, I verified the participant’s eligibility for this study (e.g., whether they had a child currently in or has been in EI).

### Data Analysis Plan

Once data were gathered, I used NVivo software to aid with analyzing the data. When analyzing data, I looked for common themes that the participants stated. According to Bailey (2008), when listening to recorded data and reaching data saturation, researchers will hear commonalities among the data. To ensure that no themes were overlooked when analyzing the data, I used Rev Transcription Services to assist with the transcription of data.

## Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is one of the main ways in which researchers are able to convince their audience that their findings are credible (Nowell et al., 2017). Once trustworthiness is established, the study is considered valid. There are several aspects that assist with determining whether a study is trustworthy. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are four factors that need to be taken into consideration when determining trustworthiness. Because I used a transcription service and NVivo data analysis software, I assumed that trustworthiness would not be difficult to establish.

### Credibility

During interviews, I took notes and asked follow-up questions based on the information that participants provided to ensure that their thoughts were being understood correctly (see Creswell, 2005). I also used member checks and verified with participants the data that had been collected. Member checks allowed for participants to provide additional information that they were unable to discuss during the initial interviews (see Yin, 2014). This process aided in validating the current study's trustworthiness.

### Transferability

Transferability is the act of providing enough evidence so that the findings can be applied to other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). For transferability to be successful, the description of how the study was carried out needs to be detailed. Korstjens and Moser (2018) use the term "thick description" to explain the process. I provided precise instructions on how to conduct this study so that other researchers would be able to do the same. I also provided descriptions of each setting that was used in this study, as well as every tool, instrument, and program that was used. Descriptions regarding the participants, interview settings, and other background information were provided so that others could acquire the same understanding as I had.

### Dependability

To ensure dependable results, I discussed results with participants and had them review the findings for accuracy. Dependability is increased by obtaining confirmation from participants after the initial interviews are conducted. Providing the participants the time to add/remove or enhance their statements allows for a more dependable study

(Korstjens & Moser, 2018). This aspect also permits other researchers to conduct the same study in another region with more or fewer participants than the present study.

### Confirmability

Confirmability is the idea that other researchers can confirm the results that have been presented in the study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I provided extensive data analysis so that other researchers would arrive at the same conclusion presented in this study. To ensure that I did not place my thoughts in the participant's data, I provided them with the transcript of their interviews to guarantee accuracy. This step allowed for the removal and correction of any ideas that I may have introduced in the data.

## Ethical Procedures

Ensuring that ethical standards were upheld during this study was the main priority. Once Walden's Institutional Review Board gave approval for this study, I proceeded with verifying participants' safety and protection during the study. Each participant received a letter discussing informed consent via email. The informed consent form depicted the participant's rights and listed safeguards that were in place to protect them. Confidentiality was also reviewed with the participants, and all questions regarding this study were answered promptly.

## Summary

Chapter 3 included a discussion of the methodology used to explore the perspectives of parents with children with disabilities regarding the process of transitioning them into kindergarten. Ten individuals completed Zoom interviews responding to the questions that were provided in this study. The goal of this study was to use the information provided by the participants to initiate social change within the school systems regarding children with disabilities. Identifying the issues that parents are facing when trying to obtain IEP services for their children may allow school officials and other stakeholders an opportunity to improve these practices. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this qualitative study and provides detailed data analysis.

# Chapter 4: Results

This qualitative study was conducted to identify the hardships associated with transitioning from early intervention to the LEA for children with disabilities. Many studies addressed issues regarding this process; however, they sought the opinions of school officials and stakeholders. Other studies looked into a specific group of children with disabilities depending on their diagnosis. I used Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory in combination with Bowen's (Erdem & Safi, 2018) family systems theory to explore how families advocated for their children with special needs. Ten participants were used to obtain data from the interview questions that were asked. These individuals were recruited via a public social media post. Participants were parents of school-age children with disabilities. These participants were individuals whose child received some form of EI services prior to entering kindergarten. Participants were interviewed via Zoom with optional video. The conversations were recorded for quality and accuracy when interpreting results. Chapter 4 includes a description of the setting, demographics, data analysis, data collection, evidence of trustworthiness, and results. The chapter concludes with a summary.

## Setting

I sought to identify hardships associated with transitioning children with disabilities into the LEA. I conducted 10 semi structured interviews with parents of school-age children with disabilities. Each participant had a child who had received a form of EI services and had transitioned into the school system. Participants engaged in an interview with questions addressing issues and hardships they encountered while transitioning their child. The interviews allowed for parents to provide details and to expand on the interview questions. Each participant’s identity was kept confidential. The interviews were conducted via Zoom with video as an option. Each interview was recorded with a voice recorder and saved under the labels of Parent 1, Parent 2, and so forth. Each participant was emailed the transcript of their interview for confirmation of its accuracy and clarity. Participants responded to the emails to confirm.

## Data Collection

The participants were parents of school-age children who had received EI services. All participants who showed interest in the study were screened for eligibility. Once they were deemed eligible for this study, the participants were emailed consent forms. Participants were to respond “I consent” to continue the process. Interview date and time options were also sent to the participants. Each participant was emailed a Zoom link invitation to join the interview at their selected interview time. Participants were also reminded of the optional video. Before the interviews began, I reviewed informed consent and confidentiality and answered any questions regarding the study. Participants were informed of their rights and reassured that they could discontinue the study at any time with no penalty. An interview tool that consisted of seven open-ended questions was used for this study (see Appendix). The Walden Institutional Review Board provided approval, and I was then able to begin data collection. Data were collected through the use of social media outlets such as Facebook and Instagram. Social media invitations were posted weekly allowing for more exposure to willing participants.

Individual semi structured interviews took place between June 2022 and August 2022. Thirty minutes was allotted for each interview, although some interviewees did not use the full allotted time. An interview protocol was used to guarantee that each interview plan was consistent. Typed notes were taken during the interview for additional data collection. Each interview was recorded on a personal voice recorder. Once all interviews for that day were complete, I began to transcribe each interview. Although a set protocol was used for these interviews, the semi structured format allowed for some flexibility during interviews. This allowed participants to provide further details regarding hardships that they encountered while transitioning their child with disabilities into the LEA. Many participants took advantage of this interview setup and provided abundant details on the issues they faced. Once all interviews were completed, participants were sent transcripts of their interview for confirmation of its accuracy. Participants were able to make corrections or add information to the interview transcript.

Once participants responded to their transcribed interview, I was able to begin coding the interviews. During this process, identifying themes and patterns from the interview responses was crucial. I noted the patterns and other recurring concepts. These themes included advocacy, expectations, progress, issues, and service. These five themes were present in the responses of the participants.

## Results

Participants were asked seven interview questions regarding their experience with transitioning their child into the school system from EI. Each participant was given a pseudonym for this study that followed the pattern of Parent 1, Parent 2, Parent 3, etc. Each participant was willing, and they responded to the interview questions as effectively and clearly as possible. The interviewees also provided in-depth responses regarding their experiences. The information the participants provided aided in this research and allowed me to analyze the data in a way that would allow for further studies to be done.

### Interview Question 1

Interview Question 1 discussed how each participant was informed of EI services for their child. In response to this question, most participants discussed how they were not aware of EI services until outside professionals informed them. Parent 1 discussed how they were informed of EI services from hospital workers due to the child being premature. Parents 2–6 indicated they were unaware of EI services until their child was around the age of 2 years. Parent 7 stated that she was aware of EI services due to their place of employment. Parent 7 stated “when my child was 3 weeks old, I began my speech pathology program. This is how I became aware of early intervention.” Parents 8 and 9 reported being informed about EI from their child’s pediatrician. Parent 10 stated that they were able to learn of the services available to them for their child from a family member who received the same services for their child.

### Interview Question 2

Interview Question 2 inquired about how each child became eligible for EI services. One way to receive these services is the child must have a 25% or greater delay in at least one area (cognitive, social-emotional, physical, adaptive, communication). The other qualifying factor would be if the child has an eligible diagnosis that is known to affect or delay childhood development (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Child's Qualifying Areas for Early Intervention*

| Parent | Qualifying area |
|---|---|
| Parent 1 | Premature |
| Parent 2 | Speech delay |
| Parent 3 | Cognitive delay |
| Parent 4 | Speech delay/ emotional delay |
| Parent 5 | Autism |
| Parent 6 | Cognitive delay |
| Parent 7 | Speech delay |
| Parent 8 | Physical delay |
| Parent 9 | Speech delay |
| Parent 10 | Autism |

## Interview Question 3

Interview Question 3 addressed parents' opinion on the progress that their child made while receiving EI services. Each parent reported how their child began progressing with the services. Nearly all parents indicated great progress after services were initiated. Some parents showed shock regarding the amount and the quickness of progress. Parent 6 stated "I couldn't believe the turnaround my child made once they began working with him." Parent 9 indicated that "not shortly after my child began therapy, we started seeing small improvements with communication … more attempts to make words were made." Every parent provided details on how they were able to track their child's progress through EI. Increases in communication skills, functional play skills, and preacademic skills were also noted. Responses to this interview question demonstrated how effective EI services were for the children in need.

During this portion of the interview, some parents expounded on the effective skill set of their providers. Parent 1 stated "the occupational therapist worked really well with them." Parent 1 further indicated that the provider had a great relationship with the child as well. Parents 4 and 7 reported how having good rapport with the child and the family is crucial to the outcome of the services. The lack of progress with EI was not reported by any parent.

### Interview Question 4

Interview Question 4 addressed how parents were informed about the transition planning meeting. This process occurs when the child reaches the age of 27 months. At this time, the EI service coordinators discuss with the family what comes after EI (when the child turns 3 years old). Service coordinators provide options for the families to determine what the next step for their child should be. The options for this next step depend on the needs of the child and the desire of the family.

One option is that the child be transitioned into the LEA in the family's city. If this option is chosen, the family would continue to receive services for their child under the realm of special education. When parents hear of this option, they tend to shy away not wanting their child to be labeled as a child who needs special education services. Depending on the needs of the child, this step would not necessarily place the child in a special education classroom. The child could be place in a general classroom but still receive services such as occupational or speech therapy.

The second option is that the parents have the right to opt out of the transitioning process. This would mean that once the child turned 3 years of age, they would no longer receive any EI services. Because the family decided to opt out of transitioning, they would not receive any services moving forward. During the transition planning meeting, parents are also informed that if they opt out and later decide that their child is still in need of services, they are able to do a parent referral with their LEA to start their services again.

When asked Interview Question 4, all parents reported that they were informed of the transition planning meeting either at or a little after the child reached 27 months of age. This question raised many emotions for some of the parents interviewed. Parent 3 stated “no parent wants their child to be labeled or talked about because they are in special ed … but I knew he still needed help.” This response was seen also with Parents 4, 6, 8, and 9. They all expressed a similar sentiment concerning their child possibly being placed in special education.

Parent 8 discussed that because their child had a physical impairment, they were concerned that the child would be placed in the resource room full-time and not have interactions with typically developed peers. Although special education has developed over the years, parents reportedly still feel the stigma that comes with the name. Parents 1, 2, 5, 7, and 10 reported that they understood and expected for their child to be in special education due to the relevant diagnosis. They showed little to no concern regarding the expectation of special education for their child.

### Interview Questions 5 and 6

These questions addressed the amount of information that was provided to the parents regarding the transition process. All parents reported that there was considerable information provided to them regarding what would occur during the process. However, some parents reported that once the process began, they were at a loss when it came to understanding certain terms and school jargon. Parent 10 reported that they felt unprepared for the transition meeting once it came. They further added “I was lost … I was sitting in meetings, honestly, nodding and agreeing in the beginning. I did not understand the language of it.” This was a theme that was found among most of the parents with the exception of one. Most parents indicated the feeling of the “unknown” when it came to discussing the needs of their child. Parent 8 discussed how the school officials mainly set in place the services that the child would receive without the input of the parent. Parent 8 further expressed that they wished they knew that parents could bring anyone to the meeting they wanted. Parent 8 added that they were unaware that they could bring others to advocate for the child.

Parent 2 also showed concerns regarding this meeting. They stated they had little to no say in what services their child would receive for the upcoming year. Parent 2 also stated that because the child was not given the need services initially, they had to learn how to advocate for their child at later IEP meetings. This interview question revealed hardships in the transition process, including not feeling prepared, not knowing what they could participate in, not understanding the verbiage, and feeling the need to agree with school officials. These were common themes found throughout this portion of the interview.

Another hardship that parents discussed was the need for further testing for their child. Parents indicated that after EI, it was difficult to obtain the proper diagnosis. Parent 1 discussed how it was difficult to get the right services for their child because of the wrong diagnosis given to the child. The parent stated “they (school IEP team) didn’t want to diagnosis (the child with autism) because of his age … they did not want to give him a diagnosis too early. So, he was labeled as developmentally delayed.” Parent 1 went on to discuss how a child with that diagnosis would not receive enough services as a child given the diagnosis of autism. In this case, the parent was left to go to outside sources for an accurate diagnosis. Parent 1 expressed the frustration of having to do what they felt the IEP team should have been able to do.

### Interview Question 7

The last interview question addressed parents' overall experience with the transition process. All parents except one expressed how this process involved many points that they were not aware of. Parents indicated that they mainly wished they knew more before entering into the process so that they would have been better able to advocate for their child. These parents also reported that the transition planning meeting with their EI service coordinator did not prepare them for what was to occur at the meeting. Parents reported that not knowing their rights as parents in the meeting was also an issue. Although each parent reported receiving a copy of the *Special Education is a Right Not a Favor* book, they felt like it was more of a formality. Parent 8 stated that "when they gave me the book, I didn't really get a chance to review it before the meeting; they just gave it to me and continued with the meeting." Parents' overall experience were similar except for Parent 7 whose occupation allowed them to be aware of the transitioning process and EI.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, several factors are deemed necessary for the research to be considered reputable. Trustworthiness depends on whether the research can be trusted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The definitions for trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). For the current study, each interview was audio recorded. The transcription of the interviews was done the same day as the interviews took place. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was also conducted with each participant. They were asked to provide any corrections to what was transcribed from their interviews. Each participant provided feedback and confirmation of their statements via email. Ensuring that the research process was thoroughly detailed in this study provides the way for others to replicate this study. Dependability and transferability were obtained by following these steps.

According to Korstjens & Moser, 2018 and Burkholder, Cox, and Crawford (2016), the ability for qualitative research to be transferred depends on the rich, thick descriptions provided. This statement insists that the researchers have described experiences as well as the context of the experiences so that they can be meaningful to the readers (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). With this as the standard practice, thick descriptions of participants, the setting where the interviews were help, the process by which they were held. Triangulation refers to utilizing multiple data sources during research to produce outcomes. This practice of triangulation was used during this study by way of utilizing 10 participants who all came from different backgrounds. This allowed for the differentiation of viewpoints to be obtained on the same topic. By utilizing triangulation, credibility was obtained.

Confirmability ensures that what the researcher gathers from the data is confirmed by the data (Nowell et al., 2017). It is important that the research does not implement their own ideas as to what the participants meant by their statements. Confirmability is only reached once transferability, credibility, and dependability have all been met (Nowell et al., 2017). By obtaining the input of the participants through member checks, this researcher was able to ensure that the information gather through the interviews were accurate and precise. With these, this study is considered to be trustworthy by way of transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the hardships associated with transitioning a child with disabilities from early intervention into the LEA. This study utilized detailed semi-structured interviews along with the qualitative approach to further understand issues that parents face when trying to obtain services for their disabled children. Ten parents with disabled children were interviewed for this study. Each parent discussed their child's transitioning process from early intervention services to their LEA. Data was gathered and coded revealing five major themes: advocacy, expectations, progress, issues, and service. Each parent excluding one, discussed issues regarding the transition process to their LEA. All parents also discussed the lack of information that they received regarding advocacy. The lack of knowledge around parents not knowing that they could have other present to aid with advocating for their child was alarming. Research questions 5 and 6 both showed this as evident by the responses of the participants. All of the parents indicated the great level of service that was received from their early intervention team. Research question 5 and 6 also spoke to how the parents expected to be able to provide input regarding their child in the transition meeting, however, this was not the case. Many parents discussed feeling like they had to agree with what the school officials recommended for their child. Responses to research question 3 speaks to the quality of services that each parents' child received.

Overall, Parents indicated that they wish more information was given regarding the transition process. They further indicated that being aware of what rights parents have in the transition meetings prior to, would be greatly beneficial. Chapter 5 will address the interpretation of data, limitations, recommendations, implications for social change, and the conclusion.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I sought to explore the experiences of parents with children with disabilities regarding the transition process from EI services to the LEA. This study was done to fill a gap in research and to aid school officials with understanding how this process can be improved for future families. The following interview questions were used to collect data in this study:

1. How did you first hear about early intervention?
2. How did your child qualify for services?
3. How do you feel about the progress your child has made while in the program?
4. Please explain how and when you first heard about the transition planning meeting.
5. Was the process explained in detail?
6. Please discuss any concerns that you may have had concerning the process.
7. How has your overall experience been?

I interviewed 10 participants for this study to explore their experiences when entering the transition process for their child with disabilities. Transitioning children with disabilities from the EI sector into the LEA is a requirement by law, if the parents so choose. Recent research addressed many issues that school officials have encountered while attempting to transition a child into the LEA (Fogle et al., 2020); however, few studies had been done to explore parents' viewpoint on this process. Concerns about this process were more prevalent among families of children with disabilities compared to families with typically developing children (Sands & Meadan, 2021).

Chapter 2 addressed the gap in research regarding the transition from EI to the LEA. Research was conducted on EI practices, rights and privileges given to families, and school official roles (Babić et al., 2018). Research was also done on the transition process with all types of disabilities, including autism, speech delays, cognitive delays, or other diagnoses that would deem a child eligible for EI. After examining the research, I found a gap regarding the lack of research on parents' perspectives of transitioning their child with disabilities. Chapter 3 focused on the data collection processes, research design, methodology, and role of the researcher. In Chapter 4, I provided the findings from 10 semi structured interviews done via Zoom. These interviews offered a detailed understanding of parents' perspectives and the hardships they encountered while transitioning their child with disabilities.

The findings from the data showed a lack in several areas. Parents indicated an issue with not being aware of their rights as parents during this process. They also expressed that although they were briefed on the process by their EI service coordinator, they were still unknowledgeable once the meeting occurred. Other issues included not being informed of the potential for advocacy during the transition meetings. Parents indicated that this led to their child not receiving the right amount or correct services. The call for better advocacy and more input from the family was strongly indicated in the findings. This chapter includes the interpretation of the data, limitations of the study, recommendations, and suggestions for social change.

## Interpretation of Findings

The interpretation of findings for this study are derived from my reflections on the data that were provided by the participants. While studying this data, I kept the conceptual framework in mind. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory details the many factors that impact children and families.

### EI Transition

Throughout the interviews, the parents expressed how thankful they were for their EI team. They also discussed how the process with EI was very smooth and how they felt supported while their child was receiving EI services. Parents provided insight into how the transition process was explained to them and an overall view on what to expect. Although they had an idea of what was to come, parents indicated that they wished they knew more regarding the IEP meeting with their LEA. It was clear that parents would have liked to have had a more in-depth explanation as to what they were preparing for regarding the meeting. It was also seen how parents’ need for continued support during the process was imperative.

### IEP Meeting

Upon entering the IEP meeting, most parents indicated how unprepared they felt. The feeling of not knowing what services to ask for as well as what services the child was eligible for was also discussed. Parents described the feelings and emotions that they had while in this meeting. Parent 5 indicated that they wished they had known about the ability of having others present at the meeting to assist with advocating for the child. Another stumbling block for the parents was the professional language that was being used. Parents expressed how the verbiage being used made them feel inept.

While interviewing the participants, I noticed one consistent theme: advocacy. Parents discussed how there was a lack of understanding of how they could and were allowed to advocate for their child. Parents also discussed how they felt unprepared for meeting with the IEP regarding the services for their child.

## Conceptual Framework: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner (1977) discussed how all children are a part of a system that includes five different components. While holding the child in the middle, the microsystem involves the child's school, peers, family, and health services. The mesosystem is the relationship between the microsystems. The ecosystem includes the neighbors, social services, media, and politics. The macrosystem is the socioeconomic status, culture, and ethnicity.

In the current study, I used this model to look at what hardships parent face when attempting to obtain services for their child with disabilities. In this study, I kept in mind how a person's environment and socioeconomic status can affect their decisions regarding how to obtain services. Many parents discussed how they were unaware of EI services. This could have been due to their education levels or the community in which they lived.

One of the most important systems in this model for the current study was the mesosystem. This system is the relationships between those involved in the child's microsystem, which made it a crucial component. Parents reported how they had great relationships with their EI team. Parents discussed how they were able to communicate with them well and build great rapport. The hardships came when it was time to end EI and meet with their LEA for the IEP. The lack of relationship between the parents and the IEP team was evident. To successfully transition a child into school, all stakeholders must communicate effectively (Curle et al., 2017).

There were also some reported deficits in the microsystem for some parents. One parent discussed how it took an extended amount of time to obtain the proper diagnosis for their child. This issue is what led to the school system to be unable to provide the needed services to the child. The lack of health service providers who were able to perform testing for developmental and neurological disorders in that parent's area affected them greatly.

## Limitations

The first limitation associated with this study was the sample size of participants. This study included 10 participants before data saturation was reached. Have a larger sample of participants may have provided a more in-depth response to the research question. The sample size was also limited due to the qualifications of needing to be the parent of a child with disabilities who received EI services. The sample size was also small due to the number of willing participants to discuss the issues that they encountered transitioning their disabled child from EI into the LEA.

The next limitation to this study was researcher bias. As a former early interventionist, I needed to remove any unwanted bias during this study. Measures were put into practice to eliminate any possible bias. As data were being collected, I ensured that my personal understandings of what the participants were conveying did not influence the data. This was evident through the process of member checks. Throughout the interviews, thorough notes were taken to support the interviews that were being recorded. Each participant was sent a copy of the interview transcript to ensure researcher bias was eliminated. Participants were encouraged to correct any misrepresentations or incorrect depictions of their data. Each participant provided feedback that the transcripts and the gathering of the information were correct.

The final limitation was the format by which the interviews were completed. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to respecting social distancing mandates, the interviews were conducted via Zoom. Although this method is an acceptable mode of collecting data, in some instances interviews were interrupted due to participants' family members. This caused some participants to lose track of their thoughts because of the interruptions. Future researchers should attempt to conduct interviews in a face-to-face manner.

## Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify hardships that parents face when trying to transition their child from EI into the LEA. The initial recommendation that I would provide would be to increase the population of this study. This study consisted of 10 participants who provided detailed answers to the interview questions asked. Increasing the number of participants would provide a deeper look into what parents experience during the transition process. I also recommend that future studies regarding this topic should break down demographics related to the participants. Demographics were not obtained in this study due to the sensitive topic of parents discussing their children. I also recommend obtaining data regarding which EI programs the child was a part of. These data should provide more insight into which geographical areas need additional assistance with the transition process. I also recommend for interviews to be conducted in person if possible. Being able to sit down with each participant in a quiet environment would give them the opportunity to respond uninterrupted.

## Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the difficulties that parents face when transitioning their child with disabilities from EI into the local school system. Participants discussed the trials that accompanied the transition process. The parents were able to discuss in detail the issues they encountered as they attempted to get services for their child. This study provided further insight into the issues that are present for families who have children with disabilities when the child reaches school age.

Some of the issues that were found during this study included parents not receiving detailed explanations regarding the process or their rights as a parent with a child with a disability, struggles regarding knowing how the transition process works, and the lack of advocacy present for the child and parent. These issues can be addressed in future settings between stakeholders, school officials, and parents. All parties involved would be able to improve their process concerning transitioning children with disabilities from EI into their local school system.

These changes may not only bring about social change, but they may also increase advocacy, knowledge, and overall rapport with the families. When parents are made aware that they can have whomever they would like present to advocate for their child in the transition meetings, this may improve parents' overall experience with their LEA. Increased advocacy may also give parents the encouragement to learn to be the voice for their children in situations in which they feel like they have no voice. Second, making sure that parents are knowledgeable of all the steps and processes concerning the transition phase is recommended. Parents should be explained in understandable terms what is occurring with their child. School officials tend to make decisions regarding a child based on their own assumptions. This was seen in the interviews with several parents in this study. Clear and concise discussions should occur so that parents and other child advocates can understand why the child is eligible only for certain services.

Last, building strong rapport with the families is needed for several reasons. First, the families are coming from EI, where they had great relationships with their team. This same relationship should be available in the transition from EI to LEA and IEP. Addressing these concerns for parents should create social change in this area.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the hardships that parents face when transitioning their child with disabilities from EI to their local school system. Ten virtual interviews were carried out with parents who had children with disabilities who transitioned into the LEA from EI. These interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These interviews provided insight in what these parents endured while transitioning their child. The data were verified through the member checking process. Each participant was able to review what was gathered from the interviews to ensure accuracy. After the interviews were completed, I was able to analyze the data and find common themes throughout. The themes that were found included advocacy, expectations, progress, issues, and service. Each participant provided answers with these themes.

The participants expressed the lack of advocacy throughout the transition process. They discussed how they felt unprepared and unknowledgeable of what was to occur and what they could ask for regarding their child. Participants also discussed how they felt alone in the IEP meetings and how they had to agree with what was being told to them by the professionals. Participants described issues that occurred during the transition process that left them feeling unsure regarding the services that their child would be receiving.

Participants stated that being able to properly advocate for their child would have been a great help for them during this process. Participants also expressed how having the same level of rapport with the IEP team that they had with their EI team would have made a difference in how they felt going into the IEP meeting. Keeping these issues in mind would provide ways to reduce the hardships that parents face when transitioning their child with disabilities from EI into the local school system.

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# Appendix: Interview Questions

How did you first hear about early intervention?

How did your child qualify for services?

How do you feel about the progress your child has made while in the program?

Please explain how, and when you first heard about the transition planning meeting.

Was the process explained in detail?

Please discuss any concerns that you may have had concerning the process.

How has your overall experience been?