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**THE EFFECTS OF A PARENT FORUM ON PARENTAL  
EMPOWERMENT AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SPECIAL  
EDUCATION PROCESS AND EDUCATIONAL DECISION  
MAKING**

by  
Laura Elizabeth Walker

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Language, Literacy and Special Education  
College of Education  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
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Master of Arts  
at  
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Thesis Chair: S. Jay Kuder, Ed.D.

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## **Abstract**

Laura Walker

### **THE EFFECTS OF A PARENT FORUM ON PARENTAL EMPOWERMENT AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS AND EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING**

2013/14

S. Jay Kuder, Ed.D.

Masters of Arts in Special Education

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of a parent informational forum in empowering parents to engage in the special education decision making for their child with special needs in an urban elementary district. A pre-survey and post-survey were completed by parents who attended a bilingual information session. Both surveys contained nine identical indicator statements that parents rated on a four point scale. The post survey contained an additional eight indicator statements and four open ended responses. Fifteen parents attend the forum and completed the pre-survey, while seven parents completed the post-survey. Results showed a drop in parental belief that they were equal partners with school professionals. Drops were also seen in parent's belief that the school was responsible for the development of an educational program, and knowing how to make changes in an educational program. These drops could possibly be explained by parents developing an understanding of their role and their rights as parents of students receiving special education services. Approximately 70% of parents left the forum feeling empowered to participate in meetings.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

There has long thought to be a connection between parent involvement in school activities and positive academic outcomes for the students. Schools often actively seek ways to invite parents into the schools to take part in activities and interact with school employee and students. In fact, the Canadian Ministry of Education has spend \$21 million since 2006 in support of their Parents Reaching Out program, identify limiting issues and developing local solutions for increasing parental involvement (Onterio Ministry of Education, 2013). Studies, however, have found conflicting results, as positive outcomes do not result from a parent simply being present at school activities (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Underwood, 2010). A parent's presence and participation at school activities does not seem to be enough to affect positive academic outcomes.

Though parental involvement does not seem to consistently improve a student academic achievement, parental engagement in the learning process does. A distinction is being made between what constitutes parent *involvement* and parent *engagement* (Underwood, 2010). Parent involvement is generally considered participation in school activities that do not encourage parental input and decision making in the learning goals or outcomes of the students. These activities include volunteering for class trips, participating in parent-teacher organizations, or assisting in classroom activities. Contrastingly, Parent engagement includes interactions in which parents are and involved in the decision making of learning goals and instructional practices. Parents who are

actively engaged in their child's learning meet with teaching staff to develop learning goals and instructional methods that will be applied in the classroom.

Engagement in developing the learning outcomes is even more central for parents of students with special needs. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) parents are considered a member of the IEP team (US Department of Education, 2006), are expected to attend and participate meaningfully when determining a child's eligibility and assessment measures, and when developing and changing an Individualized Education Plan. Unfortunately, there are often barriers that limit parents in being active and engaged participants in these complicated processes.

There are a multitude of reasons that can limit a parent's engagement in their child's learning programs and outcome. One such limitation is the amount of time required to be an active participant in meetings and events (Stoner & Angell, 2006). Parents report that in order to be prepared for meetings that discuss learning goals, a considerable amount of preparation must take place prior to the meeting. Also limiting is the belief that the teachers and school professionals are the experts and families are the recipients of information (Kozleski et al., 2008), diminishing the parents' sense of value as a part of the special education team. Perhaps most importantly, becoming a meaningful contributor to the IEP process and an advocate for the child also requires knowledge about special education law as well as school wide procedures (Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 200). Without this knowledge, parents do not feel confident in affecting change in their child's special education program.

These problems are intensified when there are cultural differences between home and school. For example, when certain cultures view school personnel as authority figures, they may not feel it appropriate to interfere with school decisions (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Some cultures believe that the school is responsible for the child's cognitive development, while the home is responsible for social-emotional wellbeing (McWayne, Melzi, Schick, Kennedy, & Mundt, 2013). This leads to less family participation in the school, and a perception held by school professionals that parents are unengaged.

Additional challenges arise for families with low socioeconomic status. Parents may be restricted in their participation due to logistical issues, such as difficulties acquiring transportation (Conroy, 2012; Murray, Akerman-Spain, Williams, & Ryley, 2011). However, the limiting factors can come from the attitudes and behaviors of professionals. For example, minority families or families of a low socioeconomic status are often viewed through a deficiency lens, through which school professionals focus on what these families lack rather than their strengths (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). This, unfortunately, can lead to situations in which families of low means are excluded from participation simply because they lack the resources they need to become meaningful partners in the special education process (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). This lack of participation can be viewed by school professionals as “non-compliant” (Kalyanpur et al. 2000), perceptions that only further limit active family engagement.

### Research Question

The questions to be answered in this study include:

1. How will group information sessions affect a parent of a child with special need's feelings of empowerment as measured by parent self report surveys?
2. What are the effects of attending group information sessions on parent's attitudes and perceptions towards the special education process?
3. What are the effects of attending parent group information sessions on a parent's motivation to actively engage in decision making regarding their child's education program and learning outcomes as measured by parent self report surveys?

### Key Terms

*Information Session* – a meeting of parents of students with special needs facilitated by a special education teacher that focuses on a specific topic regarding parents' rights, the IEP process, at-home engagement, and other related topics that may arise during discussions

*Parent Engagement* – meaningful participation in activities that determine the learning goals of a student, include active participation in IEP, evaluation, and other meetings regarding child (Underwood, 2010)

*Parent Motivation* – a parent's perceived readiness to attend and actively participate in decisions that affect the learning outcomes of a student

*Empowerment* – a parent's sense of control and perceived ability to affect change in his/her child's educational program and learning outcomes

## Implications

IDEA mandates that all educational decisions concerning the special education of a child, such as evaluations, program placements, learning goals and objectives, must be made in collaboration with parents. However, there are many factors that limit parents from being active and engage participants in these processes. If parent information sessions can effectively encourage parents to be engaged in their child's educational process and learning outcomes, school districts can implement such strategies to develop a more robust support system for the child. Ultimately, active parent engagement in decision making regarding the learning outcomes of a child leads to greater student progress. Therefore, by supporting parents, the educational outcomes of the child can be positively impacted.

## Summary

A parent's participation in the educational decision making is mandated by special education law. Unfortunately there are many barriers that limit involvement in the process. Among these are issues are misunderstanding of school professionals and lack of trust from the parents. Difficulties maintaining positive relationships and active engagement are compounded for those parents with culturally diverse backgrounds or of low socioeconomic status. These issues lead to parents feeling disempowered within the special education system. By educating parents of students with special needs about policy, procedures, and parental rights, they may become more empowered to contribute to their child's educational plan, though further research is still needed to better understand this relationship (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007; Jeynes, 2011; Kozleski et al.,

2008; McKenn & Millen, 2013; Murray, Handyside, Straka, & Arton-Titus, 2013). This study will seek to understand the affects of parent forums which focus on special education policy, procedure, and parental rights on a parent's sense of empowerment in participating in the education decision making process for their children with special needs.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Literature

#### Parental Involvement v. Parental Engagement

Throughout the literature there are several, often contradicting, definitions of the interactions between families and school professionals. The two most commonly used terms to describe those interactions are family involvement and family engagement. Family involvement is often used in a broader sense (Stoner & Angell, 2006; Underwood, 2010; Jeynes, 2011) indicating any interactions between home and school, such as communication note books, parents volunteering in the classroom, or parents attending after school events. Epstein & Dauber (1991) outline five types of parental involvement: (1) basic parenting responsibilities, (2) communication with the school, (3) volunteering at school and attending school events, (4) engaging in learning activities at home, and (5) engaging in the decision making, and advocacy for the school and students. The first four of these activities are included in the definition of parental involvement for this study. These activities often are more superficial in nature, as they do not directly impact the learning outcomes for the student by impacting the educational programs or services that the child receives.

While not consistent throughout the literature (McWayne et al., 2013), many researchers have established parental engagement to include more meaningful participation of the family in the learning processes of the child, including participating in decision making regarding the instructional activities, learning goals, and school resources (Underwood, 2010; Epley, 2013; Stoner & Angell, 2006). McKenna & Millen

(2013) assert that parent engagement must include two important components: parent voice and parent presence. Parent voice is the sense that parents have the right and opportunity to express their thoughts and concerns regarding their everyday lives and their child's education and that these thoughts and experiences will positively influence the education of the child. Parent presence includes a parent's direct involvement in the child's education, be it school work, school activities, and volunteering in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to examine parents' sense of empowerment towards participating in the decision making process regarding their children's Individualized Education Plan and special education services. For the purposes of this study the term *parental engagement* will refer to this decision making process, which includes having an active voice in the learning outcome of the child. The current definition does not include the concept of parent presence, as that is a concept more closely aligned to parental involvement.

#### Effects of Parental Engagement

It has long been a belief in the educational community that high levels of parent engagement in their child's learning leads to positive outcomes for that child. As research in this field surged during the 1980's and early 1990's, positive results were found that supported the positive impact of parental involvement on student outcomes (Bempechat, 1992). Despite the positive outcomes reported in parent involvement studies, as researchers began to look more deeply at the types of engagement and different types of families, results began to vary (Mattingly, Prislun, Mckenzie, Rodriguez, & Kayzar, 2002). Researchers came to find that more subtle behaviors, such

as parental attitudes, had more of an impact on student outcomes than more over, but superficial, types of involvement, like attending school events (Epley, 2013).

The findings of Jeynes (2005) support the growing sentiment that the more overt forms of parental involvement may not have a dramatic impact on student outcomes like was previously believed. His study analyzed the data of 2,260 self reports of African American parents on their involvement in their child's education. For this study, involvement included attending school functions, communicating with the school, and checking homework. Results showed that the parent's socioeconomic status was a greater predictor of student outcomes than parental involvement, as once parental socioeconomic status was controlled for being a "highly involved parent" was not correlated with academic achievement. Since Jeynes' study focused on the more salient parent involvement activities, it adds to the growing research suggesting that these activities are not as strongly related to student educational outcomes.

Epley (2013) analyzed the perspectives 4,413 parents of children with disabilities regarding their attitudes towards the school and the daily educational activities they engaged in with their child. They correlated those perspectives, as determined by responses on a self-report survey, with the academic and social/behaviors outcomes of their child and found that 4% of the variance in academic and social/behavioral performance could be contributed to parent perceptions and engagement. The researchers found only a slightly higher relationship between the attitudes of parents and the behavioral outcomes for the child. Though the connections were not strongly

connected, this study adds to the sentiment that the more subtle behaviors of parents may have a stronger influence on student outcomes than once thought

Though not the focus of earlier studies, the idea that a parent's general attitudes towards education and the child's school could positively influence student performance has been considered an important predictor of student outcomes (Bempechat, 1992). Jaynes (2011) has called for parent involvement researchers to place a stronger lens on the subtle behaviors of parents, such as high expectations for their child, communication, and parental style. He cautions that the more overt, salient efforts of parents to be involved, such as checking homework and participating in school activities, do not have the effects on student achievement that was once believed. However, it is important to consider that these suggestions are based on the general education population. While the positive effects of the subtle parental behaviors may be similar for typically developing students and students with special needs, this research has yet to be conducted. However, a general belief held by educators and law makers contend that if parents actively collaborate with school professionals and advocate for their child's needs, it is logical to believe that there will be education continuity for the child (Conroy, 2012).

Research analyzing the outcomes of parental involvement and engagement must be looked at carefully. It may be a lack of high quality, reliable research that has resulted in only a weak connection between parental involvement and student educational outcomes (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). In fact, in their meta-analysis of 41 intervention programs targeted at increasing parental involvement, Mattingly et al. (2005) found that most research studies lacked the scientific rigor to draw any definitive conclusions. The

authors were clear in stating that insufficient results were not evidence that parental engagement does not have positive effects on a child's educational outcomes. The results of their analysis simply called for a strengthening in the rigor and scientific methodology when evaluating the effects of parental involvement and engagement.

### Parental Engagement and Policy

Despite limited quality research, parental engagement in the general education setting is still encouraged and believed to foster positive outcome for the child. In fact parent involvement is also one of the six targeted areas of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Mattingly et al., 2002). In 2004 the U.S. Department of Education released NCLB Non-Regulatory Guidance in order to assist schools in engaging in effective parent involvement practices. These guidelines state that because communication is the foundation of effective parent involvement, it is the school's responsibility to provide information regarding school performance and student performance on a regular bases. The guidelines also state that schools must make reasonable efforts to provide communication in the native language of the home. Though the guidelines do not provide specific information for communicating and involving parents of students with special needs, it does highlight the need for schools to approach communication with parents in cultural sensitive way. The guidelines are also an example of the strong belief in the educational community that parental involvement promotes positive outcomes for the child.

While NCLB encourages non-regulatory guidelines, for parents of child with disabilities active parental engagement is the law. The Individuals with Disabilities

Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes both parental rights and the need for parents to be equal partners in the special education process (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Conroy, 2012). Parent rights include participating in meetings regarding their child's identification and evaluation. It also includes being a partner in the development of their child's Individualize Education Plan (IEP), including being an equal contributor in the decisions regarding the child's placement, program, goals and objective, and modifications (U.S. Department of Education). These procedural safeguards must be presented to the parents yearly in order for them to remain informed (U.S. Department of Education). IDEA policy also considers cultural differences, mandating that all documents be presented in the native language of the parents, and that schools provide translators for all meetings regarding the child's education planning and program.

The legal rights of parental engagement in the decision making process has been highlighted in the 2007 Supreme Court ruling *Winkelman v. Parma City School District* (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009). Jeff and Sandee Winkelman filed for due process on grounds that their son's IEP did not provide an adequate free and appropriate public education (FAPE). After repeatedly being rejected for hearings, they appealed their case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court's subsequent ruling emphasized the necessary component of parental involvement in the FAPE of the child (Yell et al., 2009). Specifically, the ruling concluded that in the definition of FAPE the rights of the parents are enforceable under law, and that parental participation is not only mandated by IDEA but a crucial element in ensuring that children with disabilities receives a free and appropriate education (Yell et al., 2009). And while parental

participation is crucial in developing an appropriate educational plan for the child, making certain that parents have the opportunities to engage in those decision making processes is the onus of the schools (Epstein, 1991), a process that is monitored nationally.

National regulators analyze school districts compliance with the IDEA mandates of parental involvement through the annual State Performance Plan for Special Education (SPP), Indicator #8. Indicator #8 requires parents to complete a survey regarding how well school districts facilitate parental involvement, including what types of involvement and education programs are provided for parents (National and Regional Technical Assistance Centers, 2012). Survey results from 2010 indicated that in only 13.0% of states parents showed 90-100% satisfaction in their school district's attempts to facilitate parental involvement. The collection of data emphasizes the importance of the mandates set forth by IDEA that parents of children with disabilities must be involved in the educational decision making for the child on the school districts. The survey informs on the sentiment that the school district is responsible for creating programs that encourage and enable parents to become engaged participants in their children's special education program.

#### Barriers to Engagement

In spite of the potential benefits, there are many parents who are not involved in the decision making process for their children's special educational program. Studies have found is an array of possibilities when considering the reasons why parents would not be engaged in these processes including a lack of trust (Bezdek, Summers, &

Turnbull, 2010; Conroy, 2012; Matuszny, Brenda, & Coleman, 2007; Murray et al., 2011; Murray et al., 2013; Stoner & Angell, 2006), lack of resources (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Olivos et al., 2010), basic logistical limitations (Conroy, 2012), and lack of knowledge of policy and procedures (Turnbull et al., 2010; Sheehey, 2006). Cultural differences, too, may limit parents' motivation to engage in educational decision making for their children (Salas et al., 2005; McWayne et al., 2013). The perceptions and actions of school professionals can also create barriers that limit effective collaboration (Conroy, 2012). It is important to understand these potential barriers families may face when developing collaborative relationships with school professionals, because in better understanding these barriers professionals can develop effective interventions to overcome the issues.

Several studies have found that parental trust in school professionals to be a necessary foundation for a collaborative relationship. In fact, Bezdek et al. (2010) define partnerships as interactions between families and professionals that are characterized by, among other factors, trust. Parental trust is particularly essential for culturally diverse families (Salas et al., 2005). After interviewing eight parents of children with special needs Stoner and Angell (2006) found parental trust increased when they believed educational professionals to be competent, dependable, and had their child's best interest in mind. The level of trust that parents had directly related to the amount of time they spent in the classroom supporting the activities of the school. Without trust parental collaboration in the decision making process is less likely to occur.

The positive effects of a relationship built on trust can be found in setting outside of the school. For example, in a study involving parents working with Child Protective Services (CPS), an increase in their own trust of CPS agents was positively correlated with their participation in action plans designed for the parents to regain custody of their children, including spending increased time with their children (Summers, Wood, Russell, & Macgill, 2012). Participants in this study lacked that trust on the onset, but they were able to develop a deeper understanding of the roles of CPS agents by participating in workshops and partnering with parents who had previously gone through similar experiences. Those parents who did not participate had fewer interactions with their children and engaged less in their action plans. These are encouraging results, because it shows that through education, trust can develop where there once was none. Without parental trust of educational professionals, building effective, collaborative partnerships is unlikely, and parents will be less likely to engage in the educational decision making for their child.

Lacking the necessary resources can result in parents remaining unengaged in the decision making process for their child. One such resource that parents often lack is a means for finding valuable information regarding special education processes and policies. Turnbull et al. (2010) found that parents often first turn to an internet search engine when seeking information, which provides thousands of web pages with a wide range of usefulness. Understanding which of those sources of information are valid and useful becomes a daunting task. Even with good intentions, finding relevant, high quality information regarding practices and policy is a great challenge for parents (Turnbull et

al. 2010). Without this access to knowledge, parent's contributions to the decision making process may be limited.

Kalyanpur et al. (2000) assert that these issues are compounded for parents of low socioeconomic status, whose day to day restrictions make becoming an equal partner in decision making an even greater challenge. For example, states report that as a way to keep parents informed about parental involvement they post information on the State Department of Education websites (National and Regional Technical Centers, 2012). However, this will limit those families who lack readily available internet access from obtaining that valuable information. Also, low income families often have longer work hours and limited transportation. For this reason, if schools are not flexible in scheduling meetings in regards to time and location, parents may be restricted from participating (Olivos et al., 2010). Parents of low socioeconomic status may face these increased challenges participating in their children's educational processes.

The very nature of the parent/school relationship can be a possible limiting factor in the development of collaborative relationships. In order to establish effective partnerships all parties must have equal voice, with input from all partners carrying equal weight in the decision making process (Olivos, Gallagher, & Aguilar, 2010; Bezdek et al., 2010). However, this contradicts the notion that teachers and school professionals are experts in their field (Olivos et al., 2010; Salas et al., 2005; Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Olivos et al. (2010) and Murray et al. (2011) have also found that parents are often intimidated by school professionals, and feel that their subjective knowledge of their child is not as valuable as the objective information provided by school professionals,

such as test score and knowledge about programs and resources. In this unbalanced relationship, parents become the recipient of information, not an equal contributor (Kozleski et al., 2008). Research has found that parents of low socio-economic status are even less likely to initiate contact with the school (Bempechat, 1992). Due to this sense of the teacher as the expert, it is a general held belief that in order to start a collaborative relationship an atmosphere of open communication should begin with the teacher (Conroy, 2012).

### Cultural Differences

Cultural differences between school and home may create an even greater challenge when attempted to foster collaboration. Entrenched in the IDEA regulation are the values of freedom of choice, individual rights, and equity (Sheehey, 2006; Kalyanpur et al., 2000). However, these values may not be aligned with the values of families from diverse cultures. For example, Sheehey (2006) found that parents of children with disabilities in rural Hawaii placed a greater value on community well being as opposed to the needs of the individual. As the children of these parents began receiving special education services, they were not eager or comfortable participants in the decision making process. It was only as they worked with community and family resources that they were able to be advocates for their children, affecting change in their educational programs.

Hispanic families, which constitute the largest minority group in country (U.S. Census Bureau News, 2013), present several cultural barriers that may limit their active engagement in their children's special education process. One hundred thirteen parents

of children in a Head Start program who categorized themselves as Latino participated in 2-hour focus groups to discuss their role as parents in the educational progress (McWayne, Melzi, Schick, Kennedy, & Mundt, 2013). They found that parents believed that the cognitive and linguistic development was the responsibility of the school. While most of the parents engaged their children in activities at home to prepare them for the future, they were not as involved in the educational decision making. This was due to the fact that their value system was not aligned with that of the school. This idea that cultural differences may affect the participation of parents of Hispanic heritage is supported by Salas et al. (2005). He cautions educational professionals to account for the acculturation of Mexican American families, as those who maintain their native cultural values hold educational professionals responsible for the cognitive development of their child. These parents will likely remain unengaged in the educational processes without support.

The perspectives and biases of school professionals may limit their attempts to engage parents in collaborative decision making. Those parents who remain unengaged, even if their aloofness is due to cultural values that differ from those of the school, are often thought of as “non-compliant” by school professions, resulting in school contacting those parents less often (Kalyanpur, 2000). Bezdek et al. (2010) surveyed and interviewed 20 school professionals to examine their perceptions of families. They found that although school professionals may use family-centered language, they lack follow through in their actions. They also found that professionals did not respond positively when parents became involved in the educational processes in the classroom. Lastly

Bezdek et al. found that professionals blame parents for weak home/school partnerships, and did not consider their own behaviors in affecting that relationship. Additionally, for culturally diverse and low income families, school professionals often view through a deficit lens, not considering their strengths or needs (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; McKenna & Milen, 2013). The perceptions and biases of school professionals are limiting factors for creating partnerships with families, particularly for culturally diverse and low income families. Consequently, Olivos et al. (2010) advice teachers to become aware of their own cultural biases in order to create an atmosphere where parent's input is equally valued as that of the school.

For all families, the IEP process itself may be stressful, confusing, and overwhelming, causing many parents to avoid active participation (Sheehey, 2006; Salas, 2005). Parents are often made to feel unwelcome, unwanted, unsupported, and intimidated during meetings with professionals, particularly families of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Olivos et al., 2010). This problem may be made more complex as culturally and linguistically diverse parents may not understand the special education processes and may be confused about what the school professionals are asking of them (Salas et al., 2005). As a result, parents are disempowered (Underwood, 2010). Moreover, Sheehey (2006) found that when parents attend an IEP and find that the IEP has already been created, they are less motivated to attempt to change the document because they feel their thoughts and ideas are not important to school professionals. They feel unable to effectively contribute in their children's special education process,

that they cannot become equal partners in the process, and that they cannot create positive change for their child (Kozleski et al., 2008).

### Empowerment and Parent Voice

Individuals who are empowered feel that they are able to change the outcomes of their life (Hur, 2006). Empowerment is often thought of as a state, when in fact, empowerment is a process (Murray et al., 2013; Hur, 2006). Murray et al. (2013) indicate that the process begins when parents first acquire the skills and resources needed to affect change. Hur (2006) describes the growth of empowerment as one that begins when an imbalance of power exists. The empowerment eventually grows, through the joining of individuals, into the creation of a new system. Though Hur's research focuses on the empowerment of societal groups, as opposed to parents advocating for change in their child's special education needs, several of the steps in the empowerment process are applicable. These crucial steps include parents gaining necessary knowledge and fostering confidence to affect change. Without these two steps, parents cannot be empowered to affect change in their children's education.

As researchers study parental empowerment they develop definitions that encompass what they feel are necessary components. Murray et al. (2011) include access and control over needed resources, decision making and problem solving abilities, and the ability to effectively communicate with others as the necessary facets of empowerment. In 2013, Murray expanded the characteristics of empowerment to include effecting change in one's life, feeling part of a group, experiencing hope, and receiving respect. This broader view of empowerment encompasses a greater community view and

places a greater emphasis on the roles of others when achieving empowerment. Spiegel-McGill, Reed, Konig, & McGowan (1990) adopted a more pragmatic view of parental empowerment, indicating that it includes knowing how to communicate effectively with professionals, understanding their rights under special education law, and making well informed decisions. Stoner & Angell (2006) describe an empowered parent through the role that he/she takes on in relationship to the school. They assert that a parent who is a negotiator, able to bring about outcomes through conferences, discussions, and compromises with school professionals, is an empowered parent. Despite the variations in what is considered an empowered parent, there are certain consistencies in the definitions. Most notably are the parents' abilities to affect change in the education of their child.

Most parents do not experience empowerment as their child begins to receive special education services. Stoner and Angell (2006) interviewed eight parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder regarding their engagement in the schools. For almost all parents, becoming a negotiator for their children evolved over several years. They also found that the need to become an empowered increased as parents became dissatisfied with their children's educational services. Underwood (2010) found similar results, stating that parents who were the most dissatisfied with their children's educational services were those that became the most empowered, and took a more active role in affecting change. Even for those parents who do not experience high levels of dissatisfaction, it takes approximately two to three years for parents to become advocates for their children regarding their special education program (Kozleski et al., 2008).

There is a disparity between the notion that parents become more involved as their dissatisfaction increases and the low participation levels for parents from culturally and linguistically diverse families (McWayne et al., 2013; Bempechat, 1992). Minority children receive special education services at a much greater percentage than white students (NICHCY's Building the Legacy). However, culturally and linguistically diverse parents are less likely to contact schools and participate in the special education process than parents of the majority population (McWayne et al., 2013; Bempechat, 1992). A possible reason for this is that parents of diverse backgrounds and low socioeconomic status are disempowered, feeling like they cannot contribute to the decision making within the school (Olivos et al., 2010). For these parents, feelings of being isolated from their familial supports, as well as feeling as if the educational professionals are biased towards them may have negatively influenced their self perceptions as valid contributors to their child's educational process (Olivos et al., 2010; Brandon & Brown, 2009). It is crucial that school districts reach out to empower these families.

Some researchers have found that connecting with others in similar situations has empowering effects for parents (Epstein, 1991; Murray et al., 2013). Murray et al. (2011) included this sense of group belonging in his definition of empowerment. In Murray's study, 27 parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder participated in four training sessions that focused on empowerment, available services and community options, collaboration and decision making. While parents found the information useful, they remarked that the interactions with other parents helped them feel more confident in their

own situation. Similar results were found in 2013 (Murray, et al.) in a study which placed 71 parents of children with disabilities in undergraduate courses for preservice teachers. While parents found the information learned in the course helpful, it was determined that networking between parents became a contributing factors for several parents' increased feelings of empowerment.

In almost all of the studies reviewed for the current research, gaining knowledge is essential for the development of family empowerment. (Murray et al., 2013; Huang & Mason, 2008; Hur, 2006; Murray et al., 2011; Sheehey, 2006; Spiegel-McGill et al., 1990; Stoner & Angell, 2006). Earlier research has suggested that educating parents about child developmental needs can help parents foster cognitive growth for their child (Bempechat, 1992). More recently Huang & Mason (2008) studied of the effects of participating in a parent program that helps promote literacy activities at home, Project LEAPS. Though parent participation was low, a common theme for the parents who were interviewed was feeling more able to contribute to the child's reading progress. This research, although limited in its sample size, suggests that informing parents of ways to engage in educational activities at home makes them feel more empowered regarding their children's education. In a study of 4,413 parents of children with special needs, Epley (2013) measured academic activities that families engaged in at home. Epley's found that creating partnerships with parents to develop activities to do at home will empower parents to affect their children's educational outcomes.

Increasing a family's knowledge of services, policy, and procedure is directly linked to an increase in parents' sense of empowerment (Sheehey, 2006). Working with

a small sample size, Sheehey (2006) interviewed parents about their experiences with the special education system. She found that when their children first began receiving special services, parents felt overwhelmed by the process. The learning process for these parents did not happen spontaneously, as they were often encouraged by social supports, such as family or close friends, to begin advocating for their child. After parents gained knowledge about the policy and service options they all reported an increase in confidence, and became active decision makers in their child's education process. In Huang & Mason's 2008 study including four African American parents, found all four parents sought out knowledge regarding their children's programs as a way to empower themselves to positively affect their children's learning. These findings support the notion that gaining knowledge regarding policies and procedures is a precursor for parents being active decision makers in the special education process.

There have been several attempts by researchers to create programs to enhance parental engagement in the decision making process for their child with special needs. One such program developed by Partnerships for Autism was Collaborative Community Choice and Empowerment (Project PACE) (Murray et al., 2011). Twenty seven parents of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) attended four separate training sessions which discussed topics of family empowerment, service and community options, collaboration, and informed decision making. These parents, in turn, became workshop facilitators for the community, presenting on topics relevant to parents of children with ASD at different age levels. The parent results suggest that the training enabled parents to become advocates not only for their own children, but for the community. In fact, one

parent became the head of a parent support program, another opened an inclusive childcare center, and many continued to advance their knowledge of ASD through workshops and advanced degrees.

### Parental Engagement Programs

There are many factors to consider when developing a program designed to enhance parental engagement in their children's special education process. The National and Regional Technical Assistance Centers (2012), upon evaluating data collected from all 50 states regarding their parent involvement efforts, advise that schools should target those populations with the greatest challenges. This includes families with low socioeconomic status, as well as those whose culture and language differ from that of mainstream America. For this reason, a critical to consider a culturally sensitive approach when designing a program for parents (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Cultural considerations includes using a respectful tone, (Turnbull et al., 2010) avoiding all stereotypes (Salas et al., 2005), and considering several points of view (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Several studies also emphasize making the environment comfortable for parents of varying cultures (Matuszny et al., 2007; Epstein, 1991). It is imperative, when considering culturally sensitive practice, to assess the needs of the parents (Matuszny et al., 2007; Epstein & Dauber, 1991) , as culturally diverse populations have been disempowered for a number of reasons, and it is in meeting their needs that they will begin to feel able to affect change in their child's educational outcomes.

Conroy (2012) suggests the use of a cultural liaison as a means to connect school professionals with parents from a culturally diverse population. Cultural liaisons are

individuals from the cultures of the families. These cultural liaisons will work with school professionals in order to help them understand the cultural rules and paradigms of the community with which they may be unfamiliar. These individuals can also help school professionals and parents initiate conversations in a manner that is culturally sensitive. Conroy also asserts that it is important for professionals to ask questions regarding the culture and values of families. They should seek to better understand the culture of the family with which they work, and by asking questions with a sense of curiosity and respect, conversations can begin that may break down the barriers that have historically limited parental involvement of culturally diverse parents.

Turnbull et al. (2010) have developed and honed a system for delivering potentially complex information to parents in an accessible and useful way through knowledge-to-action (KTA) guides. The process begins when the needs of the populations are determined. Experts then gather and evaluate resources from reliable sources. That information is translated into a succinct summary, focusing on the bottom line of the information in how it applies to the parents of children with special needs. Turnbull and associates assert that after the information has been presented and is accessible, it is the onus of the parent to review that information, apply it, and evaluate the outcomes. The Beach Center Family Support Community of Practice have developed several KTA guides directed at empowering parents of students with disabilities. However, many parents are unaware of this resource. Additionally, these resources are found online, which makes it challenging for some families of low socioeconomic status to access. However, the process of gathering, summarizing, and making relevant the

immense volume of quality information is a valuable technique that school professionals can apply to programs designed to empower parents.

Matusznyi et al. (2007) have developed best practices guidelines for professionals to develop positive relationships with families that enable them to feel empowered in the decision making process. The four-phased plan begins with an initiation that occurs before the start of school in which the teacher engages parents in casual conversations in an informal setting in order to better learn the strengths and values of the family and visa versa. Phase two occurs shortly after school begins, in which the teacher shares information about the class, offers parents choices, and solicits input on certain classroom decisions, such as classroom rules. Phase three continues throughout the school year as the teacher maintains communication between home and school. Finally, in phase four, parents and teacher meet to discuss and review the good and the bad experiences over the past year in terms of communication, parent involvement, and parent sense of empowerment. This method provides insight into elements that may foster positive outcomes in an isolated parent information session, such as sharing of personal information in order to increase trust, and asking for parental input in order to instill a sense of purpose for the parents.

There are many logistical issues to consider when implementing a program targeting low income and culturally diverse families. In one framework for fostering collaboration Olivos et al. (2010) emphasize that school professionals should consider transportation and flexible meeting hours. It is important to consider a location that is convenient for parents (Murrey et al., 2011). Advertising is also important (Underwood

& Killoran, 2012; Murray et al., 2011), with notices sent home in the native languages of the target families. Also, school professionals must consider the native language of parental participants, and have a translator available during the programs (Olivos et al., 2010). Though many parents have access to information via the website or community supports, it is the responsibility of the school to establish positive collaborative relationships between home and school, in which parents are empowered to actively engage in the decision making process (Epstein, 1991; McWayne et al., 2013; Olivos, 2010; Salas et al., 2005; Stoner & Angell, 2006l ).

### Financial Considerations

The cost of implementing a program to increase parent engagement in educational decision making must be considered. After reviewing several state, district, and school level initiatives to increase parent involvement, Epstein (1991) asserts that to implementing a quality initiative at the district level would cost approximately \$10 per student, with the cost reduced to \$5 per student for statewide initiatives. This initiative would include at least one full time position dedicated to coordinating and facilitating parental involvement. Additionally, Murray et al. (2011) were able to implement an effect parent education program through Project PACE, which substantially increased parents' feelings of empowerment. That project, however, we able to run with the aid of a \$15,000 grant. Unfortunately, school districts, particularly those in urban and low income communities, do not have the additional funds to spend on robust parent involvement programs. The burden of partnering with and empowering families then falls on the teachers and principals of the school (Esptein, 1991).

## Conclusion

There is a legal obligation for parents of children with special needs to be involved in the decision making process of students with disabilities. However, previous research has shown that due to several factors, parents are often do not feel empowered to affect their child's special education program (Kozleski et al., 2008; Olivios et al., 2010; Underwood, 2010). Efforts that have been made to empower parents are often costly, limiting implementation in those school districts where the parents are the least involved, and these programs are most needed (Jeynes, 2005; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Matuszny et al., 2007). This study, therefore, seeks to determine the effectiveness of a low cost parent empowerment program in an urban, mutli-cultural school district.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

#### Setting and Participants

The goal of this study is to find a practical, low cost method for empowering ethnically diverse and low income parents to engage in the decision making process regarding their children's special education program. To accomplish this, a parent forum was held for parents of children with special needs. In following the advice of Murray et al. (2011) and Olivos et. al. (2010) the time and location of the forum was chosen to be as convenient for families as possible. The event took place in the children's elementary school in the evening, so parents who work during the day will have the opportunity to attend.

Participating parents were recruited from an elementary school in a diverse and typically economically disadvantaged city in the north east. The NJ Department of Education school performance report indicates that in the 2012-2013 school year 47.1% of the 365 students enrolled students in the school were Hispanic, 47.1% were black, 5.2% were white, and less than 1% of enrolled students were identified as Asian. The report also indicated that 95% of the students were considered economically disadvantaged. The demographic data of the target school suggests that parents of these children attending the forum match the general population for the given city.

In the 2013-2014 school year, the special education population of the school included 18 students receiving out-of-class resource for math and/or language arts, 40 students in self-contained classroom for learning disabilities or cognitive impairment. All

students were in grades one through five. The parents of these children were targeted for participation in the study.

Studies by Underwood and Killoran (2012) and Murray et al. (2011) highlight the importance of advertising and marketing when planning an event for parents and families. In that vein, the parents of child with special needs were recruited as participants for the current study using several different methods. In order to make parents aware of the event, the forum was included in the *Parent Bulletin* that is sent to the families of all students in the school each month. Additionally, an automated phone message was sent to all parents in the school on two separate dates prior to the event occasions. In order to specifically target and invite parents of children with special needs, flyers, written in both English and Spanish, were sent home with the special education population on several occasions. Finally, personal phone calls were made to parents the evening prior to the event reminding them of the time and location.

In order to encourage parents/guardians to participate in the event, several additional considerations were included in the event. Dinner was provided at all attending families and additional staff volunteers from the school were on hand to watch any children that come with their parents. Providing childcare accommodations is essential for families, as many parents may not be able to find additional childcare in order to attend the forum in the evenings. Most importantly a Spanish/English translator was co-presenting in order to translate the entire forum for Spanish speaking families. Due to the large percentage of Hispanic children in the school, this accommodation was essential in ensuring that all parents have opportunity to participate in the forum. These

considerations were included in all flyers sent home and phone calls to families in order to encourage them to participate in the event.

The parent forum was designed to empower families to become involved by educating them on not only the special education process, including evaluations and IEP development, but by informing parents of their rights as parents of children with special needs. Previous research also indicates that knowing how to communicate effectively and connecting with other families in similar situations can also help empower others to act (Spiegel-McGill et al., 1990; Epstein, 1991; Murray et al., 2013). All of these elements, therefore, were included in the forum presentation.

The discussion in the forum was guided by a PowerPoint presentation, written in both English and Spanish, in order to ensure that all talking points are addressed. The presentation began with an overview of the two foundations of special education, a free and appropriate education and the least restrictive environment. It then discussed the IEP process, including the IEP team, purpose of annual meetings, what to say and ask during IEP meetings, and how to be prepared for an IEP meeting. An emphasis throughout the presentation was that parents are an equal member of the team, and their input is valuable and essential in the development of their child's special education program. The next topic of discussion was the purpose of the reevaluation meeting, who attends those meetings, what to say and ask during reevaluation meetings, and how to be prepared for reevaluation meeting.

The topic then shifted to discuss some of the most important parental rights relevant to parents within the community. This included the rights to language

translation, how to address concerns regarding your child's education, and finally, how to address disagreements with the school. Finally, a parent of a student in the school who is an active participant in her child's education, affecting positive change in her child's educational program, shared her story with the other parents. Connecting parents with similar situations has been shown to be an effective method of empowering others to do the same (Epstein, 1991; Murray et al., 2013), and it is therefore an essential component of the current parent forum. Parents also received copies of the PowerPoint presentation and a copy of the PRISE (Parental Rights in Special Education) in their primary language. Throughout the event parents were encouraged to ask questions and share their personal concerns.

A crucial element of the parent forum was the translator. Not only did this individual act as a bridge between the English and Spanish speaking families linguistically, she also acted as a cultural liaison (Conroy, 2012). The translator was an individual who lives in the same community as the families in attendance, as well as from similar cultural and ethnic background as many of the families participating. Conroy (2012) found this to be an important element when schools are making connections with families, as it helps to open dialogue in a culturally sensitive way. The cultural liaison also assisted school staff in understanding the cultural paradigms of many of the families, helping staff provide more appropriate interventions. Therefore, the translator was an essential component of the parent forum.

## Materials and Instruments

Pre and post survey data was completed by parents and collected to measure possible changes in perceptions of parents and guardians as a result of attending the forum. The pre-survey included nine indicator statements regarding how parents perceive their involvement in the education decision making of their children. Indicators includes statements such as “I am considered an equal partner with teachers and other professionals in planning my child’s special education program,” and “I know what to do to be prepared for a meeting with teachers and school professionals.” Parents indicated their level of agreement for each statement, marking if they strongly disagree, disagree, agree, or strongly agree with each. The pre-survey also included questions to gather demographic information, including ethnicity, grade and current placement of the child with a disability, and number of years since their child began receiving special education services. This information was used to compare results across ethnic backgrounds. It was also used to see the possible effects of time that a child has been receiving special education services with a parent’s perception of control and voice, as previous research has indicated that the longer a child is receiving special education services, the more empowered that parent tends to become (Sheehey, 2006).

The post-survey included the same initial nine indicator statements as the pre-survey with identical choices for level of agreement for each. The post-survey also included eight additional statements related specifically to the effects of the forum, including “This forum helped me know my rights concerning language and translation services,” and “It was helpful to hear the experiences of other parents participating in the

special education system.” These indicators were rated on the same four point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The post-survey also included four open ended questions for parents to complete about what they felt were most and least helpful about the forum, as well as any other questions or concerns that they would still like to be addressed. These surveys were used to assess any changes in perceptions that parents may have had regarding empowerment and parental voice as a result of the forum, and well as overall opinion of the event’s effectiveness.

## Chapter 4

### Results

This study sought to explore the affects of a school-based parent forum focused on special education principals and parental rights on a parent's feelings of empowerment, attitudes and perceptions towards the special education process, and motivation to engage meaningfully in decision making regarding their children's special education process. This study placed a focus on parents in a diverse, urban setting, as the parents in this setting are least likely to be involved in the educational decision making of their children (Bempachat, 1992; Conroy, 2012; Jeynes, 2005; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Matuszny et al. 2007; McWayne et al., 2013; Olivos et al., 2010).

#### Demographic Information

A parent forum was held at an elementary school in an urban northwest city. The forum was held in the evening to accommodate parents who work during the day. There were 15 parents in attendance. All 15 parents completed pre-surveys prior to the start of the forum and seven of those parents also completed post-surveys after the forum was complete. Of those in attendance, four parents (26.7%) identified as black or African American, and 11 parents (73.3%) identified as Hispanic or Latino (see table 1). Based on language preference of forum materials and the pre-post surveys, eight parents were primarily Spanish speaking.

Table 1

*Parent Demographic Information*

Ethnicity	Total	Percent
White	0	0
Black or African American	4	26.7
Hispanic or Latino	11	73.3
Asian	0	0
American Indian	0	0
Pacific Islander	0	0

All parents in attendance had one or more children classified and receiving special education services within the public education system. A total of 19 children were identified as receiving special services, with 36.8% ( $n = 7$ ) in first grade, 5.2% ( $n = 1$ ) in second grade, 10.5% ( $n = 2$ ) in third grade, 26.3% ( $n = 5$ ) in 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and 21.1% ( $n = 4$ ) of the children in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

Parents reported on the total years that their child/children have been receiving special education services for 16 children total. Of the 16 students, 12.5% ( $n = 2$ ) had been receiving services for zero to one years, 25% ( $n = 4$ ) had been receiving services for two to three years, and 62.5% ( $n = 10$ ) indicated that their child/children had been receiving special education services for four or more years.

Parents also reported on the placement of 14 children receiving special education services. Four children (28.6%) received supplementary aids and services. One child (7.1%) received special education instruction in a pull-out or resource setting. The largest subgroup of students, ( $n = 6$ , 42.9%) received special education services in a self-contained classroom within the local school district. Two students (14.3%) were

receiving special education services in a specialized school. One parent was not sure of the placement of her child. Two parents did not report on the placement of their child/children.

### Pre- and Post-Survey Comparison

The pre-survey and post-survey contained nine identical statements that parents rated on a four point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The same questions were used in order to measure change in attitudes and perspectives before and after the forum. On the pre-survey 80% of parents strongly agreed that they were equal partners with school professionals in the educational planning, while only 57.1% of parents indicated strong agreement in the post-survey (see Table 2), with a 22.9% drop in parents strongly agreeing to the statement (see Table 3).

Parental responses concerning knowing how to make changes to their children's educational program changed considerably from pre- to post- forum results. 61.5% of parents indicated that they strongly agreed that they knew how to make changes to their child's special education program prior to the forum, while 42.9% of parents indicated that they strongly agreed in the post-survey, a decrease of 18.7%. A similar decrease in parents' strong agreement is seen in feelings that the school is solely responsible for the development of their child's special education from, from 46.7% in the pre-survey to 28.6% in the post-survey, a decrease of 18.1%.

Table 2

*Pre- and Post-Survey Result Percentages*

	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Feeling like an equal partner	80.0	57.1	20.0	42.9	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Know what questions to ask	66.7	66.7	33.3	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Able to discuss concerns	71.4	85.7	28.6	14.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Know what info to share	92.9	85.7	0.0	14.3	0.0	0.0	7.1	0.0
Feeling that input is valued	86.7	71.4	13.3	28.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Know how to prepare for meeting	57.1	71.4	42.9	28.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Know how to make changes	61.5	42.9	38.5	57.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Parents should be responsible	60.0	50.0	40.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7
School should be responsible	46.7	28.6	26.7	28.6	13.3	14.3	13.3	28.6

Table 3

*Differences in Parental Agreement Levels from Pre-Survey to Post-Survey*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Feeling like an equal partner	-22.9%	22.9%	0.0%	0.0%
Know what questions to ask	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Able to discuss concerns	14.3%	-14.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Know what info to share	-7.1%	14.3%	0.0%	-7.1%
Feeling that input is valued	-15.2%	15.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Know how to prepare for meeting	14.3%	-14.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Know how to make changes	-18.7%	18.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Parents should be responsible	-10.0%	-6.7%	0.0%	16.7%
School should be responsible	-18.1%	1.9%	1.0%	15.2%

Parental responses concerning knowing how to make changes to their children's educational program changed considerably from pre- to post- forum results. 61.5% of parents indicated that they strongly agreed that they knew how to make changes to their child's special education program prior to the forum, while 42.9% of parents indicated that they strongly agreed in the post-survey, a decrease of 18.7%. A similar decrease in parents' strong agreement is seen in feelings that the school is solely responsible for the development of their child's special education from, from 46.7% in the pre-survey to 28.6% in the post-survey, a decrease of 18.1%.

Decreases in parental levels of agreement were also seen in the parent's level of agreement that their input is valued during meetings with school professionals regarding the educational decision making. Pre-survey results indicated that 86.7% of parents strongly agreed that their input was valued. However, prior to the forum, only 71.4% of parents strongly agreed that their input was valued, a decrease of 15.2%.

There was no change in the percentage of parents who felt that they strongly agreed or agreed that they knew what questions to ask during meetings regarding their child's special education services. Both the pre- and post-surveys indicated that 66.7% of parents strongly agree and 33.3% of parents agreed that they knew what types of questions to ask at meeting.

An increase in parental levels of agreement only occurred concerning two of the nine statements that appeared on both the pre-and post surveys. Those two statements indicated parents' level of agreement regarding knowing how to be prepared for meetings with school staff and knowing how to discuss concerns. In both instances, there was an

increase of 14.3% of parents who strongly agreed to the indicator statements after the forum. Parents who felt that they strongly agreed that they knew how to be prepared for meetings change from 57.1% of parents strongly agreeing in the pre-survey to 71.4% of parents strongly agreeing in the post-survey. Parents who felt that they strongly agreed that they were able to discuss their concerns regarding their child's needs during meetings with school staff changed from 71.4% of parents in the pre-survey and 85.7% of parents in the post-survey.

There were changes in parent's feelings of responsibility for their child's education. Before the forum, 100% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they were responsible for their child's education. After the forum, 16.7% of parents strongly disagreed with that statement, indicating that they did believe their child's education was not their responsibility. The data also shows that while 13.3% of parents strongly disagreed that the school should be responsible for their child's education prior to the forum, that percentage increased to 28.6% of parents prior to the forum, indicating that parents did not think that the school was solely responsible for their child's education.

#### Post Survey Results

The post-survey contained eight statements related directly to the forum, to which parents indicated their level of agreement on the same four point scale. Parents indicated that that they agreed or strongly agreed with all eight statements (see Table 4). The statement with the highest percentage of parents indicating that they strongly agree (71.4%) was regarding the forum helping parents feel empowered to participate in meetings regarding their child's special education program. 66.7% of parents indicated

that they strongly agreed that the forum helped them understand their role as a parent of a child with special needs. The same percentage of parents (66.7%) indicated that they strongly agreed that the forum helped them understand their rights when addressing concerns about their child's special education program.

Table 4

*Percentages of Parental Agreement on Post-Survey Only Questions*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<i>This forum helped me...</i>				
...understand my role as a parent	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
...be prepared for meetings	57.1%	42.9%	0.0%	0.0%
...feel empowered to participate	71.4%	28.6%	0.0%	0.0%
...feel empowered to exercise my rights	57.1%	42.9%	0.0%	0.0%
<i>This forum helped me know my rights about...</i>				
... translation and language services	57.1%	42.9%	0.0%	0.0%
...addressing concerns	66.7%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
...disagreements with school decisions	42.9%	57.1%	0.0%	0.0%
<i>It was helpful to hear...</i>				
...experiences of other parents	57.1%	42.9%	0.0%	0.0%

57.1% of parents indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement indicating that the forum helped them to be prepared for meetings, and with the statement indicating that they felt empowered to exercise their rights as parents of children with special needs. The same percentage of parents (57.1%) also indicated that the forum helped them know their rights about language and translation services. 57.1% of parents also strongly agreed that it was helpful to hear the experiences of other parents participating in the special

education system. Only 42.9% of parents strongly agreed that the forum helped them understand their rights when they disagree with the actions of the school.

### Parent Comments

The final portion of the post-survey allowed parents to answer opened-ended questions regarding the forum and their children's special education program. Of the five parents that left comments, 80% of parents indicated that learning about their rights was most helpful element about the evening's forum. Eighty percent of parents also indicated that they would not change anything about the forum in the future. When asked if they had any further questions regarding their child's special education program, three out of the five parents indicated they had no further questions at the time. Two parents wrote general comments concerning the child's learning or how to improve the child's performance.

Four parents responded to the final open-ended question which asked parents to share any comments or questions they may have had about the forum. Seventy five percent of the comments in response to this final question could be considered positive, with two parents writing a thank you for the help and support, one parent indicating that it was a good meeting. Twenty five percent of the comments on the last question are considered neutral, with one parent stating that he/she did not have anything to share at the time.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### Review

This study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of a parent forum, focusing on three main research questions.

1. How will group information sessions affect a parent of a child with special need's feelings of empowerment as measured by parent self report surveys?
2. What are the effects of attending group information sessions on parent's attitudes and perceptions towards the special education process?
3. What are the effects of attending parent group information sessions on a parent's motivation to actively engage in decision making regarding their child's education program and learning outcomes as measured by parent self report surveys?

Results from the pre- and post-surveys completed by parents who attended the informational forum indicated that there were changes in attitudes and perceptions regarding their child's special educational program that give insight into this study's research questions. Of all the indicator statements on the post-survey, parents most strongly agreed (71.4%) that they felt empowered to participate in meetings regarding their child's special education program, supporting the notion that a culturally sensitive parent session can have positive outcomes for parent engagement. The majority of parents (57.1%) also indicated that they felt empowered to exercise their rights, indicating motivation to actively engage in the process.

Interestingly, while this study sought to make parents feel more confident in affecting change in their child's educational program and learning outcomes, post-survey results indicated that parents felt less like they knew how to make changes to their child's educational plan than before the forum. This could be due to several factors. For instance, the forum may have helped parents realize the procedures and paperwork required within the special education system of which they were previously unaware. Prior to the forum, parents may have had a false confidence in their ability to affect change. However, after the forum, although they become more aware of the meetings and procedures involved, parents may have felt less knowledgeable about how to navigate those procedures after the completion of the event.

Concerning parents' attitude and perceptions, parents indicated that they felt the forum helped them understand their roles as a parent in the planning of their child's educational program. Additionally, after the forum, parents tended to disagree at a higher rate that neither themselves nor the school had the sole responsibility to develop their child's educational program. This indicates that parents may have gained an understanding that the educational decision making is a team effort, and parents may have developed a better understanding of their roles as a member of that collaborative team.

In relation to better understanding of their role as a member of the decision making team, parents left the forum feeling less like equal partners with school professionals and feeling that their input was less valued by school professionals than before the start of the forum. This may be due to several factors. One such factor is that

almost 50% of parents came to the forum feeling that it was the school's responsibility to develop their child's educational plan, and therefore may have felt that their input was not needed or important. However, as parent's began to develop understanding as decision making as a collaborate process, they may have realized the value of their own input within that process, and therefore, may have felt that their input was, in fact, not values by school professionals in the past. Therefore, the drop in feeling like an equal partner does not necessarily indicate that they do not wish to become an equal partner. This decrease may, in fact, be an evaluation of their growing understanding of their own role compared to previous experiences working with school professionals.

The significant drop in feeling like an equal partner may also be due to parent's gaining a better understanding of their legal rights within the special education process. One hundred percent of parents either agreed or strongly agreed that the forum helped them understand their rights regarding language and translation services, and regarding addressing issues and concerns with the school. The parents in attendance may have been previously unaware of their rights and services that are legally available to them. Upon learning their rights, parents may have realized that they have been violated or ignored by the school district in the past, and, therefore, felt less like an equal parent after the forum than they did prior. This explanation, again, supports the notion that though parents did not feel like equal partners, this does not necessarily reflect the parent's desire to be an equal partner in that educational decision making process.

### Limitation

While this study provides valuable insight into parental attitudes and beliefs, there are several limiting factors that diminish the study's strength. While measures were taken to actively promote and advertise the event, one limitation of this study was the small sample size. Fifteen parents attended the forum, which accounted for only a small percentage of the population of parents of children with special needs in the school. A larger sample size may have given further evidence of the effects of the forum.

A disproportionate number of pre- and post-surveys may have also significantly skewed the results of this study. While there were fifteen parents in attendance who completed the pre-survey prior to the start of the forum, only seven of those parents completed and returned the post-survey after the forum was complete. Therefore, comparisons made between the pre- and post-surveys must be analyzed with some degree of scrutiny, as it is possible that those who were less likely to complete and return the post-survey were those who represent a particular subgroup of parents. For example, it could be possible that the parents who were the most dissatisfied with the event left prior to completing the post-survey, and therefore, that data was not considered in this study, possibly skewing the results.

The use of a self-report survey may be considered a limitation of this study, as parents may have been biased when filling out the pre- and post-surveys. Parent reports on the survey may have reflected how they felt the school professionals would have preferred them to respond, as opposed to their true attitudes and beliefs. This is of a particular concern for this survey, as 96% of all responses on the pre-survey indicated

that parents either agreed or strongly agreed with all of the indicator statements. The high percentage of agreement also limits the ability to measure growth and change, as no improvement could be shown for parents who indicated that they strongly agreed with indicator statements on the pre-survey. Additionally, upon completing the pre-survey, parents may have completed the survey in false confidence, indicating that they were more comfortable navigating the special education processes than was true in fear of appearing like an incompetent or uninvolved parent.

A lack of follow-up can also be considered a limitation of this study. This study sought to determine parental empowerment and motivation to engage in the special education decision making for their children. In order to truly measure this, follow-up should be conducted to see how many parents attended scheduled meetings, called for additional meetings when an issue arose, or exercised their rights as parents, such as requesting a translator when meeting with school professionals. Additionally, in order to measure true engagement, as opposed to participation, a researcher would need to attend the meetings with parents in order to measure if the parents are actively participating in the decision making process or simply acting as receptors of information provided by the school professionals.

### Practical Implications

The purpose of this study was to develop an effective service for families that could be easily implemented by school staff in any district. It is the onus of the school to ensure that parents are engaged in the educational decision making for their children (Epstein, 1991). However, the task can seem overwhelming, with some estimates

indicating that an effective parent outreach program could cost up to \$10 per pupil (Epstein, 1991), and other successful programs costing upwards of \$15,000 (Murray et al., 2011). The program implemented in this study is school based, and had few financial costs that could easily be covered by school's parent/staff association or built into a school's annual budget. Also, with most of the budget for the event being put towards food for families in attendance, this can also be circumnavigated depending on the communities being served. For example, if families are able to donate a dish to the event, costs can be significantly cut, making the event even less of a burden for the school and district.

The implications extend beyond just creating a cost effective event. The documents to support such an event have already been created, and have been shown to be effective in changing parental attitudes. If school's were to be provided with these pre-made materials, only minor adjustments would need to be made to ensure that the content be culturally sensitive and relative to the populations being served within that community. With cost and labor minimized, schools would be more likely to implement such an event. Though more research is needed, the widespread implementation of simple yet effective parent outreach forums could have significant impacts on parental engagement and students learning outcomes.

The implications of this study are even more significant for urban and diverse communities. In the past, participation of parents in the educational decision making has been limited in these communities (McWayne et al., 2013; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Kozleski et al., 2008; Conroy, 2012; Murray et al., 2011). However, this study has

shown that by considering the cultural sensitivities and providing simple, yet necessary accommodations, parents can be motivated to become a member of the decision making team. For example, in the current study teacher volunteers were able to watch the children of attending parents, as many parents in the community may be unable to afford child care in the evenings. This came at no additional cost to the school, but afforded many more parents the opportunity to attend the event. Additionally, the event was held after traditional working hours, to accommodate working parents. The language needs of the community were also strongly considered, with all advertising, materials, and discussion during the event translated into Spanish. This was, again, done with a staff volunteer from the school and came at no extra cost to the school or district, yet had significant impact on the population of parents in attendance. These simple considerations can have an impact on a parent's sense of empowerment and motivation, which is the first step in becoming engaged in their child's educational decision making, and should be implemented by schools as they plan their own parent outreach programs.

### Future Studies

Future studies should expand upon the findings of the current study by following up with parents to determine true changes in parental engagement within the educational decision making process. This should include monitoring parental attendance at meetings with school staff prior to and after attending the forum in order to determine if an increase in participation has occurred. This follow-up should also include attendance of a researcher at meetings with parents and school staff to determine a level of parental engagement in the decision making process. The researcher, should, monitor the

contributions of the parent during these meetings to ensure that the parent is truly engaging in the decision making process.

Future studies should also implement a parental coaching element, whether it be provided by school professionals or student advocates. While many questions can be answered by an information session, many parents may have a more specific issue or concern with which they need assistance. The current forum may act as the starting point, but future studies should evaluate the effectiveness of a follow-up coaching session or additional assistance in making parents empowered to become contributing members to their child's educational program and make the changes that they hope to see.

Finally, future studies should seek to clarify the decreases in parental feelings of being an equal partner and feeling that they are able to affect change in their child's educational program that were seen in the current study. While this study did see these decreases, limitations in the self-reporting allow for only speculation as to why those trends occurred. In the future, studies should seek to determine why parents, upon gaining information and attending a parent focused forum, felt less of a partner and less able to make change after the event.

### Conclusion

This study found that providing parents the opportunity to attend a forum about the special educational process and parental rights can cause changes in parental attitudes and perceptions of the special education process and educational decision making. These changes are particularly evident concerning the parents' understanding of their roles as a member of the decision making team, their legal rights, and a sense of empowerment to

participate in the educational decision making process. This study found that to be true for populations previously thought of as hard to reach or uninvolved. Cultural considerations and parental accommodations showed to be successful in providing parents the opportunity for attendance. While many of the parents left feeling less confident navigating within the special educational system, the majority of parents left feeling empowered and motivated, which are positive steps in becoming active participants in their child's education and learning outcomes.

Without the input and contributions of parents a child's outcomes could be compromised. This study showed that there are realistic and simple steps schools and educators can take to affect change within parents in hopes of providing the best educational outcomes for all special education students.

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