Developing individualized education programs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes: a heuristic inquiry of special education teachers

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DEVELOPING INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAMS WITH CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES FROM LOW-INCOME HOMES: A HEURISTIC INQUIRY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

by

Kristen E. Clark

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DEVELOPING INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAMS WITH CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES FROM LOW-INCOME HOMES: A HEURISTIC INQUIRY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Kristen E. Clark
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Patty and our daughter Olivia for their unwavering love, support, and above all else, patience.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Michael Elium for his encouragement and support through this journey. His guidance and confidence in my ability as a researcher provided me motivation towards working to achieve both personal and professional goals. Several of these goals were accomplished due to his dedication to my success. I would also like to thank Dr. Thomas Nelson for introducing me to new ways of thinking, changing my perceptions of the world and interconnections within. Learning from him has not only changed my thinking patterns, it has positively affected my relationship with nature. Additionally, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Linda Skrla for sharing her prolific skill and vast knowledge of academic research. Having the opportunity to learn from Dr. Skrla led me to establish a solid foundation on which to build this study. Once on my own, I referenced her teachings which aided me throughout the dissertation process.
DEVELOPING INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAMS WITH CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE FAMILIES FROM LOW-INCOME HOMES: A HEURISTIC INQUIRY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

Abstract

by Kristen E. Clark

University of the Pacific
2015

Research shows evidence of overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse children enrolled in special education services, a positive correlation between parent involvement and academic success, and a plethora of barriers impeding active parent participation in IEP development. Barriers include language, culture, low income, and school climate and team dynamics. The aim of this study was to explore: (a) In what ways do special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in the IEP development process? (b) In what ways do special education teachers address culturally and linguistically diverse children’s educational needs while also addressing both legal and workplace expectations? (c) In what ways do special education teachers develop IEPs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes addressing both legal and workplace
expectations? These questions were addressed qualitatively utilizing Moustakas’s heuristic inquiry. Deductively exploring themes using Lipsky’s street-level bureaucracy framework exposed challenges special education teachers in this study had addressing both legal and workplace expectations, such as meeting IDEA 2004 mandates. With a systems theory approach, themes and subthemes were identified as being interconnected. Power imbalances between stakeholders and socioeconomic differences across families appeared to be the most prolific barriers impeding parent participation. Inductive analysis explored emergent and uncovered themes elucidating what it meant to be a special education teacher.

*Keywords:* special education, individualized education program, cultural and linguistic diversity, teacher perceptions, heuristic research, street-level bureaucracy, systems
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations

1. ADHD-Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
2. ID-Intellectual Disability
3. IDEA-Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
4. IEP-Individualized Education Program
5. OHI-Other Health Impairment
6. RSP-Resource Specialist Program
7. SSI-Supplemental Security Income
Chapter 1. Introduction

Family involvement in children’s education positively correlates to scholastic success (Behnke & Kelly, 2011; Epstein, 1995; Sheldon, 2003). For culturally and linguistically diverse families, parental involvement may be more crucial for their children’s success than for children of their non-diverse counterparts due to increased barriers to parental involvement for culturally and linguistically diverse families (Martinez, DeGarmo, & Eddy, 2004), families whose native language is other than English, and who represent a non-White racial, cultural, or ethnic background (Sullivan, 2011). Barriers that impede parental involvement in their child’s education undoubtedly exist for families whose children are in special education (Dabkowski, 2004; Fish, 2006). Additional barriers exist for these families who are culturally and linguistically diverse (Harry, 2002; Lo, 2008, 2009).

The US is considered home to many families from a wide variety of cultures, ethnicities, and income levels. A report for the Census Bureau (Shin & Kominski, 2010), details over 380 languages are spoken in homes across the nation, representing 55.4 million culturally and linguistically diverse residents. Moreover, ample documentation exists underscoring disproportionality and overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education programs and services (Sullivan, 2011). Through various educational mandates, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, education professionals are responsible for upholding parental rights which ensure participation in special education processes (IDEA, 2004a).
Even with IDEA mandates, barriers to parental involvement continue to exist, impeding and limiting active parent participation in individualized education program (IEP) meetings, most notably for culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes (Harry, 2002). Detailed under IDEA (2004a), procedural safeguards stipulate requirements for education professionals to deconstruct those barriers and provide equal membership in the IEP team, allowing full participation regardless of perceived or actual barriers due to language, culture, income level, or school climate. Unless clearly not feasible, documents including parent rights, procedural safeguards, prior written notice, and others must be made available in parents’ native languages as delineated under Part B, section 615 of IDEA (2004a). It is logical to conclude that in order for culturally and linguistically diverse families to be active participants in their child’s IEP, they must be able to understand and contribute to all dialogue taking place in IEP meetings. Parents whose native language is not English may be more likely to have difficulty actively participating. It has been suggested that language differences do not correlate with parent attendance in IEP meetings (Hernandez, Harry, Newman, & Cameto, 2008); however, they may influence participation (Barrera & Liu, 2006; Harry, 2002; Lai & Ishiyama, 2004).

**Barriers to Active Parent Participation**

As mandated under IDEA, local educational agencies must include parents in special education processes, which includes referral, identification, development of the IEP, and subsequent annual and triennial IEP reviews (Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2006). In order for this to take place, parents must be able to communicate with education professionals which may be through interpreters and/or translators. In compliance with
IDEA, informed consent from parents must be secured before any evaluations or assessments may be conducted to determine special education eligibility (Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2006). In addition, IEP teams must take into consideration parental concerns and desires related to their child’s education. This can only be achieved when comprehensible communication occurs between team members. Language barriers lead to breakdowns in communication; therefore, parents are not able to be active participants. In a study of Chinese families participating in IEP meetings, Lo (2009) exposed language barriers as impediments to active parent participation, noting several factors leading to, or maintaining those impediments, such as interpreters leaving out information they themselves did not understand, IEP team members not allowing adequate time for interpretations, and using untrained interpreters. Additional research has resulted in similar findings by Schoorman, Zainuddin, and Sena, (2011) who found that time allocated for interpreting was limited, and by Hart, Cheatham, and Jimenez-Silva (2012) who found that “omission, addition, condensation, and substitution” were common interpreting errors (p. 208).

Similar to language differences, cultural differences between education professionals and culturally and linguistically diverse parents can create barriers to active parent participation in IEP development. Harry (2002) posited the way in which parents’ culture shaped their perception of disability and human development, how they managed stress, what was expected regarding participation and advocacy, and their ability to access information may adversely influence their participation. Lai and Ishiyama (2004) supported these findings through a study of parental involvement in education by Chinese Canadian immigrants with children who had disabilities. Although views of disability
may differ across cultures, numerous groups of people acknowledge the existence of impairments and perceived deficits within their society (Antony & Banks-Joseph, 2010; de Fur, 2012; Harry, 2002; Valle, 2011). For example, Harry (2002) suggested that many Asian cultures believe disability to be accredited to divine justice or retribution for parents' past behavior or actions. These convictions can vary amongst parents and other members of the IEP team (Dabkowski, 2004; Harry, 1992), thus creating a cultural barrier, hampering active parent participation.

In addition to language and culture, having low income can prevent or hinder culturally and linguistically diverse parents from actively participating in IEP meetings. Literature examining the effects of family income on parent participation in IEPs is minimal; however, available literature describes several challenges that can hamper participation (Callicott, 2003; Geenen et al., 2005; Harry, 2002; Hover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jones & Gansle, 2010; Kalyanpur, et al., 2000; Pang, 2011). Factors such as work schedules (Lo, 2008), transportation (Geenen, et al., 2005), and child care (Turney & Kao, 2009) can make it difficult to arrange meeting dates and times in which all team members, including parents, can meet.

A fourth barrier to active parent participation by culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes is school environment or school climate. Education professionals' behaviors and attitudes can have a negative impact on participation. Such behaviors and attitudes include seating parents on one side of the meeting table apart from other team members (Dabkowski, 2004), assigning responsibility to parents for child's inappropriate behavior and lack of academic progress, ignoring parental concerns, not encouraging parent communication (Lo, 2008), and
presuming parents can read (Lo, 2009). Additionally, it is suggested that the physical school environment can affect parent participation (Dabkowski, 2004; Mexican American Legal Defense Education Fund, 2010). Cold, inhospitable staff (MALDEF, 2010) and cramped spaces suggest an uninviting, uncomfortable atmosphere (Dabkowski, 2004). Moreover, parent comfort levels can influence their decision to be active team members if they had negative experiences in school when they were children (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). The existence of these language, culture, low income, and school climate barriers have elicited research into potential solutions that abolish or weaken these challenges (Lo, 2009; Pang, 2011). Several state departments and advocacy groups have contributed to literature on deconstructing barriers and increasing parent participation in children’s education (Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, 2006; MALDEF, 2010; Stith-Williams & Haynes, 2007; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Weishaar, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Research exposed several obstacles to parent participation by culturally and linguistically diverse families in the IEP process. Several of these findings were found through inquiry into parent experiences and perceptions of IEP team meetings (Fish, 2006; Lo, 2008, 2009; Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2009; Salas, 2004; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Research highlighting special education teacher perceptions of the IEP process is limited, but increasing. While quite outdated, Gerber and colleagues’ (1986) study of teacher perceptions concerning special education processes deserves reflection while emerging research is coming to light, uncovering special education teacher attitudes of IEP processes (Spessard, 2014). Research appeared absent pertaining to special
education teacher perceptions regarding the effects language, culture, low income, team dynamics, and school climate have on parent participation in IEP meetings by culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes. Literature also appears absent regarding special education teachers’ perceptions of how they engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in developing IEPs. Additionally, a lack of literature on how special education teachers balance meeting both IDEA requirements and school policy with regards to parent participation in IEP meetings by culturally and linguistically diverse families points to a need for such inquiry.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore what it means to be special education teachers working in large, urban school districts, interacting with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes.

Research Questions

1) In what ways do special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in the IEP development process?

2) In what ways do special education teachers address culturally and linguistically diverse children’s educational needs while also addressing both legal and workplace expectations?

3) In what ways do special education teachers develop IEPs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes while addressing both legal and workplace expectations?
Significance of the Study

United States education institutions, including special education departments, function as bureaucratic systems (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). Artiles, Trent, and Palmer (2004) posited the attitude in the US considering the increasing language diversity has been negative, leading to inequities in the US educational system. Research indicates that culturally and linguistically diverse students from low-income homes are disproportionately overrepresented in special education programs as compared to non-culturally and linguistically diverse students (Ahram et al., 2011; Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders, 2013; Sullivan, 2011). Since federal law stipulates the inclusion of all parents in the development of the IEP (IDEA, 2004a) regardless of culture, language, or income, this study is intended to draw an audience of pre-service teacher educators, special education teachers, and education professionals who work with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes, as well as policymakers who influence education professional practices. It is important for this particular audience to be informed about this study’s findings, as they are in positions that may influence active parent participation in IEP meetings. Current research appears limited in providing potential solutions to or models for deconstructing barriers and increasing active parent participation for this specific demographic of parents. Most suggestions are geared towards parent participation in general, or participation outside of IEP meetings and other parts of the special education process (Virginia Department of Education, 2005; MALDEF, 2010), and others refer to parent participation in IEPs for all parents (Weishaar, 2010). There are limited models and potential solutions for decreasing or eliminating active participation barriers, and
increasing active participation in IEPs for culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

Two frameworks were used in this study. The first was a systems theory framework. This framework is also referred to as systems thinking, or systemic thinking. It was used to develop the structure and components of the literature review, as a tool to analyze data, as well as provided guidance in establishing the scope of the study. Von Bertalanffy (1969) described the appropriateness of a general application of the principles of systems theory. In von Bertalanffy’s (1969) view, systems theory can be applied to not only physical and biological sciences, but social sciences as well. Bronfenbrenner (1976) shared a similar perspective. Described as *ecology of education*, Bronfenbrenner (1976) believed learning occurred as a result of interconnected relationships between learner characteristics and characteristics of the learner’s surroundings, which interacted with relationships developed between learner characteristics across other settings. Capra (2003) delineated systems thinking as an approach towards understanding and exploring complex systems, such as the interconnected web of living systems. Caine (2004) discussed systems theory when explaining his view of education as rooted in “living systems” (p. 4). Cassell and Nelson (2010) linked systems thinking with a discussion of the interconnections between environmental, sociological, cultural, economic, and education systems. Systems theory can also be used to study similarities in phenomena occurring within a community, or group, with those of an individual. Conners and Caple (2005) reviewed group systems theory as applied to analyzing team dynamics and group behavior.
The IEP team is a subsystem of the special education process, which itself is a subsystem within the larger web of the education system. The IEP team contains interconnected subsystems, each significant, purposeful, and dependent on each other. Individualized education program team dynamics are at the center of this interconnected web. Think of this as the hub of a spider’s web (see Figure 1). The radii (threads that move out from the hub) include team members (general education teachers, administrator/local education area designee, therapists for speech and language, occupational therapy, physical therapy, music therapy, adaptive physical education teachers, behavioral interventionists, and others), power, perceptions, special education teachers, and culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income. Special education teachers are on a separate thread, as this study focuses on their experiences. Parents and Families, including the student, are on a separate thread as well, due to power imbalances between them and education professionals. As a side note, students as team members is not a focus of this study, however it is crucial to note they are a part of the team, as the IEP revolves around them. Oftentimes, parents represent the student, unless appropriate for students to represent themselves. Returning to describing Figure 1, each radius is interconnected with the hub, and therefore, each other’s radius. They all influence or affect each other. As discussed in Chapter 2, each member of the IEP team has some degree of power, and all members have their own unique perceptions.
Figure 1

*Individualized Education Program Team Dynamics*

It is difficult, if not impossible to separate the influences of power and perceptions on team dynamics. Laws and policies also influence team dynamics, as well as establish and maintain special education processes. Looking through a system lens, I found it not only appropriate, but crucial to address these factors within the literature review.

The second framework, street-level bureaucracy, a phrase originally coined by Lipsky (1969), describes how public servants (teachers, police officers, social workers, etc) succumb to their institutions’ requirements and expectations of their employment, even at the cost of their personal beliefs. For example, IDEA (2004a) stipulates the requirement for parents to be participating members of IEP development. This can only be achieved if parents are able to meaningfully communicate, and understand all dialogue transpiring in the meeting. Furthermore, there must be ample time for interpreting, which means team members should anticipate meeting times to double, as it is logical to expect all dialogue will need to be stated in both languages. A meeting that might have been 30
minutes if not interpreted, should be expected to last one hour, yet team members may only afford 45 minutes when scheduling IEPs, as it is an expected practice to conclude meetings as quickly as possible. Some team members may disagree with this practice, but go along with it anyway, as it is common practice at that particular institution. Street-level bureaucracy suggests that public servants, in this case teachers and IEP team members, are the true policy-makers. Regardless of the letter or spirit of a policy, what truly is in place occurs at ground level (Lipsky, 2010). A street-level bureaucracy framework, which is detailed in the literature review, Chapter 2, and referred to in the data analysis section of Chapter 3, was used in analyzing data collected in this study. This framework was appropriate for disaggregating interview data, as special education teachers are street-level bureaucrats. Using this lens, I examined the themes identified from thorough exploration into participants’ experiences of developing IEPs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes, and how participants address IDEA 2004 requirements and their schools’ or districts’ policies for active parent participation in IEP development by culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes.

**Definition of Terms**

This study uses special education terminology which are defined in order to provide readers with a clear sense of their use and meaning in the parameters of this study. Additionally, this study uses certain words and phrases which may have multiple meanings when applied to other situations, or other areas of study. These terms are defined, as well.
Active parent participation/involvement: attending IEP meetings, providing consent in order for team members to make changes to the IEP, or to re/evaluate a child’s eligibility for special education services, contributing to dialogue, and collaborating with other team members during assessment and evaluation, and in decision-making processes (Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2009). This is different from parent participation which may not include contributing to dialogue, and collaborating with other team members during assessment and evaluation, and in decision-making processes.

African American: shown as Black or African American in United States Census Bureau glossary, and defined as “A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as ‘Black or African American’ or report entries such as African American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian” (United States Census Bureau, 2015a).

Asian: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam…” (United States Census Bureau, 2015b).

Culturally and linguistically diverse: those whose native language is other than English, and who represent a non-White racial, cultural or ethnic background (Sullivan, 2011).

Culture: beliefs, values, and practices that are associated with a particular group of people (Harry, 2002).
• Individualized Education Program (IEP): “a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised” (IDEA, 2004a).

• Language: communication that is either spoken, written (letters, caricatures, symbols, or pictures) or sign language, which consists of using “visual gestures and signs, as used by [people who are] deaf” (Oxford University Press, 2015).

• Latino/a: shown as Hispanic or Latino origin in United States Census Bureau glossary, and defined as “Hispanic or Latino refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central America, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race” (United States Census Bureau, 2015c).

• Low-income: “not having or earning much money”; families from low-income homes struggle to fulfill basic needs (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

• Parent: includes foster parents, adoptive, and natural parents, and “individual[s] acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent...with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare” (IDEA, 2004a).

• School climate: as defined by Tagiuri, ecology, milieu, social system, and culture of a school (as cited in Anderson, 1982).

• School culture: beliefs, values, and practices that are associated with a particular group of people (Harry, 2002) within the context of public elementary school through high school.

• Team dynamics: interactions, behaviors, functions, and responsibilities (WebFinance, Inc, 2013) directly related to education professionals and parents which constitute the IEP team.
• White: “A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as ‘White’ or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian” (United States Census Bureau, 2015d).

Chapter Summary

As represented throughout the United States, cultural and linguistic diversity abound in education institutions. Within special education, differences in culture, language, and income between families and education professionals have led to barriers impeding active parent participation in the development of IEPs. Even with federal mandates created to ensure parents’ right to participate, these barriers still exist. In addition to language, culture, and low income, school climate and IEP team dynamics also play a role in limiting or supporting active parent participation. Research has illuminated potential solutions towards overcoming the challenges faced by both culturally and linguistically diverse families and education professionals in their endeavors for collaboratively developing IEPs; however, few models exist, and even fewer seem to be implemented. In Chapter 2, the literature review provides evidence showing little information exists that leads to understanding how special education teachers experience IEP development with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes, nor how working with culturally and linguistically diverse families in IEP development plays a role in special education teachers’ abilities to address both legal and workplace expectations. This study discovered and elucidated such experiences, providing crucial information to stakeholders and policy-makers, those who are in control of crafting and implementing new laws and policies, regarding how
education professionals interact with culturally and linguistically diverse families within the context of special education, and the implications thereof.
Chapter 3. Literature Review

Presented in this chapter is a review of literature related to the purpose of the study, understanding what it is like to be a special education teacher working with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes. Guided by the principles of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990), the questions this study explored were:

1) In what ways do special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in the IEP development process?

2) In what ways do special education teachers address culturally and linguistically diverse children’s educational needs while also addressing both legal and workplace expectations?

3) In what ways do special education teachers develop IEPs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes while addressing both legal and workplace expectations?

This literature review commences with a discussion of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 and educational policy, team dynamics, parent participation, barriers impeding parent participation in IEP meetings by culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes, models and frameworks for parent involvement, and various stakeholders’ perceptions of the IEP process. The review concludes with a discussion of what appears limited or missing in current research.
Law and Policy

**Federal special education law.** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federally mandated law enacted in 2004, was developed within a framework of six principles: “zero reject, non-discriminatory evaluation, appropriate education, least restrictive environment, procedural due process, and parent participation” (Turnbull, Huerta, & Stowe, 2006). *Zero reject* states that every child that qualifies for special education services under IDEA eligibility is guaranteed a free and appropriate public education (Turnbull et al., 2006). *Non-discriminatory evaluation* pertains to several specifications including assurances that assessments given are unbiased for gender, race, and culture, trained professionals are conducting the assessments, and more than one assessment must be used to determine eligibility (Turnbull et al., 2006). *Appropriate education* pertains to a non-discriminatory evaluation, IEP, and placement in the least restrictive environment, and that the student is provided a program “…with a reasonable opportunity to benefit” (p. 41). The *LRE* is where a student is able to be included with her or his non-disabled peers as much as is appropriate for that child. *Procedural due process* gives parents, local education agencies (LEAs) and state educational areas the right to seek “mediation, appeal to an impartial hearing officer, or appeal to state and federal courts” (p. 71) in dispute to actions taken by either party. *Parent participation* affords parents the right to be a part of the decision-making process of their child’s education.

The parent participation principle instructs LEAs to include parents in their child’s education at school and at home. Procedural safeguards and parent rights also stipulate parents must be participating members of the IEP team (IDEA, 2004b). This
includes participating in the development of the IEP (Turnbull et al., 2006). During initial and subsequent IEPs, a review of existing data and information must occur including such information provided by the parent (Turnbull et al., 2006). Furthermore, IDEA specifies IEP teams take into consideration parental concerns when creating the IEP (Turnbull et al., 2006). Comprehensible communication is necessary to achieve this requirement. Part B, section 615 of IDEA (2004b) specifies LEAs are required to supply parents with a copy of such procedural safeguards and parent rights, as well as to provide written prior notice of any action regarding “identification, evaluation, or placement of the child, or the provision of a free and appropriate public education to the child... in a native language unless clearly not feasible” ([b][4]). In accordance with IDEA, parents must provide informed consent for evaluations to take place (Turnbull et al., 2006). This suggests that in order for consent to be informed, parents need to become conversant by whichever means are appropriate for them. This may include communication through their native language. Even though IDEA is a federally mandated law, several barriers exist that may impede participation, notably affecting culturally and linguistically diverse parents with low income (Harry, 2002). Individual school sites or districts may have their own policies, formal, and informal, for addressing these mandates.

**School and district policies.** When it comes to interpretation of the law, school and district policies regarding special education are not always complementary to the spirit of IDEA (Jung, 2011). Provisions of IDEA pertaining to IEP meeting attendance stipulate that a team member may be excused from attending if (a) the member’s area of curriculum or services is not being discussed or modified, or (b) they may be excused in part or in whole from attending the meeting if parents and administrative designee
approve the excusal in writing, and the member has provided written input to contribute in developing the IEP prior to the meeting (IDEA, 2004c). However, in practice, this provision might not be met as originally intended. Etscheidt (2007) reported due process hearing officers established that early excusal of a member before making placement decisions, or absence of a general education teacher may violate the child’s right to free and appropriate public education services. Although the provisions of IDEA mandate that parents are to be equal members of the team, it is quite often that professionals are the primary decision-makers (Fish, 2006). Research is rich with examples of other violations of parent rights: not providing interpreter services to a non-English speaking parent and continuing with the meeting anyway (Lo, 2008), providing interpreters that are not fluent in the parents’ language (Lo, 2009), and arriving at IEP meetings with goals already completed (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011) are just a few. These actions are either infringements against IDEA mandates, or practices that, although not violations, are not in line with appropriate behavior at IEP meetings (Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, 2006; Virginia Department of Education, 2005; Weishaar, 2010). Whether intended or not, actions such as the aforementioned have the potential to influence parent participation in IEP meetings (Lo, 2008, 2009; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011).

Parent Participation in IEP Meetings

Schools often exclude culturally and linguistically diverse families from actively participating in the navigation of their child’s educational journey (de Valenzuela et al., 2004). It is the legal responsibility of educational entities to deconstruct barriers to parent participation such as language, culture, low income, school climate and team dynamics, to ensure procedural safeguards, and to guarantee parents’ rights are upheld
IDEA, 2004b). This may be more challenging when working with parents whose native language is not English (Lo, 2008, 2009), whose culture is different from those of the education professionals that serve their children (Ford, 2012; Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2005; Salas, 2004; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013), and who have limited financial resources (Lo, 2008). Furthermore, school climate and IEP team dynamics (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2014; Salas, 2004), the location and manner in which the team members operate and behave, also affect parent participation (Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Dabkowski, 2004). It is difficult to discuss each factor as separate, since each is like a piece of a puzzle that when together make one picture; if a piece is missing, the picture is incomplete. These factors are interconnected within this system of special education, and, as a system, are interdependent, interconnected, and inseparable (Capra, 2003). Although these factors are interconnected, for the purpose of this literature review, each factor is discussed separately, in order to allow readers to focus on one dynamic at a time.

Language

Barriers. Communication between parties speaking different languages, regardless of the subject of discussion, may not be an effective means of establishing mutual understanding. Like traveling to a foreign country whose language is not understood by the visitor, culturally and linguistically diverse parents may experience a disconnect when participants in IEP meetings do not speak their language. When IEP team members do not share a language or lack the ability to effectively communicate with other team members, it is likely that participation will be limited (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). At the same time, it has been suggested that language differences do not correlate with parent attendance in IEP meetings (Hernandez et al., 2008). However, such
differences may influence participation (Barrera & Liu, 2006; Harry, 2002; Lai & Ishiyama, 2004; Salas, 2004; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). To overcome language barriers, common practice is provide parents with an interpreter. While interpreter services are a viable means of translating IEP participants' dialogue into parents' native language and vice versa, these services are not without limitations or concerns (Hart et al., 2012).

A crucial component in clear and understandable communication between English speakers and non-English speakers is interpreter services (Hart et al., 2012; Lo, 2008, 2009). However, several factors must be considered when utilizing these services in order to maximize benefit and minimize complications. Lo (2008, 2009) studied parent-professional collaboration in IEP meetings involving culturally and linguistically diverse Chinese families, and found several challenges and impediments to breaking down language barriers when employing interpreter services: a) professionals not allotting adequate time for interpreters to translate between speakers, speaking for an extended period without pausing for interpreters to translate, and anticipating translations would not extend the meeting time; b) using school employees as interpreters who are not familiar with special education terms, or who are not trained, professional interpreters; c) interpreters limiting translations due to perceived time constraints, and translating what they believed to be important or just the general idea; and d) using interpreters who are not familiar or knowledgeable about parents' cultural beliefs or practices. Some of these findings are in line with and supported by additional research by Schoorman, Zainuddin, and Sena (2011) who noted that education professionals did not allocate enough time for interpreting. If there is not enough time to interpret all dialogue occurring in IEP meetings, parents are being marginalized, as their voices are being silenced or limited. It
was also found that marginalization can occur when education professionals use jargon-laden terminology (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2014; Schoorman, Zainuddin, & Sena, 2011).

The formal language used in IEPs can become a barrier for any parent, regardless of the their income or native language (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2014; Dabkowski, 2004; Sheehy, Ornelles, & Noonan, 2009). Using jargon-laden terminology may be confusing and hard to decode (Jones & Gansle, 2010). Phrases such as “invited to observe” a meeting as opposed to “invited to participate” in a meeting may send a message of apathy towards parent participation (Dabkowski, 2004). In addition, culturally and linguistically diverse families who do not speak English well may feel uncomfortable speaking, thus leading to reluctance in participation (VDE, 2005).

**Possible solutions.** Most barriers associated with language differences have been addressed through research and by state departments of education through the development of practices suggested to avoid and overcome such challenges (Dabkowski, 2004; Geenen et al., 2005; Hart et al., 2012; Lo, 2008, 2009; Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, 2010; Michigan Department of Education, 2011; Palawat & May, 2011; Pang, 2011; VDE, 2005). MALDEF (2010) suggests school officials provide training to interpreters regarding special education terminology, and how to translate complex wording into simpler terms. These practices can remedy issues such as interpreters skipping over information, or limiting their interpretations due to a lack of knowledge specific to special education terminology (Lo, 2009). Using untrained school staff members as interpreters was cited as a problem (Hart, et al., 2012; Lo, 2008); however, this was not often addressed in the literature. Finally, Lo (2008) suggested
informing all team members, including interpreters of the anticipated time frame of the meeting, allowing for interpreters to schedule adequate time for attending the meeting.

Culture

**Barriers.** In addition to language barriers, cultural barriers may also exist which may shape active parent participation (Antony & Banks-Joseph, 2010; Geenen et al., 2005; Harry, 1992, 2002; Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Zhang & Bennett, 2003). Harry (2002) found that “other researchers pointed to culturally based differences in interaction styles and levels of information, which tended to serve as barriers to effective parent-professional communication” (p. 136). Additionally, Harry (2002) presumed the manner in which parents’ culture influenced their view of disability and human development, how they coped with stress, what is expected regarding participation and advocacy, and their ability to access information may adversely affect their participation (p. 136-137). Ford (2012) acknowledged differences in views of disability by various cultures may be misconstrued by White teachers, leading to misinterpretations of behavior. Lai and Ishiyama (2004) supported these findings through a study of immigrant Chinese Canadian mothers of children with disabilities, and their involvement in their children’s education. In the study, limited parent participation was found to be due in part to prior experience with Chinese schooling and its formal structure before they immigrated to Canada. Moreover, many groups of people recognize the presence of impairments and perceived deficits within their society; yet, views of disability vary greatly amongst different cultures (Antony & Banks-Joseph, 2010; de Fur, 2012; Harry, 2002; Valle, 2011). For example, Harry (2002) noted that many Asian cultures consider disability to be attributed to spiritual retribution or punishment for parents’ prior behavior
or actions. Views such as these can differ between parents and other team members (Dabkowski, 2004; Harry, 1992).

Although not necessarily unique to interacting with culturally and linguistically diverse families, professionals’ cultural practices regarding decision-making and behavior during meetings can influence parent participation, as well (Harry, 1992, 2002). It is common for professionals to view the IEP process through their own cultural lens, projecting biased assumptions regarding parent participation (Harry, 2002). In the US it is considered commonplace and a cultural norm for professionals to be direct and to the point; however, this can be construed as offensive and disrespectful “to people whose cultures require greater tact or indirectness” (Harry, 1992, p. 344). A direct style of communication and interaction can hamper honest efforts to develop positive parent-professional relationships. Additionally, decision-making processes of some culturally and linguistically diverse families can contrast with those of professionals (Burke, 2012; Sheehy et al., 2009). Some families view decision-making as a collaborative practice, involving more than just the parents (Sheehy et al., 2009). Some families do not want to take part in decision-making at all (Sheehy & Sheehy, 2007).

Possible solutions. In an effort to overcome barriers associated with diverse cultural practices and beliefs, research suggests that professionals enhance their knowledge of cultural ideals belonging to the culturally and linguistically diverse families they work with (Pang, 2011; Stith-Williams & Haynes, 2007), as well as re-examine their own beliefs and attitudes that may appear biased or dismissive towards culturally and linguistically diverse families (de Fur, 2012; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Pang, 2011). Having trainings available for professionals to increase their understanding of how family culture
can relate to expectations of children is also recommended (Harry, 2002; Pang, 2011). Adopting active listening techniques, such as paraphrasing parents’ dialogue and asking for clarification can contribute to overcoming culture barriers, as well (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). Respect that parents’ culture may revere teachers as instructional decision-makers (Sheehey & Sheehey, 2007).

**Low Income**

**Barriers.** Literature delving into the effects of income and parent participation in IEPs appears limited; however, available literature discussed several obstacles that may limit or prevent participation (Burke, 2012; Callicott, 2003; Geenen et al., 2005; Harry, 2002; Hover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Jones & Gansle, 2010; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Pang, 2011). For many culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes, the expectation to participate in IEP meetings can be overwhelming and challenging to meet (Geenen et al., 2005; Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Scheduling conflicts may arise when parents are unable to take time off work to attend meetings (Lo, 2008). For some families, taking time off is not an option, as the family’s survival depends on that income (Geenen et al., 2005).

Though not unique to culturally and linguistically diverse families, limited or nonexistent childcare resources can impede participation (Burke, 2012; Turney & Kao, 2009), as well as lacking available transportation (Burke, 2012; Geenen et al., 2005), and disparate parent education levels (Jones & Gansle, 2010; Sheehey, et al., 2009). Dissimilar education levels can also affect decision-making (Jones & Gansle, 2010; Sheehey et al., 2009; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Without understanding the terminology professionals use in IEP meetings (Burke, 2012; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014), or lacking
knowledge of support and advocacy services, parents’ ability to make informed decisions regarding their child’s education can be stifled (Jones & Gansle, 2010; Sheehy et al., 2009). These barriers reinforce an element of power inequities that affect decision-making and participation, as described by Geenen and colleagues (2005), as parents may perceive professionals as authorities making final decisions in developing the education program.

**Possible solutions.** To address the obstacles associated with low income, several suggestions are proposed. To reduce scheduling and time constraints, education professionals should give parents advanced notice of the meeting timeline, and collaboratively schedule the meeting with the parents based on a convenient time, date, and location that works for them, before scheduling with other team members (Geenen et al., 2005). Simply providing flexible options for meeting locations can increase parent participation (Oregon Department of Education, 2006). The opportunity to hold a meeting in the family’s home can alleviate childcare and transportation stressors (Geenen et al., 2005).

Jones and Gansle (2010) suggest limiting the use of special education jargon and technical terms to provide opportunity for increased participation for parents who are not familiar or comfortable with such vernacular. They posited differences in socioeconomic status can equate to differences in comfort with professional terminology. Using such language can limit participation and can be disempowering to parents. Additionally, disparity of knowledge between parents and professionals can result in a differentiation of power (MALDEF, 2010). Power imbalances effect meeting outcomes (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2014; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011), and inequities of power,
knowledge, and resources can have a dramatic impact on the parent-professional relationship. However, establishing parent-professional relationships that are built on trust and respect can result in positive outcomes (MALDEF, 2010).

Other practices that can reduce power inequities include rotating leadership roles in meetings, and abandoning the practice of using IEP forms to guide the procession of meetings (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Being from a low-income home may limit available resources for additional or outside services, leaving parents dependent on professionals who have such access (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Families must be able to trust professionals to be mindful of family financial situations. Taking parents’ income into account when establishing goals intended to be generalized at home may prevent a financial burden on the family (Harry, 2002).

School Climate and Team Dynamics

Barriers. Attitudes permeating from past prejudiced ideologies may still effect the educational institution atmosphere (Artiles et al., 2004), not only through implementation of policy, but also by behavior of education professionals during IEP meetings. The manner in which IEP meetings are held can greatly influence the level of parent participation (Dabkowski, 2004). It has been documented that parents have arrived to meetings finding IEP forms pre-filled (Geenen et al., 2005; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). This practice sends the message that parent participation is not needed nor valued (Weishaar, 2010). Although done with intentions of conserving time, a pre-filled IEP is counter-productive towards increasing active parent participation. Slattery (2013) emphasized the need for “hospitality, inclusiveness, and graciousness” (p. 81), as these gestures assist a movement towards more collaborative relationships. Moreover,
constraints due to professionals’ large caseloads can influence parent participation (Park, Turnbull, & Park, 2001). Team members arriving late or leaving early due to other obligations can suggest to families that they are not as important (Lo, 2008), and can hinder holistic decision-making, as absent team members cannot participate in or comment on unanticipated dialogue occurring in their absence. Furthermore, individuals may feel they are not accountable for group-made decisions occurring in their absence (MCIE, 2006). Other team member behaviors that may impede active parent participation include segregating professionals from parents at the meeting table (Dabkowski, 2004); blaming parents for child’s behavior and lack of academic progress (Lo, 2008); disregarding parental concerns (Lo, 2008; Salas, 2004; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014); failing to elicit communication from parents (Lo, 2008; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014); assuming parents are literate (Lo, 2009); assuming parents understand their role at meetings (Lo, 2009); making decisions without justification (Lo, 2008); addressing parents by their role as opposed to their name, and failing to communicate their child’s positive behavior (Geenen et al., 2005; Salas, 2004). I believe these behaviors and practices add to abhorrent injustices plaguing marginalized populations today. Part of IDEA (2004a) is intended to secure parent rights. Upholding these rights is beneficial to us all, as it exemplifies a core standard of our democratic society (Slattery, 2013), a standard that is reflected in our attitudes and beliefs. In addition to attitudes, the schools’ physical environments and meeting location can manipulate participation (Dabkowski, 2004; MALDEF, 2010). Unfriendly staff (MALDEF, 2010) and cramped spaces convey an unwelcoming atmosphere (Dabkowski, 2004). Finally, parent comfort levels can
influence their decision to be an active team member if they have had negative experiences in school (Burke, 2012; MALDEF, 2010; Staples & Diliberto, 2010).

**Possible solutions.** The National Center for Special Education Accountability Monitoring, along with the Future of School Psychology Task Force on Family School Partnership (n.d.) said a key to developing effective parent-professional partnerships includes educators displaying a positive attitude towards family engagement. This positive attitude includes recognizing all families have strengths, unique perspectives and expertise regarding their child (NCSEAM & FSPTFFSP, n.d.). Upholding this belief, an IEP team should not have pre-filled IEP forms, as it limits parent input. The Washington Department of Education (2008) has available for use on its website, a form for eliciting parent input prior to the IEP meeting. Although this tool appears useful, the language used may imply an “us-them” attitude: “Is there any other information that we should know that would assist us in developing the IEP” (WDE, 2008). Using the term IEP team may alleviate polarizing phrases. When acting as a team in decision-making, providing justification for those decisions can further remedy feelings of marginalization (Park et al., 2001). The Technical Assistance ALLIANCE for Parent Centers (n.d.) emphasized that when professionals recognize parents as equal members of the IEP team, they express a positive attitude towards parental involvement. Further suggestions for addressing barriers brought on by professional attitudes, practices and the physical environment include utilizing professional self-reflection, drawing out parent perceptions of professional practices, and creating a welcoming environment by use of a round table eliminating feelings of physical isolation (Dabkowski, 2004; MALDEF, 2010). When working with parents in IEP development, it is suggested that education professionals ask
themselves what they would want if they were in the parents' position (Sheehey & Sheehey, 2007). Asking parents to share their story can also help create a hospitable atmosphere (Sheehey & Sheehey, 2007). Lastly, placing oneself in parents' shoes and giving them an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings supports parent-professional collaboration by establishing a foundational relationship (Sheehey & Sheehey, 2007).

**Models and Frameworks**

The following section highlights models and frameworks aimed at increasing active parent participation. Although some of these models, frameworks, and practices are geared towards parents in general, not specifically towards culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes, they are included in this discussion, as there is often overlap between various models. Models and strategies for increasing active parent participation as discussed in the body of this paper have been synthesized and developed into a preliminary blueprint intended to guide professionals in the effort to increase active parent participation in IEP meetings with culturally and linguistically diverse parents with low income, therefore allotting them opportunities to take active roles as IEP team members (see Appendix A). Additionally, findings from this study suggest other methods in which to elicit active parent participation in IEP meetings. These suggestions are included in the blueprint, and are identified as findings of this study.

With the assistance of families he worked with in developing IEPs as an administrator, Weishaar (2010) created a plan to incorporate strength-based planning in the development of IEPs. This plan consists of 12 steps under the following three
headings: “Preparation for the IEP Meeting,” “Presentation at the IEP Meeting,” and
“Documentation of the IEP Meeting” (p. 209). Within the 12 steps, Weishaar suggests
that pre-meetings are held with parents to avoid any surprises at IEP meetings, meetings
are arranged with parents personally, positive language is used to focus on and describe
the child’s abilities, and parent input is requested before developing goals (see Table 1
for more details).

Table 1

Weishaar’s 12 Steps of Strength-Based Planning in IEP Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preparation for the IEP Meeting</th>
<th>Presentation at the Meeting</th>
<th>Documentation of the IEP Meeting</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss the student’s behavior in terms of actions, not pertaining to the student’s personality. Example: Say that the student hit another child, instead of he hurts others. Schedule the meeting with the parents, tell them what to expect at the meeting, inform them of the option to bring a friend of support with them to the meeting, and ask them to think about in what direction they would like to see their child’s education go. Inform parents of any “potential areas of conflict” (p. 209). Inquire about concerns the parents may have that they would like to address at the</td>
<td>Provide nametags for team members and attendees. If the parents prefer, offer them to sit beside the note taker in order to reassure parents of what will be recorded (Dabkowski, 2004, as cited by Weishaar, 2010). Begin meetings with everyone sharing something positive about the student. Address all members in the same manner, either all by first names, or surnames. Solicit input from the parents regarding what goals they have for their child.</td>
<td>Discuss what the student can do, as opposed to what they cannot do. Use this as a baseline for writing measurable goals which include a statement of how student’s skill advancement will be evaluated. Allow adequate time for decision-making which takes into consideration family’s and other team members concerns. It may be necessary to reconvene</td>
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The Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education (2006) with support from the Maryland State Department of Education created the “Guide for Collaborative Team Practices” in order to assist teams of educators with improving their cooperative working relationships. In this guide, procedures are detailed to develop “collaborative skills, team meetings, and team member roles” (p. 6-8). Education teams are guided through an inventory of processes to establish collaborative teams, as well as address how to resolve conflict.

*Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement* (Epstein, 1995) addressed “parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community” (p. 704). According to Epstein, acknowledging a need for interpreters when appropriate, and calling on local advocates and agencies to assist in increasing parental involvement allow for increased communication and knowledge of resources for both professionals and families. Epstein claimed that having support at the state and local level to aid school districts and education professionals additionally strengthens family-professional partnerships. She suggested that funding may be available through federal, state, and local entities that aim to increase parental involvement in school.

The Oregon Department of Education (2006) established a toolkit for family involvement in education, while emphasizing the unique needs of families with children with disabilities. Strategies are described with potential remedies to obstructions barring
parents from actively participating in their child’s education. Some strategies include “create a school/district advisory committee for special education; create a mentor parent program; and offer community education courses” (p. 92).

The Virginia Department of Education (2005) released a toolkit for family involvement specifically for parents with limited English proficiency. This guide describes barriers impeding parental involvement as cited by parents. Underscoring the promotion of parent participation in their child’s education, a description is provided for outreach strategies, such as considering parental points of view, enlisting support of local organizations, offering parent workshops, creating school handbooks specifically geared towards families with limited English proficiency families, and the use of appropriate translation and interpreter services (VDE, 2005). Although the intention of this toolkit is to elicit parental involvement of families with limited English proficiency, these strategies concur with those highlighted above that are geared towards increasing active parent participation of culturally and linguistically diverse parents with low income in the IEP process.

Fong, Boyd, and Browne (1999) discussed methods of empowering families of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage used in social work. They presented a framework, “biculturalization of intervention” (p. 97) which is an adaptation of the “Gandhi Technique” (p. 100), first coined by Neil P. Schiff and Richard Belson in 1988, blended with various Western interventions (Fong et al., 1999). This method used a bicultural approach, differing from what they called the traditional Western approach. In their research they referred to Ohana which means family in Hawaiian (Fong et al., 1999). Placing values of Ohana within a context of problem solving, the researchers established
an approach towards developing a framework for biculturalization interventions integrated with Western approaches. The development of this framework drew on family values of ethnically diverse cultures, and integrated intervention techniques that were familiar to the individual family while maintaining families’ cultural beliefs (Fong et al., 1999). This process of biculturalization within the context of family participation has been a driving framework for other research (Sheehey et al., 2009). Both studies emphasized cultural diversity and unique family beliefs integrated within a Western approach to problem solving, which could be applied in determining the most appropriate IEP.

These models and frameworks were established with the goal of increasing parent involvement in their child’s education. Each include unique suggestions for increasing parent participation with an underlying assumption that these models will work for their targeted population. Unfortunately, there is no one model cure-all to deconstruct barriers to parental involvement, and each of the models and frameworks listed above have shortcomings.

Weishaar’s (2010) 12 steps to developing IEPs certainly has strengths. One such action as avoiding pre-filling IEPs was mentioned by Ruppar and Gaffney (2011) as a way to reduce power inequities between parents and education professionals. Another step in Weishaar’s (2010) model included obtaining parent input before developing IEP goals. In line with this thinking, NCSEAM & FSPTFFSP (n.d.) supported recognizing parents’ expertise and perspectives regarding their child. Even though Weishaar (2010) tackled several obstacles that could hamper parent involvement in IEP development, his twelve steps did not address culturally and linguistically diverse families.
The MCIE and Maryland State Department of Education’s (2006) “Guide for Collaborative Team Practices” addressed many factors to strengthen positive team dynamics such as listening and communicating effectively, and assigning team member roles and responsibilities. Good communication and listening skills support parent involvement (Lo, 2008, 2009; Lai & Ishiyama, 2004), as well as does assigning roles and specific tasks to team members (Weishaar, 2010). The MCIE and MDE (2006) mentioned the need for teams to recognize and respect cultural differences, but offered no suggestions in how to develop those skills. Furthermore, nowhere in this guide is the term parent, caregiver, or guardian. It may be implied that parents are considered part of decision-making teams; however, it is my view that explicit reference to parent participation in team decision-making should have been included.

Epstein’s (1995) framework has been referenced and cited numerous times, as her model addressed many of the challenges faced by parents and education professionals attempting to establish parent-professional relationships and increase parent involvement in children’s educations. These challenges included creating home environments where families can reinforce what their children learn at school and support further learning, developing effective means of communication between parents and school, enlisting parent support, including parents in decision-making processes, and involving local communities to support family education programs and services. Epstein failed to address families with children with special needs (Burke, 2012). An argument could be made that it is implied; although, it is my view that implications do not equate inclusiveness.
The Oregon Department of Education’s (2006) toolkit for family involvement was specifically geared towards increasing parent involvement in their child’s education; yet, it did not address specific needs of IEP teams. Alternatively, it addressed parent involvement broadly, suggesting development of advisory groups, a requirement of IDEA (2004), mentor programs, and parent education classes. The Virginia Department of Education’s (2005) toolkit was developed for increasing parent involvement by linguistically diverse families. In their toolkit, the VDE suggested practices to overcome challenges that were listed in the previous section on barriers to culturally and linguistically diverse family involvement in IEP development and possible solutions. These included such issues surrounding interpreter services (Hart et al., 2012; Lo, 2008, 2009), jargon-laden dialogue (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2014; Jones & Gansle, 2010), and cultural background (Pang, 2011; Stith-Williams & Haynes, 2007). While this toolkit was filled with several positive suggestions for increasing parental involvement, some of which have been mentioned by other researchers (Epstein, 1995; Lo, 2008, 2009), it did not specify challenges directly affecting culturally and linguistically diverse families’ ability to participate in the development of IEPs. Fong, Boyd, and Browne’s (1999) “biculturalization of intervention” (p. 97) framework, was developed specifically for working with families of Asian and Pacific Islander heritage. This framework may not address needs of other culturally and linguistically diverse groups of people living in the US.

After reviewing these models and frameworks, I conclude there is a need for a model or framework for deconstructing barriers that impede culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes from actively participating in IEP development
as equal IEP team members, and that also addresses the challenges education professionals face in eliciting culturally and linguistically diverse parental involvement in IEP decision-making processes. I made a preliminary attempt to do so by merging key strategies from all aforementioned models, frameworks, and possible solutions as found in the reviewed literature into a blueprint (see Appendix A). During data analysis of the study, I found further evidence that suggested a need for such a model or framework, as well as needed supports we identified to alleviate some of our challenges with eliciting parent participation in the IEP process that were not mentioned in the reviewed literature. I merged these practices into the blueprint, as well.

**Stakeholder Perceptions of IEP Meetings**

After reviewing barriers to parent participation in IEP meetings, suggestions for overcoming these challenges, and models and frameworks for increasing parent participation and deconstructing barriers, I find it important to consider what parents think about IEP development. Evidence exists to suggest some parents feel isolated and discriminated against when language barriers impede collaborative dialogue (Jung, 2011). Parents have reported feeling overpowered by education professionals when they, the parents, attempt to speak up and exercise their parental rights (Jung, 2011; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Some parents, however, are satisfied with their experiences, even though they have cited similar barriers impeding participation in IEP meetings (Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2009). Parents may feel uncomfortable participating in IEP meetings because they feel the purpose of such meetings is to underscore their child’s lack of successes (Fish, 2006; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Moreover, parents may feel as though they are not equal team members, nor that they possess knowledge on par with that of other team
members, thus leading to feelings of inadequacy regarding their ability to participate in decision-making (Fish, 2006; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Research has shown some parents have felt, at least one time or another, that they were not included in decision-making processes in creating their child’s IEP (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Furthermore, parents have felt their suggestions, ideas and input was not well received or included in developing IEPs (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). I find it important to understand the parent perspective when discussing parent participation in IEP development. Additionally, examining other team members’ perspectives provides a clearer picture of IEP development and decision-making processes. Although much data have been recorded regarding parent perceptions of the IEP process (meetings and decision-making), and abovementioned factors influencing parent participation in IEP meetings, few articles have been produced discussing other stakeholder perceptions, such as those of administrators and speech therapists.

It is not uncommon for an IEP team to be comprised of several education professionals in addition to parents or guardians, an administrative designee, and a general and/or special education teacher. In my experience as a special education teacher, depending on the services included in an IEP, team members may include a speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, psychologist, physical therapist, music therapist, adaptive physical education specialist, additional service providers, and when appropriate, the student. Each playing an integral role in the development of the IEP document, it would seem crucial to gain understanding of their perceptions of IEP meetings whether pertaining to parent participation barriers, IEP development, or implementing IDEA; however, my literature search revealed limited information into
perceptions of other team members regarding special education in general (Gerber, Banbury, & Miller, 1986; Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Spessard, 2014).

Gerber and colleagues (1986) reported their study on special education teacher perceptions regarding parent participation in IEP meetings revealed that less than half considered parent participation to be advantageous. Furthermore, 71% of the participants felt parents should have the option to submit participation waivers, leaving decision-making “solely in the hands of professionals” (p. 161). Martin and colleagues (2004) reported comparisons of professionals’ perceptions regarding participation of high school aged students in IEP meetings when planning for transition out of school. Their findings showed that when students attended meetings parents had better understanding of the meetings’ purpose, overall communication and shared decision-making increased, and participants had a clearer understanding of what they needed to do post-meeting (Martin et al., 2004). Spessard (2014) studied IEP team member collaboration and dynamics. Findings from her study revealed insight into team member perceptions pertaining to decision-making, paperwork, team member roles, power imbalances, levels of input, team member knowledge of the IEP process, and parent perceptions of participating in IEPs. Keyes and Owens-Johnson (2003) reported they briefly discussed team member opinions of IEPs, yet, I was unable to locate this information in their article. Having been able to find limited research on stakeholder perceptions of special education processes, this suggests there is necessity for additional inquiry into stakeholder perceptions pertaining to the IEP process, and likely, other special education processes, as well.
Special Education Teacher Perceptions of IEP Meetings

Aside from Spessard’s (2014) research, inquiry into special education teacher perceptions of the IEP process appeared inadequate, and quite outdated (Gerber et al., 1986). Moreover, I was unable to find available data pertaining to special education teacher perceptions regarding the role language, culture, income, team dynamics, and school climate play in parent participation in IEP meetings by culturally and linguistically diverse parents. Without being able to find current literature, it is unclear to me how special education teachers address both IDEA requirements and school policy with regards to parent participation in IEP meetings by culturally and linguistically diverse parents.

Street-Level Bureaucracy

What began as a burgeoning theory conceived by Lipsky (1969), street-level bureaucracy (SLB) took root in the social sciences field to describe “the political behavior of Street-level Bureaucrats and their interactions with clients” (p. 4), street-level bureaucrats being those who work directly with civilians, and who represent government entities, have a degree of independence and power to make discretionary decisions (Lipsky, 1969). These workers include teachers, police officers, and other civil servants (Lipsky, 1969, 2010). Lipsky (1969) focused his discussion on issues that beleaguered civil servants, and quite arguably still do (Carlson & Planty, 2012; Honig, 2006): limited resources, contradicting obligations and expectations, and “physical and psychological threat” (Lipsky, 1969, p. 4). For the purpose of this literature review, I will focus on the first two, as in my opinion, physical and psychological threat do not apply to the teaching profession to the extent that they do in other civil service positions such as those in police
and child welfare departments (Lipsky, 1969). Lipsky (1969) emphasized that his theory of street-level bureaucracy tends to apply most reliably with regard to clients from low-income homes and those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. He claimed this is due to a higher level of dependence on governmental entities for essential services such as health care and government assistance (1969). With limited resources and lack of clearly defined or contradictory goals, street-level bureaucrats use their power of discretion and improvisation to accomplish daily tasks (Lipsky, 1969, 2010). Moreover, street-level bureaucrats develop coping skills to overcome or lessen the burden of performance challenges (Lipsky, 2010). It is important to note that Lipsky (1969, 2010) believed not all street-level bureaucrats have the same pressures, nor do all have to contend with the aforementioned challenges, but for those who do, coping mechanisms allow street-level bureaucrats to perform their duties. These skills may develop as workers encounter constraints that impede their ability to perform their job to the extent required by law or by organization.

Limited time and high numbers of cases may cause workers to take short-cuts or make snap decisions. Workers develop routines that are supported by their high level of independence and discretion enabling them to address demands, utilize resources efficiently, and secure client acquiescence. It is through these simplifications of procedures and routines that street-level bureaucrats create policy (Lipsky, 2010). Additionally, these policies may benefit some clients more than others. Street-level bureaucrats show differential treatment of clients; not necessarily in an attempt to show preference, but in order to perform their job ideally for some, whereas they are not able to for all (Lipsky, 2010). Simply placing into law the requirements and responsibilities of
agencies does not equate appropriate allocations of resources in order to accomplish institutional goals. What is mandated by law and what is possible to achieve with given resources can be contradictory, and therein lies a major challenge for street-level bureaucrats, and thus, street-level policy implementation (Lipsky, 2010).

Weatherley & Lipsky (1977) studied the effects of implementation of the 1972 Comprehensive Special Education Law of Massachusetts, Chapter 766, in large part, on special education teachers. They found special education teachers were under tremendous pressure to comply with the new law’s mandates for reasons including limited resources. In their article, Weatherley and Lipsky referred to public employees, which included teachers, as street-level bureaucrats, calling them lower-level policymakers. Street-level bureaucrats implemented the law in a discretionary manner, while managing limited resources. Weatherley and Lipsky discussed coping skills special education teachers used in order to perform their duties such as “routinizing procedures, modifying goals, rationing services, asserting priorities, and limiting and controlling clientele” (p. 172). They stated that if special education teachers had to adjust their decision-making processes due to the implementation of Chapter 766, researchers needed to study teachers in action to understand how they did so. Weatherley and Lipsky described implementation of parts of the law as problematic due to poor development, ambiguity of implementation and requirement deadlines, lack of training of general education teachers for working with children with disabilities, and most notably, no guarantee of legislative funding. Through interviews, observations, and document reviews, they found some teachers would deliberately blame parents and their child for the child’s inappropriate behavior or challenges. Researchers also noted that at meetings,
parents were sometimes disadvantaged when class, culture and language disparities were present between parent and professionals. Additionally, professionals' terminology in assessment, and planning of meetings were often inaccessible by parents.

With Chapter 766, teachers and other assessment and planning team members faced challenges including increased numbers of new assessments and enormous time constraints (Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). It was noted that these demands resulted in time spent completing paperwork that could have been spent working with students. Researchers found the increased workload led to routinization of procedures, lack of individualizing educational programs, and other problematic behaviors. Ultimately, Weatherley and Lipsky found “while not, for the most part, motivated by a desire to compromise compliance, school personnel had to formulate policies that would balance the new demands against available resources” (p. 194). These findings along with other works from Lipsky stimulated a wealth of research and literature using street-level bureaucracy as a guiding theoretical or conceptual framework (Carlson & Planty, 2012; Comer, 1978; Honig, 2006; Hudson, 2005; Prottas, 1978).

To say Lipsky has been cited and referenced by several researchers in the social sciences arena is an understatement. A recent search for literature related to this topic generated an abundance of articles; however, only two were in relation to special education. One was the aforementioned study (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977), and the other was a book chapter that discussed street-level bureaucracy in relation to service workers and clients with disabilities (Hudson, 2005). In his chapter, Hudson (2005) described street-level workers as “buffers between government and citizens” (p. 77) with high levels of discretion and low levels of accountability, striving to endure the day to day
expectations placed upon them. Hudson’s (2005) discussion brings into perspective a lack of client independence, as they are at the mercy of street-level bureaucrats, and the lower a client’s income, the greater their level of dependence. Moreover, Hudson (2005) expressed the necessity for understanding the position street-level bureaucrats hold in society, and how society imposes “upon the character of bureaucratic relations” (p. 85). Hudson’s (2005) views on client-provider relationships echoed those of Lipsky (2010). Furthermore, he added that in order to understand the phenomena of SLB and policy application, street-level bureaucrats must themselves be understood. Rorrer and Skrla (2010) discussed educational leaders in their roles as policy implementers. Part of what they explored was how educational leaders adapted governmental policies at the institutional level with implementation related to local needs. Rorrer and Skrla (2010) posited that the educational leaders they studied were “policy mediators,” (p. 54) similar to what Lipsky referred to as street-level bureaucrats.

Lipsky (2010) explained that not all public service employees suffer the same level of challenges, use coping strategies to the same extent, or use coping strategies to modify the aims of their practice; some teachers are able to generate strategies that realize set goals, and many enjoy their positions with little dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, Lipsky emphasized “the gap between the realities of practice and service ideals” many street-level bureaucrats are not able to bridge (p. xvii), and he proposed value in research uncovering how teachers find equilibrium between expectations and achievements. Moreover, he suggested this dilemma may pose a greater effect when working with clients who are culturally and linguistically diverse.
Chapter Summary

Research underscores a link between parent involvement and academic success. Moreover, literature suggests it may be more vital to the educational success of culturally and linguistically diverse children for their families to be involved in their education as compared to their non-culturally and linguistically diverse counterparts due to additional barriers to parental involvement impeding success. These barriers may be further compounded for culturally and linguistically diverse families whose children receive special education as IDEA mandated parent involvement in the development of IEPs. A great deal of literature describes the challenges and barriers parents and education professionals face in meeting parent participation and requirements of IDEA, in both letter and spirit of the law. Constructs of language, culture, income level, school climate, and team dynamics play a role in parents’ ability to access opportunities for equal membership and decision-making within the context of IEP meetings. In addition, literature suggests a plethora of potential strategies for overcoming challenges and deconstructing barriers, as well as offers limited models and frameworks. However, even with these suggested approaches towards developing productive partnerships based on equality and shared decision-making, data provided evidence of continued struggles for both parents and professionals. I was able to find a limited amount of literature delving into stakeholder perceptions of IEP meetings, namely those of special education teachers, and the existing predicaments street-level bureaucrats face in addressing federal law and institutional policy imply an imperative necessity for qualitative inquiry into (a) what ways special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in the IEP development process, (b) what ways special
education teachers address culturally and linguistically diverse children’s educational needs while also addressing both legal and workplace expectations, and (c) what ways special education teachers develop IEPs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes while addressing both legal and workplace expectations. Chapter 3 provides a complete description of the research design, heuristic inquiry, for this study.
Chapter 3. Methodology

Included in this chapter is a thorough description of the study of which its purpose is to explore how special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income in special education processes. Using the methodology and research design as explicated in this chapter, I addressed the following research questions:

1. In what ways do special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in the IEP development process?

2. In what ways do special education teachers address culturally and linguistically diverse children’s educational needs while also addressing both legal and workplace expectations.

3. In what ways do special education teachers develop IEPs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes while addressing both legal and workplace expectations?

This chapter begins with a description of the chosen research method and methodology, along with a rationale for using the selected approach followed by a description of the research design, data collection procedures, how data was analyzed, and a chapter summary. It is important to note that many of these components are imbedded within the description of the research methodology, as in my view it seemed appropriate for the chosen methodology; however, an additional section clearly lays out the specific data
collection and analysis procedures as would typically be addressed in the methodology chapter of a dissertation.

**Research Method**

This study was conducted qualitatively, in order to best address the research questions. These questions were intended to draw out the essences and meanings of special education teachers' experiences working with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income in special education. Researchers and participants involved in qualitative studies have unique perceptions of experiences they are studying or are involved with (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of qualitative research is for researchers to express these "multiple realities" (Creswell, 2013, p. 20) as participants live them. This study presents the multiple identities of the participants, expanding on current social science research.

Social science research is increasingly conducted through qualitative research methods (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Qualitative researchers seek to understand why and how things happen, to uncover what is happening, and to depict emotions, experiences, opinions, and behaviors (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Patton, 2002). Qualitative research in special education can highlight a necessity for policy change, explore what it means to have disabilities, track instructional outcomes, bring to light various stakeholders' perceptions of special education processes, and give emphasis to what it means to be involved in special education processes (Brantlinger et al., 2005). In order to uncover what it means to be a special education teacher engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income in special education processes, data were obtained through open-ended interviews, documents, and field notes which were analyzed
qualitatively (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, a qualitative methodology design was appropriate for this study. Additional details of data collection procedures are found under Research Design.

Research Design

The research design for this study is Moustakas’s heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Coming from the Greek word *heuriskein*, “meaning to discover or find” (Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 2013a; Moustakas, 1990; Oxford University Press, 2013), heuristic is applied to discovering meaning in one’s experiences through a process of extensive reflexive internal dialogue, and researching the phenomenon experienced (Moustakas, 1990). The process of heuristic discovery is a highly structured and personal journey (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). In his work *Loneliness* (1961, as cited by Moustakas, 1990), Moustakas introduced heuristic research to the scientific community. Citing Polanyi (1958, 1966, 1978) and other influential researchers as impacting the development of his work, Moustakas (1990) commenced the creation of a heuristic research methodology through his own interpersonal reflections. This led to numerous publications on studying phenomena of loneliness (1961, 1972, 1975, as cited by Moustakas, 1990), an explication of heuristic inquiry (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985), and ultimately to his guide on conducting heuristic research (1990).

Moustakas (1990) referenced Polanyi’s explication of tacit knowledge as having “significance in the development of heuristic concepts” (p. 9). During my examination of Polanyi’s publications (1958, 1966), I began to understand the foundations of Moustakas’s heuristic research, and how it is heavily dependent on the concepts of tacit knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). Polanyi (1958) described two forms of knowledge:
explicit and tacit. He defined explicit knowledge as that which is able to be described, formulated, and written. Tacit knowledge on the other hand is subjective, private, internal, “inarticulate” (p. 16). He continued to explain “that purely tacit operations of the mind are processes of understanding” (p. 21). Giving examples of tacit knowledge such as the processes involved in riding a bicycle and swimming, Polanyi (1966) explained that these operations are performed without thinking, without explanation of how to balance oneself on the bike, or how to synchronize all the actions needed to stay afloat. Furthermore, Polanyi (1958) elucidated that “we need not hesitate then to conclude that the tacit personal coefficient of knowledge predominates also in the domain of knowledge and represents therefore at all levels man’s ultimate faculty for acquiring and holding knowledge” (p. 25). Understanding the reliance on tacit knowledge to carryout everyday tasks and functions is crucial if one is to understand the importance and legitimacy of heuristic research in the field of social sciences. Although I was able to grasp the concept of tacit knowledge, throughout my journey in the world of heuristic research this methodology proved to be quite complicated and demanding (Moustakas, 1990), as the prescribed actions for successfully conducting heuristic research must be understood and adhered to throughout the entire process (Moustakas, 1990).

**Heuristic research.** Heuristic research involves delving into the experiences of researchers and participants who have experience similar phenomena (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). In this study, I used Moustakas’s (1990) heuristic methodology to understand what it means to be a special education teacher engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income in special education processes. I am a special education teacher, and sought out participants who were also
special education teachers. More details regarding participant selection are described in *Participants, Data, and Other Study Components.* Heuristic research is dependent on experiences of researchers, who may divulge intimate details of researchers’ and participants’ experiences (Ings, 2011; Moustakas, 1990). Hence, a first person voice is used when reporting the study’s findings. I, the researcher, am not separated from the study as I would be in using the scientific method (Schwandt, 2007); therefore, use of first person pronouns (I, we, us) throughout the presentation of the study is appropriate and necessary. It may seem that heuristic research is just another name for phenomenology; therefore, distinctions must be made clear for a truer understanding of Moustakas’s heuristic approach.

**Phenomenology and heuristic inquiry.** There are similarities between phenomenology and heuristic research. Patton (2002) described philosopher Edmund H. Husserl as the first person to use phenomenology, explaining that Husserl believed in order to understand lived experiences or phenomena, one needed to uncover senses related to the experiences illuminated by interpretation and description. This seems to reflect heuristic methodology, as Patton depicted heuristic research as a form of phenomenology with the addition of researchers’ personal experience. This is somewhat contrasted by Douglass and Moustakas (1985), who cited several differences between phenomenology and heuristic research. Douglass and Moustakas (1985) claimed phenomenology disengaged the researcher from the researched, whereas heuristic inquiry is based on connectedness. Additionally, they claimed phenomenology was concerned with structures of experiences, whereas heuristic research seeks to uncover essences, and personal meanings. Phenomenological studies close with a descriptive presentation of
structural elements within the experience, whereas, heuristic studies close with a creative
synthesis underscored by tacit knowledge and intuition. An explication of creative
synthesis is found in the description of the sixth phase of heuristic research. Finally,
Douglass and Moustakas (1985) believed “phenomenology ends with the essences of
experience; heuristics retains the essence of the person in experience” (p. 43). In
phenomenological studies, researchers’ experiences remain outside the scope of the
inquiry; however, use of intuition, tacit knowledge, and self-reflection are inherent in
heuristic research (Patton, 2002). In addition to Husserl’s phenomenology, comparisons
can be made between Moustakas’s heuristic inquiry (1990) and van Manen’s

According to van Manen (1990), “phenomenology is the study of lived
experience” (p. 9). He continued to explain that the process of conducting
phenomenology is that of understanding the significance of life experiences, those that
occur every day. Moustakas (1990) defines heuristic inquiry similarly, as “a way of self-
inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important
human experiences” (p. 15). Comparing these descriptions, the only difference seems to
be that heuristic inquiry incorporates the researcher looking inward at their own
experiences with the phenomenon. When analyzing van Manen’s (1990) phenomenology
as compared to Moustakas’s (1990) heuristic inquiry, I noticed both researchers
frequently discussed the uncovering of essences of experiences. Van Manen (1990)
asserted “the essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a
study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the
essence of that phenomenon” (p. 10). In other words, common qualities of the studied
phenomenon are recognized when the fundamental components of a phenomenon are
identified. Component identification occurs by studying the formation of a phenomenon
in the moments that the elements are readily perceived. Moreover, van Manen (1990)
continued to describe his usage of the term *essence* to mean “a linguistic construction, a
description of a phenomenon” (p. 39). Moustakas (1990) did not offer an explanation of
what he meant by essences, but often paired the term with *meanings* when referring to
essences of a phenomenon, as well as elucidated the aim of heuristic inquiry as being, in
part, to “understand the dynamics and constituents” (p. 13) of the studied phenomenon.
Further analysis of van Manen’s (1990) phenomenology and Moustakas’s (1990)
heuristic inquiry emphasizes additional similarities and differences.

Both van Manen (1990) and Moustakas (1990) referred to researchers’ use of
intuition to uncover meanings and essences of studied phenomenon, and both explained
the necessity for reliving experiences through reflection. A major difference between the
reflection process is that of researcher self-reflection. Heuristic research is heavily
dependent on researcher self-reflection, so much in fact, that Moustakas (1990) believed
only after intense self-reflection could the researcher recognize and identify with the
experience of others. Another striking difference between van Manen’s (1990)
phenomenology and Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic inquiry is the idea of using meditation
techniques to reach a deep cognitive level of awareness. Van Manen (1990) clearly
stated that phenomenology “is a western research method which should not be confused
either with certain ‘mystical’ or eastern meditative techniques of achieving insights about
the ‘meaning of life’” (p. 23); however, he later included meditation as one way to give
meaning to lived phenomena. In my opinion, it seems that van Manen (1990)
contradicted himself; however, this appearance of contradiction may be due a lack of clarification of his idea of meditation. Moustakas (1990) does not give a definition of meditation, but refers to self-reflection as an essential component to heuristic research, and according to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, one definition of meditation said it is a process of reflection (Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 2013b). Researcher self-reflection is a major component of Moustakas’ (1990) heuristic research, as it is necessary when incorporating one’s own lived experiences into the study of phenomena. Van Manen (1990) believed that there is no room for researchers’ personal recounting of lived experiences in phenomenological research. There is however, necessity for intuition, which aides in uncovering meanings of lived experiences. Moustakas (1990) pressed upon readers that researchers must rely heavily on intuition, as dependence on intuitive decision-making is a crucial component of the heuristic research process that allows researchers to make adjustments and modifications throughout the learning process. I used intuition in part to guide interviews. When appropriate, I shared my experiences with participants in order for them to feel more comfortable opening up as it was at my discretion to do so, thus shifting the direction of the interview as guided by intuition. This reliance on intuition is what contributed to bringing to light meanings of experiences, guiding me closer to understanding participants’, as well as my own experiences (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990).

To capture the meaning of experiences shared by researchers and their participants, Moustakas laid out a six phase process for conducting heuristic research. This process leading to discovery includes initial engagement with the research topic and
question, immersion in the research question, an incubation period, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. These six phases make up the heuristic research design, and must be fully implemented and completed in order to gain the in depth knowledge needed to make meaning out of experiences. During this study, I completed each phase to the best of my ability while considering a self-constructed timeline for completing this dissertation. This was done with the aim of appreciating the experience of conducting first hand research and developing this dissertation.

Exploring the Six Phases of Heuristic Research

**Initial engagement.** The first phase, *initial engagement*, involves the process of researchers searching for and uncovering what deeply interests them (Moustakas, 1990). During this phase, as Moustakas (1990) elucidated, researchers find an issue or problem that is personally interesting to them, something that is of both social and personal importance. He continued to explicate that it is during this phase that the research question or questions surface. This involves inner dialogue, autobiographical discovery, and exploring one’s own tacit knowledge and intuition regarding the theme or topic at hand (Ings, 2011; Moustakas, 1990). I have spent most of the past three years finding what research questions held personal and profound meaning for me.

From the beginning of my doctoral journey until the presentation of this study proposal, I was in this phase. Although I knew I was going to lead a study where my experiences as a special education teacher would provide pertinent data for a study (Moustakas, 1990), I still needed to adjust the research questions until they reflected what I was passionate about exploring. This was no easy task, as there were several different, yet similar questions entertained. Once I had my Eureka! moment, much like the one
Moustakas described that Archimedes experienced when he “discover[ed] the principal of buoyancy” (p. 9), I knew that heuristic research would be my methodology, and with new research questions fresh in mind, I posted them on my office wall and immersed myself in literature, learning as much as possible about heuristic research; therefore, exploration resulted in a profound understanding of heuristic research as designed by Moustakas (1990).

Immersion. The second phase of Moustakas’s (1990) design is immersion. This phase begins after the research question is clearly defined. Researchers are completely absorbed by the question in dreams, while eating, and while performing daily tasks. During this phase participants are identified and informed of the study’s purpose. It is important to note that Moustakas (1990) refers to participants as co-researchers. In this study, the term participant is used as I view the term co-researcher to imply that participants will need to take part in an internal review board process, participate in human subjects training, and co-author the research findings. These additional responsibilities could have limited the number of participants that would have agreed to participate in this study. It was imperative for me to recruit participants who were willing to participate given the demands of heuristic process and the time requirements such research entails (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Moustakas, 1990). Other researchers have mentioned using purposeful sampling within the community where they were raised (Scott & Brown, 2008), intensity sampling where the researcher contacted a pool of potential participants via email and telephone who were in the same occupation (Grimes, 2012), and snowball sampling which was the result of identifying initial participants through posting advertisements for a study in local churches and community centers
Highlighting the steps for research preparation, Moustakas (1990) explained that researchers should draft a contract with participants that includes informed consent with details of participants’ expectations and requirements, such as “time commitments” (p. 46). Additionally, in this phase, researchers prepare for how they will create an inviting atmosphere that encourages open and candid responses from participants. Empathetic listening is a necessity during interviews (Moustakas, 1990). It was essential that researchers understood our conversations might have been emotive, and that I took care to ensure participants were treated compassionately (Ings, 2011). Moustakas (1990) mentioned that in addition to interview data, journals, poems or any other artifacts can be insightful in conveying significance of experiencing the studied phenomena. Similarly, Moustakas (1990) spotlighted the importance for researchers to journal their thoughts and experiences of the researched phenomena, as researchers are participants, as well. I found this to be a crucial component of the data collection process, as heuristic research involves a process of searching for meaning and learning through one’s own experiences in addition to others’ experiences (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). Furthermore, during the immersion phase, researchers themselves are open to identifying information relevant to their topic by a variety of methods and sources, such as collecting data found in public spaces, during communication and interaction with other people, during self-reflection, and through inner dialogue (Moustakas, 1990). Moreover, the physical places that amplify situations in which the phenomena is experienced can offer greater insight into the essences of the human experience (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). During this phase
is also a time for “pursuing intuitive clues or hunches, and drawing from the mystery and sources of energy and knowledge within the tacit dimension” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 28).

Throughout the immersion phase, researchers are conducting extended interviews and analyzing data. Through conversational style interviewing techniques (Patton, 2002), participants are given opportunities to tell their story, complete with as much detail as possible (Moustakas, 1990). This interviewing technique supports exploring new themes that may arise during interviews, and gives researchers the flexibility to change the direction of the interview depending on where the data and participants take the conversation (Patton, 2002). During these interviews, researchers may choose to share their experiences with participants (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010), especially if it cultivates an atmosphere of comfort and comradery (Moustakas, 1990). Supplementary questions may arise from initial interviews, as additional thoughts of importance may surface from both researchers and participants; therefore, multiple interviews may be necessary (Grimes, 2012). For this reason, participants received journals to record any dreams, thoughts, and revelations that might have occurred regarding their experiences of the phenomena being explored. Moreover, Moustakas (1990) suggested interviewing one participant at a time, and analyzing those data before moving on to the next interview. However, due to a self-constructed timeline I only did this for the first three participants’ interviews.

An additional component of the immersion process is beginning data analysis (Moustakas, 1990). It is vital for researchers to discuss with their participants what they each think of the data they have contributed (Moustakas, 1990). It is, however, ultimately up to researchers how involved participants will be in this process. The
manner in which I involved participants in this process is detailed in the section, *Participants, Data, and Other Study Components*. During data analysis, researchers are looking for common and emergent themes. This is only one time of several that data are analyzed, as researchers continue the heuristic process, and new insights surface which prompt reanalysis of collected data leading to new discoveries (Moustakas, 1990).

Moustakas (1990) calls for organizing data to tell each participant’s story. When analyzing the data, researchers must be intimately immersed while taking short breaks between periods of analysis (Moustakas, 1990). Data analysis carries over into the next phase of the heuristic process: incubation.

**Incubation.** Moustakas’s (1990) third phase of heuristic research is the *incubation* period. In this phase, researchers stop dwelling on the research question, disengaging from the study’s focus (Moustakas, 1990). At first, I found this questionable, though after further explanation, Polanyi’s (1958, 1966) lessons on tacit knowledge resurfaced to the forefront of my mind. When detached from the study’s focus, researchers are able to uncover knowledge kept below the explicit knowledge level; that which harbors in the tacit realm (Moustakas, 1990). This all seemed a bit mystical and somewhat exciting. Moustakas (1990) explained that being in this phase “allows the inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition to continue to clarify and extend understanding on levels outside the immediate awareness” (p. 29). After all, the purpose of heuristic study is to understand and make meaning of similar experiences. Delving into one’s own tacit knowledge adds depth to that understanding, leading to an Archimedes-like Eureka! moment that sets off the illumination phase (Moustakas, 1990).
**Illumination.** In the *illumination* phase, themes and subthemes found in the experiences of researchers and participants are highlighted, resulting in a “breakthrough in conscious awareness” (p. 29) that clarifies and elucidates the meanings behind the experiences (Moustakas, 1990). This may lead researchers to dispel incorrect assumptions, modify their interpretations, and possibly uncover previously intangible significances (Moustakas, 1990). I liken this phase to a detective finding all the clues to solve a mystery. Next the detective must search for meanings the clues provide. This leads to the fifth phase: explication.

**Explication.** The *explication* phase is essentially an extension of the illumination phase, however, implemented in a more profound manner (Moustakas, 1990). This phase seemed to be a little convoluted, as in my opinion, Moustakas (1990) did not explain this phase as clearly as I would have liked. When analyzing data, researchers reflect, indwell, and focus on the details of the experiences utilizing “their own awareness, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgments” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31) to guide them towards uncovering overarching themes and meanings, what Moustakas (1990) refers to as “essences” of the experience or phenomenon (p. 31). Once themes and meanings are uncovered, thoroughly examined, and understood, researchers combine essences and put together a complete “experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). This complete experience is expressed in depictions that portray individuals’ and group experiences, complete with quotes and narrative (Moustakas, 1990). Throughout the last step of this phase, researchers return to the original data, and choose a small number (2-3) of participants whose experiences reflect that of the group and tell their story, illuminating the meaning
of the phenomena and that of the participants’ individual experiences. Once complete, researchers develop a creative synthesis.

**Creative synthesis.** The final phase of the heuristic study is constructing the *creative synthesis*, an innovative, scientific-artistic rendition of the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1990). This synthesis may take several different forms: painting, narrative, poem, or other intuitive and symbolic expression researchers choose (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Ings, 2011). Moustakas (1990) held that creative synthesis could “only be achieved through tacit and intuitive powers” (p. 31). This gives researchers great freedom in how they depict the essences of the phenomenon of which they have an intimate understanding, for the synthesis is purely based on researchers' perception and interpretation (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Creative synthesis can include verbatim quotes and other forms of data giving added depth and detail with which researchers give prominence to the core themes of the phenomenon, which were underscored in the illumination and explication phases (Moustakas, 1990). Furthermore, part of making meaning of a particular phenomenon includes connecting with the self, linking one’s self to the world, and intertwining one’s own experiences with those of others’ (Moustakas, 1990). I am reminded of this by a quote from Moustakas (1967), “The reality of one’s own personal experience may be understood through self-reflection, in times of loneliness or isolation, and in moments of communal life” (p. 1). I have learned this to be true through past experiences. Sometimes, you need not only to look inward, but also to those around you who have shared in similar experiences to better understand your own (Moustakas, 1990).
Understanding the Heuristic Process

Although the steps to heuristic research have been described in a linear fashion, the process of this research is not linear at all (Grimes, 2012; Ings, 2011). Alternately, I believe that researchers move back and forth between the immersion, incubation, and illumination phases (Grimes, 2012). Advancement through the steps do not adhere to a prescribed timeline; they unfurl naturally, progressing instinctively as researchers aim to elucidate phenomena (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985).

I was limited by a self-constructed timeline to complete this dissertation, though able to meet the goals of heuristic research as expressed by Moustakas (1990). In order to complete this study, there had to be a balance fulfilling the aims of heuristic research, with meeting the deadline for completion. I pushed that deadline back a few times, as heuristic research moves at its own speed. Submitting to the process with minor modifications (interviewing participants before completing incubation phases), I was able to make connections and revelations that might otherwise have been missed. Given ample time to collect my own data before attempting to interview other participants, it was imperative that I connected with personal experiences first, so they were vivid in my mind while engaging with other participants.

Once researchers collect personal data (self interviews, journals, etc.), moving through immersion, incubation and illumination phases, the next step is to interview and collect data from a participant. Immersion, incubation and illumination phases are repeated with this participant before moving on to the next (Moustakas, 1990). Here was where my process deviated from the prescribed method. With new data in hand, researchers return to previous data, making comparisons, and looking for additional
common themes, or discovering new essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). Progressing through these steps involves a lengthy series of spirals between phases, transcripts, additional data, and explicated themes.

Due to the demanding and time consuming nature of heuristic research (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Moustakas, 1990), researchers have a responsibility to elucidate the importance of the immersion process to the participants, as well as how to proceed in each of the phases in which they are participating. Not only are researchers and participants learning together as they proceed through the heuristic research process, but they are also connecting on a more personal level, exposing and sharing personal information. Therefore, researchers must be ready for any emotional reactions from their participants, as well as from themselves. Conducting heuristic research ultimately results in a “better self” (Ings, 2011, p. 238), in which researchers have gone through “a process of discovery in investigations of the symbolic growth experience (SGE)” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 99).

Willard Frick’s (1990) groundbreaking research on SGE explored its significance on personal growth and how it alters one’s perceptions, resulting in further development of personal identity and changing self images. This process occurs naturally through lived experiences, and is furthered by exploring and uncovering the essences of those experiences (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas (1990) suggested a seventh phase of the heuristic process: action. He elucidated that “the course of action is the challenge to put into practice the illumination and explication of the facets of the problem to the underlying structures that account for it” (p. 123). I interpret this to mean that once researchers and participants understand the reasons behind the problem, they can take
action to make personal changes that will affect the structure of the problem. For example, I anticipated that once my participants and I understood the meanings of our experiences, we would be in a position to make personal changes in our professional behavior that may alter the ways in which our practices affect families we serve. This was true for me. Unfortunately, I was not able to collect information pertaining to the affect our interviews had on participants. Additionally, the written product of our journey through the heuristic process brought to light need for widespread institutional change. Having identified problems within the special education system, and special education processes, one purpose for my heuristic research was to inform a wide audience of education professionals of existing problems, and how our experiences affected us and those around us through explication of their meaning. Other heuristic studies have sought to do the same (Boyer, 2010; Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010).

Additional evidence of personal growth resulting from heuristic inquiry is found in studies exploring an array of phenomena (Boyer, 2010; Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Grimes, 2012; Scott & Brown, 2008). Moreover, alternate views of how heuristic research is conducted are also found.

In her 2002 critique of Moustakas’s heuristic research process, Sela-Smith made the claim that Moustakas presented heuristic research theory differently from application. Though she underscored the extensive contribution Moustakas had brought to the field of psychology, through illumination of heuristic research, she pointed out limitations of his method. Sela-Smith investigated 28 heuristic studies that asserted using the “Moustakas (1990) heuristic research method” (p. 70), and of those studies, “only 3 were able to successfully fulfill the Moustakas method” (p. 70). She cited the lack of self-exposure,
the absence of surrendering to the heuristic process, and the dependence of a time frame for completion as evidence to support her claim that Moustakas is equivocal in his explanation of how to conduct heuristic research. Sela-Smith alluded to Moustakas’s definition as being open to interpretation, whereas researchers construed the process incompletely, thus leading to a curtailed heuristic study. It is possible that due to Moustakas’s (1990) methodology being open to interpretation, many other disciplines have been able to utilize heuristic inquiry to explore a plethora of topics.

Heuristic inquiries have been conducted across a range of topics and disciplines, delving into a variety of experiences, synthesized and conveyed through a multitude of creative expressions (Grimes, 2012; Ings, 2011; Moustakas, 1990). Some examples include research in the fields of graphic design (Ings, 2011), psychology (Kleining & Witt, 2000; Moustakas, 1990), teaching (Grimes, 2012), nursing (Casterline, 2012), and agricultural education (Dooley, 2007). Many studies draw from the heuristic research process as described by either Douglas and Moustakas (1985) or Moustakas (1990) (Boyer, 2010; Casterline, 2012; Grimes, 2012; Scott & Brown, 2008). Though their themes differ greatly across different fields of study, heuristic researchers seek to understand meanings behind the essences of lived experiences; however, the depth in which they divulge their own personal feelings and experiences in their published works vary (Boyer, 2010; Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Scott & Brown, 2008). As Moustakas (1990) explained, it is at the researcher’s discretion whether or not to share their own experiences with their participants, or how much they are willing to invite scrutiny of their personal lives by others. Researchers may choose to describe their motivation for conducting their study as a desire to understand their own experiences (Djuraskovic &
Arthur, 2010; Grimes, 2012; Scott & Brown, 2008), or they may choose to give a broad description of their experience (Moustakas, 1992). In my view, heuristic studies are unique in phenomena and synthesis, as are researcher perceptions of the extent to which divulging details of personal experiences is necessary. I frequently contemplated the extent to which I would expose my personal experiences and the feelings entangled therein when reporting my study. What are the consequences, personally and professionally for such exhibition? How does the research community view heuristic research practices in general? I chose to report my personal experiences under a pseudonym, as deserving the same anonymity afforded to the other participants due to the nature of this study.

A Place and Rationale for Heuristic Research

There has been debate over what qualifies as research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Quaye, 2007). Cited as being subjective and messy (Quaye, 2007), social science scholars have been urged to use an objective, scholarly voice in reporting findings, as opposed to writing narratives and other creative writing forms (Patton, 2002; Quaye, 2007). Countering those sentiments, it is recognized among a growing number of scholars that some qualitative research is inherently subjective, as some methods require using intuition and interpretation to discover themes and their implications, and that is not a bad thing (Moustakas, 1990; Patton, 2002). There exist multiple truths (Jayakumar et al., 2009, Schwandt, 2007), and reporting truth from researchers’ and participants’ perspectives does not lend itself to being objective. Patton (2002) argued the mere ideas of subjectivity and objectivity are useless in the qualitative research process. This is good news for heuristic researchers, since heuristic research is subjective by nature. In
addition to issues of truth, validity is another measure with which the research community judges the quality of research.

Creswell (2013) suggested that validity represents the trustworthiness of a study, and there are several methods of validation. Member checking, the process of collaborating with participants to verify the accuracy of collected data and findings of a study, is intrinsic within the heuristic process as emphasized by the dependence on participants for data in addition to that of the researcher (Grimes, 2012; Moustakas, 1990). Validating heuristic studies relies on the degree to which researchers can “comprehensively, vividly, and accurately” express “the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 32). It is important to note, however, that Moustakas (1990) believed researchers make the final judgment. Other forms of validation highlighted by Creswell (2013) that are part of the heuristic process (Moustakas, 1990) include prolonged engagement with participants, and thick descriptions of the essences of participants’ experiences within the research manuscript. Sela-Smith (2002) also addresses validity in heuristic research:

Validity of the research is established by surrendering to the process that is pushing itself into the consciousness of the researcher, allowing the process to unfold and then noticing results in expansion of self-awareness, deepening of self-understanding, and of self-transformation that others can experience in the “story.” (p. 79)

In addition to validation measures, researchers look to address issues of generalizability and transferability (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002); although, within heuristic inquiry, the aim is not to provide replicable results, or even a generalizable
theory. Moustakas (1990) elucidated "the heuristic process is autobiographical, yet with virtually every question that matters personally there is also a social—and perhaps universal—significance" (p. 15). I interpreted this to mean that our problems and experiences are not unique inasmuch as they are experienced by others around the world. Each case has inimitable details, but overall, phenomena are shared experiences. Getting to meanings and essences of those experiences, events that researchers themselves have experienced, is a core purpose of heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990). Therefore, heuristic studies should not intend to generalize, but offer complete representations of the essences of lived experiences. Scholars evaluating heuristic research should keep this in mind when making judgments of quality and rigor, and researchers should focus on the accuracy of their interpretation, and the richness of their descriptions (Creswell, 2013).

After exploring Moustakas's (1990) heuristic research design, I argue this methodology was appropriate to carry out the purpose of this study, to explore how special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income in special education processes. Additionally, Moustakas (1990) discussed the need for researchers to focus on "thoughts and feelings that are essential to clarifying a question, getting a handle on the question, elucidating its constituents, making contact with core themes, and explicating the themes" (p. 25). Using this methodology, I was able to address the research questions; in what ways do special education teachers engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in the IEP development process, in what ways do special education teachers address culturally and linguistically diverse children's educational needs while also addressing both legal and workplace expectations, and in what ways do special education teachers develop IEPs
with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes while
addressing both legal and workplace expectations? Although details of data collection
and analysis procedures have been embedded in the aforementioned literature, it is
helpful to identify them separate from the above text in order to clarify these components
of the proposed study.

Participants, Data, and Other Study Components

Details regarding participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures must
be made clear to both researcher and participants. Descriptions of these components that
follow have been carefully, methodically thought out in order to successfully uncover the
essences of what it means to be a special education teacher engaging culturally and
linguistically diverse families with low income in special education processes. When
making decisions about data collection and analysis procedures, I referenced Moustakas’s
(1990) recommendations for heuristic study design, while also developing an anticipated
timeline towards completion of the study and dissertation. However, it must be reiterated
that heuristic research should not be rushed (Moustakas, 1990). Even though I had
created a timeline for completion of the study, I never felt the process was hurried.

Participants and sampling procedures. In heuristic studies using Moustakas’s
(1990) method, participants are referred to as co-researchers. This is due to the nature of
heuristic inquiry being a collaborative effort between researcher and participants
(Moustakas, 1990). The term participant is used for reasons mentioned earlier pointing
to the challenges that using the term co-research might impose on the recruiting process
of prospective participants. In addition to myself, eight participants were selected from
two large urban school districts located in Northern California. Those recruited to
participate in the study were tenured special education classroom teachers who had at least five years experience with teaching students with disabilities in public K-12 classrooms while serving on IEP teams in large, urban school districts, and who were currently teaching and serving on IEP teams within large, urban school districts. Participants' age and gender were not factors in participant selection. I used intensity sampling, which according to Patton (2002) is the most appropriate method to use for heuristic research as it offers the researcher a method of locating participants who have intensely experienced the phenomenon of study. Both Patton (2002) and Creswell (2013) noted that intensity sampling does not mean that the researcher searches for extreme cases, but those who have had ample experience with such phenomenon, as determined by the researcher. I also attempted to utilize snowball sampling, in which participants assisted in identifying other participants who they believed might have been appropriate participants for the study (Patton, 2002); however, those suggested participants did not fit the requirements to participate. Instead, I utilized personal connections to obtain a list of potential participants for the study, as it was difficult finding teachers that were either willing to participate, or who met the requirements for participation. From Bendita Unified School District four participants were identified from a pool of 10. They responded to an initial email. Two of these participants worked at the same school site.

In order to find participants from Cervantes Unified School District, I used a list identifying every special education teacher in the district, over 100 teachers, provided by a gatekeeper, or someone who had granted me access to such information (Creswell, 2013). I excluded teachers that had part-time positions, who were resource specialists, and who were not classroom teachers. The first time I sought out participants, four of 10
teachers responded to the email. Three did not fit the requirements to participate. The fourth met the requirements and agreed to participate. A second round of emails were sent to those who did not respond to the first email. An additional participant was located who fit the criteria for participation. After completing interviews with the two identified participants from Cervantes, a final round of emails were sent to 27 additional potential participants. Eight teachers responded. Two were not interested in participating, one agreed on the condition that she would participate by responding to a questionnaire. I thanked her for her willingness to participate, but did not include her in the study, as interviews were required. One agreed to participate who met the criteria for the study. She recommended another teacher who had not responded to my prior email. I discovered she had three years of experience as special education teacher, and therefore she was not able to participate in the study.

The eight participants represented four cultural designations, as it was important when discussing issues of culture and language to have perspectives from those representing diverse cultures. Of these participants, four were White (including myself), one was African American, one was Latina, and two identified themselves as Asian. I decided on including eight participants as Moustakas (1990) believed having a small number of participants narrows the researcher’s focus, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into the phenomenon. I included myself in this study, as heuristic research begins with self-reflection and indwelling, immersing the researcher into their own lived experience with the phenomenon of study. Moustakas (1990) referred to indwelling as a way for researchers to become deeply entrenched in their experiences shaping their research. In order to truly understand one’s own experiences, to explicate themes, to
expand on what is already understood regarding their own experiences, researchers must eat, breathe, and sleep their experiences (Kenny, 2012; Moustakas, 1990). They must explore them fully, diving into the very depths of the mind, searching for meaning and understanding that has dwelt in the far recesses of the subconscious (Moustakas, 1990).

**Data collection and study time frame.** Data for this study were collected in a number of ways. The primary data source from participants was obtained through a hybrid of “Standardized Open-Ended Interview[s]” (Patton, 2002, p. 344), with that of “informal, conversational interview[s]” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 47). Open-ended interview questions were developed prior to interviews in order to guide the interview, and ensuring maximization of allotted time, but their lack of natural flow resulted in following our conversations in directions they naturally took as led by participants, preventing hindrance of the flow of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990). Even with the occasional randomness of our conversations, I was able to address each interview question. I worked from a list of interview questions, but at times worded them differently to participants so that they matched the flow of the conversation without changing the information being elicited. I anticipated a need for conducting two interviews and possibly a third follow up interview for each participant. Most participants were more eager to finish interviews in one sitting. Three participants participated in two interviews. Follow up emails and phone calls were made to two other participants for clarifying questions that arose after the initial and second interviews. Further contact with participants occurred during member checking procedures which are discussed with data analysis.
Interviews with the first three participants were each conducted and analyzed before moving on to the next participant, as per Moustakas’s (1990) design for the purpose of immersing myself in one experience at a time, moving into an incubation period, followed by an illumination phase, which permitted the revelation of themes from the participant’s experience. Interviews with the next participant were conducted when those three phases of heuristic inquiry were completed. With the first three participants, I returned to the cycle of immersion, incubation, illumination, and adding to themes identified from the previous participant’s transcripts. The process of heuristic research progresses slowly, and with a self-constructed timeline, I needed to quicken the process. This was made possible by interviewing the remaining participants after transcribing and coding data, instead of waiting until post incubation and illumination phases. This decision was not made lightly. I did not feel rushed, nor that I missed opportunities for gaining further understanding of the essences of our shared phenomena.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by me, the first two by typing, and the rest by using speech to text software. Each transcript was reviewed twice for accuracy of transcription while listening to interviews and reading transcripts. All errors were corrected. This allowed me to gain optimal understanding of, and connectedness with participant responses, which was furthered by additional reviewing of transcripts through data coding and analysis. Data collection, transcription, coding and initial analysis of interviews took a little more than six months from the end of January 2014 through July 2014. I also supplied participants with a copy of the interview questions and journals, so they could record any thoughts that surfaced during the immersion, incubation, and illumination phases, or in between interviews. None of the participants
utilized the journals, and one declined to accept the provided journal stating, “Honestly, I won’t use it.” I continued to keep a journal of my own thoughts about my experiences with engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families in special education processes, and those reflective of the heuristic process. Supplementary data were collected through field notes taken immediately after interviews. One participant provided me a copy of a parent questionnaire in Spanish that she used to elicit input from parents pertaining to information that would be included in IEPs. No other participants had any documents or artifacts they used in their IEP meetings other than the online IEP program. Having access to that program already, it was not necessary to obtain access to IEP documents from other participants.

**Data analysis.** Moustakas’s (1990) heuristic inquiry details the steps of data analysis through the immersion, incubation, illumination, and explication phases. In these phases, data are analyzed and coded for themes. I identified themes during the immersion, incubation, and illumination phases for each participant. As identified, major themes were coded and subthemes falling under major themes were identified and labeled. Major themes were color coded, and subthemes were assigned a unique number. A total of four tiers of subthemes were identified under major themes for a total of five levels of coding. The first level, major themes, were color coded, followed by a second level which was assigned a number, a third level which was given an uppercase letter, a fourth level that was given a decimal, and when a fifth level was discovered, it was given a lowercase letter. For example, *Barriers* was a major theme, coded with the color purple, identifying the first level of themes. Under this major theme, the subtheme *Language and Communication* was given the number 1, as it was a second level theme.
Under this theme were level three subthemes, *Interpreting and Transcribing* which was assigned the letter A, and *Eliciting Parent Communication and Participation*, assigned the letter B. Under subtheme B were additional subthemes identified as level four themes. One level four subtheme *During IEP* was coded as .2, and under that subtheme, six additional subthemes, labeled as level five subthemes were identified. One such level five subtheme was labeled *Parents Do Not Know What To Say In Meetings*, and was given the code a. When coding for that level five subtheme in transcripts, the code was highlighted in purple, and labeled as 1B.2a. Although this coding process may seem confusing to others, it was clearly understandable for me, and made coding easier since I did not use coding software. I kept record of codes and themes by covering the walls in my home office in butcher paper, reserving a section for each major theme, using sticky notes to record titles and codes of subthemes, and page numbers of participants’ transcripts where coded data could be found. Participants were simply identified with a capital P and the number of the order in which they were interviewed. Moving through coding and data analysis with this process gave me a visual and hands on experience with the data. Transcripts were thoroughly read a minimum of 10 times during coding and analysis, illuminating connections between major themes and subthemes and the larger system at work while viewing data through a systems thinking lens.

Data analysis occurred deductively through Lipsky’s (2010) street-level bureaucracy (SLB) framework to identify how participants interacted with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income in IEP development while addressing both legal and workplace expectations, and with a systems theory approach to look for ways in which themes and subthemes may be interconnected. Data were also analyzed
inductively exploring emergent and uncovered themes elucidating what it means to be a special education teacher interacting with culturally and linguistically diverse families in IEP development. These analytical processes did not happen in a linear fashion. They spiraled and shifted back and forth, as I allowed the data to speak to me from both inductive and deductive perspectives.

In the explication phase, I continued identifying themes while focusing on my own "awarenesses, feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and judgments" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 31). Moustakas explained that by focusing on personal experiences, delving deep into the inner consciousness, themes will be explicated from those intimate experiences. During explication, I cleared up any misunderstandings, made corrections, adjustments and refined identified themes. To ensure data were credible and trustworthy, two validation methods were utilized: member checking and triangulation. Member checking refers to verifying intended meanings of participant responses by reviewing researcher interpretations with the participants (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation is the process of identifying similar themes in multiple sources of data to increase credibility and trustworthiness of findings (Creswell, 2013). Patton (2002) on the other hand, described triangulation as a process of testing for consistency, not necessarily to prove that different data sources result in the same findings. I used member checking to verify the accuracy of transcripts, my interpretation of interview data as described in individual depictions and the group, or composite depiction. Each participant was emailed a copy of their transcripts, and asked to verify their accuracy, as well as make deletions or additions as they would like. Five participants responded verifying their transcripts were accurate, and chose not to omit or add information. For the two exemplary depictions included in
this study, those participants were also sent a copy of their story. One participant responded that she laughed and cried, and that the depictions were accurate. She did not want to make any changes. The other participant felt he was accurately represented, and did not want to make any changes either. I chose not to collaborate with participants during extrapolation and explicit analysis of the core themes identified in this study because this information was presented in narrative form through both individual and composite depictions, which had already been sent to participants for review. Moustakas (1990) discussed discretion afforded to researchers conducting heuristic research to choose whether or not to include participants in this part of the process. I took advantage of that discretion, as it seemed appropriate. Due to the possible repercussions of sharing data from this study, it was imperative that participants’ confidentiality, including my own, was maintained. It was for that reason that I also gave myself a pseudonym in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Chapter Summary**

Being a form of self-inquiry (Moustakas, 1990), heuristic research is different from what traditionally counts as research (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) emphasized that “each self-study researcher must negotiate that balance [between biography and history]...tipping too far toward the self side produces solipsism or a confessional, and tipping too far the other way turns self-study into traditional research” (p. 15). Although Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) focused on autobiographical (self) studies, their message was relevant to heuristic research which includes, but does not focus on researcher experiences. I struggled with this idea of finding balance, and assumed many heuristic researchers do, as well. Knowing what and when to divulge or
to hold back was not always easy to determine. Moustakas (1990) emphasized repeatedly that throughout the heuristic process, researchers must rely on their intuition. Other heuristic researchers have underscored their dependence on their intuition through their studies (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Grimes, 2012; Moustakas, 1990), while others have not (Boyer, 2010; Scott & Brown, 2008). I believe it was intuition that lead me to the appropriate amount of disclosure. Intuition might be noted as a limitation or bias in other studies; in heuristic research, it a crucial is part of the process. Each of the seven phases as described in this paper: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, creative synthesis, and action reflect Moustakas's (1990) method, almost exclusively, although portions can be identified in the Douglass and Moustakas (1985) article.

Throughout the heuristic journey, researchers and participants are vulnerable to the reopening of old wounds, uprooting of deeply buried ghosts, and uncovering of hidden emotions (Boyer, 2010; Scott & Brown, 2008). Moustakas (1990) anticipated this process would heal, and result in personal growth. I anticipated that for me, this process would engender both personal and professional growth. This was found to be true, and is discussed in Chapter 5. Being responsible for the consequences of conducting heuristic research, such as emotional effects, researchers must listen compassionately. In order to gain the trust of participants, an essential component to uncovering the essences of shared phenomena, researchers must show respect and empathy. Heuristic research should be carried out with care and compassion; not just for participants, but also for researchers themselves. With the scrutiny of internal review boards (IRBs), we focus on protecting our research participants, but do not always consider the implications autobiographical
research can have on the self. Moustakas (1990) did not discuss that researchers should take care to protect themselves, as it may seem to go against taking that leap into the abyss of the unknown, but I believe heuristic researchers should always take caution to ensure their emotional wellbeing. Heuristic research is meant not only to give prominence to meanings and essences of phenomena, but also to provide a path towards healing and growth for both researcher and participants (Casterline, 2012; Moustakas, 1990). Part of making meaning of a particular phenomenon includes connecting with the self, the world, and experiences of others. Chapters 4 and 5 illuminate the experiences of special education teachers who engage with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in special education processes, and conclude with a creative synthesis of the essences of the phenomenon experienced in the form of a poem.
Chapter 4. Findings

This chapter is dedicated to introducing the reader to eight special education teachers, including myself, who work with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income. Presented here are stories and experiences we had as educators. These experiences have shaped our perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors in the context of our careers as special education teachers. Bringing to light our stories will help readers understand our perceptions, feelings, emotions, and challenges associated with our role as IEP team members. Each one of us in this study has a unique, yet similar story to share, providing essential insight into the shared phenomena of being a special education teacher working in a large urban school district with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income in developing IEPs, addressing this study’s research questions:

1) In what ways do special education teachers engages with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes in the IEP development process?

1) In what ways do special education teachers address culturally and linguistically diverse children’s educational needs while also addressing both legal and workplace expectations?

2) In what ways do special education teachers develop individualized education programs with culturally and linguistically diverse families from low-income homes while addressing both legal and workplace expectations?
Individual Depictions

This chapter begins with individual depictions of our experiences as special education teachers in the form of first person narratives told with verbatim and paraphrased material. Verbatim quotes from transcripts are not in quotes, as I felt that would stifle our voices. The form of the individual depictions is similar to the first person narrative style testimonios; however, it must be made clear that these depictions are respectfully not intended “to name oppression and to arrest its actions whether of genocide, racism, classism, xenophobia, or any other type of institutionalized marginalization” (p. 527), which are aims of a true testimonio (Reyes & Rodríguez, 2012). Each depiction is written with our unique tones and personalities. Individual depictions follow Table 2, Participant Demographics. Following individual depictions is a composite depiction, described through analysis of our stories we shared, sometimes cautiously, always honestly. Unlike the individual depictions, the composite depiction is written in a first person plural voice. This is different from the testimonios style of the individual depictions, as this is a shared representation, and our individual quotes are cited. Two exemplary depictions follow the composite, conferred in a manner in which essences of our experiences are told through two emotive stories. The last section in Chapter 4 is an extrapolation of the study’s emergent themes, underscored and examined in detail as I return to our stories and take a deductive approach towards viewing our experiences.
Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Years Taught</th>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reuben</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bendita</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becca</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Cervantes</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Cervantes</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Cervantes</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kari</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Bendita</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regina</td>
<td>6 (in special education)</td>
<td>Bendita</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudia</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Bendita</td>
<td>Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cervantes</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reuben.** I grew up in a diverse neighborhood that socioeconomically wasn’t as bad as where I work, but I can relate to the kids growing up with tight financial situations. I work at a high school, and I teach an independent life skills class to students with moderate to severe disabilities. At some point I knew I would become a special ed teacher. My mom worked as an assist in a special day class. I would visit her, and help out in the classroom. It was a lot of fun, and I was really good at it. So, when it was time to get a job, I immediately thought “assist.” I’d get some more experience, and work my way towards a teaching career. I went to school and got a my bachelor’s degree. Then I heard about this intern program where I could have my own classroom, and get paid
while going to school for my teaching credential. How awesome is that, but I had to get a job first.

I applied at Bendita Unified School District, and they hired me as a substitute teacher until I passed the California Subject Evaluations for Teachers. Yeah, the CSET. I’ve been working in this district ever since. This is my sixth year. I’ve worked in a few different grade levels including kindergarten. It was really hard in the beginning because the only training I got was what I learned in my credentialing classes. No one ever told me how to do IEP paperwork. I never had anyone tell me anything other than a little bit of advice on specific tasks. I had to figure things out myself, mostly, which was kinda stressful considering I’m responsible for this legal document, and there are all these expectations. It can be overwhelming sometimes. When I first started teaching, I felt like I was alone. You know, not like I was part of a team. Here, it’s different. There are something like 11 other special education teachers here. It’s really nice to have the support and to feel a part of something because I didn’t really have that before. Sometime though, I get the feeling that people look at me as if I don’t know what I’m doing. When I was an intern, I felt like they thought I wasn’t a real teacher. Even now, I feel disrespected at times when my ideas are not heard. It’s not so much the staff at my school, but my program specialist. She has a way of just blowing me off, and not listening to my opinions. I’m the one who knows my students. I’m the one in the classroom. Why doesn’t my opinion matter? It just gets so...frustrating. On the flip side, during IEPs, the families pretty much just go along like I’m the expert. I have a really hard time getting them to give input. They don’t really have much to say. They respect me, and I totally respect them, but it’s frustrating that they don’t give me
anything. Just give me something. I don’t know exactly why it is, but they just don’t
seem to care, and they let me do what I want to do. I wish they would challenge me,
have a different opinion, other ideas, but it doesn’t happen. I don’t know if it has to do
with culture, or they just don’t care. I don’t know what it is, but it’s not like they're the
only ones just sitting there and not really participating.

My administrators usually just sit there because they have to be there. The
psychologist is really cool, and she’s the one that has given me pointers. She always
coordinates with me, and has her reports uploaded into the electronic IEP system. The
other service providers aren’t as good about that. There’s nothing I can do about them
not doing their job, but it’s my responsibility to share all their information when they
aren’t there, and it’s my responsibility to get a copy of their reports and goals to the
parents. It all falls on my shoulders. I try to keep organized, keep everything laid out in
my head as far as what I need to do to get ready for the meetings, and things I need to do
after, like finalize the IEP online. After six years, it’s still demanding, but I’ve learned
how to cope. Even with the demands of the teaching, I try my best to get it all done. I
mean, it’s not like my responsibilities don’t extend far beyond the classroom. I try to be
an advocate, not just the case manager and facilitator in IEP meetings. It’s hard, but I just
want to make the parents happy. If they are happy, I’ve done my job.

Becca. There’s probably not a lot of teachers like me. My specialty is teaching
deaf and hard of hearing students. I wasn’t planning on becoming a teacher. I didn’t
follow in someone’s footsteps. I didn’t have deaf parents or siblings. I took a signing
class, and really enjoyed it. When I discovered that there was a need for teachers for deaf
students, I decided to get into education. That’s how it happened. After college, I
worked for a county program. It was a great program, and I kind of miss working there. I’ve been here in the Cervantes Unified School District for 14 years now. No, I don’t love this district, but with my tenure, there really isn’t any point to changing employers, unless I move out of state or something. It’s not a bad district, but like any other big district, it’s got its problems. I do love my job though, and the school I work at is great. I have a supportive principal, and good support staff. There are a lot of people that I can depend on for help when I need it, or for interpreting and translating for non-English speaking parents. I’ve tried Internet translation programs in the past, but how do I know what it actually says? Since I’m fluent in sign language, I never need an interpreter for communicating with my two deaf families. So, there’s no hurdle to jump there. There have been challenges working with some of the IEP team members in the past, but for the most part, things run smoothly.

In the classroom, it can be challenging having to differentiate instruction for students who are at or above grade level, and for those who have intellectual disabilities. Some of my students have other disabilities besides their deafness or hearing loss. They all have goals for every concern that arises during the IEP meeting. With so many goals, it gets kinda of daunting, especially since my students have a diverse range of skills. My two students that come from deaf families are mainstreamed. It’s great because they don’t need as much support as some of the other students in my class. Even then, finding the time to get IEPs ready, the paperwork, the reports...Things change all the time, and it’s not like you get any real training. You get an email when the special ed department wants you to do this, or not do that. It’s stressful.
I spend a lot of time writing draft IEPs in advance. I have to do a draft because no one has the time to sit at the meeting and create the IEP from a blank document. These meetings are long enough. I usually work on IEPs from home. It takes me a few days to make sure I word things properly, but since they’re not initial IEPs, I can usually just modify the last one, and make additional changes during the meeting. The frustrating thing is that so many of my parents are not really actively participating. They’re usually pretty quiet. They really should be more involved. Maybe I’m not doing enough to get them involved, but it’s their kid. They should have something to say. I do think parents are like that with other teachers. I don’t think I’m the only one who has these issues, but I notice it’s more with my Latino and Asian families that they respond with “Whatever you think is best.” It’s kinda silly, and these IEPs are not about me. It’s about their child. Usually, those are the families of my students that come from low-income homes. My more affluent, White parents are the ones that ask questions, and have a lot more concerns. The families that are less affluent tend to ask questions about how they can help their child with homework. Either way, with all the paperwork, it’s gets pretty confusing for parents. It’s overwhelming. I just ensure the students are receiving the services they need, and I try to do my best as their teacher.

Annie. I didn’t start out as a teacher when I got into the workforce. In fact, my job had nothing to do with teaching. I worked in pharmaceuticals, but then decided to get my Bachelor’s degree and teaching credential. I got a multiple subject credential which emphasized a multicultural approach to teaching general education. Unfortunately, school districts were swimming in pink slips, and lay-offs seemed never ending. During my student teaching, my cooperating teacher told me that I wasn’t going to get a job as a
general education teacher, and that I needed to go into special education. Special education teachers weren't being laid off nearly to the extent of general education teachers. Everyone's being laid off, and she's like, "It's not reasonable for you to think that you're gonna get a job anywhere for multiple subject," which was true. I really took that advice to heart. I gave up a pretty profitable career; so, I needed to have a job after I graduated. If it wasn't for my cooperating teacher, I would have been unemployed.

From that point, I began a special education credentialing program, and got an intern position with Cervantes Unified School District, which is the district where I completed my student teaching. I've been working with students with mild to moderate disabilities for the past five years at the same middle school since my first day, and I feel genuinely lucky to work with such supportive staff. I have really good friends here, and I think that's why I get so much support. I'm not sure what it's like at other campuses, but here, we're a team. Strong relationships and good communication are key. We're also really timeline driven. We're never out of compliance with any deadline. We schedule our IEPs either before or after school because we're all teaching during the day, and we'll hold them even if the parent doesn't show up. They sign the paper saying they'll come, but then they don't show. If we can get them on the phone, we'll do the meeting that way. That's probably the hardest thing: actually getting a hold of parents. Contact information is constantly changing. I often have to go to their homes. We're a neighborhood school, so it's not a big deal if I have to do a home visit. Sometimes, I just have to send the IEP document home with the student for the parents to sign, to get their consent and agreeing to the IEP. Occasionally, I'll have to track them down. One of my families is homeless, so getting a hold of them is sometimes a challenge.
When parents come to IEP meetings, they don’t have much to say. They don’t ask many questions, but I have really good relationships with them. I think they would tell me if they didn’t like something I was doing. They don’t really understand the standards, and because the students’ goals have to be written to grade level standards, they don’t really know enough to request specific goals. I present draft goals, and ask if there’s anything they want changed, or added, but they don’t ask. I’m getting my master’s in special education, so I understand IDEA and parent rights, but they don’t have that knowledge. Even though we give them a copy of their rights and procedural safeguards, they don’t know better. There have been times when I tell them off the record that they need to ask for this or that service. I let them know that they have the power here. I shouldn’t have to hide that, but that’s kind of what I have to do working in this district. I don’t think their lack of parental input has as much to do with culture, as it has to do with socioeconomic factors. All of our students qualify for free lunch; there aren’t any affluent families here. Regardless of their situation, I think it’s really important to hold both parents and students accountable for their education.

Violet. I never once thought I would be a teacher, but I guess it was meant to be. Every job I’ve ever had was working with children in one way or another, and it just seemed like a natural progression to go from teaching preschool to special education. I knew what it was like to be a special education student. I was in an RSP [resources specialist program] for speech in elementary school, and all through high school. I grew up in Northern California, but after high school, I went to college in the Midwest. After I graduated with my bachelor’s degree and teaching credential, I taught on a reservation for a few years before I moved back home to California and got my master’s degree. I
started applying to different school districts, and eventually ended up here in Cervantes Unified. I’ve been working at the same school site since I was hired, which was 14 years ago. I teach elementary school children with moderate to severe disabilities. However, last year it felt like a mild to moderate class. I had a few kids with behavior problems and attendance issues. They did not have severe intellectual disabilities. I actually had to get between two of them to keep them from getting into a fight. Ugh, this job can be very nerve-wracking sometimes.

Besides dealing with constant interruptions from people coming and going from my room, I have to get all my IEP paperwork ready for coming meetings. It’s a lot to do, and it’s not just checking boxes and drafting goals. It’s also finishing the paperwork after the meeting. I always feel both relieved and tired after a meeting. Sometime it’s a big sigh of relief. Other times, I’m just glad that the parents agreed to the IEP and signed it. After the meeting, I usually put the paperwork aside and work on it the next day. Sometimes, I’m just too exhausted to even look at it, but the district tells us we have to get everything finalized, affirmed, and attested in three days. At least, I think that’s what it is now. Things change all the time. I really try to meet the deadlines. Sometime though, it’s just not reasonable. I mean, I have other students. I can’t just focus on one or two. I have multiple IEPs, and a lot of times, I have to work on the drafts after hours. Is it too much to want a personal life that doesn’t involve work? I need to have a life outside of this job. I love what I do, but there needs to be an understanding that teachers have lives. They have families, children they want to spend time with, friends they want to see.
On a positive note, there are some really great people that I work with. My speech therapist is always so faithful to her duties, and even comes in on her days off to assess kids and go to IEPs. We work well together. My classroom assistants are pretty good, too. Their skills are limited, but I can rely on them to help me stay on track with timelines, and we bounce around ideas for classroom lessons and IEP goals. We’ve been through a lot together over the years. I remember the culture shock when we had a father that broke his child’s sandwich up by taking little bites of it with his mouth before feeding it to her because she needed smaller bites. My assistant just dropped her plate. There was another time when this same parent lined up little teddy bears with his daughter and said, “Oh, look! Soldiers!” So, there are a lot of different challenges that we deal with. Whether they are familial, classroom, budgetary, or procedural challenges, we get things taken care of, and we get the job done. I spend a lot of my own time making sure my responsibilities get met, but even then, I still find time to dance!

I love dancing. I have a wide repertoire of dance styles that I’ve learned including the tango, fox trot, and the waltz, but my two passions are the nightclub two-step and swing dancing. I take lessons, and even had my instructor come to my classroom and show my students what we do. Dancing is definitely an escape from the pressures of work. I need to do something fun, and I need people to remember, I’m human, and can only do so much. I wanna go out and have some fun, and maybe I wanna meet somebody. Truly, I hadn’t planned on becoming a teacher. That was the last thing that I was ever gonna be. Yet, here I am, and I love what I do.
Kari. You know, I just realized that I’ve been a special education teacher for 30 years. That definitely hadn’t been the plan when I started this career. When I was in fourth through sixth grade, I was a reading specialist, and worked with students in the primary grades. I really enjoyed working with children. It wasn’t until junior college when I took an education course and visited special education programs that I decided to pursue a career in special education. At the time I was earning my teaching credential, I had to first complete one for general education, and then I had a choice of either getting a master’s degree, or an alternate credential in order to meet the requirement to clear my preliminary credential. I was planning to teach for only 10 years, and then go into a different occupation. Fifteen years later, I realized I had already past my 10 years, and I thought, “Well, I’m already in it, so might as well stay,” and that’s how it all began.

I’ve been working in the Bendita Unified School District for most of my tenure. There was a bit of a shock coming to this district because where I was before, the program specialist was the case manager. You were just a participant. Here, it’s not that way. I’m responsible for it all. I have pretty good relationships with the other IEP team members. I have everyone’s phone number, so I can text them when I’m going to be finalizing paperwork in the electronic IEP program. These past few years though, we’ve had challenges that we didn’t have before. We’ve had a lot of turnover with administration over the years, and the leadership has changed. Let’s just say that we don’t share the same philosophies. It appears that the new leadership doesn’t have a clear understanding regarding a student’s IEP and that it’s a legal document. Also, there have been changes in personnel, and the dynamics here have become... interesting, challenging, not just for the staff, but for the students, as well.
I work with students with both physical and intellectual disabilities, but most of my students have challenges with mobility. The physical location of the classrooms were more integrated before the changing of administration. It feels like we’re going backwards in time. Although our classes are not physically in the same buildings as the rest of the campus, it’s a short trip to the general education classes where many of my students are mainstreamed. They have an assistant go with them, but the assistant is there to help our students manage their supplies. Those students don’t really need academic assistance. I try my best to teach my students to become as independent as possible. Sometimes the challenges come from the families. I had one parent ask for occupational therapy services to be added to the IEP because her child didn’t know how to feed himself. It turned out the grandmother was feeding him at home. I had to tell her that he eats just fine at school. Some families do everything for the child, but eventually, it’s going to take a toll on the family. They don’t do it to hurt them; they do it out of love, but I don’t think they understand the repercussions. Even though I see this across the board with parents, I do see that in some cultures, its more prevalent or to a greater degree. I also don’t see them giving as much input, or asking for things during IEP meetings. That kind of thing I see with more educated and affluent families. There are parents who know their rights, which is great, but there are some things parents are requesting us to do for their child, and that responsibility should be on the parent or shared. It’s like they have a sense of entitlement. On the flip side, we’ve had parents make demands, and they get what they want because the district caves. It’s cheaper for the district to give in to parents’ demands than it is to go to court. For better or worse, I love this program. We’ve been through many different administrators, and we just keep
on doing what we need to. The staff in our program work well together; people don’t usually leave this program unless they die or retire. I’ve heard of teacher burnout, and if I was in a different program, I might get that, but not here. It really is a great program.

Regina. I’m often asked why I’ve had so many different jobs. My response is always the same, “I go in. I learn it. I move on.” Most of my jobs have involved working with people with disabilities in some way or another. I always wanted to be a teacher, but I just couldn’t figure out how to work full-time, pay for school, and raise two kids. I had a daughter in special education. I mean, she was a chair throwing, screaming child, but she turned out great. She’s very successful, and has a family of her own. So, this has been a long journey for me. I worked in many different fields before I went into teaching, and I really think my previous occupations and personal experiences gave me a lot of foundational information that helped me to become a better special education teacher. I discovered that I was good at teaching special education kids after I was sent to teach special education by default. I could have remained in general education but I came to believe that special education needed me more. So, I made the switch, and I’ve been a special education teacher working here in Bendita Unified for six years, four of which have been here at this school. I’m supposed to be teaching intermediate students with mild to moderate disabilities, but I get all kinds of kids with a multitude of disabling conditions. Some have emotional disturbance, others Autism, and a few who appear to be just lazy and don’t want to do their work, or haven’t been challenged enough to want to do academic work, or maybe they just haven’t been expected to do the work. I find this to be more of an issue with students whose disability is described as Other Health Impairment. I think we have gone too far with what is considered a disability. I’m sorry,
but ADHD, I really don’t see that as a disability. We can do some behavior modification, get some medication, get the parent, child, and teacher on board to work as a cohesive team. I usually find the students whose disability is ADHD to be very bright. I have a difficult time working with students whose overarching disability is Autism. I can’t intervene with their symptoms to reach them academically. I love the kids, but it is time for me to go. I feel that I am on the verge of burnout. I don’t wake up in the morning happy to go to work. I need to move on to something less challenging.

In general, I like the way special education provisions work here. We are a very poor school, and the neighborhood is rough, but for the most part, they’re good kids. I’ve been able to mainstream some of them, and even had one test proficient on the California Modified Assessment. He’s going on to high school, so life is good. When I’m able to do my job, things are great. If I had an assistant that actually did something, things would be better. So yeah, I’ve got challenges to contend with in the classroom, but somehow it all works out. As far as IEPs go, we get it done. When we have non-English speaking parents, we manage to get someone to interpret, either the vice principal, or someone from the language office. Usually, it’s someone with some skills who will actually say everything that I say, not someone who just picks and chooses what they feel is important. That’s happened in the past where they said, “Parents don’t need bad news.” I had to clarify that it wasn’t up to them. That’s not their job. Parents need to know what’s going on.

I’ve had parents refuse to believe that their child did wrong, and I’ve had a parent accuse me of being racist. Um, hello, I’m Black just like your daughter, so no, I’m not being racist. I think I have more parent issues than anything else. I try and get their child
out of special education, but some of them want their kid to stay. They want that money, that Supplemental Security Income. Nobody here has money, but I tell you, they spend that SSI on the most ridiculous things. It’s like, “How about you stop buying them videogames that shoot people, and spend the money on a refurbished computer, or at least buy a keyboard for the PlayStation because those can be used as computers, too.” It’s like they feel bad that they don’t have a lot of money, so they spend what they do have on frivolous things, or they’ll buy them junk food, and if I say something about it, they get all defensive, like I’m criticizing their parenting. It’s not that. My mother used to tell me — she was a maid, and she used to say, “If you don’t want to do this, you will go to school.” It’d be snow on the ground, and you’d have a hole in your shoe, and she’d tell you, “Put some plastic on your foot, put your foot in your shoe, and go to school,” and that was just the way it was. So, I understand poverty, and I also understand that you don’t make it up to your kids by mismanaging money. Use your money for something that makes sense. They get offended, but it’s like, I’m sorry, that’s how I feel. I also think that sometimes they have low self-esteem.

Some of our parents are illiterate, and there are challenges associated with that. They have a hard time understanding the IEP process, some of the jargon, and whatnot. Some of them have special needs themselves. So, their past personal experiences of special education can sometimes play a role in how they respond to suggestions in the IEP meetings. They don’t understand that special education these days is not the same as the special education they had. Many times, the biggest issue with the parents is the money. I’ve had parents who insisted that their child receive a high school diploma. When it is explained that they will need to complete certain classes and pass some tests,
they become hesitant. When they are told their child will no longer be considered disabled for academic purposes if they are actually able to receive a high-school diploma, most times, they quickly change their minds. I guess if you are highly impoverished, the income from SSI is more important than a high school diploma. Some parents are really involved, and I just applaud them, but it's when you get these parents that just don't seem to care that I just feel really disappointed. Out of 15 IEPs last year, I had five parents that showed up. I don't understand the reluctance or total refusal by those parents to participate. I let it go and request that they at least get their kid to do their homework. On top of dealing with that, I've got to deal with team member issues.

I have colleagues here that really don't seem to understand that they are not the center of these IEP meetings. Yes, they are an important part of the team, but not the most important. I do home visits, and I have pretty good relationships with my parents. They've seen me probably more than they want to. These other people, these peripheral people as I call them, often parents have never seen them before. They don't know them, and these people want to talk and talk. When we send out the meeting notices, parents should be able to select who they want at the meeting. We have a speech therapist that wants to explain every little thing she does with the students, so that we can all be assured that she is doing her job. I have to explain to them that they do not need to describe all the nuances of their service provision. This is about the student. Just talk about that little bitty part that you do. I can't handle all these people talking. I have adult ADHD, okay? They just want to go on about their role, and the parents don't want to hear about it. They want to be in and out. This year, for the first time since I've been in this district, I had a program specialist that insisted on coming to some IEPs. They were
three hour IEPs! She’s sitting there telling me to read every piece and I said, “You know what? I don’t do that. I go over their rights, I go to the first page, and I check is this the right address, is this the right phone number, and are you the parent? You know? I go over the goals. I go over the offer of FAPE. ‘Is there anything that I can do for you? Is there anything that you want to be added to this?’ And I’m done.” Three hours? Never. She came to two meetings, and each was two and one half to three hours. By the time it was all over, my hands were shaking. Not only could I not keep focused, neither could the parents. Parents will say that they trust me to do what I think needs to be done. They know I’m looking out for what’s best for their child. It’s a lot of work to do things right, but I prepare for meetings far in advance, since I know I’m not going to get any support.

We don’t get any direction from the special education department. There’s no real oversight. They just send emails telling you what to do, but no one checks. I use the online IEP system to print out my case list with meeting due dates, update the goals, and try to schedule meetings so everyone can be there, including the student. I always have them in the meeting. Getting the other people there, including an administrator and a general education teacher, is tough. The general education teachers are teaching during my IEPs. All of my kids are supposed to go to general education PE, but they don’t, even though it’s in their IEP, so I feel like I’m lying when I put it in there. The general education teacher is supposed to provide PE, but that doesn’t happen often. So for their input on the IEP, I have a quick chat with the general education teacher in the hallway, report their information, and have them sign the attendance page. If I don’t have the excusal page, I will ask the Vice Principal or the administrator to read the general education teacher’s report, then the general education teacher can sign the IEP. I know
that all of these pieces of paper are the result of some legal intervention, but sometimes I just can’t do it all.

I’d like more of my students to be mainstreamed, but that’s one of my biggest challenges. They have to be able to go on their own. I don’t have the support to be able to send them to another class, and I’d really like to integrate more students into general education, and not just based on the skills that they’ve acquired. I think it’s important that they get to be around the general education kids more than they do. That’s something I would really love to see changed. Let’s get more kids mainstreamed. Let’s work together, special ed and general ed, to get these kids building positive relationships with kids outside of their classroom.

**Claudia.** I started my career as a long-term substitute teacher, and found I enjoyed working with English-language learners, more specifically, those with disabilities. My favorite students were always the ones that came from the special day class. A teacher I greatly admired told me I’d be a good special ed teacher, and that always stuck in my mind. So, it all evolved from there. When I was on an interview for a teaching position, I told the interviewer that I was interested in teaching special education. They looked pleasantly surprised, and they hired me just like that. I started out teaching in a part of California where money wasn’t a major consideration, neither for parents, nor school district, but now I teach in a completely different world. Here in Bendita Unified, every single one of my students comes from a low-income home. If you’re not poor, you’re not going to send your child to this school. There’s no way. You wouldn’t even live anywhere near here. I went from teaching where copy orders were turned around overnight if not in hours, and where copies were delivered to you shrink
wrapped, to teaching in a school where funds are scarce, and parent donations are virtually nonexistent.

I used to have daily prep periods where all of my students were mainstreamed throughout the day, to being the everything teacher for nearly all of my students. I teach students with mild to moderate disabilities, so they look like everyone else. I wouldn’t want to teach a moderate to severe class because it’s glorified babysitting. For me, the joy comes out of the teaching part. I try to mainstream my students here at this school, and it’s like, it’s not going to happen, at least, not for most of them. I don’t have the support, not from the gen ed teachers or administration. My students have been excluded from music and field trips. It’s really ridiculous; it’s their legal right to be included. We all just get conveniently forgotten. I try to be an advocate for my students. I’ve complained about it, but nothing really seems to change. I guess it’s fitting then that our classroom is like no other on this campus, and not in a positive way. Let’s just say that this room is not conducive to teaching or learning for so many reasons. Nobody would ever choose to teach in this room. I didn’t. No, it definitely was not a choice, but that’s kinda how it goes here. You don’t really get much of a say in these things. These are the kind of challenges that I deal with on a daily basis. Then I have my IEPs.

A lot goes into making an IEP. It’s not just the meeting itself that is a lot of work, but the preparation and getting parents to sign paperwork can be challenging. First, I have to schedule the meeting. Trying to get everyone together to agree on a date is no small feat. My classroom assistant speaks Spanish which helps when I need to make phone calls to parents or send notes home, but when I send out the meeting notices or the assessment forms, the parents don’t always check the boxes saying they’re coming or
giving us permission to test. They just sign it. Part of it is that some of them can’t read, even when I print it out in Spanish. Some of them are illiterate. Then I have to schedule an interpreter. I don’t speak Spanish, but I should. I mean literally, I should. My mother speaks fluent Spanish, I’m Latina, but we weren’t allowed to speak Spanish. It’s not like I haven’t tried to learn, but it’s just something that I can’t do. So, I miss out on that relationship with the parents who speak Spanish which creates a big barrier. I have to rely on an interpreter, and scheduling one is a huge deal at our school. I used to have an administrator who spoke Spanish, but even then, he wasn’t always available. Even now, administrators aren’t always available to be in meetings.

When parents arrive, we usually spend the first 10 minutes trying to find a room and a designee, even if they are just physically in the room or within earshot. We have been through so many administrators here at the school and in the special ed department. Philosophies change, and we have to do things differently every time someone new comes in. We don’t get any training on this stuff, just an email after the district’s been sued, telling us to change something, like “Make sure there is a gen ed teacher at all times in your IEPs. If not, you have to put them on the excusal form and get prior input from them.” I got that email towards the end of the school year. So next year, I’ll be sending the excusal form to the parents when I send out the meeting notices. There’s no way I can get a gen ed teacher to come. They’re all teaching when we hold our IEPs. Parents never complain or ask about it. They don’t even give real input at the meetings. They just say, “Whatever you say teacher. Whatever you think is good.” Even with interpreters there, it’s still the same thing. Occasionally, we have contentious meetings. That’s usually with the parents that were in special ed themselves when they were in
school, or if it's about losing their SSI. That's what most of these parents care about. It's not so much an ethnic culture clash; it's more about money.

Parents that are concerned with money typically don't care what's in the IEP. They just want to make sure that they still get the money. We'll all be prepared for an emotional meeting because the psychologist is going to tell them that their child has emotional disturbance, and the parent will ask, "Where do I get the papers for the money?" When we try to move a child from a special day class to go into resource, parents get upset because that means they'll lose transportation. Think about it. They'll be going back to their neighborhood school, and parents might not have the means to transport their child. So, I mean it's a few different things, but it all comes down to money. Especially at the district level. They'll cave and give parents what they want so they don't take them to court, even when it means that the child is not getting an appropriate placement. There are so many things wrong with this district. It can be really upsetting at times, but I just do what I gotta do to get through the day, and meet my responsibilities.

**Amanda.** I only became a special education teacher because I couldn't think of anything else that I would be good at. I held a lot of jobs growing up, but I was always working with kids, even at an early age. I started out in special education as a one on one assistant for a little girl that had Autism. I had no idea what I was getting into. I had never really heard of Autism, and when I started, no one gave me guidance or training. I met the parents the first day of school and they told me three things: she bites her finger when excited or upset, she'll hit when she's mad, but she loves it when you sing to her. Eventually, I went to school and got two teaching credentials, one mild/moderate, and
one moderate/severe. I’ve never taught in a mild/moderate classroom though. For seven years, I’ve been teaching students with moderate to severe disabilities ranging from first to sixth grade. All my students have intellectual disabilities. Some have Down’s Syndrome, others Autism or mobility challenges, but they all have severe developmental delays.

I got my job in Cervantes Unified as an intern because of my experience with behavior modification. It was a big shock my first year when I realized that modifying behavior in a contrived environment was far different and way more challenging in a classroom. I never got any training from my school district other than having a program specialist run my first IEP meeting after a quick tutorial on how to fill out IEP forms. I was never told to make sure I had a designee or never to have a meeting with just the parents and me. That I later learned in my intern program. Thank goodness for the intern program.

During my first few weeks on the job, I was told by a gen ed teacher to make sure my kids were under control because in previous years they ran amuck. I was terrified to be thought of as a teacher who didn’t have control over her class, so that first year, my students didn’t go anywhere if they weren’t in a line. After that I was praised for my obedient class. Even my principal gave me kudos, and although I appreciated that, she had only come into my room a few times that year. She rarely came into my room during the three years I was at that school, and she rarely came to my IEPs. She would always tell me to just put the attendance page in her mail box, and she’d sign it and get it back to me soon.
After a few years, we were moved to a different school. It was a lot smaller, but the staff was very welcoming and supportive, except the principal. I think she hated me. She challenged every decision I made. She’d email my supervisors, who would tell her I was correct in my actions, but she still gave me no reprieve. Even in the meetings, she’d challenge me. It was really quite embarrassing. After she left, we got a really great principal. He was completely opposite of the last one, and he went to everyone of my meetings, got to know my students and their families. We accomplished so much with his support. Then we had to move again. The principal I have now is kind and very supportive, but not quite like the last. The staff is nice, but my class is never included for field trips. I made sure to tell the gen ed teachers that we wanted to go, but there always seemed to be some excuse as to why my class couldn’t participate. I find that if I push and advocate for my students, I might get “shunned from the village.” My demand for a designee is also not appreciated, but after getting tenure, I stopped caring what others thought, and I just try to do my best to make sure my students’ and parents’ rights are not violated. No matter how I try, procedures and rights get violated all the time though.

I almost never get input beforehand from service providers who aren’t coming to the meeting. I always use the excusal forms, but I know that when I check the box that says written input was given to parents before the meeting, that’s not true. Parents don’t challenge it, and I tend to look the other way. It’s not like I can force people to do their job. In our district, we are really stretched when it comes to caseloads. Everyone has so much on their plate that making sure all Ts are crossed and all Is are dotted is not a priority. Still, we’re really good about getting the students what they need, even if it’s a one on one assistant. It’s a long process, maybe taking months to happen, so the
classroom might be in chaos until then, but it usually works out. It really bothers me how all the students’ educations suffer while we wait for the additional support. If parents knew what was going on in the class, I’m sure a few would complain.

We have some affluent parents, but most of the students come from low-income homes. They all get bused to school from all over the city, which means that during back to school night or open house, only three or four families show up. Actually, if four parents show up, that’s considered a huge success. Same at IEPs, when parents show up, that’s wonderful. What am I supposed to do when parents want me to do the IEP without them, or if they want to postpone the meeting past the deadline?

Getting support from the special education department isn’t always easy, but sometimes you have a great program specialist that will get you answers. Those are the people you want to know, and have good relationships with. It’s too bad that their assignments change almost every year. I’ve had four in my seven years of teaching. Staff turns over almost all the time. Between the two schools I’ve been at, I’ve had seven different psychologists, three just last year. I’ve worked with four speech therapists, three nurses, two special ed department supervisors, and countless assistants; although, one has been with me the entire time. It’s a difficult, stressful, frustrating job, but I love it. I just wish we had more support.

**Composite Depiction**

Most of us began a career in teaching as special educators after a history of working with children in some capacity. Whether it was a natural progression working as a classroom assistant or preschool teacher, or somewhere in the field as a psychiatric institutional assistant, we seemed to follow a pattern. A few of us had no experience with
children, but somehow made our way back into the realm of public schooling. Whatever the starting point of our own individual journeys, we have all come to the same place: special education. We all teach in large, urban school districts; though, some of us work in poorer neighborhoods than others. Collectively, we teach at all grade levels, kindergarten through twelfth grade, in several different programs for students who are deaf and hard of hearing, have intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbances, mobility challenges, and mild to moderate learning disabilities. We all have our own unique experiences, but we share many things. We have experienced several of the same challenges, and shared some of the same joys. This story is our story. We are special education teachers. We are decision-makers. We are responsible.

As special education teachers, IEP meeting facilitators, and case managers, we shoulder an extensive list of duties and responsibilities. Some of us have a lot of support to get the job done. Regarding her coworkers, Annie shared, “There’s some really good support staff here. We’re a great team. The administrator’s really supportive, and um, I’m friends with all the teachers.” Some of us are left to our own devices to meet our employment expectations. Violet said, “[To get a general education teacher to come to IEP meetings] we beg, borrow, bribe, whatever we can do.” Some of us are driven by timelines. Others are driven by influences of other IEP team members, but we are all advocates in some way, either for parents and as result our students, or we simply focus on giving voice to our charges.

In certain situations, we may feel clueless. “I have no idea to be honest…our district is always telling us different things…there’s always something that’s changing” (Annie), or we may feel helpless, “There’s nothing anyone can do about it” (Claudia).
Other times we feel confident, and successful, “I’ve never had a bad IEP. I don’t wanna say that I’m the man, like I’m awesome; it’s just—you know what I mean? I’ve never had a really bad one” (Reuben). We are perceptive to barriers that exist for our parents when it comes to being able to actively participate in their child’s education or in developing IEPs, “I can see the interpreter telling them, and they still have this ‘I’m not quite sure what you mean’ look on their face, and so I’ll leave the meeting just to bring out more stuff, so that they can see what we’re talking about” (Kari). We have to be very perceptive in our line of work.

Parents do not often ask questions in meetings, and more often than not, they just trust us to do what we think is best. We encourage them to participate in creating the IEP, but many of them do not contribute much, and we are not always sure why. It seems we have a variety of opinions to explain this behavior. Some of us think parents don’t understand what’s going on. “They’re like a deer in the headlights” (Claudia). “Even though we try to explain it as best we can, they might not understand exactly what we’re saying” (Reuben). In some cases we think that “some people are just frightened. It’s like they’re so out of their element. They don’t know because they are used to people telling them what is going to happen” (Annie). Maybe it’s that “…its’ so much paperwork, and it’s so confusing, so overwhelming…” or “they just think that we’re the experts” (Becca). A few of us even think “maybe they don’t care” (Reuben). Overwhelmingly though, we all agree that most parents view us as the authority regarding decision-making. “I had a parent tell me, ‘You’re the professional. You make the choice’” (Becca). “They’re relying on us with our expertise” (Violet). “They don’t want to second-guess us” (Reuben). Yes, we are experts in our field, but parents are experts on their child. We are
not sure why parents do not see it that way, or maybe they do. Maybe for some it has to do with culture: parents show their respect by agreeing with the education professionals. “Certain cultures are more like, ‘Well, whatever you think as the teacher.’ They're very respectful of the teacher... and they are not going to argue with you” (Becca). This belief is common amongst us. Many of us believe that culture has a lot to do with what we acknowledge as passive participation by parents in developing their child’s IEP.

Most of the families we serve are Latino, Asian, and African American. Discussions regarding culture as a factor in decision-making were primarily pertaining to Latino and Asian cultures. When engaging with non-English speaking families, we get responses such as, “Sure, whatever you think is fine” (Becca), and some of us have a hard time accepting that. “It’s like, ‘No, this is an IEP team decision,’ you know? ‘What do you and your husband think?’ And it’s like, ‘Well, it’s whatever you think.’ ‘No, not whatever I think’” (Becca). We may feel annoyed at parents when they appear apathetic, but when it appears that cultural factors are impeding our student’s progress on goals or their independence, we might feel frustrated, irritated, or disappointed. Amanda shared:

I had a fourth grader from a Latino family, and his parents would lay him down to change him. I offered a goal to teach him how to take care of himself, and they laughed at me. Well, he learned how to change himself, and his parents were still laying him down to change him at home. I felt like they were hindering his independence. It’s so frustrating!

Some of us have experienced this behavior with both Latino and Asian families. “In the Spanish culture, and the Filipino culture, and the Chinese culture, the Asian culture, the grandparents and everybody in the family just tends [sic] to do more for that child”
(Kari). We know some families that are Asian and Latino do push their children to become more independent, and what they are doing at home compliments what happens at school. We are speaking from our experiences within our classrooms and with our students' families. We also know many families don't operate this way, and Annie doesn't see any cultural factors playing a role in IEP development or parent participation:

I haven't seen culture play a huge deal. Plus, if it's Spanish speaking, there's a Spanish translator. Um, the principal's Hispanic as well, and I'm Asian. So, I don't know if that makes a difference. Yeah, I don't see that as an issue at this school.

Most of us have experienced cultural differences among our parents though, and we see some similarities in the way our Spanish speaking and Asian parents make decisions, which tends to be passively relying on us. However, counter to this behavior, there are times when culture appeared to be a factor for parents disagreeing and outright refusing suggestions by the rest of the IEP team. Parents may refuse to accept their child has a disability. We have also seen a difference in reaction from fathers from certain cultures when they learn their son has a disability as compared to learning their daughter has a disability. We are not sure why, but we speculate reasons for this behavior to be culturally motivated. We make judgments about families whose cultures vary from our own. We want to understand how the families feel, and we want to be able to connect with them to help them see our perspective, and to help us see their perspective. We sometimes perceive language and culture differences to blame for not seeing eye to eye with parents. For those of us in Bendita Unified, we also see that limited participation
does not always have so much to do with culture, inasmuch as it has to do with socioeconomics.

We recognize socioeconomics affect parent participation, decision-making, and attitudes during IEP development. Parents’ choices and perceptions play a role in their child’s education. We have had parents take their children off medication, so that they continue to qualify for services. Claudia gave an example:

I’ve had parents change their [child’s] medication, take the kid off meds once we’ve gone to the meeting and the county mental health has said, “They’re no longer qualified...” and for the rest of the year [they] to try to get that kid [sic] mental health back, back to qualifying. [The kids] were so devastated because they knew how successful they were...

How do we contend with that? We are powerless. Isn’t it the parents’ right to choose to medicate their child or not? We have no say in the matter. We’ve been told by our districts that technically, legally, we cannot tell parents to medicate their child, but sometimes we have a difference in opinion, “…I don’t talk about meds at all [satirizing]” (Claudia). We’ve had parents overtly express their lack of concern for what’s going into the IEP unless it is going to affect their income, their child’s supplemental security income (SSI), “…and it came down to [me] not saying I’m putting [their] child out of special ed. ‘You’re not gonna bother my money, so I’m good to go,’ and that’s sad” (Regina). In some situations, it was not the SSI that parents were worried about, there were other factors, such as transportation.

In both our school districts, special day classes are spread throughout the district. Not every school has a special day class; however, almost every school has a resource
program. For the students in a special day class, they have transportation services to bus them to schools that are outside of their neighborhoods. For students in resource programs, they attend their neighborhood school. Their families are responsible for ensuring they get to school. For parents who do not have transportation, they can be reluctant to approve a change in placement from special day class programs to resource specialist program (RSP). “If he went to resource, he would have to go back to his home school; then there’s no bus. They’d have to walk to school” (Claudia). How can we put our students in the least restrictive environment, if their parents won’t consent? Is it that parents are fearful for their children having to walk to school in their neighborhood?

We view issues of culture and socioeconomics to be out of our hands, especially when our districts do not back us up. When parents refuse to sign IEPs, it usually has to do with a disagreement in placement and services. In Cervantes Unified, we see parents who are more affluent exercising their rights, and demanding services, like music therapy, or one on one assistants, even when we believe their child does not need those services. Becca shared her inner dialogue during one particular IEP meeting exemplifying this concept, “What?! Your kid’s like, deaf. Your kid has music therapy?!” These parents are usually White, although culture doesn’t seem to be the prevailing factor. Socioeconomics is what triumphs. We believe that parents who are more affluent tend to know and exercise their rights, regardless of cultural identity, but for those of us teaching in Bendita Unified, we feel that when parents are concerned about how the IEP will affect their income, or the money they would be receiving because of their child’s disability, oftentimes those parents were African American and White with low income. In either situation of socioeconomic influence, our districts
cave, and give in to parents' demands in order to avoid lawsuits. We have seen egregious violations of IDEA involving students receiving services they do not qualify for, only to appease a parent who threatens to sue. How is it possible for a child who does not qualify for special education under any category receive special education services?

Our beliefs, practices, and attitudes are not always complimentary with those belonging to our families. We sometimes see parents as one or more of a barrier to students' academic and social growth, and we can make them feel intimidated and uncomfortable in IEP meetings, although we may not perceive our behavior as such. We push for IEP decisions that we feel will be best for the student. We all complete draft IEPs with draft goals ahead of time. We all present goals, asking parents for their opinion with questions such as, “What do you think?” (Reuben), “Are these okay with you?” (Becca), “Do you want anything added, changed, or removed?” (Amanda), or “Do you agree with these goals?” (Claudia). Our parents overwhelmingly respond with comments such as, “Whatever you think is right” (Annie), “Whatever you think is good” (Claudia), or “Whatever you think as the teacher” (Becca). Do they even feel like they can disagree? What do they think would happen if they did? What would we do if they told us, “No, I don't like that goal,” or “No, I don't agree with that?”

We feel we have positive relationships with our families. We think that if they were unhappy, they would let us know. Many of us do home visits, and we often have students in our classrooms for three years. It is inevitable that we will establish some sort of a relationship with the families, more often for better than worse. We have these meetings, sometimes with 10 or more participants, most of whom are education professionals, and we expect that parents are going to contribute. After all, this meeting
is about their child, not ours. Yet, for one reason or another, parents just don’t seem to want to contribute more than what little they do. Are they really that uncomfortable? Something is amiss.

We discuss IEPs with our colleagues before the meetings, so that we are all on the same page. Meetings are more likely to run smoothly if we communicate beforehand. We are all here for the student. As Becca said, “[We are] not trying to screw their child over.” We let them know when “it’s time for [a student] to mainstream” (Regina). We let them know where “[their child] would probably be better served” (Kari), and we make sure goals are addressing academic standards. We have tried to elicit parent input before meetings, but more often than not, they do not return our calls or the questionnaires that some of us send home. This is where a home visit might help, but not all of us have the availability to do this.

Home visits might be opportunities to hold IEP meetings, but it is not often that it actually happens. If we are unable to get a parent to come to a meeting on campus, we try to hold the meeting over the phone. It is likely that after three attempts, sometimes more, we will have the meeting without them, and send the IEP home with their child to be reviewed, the consent form signed. Getting that signature is crucial, probably the most important part of the IEP process for us. We sigh with relief when we get the consent form signed. With parents’ consent we can implement new goals, and give students services they need, or keep them from being pulled out of class for services they no longer need, and we avoid any “sticky situations” (Annie). Without their consent, it can mean we miss legal deadlines, or students’ educations can become stagnant. We cannot legally implement new goals. We have to continue pulling them out for services we
believe they no longer need. They have to stay in placements we feel are not meeting their needs, and may be impacting the education of other students in their class. We get stressed and feel helpless. We get irritated and frustrated. We are left to do whatever we can to keep our class out of total chaos. Dramatic as it sounds, it sure feels that way sometimes.

Our job comes with numerous responsibilities. If we can’t meet our deadlines, it’s usually us who are blamed. We have to schedule IEP meetings by collaborating with all team members. Inevitably, there is someone who cannot make it. When meetings are scheduled and parents do not show up, which occurs often, we have to reschedule meetings. Trying to schedule a time and place for everyone to meet is difficult, so imagine how hard it is to do it a second time, last minute because the IEP deadline is approaching or has now past. Never mind trying to get a general education teacher there. Most of us laugh at the idea. They are busy teaching, so no, they cannot make it, and even if they could, most often they do not know our students. What good could they possibly do? However, should a parent want a general education teacher there because it is their right to have one, we would have to table the meeting and reconvene on a later date, unless there just happens to be a general education teacher available, maybe one who is on their prep period walking the halls, so we use excusal forms.

Technically, an excusal form can be used to excuse a team member, including the general education teacher, from attending the meeting if their services are not being changed nor discussed. Well, most of our students do not see a general education teacher, so we feel that we can put them on the form, have the parent sign it, and then we are legally in the clear. What about team members who are unable to come to meetings?
Our teams often include occupational therapists and physical therapists, and many times they do not attend meetings because they are seeing other clients. Are we supposed to “drag the person from their clinic” (Violet)? The excusal form tells us to get prior written input from them, which in turn is given to parents before the meeting. Some of us have had luck getting written reports or input beforehand, but that does not always happen, “I rarely get reports ahead of time from others who are not going to be there” (Amanda). Still, they are added to the form, and parents sign it. We are under tremendous pressure to meet IDEA requirements and district policies. We do what we have to do.

We hold meetings where we can. Sometimes we hold them in our classrooms, and other times we hold them in copy rooms, staff lounges, or in cramped offices with clipboards on our laps to write. None of us have the luxury of a conference room where we know we will be completely free from interruptions. Where we hold our meetings does not always convey a welcoming attitude, nor a sense of equality. Imagine coming to your child’s school for an IEP meeting for which you took time off from work. You spend the first five to ten minutes having to wait in the office for a vacant room, and when one comes available, it is the speech room filled with tiny little chairs and a small kidney table, or it is an administrator’s office, with a few chairs, no table, walkie-talkies buzzing while the administrator-designee writes up discipline reports. How would you feel if you were the parent? Would you feel respected and as an important part of the team, or would you feel insignificant?

While we run meetings, we write notes to be later added into the IEP, or we type as we talk. Some of us are lucky enough to have a speech therapist that types while we are facilitating the meeting. Regardless, we are responsible for what is put into the IEP
document. We make sure we have all the boxes checked. We make sure dates are changed and updated. We definitely make sure parent concerns are recorded under the small section of the IEP document that asks for those specifically, even when parents say that they have no concerns. Regina gave this example:

Say parent has no concerns, parent voices no concerns, I will say, “Parent was asked if they had any concerns, if they thought that there was something that their child needed to help them,” um, “reach their goals,” or whatever, “and parent had no input.”

We add in our own data and opinions, and that of other team members into the rest of the document, unless it was already added as part of the drafted IEP, then we just read it. Sometimes, we ask the parent if there is anything they want to be noted under other sections such as where we might discuss toileting needs or social and emotional behavior. We try and elicit parent opinions and desires for their child’s future during transition planning, and some of us are really good about making sure students attend their own meetings in order to understand their hopes and dreams for the future. This legal and confidential document defines their educational path.

Whether we are merely conversant in IDEA, or an expert, we are all held to the same legal expectations. Additionally, we have district and workplace policies to which we must adhere. We talk about parents being overwhelmed and confused with the IEP process. We are, too. No matter how well we understand our responsibilities, we find it impossible to meet them all. In some ways our power is limited, and we have no choice but to satisfy our obligations to the extent possible, not to the extent expected.

Unanimously, we feel tremendous pressure to meet every IDEA regulation, district, and
school site policy. Do we meet every one? No. Even though our special education supervisors insist, we have challenges getting general education teachers in our meetings. “I mean, we all know you have to have a gen ed teacher there, and we all know it’s impossible” (Claudia). “The general ed teacher is usually not here. They’re never here after school, so those are excused” (Annie). If we are lucky, we are at a school that supports us to meet this expectation. “I make sure I have a general education teacher there...here at this site, they’re really good” (Violet). We creatively attempt to find ways to meet this expectation, even if it means that we have to bend the rules. “If I’m actually going to have to follow that law...the only way I can think of is when I send home a meeting notice, I’m gonna send an attached excusal notice for gen ed teachers” (Claudia).

Amanda believes there is a “loophole” to this legal requirement:

Technically, I’m pretty sure you don’t have to have a gen ed teacher there, if you can show that there is no way the student would be participating in gen ed. For most of my students, it’s just not going to happen. Most of them are four and five years below grade level, and we don’t have the staff to help them mainstream.

We are missing many supports and resources to do our job to both the letter and spirit of the law. Time is one of our most precious resources, and we never have enough. Administrators are busy with a multitude of other demands. Their presence at meetings is limited at best. Unless working at a single site, occupational therapists and physical therapist rarely attend. Psychologists have overtaxing caseloads. When they come to meetings, they usually do not stay the entire time, or if they do, along with all the other team members, they expect a speedy meeting. Depending on the site, policies regarding time allotted for IEP meetings ranges significantly; however, none of us start with a blank
document. We all have a draft, or type notes into the previous document to update changes made to the IEP. We are aware that technically, we should start with a blank document in order to give parents the opportunity to be fully included in the development of the IEP, but it is impossible to do so with our time limitations. “Does everybody want to sit here for five hours? It’s not feasible. I mean, right, you’re supposed to, but like, hello! They’re already long enough as it is. That’s why it’s just like, hello draft!” (Becca). “Yeah, I do a draft IEP...present levels, I do what I can do here. All that information is put in beforehand” (Annie). We have to come to meetings with goals already made, which we refer to as draft goals. “I will start doing the goals probably a week before...,” or risk upsetting everyone in the meeting (Regina). Amanda share:

I actually received an email from my program specialist telling me she expects us to have as much of the IEP filled out before she arrives to the meeting. One time, I forgot to do goals, and that meeting was so long. The other team members looked so annoyed.

When meetings run efficiently, they are completed in the amount of time anticipated, but that varies between all of us, depending on the culture of the school, and our own personal preferences. In general, meetings can range between 30 minutes to two hours. Some of us would never dream of having a meeting last longer than 45 minutes, even when it is an interpreted triennial. Others expect up to two hours; however, it is likely that many of the team members will leave early. Time is a major factor in how we run our meetings, but other resources such as supports to accomplish both IEP and classroom duties can play an equally important role.
Not only do we need time outside of our contracted obligations, we need assistants that can help facilitate lessons while we use classroom time to schedule meetings, start or complete paperwork, and assess students for progress on goals to establish new baselines. Some of us need classroom staff competent to run a small groups, or who can take data. Few of us have great assistants, and many of us would have preferred to have been included in the hiring process, “Somebody just shows up one day...they don’t want to help with anything” (Regina). We work in close quarters, and rely on our classroom staff to support us and our students. When this is not the case, relationships can be strained, so much in fact that and our working environments become inhospitable, even utterly unbearable. Healthy working relationships are crucial to conducive IEP meetings. If we feel unsupported, or have tense interrelations between team members, the negative feelings associated with those relationships can seep into meetings, creating unwelcoming atmospheres, and uncomfortable situations for everyone. How are we supposed to find common ground during disagreements when there are ill feelings between team members? It is no wonder IEP meetings are a source of stress.

We have so many responsibilities. There are numerous expectations we have to meet. Considering that we have taught between five and 30 years, it is plausible that we are experts in law and policy guiding IEP processes, whether as stipulated by IDEA, our district, or school site. In reality, we do not. There are too many IDEA regulations for us to know them all, and our workplace expectations are ever changing. Some of us feel undertrained, overwhelmed, and worried of perceived consequences if we violate procedures or make clerical errors. At times this job makes us feel frustrated, worried, sad, irritated, stifled, and nervous. However, at times we feel lucky, hopeful, trusted,
joyful, and appreciative. No matter how we feel about our job, at the end of the day, when our IEPs are signed, when parents are happy, when we see success in our students, we love our job, and are proud to be special education teachers.

Exemplary Depictions

This portion of Chapter 4 includes a complete portrayal of Violet’s and Reuben’s experiences. Although all of us took part in this phenomenon, these two stories parallel many others’ stories I have heard over the duration of my career from other special education teachers under similar circumstances. Their stories epitomized the interconnectedness of the themes found in this study, themes found in every one of our experiences. The essences of these storytellers can help others to understand what it means to be a special education teacher working in a large, urban school district, developing IEPs with culturally and linguistically diverse families with low income.

Violet. I met Violet in her classroom after school for our first interview. She greeted me with a kind smile, and welcomed me to sit at a kidney shaped table in the front of her room. It was a hot day, and the air conditioner was pumping cool air into the room, reverberating with a steady hum. She offered to turn off the large, antiquated machine. I declined the offer. Although it would have improved the audio quality of our recorded conversation, the temperature that day was a sweltering triple digit read on the temperature gage in my car. I opted for a more comfortable climate for our interview. After a brief and casual discussion about her students and how she had her classroom set up, we discussed her journey into teaching. I asked, “How long have you been a special education teacher?” Violet proudly replied, “I have been a special education teacher for
14 years.” I then asked, “How did you decide to become a special education teacher?

Violet candidly shared:

Um, well it had to go back to why I decided to become a teacher in the first place.
Um, funny thing is, when I was in high school, I never, ever thought I would become a teacher. That was the last thing I was ever gonna be, but with the jobs that I got, what could I get? They all involved working with kids, one way or another. So, it was just a natural progression that I went from preschool teacher to special education teacher, and when I finally decided to become a teacher, uh, it seemed like a natural thing to do to go into special ed because I know special ed from a student’s point.

Violet was in a resource program starting from the time she was in kindergarten through twelfth grade. She saw special education from both sides. “I know what it’s like,” she confided. “So, I decided to teach this population.”

Violet taught students with intellectual disability, grades 4 through 6. She had two classroom assistants she relied on for support throughout the school day:

My aides are doing great, especially my one that I’ve had that’s been here, that’s been in these type [sic] of classes for 20 years. She knows exactly what to do.

So, she’s really good, and she gathers up good information for me.

Violet worked for Cervantes Unified School District, located in a large urban city in Northern California. I asked her why she worked for that particular school district, and she said:

For me to decide Cervantes—Cervantes called me and said, “We want to interview you.” “Okay.” So, it wasn’t that I wanted to work for Cervantes, I was
just applying to Tinlock Hills (school district), [and] I was applying to North Pendale school district, you know. I was just trying to get a job. It was Cervantes who called me.

Although early on in her career she had taught on an out of state reservation, Violet had worked at one school in Cervantes Unified since she had been hired. Her school was located next to a large, well kept park in a residential neighborhood. Her students came from homes with a mix of income levels:

Over all the years I’ve been teaching, it’s always been a mix of students who come [sic] from welfare families to...well-off families. I believe I only have two students who pay full price [for lunch]. The rest are free. No reduced.

Although her school was not located in a neighborhood where the majority of families had low incomes, her students were bused to her class from all over the district; so, there were many students that came from low-income homes enrolled in her class. Violet’s classroom represented a culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse city.

Students in Violet’s class were Russian, Hmong, White, Latino, and Vietnamese. When she needed to contact her students’ non-English speaking parents, a classroom assistant on campus translated her notes if they were in Spanish, and would also translate to English, the notes Spanish speaking parents sent to Violet. When it came to IEP meetings, that same assistant would interpret for Spanish speaking parents. When she was not available, or when parents spoke a different language, such as Russian or Hmong, Violet scheduled an interpreter employed by the district. Violet described one case in which a student’s mother spoke both Spanish and English, but still requested an interpreter, “Mom understands more than she wants to let on, but it’s her right to have an
interpreter, so I make sure she has an interpreter.” It might have been that she was able to better understand Spanish than English, and wanted to make sure she was able to fully understand the goings-on of the IEP meeting. Violet was also able to get the IEP for this parent’s child translated into Spanish, due to legally influenced circumstances, a practice that she commonly reserved for parents who requested the translation, “Because she requests it, we have to do it. So, I know this may not be technically right, but I kinda wait for the parents to request it.” Violet believed there was a limited number of people available for translating documents, and she was concerned with the burden bared by those charged with the task:

There’s only like two people who can translate Spanish, or something. Who’s typing all that? And they’re taking that stuff—even though the district is paying them—they’re taking that home and continue [sic] translating it, and they’re giving up their time—spending time—and the weekend, just to translate, and that’s not fair to them.

Violet was also concerned with the financial burden translations services imposed on the school district, “We don’t have enough people, and technically... by law they all should be presented in their native language, but who’s going to do it, and who’s going to pay for it? I mean the poor district...”

During her time as a teacher, Violet had many parents who required interpreters at IEP meetings, and she made sure to have that need met. Although she had interpreters at meetings, she was not always able to have an interpreter to communicate with non-English speaking families outside of meetings when they spoke languages other than Spanish. She tried to get an interpreter to help her communicate with families in
preparation for meetings; however, “sometimes it’s not that simple. It’s—the communication, but I do try to talk to them. It just makes it harder.” In addition to discussing challenges and resources she uses for communicating with non-English speaking families, Violet shared other challenges she had with communicating with culturally and linguistically diverse parents:

Culturallywise [sic], um, their family may not be used to—um, in their culture, in their country, our children, our students—this class would never exist. Um, I know that in Vietnam, Hmong, they wouldn’t. Russian, same thing. They wouldn’t exist. Um, and I believe also in Spanish, too. Um, I know because, um, there was a case I heard about involved in this school…and they do have a special education program [where they are from], but not a severe [program] like we have, and so, they don’t understand, and they don’t understand why their kids cannot lean in the same way. If they’re not learning the same way like everybody else, then they’re not learning. [I] don’t understand that. So what they end up doing is, “Well, you know, he’s special needs,” so they end up, um, doing everything for the child, not treating them like a regular kid, not expecting them to be independent, um, expecting that he will all [sic] have to be dependent instead of independent, and that’s sometimes hard to do, too because here at school, we are expecting them to be independent. We teach them to how to be independent, and they go home, and their family does everything for them, you know?

Violet gave a couple examples of students she had in her class that had parents who she felt stifled their child’s independence:
...her mom was carrying her tray for her...because mom is used to doing everything, and in her culture, everything is done for them. They’re cared for, they're fed, you know, and clothed, you know, but they are not expected to do anything.

Another example:

Dad took a bite of her sandwich...Then he takes it out of his mouth, and feeds it to her, and he looks at me and says, “She needs smaller bites,” and I remember going [facial gesture of shock] “I’ll use a knife.” My aide just dropped the plate when he did it. Um, and then we worked with this child, and one day the father was there, and was just watching her with these toys, and he was putting them—these teddy bears—and he was saying, “Oh, look, soldiers!” Oh, that’s nice [laughing]. I’m like, I’m not impressed [laughing]. He’s using these teddy bears as soldiers. Okay!

Violet had challenges understanding these families’ cultures. She was bothered by practices that may have been commonplace in their country of origin, “We had to get somewhat of a history, but apparently, these families—this family coming from Russia thought—well because their cultural background, she stays home, and doesn’t attend school. That’s what we’re dealing with.” Culture clashes occurred in the classroom, and I presumed this occurred in meetings, as well. When asked, “Do you see their culture playing a role in decision-making during IEPs meetings?” she replied:

Somewhat. Yeah, somewhat, um, but a lot of times, I think they’re kind of passive, you know? Because they are relying on us. They are relying on us with our expertise, what’s good for their child, and what’s not good for their child.
When it comes to education—because again, I don’t think *they* need to be educated because I don’t think—like again, and them growing up, their background, they don’t know how to deal with children who have special needs, or how to educate them. So, they’re more relying on us, and they are just listening to us, and I get the feeling that sometimes they—because that feeling—they are just being passive, “Yeah, yeah, that sounds good.”

Violet felt there were many times when parents had passively participated in IEP development, and gave responses like those in the last example, expressing what I interpreted to be a trusting attitude. On the contrary, she also felt there were times when parents had actively participated, made demands, and insisted on services that might not have otherwise been offered:

...they’re demanding all these things because they can, you know? And I think the problem is they hear—they hear all these different, good things because a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend—their child was this way, and they did this, and Boom! the miracle. They woke up one day and started talking, and that’s not reality there.

Returning to her thoughts concerning parents making demands, Violet began, “I don’t know if this was a culture thing, or what it was, but, um, the parents wanted the sun, the moon and the Cadillac.” She spoke about a family that requested their child be put in a program with her sibling that was deaf, even though their daughter was not deaf. They wanted them to learn sign language together:

Well, the parents wanted her to be put in the deaf program, so she could learn to sign. Well, she can’t just—you can’t just put her into the deaf program, so that
she can learn signing, and they fought for that. It’s like, “No, she doesn’t qualify. Her hearing is fine,” and see, again they don’t…but to push, to push a child who is normally—who can hear normally, to push to try to put her in a program that’s not appropriate—you know? It wasn’t a culture thing. I think it was more that family, even though they were coming from a different culture, you know?

It seemed hard for Violet to determine whether culture was influencing and motivating this family’s demands. I believe culture influences everything. How could it not? Belief systems, in my opinion, are shaped in part by our histories, and our histories cannot be separated from our culture; therefore, I can understand how this family’s culture may have been a motivating factor for their decision-making process.

Violet told a few more stories of how she thought culture influenced a child’s education. She told a story of a Hmong family that cleaned up their child’s messes for him:

But as far as culture, I see—like the Hmong, I spoken [sic] to—but the father who knows a lot of English—I have a Hmong kid, and he just sees—I’m saying, “Yes, he can do that because he does it at school.” Like, I guess at home he will poop on the floor, and uh, or make a mess, and they will come up behind him and clean it up, and I’m saying he’s made messes—not poopy messes—he’s made messes in the room, and we give him a cloth and have him clean it up. Like he’s—one time he literally spilt his milk, “Okay, there you go. Clean it up.” “Oh, he doesn’t do that at home.” “Well, he does it here. Do you make him clean up?” “No, no, no, my wife doesn’t make him clean up. She cleans up.” I’m like, “That’s when we go [holds out a rag for the child to use to clean up a mess].”
think that’s kind of a culture because she doesn’t think he can do it, right? You know?

Violet had a hard time working through cultural barriers such as these, “So, I don’t know where we can put the balances, you know, to let them understand that some of these kids can do much more than they think they can.”

Violet had difficulty facing cultural barriers, and she also had difficulty working with parents that placed demands on the district. In some cases, she was unsure if it was culture that drove parent demands, or information they received from friends. She returned to discussing parents making demands. In addition to being bothered by what she perceived as false hope inadvertently given to parents by friends or through stories they read, Violet shared she was troubled by budgetary impositions brought on by attorneys:

What is happening—I’m not saying they shouldn’t do this, but parents are getting educated, and all of a sudden, they are demanding the Cadillac, the sun, the moon, and the Cadillac, and they’re getting attorneys, and these attorneys are—I’m sorry—I feel like they are milking the district because parents are not paying for this. The district is paying for all the attorneys.

Later on in the interview, when I asked Violet if she perceived income level affecting decision-making in the IEP, she said, “Yes and no.” Elaborating, she explained her perspective and its influences:

I had one kid whose parents both work, and they’re, you know, average income, and then we had another child, his mother was welfare, and those two situations, um, the decision that we made on goals, what their progress was going to be,
everything like that, had nothing to do with their income, but on the other hand, I have seen where parents influence because they have the money to demand their want [sic]. For example, I’ve had parents who have money, and you know, get the lawsuits, and music therapy, okay? Because they have the money, and they have the influence to get musical therapy where musical therapy could really benefit this other child whose mom is struggling. She works all day, but he doesn’t get it.

I asked, “Would it be fair to say that those families who are more affluent tend to advocate for their kids more, or even beyond advocating, pushing for and requesting services?” She replied:

I think yes. Yes because they’re more educated, um, not saying that welfare parents are not educated because they can be. They’re pushing there for their child, I would say so, too, you know? Um because—I’m thinking of this one child who got put in last year, even though the class was full...

Other times in our conversation, we discussed IEP decision-making. Violet tried her best to give parents a copy of drafted goals she created based on any prior communication with parents regarding their concerns for their child, and on newly established baselines determined by assessment data of progress made on the previous IEP goals:

I do the draft goals, “My goals for your child. Look them over. See if there’s anything else—if you want more goals, if you want a different goal for your child, do you want something?” because I’ve been in contact with them, and through parent-teacher conference. For some parents, it’s a note, it’s a communication
back-and-forth, um, sometimes phone calls back-and-forth; so—but I always tried [sic] to give them the goals, “This is a draft. This is not—this goal is not—nothing is set in stone until we affirm and attest. So, you know, if you don’t like something, if you feel like it’s too hard, we can talk about it.” I also try to get their concerns, and I do put that in the present levels when I talked [sic] to the mom at the meeting. I say, “Hey, you know, we talked on the phone, and you had expressed your concern about this and this. Is this still your concern, or—and—or is this still your only concern, or do you have more concerns?” This gives them time to think about it.

When Violet told me about giving goals to parents and asking their concerns beforehand, she was mainly referring to English speaking parents. When it came to non-English speaking parents, she said:

I try to give them the goals I can, um, or I—I’ll have the interpreter talk to them.

So, you know, sometimes it’s not that simple. It’s—the communication, but I do try to talk to them. It just makes it harder.

Violet invited parents to take part in changing or adding to drafted goals. Parents did not always take advantage of this invitation. Violet believed that may have been because parents relied on her to decide what the most appropriate goals were for their children. They trusted her to make decisions pertaining to their child’s IEPs:

Um, but what I have found with a lot of parents, and it doesn’t matter what culture they come from, basically, they’re trusting me on what to do. So, they just kind of lay back and go, “What do you think, Violet? What do you think, Violet?”
Like so many special education teachers, Violet was trusted to make important decisions regarding her students’ educations. Violet did not think these sentiments varied amongst parents from different cultural backgrounds. She treated all of her parents the same, regardless of culture or language. I asked her, “Are there any particular things that you might do differently besides having an interpreter in IEPs for families who are non-English speaking?” Violet explained:

Not really. I conduct the meeting in the same way I always do. It takes a little bit longer because sometimes they need it translated more, and I try to keep it—with any parents—I try to keep it very simple in terms-wise, but not much. I do the same greeting...It doesn’t matter who they are, I will greet them the same way...I do the same thing. I might present things in their native language, you know, like their copies of parental rights, but I don’t really do much different than I do for my English speaking parents.

Not only did Violet treat parents the same regardless of culture and language, she did not differentiate for socioeconomic status, “I do the same thing if the parent is from welfare, or if the parent is very wealthy. I do [the meetings] in the same way because when it comes to their meetings, they are treated the same.”

When parents arrived to meetings, Violet made them feel welcomed. She wanted parents to feel comfortable. Violet described where she held meetings:

I normally hold [meetings] in the conference room, in the office...it’s much easier. It’s—you come from the office because they always have to come to the office anyway. It’s easier to just go into that room, and they have big comfy chairs, and they have a nice table, and we have a computer right there...it’s a nice
room, neutral, and there’s plenty of room [because] sometimes you have 10, 12, 14, 20 people in that room! Or [sic] if we have that many, we go into the staff room where it’s much bigger, and then we put a sign, “Don’t Come In!” Usually, we put up a sign, “IEP in progress”…sometimes we’ve had to lock the door, so people don't accidentally walk in, but most of the staff here, when they see that sign, they know what it means. So, they’re respectful.

Violet brought students’ cumulative files to her meetings, along with drafted IEPs, including goals, and a hard copy of the present levels of performance pages, parental rights and procedural safeguards, and any pages that parents needed to sign. Violet shared that she had good relationships with her parents, and her meetings usually went quite smoothly.

Part of Violet’s IEP process of ensuring meetings ran smoothly started before meetings commenced. With a lot of paperwork to complete ahead of time, Violet prepared for IEP meetings several days in advance. In addition to assessing students on their goals and drafting new goals, Violet had a few other tasks to complete ahead of time:

I guess the first thing I’m gonna do is get my meeting notices out, [and] my prior written notices out, um, with my parents. Um, I email a lot of my team members…I try to talk with my parents first, and then my principal, and then just see if everyone else can meet that day. I try to do that far in advance.

Violet had to schedule meetings in advance due to the large number of participants, and the numerous schedules with which to work. It was sometimes difficult to get all team members to meet at the same time due to previously scheduled meetings, and team
members' responsibilities to serving other clients. Most meetings were scheduled to be held after school.

I wondered how she managed to schedule several meetings, having to account for others' schedules, as well. Violet explained, "It depends I guess, on the importance of the parents, but also the importance of the other team members, you know?" When her program specialist had to attend meetings, Violet worked around her schedule, as Violet believed her program specialist's schedule was most demanding compared to the other team members' schedules, and she had the least availability. Violet also tried to get a general education teacher to attend her meetings, as well, per her program specialist's expectation, "We beg, borrow [laughing], bribe, whatever we can, but no, here at this site they're really good, and we try to get them in and out. They're really good with that."

After meetings were scheduled, and Violet had prepared all the paperwork she needed beforehand, she was ready for the meeting. Violet walked me through how she began meetings once parents and professionals were seated, mixed together around a large rectangular table:

When we start, I do an introduction, so everyone introduces themselves. I present the parental rights to them, ask them those questions, "Um, you've read your rights? Do you know your rights? Do you understand your rights?" You know, at the meeting, "If you want to read it further, if you have any questions or concerns, anytime, call me, call my program specialist." I have everybody sign the attendance, um, and I will tell the parents, "At this time you're only signing, showing that you are participating in the meeting. You are not agreeing to anything at this time," and then we go into, "Okay, let's start with that top—
what's the strengths...” [top of the present levels of performance page].

Sometimes, I will pre-put something in there, like, “This is what I’ve seen...” As each team member is doing their piece, I’ll start adding it in. Um, sometimes, if I can [inaudible] and go, “Per telephone conference, your concern was blah, blah, blah, this and this. Is this concern still...? Does that concern continue? Do you have new concerns?” Sometimes that doesn’t happen [communication with parents about their concerns before the meeting]. Sometimes, I have parents that say, “I have no concerns.” “Well, you know, do you...” and I try to [inaudible—implying that she tried to elicit more input from parents] but sometimes they just, “I have no concerns at this point.” I say, “Well, okay, I will put that down.”

Sometimes I have parents that, “I’m concerned about their writing. I’m concerned about their speech and language.” Especially in sixth grade, “I’m concerned about what school they’re going to next year...” “I have to be honest. I don’t know what school they will be attending. These are the three schools that have this program, and I have no clue. In fact, you will probably be informed before I would,” and then we go into the present levels, and we go into—each member is giving the reports, and giving copies to the parents. Um, if there’s an excusal page, I do it. I know technically I am supposed to put the general ed teacher on because sometimes, they can’t make it if the meeting starts at 2:30, but they can come [after] 3:00. I’ll tell the parents, “I’m having Mrs. So-and-so, or Mr. So-and-so come in, but right now, he’s in class,” and I know technically, were supposed to put them on the excusal page, but half that time, it gets overlooked...and so when I have the teacher come in, I kind of let them come in
and [I] say, Can you give us an overview of what fifth graders are doing at this time, what they’re studying, what they’re doing in math”...most of the time I’m asking parents, “Do you have any questions for Mrs. So-and-so?”...and I have parents who are like, “No.” “Okay. Well, if it’s okay with you, can I have Mrs. So-and-so excused from the meeting?” “Yes.” “Okay, here Mrs. So-and-so, sign that you are here [on the attendance form],” and then we conveniently forget the excusal page [laughing] because it’s so grrrrr, and then we just talk, you know? Um, I go—we go through the goals. I go through my reports, the progress reports. I give them everything. We go through the other pages, what level they’re testing, what services they will get. Um, are they getting transportation? Yes, I tell them that they’re getting transportation. We talk about, “at this time we are looking at the least restrictive environment,” you know? “The SDC/ID [special day class/intellectual disabilities] class is the least restrictive environment program for your child with the support of blah, blah, blah,” and if they’re happy, they will sign, and then I make it—you’ll see I make copies, so that they have everything. I do tell them, “I need to affirm and attest because sometimes I do do [sic] spelling errors and grammar, I’m gonna go over the IEP. If I find a mistake...If there’s errors, I will send you an updated copy to add to your files,” and I’ll put on it “updated copy.”

Violet’s meetings flowed in a natural progression, and she did everything she could to keep parents happy and to successfully complete a fully developed IEP by the end of the meeting. If parents had questions that she could not answer, or if they made requests that
could only be addressed by her program specialist, Violet had to table, or pause the meeting, to be rescheduled and reconvened at a later date:

I know I’ve been in cases where the parents have requested a service like musical therapy. “I can’t say you can have it.” At that point I say, “Okay, I do not have…the authority to do it…If you are bound and determined, table this meeting…We will revisit this another time when the program specialist comes here…” And I don’t like having to table meetings, and trying to reschedule everything…I’m the one who runs it, but a lot of times, I can’t make certain decisions. There is a lot of decisions I can’t make as my role.

Although Violet had some discretionary power, her authority was limited in respect to allotting services. This was somewhat contrary to what Lipsky (2010) suggested with street-level bureaucrats; however, he did recognize we had various levels of power and the number or severity of challenges varied between teachers, as well.

Like many of us, Violet managed her responsibilities while she contended with copious challenges. Violet mentioned she did not like to table meetings because rescheduling meetings could be difficult. She was adding another meeting to her overwhelming schedule and to those of team members. Parents had to alter their schedules, too; however, Violet was willing to be flexible with her schedule to accommodate parents:

I had a meeting at Starbucks…we did it on paper. [The principal] and I met this parent…and [the parent] brought a friend over with her… I had everything in a draft, and then we wrote notes down…I said, “I don’t want you to sign it until
you’ve seen everything we talked about, and then you can sign it. I’m just showing that we had a meeting, that you’re participating in this meeting.”

Violet completed the paperwork at school the next day and sent the IEP home for the parent to review and consent. Violet wanted parents to be comfortable, and suggested when necessary to hold meetings “in a neutral place.” It was important to Violet that she made parents “happy.” She frequently used the term, happy when she stated what she found made a meeting successful, “If they’re happy, they will sign it... [I am] glad [when] the parents [are] happy.” Violet also talked about what made meetings challenging, “Making sure the deadlines are met.”

Violet gave examples of having difficulty meeting deadlines, “They used to give you a week to get everything affirmed and attested. Now, they’re just giving you three days, and that’s not always possible...” After completing IEP meetings, district policies determined how many days were allotted to complete paperwork and make IEPs official. It was hard meeting these policy expectations when we had other responsibilities, such as teaching. Violet reported it was difficult not knowing certain aspects of special education and educational law, “Another challenge I have is when it comes to IDEA [and] foster children. I’m talking about the law when a child’s in foster care, who has educational rights? Because only the one who has educational rights can sign the IEP.” From my own experience, teachers were not always informed about educational rights. It did not seem we understood that goal development was intended to happen collaboratively with parents. Doing so might have alleviated challenges associated with goal development, a challenge that Violet explicitly underscored.
Violet stated how difficult it was to develop goals for certain students. When I asked her, “How do you decide which goals to include in the IEP?” she elaborated with two examples:

That can be really difficult at times, and it’s based on the individual... I’m working on this case now. Where do I start? I’m looking at her old goals, and she didn’t quite meet her goals. She was a few percentages off on meeting the goals... based on what I observed and stuff, she got 70%. It was 80% [percent needed to meet goal], and so she missed it by a few marks, but at the same time, I know she’s capable of doing more.

Violet “bumped up” this students’ goals with new baselines. She did not say whether she noted the goals was actually met and created a new goal with new baselines, similar to the old goal, or if she continued the previous goal with new baselines and new qualifications for meeting the goal. The second example Violet gave concerning difficulty creating goals had to do with a student that had intellectual disabilities more severe than the other students in Violet’s class:

Where do I go for this child? What do I do for this kid, now? Do I do more functional goals? Do I do more academic goals, or safety issues? Do I continue the goal, or do I find something else that’s more productive?

Violet also believed that at some point, goals needed to be dropped “because when you’ve had the same goal for five years, and you’re not making progress, you need to change it up.” Some of our students came to us with goals they had for years. The decision to drop goals could be made with the help of other team members, especially parents. Violet did not say whether a conversation ensued at these students’ meetings
pertaining to the difficulty she had developing goals. It might have been helpful to get parents’ opinions.

There were other challenges Violet had in addition to meeting deadlines and developing goals. She had difficulty reading other service providers' reports when they were absent from meetings, “I appreciate when O.T. [occupational therapists] and PT [physical therapists] can come because when I have to read the reports, I don’t know what bi-lateral means…Sometimes, these technical words, I have honestly no clue what it means.” I shared this sentiment. It appeared we needed training in reading reports from other service providers. It might have helped us to understand what service providers were doing, and how they were supporting our students. We might have also been able to answer parents’ questions about their reports. Revisiting this challenging aspect of her job, Violet said, “I am not an expert in that area…if a parent wanted, we would have to table the meeting, and have that person come to the meeting, which creates delays.” Violet did not feel confident in reading other service providers’ reports. She also did not like tabling meetings, as it added weight to her already burdening challenge of meeting deadlines while still having to address other workplace expectations.

Time management was most difficult for Violet. She wished she could change how she managed her time more than anything else. “I always want to change my teaching. I always want to change my time management, sometimes my classroom management, but mainly my time management.” Violet shared stories of her struggles being a special education teacher. She shared her joys, and concerns, and she confided in me how she managed to get through the day, meeting legal and workplace expectations as best she could. She asked me to share this with readers:
Just remember that I am a human person, and I have a life outside of school. I don’t know about you, but everybody who doesn’t know this, we have a life. We have families. We have a life, you know?

Reuben. Reuben grew up in a town not far from where he worked. He lived in a culturally and economically diverse neighborhood. His mother was an assistant in a classroom for students with disabilities, “I used to visit the class, and it was fun...I would go and volunteer and stuff, and then it was my turn to kinda figure out what I wanted to do.” At first, Reuben followed in his mother’s footsteps. Soon after moving out of his mother’s house, he got a position with a local school district, working as an assistant, “The first thing I thought of to be for a job was to go be an assist[ant] because I [knew] I wanted to teach...and then it just kinda fell into place after that.” He did not choose to work in Bendita Unified School District; it just happened that they were willing to hire him as a long-term substitute teacher until he had satisfied certain requirements. I asked Reuben why he continued to work in Bendita Unified. He replied, “I like the school that I’m at. I think that’s why. The district seems to be in a mess, but the school, individual schools seem really strong...and there is really good staff.” Reuben seemed to enjoy working at his school. He felt like he belonged to a team:

I’ve never been in that big a group before for special ed; so, it’s nice to have, like, a team, and I feel part of something [because] before, I never really felt part of a team. I was always by myself...

Reuben had the opportunity to work with other special education teachers, and felt more included at his school. He felt part of a team at his site. He was not only a special education teacher; he was also the IEP meeting facilitator for his IEP teams.
Reuben taught at a high school, and had a special day class where the focus was primarily on teaching students independent life skills. He drafted IEPs and transition plans meant to assist his students with life after high school:

I always try to think long term, especially after high school...trying to get the stuff that they are going to be able to take outside, you know, job application skills, um, how to ride the bus...independent skills that are needed to take care of themselves...

Reuben created goals based on what he thought his students needed, and based on observations in class. He presented drafted goals to parents at IEP meetings, and asked for their input:

...but goals, I try to just—I put them in but I—I usually leave it more for like suggestion, and I’ll say, “I think we should do this,” and—or they’ll agree with it or not, and I’ll delete it right there, or add, or keep it in.

Reuben continued:

I don’t ever delete goals unless it’s—unless it’s a three or four year old goal that they haven’t passed, and we were kinda told by our district that if a goal is more than three years old, and they haven’t accomplished 100%, to just get rid of it, and start over. It’s kind of an unwritten policy...I never cut it before asking the parent, um, just in case because I—even though they tell us to, I always make sure the parent is okay with it [because] that’s up to them.

Reuben considered himself to be an advocate for his students and his parents. Throughout his interview, Reuben frequently discussed his struggles with drawing out active parent participation during IEP meetings. He received little feedback from parents.
Reuben asked parents questions, trying to engage in conversation about their child. Reuben explained, “So, I try to include them. I try to include my parents as much as I can, and ask, ‘What do you think we should do in class? What are you doing at home? What do you think we should change?’” Reuben explained how he viewed parents’ roles:

I honestly think it’s—they’re the ones running the IEP meetings. The way I view it, I try to get them—I always ask questions. I’m always asking, “What do you think we should do? How do you think this is going at home?” I think their input drives the IEP.

With many families, Reuben was not as successful as he hoped to be at gaining parent input:

...It’s frustrating because I think they’re so—like I said, some are just saying, “Oh, no, it’s okay,” and they’re totally sweet about it. They’re like, “Oh you know what you are doing. I don’t care. No, you’re the professional. I trust your judgment” kinda thing. It makes me feel good that they trust my judgment, but I kinda want them to question me, and say, “What are you doing? Can we do this? Can we change this? Can we try this instead?” You know, and it’s hard. I don’t know if they understand the process of how we do things in class, like actually the instructional part, or if they just don’t care. You know, it’s frustrating to not know what they’re really thinking, and I think that’s the biggest issue.

Reuben expressed his frustration with parents not taking the opportunity to give their own ideas and suggestions during decision-making. Reuben was puzzled by what he perceived to be their lack of contribution, and possible apathy. He also shared, “Their
opinions matter, too, and I think a lot of them don’t feel their opinions matter.” As he continued, Reuben pointed out that he could only do so much to encourage parents to actively participate. He wanted parents to take responsibility for their role in IEP development, “It’s not fair on their part that they’re just sitting there, letting all these people talk, and they’re just kinda, you know, just going along with the flow.” He was not trying to place blame on parents for the existence of barriers to their participation; he was expressing his view that he depended on them to utilize opportunities he gave them to actively participate. Metaphorically speaking, he wanted them to walk through the door that he had opened.

Reuben recognized there were power imbalances between families and education professionals. Speaking in regards to parents that are culturally and linguistically diverse, Reuben shared his opinion as to why some parents did not provide feedback when he sent notes home, or when he tried to elicit their opinions in IEP meetings:

I think they’re intimidated because they don’t really—I think a lot of them don’t understand the process…I think they are just scared because we’re, you know, professionals, and they’re kinda of…it’s just that they don’t know. They don’t want to, like, second-guess us because they don’t think that they know. I had a parent tell me, “You’re the professional. You make the choice.”

When we discussed language barriers, he asserted he scheduled interpreters for meetings. However, even with interpreters, Reuben thought, “…they don’t feel that they can communicate properly what they’re trying to say, or they might not understand enough about…what we’re talking about.” In Reuben’s perspective, parents’ lack of contribution to discussions in IEP meetings was also attributed to differences in education between
parents and other team members. He shared a story about a Latino mother that wanted to disenroll her child from school:

I had one parent say that she didn’t want her kid in school because he was going to work in the field after high school. He needed to make money, and so she didn’t want him in school, and we had to explain to her that he had to wait until he was 18 [because] he was 15 at the time. So, I think a lot of it is they just don’t really—I don’t know. It’s not that they don’t value education, they just don’t understand it. I think a lot of them understand their kids’ disabilities, and they understand their kids are lower, you know, and they’re probably not going to get where they think they should, and that they’re [parents are saying], “Maybe I should just, you know, forget about it. Maybe I should let them work in the field because that’s what they are going to do anyway,” kinda thing.

Reuben considered this an example of the existence of different levels of education between parents and other team members. It was possible that this was an example of cultural differences or dissimilarities of educational values playing a role in decision-making. This mother had goals for her child that were very different from Reuben’s and those of the other team members.

Reuben worked with several other education professionals in developing IEPs. In Reuben’s meetings, the designee was almost always a vice principal. It was rare that the principal participated in IEP meetings, “It’s usually one of the three VPs [vice principals]. The principal never comes to an IEP unless it’s super important.” While transcribing this statement, I asked myself, “How would that make a parent feel to know the principal only came to IEPs that were considered important? What made an IEP
important in the eyes of the principal?” I followed up with Reuben, and his response was, “He hardly goes to any IEP unless it’s a really contentious meeting, or there are some legal issues with the school. I think he has maybe gone to one IEP in the four years that I’ve been here.” If it was possible a meeting might result in financial repercussions negatively affecting the school district, the principal attended the meeting. Reuben also explained that it was not often that designees actively participated during meetings:

Unless it’s something really important, like if there’s a behavior, or the kid—there’s an issue with mom and dad. I usually just talk to the parent, and the administrator just kinda sits [because] they don’t really input a whole lot.

Other team members included the school psychologist when the meeting was for a triennial review, the speech therapist, and any other service providers. Reuben seemed to get along with the other service providers; however, he mentioned aside from the psychologist, other team members did not always have their information ready in time for IEPs, “Some don’t…and that’s probably the most frustrating part…” It was expected that service providers would have students’ present levels of performance entered into IEP documents before meetings. If service providers were absent from meetings, Reuben presented their reports and comments to attendees. When information was not provided, Reuben was unable to tell parents how their child was doing with goals from other service providers. This was a challenge for Reuben. Fortunately, he did not have the same challenges with the psychologist that he had with other service providers. In fact, Reuben received support from the psychologist regarding clerical and procedural duties, “…if she knows something is coming up, or if things need to be done in a certain way…she’s usually pretty good about talking and communicating, walking me through
it.” Although Reuben commented that he did not have much support as far as receiving training on how to write IEPs, or receiving guidance from anyone in the special education department, he was given some support from his psychologist. Reuben described her role in meetings was to present information regarding eligibility for special education services. He believed information she presented had greater value than information he presented, “I’ll let her go over her results first because usually, I always think that hers are a lot more important than mine, especially if it’s a testing change, or placement change…,” and he believed her reports were far more difficult for parents to understand than any other information presented, “I think their stuff [psychologist’s reports] is the most—the hardest to understand, especially when they talk about the testing results…cognitive levels, and stuff like that. I think parents just don’t understand.” I agreed with Reuben that it could be difficult to make sense of psychologist reports and explaining testing results. If it was difficult for him to understand his psychologist’s reports, and he spoke the same language of his psychologist, imagine the difficulty parents who did not speak English had with understanding that information. Even with interpreters, parents were also having difficulty understanding IEP processes, as noted by Reuben when he said that even with interpreters “they might not understand enough about the, um, what we’re talking about.” Communication is key to understanding. For parents to understand complex information presented at IEP meetings, communication must be free of special education jargon, as suggested by Jones and Gansle (2010).

Reuben tried to communicate with parents in IEP meetings using as little professional jargon as possible. He modified the language he normally used in discussions with other education professionals, “I try to do it [modify language] with all
my parents because even the English speaking ones may not understand...it’s just part of the process, my IEP process...” Reuben conducted IEP meetings in ways he thought would make parents feel comfortable; however, his style was not always appreciated by designees and his psychologist:

I’m more laid back in my approach, and I’ve been told that’s a detriment sometimes because they say, “You know, you should be more strict, and this and this,”...but I try to make the parent, as much as possible, as comfortable as possible. I’m not trying to appease the administrator, and the psychologist. My job is to make sure the parent’s comfortable, and they are, you know, okay with what's going on in class...my responsibility is to the parent. That’s how I see it.

Since he was the facilitator, Reuben had discretionary power to run his meetings as he felt was best. He focused on parents’ comfort, providing a welcoming atmosphere that was conducive to drawing out parent input. Part of a welcoming atmosphere is not only the temperament of team members, but also the location of meetings (Dabkowski, 2004).

I asked Reuben questions regarding the school environment, how parents were greeted, and where IEP meetings were held. Reuben depicted an atmosphere that at first appeared friendly and hospitable, “When they come in, everybody is required to check in at the front...So, they’re usually greeted by the security guard...she really nice, and then they’ll come in, and they’ll [front office staff] point them in the direction of the room.” Then Reuben described the where he held IEP meetings:

We have a specific conference room that we use. I don’t really like where the location is because...the conference room is kinda in the middle of the psychologist’s [office], the speech office, and the two RSP teachers’ [offices], and
so everybody that needs to come into those offices goes in through the IEP. They physically walk through the doors...because it’s right in the middle of the four doors....and sometimes other teachers will come, and other students....I think after awhile you block it out. I think it still kinda like, I think it kinda disrupts the flow a little bit because there’s something coming in, and there’s noise, phone calls, something, you know? It’s just kinda irritating after awhile.

It really bothered Reuben that IEP meetings were interrupted. These meetings were confidential, and when people walked into meetings, even if they were just passing through, it violated parents’ right to privacy. Reuben was not okay with this blatant violation of parents’ rights; yet, he felt there was nothing he could do about it. He confided:

I’ve had IEPs that have run over [the allotted time frame] because we all share the conference room; so, it’s kinda strange, it’s really—and, and I know it’s totally illegal, but when the administrator’s standing there, too, and they don’t say anything, you kinda just sit in the hallway and talk, and I think that’s a frustrating thing, too....sometimes it’s blatant that you’re messing up, and you know you’re messing up, but what are you going to do?

I was surprised when he shared this. Again, I had to wonder how it would make a parent feel. If I was the parent, how would I feel to have my child’s IEP meeting held in a hallway? What would happen if Reuben brought his concern to the administrator? When I asked Reuben, he said, “I’d probably get in trouble.” He had to comply with workplace expectations, in order to maintain a comfortable work environment while simultaneously managing his internal struggle. He wrestled with ethical contemplations and self
preservation. He knew what he felt was right, and he believed to express those feelings would lead to negative ramifications. He felt like this as a result from others’ actions. He felt slighted and with few options:

I think that comes back to the lack of respect thing. I don’t feel like it’s my lack of confidence; yet, if I know something is blatantly wrong, I don’t feel like it’s my place to say anything...it’s stepping on an administrator, you know what I mean? There’s that line. Do you want to cross it? Should you cross it? You know, you have to kinda play within those professional boundaries, I guess.”

I understood how he felt. I had been reprimanded for pointing out illegal practices by an administrator, and that resulted in an uncomfortable working relationship. Reuben added:

There have been times where I’ve bit [sic] my lip, and I wanted to say something in front of them, but I didn’t because it’s like, I don’t want to come off like a jerk or like I’m arrogant, or that—you know what I mean? It’s hard to come up with a balance.

Violet had a difficult time finding balance between teaching her students to be more independent, and contending with what she believed was a stifling of their independence at home. Here, Reuben had difficulty finding balance between expressing his concerns with parent rights violations, and being perceived negatively by his coworkers. Additionally, Reuben was concerned about his relationships with team members. Those were people he had to interact with on a regular basis. Positive relationships were important to him.
Reuben reported having good relationships with his students’ parents. He knew they trusted him to make decisions, even though he wished they would make some on their own. Nevertheless, there was less stress associated with keeping parent relationships positive because they seemed easier to maintain. Reuben might have felt frustrated by their lack of communication; however:

...most of my families are great...I don’t think the ones that I do talk to have any issues. I always tell them, “Feel free to come in class. Visit anytime you want. If you have any questions...” I give them my cell phone number. I have parents that’ll text me all the time.

He offered parents a direct connection to their child’s teacher to communicate verbally and via writing (texting). He cared about staying connected with families; although, it was difficult for parents that did not speak English to communicate with him in this manner. There was a disconnect between Reuben and his non-English speaking families. He tried to bridge the gap during IEP meetings; however, it was more difficult to do that outside of an IEP meeting, where he did not have access to an interpreter for all communications. Like some of us in this study, Reuben felt he tried the best he could to carry out his responsibilities while balancing both legal and workplace expectations, and covertly, his ethics. There were moments he was concerned how coworkers perceived his actions in IEP meetings, as mentioned above, and other times where he felt confident that he could assert what he considered his ethical obligations. His feelings of confliction were evident in his comments, “...I don’t want to come off like a jerk or like I’m arrogant...” and “I’m not trying to appease the administrator and the psychologist. My job is to make sure the parent’s comfortable...my responsibility is to the parent.”
Ultimately, he knew he was an advocate for his students and their parents, and at times he felt he could act on their behalf with overt discretion, “My job is to be their [parents’] advocate, and their child’s advocate, and I do whatever it takes…” Like all of us that participated in this study, Reuben had a challenging career. We all tried our best to be advocates, to balance legal and workplace expectations, to meet our students needs, and to maintain a comfortable workplace environment.

Exploring Themes

During analysis of transcripts, field notes, documents, and my personal journal, several themes and subthemes emerged. I was able to classify data into five distinct categories or major themes: Perceptions, Feelings and Emotions, Barriers, Evidence of Best Practices, and Challenges. Additionally, I developed a poem entitled, Who Are We? presenting data underscoring a sixth theme, illuminating and expressing what it is like for us, this study’s participants, to work in the field of special education. It is this final theme that I believe paints the clearest picture of what it means to be a special education teacher. This final theme, as expressed in poetic form, is found in Chapter 5 as the creative synthesis.

After coding and analysis, I found that many of the subthemes overlapped into other themes. For example, school climate and team dynamics are interconnected with all major themes. In this section, I explain themes I uncovered, and highlight examples found in data, many of which were underscored in the individual and collective depictions. Others were further emphasized in the exemplary depictions. Each theme in this section is detailed separately, though it is noted where and how themes interconnect or are interrelated. It is difficult to develop an understanding of how themes relate when
viewed individually. Themes appear more relevant and tangible when viewed within the
system of which they are a part. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, this section
attempts to explore themes found through a linear progression. Evidence of street-level
bureaucracy (SLB) was recognized predominately under the theme Challenges, although
it appeared throughout other themes, and was noted as each theme was investigated.
Insight into each of the five major themes, their subthemes, which I refer to as minor
themes, and how systems and SLB frameworks fit the study are discussed in this section.

**Perceptions.** The major theme Perceptions is comprised of 20 specific
subthemes, which are collapsed into nine minor themes: (a) identity: how we view our
identity as a special education teacher; (b) parents: how we view our students’ parents,
and their role in developing IEPs; (c) employer: how we view the school district we work
for; (d) staff: our view of school staff including classroom and site support staff, office
staff, administrators, and other IEP team members; (e) meeting environment: our
opinions and perceptions of the meeting location; (f) IEP document/online program: our
view of the system in which we create actual IEP documents; (g) laws and policies: how
we perceive IDEA, school site policies, district policies, nonspecific policies, and
perceived consequences for violating laws and policies; (h) students’ needs: what we
believe to be our students’ educational needs; and (i) disabilities: how we view various
disabilities.

*Minor theme: identity.* Under this first theme, we explained how we viewed our
roles as special education teachers, IEP facilitators, case managers, and IEP team
members. We have expressed what is or is not our duty. We perceive ourselves to be
advocates. Reuben shared how he viewed his role, “My job is to be their advocate, and
their child's advocate.” We view ourselves as being responsible for completing IEP related tasks. As Regina put it, we have to “run the IEP,” and “cheerlead” to keep people motivated. We feel we must “try and do what’s best for them,” according to Annie, and make parents “happy,” according to Annie, Violet, Amanda, and Reuben. Several of us used the term happy to describe the way we believed parents should feel if we fulfilled our duty of finalizing an IEP.

At times we might have perceived ourselves as belonging when we have someone with which to collaborate, or alone when working on a site where few other special educators work. Reuben discussed being in a place where he felt included and part of a team, “…I’ve never been in that big of a group before for special ed, so it’s nice to have like, a team… I never really felt a part of a team. I was always by myself.” This idea of feeling alone or excluded was noticed when we worked in situations where general education staff excluded our students from attending field trips or general physical education, when we were placed in classrooms pushed off to the side, or when we were included in staff meetings, yet very little if any information pertained to us and our students. We believed in the importance of our role, but also believed there were many things left to learn and improve.

When asked what we wanted to improve or change, we revealed several different aspects of their job responsibilities, and the special education process by which we are legally and politically governed. From Cervantes Unified, Becca expressed a need for learning how to read the results of psychological testing for triennial IEP, such as those from the Woodcock Johnson, Third Edition. Although she felt competent in creating goals and completing IEP documents, she voiced her desire to increase “parent
involvement.” Annie who was also working in Cervantes Unified believed that she probably needed to improve “probably everything” she did. She wanted to know how to write legally defensible IEPs, so that if her work was to be audited, the auditor would find that she had done everything correctly. She said she wanted Cervantes Unified to give her a model from which to write her IEPs. She also mentioned wanting to improve lesson planning, and teaching fluency and math with Common Core standards. Violet, who taught for Cervantes Unified as well believed improving “time management” was most important. She also expressed wanting to improve classroom management, and teaching skills. Also working in Cervantes Unified, Amanda expressed several changes she wanted made. She wanted her students to be included on field trips, have competent classroom staff, be able to communicate more often with parents before IEP meetings, and have more support by school administration and special education administration with incentives to attend trainings.

Employed by Bendita Unified School District, Reuben expressed that he wanted to increase communication with parents on a weekly basis, as well as improve what he called “the clerical part” of IEPs, getting all the paperwork turned into the special education department, and updating the special education folders he had for each of his students. Kari, who also worked for Bendita Unified, felt she was good at everything. In fact, she was given a model of an excellent IEP document. “You know what? It turned out to be my IEP. I was like, ‘Thank you.’” The only change she wanted to see was with the current online IEP system used in both Cervantes and Bendita Unified School Districts. The previous online system Bendita Unified was using would not permit users to leave the page while affirming and attesting IEPs if something was missing. The
current IEP system does not have that feature. She also preferred the goal bank in the previous program to that of the current program. There she was able to find sample goals that she could modify to fit her students’ needs as opposed to starting at square one to create goals. The current program’s goal bank was not favored. In Bendita Unified as well, Regina reported she “would like to team teach with a general ed teacher” in order to learn how to improve her teaching skills, as well as teach them how to make accommodations for students who are mainstreamed. She explained, “You could learn from me how to accommodate, and I could learn how to raise the bar for those kids.” She also voiced her desire to mainstream more students, not just based on their skill level. One of the biggest changes she wanted to see was parents being given an option of who they wanted to be at IEP meetings, instead of having what Regina calls peripheral people in IEP meetings, such as the speech therapist.

Claudia, who also taught in Bendita Unified, underscored her desire to speak Spanish, though she admitted she would never actually learn. “I wish that I could, but would I? Would I ever learn? Probably not.” She also stressed how important it was to have a meeting location, and designee ready when parents arrived for IEP meetings, as opposed to trying to track one down, or having an administrator within ear shot, behaving as though they was actually a part of the meeting. She felt having to wait for a meeting room or designee either made her look unprepared, “I’m wasting the parents’ time. I scheduled a meeting. That doesn’t make me look like a professional.” Ultimately she also wanted the resource of time. Not all of us mentioned wanting more time as something we wanted to improve or change; however, it was evident during interviews
that time was a limited resource that affected all of us and our ability to do our jobs to our satisfaction or the satisfaction of others.

*Minor theme: perception of parents.* This theme included how we viewed parents: (a) in general; (b) who were affluent; (c) who had low income; and (d) who were non-English speaking and culturally, linguistically diverse. These categories were created according to how we referred to parents, or how we usually identified them. In general, we viewed parents as trusting of their students' teachers, and to a lesser extent, other IEP team members. As Amanda expressed, “They just trust us.” In general, we also viewed parents as being experts on their children. Discussing her perspective of parents, Becca said, “This is your child...you are the expert on your child.” Overall, we also viewed parents as being passive participants. Additionally, Violet perceived parents that became more educated, whether accurately informed or misinformed, as “demanding so much service.”

Four of us, at one point or another, had students from affluent families, though this was not often the case. Parents we described as affluent all spoke English, and were described by Amanda as “tend[ing] to have a lot more questions, and perhaps have more concerns.” Violet described them as “tend[ing] to have more knowledge of special ed law,” as well as more likely to ask for particular goals and services. Kari viewed some parents as having a demeanor of “entitlement.” Both school districts were described as “cave[ing]” to parents who made demands. Most often, these were parents who were affluent, or at least described themselves as knowing their rights. During our tenure, most of us described having parents with low income who were demanding and who
expressed their knowledge of their rights, using that as a platform for insisting on services for their child.

We viewed parents who were considered to have low income differently in some respects. Annie, Regina, and Claudia viewed some of their White and African American parents with low income as “sitting at home collecting a check,” or “concerned about that money.” Kari believed Asian parents and Latino parents were perceived as being “respectful” and “trusting.” Reuben, Violet, Annie, Becca, Amanda, Regina and Kari believed all parents were trusting them to make appropriate educational decisions pertaining to their children.

Minor theme: view of employer. We accepted our jobs in Cervantes and Bendita Unified School Districts because they either offered us a job before another school district, we knew someone who already worked there, we were relocating to the area, or had prior experience working in the district as a student teacher. Although we came to work for our districts in a few different ways, each of us had similar views of our districts. None of us loved the districts we work for, but despite our views and opinions, we continued to work for them. Becca expressed her belief that “most districts, especially big districts have a lot of problems, but I don’t love this district.” Reuben perceived his district as “in a mess.” Amanda believed her district made decisions based on finances, “It all comes down to money.” Annie said this about her district, “Our district is about money, saving as much money as possible.” Claudia felt, “We’re out of compliance all the time as a district,” and “we are timeline driven.” We also believed our districts give in to parent demands to avoid potential legal fees and court costs in the event that a parent wants to file a lawsuit. Kari, Amanda, and Violet had this to say, “The
district just caves," "This district caves all the time," "...the district settles out of court, or gives the parents what they want..." Claudia shared a conversation with me about a time she was told the district’s "legal person" said "We won’t fight a parent on that," regarding a misdiagnosis, and the parent’s refusal to consent for a re-evaluation. In Claudia’s opinion, the parent would have lost financial support. “She’s getting like, I forget, $600 per twin, and it was—she was not going to sign anything.”

**Minor theme: staff.** During coding and analysis, I included in this theme how we viewed various staff members we worked with including administrators at our school sites and IEP team members. In discussing our classroom assistants, some of us described how we had strong, supportive assistants that could run a small group or teach lessons while we either taught a group lesson, pulled students for goal assessments, or completed paperwork. Annie had this to say about her assistant, “[He’s] super supportive. Um, and he runs a group. There’s no way for me to teach everything...I’ve been always lucky to have really good aides (assistants).” Some of us have not been so lucky. Regina shared this:

When I say, “I would like a table with these people who are always [saying] I need help, I need help. You take them, and I’m gonna teach the rest of the class...,” she won’t do it...she doesn’t refuse; she just doesn’t do it. She argues with [students]. We have another one. She naps and snores.

Amanda explained:

My aides fall asleep in class, and sometimes they needs several reminders to do something. I can’t always depend on them to run a group, but when it comes