

Decision-Making in Special Education:
A Structuration Analysis of Individualized Education Program Meetings for Students
with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities

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Abstract

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Parental participation in Individualized Education Program (IEP) team meetings has been a contested topic since the enactment of federal law granting parents of students with disabilities the right to help develop their child's IEP. The literature suggests that parents are commonly passive members of IEP teams and routinely excluded from IEP decision-making. The sparse literature on parents of color in IEP meetings contends that many parents of color also experience challenges to full engagement in the process related to their racial, ethnic, and cultural identity.

In this qualitative case study, I use direct observation and semi-structured interviews to investigate how one highly skilled special educator conducted IEP meetings for middle school students identified as having emotional/behavioral disabilities. I also examine the IEP meeting experiences of seven parents of his students, including two parents of color. In total, twenty people participated in this study. I observed four IEP

meetings over one school year and conducted five interviews with members of these IEP teams.

The results of this study indicate that special educators retain disproportionate decision-making power and influence in IEP meetings and that parents are largely excluded from making meaningful contributions during this process. However, unlike previous research, I found that parents were highly participatory in other aspects of IEP meetings. I analyze these findings across four emergent themes: parental participation; the distribution and enactment of power and authority; building parent-teacher relationships; and defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of IEP meetings. I employ structuration theory (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 1992) to examine how participants' behavior reinforced or challenged special education and IEP meeting structures, and I critique the IEP meetings using legal analysis.

I discuss implications of my findings for research and practice. I argue that greater theoretical diversity is needed in the research literature to more deeply understand the mechanisms that push parents to the periphery of IEP decision-making. I suggest that understanding these mechanisms can help special educators and school administrators to more fully embrace and effectively capitalize on the spirit of collaboration and parent involvement intended by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

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To Leah and Samuel

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Glossary of Special Education Acronyms and Terms

IDEA: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA was originally passed by Congress in 1975 as The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) and was most recently reauthorized in 2004. IDEA guarantees that all students with disabilities will receive an appropriate education and be educated in the least restrictive setting appropriate based upon their individual abilities.

IEP: Individualized education program. An IEP is a written document that describes a student's present levels of academic performance and behavioral functioning. It proscribes a learning program developed to meet each student's unique abilities and school-based needs. An IEP also includes (1) annual learning goals for the student, (2) accommodations and modifications that the student will be provided, (3) a description of what academic and behavioral services a student will receive, who will deliver these services to the student, and how often and in what setting the student will receive these services, and (4) a description of the supplemental services a student will receive, such as speech therapy or occupational therapy.

Service matrix: A description of the number of minutes of specially designed instruction that a student will receive, who will provide this instruction (e.g., the special education teacher, a paraeducator, or a general educator), and where the student will receive this instruction (e.g., a self-contained classroom, a resource room, or a general education classroom).

FAPE: Free and appropriate public education. FAPE is defined as special education and related services (e.g., occupational therapy) that are provided at no cost to the

family and that are designed to offer the student the opportunity to receive some educational benefit from school.

- EBD: Emotional/behavioral disability. EBD is one of 13 categories of school-based disabilities under which a student may qualify to receive special education services. EBD – IDEA uses the term *emotional disturbance* – is defined as “a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance: (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances. (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression. (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems” (CFR 34 § 300.8(c)(4)(i)).
- FBA: Functional behavioral assessment. An FBA is a process for addressing problem behavior by identifying the reason a student engages in a specified behavior – called the function of the behavior – through observation of the student, administering behavior rating scales, and conducting interviews. The assessment is typically conducted by a special educator or other trained school employee.
- BIP: Behavior intervention plan. A BIP is a plan developed by the IEP team to address a student’s problem behavior. The team develops the BIP based upon the hypothesis put forward in the FBA as to the function of the problem behavior. Interventions include (1) positive strategies for redirecting the problem behavior

and/or learning alternative behaviors, (2) program and curriculum modifications, and (2) supplemental aids and supports.

Transition plan: A transition plan is a written document created by an IEP team that describes a student's transition services. Transition services are those services that a student will be provided that are designed to help the student transition from school to post-school activities, such as post-secondary education or employment.

Manifestation determination: The IEP team must conduct a manifestation determination when a student with a disability is excluded from school – either suspended or expelled – for more than 10 days in a school year (consecutively or cumulatively). At the manifestation determination meeting, the team decides whether or not the student's misconduct was the result of the student's disability or the school's failure to implement the IEP. If either condition is met, the student may not be excluded from school. If neither condition is met, the student may be disciplined in accordance with the discipline that a student without a disability would receive.

Present levels of performance: A statement included in the IEP that explains (1) a student's present level of academic achievement and behavioral performance based on formal and informal assessments of the student and (2) how the student's disability affects his or her ability to participate in and progress through the general education curriculum. The present levels section also generally includes a description of the student's strengths and interests, both inside and outside of school. I refer to this portion of the present levels as the student strengths section.

Specially designed instruction: The teaching methods and curriculum used to instruct students who receive special education services.

Aversive intervention plan: The systematic use of a treatment or therapy that a student finds displeasing that is implemented for the purpose of discouraging undesirable or maladaptive behavior. Examples of aversive interventions include isolation/seclusion rooms or physical restraints.

Reevaluation meeting: Student receiving special education services must be reevaluated to determine whether they continue to be eligible for services at least once every three years, unless the parents and school agree that a reevaluation is unnecessary. After a trained school district employee, typically a school psychologist, assesses the student, the IEP team convenes to discuss the results of the assessment and evaluate the appropriateness of special education services.

SLP: Speech language pathologist. A related service professional who provides speech therapy to a student when this service is included in the student's IEP.

OT: Occupational therapist. A related service professional who provides occupational therapy to a student when this service is included in the student's IEP.

Chapter I

Introduction and Background

A small group of educators sits around a table in a classroom, chatting informally and waiting for the parents of a student to arrive. Two parents walk into the room; they say hello and take a seat at the end of the table facing the educators – some of the faces looking at them are familiar, others are not. The Individualized Education Program (IEP) team has convened. The team's task at this meeting is to develop a plan that will guide the education of the parents' child – who has been identified as having a disability – for the next year. The special education teacher welcomes the team members and commences the meeting.

How well will this group achieve its task? Will the team discuss the student's progress, educational goals, and classroom placement? Will the team debate these issues? Will all the members of the team work cooperatively to develop a mutually agreeable plan? Or, will some members participate less, occasionally making comments or asking questions, but not helping make decisions about the student's education? Will anyone simply be present at the meeting and not contribute to the task at hand? Is it possible that some members will attend but only tacitly concur with the team's decisions, not questioning its decisions despite having questions, not raising concerns despite having reservations, merely acquiescing to the ideas of the other members?

Since 1975, practitioners and scholars of special education have confronted the challenge of adequately involving parents in the process of developing an IEP that provides each student with a disability – regardless of the type or severity of disability – a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). Acting on the social, political, and legal momentum of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Movement, the

passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) – reauthorized in 1990, 1997, and 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – established the right to FAPE for all students with disabilities (Meyer, Bevan-Brown, Park, & Savage, 2010). IDEA sought to remedy educational inadequacies for millions of children with disabilities who “were either totally excluded from schools or sitting idly in regular classrooms awaiting the time when they were old enough to ‘drop out’” (H. R. Rep. No. 94-322, p. 2). Today, no longer (officially) excluded from public schools, more than 6.8 million students, 13.1% of the total public school enrollment, qualify under one of 13 school-based disability categories and receive special education services (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012).

From its inception, parent participation in IEP meetings and in IEP decision-making have been two essential elements of ensuring FAPE (Smith, 1990; Staples & Diliberto, 2010). According to Turnbull et al. (2010), IDEA “has been revolutionary in terms of its affirmation of the importance of parents participating equally with educators in making decisions about their children and thereby holding educators accountable for benefiting the child” (p. 43).

Under IDEA regulations, IEP teams convene at least once annually to develop an IEP. Teams consist of the parents of the student with a disability; educators and specialists who serve that student – including special educators, general educators, school administrators, and other service providers – the student (the student’s participation is optional until the student turns 16); and, at the discretion of the parent, a parent/student advocate. This group creates and documents an educational plan that obligates the school, or educational agency, to provide the student with specified services and instructional and

curricular accommodations and modifications. The IEP team, with the consent and agreement of the parent, can revise the IEP at any time, but the educational agency is legally bound to implement the educational plan established by the current IEP.

This study is concerned with a subgroup of students who receive special education services under the category of *Emotional/Behavioral Disability* (EBD). EBD is the fifth most prevalent school disability (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). Students who have been identified as EBD make up approximately 0.8% of the total public school enrollment – or 407,000 students – and make up 6.1% of the students receiving special education services (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012). However, many professionals believe that EBD is under-identified (e.g., Santiago, Kataoka, Forness, & Miranda, 2014; Kauffman, 2007; Forness, Freeman, Paparella, Kauffman, & Walker, 2012). Santiago et al. (2014) reported that the “data suggest that there are approximately 12 percent of school-age children with at least moderate to severe emotional or behavioral disorders” (p. 175).

Providing special education services – including educational, behavioral, and mental health services – is critically important for the academic success and life outcomes of students with severe emotional, behavioral, and psychiatric disorders. Simpson, Peterson, and Smith (2011) explained that “[s]ignificant mental health problems and pernicious school and postschool outcomes are common among children and youth identified as having EBD, including failure to complete school, incarceration, unemployment and underemployment, and significant interpersonal difficulties” (p. 230). Consequently, for students identified as EBD, specially designed instruction is necessary to guarantee their access to “universal public education” and for these students to “profit

as much as possible from their education” (Kauffman, 2014, p. 64). The importance of carefully and thoroughly evaluating students and determining eligibility, creating IEPs, and deciding the appropriate program placement cannot be understated. In particular, for specially designed instruction to be effective, IEP teams must carefully construct IEPs to match students’ (evolving) individual needs and abilities, and the interventions, accommodations, and modifications described in each IEP must be implemented with fidelity (Bateman, 2014).

In spite of the importance of delivering school-based EBD and mental health interventions and services to appropriately identified students, scholars have argued that EBD is a socially constructed disability and criticized the identification and evaluation process for EBD as fraught with cultural, ethnic, and racial bias (e.g., Blanchett, 2006; Patton, 1998). In part, this criticism is due to the stigma associated with EBD and the disproportionate number of students of color in EBD programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Even Kauffman – who has argued that more students should receive EBD services (2007; 2014) and that special education is “distracted” from its purpose by its concern with labels (2014) – has acknowledged that EBD is a highly stigmatizing label, causing parents and educators to worry about the academic and social consequences of qualifying students for special education services under this category (Kauffman, 2005). Obiakor et al. (2004) argued that this concern is especially salient for students of color, who may face cultural stigmatization in school in addition to disability-related stigmatization.

The over- or disproportionate representation of students of color who receive EBD services has exacerbated this confluence of racial, ethnic, and cultural

stigmatization and disability stigmatization. Ferri and Connor (2005) claimed that “[s]ince the inception of special education, the discourses of racism and ableism have bled into one another, permitting forms of racial segregation under the guise of ‘disability’” (p. 454). The U.S. Department of Education (2008) reported that African American students were 2.28 times and Native Americans students 1.63 times more likely to be identified as EBD than students from all other racial or ethnic groups. These data potentially threaten the legitimacy of EBD programs and the institution of special education, which Bateman (1994) explained must perpetually confront three questions of equity and educational rights: Which students should receive special education services? Where should these students be taught? And how should these students be taught?

Importance of the Problem

Appropriately constructed IEPs are central to ensuring that special education services are effective and essential to ensuring district compliance with federal and state law. Given the high stakes of IEP meetings in general, the potential consequences – including stigmatization and low educational outcomes (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003) – for students who receive services for EBD, and the racially charged context of this disability category, an examination of the creation of IEPs for students with EBD is an area of equity-focused research ripe for examination.

An extensive body of empirical and philosophical literature has documented the purposes (e.g., Smith, 1990), practices (e.g., Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Staples & Diliberto, 2010) and challenges (e.g., Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) of IEP meetings. Some of this research has considered the IEP meeting experiences for parents of color – which has, on the whole, been described as negative and marginalizing (e.g., Salas, 2004; Cho

& Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008). In addition, numerous resources exist that are designed to present special educators with suggested practices for collaboratively developing IEPs with parents. For example, *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, a publication by the Council for Exceptional Children, is a widely circulated journal designed for special education practitioners that frequently features such articles (e.g., Clark, 2000; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Dabkowski, 2004; Mueller, 2009; Moody, 2010; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012).

Despite the plethora of IEP-related scholarly- and practitioner-oriented publications, I identified two areas in need of further study. First, I have been unable to find any empirical studies that analyze the creation of IEPs for students identified as EBD. Of the studies that have examined a cross section of disabilities, including EBD, only one study (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes, 2012) disaggregated its findings by disability category. These authors analyzed national survey data and presented – among other findings – two relevant measures: parent attendance at, and satisfaction with, their involvement in IEP meetings. However, the nature of this data did not facilitate a deep examination of the process of creating IEPs. The unique social and cultural stigmatization of EBD suggests that parent participation in IEP meetings for students identified as EBD should be the focus of a targeted study. In addition, while sparse, the literature on parents of color of students with disabilities indicates that these parents may experience unique or amplified challenges in advocating for the educational needs of their children (Salas, 2004; Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008). This broad conclusion suggests the importance of studying the experiences of parents of color in the process of IEP development.

Second, the IEP literature stands to benefit from increased theoretical diversity. Despite federal special education law celebrating its 40th anniversary and the attention to IEP issues in practical, practitioner-oriented publications, the literature (discussed in detail in Chapter III) indicates that parents have yet to become involved in the IEP process and IEP decision-making to the extent envisioned by Congress when it passed IDEA (Smith, 1990; Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Harry, 2008). The lack of sufficient progress in involving parents suggests a need to develop alternative frameworks from which to analyze and understand the IEP process. Valle and Aponte (2002) contributed one such alternative theory in their article *IDEA and Collaboration: A Bakhtinian Perspective on Parent and Professional Discourse*. Rogers' (2002) ethnographic critical discourse analysis is another. The scholarship of Beth Harry (2002) and Alfredo Artiles (2003) – progenitors of a critical cultural theory of disability and opponents of deficit model research and literature – is illustrative of how the presentation of alternative theories and frameworks is necessary to broaden the scholarly discourse and challenge entrenched normative viewpoints.

In this study, I employ structuration theory as developed and explicated by Giddens (1984) and Sewell (1992) to analyze the enactment of IEP meetings. Structuration theory has not been used extensively in education research nor was I able to find any structuration studies in research on IEP meetings or, more generally, special education.¹ Structuration theory proposes a relationship between structures and agency

¹ I first learned about structuration theory – and was inspired to learn more – from reading two excellent articles by Professor Walter Parker (2011a; 2011b) in which he

that is recursive and attends to relational power dynamics between actors and between actors and the structures with which they interact. These theoretical shifts are significant analytic alternatives to existing research on IEP meetings. They offer a perspective that positions the actions of both special educators and parents as informed by, and contributing to, the structure of IEP meetings and the decisions made therein. It is a theory that considers all actors as having influence on other actors and on structures (and thus it fits well with theories of empowerment), but it also accounts for relational power dynamics and acknowledges the opportunities and limitations that power can create.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to analyze parental participation and decision-making in IEP meetings for students identified as EBD from an alternative theoretical perspective. It was guided by the following two questions:

- How does a skilled special education teacher facilitate IEP meetings for students identified as EBD? How do structures that influence IEP meetings and the special education teacher's agency interact, and how do they effect the facilitation of the meeting?
- How does parental participation influence interactions in, and outcomes of, IEP meetings? How is parental participation influenced by the conduct of other IEP team members?

applied structuration theory to his research in the field of international education and his scholarship on the construction of public schooling.

Chapter II

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Anthony Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration and William Sewell, Jr.'s (1992) revision of this theory. Structuration theory provides a framework for interpreting the influences on and consequences of social practices, how agents reproduce, create, transform and deconstruct social systems across time and space. In this study, I use structuration theory to interpret meaning in the socially situated and constructed practice of IEP meetings (IEP meetings described in greater detail in Chapter III). I examine how IEP meeting practices are reproduced, and how they are transformed or deconstructed across time and space, and the role of IEP team members in this process. I begin this chapter with an explanation of the central concepts of structuration theory as articulated by Giddens and Sewell. I conclude it with a discussion of how structuration theory can be applied to research on IEP meetings and its utility as a theoretical framework in this study.

By developing structuration theory, Giddens (1984) attempted to reconcile the shortcomings he perceived in the dominant metatheories of social science: interpretive or hermeneutic theories on one hand (subjectivist theories) and theories of structuralism and functionalism on the other (objectivist theories). According to Giddens, interpretive theories overemphasized the influence of agency in explaining individual behavior and consequently social practices. Structuralism, however, overemphasized the influence of structures on individual behavior and social practices. In developing structuration theory as an alternative, Giddens wrote, "[T]he basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor,

nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across time and space” (Giddens, 1984, p. 2). Giddens argued that by explicating the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between structures and agents, structuration theory accurately captured the influences of structures and agency as simultaneously effecting individual behavior and social practices.

Defining Structure

Structures exist through “memory traces” (Giddens, 1984, p. 377) as sets of rules and resources that pattern behavior across time and space. These rule-resource sets influence individual agency by constraining or enabling actors’ behavior. Structures are reproduced within “situated practices” (Giddens, 1984, p. 17), practices that continue to occur within a given context. As Hacking (1999) – who Parker (2011a) described as a “structurationist” (p. 415)² – pointed out, however, revealing that practices *are* reproduced is not the same as asserting that they are *inevitable*; other possibilities may exist. Giddens (1984) explained that “one of the main propositions of structuration theory is that the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction (the duality of structure)” (p. 19). Therefore, “‘structures’ are not social facts which exist apart from individuals, but sets of ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ which actors draw on, and hence reproduce, in social interaction” (Shilling, 1992, p. 78). Structures are created by human behavior, through the repetition of social practices. Over time, structures become understood – and possibly

² To my knowledge, Parker (2011a) is the first author to put Hacking’s (2004, 1999) work in conversation with Giddens (1984) and Sewell’s (1992) writing on structuration theory.

accepted – as *the* way things are, as opposed to *a* way things can be. It is this perception, not a characteristic of the practice itself, which defines the practice as structural.

Rules are “techniques or generalisable procedures” that actors generally follow when presented with a given situation (Shilling, 1992, p. 78). Rules exist as memories of lived experiences and the knowledge of others’ experiences that suggest to an actor how he or she should behave. Individuals and groups collect, interpret, and apply rules based on their memories of previous experiences. Rules therefore are not strict or precise directives because they are modified across time and space in accordance with actors’ memories and their interests. Nevertheless, rules do provide psychological constraints on actors, informing what types of actions actors believe are acceptable or possible within a given context. Actors can, however, also apply multiple rules simultaneously to give rise to a unique rule that is adapted or more relevant to the applied context. One of the primary functions of rules therefore is to create interpretive structures through which individuals, groups, and societies generate shared meaning and regulate behavior. Through this process – the process of remembering and creating rules and applying them to novel situations – particular behaviors are rewarded while other behaviors are sanctioned.³

Resources, the other half of each rule-resource set, may be categorized into two types: allocative and authoritative. *Allocative* resources are material (e.g., natural resources or the production of technology) and thus constrain or enable action in a

³ For example, when students are learning in a nontraditional setting during school – such as on a field trip to a park – students’ expectation of whether they are required to follow the typical classroom rule of quietly raising one’s hand before speaking will be either reinforced or understood as not applicable depending on how the teacher and other students respond when a student deviates from this rule.

physical sense. If a material resource does not exist, a particular action may be constrained because it is not possible or is unfeasible. If a material resource does exist, agency may be enabled, although it may not be inevitable. Allocative resources have “transformative capacity – generating command over objects, goods or material phenomena” (Giddens, 1984, p. 33). *Authoritative* resources are derived from collective agency – the agency of multiple actors – across time and space. They represent agreement about social expectations with regard to particular behavior (although authoritative resources may not always be the result of express agreement because these resources may be tacitly agreed to or even merely acquiesced). It is this collective agreement that determines whether a behavior is expected, allowable, or unacceptable. Authoritative resources provide the capacity to have psychological, emotional, or spiritual “command” over actors (p. 33). Giddens argued that many theorists have discounted the influence of authoritative resources and instead have paid more attention to at how allocative resources distribute power over time and space. However, allocative and authoritative resources work in tandem – and alongside rules – to generate power. Both types of resources influence behavior because agents act by drawing upon their memories of social action, understandings of whether a behavior is possible in a material or physical sense, and the social sanctioning of previous similar behavior.

There are three structural dimensions, or modalities, of social action within structuration theory: signification, legitimation, and domination. Signification is the enactment of interpretive structures, or types of symbolic order and forms of discourse, whereby meaning is generated from social action. Legitimation is the process of

normative regulation of social action. Domination is the mobilization of human and material resources to create power within a social system.

Structures that perpetuate across time and space develop into social systems. The structural properties of social systems are reinforced through the repetition of practice, but the constitution of these systems is not immutable. They are susceptible to the same influences as the underlying structures. When social systems are reproduced with overarching or broad-reaching influence they coalesce into institutions. Thus, institutional authority is theoretically susceptible to the same forces of influence as social systems and lower-level structures, albeit institutional authority creates a more permanent phenomenon and is sustained by a larger network of established structures.

Defining Agency

Giddens (1984) argued that all humans have agency and that agency is integral to both the reproduction and disruption of social action. Agency is the ability of the individual to choose his or her behavior, a choice (a) to act or not and (b) how to act or how not to act. Shilling (1992) explained that agency is a “capability [that] refers to the capacity of individuals to act otherwise...Capability does not require agents to be fully aware or even intend to act in a particular way. It merely refers to...their power to intervene in social life” (p. 81-2).

Giddens coined the term *knowledgeability* to describe actors’ level of awareness regarding how and why they act in particular ways. An actor’s *practical consciousness* is one’s tacit knowledge of his or her behaviors. While “often unable to articulate the techniques they employ in social interaction” (Shilling, 1992, p. 82), actors perform everyday tasks with an implicit knowledge of the competencies that are required of them.

Showalter (2002) explained that “all action is purposive, but actors do not need to be conscious of all the factors that determine their actions” (p. 9). Practical consciousness is fundamental to everyday action because it “enables [actors] to simply ‘do’ things while concentrating on activities that require conscious effort” (Cassidy & Tinning, 2004, p. 179). In contrast, *discursive consciousness* encompasses actors’ conscious awareness. It is one’s ability to describe his or her actions and articulate the purpose for those actions.

Agency interacts recursively with structure – not only in reaction to structure – through both practical and discursive consciousness. Actors’ knowledgeability and their awareness of the structures operating within a given context create the opportunity for actors to engage in agentic decision-making. Without this consciousness, agentic action is reduced to instinctive action. Having consciousness and awareness does not mean, however, that actors have control or have the agency to change all of the circumstances in which they act or interact. Actors also cannot control or predict all of the consequences of their actions. Actors can exercise a degree of agency over their behavior and their surroundings, but the whole of society is not malleable at the level of the individual decision maker. Furthermore, the degree of one’s agency varies across the dimensions of time and space and between actors.

Though actors do have agency, routines comprise the bulk of daily activity. The desire for routine satisfies psychological and social needs, providing stability and ontological security. The enactment of routine behaviors across time and space also contributes to the development of structures. Shilling (1992) proposed that “instead of arguing that...individuals are necessarily intent on upholding existing societal norms,”

understanding the impact of routine in daily life may be a more “profitable” way of understanding stability (p. 83).

Agency is the (somewhat) independent functioning of people, but Hacking (1999) explained that people are “interactive kinds” – having and being influenced by an awareness of how they are “conceived, described, [and] ordained” (p. 104). This awareness affects the way in which a person behaves because it “changes the ways in which individuals experience themselves” (p. 104). It also affects how different classifications of people are perceived. Thus, people simultaneously act according to their role, or classification, and through their behavior they define how an individual of their classification is expected to act. This relationship is a continual process (Hacking, 1999). Lynch (2001) claimed that this interaction is both socio-historical and “operates at a more intimate level” (p. 249). It occurs at an intrapersonal level when individuals are aware of their classification and at a structural level when people who interact with or identify the classified person are aware of that person’s classification (Hacking, 2004).

Actors symbolically carry a “social identity” (Giddens, 1984, p. 84) or “description” (Hacking, 1999, p. 103) that is attached to the “prerogatives and obligations that an actor who is accorded that identity may activate or carry out” (Giddens, 1984, p. 84). Consequently, actors do not have complete free will to act on their own prerogatives or obligations. The agency of actors itself therefore can be understood to constrain or enable agency as both a broad and as an individualized concept. This impact (constraining or enabling agency through the enactment of agency) can be generated by an actor’s own agency or through the agency of others.

The Relationship between Structure and Agency

Structure and agency interact to produce and reproduce behavior. Their relationship is recursive, or what Hacking (1999) called looping. According to structuration theory, structure does not function exclusively as the framework for agency. Giddens's reconceptualization of the relationship between structure and agency contemplates that both agency and structure act as constraining and enabling devices. He wrote that "all structural properties of social systems...are the medium and outcome of contingently accomplished activities of situated actors" (Giddens, 1984, p. 191). Agency can reinforce existing structures, challenge and alter them, or generate new structures. In this way, structure and agency can be understood to exist in a cycle, as interdependent functions, where each has the potential to influence and modify the other. Because social systems are premised upon structural properties, they too are maintained – or deconstructed – through social action and consequently their existence is dependent upon actors' agency.

The Role of Power

Power is another important concept in structuration theory. Structures and agency exist in the presence of situated power, and both of these elements have power. Power is the capacity to achieve an outcome or to demonstrate influence (distinct from agency, which is the capacity to make a choice). It can be a tool of liberation or of oppression. Agentive power varies in quantity and quality, and across time and space, in relation to the social position of other actors within a given context. Structural power varies in accordance with the combined allocative and authoritative resources and the normative application of these resources. Giddens called the reproduction of power the "structures

of dominance” (p. 258), through which structure or agency is further constrained or enabled and existing practices are solidified.

Sewell’s Revision

Sewell (1992) agreed with Giddens that the concept of structure is typically undertheorized and misunderstood – despite its prevalence in social science literature – a problem that inhibits deep analysis of power and agency within actions and movements of social transformation. With his revisions to structuration theory, Sewell purported to probe even further than Giddens into, and make more clear, the concept of structure and its role in social change.

Sewell (1992) supported the proposition that structures are mutable, that they are enacted, reinforced, transformed, and rejected through an interactive process. He claimed that a deterministic conceptualization of structure inaccurately precludes examination of the process of social change, rejecting determinism as contrary to the historical evidence, which demonstrates that structures can and do change over time. Rather than being permanent, structures are the “continually evolving outcome and matrix of a process of social interaction” (p. 27). Sewell also believed that structures can constrain and enable agency, and can simultaneously do both (to different actors or different elements of one actor’s agency, for example).

Sewell (1992) suggested that Giddens’s (1984) description of the rules and resources that constitute structure lacked sufficient clarity. He suggested that the concept of *schema* should replace the term rules, arguing that schema more accurately reflects the informal and unconscious manner in which people generally interpret and enact rules. Sewell (1992) also suggested that the terms nonhuman and human resources more clearly

delineate the distinction between allocative and authoritative resources. *Nonhuman* resources consist of “objects, animate or inanimate, naturally occurring or manufactured,” whereas *human* resources consist of, “physical strength, dexterity, knowledge, and emotional commitments...including knowledge of the means of gaining, retaining, controlling, and propagating either human or nonhuman resources” (p. 9). Both resources, according to Sewell, are “media of power” and are inequitably distributed across any given population (p. 10).

Sewell also believed that structure is a deeply cultural outcome of the quality and distribution of available resources. He wrote that “resources without cultural schemas to direct their use would eventually dissipate and decay” (p. 13). Sewell proposed five axioms of structure that illustrate how schemas and resources interact culturally, iteratively, and variably. These axioms explain how structures can be at the same time hugely influential, but also fragile:

- First, “the multiplicity of structures” (p. 16). People draw upon different concurrently existing schemas and resources. For any given action, multiple applicable schemas are available for actors to draw upon as they consciously or unconsciously act.
- Second, “the transposability of schemas” (p. 17). Schemas are transposable across a range of circumstances, but culture often dictates what schemas an actor engages. Nevertheless, one characteristic of schemas is that their application is not *inherently* limited. Culture may limit how schemas are engaged in a psychological way (how one would think to apply a schema), but it does not limit

the application of schemas in a physical sense (how one is able to apply a schema).

- Third, “the unpredictability of resource accumulation” (p. 18). Resources accumulate, but do so unpredictably because they are transposable and because resources embody different cultural schema across actors.
- Fourth, “the polysemy of resources” (p. 18). Resources have multiple meanings because, as cultural schemas, “their meaning is never unambiguous” (p. 19).
- Fifth, “the intersection of structures” (p. 19). Structures intersect and overlap, again informed by cultural schemas, which signify which structures apply to a given situation.

Culture, under Sewell’s revisions to structuration theory, is an indispensable instrument in the interpretation and application of structures. It is also central to his definition of agency. As described by Sewell, agency is “the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts,” a creative capacity that is influenced by culture and shared by all “minimally competent members of society” (p. 18). The depth and extent of agency, however, differs between people and across circumstances because agency is generated out of an actor’s knowledge of schemas and access to or possession of resources. In addition, agency is both an individual and a collective concept. It can sustain and reproduce structures, including cultural schemas and resources, but it also can transform or abolish them.

Applying Structuration Theory in Research

Giddens (1984) proposed that structuration theory could be used to analyze social practices at four levels, but did not prescribe a methodology for the use of structuration

theory in empirical research. The lowest level, “hermeneutic elucidation of frames of meaning,” can be used to develop an explanatory or generalized understanding of why actors behave as they do (p. 327). The second level involves an “investigation of context and form of practical consciousness” and seeks to bring into discursive awareness behavior that is engaged in tacitly (p. 327). Research into the “identification of bounds of knowledgeability,” the third level, investigates how the knowledge of actors shifts across time and space (p. 327). At the highest level, structuration analysis can illuminate the “specification of institutional orders” (p. 327). This “involves analyzing the conditions of social and system integration via identification of the main institutional components of social systems” (p. 329).

Connecting Structuration Theory and IEP meetings

Structuration theory offers several new analytic possibilities for the study of parental participation and decision-making in IEP meetings. It’s basic premise – that structures and agents are recursively related – simultaneously challenges a common perspective that the structures of the special education system dominate the IEP process and it acknowledges the influence of the relational aspects of IEP meetings.

In this study, I conceptualize federal special education law, local educational agency policy, and the IEP document as structural elements of the IEP process. I conceptualize actors’ previous experiences in IEP meetings, beliefs about how IEP meetings may be performed, and behavior during IEP meetings as agentive elements of the process.

This study examines the structural and agentive properties of IEP meetings. What structural properties do the special educator and parents perceive? When, how, and why

do these actors resist perceived structures? When, how, and why do these actors accept and implement existing structures? What are the consequences of asserting agency? Implicit in these dynamics is an analysis of the role of power (e.g., the perceived differences in social capital between teachers and parents), culture (e.g., assumptions actors make about their own and others' culturally-laden behavior and interpretive schema), and routine (e.g., the comparison of IEP meetings across IEP teams).

While I do not suggest that the findings from this qualitative case study generalize to other IEP meetings, or that they identify institutional components of the special education system, I do contend that by engaging in a structuration analysis we gain a glimpse of how structure and agency can interact in IEP meetings. We also see how agents, their situated power, and their relationships with the other IEP team members can influence the IEP meeting process and product. Adding to the theoretical diversity of the IEP literature broadens the analytic landscape and opens the door for innovative approaches to facilitating IEP meetings that are consistent with the spirit of parental involvement articulated by IDEA (a topic I focus on in the next chapter).

Summary of Themes in Theoretical Framework

The following are significant themes from my analysis of structuration theory and how this theory can be applied to the study of IEP meetings.

- Structure is the human memory of sets of rules, or schema, and resources across time and space that produce an expectation of patterned behavior or a response to behavior.

- Agency is the capacity of an actor to choose her actions. This capacity is influenced by an actor's awareness, or *knowledgeability*, of her actions and of structures informing her actions.
- Structure and agency interact recursively, each able to perform the function of constraining or enabling the other (and each able to do so simultaneously).
- Structure and agency are diminished and enhanced through situated power.
- IEP meetings can be an instructive example of the relationship between structure and agency.

Chapter III

Informing Case Law, Research, and Scholarly Literature

Many structures influence the enactment of IEP meetings. For example, IEP meetings are situated within the larger structures of the special education system, the public school system, and an economic system and social climate that funds both the public school and special education systems. Many different actors also influence IEP meetings. Special educators and parents may be considered the most central actors on the IEP team, but others – such as students, school principals, school or outside counselors, and parent advocates – may also figure significantly into interactions and decisions in an IEP meeting.

This chapter describes the structures and actors present in IEP meetings and is divided into two parts. The first addresses a significant structure (which may rightly be conceptualized as an institution) that influences the enactment of IEP meetings: the legal system. In this part, I analyze case law and scholarly commentary on parents' legal rights – and the limitations of these rights – to participate in the IEP process and decision-making. In the second part, I examine conceptual and empirical educational research on parents' experiences interacting with the special education system and participating in IEP meetings. This chapter describes some of the most significant structures relevant to IEP meetings and how these structures are experienced and influenced by the central actors who participate in IEP meeting.

Parental Rights Under The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act

The right of parents to participate in the development of their child's IEP is part of “a complex structure of laws and regulations [that] define the boundaries of special

education” (Meyer, 2011, p. 626). This right serves to protect the cornerstone of IDEA: the entitlement of students with disabilities to receive FAPE (Zirkel, 2013).

Since 1975, all levels of the federal court system⁴ have had the opportunity to interpret IDEA, FAPE, and the role of parents in special education. Meanwhile, legislative revisions to IDEA “have resulted in progressively more definitions of precisely what rights parents enjoy, and the limitations of those rights...as such, parental rights under IDEA have evolved over time” (Mead & Paige, 2008, p. 1). Mead and Paige (2008) concluded that “if the 1990s could be characterized as largely expanding parental rights through legislative and judicial activity, the first decade of the twenty-first century may well mark the point at which the pendulum shifted toward more moderated entitlements” (p. 12).

The United States Supreme Court first interpreted IDEA in 1982 in *Board of Education v. Rowley*. The issue before the Court was how to determine when a student’s FAPE has been denied. The Court’s ruling remains a benchmark in special education law and established a legal definition of FAPE. In what has become known as the Rowley Test, the Court established a two-part test that asks “[f]irst, has the State complied with the *procedures* set forth in the Act? And second is the individualized education program developed through the Act’s procedures reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits?” (p. 206-7, emphasis added).

The Court acknowledged that IDEA did not intend to create “strict equality of opportunity or services” for students with disabilities as compared to students without

⁴ I have chosen to analyze only United States Supreme Court and Ninth Circuit cases because the setting where this study took place is under the jurisdiction of the Ninth Circuit.

disabilities (p. 198). Rather, FAPE was intended to provide a “basic floor of opportunity” (p. 200) for the purpose of “open[ing] the door of public education to handicapped children on appropriate terms [rather] than to guarantee any particular level of education once inside” (p. 192).

Instead of protecting the substantive rights of students with disabilities, the Court relied on parents’ procedural rights under IDEA to do the heavy lifting. The Court explained that when procedural rights were guaranteed, substantive rights were subsequently protected:

When the elaborate and highly specific procedural safeguards embodied in [IDEA] are contrasted with the general and somewhat imprecise substantive admonitions contained in the Act, we think that the importance Congress attached to these procedural safeguards cannot be gainsaid. It seems to us no exaggeration to say that Congress placed every bit as much emphasis upon compliance with procedures giving parents and guardians a large measure of participation at every stage of the administrative process as it did upon the measurement of the resulting IEP against a substantive standard. We think that the congressional emphasis upon full participation of concerned parties throughout the development of the IEP...demonstrates the legislative conviction that adequate compliance with the procedures prescribed would in most cases assure much if not all of what Congress wished in the way of substantive content in an IEP. (p. 205-6, internal citations omitted)

While *Rowley* ensured parents’ procedural rights, including the right to participate in the development of their child’s IEP, not all procedural violations create an automatic

denial of a FAPE. Instead, “courts have recognized that when it comes to the IDEA, it is best to consider whether school officials complied with the overall spirit of the law rather than each and every one of the [A]ct’s many procedural steps” (Osborne, 2004, p. 8).

The Ninth Circuit explained that “procedural inadequacies that result in the loss of educational opportunity, or seriously infringe the parents’ opportunity to participate in the IEP formulation process clearly result in the denial of FAPE” (W.G. v. Board of Trustees of Target Range School District, 1992, p. 1484, internal citations omitted). Although the *Target Range* court, and others, did not provide clear guidance on what constitutes a serious infringement of a parent’s opportunity to participate in an IEP meeting, the court did hold that the school district cannot present the IEP to the parent as a “take it or leave it” proposition (p. 1484). The district is obligated “to conduct a meaningful meeting with the appropriate parties” (p. 1485), although the court shied away from mandating that all persons required by IDEA to attend the IEP meeting do so, so long as no one who provides essential knowledge about the student is absent or excluded.

The IEP must be developed as a team, and cannot be presented as “take it or leave it,” but the federal district court in *B.B. v. State of Hawaii* (2006) ruled that the school is allowed to create a draft of the IEP prior to the meeting. Having a draft IEP prepared for the meeting is not, on its own, evidence that the parent was denied the opportunity to participate meaningfully in developing the IEP. Instead, the court chose to look at the behavior of the district during the IEP meeting. If the draft was discussed and modified during the meeting, that is evidence that the IEP meeting, including the parent’s participation, was meaningful.

The Ninth Circuit has also allowed the school district to conduct a “pre-meeting meeting” where teachers discussed the IEP (*J.L. v. Mercer Island School District*, 2010, p. 952). Osborne (2004) explained that courts generally allow teachers to meet and develop programmatic suggestions and placement recommendations prior to the IEP, so long as those suggestions and recommendations are not treated as final decisions. The *Mercer Island* court, as did the court in *B.B. v. Hawaii*, held that additional evidence was necessary to demonstrate that parents were excluded from meaningful participation in the development of the IEP. Again the court claimed that a decisive factor was whether recommendations from the parents or other persons not at the pre-meeting were included in the IEP.

At a minimum, the parent must be present at the IEP meeting (unless the school district documents that extensive efforts were made to include the parent and the parent expressly refused to participate) and have access to all evaluations prior to the meeting. In *Shapiro v. Paradise Valley Unified School District* (2003), the Ninth Circuit held that the school district was in violation of IDEA’s procedural safeguards by conducting an IEP meeting without the parents in attendance. The district had proposed a meeting just prior to the end of the school year to discuss a change of classroom placement, which was to commence at the beginning of the following school year. The parents were unable to meet until after summer break began and the teachers were no longer under contract. The district held the meeting without the parents, made the change of placement, and mailed the parents a copy of the revised IEP for their review. The court was adamant that “[a]fter-the-fact parental involvement is not enough,” parents must be involved in the process of creating the IEP (p.1078).

In a similar case, the Ninth Circuit affirmed that parental participation must be prioritized over the availability of other IEP team members and held that parental participation was also more important than meeting the annual deadline to review the IEP (*Doug C. v. State of Hawaii*, 2013). In *Doug C.*, the school district held the IEP meeting without the parent after the parent had rescheduled the meeting multiple times. The district asked the parent to participate via telephone, but he refused because he wanted to be physically present at the meeting. Nevertheless, the district held the meeting so that the IEP would be reviewed prior to the annual review deadline and in the process the district changed the student's placement. The court found this unacceptable and explained that "delays in meeting IEP deadlines do not deny a student a FAPE where [the district does not] deprive a student of any educational benefit" (p. 15). This exception is allowed because "[p]arental participation in the IEP and educational placement process is critical to the organization of the IDEA...Indeed, the Supreme Court has stressed that the IDEA's structure relies upon parental participation to ensure the substantive success of the IDEA in providing quality education to disabled students" (p. 9).

In addition, a school district is obligated to advise parents of all student evaluations relevant to making IEP decisions (*Amanda J. v. Clark County School District*, 2001). In *Amanda J.*, the Ninth Circuit held that it was "impossible to design an IEP that addressed [the child's] unique needs" and the parents could not "fully and effectively" participate in developing the IEP if they were not informed of the results of evaluations conducted by the school (p. 881). The court affirmed the relevance and importance of parental participation:

Among the most important procedural safeguards are those that protect the parents' right to be involved in the development of their child's educational plan. Parents not only represent the best interests of their child in the IEP development process, they also provide information about the child critical to developing a comprehensive IEP and which only they are in a position to know. (p. 882)

The decisions in *Mercer Island* and *B.B. v. Hawaii* leave a significant gap in the law that is not addressed by *Shapiro*, *Amanda J.*, or *Doug C.* The school district need not agree with a parent's recommendations or proposals and a parent cannot "unilaterally determine what must be included in a child's IEP" (Meyer, 2011, p. 651). IDEA safeguards parents' presence, requires that parents "are seen as equal partners [and] that their voice is heard, not merely encouraged," but parents have no rights to compel schools to provide specific instructional programs or mandate a specific classroom placement (Daniel, 2000, p. 11). The whole IEP team, therefore, makes decisions ostensibly in a democratic fashion. Because parents are, in almost all cases, outnumbered by school district employees at an IEP meeting, schools may quite easily "consider" a parent's input without having it affect the outcome of the IEP meeting. Meyer (2011) claimed that "[a]lthough parents are present and contribute ideas at these meetings, final authority rests with the professional members of the team" (p. 632).

Depending on the procedural posture of the case (which party has appealed the lower court's decision), the school district may not even have the burden of proof to show that they considered the parents' input. Instead, it is likely that the parents will have the

significant challenge of proving that their input was not considered.⁵ While making changes to the draft of an IEP to reflect suggestions made during an IEP meeting is strong evidence that a parent had the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the development of the IEP, keeping a draft intact – making no (substantive) changes during the IEP meeting – is not, by itself, sufficient evidence that a parent has been denied the opportunity to meaningfully participate. Zirkel (2013) argued that, in theory, violating a parent’s right to meaningfully participate in the IEP is a “fatal” procedural violation, but “as a threshold matter, parents have not succeeded in preponderantly proving [this] violation in most of the pertinent court decisions to date...thus effectively eviscerating [the provision’s] exceptional, rigorous status” (p. 502, internal citations omitted).

Parents also have no obligation to agree or acquiesce to the recommendations of the district. The court in *Anchorage School District v. M.P.* (2012) held that requiring parents to agree with an IEP would penalize them “for exercising the very rights conferred by the IDEA [and] undermines the statute’s fundamental purposes” (p. 1051). However, because parents “are given no formal power or influence in the process...parents’ role in the IEP team is not that of a team player, but merely a cheerleader” (Meyer, 2011, p. 659). If a parent strongly disagrees with a decision of the IEP team, and the team refuses to modify the IEP so that it is satisfactory to the parent, the parent’s only recourse is through (potentially costly) legal action (such as, mediation, an administrative hearing, or filing a civil lawsuit).

⁵ Parents have this burden of proof when (1) they initiate a civil lawsuit against a school district or (2) they appeal a lower court’s decision finding in favor of a school district.

The irony, according to Wakelin (2008), is that “although parents have the most legal power to challenge the IEP, they lack the social power relative to the other team members to do so” (p. 8). Wakelin argued that parents’ access to legal avenues for challenging IEP decisions is limited by wealth, knowledge of their rights, and their own level of education. Parents of color and parents with limited financial resources are often barred from access to legal remedies. Many parents are also unaware that they can challenge decisions made by the IEP team or fear retaliation for doing so (Wakelin, 2008). Beyond rights, it is:

The cooperative process that develops between parents and students [that] is central to the success of the IDEA. Although the law brings parents and educational professionals together to determine the children’s educational services, it does not give them guidance on how they are to work together to determine the terms of an appropriate education. Therefore, the quality and substance of an IEP varies greatly depending on the willingness of the IEP team to work together to create an appropriate educational program. (Wakelin, 2008, p. 3)

Summary of Themes from Parental Rights Under IDEA

The following are significant themes from my analysis of the case law on parental participation in IEP meetings.

- Educational agencies have an affirmative duty to ensure that parents are present at IEP meetings, unless compelling evidence demonstrates an alternative form of participation (e.g., phone conferencing) was the most appropriate available means of ensuring parental participation, or if the parents refused to participate.

- Parents have a right to meaningfully participate in the creation of the IEP.
- The courts have not clearly defined the legal contours of meaningful participation.
- IEP decisions are made by the team as a whole and cannot be unilaterally made by any one member of the team, including parents.
- Parents face a substantial legal challenge in asserting that they were denied the opportunity to meaningfully participate in the creation of the IEP.

Educational Research and Literature

According to Artiles (2003), “special education’s original identity was grounded in a civil rights discourse for people with disabilities” (p. 165). Critically minded scholars and practitioners have argued that nevertheless the special education system often further stigmatizes already marginalized students and their families (e.g., Mercer, 1973). Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, and Ortiz (2010) explained:

[O]ne of the most puzzling paradoxes [is] how policy and programmatic resources (i.e., special education) created to address the civil rights of a marginalized group (i.e., students with disabilities) can constitute an index of inequality for other marginalized groups (i.e., students from historically underserved groups). (p. 281)

School-family relationships exist within this – often unacknowledged or unexamined – context. According to Kalyanpur and Harry (1999), the special education system has embraced the dominant conceptual perspective that disability is a physical phenomenon, an individual phenomenon, a chronic illness, and it requires remediation or fixing. These assumptions, they argue, are not implicit in the nature of disability, but are culturally laden and create a deficit-oriented understanding of disability and service delivery model. These assumptions also reflect the values of individualism, choice, and

equity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999) – mainstream values that may be at odds with many of the parents of color whose children are served by the special education system (Lamory, 2002). Special educators rarely publicly articulate these assumptions and the implications of these assumptions for serving students of color and working with their parents.

The special education system has also embraced a philosophy of objectivism. The system's reliance on objectivism has helped it pursue an agenda of developing an evidence-based service delivery model, but it has also contributed to a hierarchy of knowledge that disenfranchises parents. Within an objectivist educational system, the professional (decontextualized) knowledge of educators is more valued than the personal (contextual) knowledge of parents (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). For parents to be effective advocates for their children, they are forced to work within the dominant special education knowledge hierarchy. Attempts to introduce alternative knowledge systems and perspectives into special education decision-making are typically met with strong resistance by schools (e.g., Kalyanpur, Harry, & Skrtic, 2000; Trent, Artiles, & Englert, 1998).

School-parent collaboration reframed. It is not uncommon for schools to encourage parents to take on an active role in their children's education. However, most schools are unaccepting of alternative frameworks for understanding disability and conceptualizing the purpose of special education (Valle & Aponte, 2002; Harry, 2008; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Skrtic, 1995). When schools encourage increased parental involvement in special education, it is typically a call for participation within the existing frameworks of disability and special education service delivery (Harry, 2008; Valle & Aponte, 2002; Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). Epstein (2001) has been influential in

promoting a broadened understanding of parents' role in their child's in- and out-of-school learning. In addition, scholars have encouraged school leaders and teachers to recognize that parents' knowledge of their children (e.g., background, values, and aspirations) and their role in coordinating out-of-school services can support the school's educational agenda (Pleet & Wandry, 2010). Moody (2010) explained that parents "serve critical roles of advocacy for their children, and establish and reinforce strong family-school connections that promote student success" (p. 129).

In their widely cited study, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) found that six competencies were important to working effectively with parents, including parents of students with disabilities. The competencies of effective school-parent collaboration were:

1. Teachers should communicate frequently with parents. They should do so honestly (i.e., by providing accurate information on students' progress and concerns about students), but tactfully. They should talk in everyday language that is free from occupational jargon.
2. Teachers should express a genuine commitment to and interest in the whole child.
3. Parents are more likely to feel that they have equal status in the parent-teacher relationship when teachers acknowledge parents' ideas, concerns, and perspectives.
4. Trust is essential to collaboration. Teachers can earn trust with parents by following through with agreements, providing a physically and emotionally

safe classroom and school environment, and exercising discretion in sharing personal information about the family with others.

5. Valuing the student as a person – not as a diagnosis – communicates respect for the student and family. Respect can also be demonstrated through small but thoughtful actions, such as asking a parent what he or she would like to be called, honoring a parent's time at meetings, and acknowledging the parent's efforts in educating and raising the child.
6. Teachers need to demonstrate that they can effectively teach the child.

Epstein (2001) argued that schools can build stronger relationships with parents and capitalize on parents' interest in their children's education if schools recognize the variety of ways that parents support learning. Epstein described six types of parent involvement that should be acknowledged by schools and used to help "educators develop more comprehensive programs of school and family partnerships" (p. 408). Parents are involved in their children's education through: (1) parenting their children, (2) communicating with teachers, (3) volunteering at the school, (4) engaging their children in learning outside of school, (5) making decisions about their children's education, and (6) working, volunteering, or participating in the community.

According to Epstein (2001), schools can reinforce each of these forms of parental involvement and help parents learn how to support their children's school success by teaching parents how to create a home that encourages learning and scholastic achievement. Schools should simultaneously be receptive to learning about home and cultural practices of families. She recommended that schools engage in the following practices:

1. Establish a reliable and consistent means of school-home communication with each family.
2. Recognize and value the variety of skills that parents have and encourage parents to volunteer in the school in whatever capacity they are able.
3. Design interactive homework, and offer training to parents on how to assist their children with this homework, to help parents stay informed about what their children are learning in school and engaged in their children's schoolwork.
4. Allow parents to be involved in making important decisions about the school generally and about their child's in-school education.
5. Build and develop a culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse group of parent leaders.
6. Integrate programming from community-based services into the curriculum and family support offerings.

Challenges to effective school-parent collaboration in special education.

Effective school-parent collaboration has yet to become the norm in special education (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Harry, 2008). Teachers and parents alike are challenged to work with one another. Teachers may feel inadequately prepared to collaborate with parents or perceive a lack of administrative support for doing so (Summers et al., 2005). Parents may be fatigued from the numerous stresses of parenting a child with a disability, have logistical constraints (e.g., childcare or work commitments), be anxious to become more involved, or perceive the school as threatening (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vasquez, 2001; Lambie, 2000; Summers et al., 2005). Parents may also be unaware of and lack access to knowledge of their rights under IDEA. Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, and

Acevedo-Garcia (2012) found that while 43% of parents of students with disabilities read at a high school level or lower, more than half of the state-endorsed procedural safeguard documents from around the country (which are required to be distributed to parents at every IEP meeting so that parents are informed of their rights pursuant to IDEA) were written at a college reading level, including 39% that were written at a graduate or professional reading level.

Brantlinger (1987) cautioned that teachers may be overly attentive to “competencies [that] concern mainly procedural steps in the classification and placement process and do not encompass the broad range of knowledge and skills necessary for parents to make valid choices” (p. 100). Her survey of low-income parents revealed that these parents were concerned about the quality of their child’s education, but many were confused about their child’s placement and eligibility for special education and were unaware of the range of services available or the differences in these services. Consequently, parents often agreed to services that they did not fully understand.

Parents of color in special education. The barriers to effective collaboration for parents of color may stem from deep systemic issues in the special education system. Harry (2008) contends that the overrepresentation of students of color in special education is an extension of public education’s history of marginalizing and excluding students of color. She also argues that the special education system has adopted a narrow understanding of the meanings and causes of disability, which may be inconsistent with the views of parents of color (also see Ferri & Connor, 2005). This history and narrow perspective result in many parents of color feeling that schools discriminate against their children and do not value the parent’s beliefs about education, child rearing, or the

parent's role in their child's education. Rao (2000) observed one African American mother gradually withdraw from engaging with her daughter's teachers over the course of two school years because she felt that the teachers repeatedly disrespected her. This disrespect, not a disinterest in her daughter's schooling, was responsible for the mother's increasing lack of involvement with the school.

Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995) described a similar experience for 24 African American parents who were initially supportive of and involved in their child's special education services. Over time, the parents' efforts to participate in programmatic decision-making for their children waned as they perceived themselves as at odds with their children's teachers. Simultaneously, they began to view their children's special education services as ineffective.

Parette and Petch-Hogan (2000) stated that for some parents of color it is a sign of respect to defer educational decision-making to the teacher – although they cautioned not to overgeneralize this observation. Lynch and Stein (1987) interviewed 63 Latino families who had children in special education and found that while a strong majority (89%) were satisfied with the services their child was receiving, only 55% said they understood the services their child received and only 50% said they were active in the process of developing those services. Lian and Fotanez-Phelan (2001) also found that a majority of the 100 Latino parents they interviewed chose not to be involved in educational program planning for their children, even though they understood that it was their right. As a result of these barriers to participation and collaboration, Latino and Black families are significantly less likely to be involved in their child's school-based

education, to ask fewer questions, and to be informed about the special education services their children are receiving than White families (Lynch & Stein, 1987).

Parents of students identified as Emotionally or Behaviorally Disabled. Parents of students identified as EBD are often perceived as being resistant to becoming involved in the school (Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002). Cartledge et al. (2002) explained that this perception may come from these parents being cautious about disclosing personal or family matters to teachers, feeling that their child's behavior is viewed as a reflection of their parenting skills, and having felt disrespected or belittled by teachers in previous interactions.

In the only study I found that disaggregated its analysis of IEP meetings by disability category, Wagner et al. (2012) found that parents of students identified as EBD were equally as likely to attend and be satisfied with their participation in IEP and transition planning meetings as were parents of students with learning disabilities (the comparison group). However, across disability categories, attendance was positively correlated with higher income and parents of color were less likely to attend special education meetings than White parents.

Yeh, Forness, Ho, McCabe, and Hough (2004) found that parents of color of students identified as EBD, and especially African Americans, believed that their child's behavior issues at school were the result, at least in part, of prejudice by teachers. Teachers, however, rarely perceived or acknowledged this prejudice. This disagreement, whether voiced or not, can be an impediment to collaboration.

Building cultural reciprocity in special education. Harry, Kalyanpur, and Day (1999) suggested four steps to develop "a posture of reciprocity" (p. 14) in serving

families of color. Adopting this posture signals to parents that their cultural beliefs, values, and practices are valued by the school and is a challenge to hegemonic teaching practices. To adopt a posture of reciprocity, educators should:

1. Identify the cultural values embedded in their practice. This includes examining how educators interpret student behavior and academic performance and the cultural values embodied in the interventions they recommend.
2. Ascertain whether the family being served recognizes and values the same assumptions as the educator.
3. Acknowledge and show respect toward any identified cultural differences or assumptions.
4. Engage in open discussion with families to determine the most effective and appropriate way to adapt professional interpretations and recommendations to the family's value system, when differences between the cultural values and assumptions of the teacher and the family are identified.

Parent involvement and experiences in IEP meetings. The IEP is the blueprint for delivering *pecially designed instruction* to students with disabilities and central to the rights of students with disabilities (Fish, 2006; Mueller, 2009). Within the special education system “no document remains more significant to students, agencies, parents, teachers, and administrators” (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998, p. 216). An adequately developed IEP that is implemented with fidelity ensures that a student receives FAPE. IDEA and the federal courts have envisioned parents as an essential part of the IEP team and IEP decision-making. However, numerous scholars and studies have indicated that

parents have yet to be consistently regarded as equal members of the IEP team (e.g., Smith, 1990; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Fish, 2008; Harry, 2008). Lytle and Bordin (2001) argued that special education “has yet to be fully [inclusive] of parents as equally valued and respected members of the team” (p. 44).

Many of the same barriers to parental participation in special education in general apply to parental participation in IEP meetings. These barriers include: (1) the power differential between school personnel and parents, (2) cultural misunderstandings or disagreements, (3) excessive use of professional jargon, and (4) parents’ lack of knowledge of special education laws and their rights. Additional barriers specific to IEP collaboration include: (1) teachers having a lack of training on how to create a compliant and effective IEP (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002), (2) pressure to develop the IEP around available services rather than needed services (Johns et al., 2002), (3) an emphasis on reviewing the IEP document instead of engaging in meaningful conversation (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998), and (4) attempting to complete the IEP meeting in a limited time (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998) or hold the meeting at a time that is not convenient for the parent (Lytle & Bordin, 2001).

In their analysis of parents’ experiences in IEP meetings, Valle and Aponte (2002) used Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of discourse analysis to demonstrate how special educators dominate IEP meeting dialogue through their use of professional language and an authoritative discourse. Parents are expected to be allegiant to this discourse and the ideology of “scientific authority” it embodies (Valle & Aponte, 2002, p. 476). A parent who disagrees with the professional opinions of a teacher “unwittingly violates the boundaries” of the dialogue (Valle & Aponte, 2002, p. 476). This disagreement

represents a challenge not just to the opinion of the teacher but also to the legitimacy of the teacher's knowledge system. Consequently, many parents feel as though they are limited to "inserting footnotes, if they listen to you at all" (Valle & Aponte, 2002, p. 477).

Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2012) found similar results. Their analysis of parent-school relationships in IEP meetings revealed that when parents advocated for greater inclusion of their children into mainstream classrooms, teachers rebuffed these efforts by relying on a medical or deficit model discourse, professional discourse, or acting as though district policy and special education law required the more restrictive placement.

Empirical findings. Since the first studies of IEP meetings in the 1980s, scholars have described parental participation in IEP meetings as passive and minimal (Goldstein, Strickland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980; Vaughn, Bos, Harrell, & Lasky, 1988). Parents have historically participated in IEP meetings by providing information about their children (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001) and responding to questions (Vaughn et al., 1988), but they rarely asked questions of the educators (Vaughn et al., 1988) and they have been largely excluded from educational decision-making (Goldstein et al., 1980). In part, these patterns of participation have been a consequence of a belief that parental participation in IEP meetings is not important to developing the IEP (Gerber, Banbury, Miller, & Griffin, 1986). Gerber et al. (1986) found that nearly two-fifths of the 145 teachers they surveyed believed that the IEP meeting was a mere formality. However, other studies have suggested a possible trend toward increased valuation of parental participation and input (Trainor, 2010). Trainor (2010) also found, however, that many special educators were

underprepared to effectively capitalize on increased parental participation in IEP meetings.

Goldstein et al. (1980) conducted one of the first empirical studies of IEP meetings, analyzing 14 IEP meetings. They observed that most parents participated passively and in the majority of meetings (13 out of the 14) the placement decision – one of the most significant decisions included in the IEP – had been determined prior to the IEP meeting and without consulting the parent(s).

Vaughn et al.'s (1988) study of 26 IEP meetings found that parents most commonly participated by responding to questions and making comments, but rarely asked questions of the teachers. During post-meeting interviews, a majority (66%) of the parents indicated that they wanted the school to do a better job of educating their children, but only 12% had specific recommendations for what the school should do. The authors concluded that parents were generally not knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities and that this limited their participation in IEP meetings.

More recent studies have confirmed that parents remain largely on the margins of IEP meetings. Martin, Marshall, and Sale (2004) conducted a survey of 393 IEP meetings and found that special education teachers dominated the discussion and held most of the decision-making authority. Ruppert and Gaffney (2011) analyzed one IEP meeting and found that communication prior to that meeting markedly influenced decisions made at the meeting. They also found that the (pre-written) IEP document was used to guide the discussion. In addition, in post-meeting interviews, the other educators at the meeting explained that they elected not to question the decisions of the special educator, despite

having different opinions. All three factors, the authors suggested, inhibited collaboration during the meeting and increased the institutional authority of the special educator.

Esquivel, Ryan, and Bonner (2008) observed that even economically privileged, well-educated White parents were typically passive IEP meeting participants. In Mueller and Buckley's (2014) study of 20 fathers of students with disabilities, despite the fathers taking on active roles in their children's education, such as being advocates for their children and supportive partners to their spouses, the fathers expressed feeling distanced from the rest of the IEP team – including their spouses – and described themselves as being “the odd man out” of the team (p. 43).

Suggestions. The literature is rich with suggestions for how to improve school-parent collaboration in the development of the IEP. This includes suggestions for pre-meeting preparation (e.g., Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Dardig, 2008; Esquivel et al., 2008), effective facilitation of IEP meetings (Mueller, 2009; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012), meeting participation etiquette (e.g., Fish, 2008; Johns et al., 2002; Cartledge et al., 2002; Winzer & Mazurek, 1998), post-meeting follow-up with parents (Moody, 2010), and suggestions for how teachers can reflect on and mitigate cultural assumptions implicit in the IEP process (e.g., Harry, 2008; Harry et al., 1999; Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Boyd & Correa, 2005).

While some of the suggestions included in these sources require a deep epistemological commitment to meaningful collaboration (e.g., reflecting on one's cultural assumptions), many are common sense practices of working in groups. Diliberto and Brewer (2012) suggested drafting the IEP at least two weeks before the meeting so all team members have a chance to review it, having a designated facilitator and note

taker, creating a meeting agenda beforehand with input from all team members, setting ground rules for discussion that promote positive communication, limiting the use of professional jargon, and making sure that the team as a whole understands everything that is included in the IEP. Moody (2010) recommended that teachers share positive comments about the student during the meeting, ask questions of the parents, encourage parents to participate in placement decisions and creating IEP goals, and be aware of their body language, facial expressions, and voice pitch, intonation, and timing.

Parental participation is often influenced by factors beyond a parent's control. Many parents desire IEP meetings to follow a democratic process (Fish, 2006), but rarely do they dictate how the meeting is facilitated. However, the active participation of other team members – such as general education teachers – may encourage increased parental involvement (Martin et al., 2004). Parental advocates can have a similar effect on participation (Fish, 2006). Esquivel et al. (2008) found that when all other team members actively contributed ideas and helped make decisions during the meeting, parents were more likely to be active participants. Conversely, when important decisions appeared to have been made before the meeting, parents were more likely to remain passive during the meeting (Fish, 2008).

Parents of color in IEP meetings. Until recently, the scholarly research on IEP meetings has neglected to describe the experiences of parents of color, despite students of color being disproportionally represented in special education from its inception. Since the early 2000s, a small body of research has suggested that parents of color are more marginalized in IEP meetings than White parents.

Rogers (2002) studied how the discourse of two IEP meetings was used to manipulate an African American mother into agreeing with the school's pre-determined placement decisions. In the initial IEP meeting, the teachers engaged in a formal discourse that effectively eliminated the mother's opportunity to participate. The teachers dominated the meeting by taking turns presenting assessment data. The mother spoke only nine times during a 50-minute meeting and mostly to respond to questions from the teachers. However, in the second meeting, the teachers created an informal tone by using anecdotal evidence to emphasize the student's academic progress. With this format, the mother's verbal participation increased to 76 contributions. The formality of the first meeting was used to place the student in a self-contained classroom, but the informal tone of the second meeting was used to justify the appropriateness of this placement. Rogers (2002) argued that "alleged deficits that were severe enough to label Vicky [the student] as 'multiply disabled,' became [reframed as] her strengths...it was evident that the teachers, as representatives of the institution of schools, chose the narratives that best suited them at the time" (p. 230).

Salas (2004) interviewed 10 Mexican American mothers about their experiences in IEP meetings. She found that the mothers' voices were silenced by overt and covert messages that their opinions were not valued. The mothers were made to feel ashamed for not being more proficient in English and felt that the educators were ignorant of the families' cultural educational values. In addition, the mothers felt disrespected when teachers assumed the families were poor, did not inform the parents of their rights, and did not respect the time that had been reserved for the meeting (i.e., arriving late or leaving early).

Studies by Cho and Gannotti (2005) and Lo (2008) revealed similar experiences of parents being silenced from advocating for their children during IEP meetings. Cho and Gannotti (2005) interviewed 20 Korean American mothers who reported that most of their efforts to advocate for increased services for their children had been met with resistance and they were only successful when they proposed low- or no-cost interventions. Lo (2008) interviewed five Chinese parents who were criticized by teachers for asking for services for their children and told that they were being “overprotective” and “asking for too much.” They were also told that they were not equipped to create appropriate IEP goals for their children (p. 24).

Summary of Themes from Informing Literature

The following are significant themes from my analysis of educational research and literature on parental participation in IEP meetings.

- Many scholars and progressive educators are pushing for schools to recognize the diversity of ways that parents are involved in their children’s education and support their children’s in-school learning.
- However, the types of knowledge prioritized by the special education system typically devalue parental knowledge. This may be particularly true for parents of color who do not share the same cultural assumptions about the nature of school-based disabilities.
- Creating cultural reciprocity within the special education system, or even within a classroom, requires a deep commitment to analyzing the foundational assumptions of the system and one’s teaching practices.

- Parental participation in IEP meetings for students identified as EBD has not received significant attention in the scholarly literature.
- The facilitation of, and interactions between team members in, IEP meetings have been shown to affect parental participation.

Chapter IV

Research Design and Methods

I designed and conducted this study in the qualitative tradition of scientific inquiry (Merriam, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994, Erickson, 1986). Merriam's (2009) *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* served as my primary methodological reference throughout all phases of the study. In her book, Merriam explained that "qualitative researchers are interested in *understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world" (p. 13). Qualitative research is an inductive or discovery-oriented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) process of gathering data for the purpose of "build[ing] concepts, hypotheses, or theories" (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). The process is also "*emergent and flexible*" (Merriam, 2009, p. 16), following newly identified lines of inquiry and adapting in response to changing circumstances.

I selected a qualitative research design for two reasons. My underlying interest in this topic is the empowerment of parents of students identified as EBD (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Participation in IEP meetings is one form of potential parent empowerment within the special education system. Qualitative research is well suited to investigate how IEP team members make meaning of and understand their influence on parental participation in IEP meetings. Qualitative research is also well suited for research that applies structuration theory as an analytic lens (Valadez, 2008; Showalter, 2002). As proposed in structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), structure and agency are linked through actors' memory traces and the meaning actors apply to those memories. Because qualitative research seeks to investigate how actors make meaning of their

experiences (Merriam, 2009), qualitative research complements structuration theory analysis.

It is important to recognize, however, that my focus on understanding meaning from the perspective of participants (e.g., parents) puts my epistemological framework in tension with the established knowledge hierarchy within the special education system, which privileges objective knowledge (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999). By valuing the experiences of all participants in my study and the meanings they associate with these experiences, I elevate the status of personal and contextual knowledge. Rogers' (2002) ethnography is an example of how this type of knowledge is commonly perceived, received, and responded to within the special education system. Rogers' (2002) analysis revealed how a school discredited an African American mother's personal knowledge of her daughter's learning challenges for the purpose of placing the student into a self-contained special education classroom and keeping her there. The school's "discourse of disability" (p. 214) relied heavily on objective assessments of the student's performance and was used initially to coerce the mother into agreeing to the self-contained placement and later to resist the mother's interests in having her daughter be re-integrated into the general education population. One of the goals of my research, in part through this study, is to broaden the framework of "knowing" within the special education system to include the knowledge systems of students and their families.

Qualitative Case Study

Miles and Huberman (1994) described case study research as the investigation of "a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context" (p. 25). The phenomenon of study, or unit of analysis, can be an individual, a group, a classification (Hacking,

1999), or an isolated or repeated experience. A case is bound when the unit of analysis is defined and finite. Merriam (2009) explained that a case must be “intrinsically bounded,” limited by some characteristic of the phenomenon, such as the number of people with a particular classification or the duration of an event (p. 41).

This case study is bound in two ways. One, it is a study of one special educator and therefore bound by person. Two, it is a study of IEP meetings for middle school students identified as EBD. It is therefore also bound by event. IEP meetings are an intrinsically bounded phenomenon. They are a distinct type of parent-teacher interaction, one of several forms of formal and informal contacts between parents and special educators. The boundary of this phenomenon shrinks even more substantially when limited by grade and disability category. Combining these limitations, there were a total of eight events (IEP meetings) that occurred at the site of my study during the year I conducted my research.

Merriam (2009) further defined qualitative case study research as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. It is particularistic because of its “focus on a particular situation, event, program, or phenomenon,” revealing meaning from the phenomenon (p. 43). It is descriptive because it is a “rich, ‘thick,’ ...complete, literal description of the incident or entity being investigated” (p. 43). It is also heuristic because it can “bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader’s experience, or confirm what is known” (p. 44). It identifies previously unknown ideas from within the phenomenon and develops relationships between previously unconnected ideas.

Researcher Bias and Influence

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam, 2009; Erickson, 1986). The researcher participates in the field (to varying extents), not only influencing it (at least to some extent) by his or her presence, but also interpreting it. Despite a researcher's effort to capture the meanings and interpretations that actors in the field attribute to their experiences, the process of interpretation is influenced by the researcher's identity. Denzin and Lincoln (1998) considered qualitative research to be "biographically situated" (p. 23). They explained that "the gendered, multiculturally-situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 23). The researcher's methods, experience, and interpretive work are consequently steeped in his or her language, gender, social class, cultural, racial, ethnic, and other identity. The researcher has bias. However, "bias itself is not the problem, but one's purposes and assumptions need to be made explicit and used judiciously to give meaning and focus to a study" (Wolcott, 1995, p. 156). In attempt to attend to Wolcott's first requirement – making researcher bias explicit – I share a bit of my personal identity relevant to this study.

Professional experience. I first began working with students identified as having EBD and learning disabilities (LD) in 2004 as a youth mentor for a community-based non-profit organization. I often found myself in the position of advocating to the school on behalf of my students and their families, although this was not my principle role as a

mentor. This advocacy included informal communication with teachers. It also included serving as a student advocate and parent support in IEP meetings.

I left this mentoring organization to begin my graduate studies in special education with an emphasis on teaching students identified as EBD. During my two-year graduate program, I interned as a student teacher and worked as a paraeducator in self-contained EBD classrooms. After earning my Masters in Education, I began my doctoral studies in multicultural education. During this time, I worked as a special education teacher and substitute teacher for a local school district. In these three positions – as an intern, paraeducator, and special educator – I observed and facilitated IEP meetings for students identified as LD and EBD. I had only a few years of experience as a classroom educator (including a previous job as an adult educator), but based on my experience working with parents while at the mentoring organization and my interest in parent empowerment, I considered myself skilled at actively involving parents in IEP meetings (though, at the time, I certainly did not reflect on my own practice with the scrutiny that I analyze the data in this study).

At the beginning of the data collection phase of this study, I enrolled in law school. During the data analysis phase, I interned with the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. At this internship, I assisted in the investigation and resolution of complaints of disability-related discrimination filed by parents and students.

These three professional experiences have provided me with knowledge of IEP meetings from the perspective of a student advocate (through the mentoring program), a teacher (as a special educator), and as a (supposedly) neutral party (with the Office for

Civil Rights). My experiences in these positions and my beliefs about what I learned from these experiences influenced how I conducted this study.

Academic interests and biases. As a student of multicultural and special education, I bring a mix of conceptual and theoretical frameworks pertinent to this study. As a student earning a degree in special education, I was trained in behavioral, social cognitive, and psychoeducational approaches (e.g., Hewett, 1968). As a student earning a degree in multicultural education, I was trained in critical multiculturalism (e.g., Banks, 1996). As an emerging scholar, I have taken interest in the fields of disability studies in education (e.g., Connor, 2008) and critical race theory (e.g., Delgado & Stephanic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Within the current school order, I view specially designed instruction as necessary for students who are not learning to their potential because of a disability. On the other hand, I believe that an ideal school system would not segregate students by performance or ability, something for which I believe the special education system has been used (though efforts at inclusion and, to some extent, the requirements of least restrictive environment push back on this notion; e.g., Sapon-Shevin, 2007). I believe special education is marginalized within the larger public education system, EBD is marginalized within the special education system, and parents and students of color are marginalized within both systems. These are beliefs based on research, experience, and reflection, although I realize that counter examples exist.

Personal identity. As a student of critical multiculturalism, I endeavor to recognize, investigate, and understand how identity is relevant to learning – an interaction outside of my consciousness for most of my years as an elementary and secondary student in the public education system. I am White, identify as heterosexual and male,

was raised in the upper-middle class in an affluent urban neighborhood, and have a graduate degree. I identify as having a social position of relative power and authority. These are among my privileges. I am also able-bodied, though during the course of this study I developed substantial, unexplainable hearing loss. I continue to engage in nearly all of the activities and tasks I previously engaged in, but my hearing loss is significant enough to qualify me for academic accommodations at school. Through this experience, my personal and emotional connection to the disability community has strengthened. I am married to a Chinese American woman, and together we have two young bi-racial children. Though we live in a city where mixed White-Asian families are not uncommon, my wife and I realize, with much regularity, how our family makes us different from the cultural mainstream. These are among the factors that force me to reflect on my identity and, to some extent and in some contexts, reduce my privilege.

My identity has influenced this study. It has influenced the research questions I thought to ask, the manner in which I investigated those questions, the way I analyzed them, and how I have reported on my findings. Along the way, I have undoubtedly misinterpreted and simply missed meanings that my study participants attached to their experiences. There were racial and gender dynamics to which I was not attuned, and culturally influenced interactions I did not recognize as cultural. My role as a researcher was to listen to other people and observe them, but I heard them and saw them through the filter of my own history and identity. This is the nature of qualitative research.

Research Site

This study was conducted at Clampett Middle School (the name of this school and all study participants have been changed), which is part of a mid-size urban school

district in Washington State. There are more than 18,000 students enrolled in the district, including approximately 2,100 who receive special education services; 68% of the student body receives free or reduced price lunch. The district is located in a racially and ethnically diverse city within a major metropolitan area.

During the 2012-13 school year (the year the data in this study was collected), Clampett Middle School had 650 students in 7th and 8th grade. Fifteen percent (99 students) of the student body received special education services, another 6% (38) of students received services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Seventy percent received free or reduced price lunch. Thirteen percent were English Language Learners. The school had no racial majority: 40% were Latino, 27% White, 17% Asian American Pacific Islander, 8% African American, 7% two or more races, and 1% Native American. No data was publically available on the racial identity or socio-economic status of students receiving special education services at Clampett.

Thirty-two parents (21 of whom were White) completed a school climate survey, which was sent to all parents of Clampett students, for the 2012-13 school year. A majority believed that the school provided them with opportunities to be involved in their children's education (17 strongly agreed or agreed, 11 were neutral, and 4 disagreed or strongly disagreed). Nearly all (27) strongly agreed or agreed that they were treated with respect at the school (2 were neutral and 3 disagreed or strongly disagreed). In response to whether the school honored their family's culture, 15 strongly agreed or agreed, 13 were neutral, 2 disagreed, and 2 did not respond.

For more than a decade, the district had been implementing a positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) system. At the time of this study, all of the schools in the

district were using PBIS and Clampett was one of the district's model schools, having reduced office discipline referrals by more than 50% since the 2007-08 school year. In addition, under the guidance of a local university professor, the district had recently worked with its secondary EBD teachers to help their programs become more consistent with the principles and practices of PBIS.

This district was selected as the research site following a purposeful selection strategy (Patton, 2002). The criteria I used were: an urban school district; a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse student body (to facilitate an investigation of racially-, ethnically-, or culturally-influenced power dynamics in IEP meetings); and a well-regarded EBD program (to increase the likelihood that I would observe IEP facilitation practices that actively involved and empowered parents).

After I determined eligible districts based upon my selection criterion, I gained access to the focal district based on a professional connection. I had previously been employed by this district and was given permission to conduct my research there by an administrator I knew in the special education department. Ultimately, I selected Clampett Middle School as my research site because of the focal teacher of this study – who my contact in the district identified as a highly skilled special educator.

Observations for this study took place during IEP meetings in the self-contained EBD classroom at Clampett. Consequently, the setting for this study was as much defined by the activity as it was by the physical location. This conceptualization of setting is consistent with Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) definition: "settings are not naturally occurring phenomenon, they are constituted and maintained through cultural definition and social strategy. Their boundaries are not fixed but shift across occasions, to one

degree or another, through processes of redefinition and negotiation” (p. 41). IEP meetings are not naturally occurring. They are a construct of special education law. Though the law requires that these meetings be held, it does not specify where or when they must occur (with the exception of requiring that they occur at least once per year). Thus, the fact that my observations occurred in the same physical location was a construct of how the participating IEP teams performed the law.

Participants

There were eight primary and 12 secondary participants in this study. The eight primary participants consisted of one EBD teacher and seven parents of students identified as EBD who were in this teacher’s class. I define these individuals as primary participants because (a) they are categories of people who participated in both observations and interviews and (b) my research questions seek to make meaning of their experiences in IEP meetings. In addition, the scholarly and practitioner literature (e.g., Martin et al., 2004; Johns et al. 2002) has indicated that the special education teacher is typically the key educational professional involved in the annual IEP review considering his or her influence in creating the IEP document, amount of participation in the IEP meeting, the authority his or her participations often commands, and his or her role in implementing the IEP.

The 12 secondary participants consisted of three students identified as EBD who attended their own IEP meetings and nine other education professionals who attended all or part of at least one of the IEP meetings I observed. These education professionals were a school psychologist, Ms. Evans, who attended three of the IEP meetings; general education teachers in math, science, technology, and band (the math and science teachers

each attended two meetings, the technology and band teachers each attended one meeting); and other service providers for speech and language therapy (2) and occupational therapy (2) (each of whom attended one meeting). I define these individuals as secondary participants because (a) I did not target them for participating in post-meeting interviews and (b) their participation was not central to addressing my research questions. However, it is important to acknowledge the effect of their presence on and participation in the IEP meetings. Consequently, they have been included in my data analysis to varying extents.

Participant selection. Primary participants were recruited in different ways according to their category. The focal teacher (Erickson, 1986) was recruited through a purposeful selection technique. He was recommended to me through my contact in the school district – a well-situated informant (Patton, 2002) – as a teacher who was exceptionally skilled at building positive relationships with parents. Based on this recommendation he was recruited as a “unique sample,” someone who has “rare attributes” worthy of study (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). Patton (2002) termed this selection strategy “extreme or deviant case sampling.” These cases are “information rich because they are unusual or special in some way, such as [demonstrating] outstanding successes” (Patton, 2002, p. 230-1).⁶

⁶ Initially, my study design followed a multiple or multisite case study model (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 2009). Two additional EBD teachers were targeted for inclusion in this study. I planned to observe each of the three teachers during two IEP meetings and conduct post-meeting interviews with them and the parents who attended the IEP meetings. This would allow me to analyze IEP meeting facilitation practices across teachers. I was scheduled to observe two IEP meetings with one of those teachers, but on both occasions he canceled because the parents elected to withdraw from the study. I conducted one observation of the other teacher, but neither

Once the focal teacher was identified, all of the parents of students in his class were invited to participate in this study. Due to the district administration's general concern about relationships between their schools and parents of students identified as EBD, I agreed to have the focal teacher conduct my parent recruitment. He distributed a letter I wrote to the parents inviting them to participate and followed up with them regarding the invitation. This did not allow me to target parents of color for participation, as I had initially conceptualized the study. However, I did discuss my interest in having parents of color in the study with the focal teacher. The parents of four students (three mother-father sets and one single father) agreed to participate.

The secondary participants attended the IEP meetings I observed, but were not recruited for this study. They did, however, agree to allow me observe them.

Introduction to primary participants and students. The information presented in these brief introductions to the primary participants was collected through observations, interviews, and informal conversation following the IEP meetings.

Mr. Mariano. Mr. Mariano is a White male in his early forties. At the time of this study, it was Mr. Mariano's second year as a teacher, and during his first year he taught under an emergency certification as he completed his special education teaching program.

he nor the parent who attended the IEP was available for a post-meeting interview. This teacher cancelled a second observation because the parent elected to withdraw from the study. Consequently, I chose to exclude the data I collected during my observation of this teacher from my analysis because I had only one data point from this teacher and I did not think it would be reasonable to compare this to the multiple data points I had collected on the focal teacher. My study design therefore evolved from a multiple case design to a more in depth case study of one information-rich source (the focal teacher). Merriam (2009) explained that "[i]deally...the design of a qualitative study is *emergent and flexible*, responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress" (p. 16).

However, for 13 years prior to becoming a classroom teacher, Mr. Mariano worked as a school social worker for another district in the metropolitan area. He therefore had a substantial amount of experience working with parents who had students in EBD classrooms. When I asked him about his philosophy of teaching and why he became a classroom teacher he said: “probably the best place to start is...I like relationships. I like connections with people...I guess it’s part of my nature.” As a social worker he built connections between students, parents, and service providers in the community. As a teacher he focused on the connections he made with his students and in doing so he built strong relationships with their parents. He has an easy-going demeanor and says that “it’s just fun to get to know people.” But he also has a more radical side, a part of his personality that likes to go against the grain, to take people by surprise. Part of the fun of getting to know parents, he says, is that they don’t expect it:

I like to call parents because they always get called when there is something bad going on. So I like to call to throw them off...do the unexpected. To me, it’s like unexpected, in a good way, to call parents of EBD kids and build these relationships.

It’s not just parents Mr. Mariano likes to throw off, he wants others – other teachers, administrators, his friends – to see another side of the students and parents he works with. He wants to prove people wrong:

Every time I say what I do as a job, ever since I’ve been a school social worker, the first thing that people say is that the parents must really be fucked up. “Wow, you must work with horrible parents.” The worst...is the other professionals. When I was a social worker, the worst people to work with were the teachers.

That's why I wanted to be a teacher...because I saw so many teachers doing it wrong.

Mr. Mariano wants to be the teacher who brings people together, pulls in the principal, the family, community resources, everyone he can think of, to support his students. From his perspective, "we are a system, and the parents...they're trusting the school to do a job. So many teachers do a shitty job with classrooms that are these unsafe settings." Too many of the classrooms he went into as a social worker made him feel "exposed to all this violence," where teachers were in a "wrestling match" with the kids. "Like a bully, these kids come in and they just get thrown down, with names, emotionally, physically. These settings are abusive, I would liken them to domestic violence."

He sees a better way. He thinks of himself as connected to what's going on with the kids, but gives them space to make their own choices and learn from the natural consequences of those choices. He provides structure to the classroom, but wants his students to know that "they are their own boss" and responsible for the choices they make and their behavior. He does not use a student store or level system to encourage behavior: "I don't want my face on a dollar bill, I don't want any Mariano Bucks...my philosophy is give kids the best chance to make decisions independently." That's not how it's usually done in EBD classrooms. Because of this, he needs – and works hard to earn – the support of his students' parents. He strives to "right away be positive with the parents, because who knows, day two I may need to call them" and employ their help, and he wants to be able to say "remember, remember I called you, I called you when it was a

really good day.” He views his relationships with parents as an “investment” in the life of his students.

Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams. Alfonso’s IEP meeting was the first meeting that I observed. Alfonso and both of his parents attended the meeting. Ms. Acosta, his mother, is biracial, having African American and Latina heritage. Tim, his father, is White. Alfonso was in the 7th grade. It was the fall of his first year of middle school, but he had been in an EBD classroom in elementary school. Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams arrived at the meeting together, but sat at opposite corners of the table from one another. Mr. Adams wore faded jeans and a t-shirt; Ms. Acosta wore a tracksuit. Both parents listened attentively to the discussion and talked about some of Alfonso’s behaviors at home, activities he was involved in, and how they might be able to support interventions his teachers were trying to implement. Ms. Acosta, in particular, made a number of comments to Alfonso, most commonly complimenting him on the accolades he received from his teachers. Overall, Ms. Acosta was quite upbeat during the meeting, while Mr. Adams was more reserved. After the meeting, I learned they were separated. Mr. Mariano told me that he also did not realize they were separated until after he had met them several times. According to Mr. Mariano, they attend most of their son’s school meetings and events together and he described their interactions with one another as casual.

Mr. and Ms. Barnes. Mr. and Ms. Barnes, Ben’s mother and father, both attended his IEP meeting, the second meeting I observed. Ben, who was in the 8th grade, did not attend the meeting. He had been in an EBD program in elementary school and would be continuing in an EBD program the following year when he began high school. Both Mr. and Ms. Barnes are White. They both wore old jeans, Ms. Barnes had on an old

sweatshirt, Mr. Barnes a t-shirt, jacket, and ball cap. They appeared to be a few years older than the other parents I observed and made reference during the meeting to having an adult child. They sat next to each other during the meeting, across the table from the teachers. For most of the meeting, Mr. Barnes's chair was pushed back from the table and he sat with his arms folded across his chest, sometimes looking down in his lap, other times looking up and tracking the conversation. Ms. Barnes sat up with her chair pulled up close to the table, making eye contact with whoever was speaking throughout the meeting. Despite their different postures, both of Mr. and Ms. Barnes made a number of comments, raised concerns, and asked questions of the teachers.

Mr. and Ms. Collins. I observed Calvin's IEP meeting third. Calvin and both of his parents, Mr. and Ms. Collins, attended the meeting. It was winter of Calvin's 7th grade year. He had been in an EBD classroom since 3rd grade. Ms. Collins is African American. Mr. Collins is White. They both wore clean looking jeans and t-shirts. Mr. and Ms. Collins sat next to one another and Calvin sat next to his father. The mood at this meeting was upbeat and loose, the dialogue easy. Mr. Collins (and Calvin) maintained a steady flow of humorous comments, with the rest of the team laughing loudly in response – Ms. Collins typically laughing loudest of all. The three's presence filled the room. Mr. Collins and Calvin maintained a lighthearted banter throughout the meeting, although Mr. and Ms. Collins were constantly prompting Calvin that his comments had gone too far afield or had become inappropriate for the setting. Calvin's influence during the meeting was significant, and in many ways he dominated the conversation during the meeting.

Mr. Davis. The final IEP meeting I observed was for Danny. Danny was an 8th grade student, but he was a year older than the other 8th graders in his class. He would be

continuing in an EBD program the following year in high school. He and his father, Mr. Davis, attended the meeting. Mr. Davis is White and a single parent. This was the only meeting I observed where only one parent was present. Danny's mother, whom he does not live with and who was not at the meeting, is an immigrant from Russia. Danny and his father arrived 40 minutes after the meeting began; Mr. Davis dressed in a button down shirt, Danny in an oversize hoody. Danny brought his school-provided breakfast with him to the meeting and ate it slowly as the team talked, using his sleeve to wipe his face when he thought not one was watching. From the moment Mr. Davis sat down, he jumped into the discussion, frequently running his fingers through his hair as he talked. There was an urgency to his comments. Mr. Davis and Mr. Mariano tried to involve Danny in the discussion, but he was largely unresponsive to questions – listening, taking a bite of his food, pausing, and then saying he didn't have anything to say. Mr. Davis appeared a bit frustrated by this, responding for Danny more quickly each time it happened.

Data Collection

This study is principally informed by observational and interview data. One document was also collected. The use of multiple data sources across multiple participants is a form of triangulation, a process of establishing the trustworthiness of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994, Erickson, 1986).

Observations. I observed IEP meetings for four students receiving special education services for EBD. Mr. Mariano facilitated each meeting. The meetings ranged in duration from 31 minutes to 75 minutes ($M = 54$ minutes). Between seven and nine people attended each meeting, including the student in three of the four meetings.

I participated in each meeting in the role of *participant observer* (Merriam, 2009). In this role, my presence was known to the meeting participants, but my role was as an observer of the events, not a participant in them. The purpose of this approach is to capture the events as close to their natural state as possible while observing the field in person.

Prior to my first observation, I met Mr. Mariano to introduce myself to him, explain my study, and answer his questions. I first met the other participants at the IEP meetings (though they had consented to my observations prior to the meetings). At each meeting I chose a seat that allowed me to see all of the participants but remain as unobtrusive as possible, either at a corner of the table where the team sat or at an adjacent table. My participation in each meeting was slightly different. In Ben's meeting my only engagement with the team members was during introductions and a brief informal conversation after the meeting concluded. In Alfonso and Calvin's meetings, the parents interacted with me during the course of the meeting, for example turning to me and making comments or asking me questions. In these situations, I responded naturally, attempting to be polite, but not participate in the meeting in a substantive way. In Danny's meeting, before Mr. Davis and Danny arrived, the educators included me in the discussion through eye contact and body language more than I had been included in other meetings, though I still did not verbally contribute to the discussion.

I recorded the dialogue at these meetings with an audio recorder. During each meeting I also took field notes on the participants (who was at the meeting and their role), their conversation (in particular, comments that seemed to have a significant influence on the discussion), their nonverbal interactions, the physical setting and seating arrangement

of the team members, and my reflections on the meeting (Merriam, 2009). In addition to collecting this data, the purpose of my observations was to assist me in developing questions for post-observation interviews.

Shortly after each meeting, I transcribed the audio recording and wrote a memo based on my observations. These memos were highly descriptive of the meeting as well as reflective (Merriam, 2009). I transcribed recordings as a strategy to become more familiar with the data (Erickson, 1986).

Interviews. Interviews are a constructed interaction between researcher and study participant. They complement observational data and are an important data collection method in qualitative research because they assist the researcher in understanding how participants make meaning from their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Interview questions can be used to explore ideas or the meaning of events, confirm or refute emerging hypotheses, and develop new ideas.

My interviews covered the following broad topics: (a) the participant's beliefs about the purpose of the IEP meeting, (b) the role the participant assumed during the meeting, (c) what the participant believed encouraged or inhibited parental participation in meeting, (d) what effect parental participation had on the meeting, (e) and in what ways and to what extent were the content, communication, and interactions during the meeting culturally familiar and comfortable to the participant.

Each live interview was audio recorded and transcribed shortly thereafter. This procedure helped me to become more familiar with the data (Erickson, 1986). I also took field notes during interviews on key ideas, comments, and reactions from the participants and on my reflections. I wrote a memo after each interview.

Table 1

Interview questions protocol: Mr. Mariano

-
- 1) In general, how often do you and [parent] communicate? How do you communicate with [parent] (e.g., phone, email, in-person meetings)? What do you usually communicate about? How would you describe your relationship, overall, with [parent]?
 - 2) What did you do to prepare for [student]'s IEP meeting?
 - 3) In general, what do you think parents should do to be prepared for an IEP meeting? What, if anything, did you do to help [parent] be prepared for this meeting?
 - 4) What did you hope to accomplish/communicate at this IEP meeting? Why was this important to do?
 - 5) What do you think your role was at the meeting and why was that your role? How well do you think that was received by the other IEP team members?
 - 6) Describe what you think is the ideal role of parents in an IEP meeting? How does that compare to [parent]'s participation in this meeting?
 - 7) Tell me what you think active parent participation in an IEP meeting looks like?
 - 8) What did you do to try to get [parent] to be an active participant in the meeting? How much effort did that take? How do you think your efforts affected [parent]'s participation? What difference did [parent]'s participation make?
 - 9) What part(s) or aspect(s) of the meeting were you most pleased with?
 - 10) What did you do to communicate and interact with [parent] at the IEP meeting in a way that was comfortable for him/her? What do you know about [parent]'s cultural or racial identity? Did, and if so how did, your communication and interaction at the meeting take into consideration [parent]'s cultural or racial identity?
 - 11) If you could have changed one or two things about the meeting what would you change? What did you do to try to address that concern during the meeting?
 - 12) Describe what, if any, aspects of [student]'s IEP were tailored to his cultural or racial identity? How did you and the IEP team determine that those aspects were necessary and/or appropriate to tailor to [student]'s cultural or racial identity?
 - 13) In general, what part of the IEP itself do you feel is most important and why? What part of the IEP process is most important to you and why?
-

I conducted five interviews for this study. Mr. Mariano participated in three in-depth interviews lasting 68, 70, and 75 minutes respectively. Additional informal conversation occurred before and after each interview. The first and second interviews followed shortly after each of the first two observations and were interviews about the

preceding observation. The third interview followed the fourth observation and its content covered the third and fourth observations.

The interviews were designed to follow a semi-structured protocol (Merriam, 2009), which included a series of structured questions, but also allowed me to develop and ask follow-up questions to Mr. Mariano's responses and to investigate emerging concepts. Table 1 shows the standard interview questions I asked Mr. Mariano, though it does not include the follow-up questions specific to each IEP meeting.

As the design of my study evolved and Mr. Mariano became more central to my data, these interviews took a progressively more unstructured format. In each interview I asked a series of questions about the preceding IEP meeting(s) according to my interview protocol, but following these questions, we increasingly engaged in less structured dialogue about issues such as his experiences working with parents, teaching philosophy, and the emerging and tentative findings of this study. In addition, Mr. Mariano asked me questions about my educational philosophy and experiences as a teacher and he asked for feedback on his facilitation of the IEP meetings. Developing a collaborative relationship with key informants is one way to maintain a high ethical standard when conducting research (Erickson, 1986). Key informants may be particularly vulnerable to the information that is revealed by a study. For example, Mr. Mariano's principal may scrutinize my description and analysis of Mr. Mariano's practices, which would not be possible were it not for my study. Working collaboratively with key informants to modify the vision for and approach to research – a process in which the qualitative researcher often engages outside the purview of the study participants – ensures that the participant receives some benefit from the study in exchange for his vulnerability. I also believe that

participants' level of involvement in the study entitles them to benefit from their participation proportionally – those who participate more should receive more benefit.

Table 2

Interview questions protocol: Parents

- 1) Please describe your relationship with Mr. Mariano, in general. How often do you communicate with him and what do you usually talk about?
 - 2) What did you hope would be accomplished/communicated at this IEP meeting? Was there anything in particular that you wanted to discuss with the team or bring to the team's attention?
 - 3) What did you do to prepare for the meeting? What, if anything, did Mr. Mariano do to help you prepare for the meeting? Is there information that you didn't have that would have been helpful to know before the meeting to help you prepare?
 - 4) What do you think is the parent's role in an IEP meeting and why is that the parent's role? How did you participate in this meeting? How do you think the other IEP team members responded to your participation?
 - 5) Can you describe a specific instance or two at this IEP meeting where you felt like the IEP team really listened to what you had to say? How did that make you feel?
 - 6) Conversely, were there any times at this meeting where you felt like the team didn't listen to something important you had to say? Please describe that experience and how that made you feel?
 - 7) Do you think your child's IEP should take his cultural or racial identity into consideration? If so, how do you think this could be done? Was this something discussed at his IEP meeting? Does his current IEP do a good job of this?
 - 8) How would you describe your racial or ethnic identity?
-

I conducted interviews with two of the parents following the IEP meetings in which they participated. The first interview was with Ms. Acosta, it lasted 15 minutes. The second was with Ms. Collins, which I conducted via email. I intended both interviews to be more in-depth, but was unsuccessful. Ms. Acosta was receptive to speaking with me, but did not want to arrange a pre-specified time for the interview. She asked to me to call her whenever I was available. When I spoke with her, she politely responded to my questions, but then cut the interview short because she was about to board a bus. I attempted to contact Ms. Collins by phone and email to arrange an

interview. She responded to my email and informed me that it would work better for her if I emailed her the questions I wanted to ask.

While both interviews were brief and not in depth, each provided some informative data about the meaning that Ms. Acosta and Ms. Collins made from their respective IEP meetings. However, due to their brevity, I was not able to follow up on their responses with probing questions. These interviews were originally designed as semi-structured, but I chose to conduct them as structured interviews (Merriam, 2009) in an effort to cover more topics in less time. My questions for these interviews are shown in Table 2.

I planned to interview each of the parents who participated in the IEP meetings, but this did not work out. Following each meeting, I attempted to contact each parent via phone or email (whichever the parent had provided) to arrange an interview. For the parents I did not reach (all except Ms. Acosta and Ms. Collins), I made a second attempt to contact them. None of the other parents returned my calls or emails. I decided that making more than two attempts to contact parents was intrusive and I took their lack of response as an indication that they did not want to participate in an interview.

My lack of success interviewing parents was disappointing. It also points to one of the challenges in conducting IEP research on parents of students identified as EBD. My belief is that my inability to engage parents more fully was the result of me not having established a relationship with the parents independent of the school or prior to meeting them at the IEP meeting.

Documents. I collected one document, a copy of Danny's IEP. Only Mr. Davis responded to my request for a copy of the IEP. In Alfonso and Calvin's case, however,

Mr. Mariano did not provide copies of the IEP to the team at the meeting, instead he used a computer to project the draft IEP onto a screen. At all four meetings I was able to view the draft IEP document during the meeting, whether in hard copy or on the projection screen.

My intention was to examine the IEP documents from each meeting to analyze in what ways and how much the documents changed based upon the discussion during the IEP meeting. This was only possible during Danny's IEP, but I was able to capture some instances where the IEP was modified in the other meetings in my field notes and by reviewing the meeting transcriptions. However, as I discuss in the following chapters, these modifications were generally minimal.

Data Analysis

I engaged in two phases of data analysis. The first phase was conducted during data collection. During this phase, I transcribed the recordings of my IEP meeting observations and participant interviews, I read through these transcripts and my field notes, and I wrote descriptive and conceptual memos. Through these procedures, I interacted with my data multiple times and with varying analytic purposes. The purpose of transcribing my observations and interviews – and reading through these transcriptions and my field notes – was to become more familiar with my data in its purest form, as close to the original phenomena as possible. Based on these readings, I wrote descriptive memos that integrated my reflections on the data with key ideas and events taken from the data. As I continued to write memos, I began to include broader conceptual ideas that emerged across the data, in addition to retaining the descriptive and reflective elements.

The process of memo writing was iterative; I periodically reviewed previous memos to further develop ideas and concepts in subsequent memos.

The second phase of data analysis occurred after my data collection was complete. This phase began with a revisiting of the case record (Patton, 2002), reading through my transcripts, field notes, and memos in chronological order. In addition, as I reread each transcript, I listened to the original recording as a strategy to activate my memory of the multi-dimensional qualities present in each observation and interview. This was also a procedure to verify the fidelity of my transcripts.

Following this immersion into the data corpus (Erickson, 1986), I began the process of hand coding each piece of data. First, I followed an open coding strategy, where I engaged in line-by-line labeling of “all ideas, themes, or issues they suggest[ed]” (Emerson, Fritz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 145). From these labels I identified a small number of interesting themes, which I used to recode the data using a focused coding strategy (Emerson et al., 1995). These focused codes were themes that emerged from the data and were responsive to the topic of my research questions – parental participation and the facilitation of IEP meetings.

Four themes emerged as particularly salient and became the focus of my analysis. First, I analyzed the focal teacher’s (Mr. Mariano) – and to a lesser extent the other educators’ – verbal interactions with the parents at the IEP meetings. This included how parents expressed their interests, concerns, and questions, as well as how Mr. Mariano responded to these discussion items. It also included the ways Mr. Mariano attempted to involve parents in the IEP through general discussion and specifically with regard to educational decision-making.

The second theme of my focused coding was the distribution and enactment of power and authority among team members. This theme examined the type and source of knowledge that possessed, or imposed, authority in the meeting. I coded for instances where Mr. Mariano positioned himself as a knowledgeable expert or where the parents positioned him as one and, conversely, where the parents positioned themselves as knowledgeable experts or where Mr. Mariano positioned them as such.

The third theme was building parent-teacher relationships. This theme included the strategies Mr. Mariano employed to build, strengthen, or maintain his relationship with the parents during IEP meetings. It also identified instances where these relationships were challenged or potentially could have been challenged.

The final theme was defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting from the perspective of the primary participants. This theme examined what outcomes (including products and/or the experience of going through a process) the participants hoped would result from or during the IEP meetings and how well the teams achieved these outcomes.

In addition, I analyzed the verbal contributions of the team members at each meeting. These verbal contributions are reported to provide an additional means of describing the interactions between team members. I differentiated verbal contributions into 11 categories. These categories expand upon the framework used by Vaughn et al. (1988), where the researchers tabulated the number of questions parents asked, comments initiated by parents, and parent responses to comments and questions from other IEP team members. The categories I used were:

1. Total verbal contributions or total remarks.⁷
2. Affirmative utterances.⁸
3. General questions to parent(s).⁹
4. Targeted questions to parent(s).¹⁰
5. Questions by parent(s) to the educators.
6. Concerns about the student.
7. Compliments about or made to the student.
8. Questions to the student.
9. Comments to the student.¹¹

⁷ I define this category as the sum of a participant's verbal remarks made during an IEP meeting. I calculated this number by adding the participant's verbal contributions from all of the other categories I tracked (utterances, questions, concerns, compliments, and comments to the student) to the number of additional comments, statements, explanations, and descriptions made by the participant.

⁸ I define affirmative utterances to mean short affirmative comments – such as “yes” or “uh-huh” – made while another team member was talking and stated without additional comment. Affirmative utterances do not include short responses to questions. Therefore, if a team member was making a comment and another team member interjected by saying “yeah” to show his or her agreement with the comment, I would identify that as an affirmative utterance. However, if a team member asked a question and another team member responded by saying “yeah” I would identify this as a comment or statement and it would be included in the tally of total verbal contributions or total remarks. Interestingly, no dissenting utterances (such as “no”) were made throughout any of the four IEP meetings I observed and consequently I only tallied affirmative utterances.

⁹ General questions were broad in scope and not specific to a particular item of discussion, such as “Do you have any questions about the IEP?” This category only included questions made by educators to the parents; it excluded questions by the student.

¹⁰ Targeted questions were asked in specific reference to an item of discussion, such as “Is there anything we should add to his behavioral plan?” or “Do you agree with this goal?” This category only included questions made by educators to the parents; it excluded questions by the student.

10. Comments by the student to his parent(s).
11. Questions by the student to his parent(s).

¹¹ This category excluded compliments and questions to the student, but was inclusive of all other comments directed to a student.

Chapter V

Major Themes and Findings, Part I

In this chapter and the following chapter, I present findings from my IEP meeting observations and interviews. I analyze each IEP meeting separately, developing the emergent themes of: (1) parental participation; (2) distribution and enactment of power and authority; (3) building parent-teacher relationships; and (4) defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting. In Chapter VII, I analyze these themes across the IEP meetings. This chapter (Chapter V) analyzes the findings from Alfonso and Ben's IEP meetings. I begin each section in this chapter and the next with an overview of the meeting, including a description of the participants, how the meeting began, the topics discussed, and the frequency and type of each team member's participation.

Alfonso's IEP

Overview of the meeting. Alfonso's annual IEP review occurred in October, three months into his seventh grade year, his first year at Clampett Middle School. The meetings took place after school and lasted 53 minutes.

Attendance. Seven team members attended Alfonso's meeting. Mr. Mariano facilitated the meeting. Ms. Evans, a school psychologist who worked with students in Mr. Mariano's classroom on a weekly basis, served as the administrative representative at the meeting. Alfonso's speech language pathologist (SLP) and his general education science teacher also attended. Alfonso and his parents, Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams, attended the meeting. Alfonso's physical education teacher and his other general education teacher did not attend.

Seating and physical arrangement of the room. Six of the team members sat around two rectangular tables pushed together at the front of the classroom. Ms. Evans sat at an adjacent table and was insignificantly involved in the meeting. Instead of giving each team member a paper copy of the draft IEP, Mr. Mariano projected the draft IEP onto a screen at the front of the room. He sat facing his computer and the rest of the team, while the other team members faced him and the projection screen. The seating arrangement is shown in Figure 1.

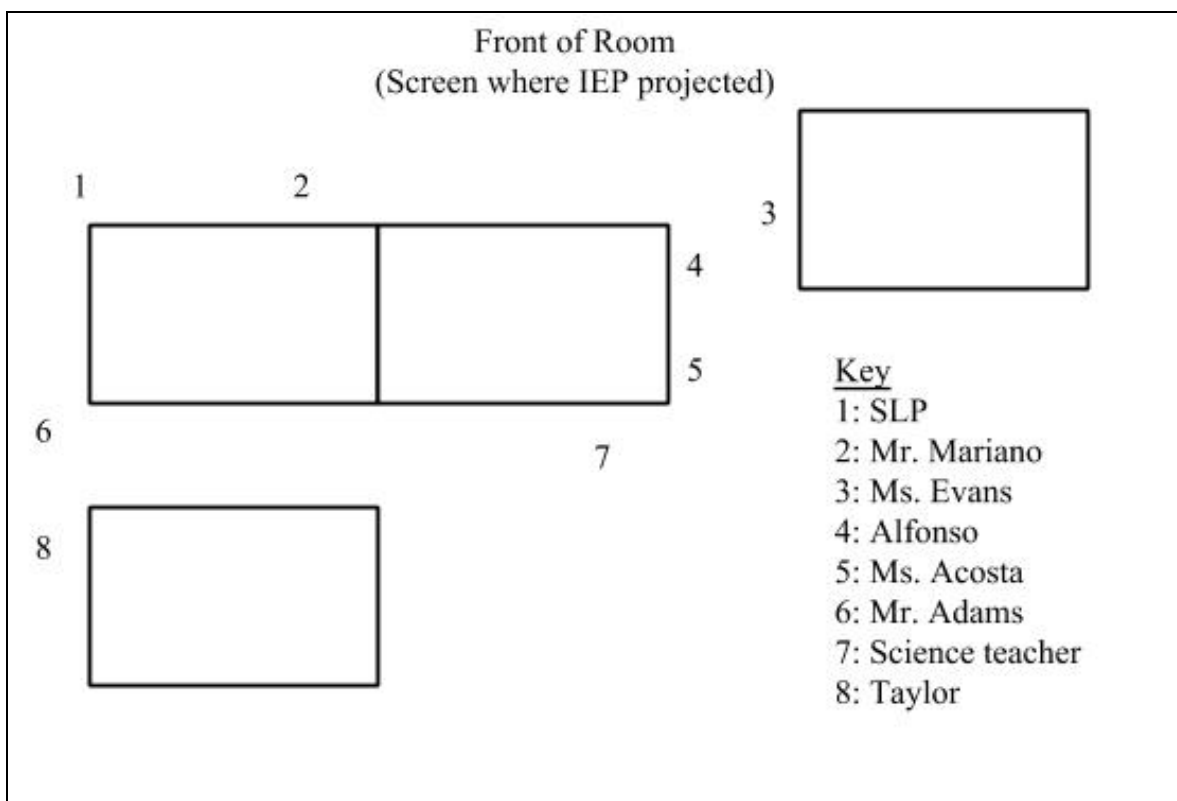


Figure 1. Seating and physical arrangement of room for Alfonso's IEP meeting.

Topics of discussion. The team discussed eleven topics during the meeting. The meeting began with quick introductions and Mr. Mariano explaining the agenda for the meeting. Alfonso's science teacher then reported on Alfonso's achievements in his class ("I recommend we move him to up a standard grading system") before leaving the meeting. The agenda for the remainder of the meeting followed the order of topics as they

were written in the IEP document. Mr. Mariano introduced each topic that the team discussed. He also facilitated the transition between discussion topics. The team spent the greatest amount of time discussing Alfonso's functional behavioral analysis (FBA) and behavior intervention plan (BIP) (10 minutes) and Alfonso's progress in social and emotional development and his new behavioral goals (8.5 minutes). Table 3 shows the order of the topics covered in the meeting and the amount of time each topic was discussed.

Table 3

<i>Topics of discussion at Alfonso's IEP meeting</i>	
Time*	Topics
2	Introductions and agenda
3	Science
3	Questions from last year's IEP
3	Student strengths
7.5	Math and Writing
8.5	Social and emotional development
4	Communication
7.5	Testing accommodations, Extended school year, transportation
3.5	Service matrix
4	Aversive intervention plan
10	FBA and BIP
53	<i>Total</i>
<i>*Rounded to nearest ½ minute</i>	

Participation by team members. Team members assumed different roles during Alfonso's IEP meeting. Mr. Mariano assumed a dominant role with respect to the amount of time he spent talking, as well as the authority he had to direct the conversation. The role of the other educators was quite limited. The science teacher stayed only long enough to give his report to Alfonso's parents. The SLP spoke almost exclusively during the section on Alfonso's speech and communication goals. Ms. Evans made only one

brief comment throughout the whole meeting. Most of the conversation during the meeting was directed to Alfonso and/or his parents.

Getting started. When everyone had assembled, Mr. Mariano started the meeting by having each team member introduce him or herself and say his or her connection to the team. He asked Alfonso to begin. Alfonso said that he was not sure what he was supposed to say, Mr. Mariano told him to state his name, which Alfonso did. Then Alfonso said he did not know what else he was supposed to say, to which Mr. Mariano replied “that’s perfect, that’s all you need to say.” The other team members introduced themselves and I introduced myself. Mr. Mariano explained his agenda for the meeting, which included going over any questions from Alfonso’s previous IEP and discussing Alfonso’s progress – “there’s been a lot of growth” – since the last annual review. He emphasized that the IEP he had written was a draft: “anytime there is something we, as a team, want to change, today or down the road, we can do that.”

Participation by type. Mr. Mariano verbally contributed more than any of the other team members. He made 74 total verbal contributions, including several lengthy uninterrupted explanations – most notably his description of Alfonso’s progress and new goals in math. Alfonso contributed the second most (59 verbal contributions), followed by Mr. Adams (41), and Ms. Acosta (37). Table 4 shows the participation, by type, for the primary participants and Alfonso.

Compared to the other team members, a greater fraction of Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams’s verbal contributions were (a) affirmative utterances or (b) made directly to Alfonso in a way that engaged him in discussion but not the other team members. Together Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams made 20 utterances (eight by Ms. Acosta and 12 by Mr. Adams).

Ms. Acosta made 12 comments to Alfonso and asked him four questions. Mr. Adams made eight comments to Alfonso and asked him three questions. Excluding these verbal contributions – which were directed to their child and not (at least expressly) for the purpose of engaging the whole team in discussion – Ms. Acosta made 13 and Mr. Adams made 20 other verbal contributions throughout the meeting. These comments were instances where the parents engaged in verbal interactions with the other team members.

Table 4

Team member participation by type at Alfonso's IEP meeting

	Mr. Mariano	Mother (Ms. Acosta)	Father (Mr. Adams)	Alfonso	Other*
Total remarks	74	37	41	59	
Affirmative utterances	1	8	12	2	
Comments to Alfonso	11	12	8		
Questions for Alfonso	8	4	3		
General questions to parents	3				
Targeted questions to parents	5				
Questions to Mr. Mariano		1	6		
Concerns	5	0	1		
Compliments to Alfonso	4	4	0		2
Student questions to parents				1	
Student comments to parents				22	

** Only one data point collected within this category of participation*

Mr. Mariano and Alfonso made more verbal contributions that were directed to the entire team than the other team members. Mr. Mariano made only one utterance, 11 comments directed just to Alfonso, and asked him eight questions. However, in many instances, it was difficult to assess whether Mr. Mariano's comments and questions that were directed to Alfonso were intended exclusively for him. An example of this was when Mr. Mariano and Alfonso were discussing how Alfonso expressed his creative imagination around his peers:

Alfonso: People respect me more than last year.

Mr. Mariano: Because, what have we done about that? What have we done about the imaginative play that we do? What are some of the limits on it?

Alfonso: I do it during first and lunch period.

Mr. Mariano: Like when in first? The whole period?

Alfonso: Until it's time to begin the schedule.

Mr. Mariano: That's right. There's limits. That's a big part of it. He has this really vivid, imaginative play, he's got these monologues and dialogues that he's got memorized. I want other students to look upon that as cool – that's just something that Alfonso does. But at the same time, people don't do that all day.

In this example, Mr. Mariano confirmed with Alfonso when he was allowed to behave in the described manner and affirmed the importance of being able to express himself. He also used the exchange to explain his expectations to Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams. Thus, in addition to the 54 verbal contributions Mr. Mariano made to the whole team, some of his 20 other verbal contributions were made for the benefit of the team.

Alfonso made two utterances, 22 comments to his parents, and asked his parents one question. He therefore had a total of 36 instances of verbal interaction directed at the whole team.

Mr. Mariano, Ms. Acosta, and Mr. Adams asked a number of questions of one another throughout the meeting. Mr. Mariano asked three general questions and five targeted questions to Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams. The three general questions he asked were variants of “Do you have any questions about the IEP?” His targeted questions were narrower in scope. For example, after explaining Alfonso's present levels of performance, he asked if Ms. Acosta or Mr. Adams had anything to add to that section of the IEP.

Ms. Acosta asked one and Mr. Adams asked six questions of Mr. Mariano. These questions also differed in type. In three of Mr. Adams's questions he sought to clarify a

term, what was said, or what was written in the IEP. For example, Mr. Adams asked if the term “extended school year” meant summer school (“Would that be like summer school?”). With other questions Mr. Adams sought more information from Mr. Mariano. For example, during Mr. Mariano’s explanation of what he planned to work on with Alfonso in his writing class, Mr. Adams asked for an explanation of the writing composition skills Mr. Mariano would teach.

Mr. Mariano brought up five concerns he had with Alfonso. Four of them were behavioral issues (e.g., using appropriate body language to convey that he was engaged during instructional time); one was a concern that Alfonso was not bringing lunch or money to buy lunch on a regular basis. Mr. Adams expressed one concern – that Alfonso had been marked for an unexcused absence on a day he had a doctor’s appointment – which was related to a larger issue of attendance that Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams had brought to Mr. Mariano’s attention before the meeting.

Alfonso received ten compliments during the meeting. These pertained to his good behavior, engagement in school, and positive attitude toward school and learning. Four of these came from Mr. Mariano, four came from Ms. Acosta, and two came from the other educators at the meeting. Mr. Mariano also gave one compliment to Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams – attributing Alfonso’s much improved attendance to their efforts to get him ready for school on time.

Parental participation. In both explicit and subtle ways, Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams participated in Alfonso’s IEP meeting. They communicated to Mr. Mariano and the other educators what they wanted to learn from the meeting and concerns they had

about how Alfonso was doing in school. Mr. Mariano also made moves to attempt to increase Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams's active involvement in the meeting.

Parents' interests, concerns, and questions. To Ms. Acosta, the meeting was successful because she heard "how [Alfonso] is adjusting socially. That's the biggest thing, just to make sure that he's adjusting and doing okay." She expressed this during the meeting as well. Early in the meeting, when Mr. Mariano asked if there were any questions about last year's IEP, Ms. Acosta replied: "He seems a lot happier here than the previous school. And he's attending. He actually wants to go to school, which is a vast improvement. He's not trying to not go to school. That's improvement." Later on, when Mr. Mariano asked if there was anything to add to Alfonso's present levels of performance, Ms. Acosta explained: "My main thing is Alfonso is a lot happier this year. He likes school and he didn't like his school last year." When asked if she had questions about his progress or goals in speech therapy, she said she did not, she was just "glad that [he was] improving." Ms. Acosta's interests and concerns were that Alfonso was doing better than before, that he was headed in a positive direction with his relationship to school, his academic performance, and his behavior.

Mr. Adams was less explicit about his interests but gave the impression that he was more interested in understanding each component of the IEP. He asked several clarifying questions that indicated this interest. His two questions (asking about Alfonso's math test score and what Mr. Mariano was teaching in writing) were the only verbal interactions that either Ms. Acosta or Mr. Adams had with Mr. Mariano during the academic section of the IEP. Mr. Adams also seemed satisfied with a general understanding of Alfonso's performance and what was written in the IEP. He wanted to

make sure that Alfonso was “up to speed” and commented that everything in the IEP “seems pretty straight forward.”

Prior to the meeting, Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams had told Mr. Mariano that they were concerned about Alfonso’s attendance the previous year. Mr. Adams wanted to make sure that Alfonso’s attendance record was accurate. However, it was Mr. Mariano who brought up this topic during the meeting (following a discussion of Alfonso’s social and emotional development, Mr. Mariano commented “And then you guys brought up the attendance, so I wanted to put that in here”) and reminded Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams that it was something they wanted to discuss. Mr. Mariano agreed with Mr. Adams that Alfonso’s attendance record was inaccurate and assured him that it would be “something that can easily be cleared up. Just remind me, and I’ll talk to the attendance office.”

Toward the end of the meeting, Mr. Adams asked two questions that generated conversation and contributed ideas not otherwise discussed by the team. First, after Mr. Mariano inquired whether the parents were interested in discontinuing Alfonso’s aversive intervention plan, Mr. Adams asked Mr. Mariano if he knew that Alfonso had attended a summer program for anger management:

Mr. Adams: Did he tell you about his, ah, Jedi Masters Program this summer? It was anger management skills.

Alfonso: Yeah, I think that might have helped.

Mr. Adams: What was it, the four-step breathing?

Alfonso: Yeah, breathe in, breathe out [demonstrates].

Mr. Mariano: Do you do those things, and I haven’t noticed? Do you do use some of those strategies?

Alfonso: Yeah I do, and you haven’t noticed?

Mr. Mariano: I haven’t.

...

Mr. Adams: It seemed like he learned some valuable coping skills in there. I noticed a change. There was about six weeks of that, we came on a couple weeks late. It does seem like that helped. Do you think?

Alfonso: Yeah.

Second, as the meeting was concluding, Mr. Adams asked about the club offerings at the school, referencing a previous conversation with Mr. Mariano on this topic. He was particularly interested in learning about the school's computer club. This question brought out that Mr. Mariano planned to enroll Alfonso in a technology course the following semester, with Ms. Acosta supporting this idea and affirming that Alfonso was very interested in computers. It also illustrated Mr. Mariano's enthusiasm for following through with questions and concerns Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams brought up. Just as with the unexcused absence (where Mr. Mariano said he would work it out with the attendance office), here, after explaining which clubs the school had and how to enroll in them, Mr. Mariano told Mr. Adams he could take action: "if you guys want a permission form, we can grab that on the way out."

Attempts to get parents involved. Mr. Mariano made an effort to provide different opportunities for Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams to be involved in Alfonso's IEP meeting. This included moves to involve them in general discussion and making decisions about Alfonso's educational plan.

To solicit general input and participation from Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams, at three points during the meeting – a couple minutes after it started, roughly in the middle of the meeting, and a few minutes before it concluded – Mr. Mariano asked Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams if they had anything they wanted to add to the IEP. None of these attempts resulted in a direct response from either of them, though Ms. Acosta responded to the first question with her comment about Alfonso being happier and wanting to come

to school (which may have given insight to Mr. Mariano into what Ms. Acosta wanted to get out of the meeting), and the final question prompted Mr. Adams to ask about school clubs (an issue that was important to him, but had not yet been addressed).

However, Mr. Mariano's main attempt to involve Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams in general discussion was his approach to completing the introductory section of the IEP, which discussed Alfonso's strengths and interests. He had left that segment of the IEP blank, introducing his concept for how to complete it to the team:

One thing I wanted to do actually was talk about strengths...I thought we could do that as a team. I filled in a lot of the paperworky stuff and the background stuff, but I thought maybe as a team we could talk about the strengths, including you, Alfonso. So what do we see as positives, what do we see as strengths?

It was the first time Mr. Mariano had tried this approach. It didn't work to get Ms. Acosta or Mr. Adams to contribute ideas – both remained silent during this discussion, while each of the other team members, and Alfonso in particular, created a list of Alfonso's strengths. Nevertheless, Mr. Mariano thought:

It's always good to start with strengths and to engage with talking about it. I've seen this as part of a wraparound team...it is good for kids to hear from the teachers and the parents and for them to be empowered to say "Hey, this is what I'm good at."

He did recognize that it might be a risk, with the student realizing his parents were not saying anything positive about him, or because the parents might be thinking "how come I can't even say anything positive about my kid?" Mr. Mariano explained that this was "actually kind of playing out...I was thinking, they haven't said anything positive

yet.” In retrospect, he said that he should have introduced the idea by saying “let’s look out across all settings for his strengths...this is not just about school.”

After this attempt, Mr. Mariano tried asking more directed questions to involve Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams in the conversation. Some of these questions also aimed to get them to help make decisions for the IEP. However, he premised each of these targeted questions with his own opinion. For example, to ask about putting Alfonso in an additional general education class, Mr. Mariano said: “I’m thinking about putting him in one more general education class, what do you think about that? Which class?” About Alfonso’s aversive intervention plan, Mr. Mariano said: “I’m thinking about removing his aversive intervention plan. It looks like it may have been necessary in the past, but I don’t think it’s necessary anymore. What do you think about that?” In both instances, Alfonso’s parents agreed with Mr. Mariano’s recommendation.

In total, Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams’s participation in IEP decision-making was minimal. Ms. Acosta shared her thoughts on which additional general education class Alfonso should enroll in – and she was enthusiastic about this – but all of Mr. Mariano recommendations or suggestions were accepted. Throughout the whole meeting, none of the other team members offered a suggestion to any decisional elements of the IEP (with the exception that the SLP created Alfonso’s speech therapy goals), such as suggesting how many minutes of special education Alfonso should receive or recommending an annual goal. Mr. Mariano recognized this, but he “wasn’t wanting to put [Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams] too much on the spot, especially after them not really saying anything much about his strengths. Maybe it just wasn’t something they were in tune with?”

Distribution and enactment of power and authority. Ms. Acosta, Mr. Adams, and Mr. Mariano had been in regular communication since the school year began (a couple months earlier) and the tone of the meeting reflected this familiarity with one another. Ms. Acosta wanted to make sure that there would not be “any surprises” at the meeting, so she made sure to speak with Mr. Mariano about her concerns beforehand. Still, for most of the meeting, Mr. Mariano was positioned as the knowledgeable expert – through his own behavior as well as through Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams’s behavior.

When Mr. Adams explained the Jedi Masters program he momentarily claimed expertise, but even in this situation, he soon deflected it. He introduced the program, said that he thought it gave Alfonso effective anger management strategies, but then deferred to Alfonso to explain the program, stating “that’s the extent of my knowledge of it.” Other than this exchange, neither Ms. Acosta nor Mr. Adams was ever positioned as experts. Participating in the discussion about Alfonso’s strengths could have been an opportunity to do this, for example by describing behaviors they see from Alfonso outside of school. This didn’t happen. Instead, they remained removed from contributing knowledge pertinent to the IEP.

On another occasion, Mr. Adams declined to make a comment about how Alfonso was doing, telling Mr. Mariano: “You probably have a better idea of what’s going on here than we do.” On an earlier occasion, when Mr. Mariano asked them about the previous year’s IEP –which Mr. Mariano did not help create – Mr. Adams again deflected taking a position of knowledge, stating that he had not “thought about that [IEP] in a while.”

Ms. Acosta positioned Mr. Mariano as expert more subtly. Instead of expressly deflecting as Mr. Adams did, she responded to several questions over the course of the meeting by stating how happy she was that Alfonso was doing well at this school. By not answering questions more directly, and by repeatedly responding that the status quo was sufficient (i.e., what the teachers were doing was good enough because Alfonso was doing better than before), Ms. Acosta did not make an effort to occupy a position of power, or position herself as having pertinent knowledge at any point during the meeting. Consequently, Mr. Mariano did not have to actively seek power in the meeting; Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams's actions and inaction gave it to him. Nonetheless, he did make several moves to establish power and demonstrate a position of knowledge. First, he opened the meeting by establishing an agenda. This was helpful for the team to understand what would be discussed during the meeting, but it also granted Mr. Mariano the opportunity to determine the express purpose of the meeting and the topics that would be covered without input from the others. Second, by having created a draft of the IEP, Mr. Mariano took initial control of its content. He left blank the section describing Alfonso's strengths but he independently completed a draft of the sections that determined Alfonso's educational plan (e.g., his academic and behavior goals and his service matrix). Third, at the beginning of the discussion of each substantive topic in the IEP document, Mr. Mariano began with a – again uninterrupted – summary of Alfonso's progress in that area and his new “draft” goals.

Mr. Mariano's efforts were neither aggressive nor domineering, but he did want to appear “confident, like I know what I'm talking about.” He tried not to come across like he was “the expert,” but wanted the parents to know that “I can steer the ship...your child

[is] in good hands.” He also felt “like I have to give expertise about the child, about special ed law, about the school, about curriculums. I feel like I have to be an expert along with being a facilitator and encouraging participation.” Through subtle moves, combined with Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams’s deflection of power, Mr. Mariano established and retained a position of being the knowledgeable expert during the meeting.

Building a parent-teacher relationship. More prominent in Mr. Mariano’s mind than interpersonal power dynamics was building strong interpersonal relationships with the parents of his students. He viewed the IEP meeting as a means to strengthen these relationships:

This is a *step* in us developing a relationship. So we’re going to do this meeting, but I’m also going to call [his parents] for nonessential things. I’m going to call when Alfonso is doing really well, I’m going to call to tell you that he needs to pay four dollars for an upcoming equipment thing. I want communication to be comfortable and as natural as possible. So they can call me up and say, “Hey, I’m on the way in right now, can I come in and talk to you?” This is a step to making it a comfortable classroom. Everything that happens here, there is no hidden agenda. And this is a really good opportunity to get on the phone and say, “Hi, this is what we’re doing, you know the IEP is coming up. It would be good to see you guys.” So it can be like what happened [at Alfonso’s IEP], where they come in for the meeting and I say that there is a family night in a couple weeks and now I got this investment, we got this relationship. So what do they do, they fill out a slip that says they’re coming [to the family night].

During the meeting, Mr. Mariano used three strategies to build his relationship with Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams. One, he focused on Alfonso's strengths and his growth, creating a positive environment. Two, he honestly addressed Alfonso's challenges at school, and in particular his behavioral challenges. Three, when conversation occurred that was tangential to discussing the IEP itself, he used that as an opportunity to connect personally with the parents.

Alfonso's strengths were prominent in each segment of the meeting. Mr. Mariano emphasized Alfonso's general growth when he announced the meeting agenda. He made a number of contributions to the discussion of Alfonso's strengths (including examples of how Alfonso had made positive peer relationships, his participation in his physical education class, his problem solving skills, and that he's smart but still works hard to keep learning). He described Alfonso's reading ability as "outstanding" and his math skills as "above grade level." He started the discussion of Alfonso's social and emotional development by saying "I have a lot of positive things to say." When Mr. Mariano explained his rationale for not recommending an aversive intervention plan, he explained that Alfonso was "using [self regulation] strategies that are not disruptive to his learning or anyone else's, and he's not being unsafe." This focus on strengths, especially strengths in emotional and behavioral regulation, was notable for a student identified as emotionally and behaviorally disabled and educated for part of the day in a self-contained behavior classroom.

Just as explicitly, Mr. Mariano was honest and forthright about Alfonso's behavioral challenges. Alfonso had built friendships with some of his peers and was interacting maturely with the students in his general education classes, but he still had

difficulty “reading the whole situation, reading what’s going on. Are you saying something positive to me, making fun of me, what’s going on?” He also had trouble “being able to get back to [work] quickly” when he became distracted by other students. He was “working on his body language. Like he’ll have his head down, but say he’s listening.” These comments produced nods and agreement from Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams.

In addition to behavioral issues that Alfonso needed to work on, Mr. Mariano brought up a potentially touchy challenge that (may have) implicated Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams’s lack of attentiveness or their strained financial situation. Mr. Mariano commented that “occasionally he’ll come here and he’s got no food for lunch...I think that this contributes to some of his behavior, just low energy.” Instead of taking offense, Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams used this as an opportunity to share their frustration with the challenge of feeding Alfonso (Mr. Adams: “That’s been a challenge. If we make a dinner and it’s not to his liking, he just won’t eat. He’ll try to sneak around at night and get something after everyone is in bed. And then that contributes to his lack of sleep.”), agreeing with Mr. Mariano that eating was a problem and shifting the responsibility to Alfonso (Mr. Adams to Alfonso: “Part of the reason is [that] you eat your lunches for dinner” and “There’s a lot of food you won’t eat”).

The conversation did not always stay on topic, which was fine with Mr. Mariano. On several occasions, he used these tangents to connect with Alfonso and Ms. Acosta, or he participated in them so that he could pull the conversation back on track to his agenda.

In one example, Mr. Mariano shared a one-paragraph essay that Alfonso wrote about being a vendor in a food cart to illustrate what he was teaching in writing:

- Ms. Acosta: What would you sell?
- Alfonso: Pizza and ice cream.
- SLP: I'd buy it.
- Alfonso: I drew a picture [shows picture to his mother]
- Ms. Acosta: Oh, nice.
- Mr. Mariano: This is a blueprint of his food cart
- Ms. Acosta: Let's check it out.
- Mr. Adams: Cool, very professional.
- Alfonso: I'm getting better at drawing.
- Ms. Acosta: It's pink!
- Alfonso: Best color in the world!
- Mr. Mariano: So being able to put together really cohesive paragraphs that make sense, and using words like transition words like 'next,' [and using] complete sentences, so it's not just a bunch of ideas that look like they're answering a question.
- Mr. Adams: Are you supposed to build a topic with the first sentence?
- Mr. Mariano: Yeah, building a topic...
- Ms. Acosta: [laughs] Gonna be closed on the weekends because you need to relax and order more items.
- Alfonso: Yes.
- Mr. Adams: Weekends are the moneymakers.
- Alfonso: Sometimes I need some R & R.
- Mr. Adams: Maybe you need to hire a consultant?
- Ms. Acosta: That is so funny.
- Mr. Mariano: One of the things I find kids doing on word processing is spending an hour deciding which font they want to use...
- Ms. Acosta: I've noticed that.

The essay the team was discussing was an example of the writing skills Alfonso was working on, but Ms. Acosta was engaging with Alfonso on a factual level (what he wrote), not on a structural level (what skills he used to write the essay). The dialogue between Ms. Acosta and Alfonso played out, but twice Mr. Mariano interjected to bring the conversation back to skill development. On Mr. Mariano's first attempt, Mr. Adams

responded, but Ms. Acosta remained focused on the discussion she was having with Alfonso. On Mr. Mariano's second attempt, Ms. Acosta refocused on Mr. Mariano, and Mr. Mariano then guided the conversation back to his discussion of Alfonso's writing goals.

In a second example, Mr. Mariano had explained a concern that Alfonso often overreacted to stimulus around him, like smells. Mr. Mariano gave an example of how Alfonso might react if he smelled another student who walked into the classroom wearing cologne, Alfonso responded, and Mr. Mariano used the exchange both to explain the behavior he would like to see and to empathize with the way Alfonso reacts:

Alfonso: Yeah, that's part of my senses.

Mr. Mariano: But being able to get back to it quickly.

Alfonso: But seriously, I've got major problems when someone puts lots of bad cologne on.

Mr. Mariano: I do, too, actually.

In a third example, Mr. Mariano used humor to bring a tangential conversation back on topic:

Ms. Acosta: ...He likes his school and he didn't like his school last year.

Alfonso: I didn't like it and I had a problem with that school. But I have a problem with this school, it's that it doesn't have any snack machines.

Ms. Acosta: I think that's a good thing.

Alfonso: What? Well, it's a good thing for you, seeing as you don't have to give me \$1.25 every day so I can get candy.

Ms. Acosta: I can still give you a \$1.25, it's just you got to buy healthy food.

Mr. Mariano: Yeah, no corn dogs.

Ms. Acosta: [Laughing] There's no corn dogs here.

Mr. Mariano: So around the goals that we're building on...

In each of these exchanges, Mr. Mariano interacted with a sense of not wanting to let the conversation go too far afield, but also with sensitivity for how to redirect the conversation, pausing along the way to connect through similarities or humor.

Defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting. To Ms. Acosta, the purpose of the meeting was for her and Mr. Adams to know how Alfonso was doing socially in school. She said “We’ve been doing IEP meetings since he was in first grade, they’re basically to see how he’s adjusting socially.” She was satisfied with how it went: “I think the IEP meeting was really successful. I found out he was doing well in school and now he’s going to be taking regular classes...I think by eighth grade he’s going to be in all regular classrooms.” In Ms. Acosta’s mind, the success or failure of the meeting seemed to be based on how Alfonso was doing in school, not on the quality of the IEP or her and Mr. Adams’s participation in the meeting.

Mr. Mariano’s take on the purpose of the meeting was slightly different though not incompatible with Ms. Acosta’s. To him, the meeting was about “establishing goals for what we’re going to be working on at school and having an opportunity for everyone that’s working with Alfonso to be on the same page.” He was especially interested in getting input from Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams because they “know [Alfonso] better and I’m just getting to know him.”

The team covered the topics and information Mr. Mariano felt like they needed to get through. He felt like Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams:

Kind of just went along with it. And maybe that’s a sign that it was just right on, or [they had] a lack of knowledge about it? I would have liked them to be more

asking a question or offering a comment...I love any input I can get to just make sure that we're on the right target with things.

Despite Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams not being as involved in creating the IEP as Mr. Mariano would have liked, he thought the meeting:

Went really well, because the first time I met Alfonso's father he was really reserved. I felt at this meeting he felt comfortable with saying stuff. He...still seems kind of reserved, but it felt like he said what he wanted to say, so it hit the mark...with Alfonso's mom, it was a feeling of her being comfortable right away. From the first time I met her she didn't mind saying what was on her mind...[Also,] Alfonso's involvement was awesome, his humor and insight, all of that, I thought was awesome as far as making people feel comfortable and making us understand that he's really engaging with what's going on...I felt walking away from there, it was a team effort and everybody felt like it was a good use of time.

For Mr. Mariano, the meeting was successful because there was space for Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams to participate and he believed they felt comfortable enough to occupy that space, if they had wanted to – although they largely did not become involved in helping create the IEP.

Selected Quotes

I feel like I know the culture of EBD and I think there is a culture no matter what the socioeconomic status is. I feel like there's that EBD culture of the family no matter what the ethnicity is, or the sexual preference, or age, or whatever. The culture is almost like they've been neglected, so I want to make them feel as involved, as important, as possible. They've been overlooked and taken advantage of, [maybe] because their own experiences in school or maybe they dropped out in 10th grade. So I feel like, overall, their culture is one that doesn't necessarily value school, not to say that all the time. I come from the approach of how can I

make them feel like they are valued, because culturally they haven't been able to speak up for themselves, they haven't been given the opportunity... Whatever the reason, I should give them an opportunity. That's the cultural piece as I see it, as a minority maybe by ethnicity, maybe by special education because their child is in the 1% of all kids – that makes them a minority. They are overlooked and undervalued. I want to make them feel important. I guess that's the cultural piece for me.

-Mr. Mariano discussing cultural identity in EBD

Honestly, I'd say cultural identity doesn't have anything to do with it. You could be Black, White, Chinese, whatever, and it doesn't have anything to do with your learning. I just want him to be happy and to be well adjusted in school.

-Ms. Acosta discussing cultural identity and her son's education

Ben's IEP

Overview of the meeting. Ben's IEP meeting was held two weeks after Alfonso's. It was fall of Ben's 8th grade year and his second year in Mr. Mariano's class. The meeting began at 7:35am (school began half-an-hour later at 8:05am), lasted for 31 minutes, and included both a reevaluation and his annual IEP review.

Ms. Evans scheduled the meeting (because she was responsible for conducting the reevaluation). With only half-an-hour before school, Mr. Mariano thought that it was "just a set up for 'you're not going to have time'...the message, I felt, was 'this is going to be a short meeting.'" According to Mr. Mariano, "45 minutes to an hour" would have been appropriate for the IEP, that's enough "to cover the important stuff without losing people."

Attendance. Four team members attended the whole meeting. Ms. Evans, the school psychologist, began the meeting as the facilitator for Ben's three-year reevaluation. Mr. Mariano, who arrived a few minutes after the reevaluation began, facilitated the subsequent IEP segment of the meeting. Ben's parents, Mr. and Ms. Barnes, were in attendance. Ben's math teacher had arrived early to the meeting and was

waiting for Mr. and Ms. Barnes when they arrived (a few minutes late). His band teacher also attended, coming in a minute after Mr. and Ms. Barnes. Both teachers left to prepare for the start of the school day after giving a short report on how Ben was doing in their classes. Three of Ben's general education teachers did not attend the meeting.

Seating and physical arrangement of the room. Mr. and Ms. Barnes sat side-by-side, across a rectangular table from the educators. Mr. Barnes sat slightly slouched with his chair pushed back a couple feet from the table; Ms. Barnes sat with her chair pulled up close to the table. The band and math teachers sat directly across from Mr. and Ms. Barnes, leaving the length of the table between Ms. Evans and Mr. Mariano. Figure 2 shows the seating arrangement.

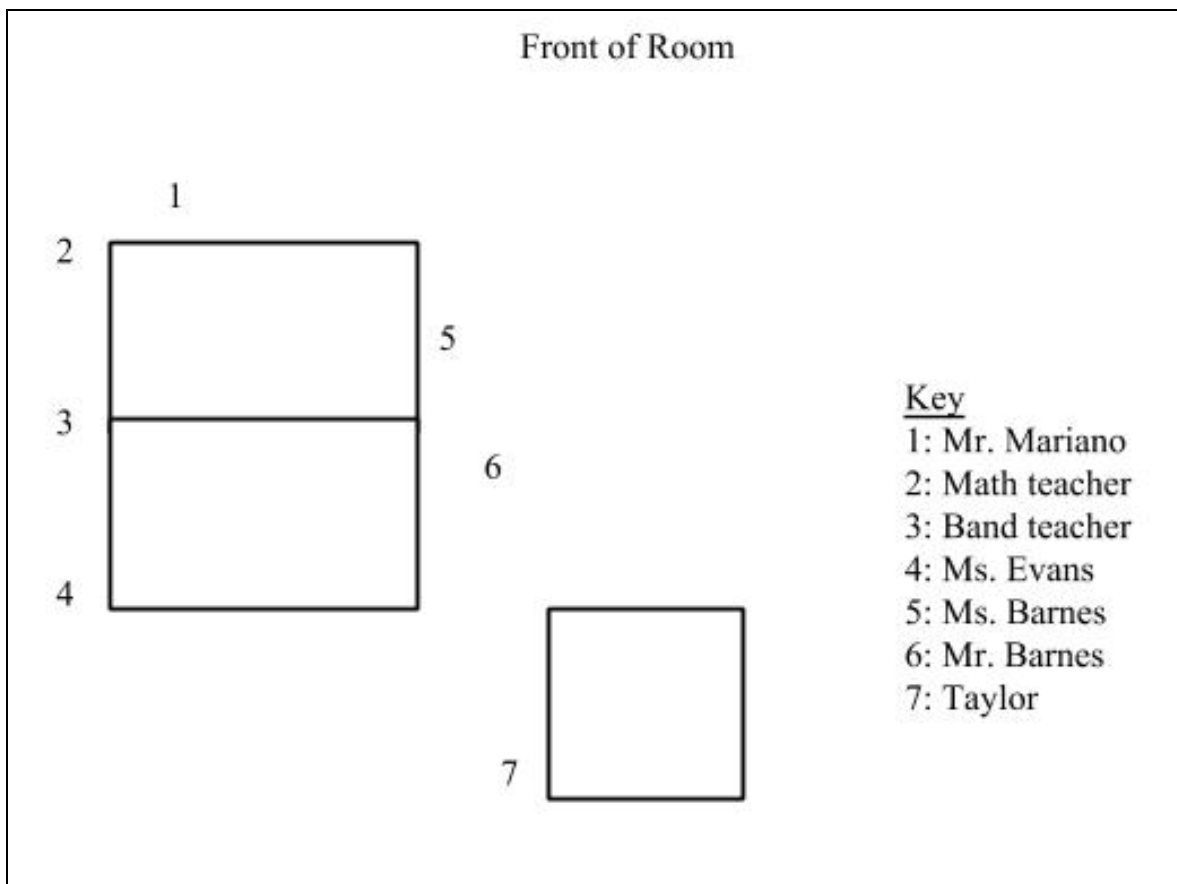


Figure 2. Seating and physical arrangement of room for Ben's IEP meeting.

Topics of discussion. Seven topics were discussed during the meeting. The math and band teachers each shared a progress report from their class as soon as Mr. and Ms. Barnes arrived. After these reports, Ms. Evans formally opened the meeting, explaining that the meeting would include Ben's reevaluation report and his annual IEP review. The reevaluation discussion took 14 minutes, many of them spent discussing two of the parents' concerns – high school (a topic which the team returned to later in the meeting) and Ben's generally poor test performance. After the reevaluation segment was complete, the team began discussing Ben's IEP. Mr. Mariano discussed Ben's progress and new IEP goals for a of couple minutes, which was followed by a team discussion of Ben's strengths. The team then spent more time discussing high school options for Ben before adjourning when the bell rang for the school day to begin and students started entering the classroom. The team spent a total of 12.5 minutes on the IEP. Table 5 shows the order of the topics discussed in the meeting and the amount of time each topic was discussed.

Table 5

<i>Topics of discussion at Ben's IEP meeting</i>	
Time*	Topics
1.5	Math
1.5	Band
14.5	Re-evaluation
2.5	IEP goals and FBA
1	Student strengths
7	Discussion about high school options
2	Signing forms
1	Follow up on upcoming parent event
31	<i>Total</i>
<i>*Rounded to nearest ½ minute</i>	

Participation by team members. Participation was divided quite evenly among the four main team members. However, Ms. Evans, Mr. Mariano, and Ms. Barnes each

guided the conversation during specific topics. Ms. Evans directed and dominated the initial discussion of Ben's reevaluation. Mr. Mariano directed and dominated the discussion of Ben's IEP. Ms. Barnes, and to a lesser extent Mr. Barnes, directed the discussion on high school options, though she did not dominate this conversation.

Getting started. The meeting began informally and in a hurried manner. It was half-an-hour before first period and the math teacher was seated at the table, waiting for Mr. and Ms. Barnes to arrive. When they did, the math teacher said hello and jumped into an encouraging explanation of Ben's performance and behavior in math class. While he was talking, the band teacher arrived and joined the team at the table. She introduced herself when the math teacher was finished talking, to which Ms. Barnes replied: "I think we met at the open house." Her report was positive as well. Ben's behavior had been improving ("humongous growth this quarter"), he was informally mentoring several students who were new to band, and on occasion he had stepped out of his comfort zone socially and engaged the teacher in informal conversation. Ms. Barnes said she was pleased to hear this, and Ms. Evans thanked the teachers for stopping by. As the teachers stood up to leave the room, Ms. Evans turned to Mr. and Ms. Barnes and gave them a copy of the reevaluation. She explained it was "just in draft form, so if we want to make any additions or changes we certainly can," and began her explanation of the results of her assessment. A few minutes into this explanation, Mr. Mariano arrived at the meeting.

Participation by type. Across the whole meeting – the reevaluation and the IEP – Ms. Barnes made the most verbal contributions (31). Ms. Evans made 23 verbal contributions and Mr. Mariano made 22. However, because Ms. Evans and Mr. Mariano each took a turn facilitating the meeting, it is also informative to analyze the number of

contributions the facilitator made (the combined number of contributions Mr. Mariano and Ms. Evans made while facilitating, which excludes the contributions they made while the other was facilitating). Mr. Mariano made 22 total contributions, 15 of which were made while he was facilitating. Ms. Evans made 23 total contributions, 17 of which were made while she was facilitating. In total, the facilitator made 32 contributions, one more than Ms. Barnes. Each facilitator began his or her section with an explanation of the document they were presenting (the reevaluation and the IEP). Ms. Evans spoke for three minutes before Ms. Barnes made a verbal contribution other than an utterance. When Mr. Mariano began facilitating, he spoke for one-and-a-half minutes before Ms. Barnes commented. The longest individual contribution from Ms. Barnes or Mr. Barnes was 45 seconds (by Mr. Barnes), but most of their contributions were short, one or two sentence remarks. Mr. Barnes made 16 verbal contributions during the meeting. Table 6 shows the verbal participation of the team members.

There were a low number of utterances overall. Ms. Barnes made three and Mr. Barnes made one, neither Mr. Mariano nor Ms. Evans made any. Mr. and Ms. Barnes therefore made 28 and 15 interactive verbal contributions, respectively.

Table 6

Team member participation by type at Ben's IEP meeting

	Mr. Mariano	School Psych	Mother (Ms. Barnes)	Father (Mr. Barnes)	Other*
Total remarks	22	23	31	16	
Affirmative utterances	0	0	3	1	
General questions to parents	1	1			
Targeted questions to parents	1	8			
Questions to Facilitator			5	2	
Concerns	1	0	3	1	
Compliments about Ben	2	3			2

** Only one data point collected within this category of participation*

Ms. Evans asked Mr. and Ms. Barnes eight targeted questions and one general question. Three of the targeted questions, however, were asked during a short exchange about one topic. In this exchange, Ms. Barnes was explaining why the family did not get Ben treatment the previous year when he was experiencing depression:

Ms. Evans: ...I understand that was a problem for him in the past. Last year he was fairly depressed, is that fair to say?

Ms. Barnes: Yeah, I'd say that's fair to say.

Ms. Evans: At that time did you look into counseling or set up counseling for Ben?

Ms. Barnes: No, we didn't have the funds, which isn't an excuse. But now he's under the Apple Care program.

Ms. Evans: What does that mean, the Apple program?

Ms. Barnes: It's a program through the state, the government, and it provides health insurance.

Ms. Evans: And at this time, Ben isn't Medicaid eligible?

Ms. Barnes: I don't know, you mean for his ADHD?

Ms. Evans's other questions were disbursed throughout the meeting, though three of the four of them were on the topic of high school options. At the end of the reevaluation she asked if the parents had any questions, which they used as an opportunity to introduce their interest in talking about high school concerns and options.

Mr. Mariano asked only one general and one specific question. The general question was his final statement during the IEP meeting, asking: "Alright, anymore questions that you have? I know we went through this kind of quickly." His specific question was in reference to an anti-social behavior Ben had exhibited at school in the past, but Mr. Mariano had not seen recently. He said: "it doesn't seem to be an issue this school year, but it's something that I'll watch out for. Have you seen that at home?"

Mr. and Ms. Barnes's questions (five and two, respectively) were mostly focused on learning about high school options. Ms. Barnes also asked a clarifying question ("you mean for his ADHD?") and a substantive question ("What's his favorite subject?"). Their primary concerns were also regarding high school (e.g., "not falling through the cracks"). In contrast, Mr. Mariano's primary concern was more immediate. He was concerned with how Ben responded to requests from teachers, explaining that Ben's initial response was often "with a growl and a scowl" on his face.

In his absence, Ben was complimented seven times. Both the math and band teachers complimented his behavior in addition to how well he was doing with learning the content of the course. Ms. Evans made three compliments, including how well Ben was doing in his general education classes and explaining how polite and respectful Ben was to her when she assessed him for his reevaluation. In addition, she highlighted the results of a survey Ben took in which he assessed how his feelings and behavior compared with his peers: "Ben, based on his response, doesn't really see himself as experiencing any problems above and beyond that of an average middle school student." Though not a direct compliment, framing the assessment results this way – which may alternatively have been described as Ben not accurately appraising his own behavior – contributed to a generally positive message delivered by the educators. Mr. Mariano gave Ben two compliments, commenting on his "natural skill" at helping mediate peer conflicts and describing Ben as having a "depth of emotional and academic experience."

Parental participation. Mr. and Ms. Barnes's primary focus during the IEP meeting was to express their concern that Ben receive the support they thought he needed to be successful in high school. The educators were responsive to this concern,

addressing it several times throughout the meeting. However, when the discussion changed to other topics, Mr. and Ms. Barnes's participation reduced drastically.

Parents' interests, concerns, and questions. Mr. and Ms. Barnes's concerns figured centrally into the discussion. They articulated their concerns early on in the meeting. Toward the beginning of the reevaluation, Ms. Evans explained that Ben would continue to qualify for behavior services but would no longer receive writing support. Ms. Barnes responded that her "biggest question is when he gets to high school [Ben might] fall through the cracks, being totally out there by himself, you know?" Mr. Barnes added exclamation to this sentiment. He acknowledged this was an important issue to him and Ms. Barnes, but also explained that transportation would be a challenge that they expected would interfere with getting Ben into a different school, which they thought was essential to his success:

Yeah, that's our number one concern right now. And since we're at this meeting, we wanted to make a definite point of that, and bring it to whoever's attention.

Because in our opinion, we don't want him at Periscope [his neighborhood high school], but then, we've got that transportation type situation.

Ms. Evans and Mr. Mariano responded differently to this concern – falling through the cracks. After introducing the concern, Mr. Barnes went on to explain that their older son's special education services were cut in high school and because of that he "never did finish high school." Ms. Evans responded by acknowledging this concern: "you feel like he didn't have enough support to start off high school?" But she never connected Mr. Barnes's experience with his older son to his current concerns about cutting Ben's services. Instead she simply agreed that theirs was "a fair concern." When

Ms. Barnes continued to push the concern, Mr. Mariano joined the conversation. He explained that his position was to gradually give Ben more time in general education as he continued to respond successfully. He assured them that:

We'll have ongoing discussion. I'm not going to make any decisions by myself.

It's certainly not my place to do that. I want to do it as a team and make sure we're doing the right thing...At some point, where he doesn't need the support, he's not going to fall through the cracks and he's on his own two feet. But I'm not going to make any decisions without your...support.

Later in the meeting, during the IEP segment, the topic of high school came up again. This time Ms. Evans introduced the topic. Ms. Barnes asked which school subjects Ben enjoyed most and Ms. Evans read from her report that "He says math is kind of fun and maybe he would like to go to Boeing [a math, science, and technology high school] next year." This kicked off a discussion about Boeing and another alternative high school where Ben could apply for admission. All four team members were involved in this exchange, with Mr. and Ms. Barnes asking questions and Mr. Mariano and Ms. Evans explaining what they knew about the programs and how to apply to them. Mr. Mariano offered to "stop by the office when we're all done [to pick an application], and actually I'll walk down there with you because I'd like to see it, too."

In contrast to the response Mr. and Ms. Barnes received when they voiced their concern about high school, Ms. Barnes's concern about Ben's writing ability was immediately dismissed as not valid. During Ms. Evans's report on Ben's writing assessment, she explained that Ben had poor handwriting and was inconsistent with his use of grammar, but she was impressed with the content of his writing. Ms. Barnes

interjected “that’s one of the places that I’m really concerned because writing is so important when you get out there, you know, in the world.” Ms. Evans countered this concern by stating “Yes, but fortunately, these days, everybody is on word processors and computers and I really think that’s going to be a benefit for Ben – you know how Word highlights your spelling errors and if you don’t capitalize things.” She then went on to declare that “as of now Ben no longer needs special education services for writing – what he needs for writing we’ll provide in his general education classes. So that’s great. He just keeps improving. Do you have any questions about that?” Neither Ms. Barnes nor Mr. Barnes asked a question.

Attempts to get parents involved. During this quick, 31-minute meeting, Mr. and Ms. Barnes made frequent self-initiated verbal contributions. Neither Ms. Evans nor Mr. Marino made a significant effort to engage Ms. Barnes or Mr. Barnes in the discussion of the reevaluation or IEP. Both facilitators explained their whole segments (the reevaluation and IEP) without pausing to solicit input, verify understanding, or confirm that Mr. and Ms. Barnes were in agreement with their assessments of or goals for Ben. Ms. Evans premised her explanation by saying that she was “going to skim a bit through this, I know you guys have been to many of these meetings.” Upon the conclusion of the meeting, when it was time for Mr. and Ms. Barnes to sign the IEP, Mr. Mariano mentioned:

I know we went through this kind of quickly...I will send a draft of the IEP home so you can take a look and if you guys see anything that...we didn’t discuss [or] doesn’t make sense, please let me know.

This felt okay to Mr. Mariano for three reasons. First, he said that if he “had got the sense that they needed more time to process what we were [talking about], I would have said we need to go somewhere” to finish the meeting. Second, he knew that Mr. and Ms. Barnes would be returning to school for conferences the next week “so that’ll be an opportunity to ask if there were any questions or anything like that.” Third, Mr. Mariano believed that “they would call me...and say ‘I have this question’ or ‘is it alright if we come back in and you give us more information?’ They would do that.” Mr. Mariano knew that it was not ideal to have such a short IEP meeting, but for him the IEP meeting was just one of the many opportunities to connect with Mr. and Ms. Barnes and involve them in Ben’s education.

Mr. Mariano made his only attempt to involve Mr. and Ms. Barnes in developing the content of the IEP after he explained Ben’s present levels of performance and new behavioral goals. As he did at Alfonso’s IEP, Mr. Mariano suggested “what’s fun to do as a team is to look at Ben’s strengths and I left that box [in the IEP] blank...as a team, I thought it would be cool to identify some of his strengths and enter them into the IEP.” While this got three quick responses, the discussion lasted only a minute before turning back to the topic of high school options.

Distribution and enactment of power and authority. Although Mr. and Ms. Barnes made a number of contributions to the discussion, Mr. Mariano and Ms. Evans’s authority was dominant and controlled the meeting. When discussing the content of Ben’s reevaluation and IEP, the facilitators established and maintained a position of authority through a showing of their professional knowledge. In contrast, they positioned Mr. and Ms. Barnes’s knowledge – in particular their knowledge of their older son’s high

school experience – as not directly relevant to Ben’s education. It was personal knowledge and was undervalued in this setting and for its bearing on Ben’s reevaluation or IEP.

Ms. Evans initiated this power structure by opening the meeting with her lengthy explanation of Ben’s assessment and her dismissal of Ms. Barnes’s concern for Ben’s writing ability. The message was clear that the results of the assessment – conducted and analyzed by Ms. Evans – were the only data points pertinent to the reevaluation. Though Ms. Barnes tried to make her personal knowledge relevant to the reevaluation, Mr. Mariano explained that what she knew was not directly transferable to Ben. When Ms. Barnes told a story of their older son skipping school she mentioned that “Ben is a totally different child.” Mr. Mariano picked up on this by saying “You guys have mentioned that before and I think it’s really important to just be aware of that.” It was a subtle move, but provided the transition for him to explain that he was going to “keep pushing pushing [Ben] into general ed” – which contrasted with Mr. and Ms. Barnes’s expressed wishes.

Mr. Mariano described Mr. and Ms. Barnes’s insistence that services not be cut as “healthy pushback.” However, within the special education knowledge hierarchy, their opinion lacked status because, according to Mr. Mariano, “they are more emotionally attached to that situation...based on their own experiences, which again are real, but [it’s important] just to give them a kind of an objective [perspective], this is reality.” However, Mr. Mariano explained that he did not want to dismiss their perspective outright. He tried to balance their interests with his beliefs and what he felt were his obligations to Ben:

I try to frame it as positively as possible: “to give Ben the best opportunity he should not be in this program, especially if he’s demonstrating the need to not be in here”...[but] I’m willing to compromise and see their perspective and say “I’m not going to do anything drastic.” I’m going to continue to track data and his progress and when we get to spring, if I really don’t have any data to support him being in the program, then I can’t keep him...I would say [to Mr. and Ms. Barnes] “I have no data to support him being here, it would be *illegal* for him to be in a program like this because he doesn’t need that restrictive of an environment.” He can still get services...we could look at a change of placement...but he doesn’t need a self-contained program.

This unequal power structure remained intact during the IEP segment of the meeting when Mr. Mariano became the facilitator. At this point, Mr. Mariano gave an uninterrupted report on Ben’s IEP and FBA, which Mr. Mariano wrote without Mr. or Ms. Barnes’s input. He followed this by inviting a group discussion of Ben’s strengths. This allowed Mr. and Ms. Barnes’s personal knowledge of Ben to be heard and valued equal to the educator’s professional knowledge. It did not, however, influence the action bearing items in the IEP (such as the modifications and accommodations that would be made for Ben or his service matrix). Finally, when the discussion turned once again to high school, Mr. and Ms. Barnes called upon the educators to share their knowledge of Ben’s options, thus reinforcing the authority of Mr. Mariano and Ms. Evans’s professional knowledge. Despite this imbalance in power, Mr. Mariano thought he and Ms. Evans met Mr. and Ms. Barnes “at their level.”

Building a parent-teacher relationship. Mr. Mariano had established a relationship with Mr. and Ms. Barnes during the preceding year and a half. He said: “a lot of times people say that in secondary parents are just kind of checked out. I disagree. I think you can make it more of an investment and a relationship, so that parents don’t feel like they’re disconnected.” Mr. Mariano described his relationship with Mr. and Ms. Barnes as:

Solid...I’ve got them to come in for informal things, like last year they came in for a semester celebration. They’ve been really easy to contact and get them in for different events, conferences, and less formal things. So that’s been ongoing. I feel like we’ve been able to maintain that.

The meeting was short, but the educators intended to deliver a positive message focused on Ben’s success at Clampett Middle School – as Ms. Evans said: “good news, good news for Ben.” This positive message helped to maintain the relationship between the school and Ben’s parents, despite their interest in Ben not losing services.

The focus on Ben’s middle school successes overshadowed his challenges. For example, Mr. Mariano and Ms. Evans’s description of Boeing High School got Mr. and Ms. Barnes excited about the possibility of Ben attending there the following year (Ms. Barnes: “I want him to go to Boeing, that would be awesome.”). They explained that it was an academically rigorous school with a competitive application process, but they were not fully forthcoming about Ben’s chances of getting accepted. Mr. Mariano explained to Mr. and Ms. Barnes that it would be good “even getting him to go through the process [of applying]...even if it doesn’t work out with Boeing.” Mr. Mariano did not

explicitly confess that he thought Ben was unlikely to gain admission to Boeing, but he implied it. However, his comment did not provoke a response from Mr. or Ms. Barnes.

After the meeting finished, Mr. Mariano reminded Mr. and Ms. Barnes about a family night he was holding later that week. They confirmed that they would attend. A week after that, they came in for parent-teacher conferences. These ongoing contacts with Mr. Mariano are illustrative of the long-term vision he has for working with parents and involving them in their children's education.

In addition to using the IEP meeting as a chance to encourage parents to visit the classroom for other events, Mr. Mariano hopes the dialogue during the IEP meeting will strengthen the quality of his relationship with the parents of his students. Mr. Mariano reflected on how his relationship with Mr. and Ms. Barnes affected Ben's IEP meeting:

I think they felt comfortable enough to be open and advocate for what they thought was best for Ben. I was happy with that. I thought that was solid. That was good. That took the place of a lot of time that we maybe had to discuss [Ben's educational] program, but they could walk away from there feeling that they were listened to.

Defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting. This short meeting did not provide a lot of time for thorough discussion of the IEP. Mr. Mariano hoped that Mr. and Ms. Barnes came away with an understanding of how the IEP and the reevaluation were related, how "I took that information [from the reevaluation] and wrapped it into a plan." In this meeting, Mr. Mariano perceived that the IEP itself was not as important to the parent as knowing that Ben was doing well in school and figuring out a plan for his transition into high school: "you don't really need to put it under a

microscope because [school is] going well [for Ben].” It was more about thinking ahead to next year, something that “definitely comes up more for an eighth grader. It’s just more real, even if [the IEP] is in the fall.” Although they were unavailable for an interview, Mr. and Ms. Barnes’s comments during the meeting suggested that making sure Ben would receive sufficient academic support in high school was their primary concern and principal interest in the meeting.

Selected Quotes

I would say [my role would be] a co-facilitator, really, ideally. I wouldn’t feel intimidated or anything. I would feel relieved if they [the parents] just felt strongly about it, where things are not necessarily a compromise, but they say “this is where I come from, what are you seeing, what’s been your experience,” to really present what they see are their child’s present levels and goals, as well. I do think we’re the main driving force as a team, you, me, and the child; so let’s make it co-facilitated. Ideally that’s what I would like to see.

-Mr. Mariano discussing his ideal vision for facilitating IEP meetings

To me, every conversation [with a parent] is kind of like an IEP – you’re talking about their child’s program in some form or the other.

-Mr. Mariano discussing the importance of communicating with parents

Chapter VI

Major Themes and Findings, Part II

In this chapter, I continue to analyze the IEP meetings I observed and the interviews I conducted. I also continue to develop the four major emergent themes. Here, I present my findings from Calvin and Danny's IEP meetings, following the same organization as the previous chapter.

Calvin's IEP

Overview of the meeting. Calvin's IEP review was scheduled for 7:00am in mid-January, two days before the end of the first semester of his 7th grade year. It began ten minutes late and lasted for 56 minutes until the school day began. It was a fast-paced meeting, filled with overlapping talk and off-topic conversation.

Attendance. In total, eight team members attended the meeting. Calvin's math, science, and technology teachers came for a discussion of their subjects and then left. Ms. Evans, the school psychologist, served as the administrative representative and attended the first ten minutes of the meeting, then left with the math teacher for another meeting. Mr. Mariano, Calvin, and Calvin's parents, Mr. and Ms. Collins, were at the meeting for its duration. Calvin's physical education and band teachers did not attend the meeting.

Seating and physical arrangement of the room. The room was arranged with two tables pushed together at the front of the room so Mr. Mariano could project the IEP onto a screen, as it had been at Alfonso's IEP meeting. Most of the team members sat around the three sides of the table facing the screen; Mr. Mariano sat at his computer facing the rest of the team. One team member, the technology teacher, attended for five minutes

during the middle of the meeting and stood at the corner of the table while he talked with the team. The seating arrangement is shown in Figure 3.

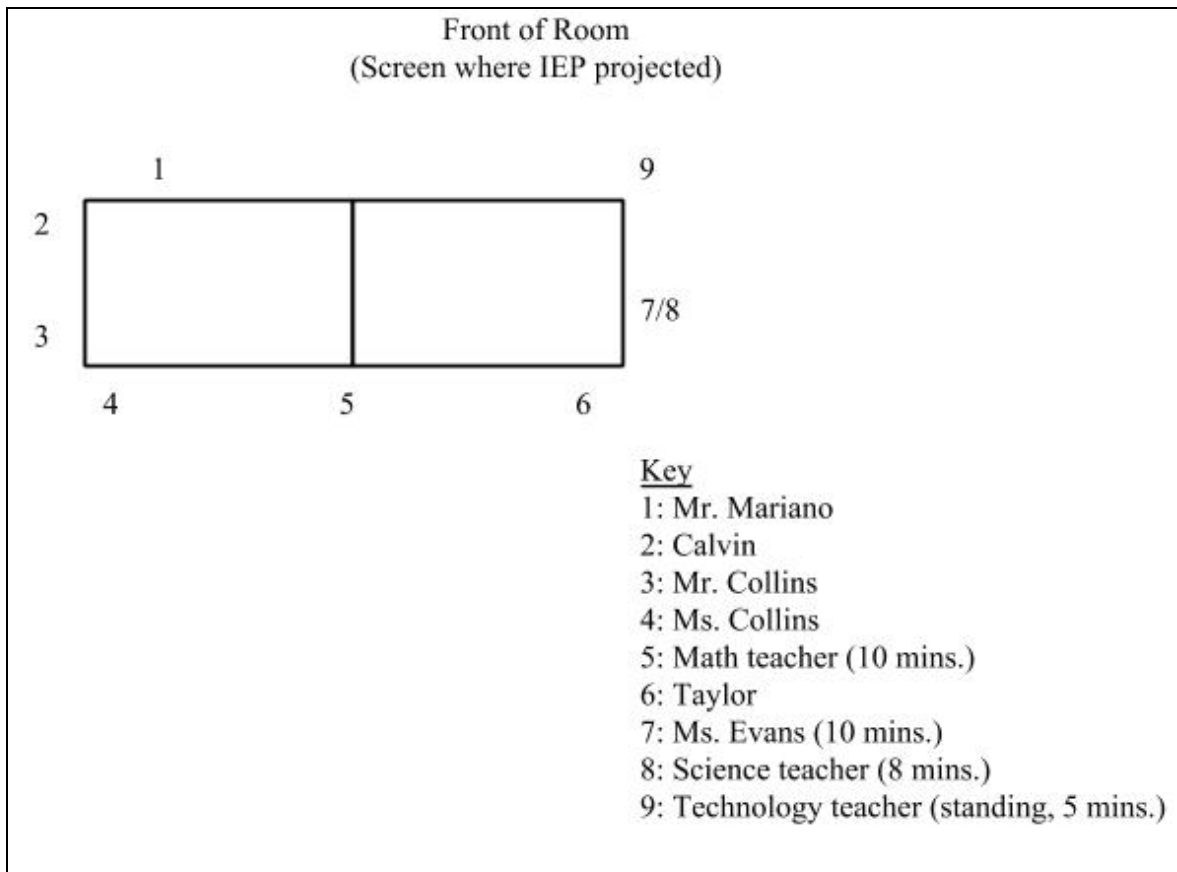


Figure 3. Seating and physical arrangement of room for Calvin's IEP meeting.

Topics of discussion. Thirteen topics were discussed during the meeting. The IEP-specific topics followed the order in which they appeared in the IEP document, though this order was interrupted by discussions of Calvin's performance in his general education classes as those teachers arrived at the meeting. The discussion of Calvin's grade in science class, which also became a discussion of his attendance and use of a school-issued planning book, lasted the longest of any topic (14.5 minutes). Though the band teacher was not present, the team discussed Calvin's aptitude in band for seven minutes. Discussions of other school subjects – math, reading, writing, and technology – lasted between two and four minutes. The meeting was concluded with a five-and-a-half

minute discussion of Calvin's strengths and his FBA. Table 7 shows the order of the topics discussed in the meeting and the amount of time each topic was discussed.

Table 7

<i>Topics of discussion at Calvin's IEP meeting</i>	
Time*	Topics
1	Introductions
3	Math
4	Parents' reading concern
1	Update on medication
14.5	Science and using school planner
7	Music
2	Writing
2	Technology class
3.5	Writing, continued
4.5	Behavior
3.5	Testing
3	Service Matrix
3.5	Student strengths and FBA
56	<i>Total</i>
<i>*Rounded to nearest ½ minute</i>	

Participation by team members. Mr. Mariano facilitated the meeting, although each of the four principal team members contributed considerably to the conversation. The general education teachers only participated when the team discussed their subjects. Similarly, Ms. Evans engaged only to discuss Calvin's eligibility for reading services.

Getting started. The team members were talking informally when Mr. Mariano started the meeting by asking everyone to introduce him or herself, starting with Calvin. Calvin said his name, sat quietly for a moment as the others waited for him to say something else, then said "I'm in seventh grade, [pause] and I'm in this class." Mr. Collins followed with a joke, saying in a comical voice: "Hello, my name is Mr. Collins and I'm the father of said Calvin, who is apparently in this class." This joke was illustrative of the tone of the meeting, which was loose, informal, and not infrequently

humorous, and foreshadowed Mr. Collins's participation, which was attentive to the discussion but alternated between acting serious and joking.

After introductions, Mr. Mariano said that he expected two additional teachers to stop in during the meeting and explained that he had the IEP on his computer and was projecting it on the screen "because it's a working document and I want us to be able to make corrections as we go along." He then asked the math teacher to start with her report.

Participation by type. Ms. Collins had the greatest number of total verbal contributions (110), but many of them (44) were utterances. Mr. Mariano had fewer verbal contributions (101), but because he had only five utterances he therefore made the greatest number of substantive verbal contributions. Calvin had 84 verbal contributions and only one utterance, though a number of his remarks were off-topic comments. Mr. Collins made 58 substantive verbal contributions (77 total verbal contributions minus 19 utterances). Table 8 shows the verbal participation of the team members.

Table 8

Team member participation by type at Calvin's IEP meeting

	Mr. Mariano	Mother (Ms. Collins)	Father (Mr. Collins)	Calvin	Other*
Total remarks	101	110	77	84	
Affirmative utterances	5	44	19	1	
Comments to Calvin	17	12	19		
Questions for Calvin	4	6	3		
General questions to parents	2				
Targeted questions to parents	2				
Questions to Mr. Mariano		3	0	5	
Concerns	1	4	0		
Compliments to Calvin	4	1	1		3
Student questions to parents				1	
Student comments to parents				23	

** Only one data point collected within this category of participation*

Forty-eight comments and 13 questions were directed at Calvin. Mr. Mariano made 17 of these comments and asked Calvin four questions. Ms. Collins made 12 comments to Calvin and asked him 6 questions and Mr. Collins made 19 comments to Calvin and him asked 3 questions. However, because Calvin made multiple off-topic remarks, the comments and questions directed at him were a mixture of IEP-related conversation, off-topic conversation, and – from his parents – attempts to redirect his attention back to the IEP.

Mr. Mariano asked Mr. and Ms. Collins two general questions (e.g., “Do you have any more questions?”), one on-topic targeted question (about how to grade Calvin in science), and one off-topic targeted question. Ms. Collins asked Mr. Mariano three questions. All three of these were substantive questions about Calvin’s educational performance or plan. Mr. Collins did not ask Mr. Mariano any questions.

Ms. Collins raised four concerns during the meeting and Mr. Mariano raised one. Ms. Collins was concerned about Calvin needing special education support in reading, him not being challenged in band, and his low grade and attendance in science. Mr. Mariano’s concern was behavioral – that Calvin was not self-managing his behavior in the classroom (“having a mini crisis”) and had been getting overly distracted by the behavior of other students a couple times a day. Mr. Collins did not bring up any concerns.

Calvin received nine compliments throughout the meeting. Each of his three general education teachers complimented his behavior and performance in class. His math teacher called him a leader among his peers. His technology teacher said that he had improved in a lot of areas. His science teacher said that “I’m enjoying having him, I’m

glad he's there." Mr. and Ms. Collins each gave Calvin one compliment – Ms. Collins acknowledged his talent for playing musical instruments and Mr. Collins praised the behavior of the "new Calvin" that the team had seen emerging at school. Mr. Mariano had four compliments for Calvin, recognizing some of his talents in school and his effort to work hard on his assignments.

Parental participation. From the beginning of the meeting, Mr. and Ms. Collins were engaged in the conversation, initiating topics for discussion, asking questions of the educators, and providing their assessments of Calvin's ability and performance in school. Ms. Collins explained that "Mr. Mariano is very good at helping people feel comfortable." Mr. and Ms. Collins had been in regular communication with Mr. Mariano and "I believe that keeping in regular communication helps us to come into the school and feel comfortable to discuss any situation."

Parents' interests, concerns, and questions. Mr. Mariano and the other educators were responsive to the topics that Mr. and Ms. Collins wanted to discuss and the concerns they shared. Going into the meeting, Ms. Collins had three items that she wanted to discuss and she was pleased that "we got to all three of them." First, she was concerned about Calvin's grade in science and wanted to figure out how he could improve that grade. Second, she wanted to express her opinion that keeping him on the xylophone in band was underutilizing his musical talents and he would become bored. Third, she did not understand how his disability would be accounted for on state performance assessments.

Her concern about Calvin's grade in science was addressed extensively, receiving more attention from the team than any other section of the meeting. The science teacher

explained that Calvin was missing a number of assignments due to being absent from class and was making “somewhat of a conscious choice” not to use his school planner. The absences concerned Ms. Collins because she said that he was in school every day and she was unaware that he was not attending science. She also wanted to hear more about the school planner because she was not familiar with that requirement. The science teacher and Mr. Mariano spent several minutes sorting out Calvin’s attendance with Ms. Collins (days he had a reason to miss class and days he did not) and explaining to her how the planner was used in all classes and factored into the grade in science.

The team also had a lengthy discussion about band. The team arrived at this topic because Calvin made an off-topic remark (his first of many), but it was a topic Ms. Collins had intended to address at the meeting. The team was finishing an exchange during which Mr. Collins and Mr. Mariano were trying to encourage Calvin to improve his grades:

Mr. Mariano: ...I think you should always go for the highest grade possible.

Calvin: Mr. Mariano, remember when

Mr. Mariano: Hold up, are you with me? You should always go for the highest grade.

Calvin: Remember when Ms. Williams told me to work on the xylophone?

Mr. Mariano: Ms. Williams, in band?

Ms. Collins: He can do better than the xylophone. He’s actually pretty talented with instruments.

Mr. Mariano: Yeah, from what I understand that was the opening that she has in there right now.

Ms. Collins used Calvin’s off-topic remark to express her concern. Mr. Mariano engaged with this topic and the team spent the next seven minutes discussing the band class and a shared interest in music.

Prior to the meeting, Ms. Collins told Mr. Mariano that she had a question about how Calvin would be measured on the annual state assessments. During the meeting, Mr. Mariano made sure to address Ms. Collins's question ("So I want to get to the question you had about the [state test]"). He explained how students with IEPs take the same test as students without IEPs, but they pass the test with a lower mark. This was a satisfactory explanation; Ms. Collins stated "Okay, I see how you have it" and Mr. Collins replied "That makes sense."

One additional concern emerged during the meeting. While the team discussed Calvin's challenges with word problems in math, Mr. Collins hypothesized "That kind of points us back to reading comprehension." A moment later, Ms. Evans returned to this comment:

Ms. Evans: Is [reading] an area that there is concern about?

Ms. Collins: For me it was, which is why he is in tutoring.

...

Mr. Mariano: I've talked with [Ms. Evans] about that earlier this week. Going in and looking at the IEP a bit closer, I was actually surprised that he didn't, I just assumed that there were reading goals. But it was just writing. He didn't qualify for reading.

Ms. Evans: It looks like November of 2011 was his last evaluation. And his scores for reading comprehension were in average range, so it didn't appear to be an issue at that time. But if the team feels like that's something that you want to revisit, that's certainly something we can look into.

Ms. Collins: I would.

Mr. Collins: Yeah, I think it would be good to look at.

Ms. Evans: Okay.

Ms. Collins: Yeah, evaluate and see where he is.

Mr. Collins and Ms. Collins's concern about Calvin's reading was not only discussed by the team and involved them in educational decision-making, it also prompted the school to take the action that Mr. Collins and Ms. Collins wanted.

Attempts to get parents involved. Mr. and Ms. Collins did not need much encouragement to actively participate in the meeting; they participated from the start. Nevertheless, Mr. Mariano made a few attempts to engage them in the discussion. He started the meeting by explaining that the IEP was a working document and that it could be changed during the meeting. When the science teacher asked Mr. Mariano how Calvin should be graded, Mr. Mariano turned the question over to the team: "I think that's a team decision, what do you guys think?" Mr. Mariano ended the meeting by asking, twice, if Mr. and Ms. Collins had any questions about the IEP.

On the other hand, Mr. and Ms. Collins were not invited to be part of creating Calvin's IEP objectives or goals, or consulted about his service matrix. Mr. Mariano had prewritten these elements into the IEP and read them to the team, but did not invite discussion on them. In one instance, the math teacher was explaining how Calvin had demonstrated mastery of his previous math goals and what she would be working on next with him. Mr. Mariano interjected to ask her, but not Mr. or Ms. Collins, what Calvin's new math goals should be.

Distribution and enactment of power and authority. Three interactions during the meeting influenced the distribution of power among the team members. The first of these was when Mr. Collins suggested that Calvin needed services for reading. As previously discussed, this suggestion was taken seriously. It also positioned Mr. and Ms. Collins as knowledgeable, including having relevant school-based knowledge. In

consequence, Ms. Collins was able to use the authority she commanded through this knowledge to supplement Mr. Mariano's knowledge of Calvin and help the team understand Calvin's academic needs. In an exchange with Mr. Mariano, she clarified his lack of understanding of Calvin's reading challenges:

Mr. Mariano: ...Definitely there's some recall, he still talks about some stories he read in elementary school...First period we do a lot of writing and I'm going to start adding in a little more reading, maybe short stories for a bit of comprehension and sequence of events.

Ms. Collins: To add to that, where I find it most noticeable is not typically with stories, but where he's taking a test or doing homework.

In a different sequence, Mr. Mariano asserted his power in a similarly cautious manner. The team was explaining to Calvin that he had two days to turn in his missing assignments before the semester ended and was trying to encourage him to do this:

Mr. Collins: My evaluation – if you want to go on vacation with me this summer – [is] I'm going to evaluate where you are and how good you've done. And then if you have an A in one category, it might make up for something in another category, see? So it'll be worth the A, because let's say you have four Bs, you might have a C somewhere and then that's not going to average out so well, you see what I'm saying?

Calvin: Yeah.

Mr. Collins: You always want to go for the higher grade.

Mr. Mariano: Because, and for, you know, it pays off in a lot of ways, because it also, because that's what you should be doing. You're capable of that, and you should get the grades that reflect your abilities and capabilities. I think you should always go for the highest grade possible.

Mr. Mariano explained that he wanted to “definitely respect what [the parents have] going on, and I hope that comes across there,” but that he wanted students to be “intrinsically” motivated, not motivated by prizes (or vacations). Although this value conflicted with how Mr. Collins presented the reason to succeed in school, Mr. Mariano said “that's my philosophy, and parents know that.”

Throughout the meeting, Mr. Mariano's willingness to participate in off-topic discussions also helped to equalize the distribution of power among the team members. For example, Mr. Mariano engaged in short, off-topic exchanges about going to a music show, motorcycles, and visiting neighborhoods in the city. Through these conversations, Mr. Mariano crossed a boundary by participating in personal knowledge sharing, just as earlier Ms. Collins had crossed a boundary by participating in professional knowledge sharing.

Building a parent-teacher relationship. Ms. Collins had been in frequent communication – “almost daily some weeks” – with Mr. Mariano. To her, the IEP was not so much an opportunity to build a relationship with Mr. Mariano, as it was “to hear from the other teachers.” Mr. Mariano, however, used the meeting as a chance to strengthen his relationship with Mr. and Ms. Collins.

A focus on Calvin's strengths was prevalent throughout all sections of the meeting. Each teacher shared positive things about Calvin. Mr. Mariano in particular commented on Calvin's maturity in class, his academic talents, and his motivation to work hard and do well in school. When the team was discussing Calvin's strengths, Mr. Mariano told Calvin:

I say there's a lot of strengths that you do have. I listed a lot of them: intelligent, charismatic, you have lots of interests, you're motivated, you set high personal goals, the mechanical inclination that you have, you can maintain social relationships, you're a good listener.

Mr. Mariano used Calvin's strengths to frame his discussion of Calvin's behavioral challenges. Mr. Mariano described the “mini crises” that Calvin had each day

– becoming distracted by small things other students were doing – but he explained that Calvin had been doing better with ignoring distractions and that he thought Calvin was “definitely getting closer” to having “strategies that are the same with his peers...that any typically developing middle school student would be able to use and enlist so that it’s not disruptive to his school day.”

Mr. Mariano’s willingness to let discussion wander from IEP specific topics was also a strategy for building his relationship with the family. In total, there were seven off-topic discussions, only one of which was related to school (Calvin asking Mr. Mariano if he could take an advanced technology class, which interrupted the team’s discussion about statewide tests). Mr. Mariano participated in six of these conversations, responding to questions Calvin asked and offering comments about his own interests (“one of my favorite bands is, well Jack White from the White Stripes”) and experiences (“I told you my grandpa had a Moto Guzzi, right?”). Mr. Mariano was aware of how much time these tangents took, but he thought they served an important role:

There’s a part of me that likes to have outcomes and know how it’s going to go. Okay we’ll have a discussion here, everybody stays on topic. Then we can move to the next thing, everybody stays on topic...I guess, too, part of working with families is kind of honoring why they’re there, too. Not necessarily catering to like listening to stories or things like that, but letting them feel like they have a voice, however that voice may come through. I feel that display is like, okay they’re comfortable saying things. Or maybe they’re nervous and throwing things off to the side. I guess, when that happens, I want to honor a little bit of it... Yeah, it’s okay to bird walk a little bit.

Mr. Mariano also felt “obligated to share specific information, too. So people can walk away from there and feel like they signed a document they are familiar with and know what the plan is for the next year.” To account for these competing time interests, he planed the meeting to last an hour so he could get “forty-five minutes of good quality...focus on the IEP.”

Defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting. Mr. Mariano approached the meeting as a chance to deepen his relationship with Mr. and Ms. Collins. He felt like they already “knew the agenda [and] knew what we’re working on” because he and Ms. Collins spoke with such regularity. Despite a good working relationship, Mr. Mariano was excited just to get parents into the classroom – especially parents of his seventh grade students – and the IEP was an opportunity to do that:

Who knows what the parents’ experience has been like in school? Probably shitty...So if I can get parents in there and for the first time they can be comfortable to be in the classroom and saying stuff, that’s all the more of a victory. You’re here, you have the confidence to say stuff too, there can be nothing negative about that.

Ms. Collins had a more specific purpose in mind. In addition to wanting to raise her concerns, she wanted to “review Calvin’s progress and plan for [his] future education needs based on his progress.” She was satisfied that the meeting accomplished these goals and she “wasn’t disappointed with any parts of the meeting,” though she would have liked to have “the other teachers to stay around for a while [longer].”

Selected Quote

You have to have relationships with people. And I just feel like things are tough anyway with this job, you need [the parents] to know that your heart is in the right

place and you're an advocate [for their child]. To me, it's about investing that time and building a relationship...[and] the luxury of having relationships with people is that it allows you to err a little bit.

-Mr. Mariano discussing the importance of building parent relationships

Danny's IEP

Overview of the meeting. Danny's IEP meeting took place in June, two weeks before the end of the school year. Danny was in the eighth grade, preparing to transition from middle to high school. The meeting was scheduled for 7:00am and lasted 75 minutes.

This meeting was unique from the others I observed in two ways. First, several minutes after the scheduled start time, under the leadership of Mr. Mariano, the team elected to begin the meeting even though Danny and his father, Mr. Davis, had yet to arrive. The team spent 40 minutes discussing the IEP and had just wrapped up this segment of the meeting when Mr. Davis, and Danny a few minutes later, arrived. Second, Danny was due to turn 16 years old before his next annual IEP review, thus the team was required to include a transition plan in his IEP. The team had begun to discuss Danny's transition plan when Mr. Davis arrived at the meeting. Consequently, Mr. Davis did not participate in the discussion or creation of Danny's IEP, but he was a participant in the creation of Danny's transition plan. A transition plan cannot be directly compared to an IEP, but it is included in these findings because of the insight it gave into the dynamics of special education planning when parents are involved in the process versus when they are absent from the process.

Attendance. Six team members attended Danny's IEP. Four of them attended the IEP segment of the meeting, and all six attended the transition plan segment. Mr. Mariano, an SLP, and two occupational therapists (OTs; one who was in training and her

mentor) participated in the IEP. Danny and his father joined these four for the transition plan. Danny's general education teachers – including his science, physical education, and drama teachers – and an administrative representative were absent from both segments of the meeting.

Seating and physical arrangement of the room. The team sat around the same table that was used for Ben's IEP, a rectangular table on the side of the classroom. The team occupied three sides of the table. When Mr. Davis arrived, he sat in a chair on the unoccupied side of the table. Danny took a chair between his father and Mr. Mariano.

Several minutes after Danny and his father arrived at the meeting, Mr. Mariano announced that Danny's classmates would soon be coming into the classroom. The team moved to an adjacent room. In this new room, the team members sat around another rectangular table in the same arrangement that they had been sitting while in Mr. Mariano's classroom. The seating arrangement for both classrooms is shown in Figure 4.

Topics of discussion. Ten topics were covered during the IEP meeting. This included three topics that had not been discussed in any of the previous IEP meetings – personal hygiene, motivational strategies, and health and development. The conversation on personal hygiene, a topic this team had discussed in a previous intervention meeting for Danny, was the longest discussion (7.5 minutes).

An additional ten topics were discussed during the transition plan segment of the meeting. This included a conversation about Danny's strengths, a topic that had not been discussed during the IEP (but was discussed in each of the other IEP meetings I observed). Table 9 shows the order of the topics discussed in the meeting and the amount of time each topic was discussed.

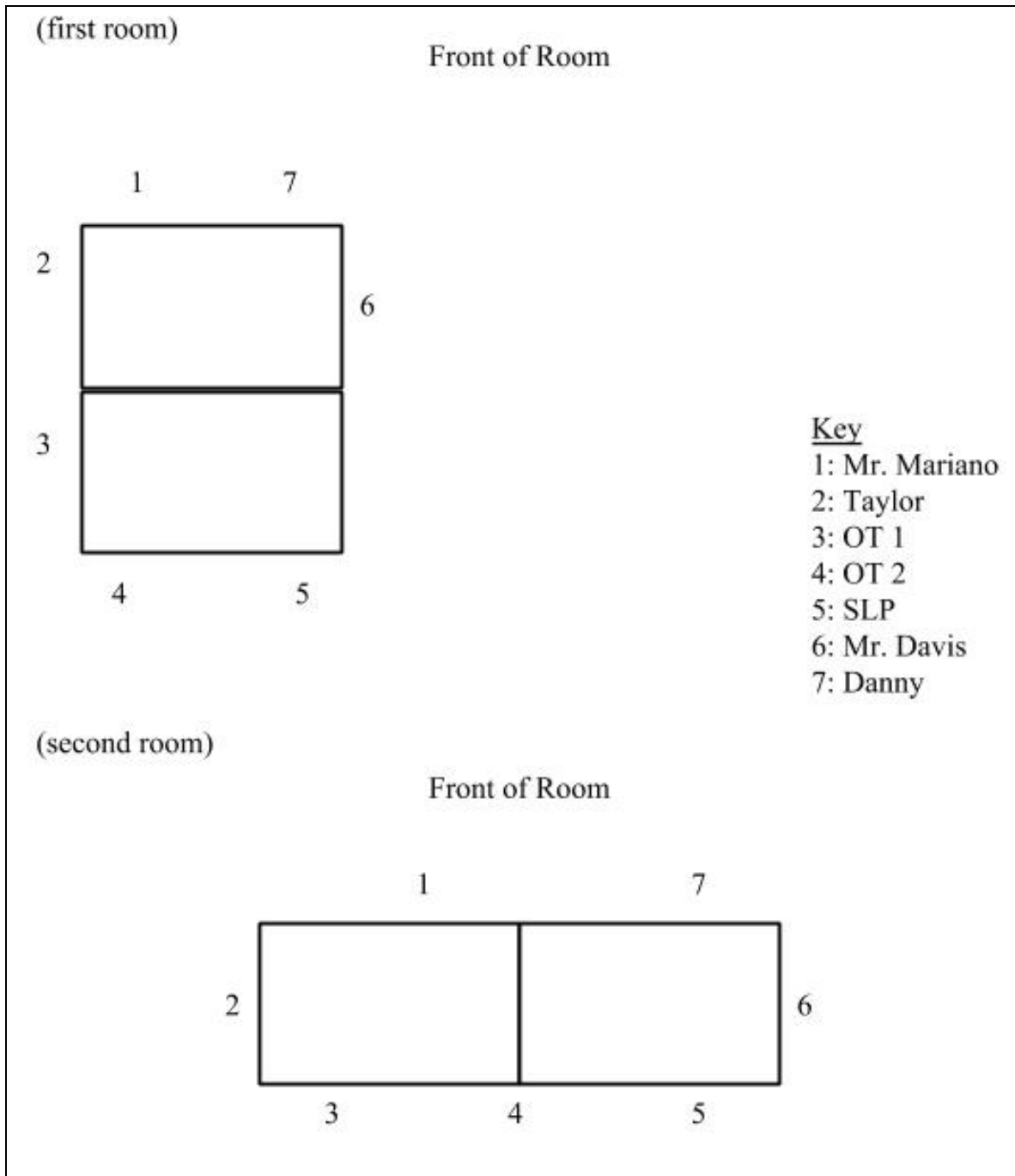


Figure 4. Seating and physical arrangement of rooms for Danny's IEP meeting.

Table 9

<i>Topics of discussion at Danny's IEP meeting</i>	
Time*	Topics
5	Speech
2.5	Occupational Therapy
7.5	Personal hygiene
5.5	Reading
3	Math
4	Writing
2	Motivational strategies
3.5	Health and development
4	Behavior
3	FBA and BIP
40	<i>Subtotal for IEP</i>
7	Introductions and transition plan overview
1	Student strengths
1.5	Moving rooms
3	Expected needs for high school
3.5	Employment goals
1.5	Educational goals
4	Independent living and hygiene goals
3.5	Grading scheme in high school
3	Setting up plan to tour high school
2	Scheduling after-school event
5	General wrap up
35	<i>Subtotal for transition plan</i>
75	<i>Total</i>
<i>*Rounded to nearest ½ minute</i>	

Participation by team members. Mr. Mariano facilitated both segments of the meeting. As I describe later in this section, the interpersonal dynamic of the IEP and transition plan segments of Danny's IEP meeting were quite distinct. During his IEP, at which only educators were present, the IEP draft was revised more extensively than in any of the previous IEP meetings I observed. In addition, the educators asked more questions of one another than in the other meetings and strategized on how to work effectively with Danny, a discussion I had not previously witnessed. During the transition plan, Mr. Davis and Mr. Mariano were the principal participants in the conversation; the

other educators were noticeably less active in the conversation than they were during the IEP segment of the meeting.

Getting started. Mr. Mariano scheduled the IEP meeting with Mr. Davis on the Friday afternoon before the meeting, which was held the following Monday morning before school. On Monday, the team waited for approximately five minutes after the scheduled start time of the meeting before Mr. Mariano announced that “Well, I think we should probably get started so we have enough time.” The other educators nodded in agreement and Mr. Mariano turned to the SLP and motioned for her to begin her report.

After 40 minutes, the team had finished discussing Danny’s IEP. Mr. Mariano said “I guess we have some time. I just want to look at this transition plan a bit and I have some questions for you guys...what do you see as his top three goals for high school?” The OT in training asked Mr. Mariano to clarify his question and Mr. Davis walked into the classroom. Mr. Davis exchanged greetings with Mr. Mariano, apologized for being tardy, and sat down at the table. Mr. Mariano continued “We were just talking about his transition plan...We were talking about his needs, like what have we given him here [during middle school] to help him be successful?” With that, the team began creating Danny’s transition plan.

When Danny entered the room several minutes later, Mr. Mariano invited him to sit at the table. I was the only person in the room that Mr. Davis and Danny had not met, but Mr. Mariano said “I think you’ve met some people here, but not everyone. We should do quick introductions.” We introduced ourselves, then the team returned to the discussion it was having about Danny’s strengths.

Participation by type. To tally the participation of each team member, I divided the meeting into two phases: the IEP discussion and the transition plan discussion. This allowed me to compare the participation of each team member across the two segments of the meeting. This is documented in Tables 10 and 11.

Table 10

Team member participation by type at Danny's IEP meeting before Mr. Davis and Danny arrived

	Mr. Mariano	SLP	OT 1	OT 2
Total remarks	40	16	16	28
Affirmative utterances	0	1	0	1
General questions to team	1	0	0	0
Targeted questions to team	5	2	8	8
Concerns	4	2	1	2
Compliments about Danny	4	2	0	2

Table 11

Team member participation by type at Danny's IEP meeting after Mr. Davis and Danny arrived

	Mr. Mariano	Father (Mr. Davis)	Danny	Other
Total remarks	57	63	14	14
Affirmative utterances	2	5	0	1
Comments to Danny	3	2		0
Questions for Danny	5	1		1
General questions to parent	1			0
Targeted questions to parent	17			5
Questions to Mr. Mariano		1	0	0
Concerns	0	4		0
Compliments about Danny	2	4		1
Student questions to parent			0	
Student comments to parent			5	

During the IEP discussion, Mr. Mariano made the most verbal contributions (40), followed by the mentoring occupational therapist (OT 1; 28), and the SLP (16) and occupational therapist trainee (OT 2; also 16). The SLP and the OTs (OT 1,

supplemented by OT 2) gave extended reports of their work with Danny before the other team members entered the discussion with comments and questions. Likewise, for the discussions on reading, math, writing, and behavior, Mr. Mariano gave his report before the other educators joined the discussion.

The number of targeted questions from the educators was noteworthy. The OTs asked eight questions each, Mr. Mariano asked five, and the SLP asked two. Nine of these 23 questions were asked during the team's discussion of personal hygiene. Among others, these questions included: "The thing I didn't take out yet [from the previous IEP] was the self-care, and I didn't know where to go with that?" (OT 1), "I don't know Mr. Mariano if you want to address that [with Mr. Davis]?" (OT 1), "Have you noticed a change in body odor? Is he showering more?" (SLP), and "Would it be okay just having one objective?" (Mr. Mariano). Other questions that the team asked regarded the program and support Danny would receive in high school and strategies that the team found effective to motivate Danny to complete tasks.

The team also raised a number of concerns (9) about Danny, as well as compliments (8) about his progress. The primary concern – which was articulated by each team member – was his personal hygiene. Members of the team were also concerned with his responsiveness to questions and directions (Mr. Mariano and the SLP), his motor-visual challenges (OT 1), and that he had stopped attending an out-of-school therapy group (Mr. Mariano). Each team member complimented the academic and behavioral progress Danny had made over the course of the year. With the exception of Mr. Mariano's report on Danny's progress in math (which did not include any

compliments), each educator's report began with a complimentary statement, such as "Just thinking about him over the last two years, he's made a lot of gains" (OT 1).

The pattern of verbal participation changed during the discussion of Danny's transition plan. In this segment of the meeting, Mr. Davis made the greatest number of verbal contributions (63) – even more than Mr. Mariano made (57). The other educators combined only made 14 verbal contributions during this half of the meeting. Danny also made 14 contributions.

When Danny arrived at the meeting, Mr. Mariano asked him to join the team at the table. Mr. Mariano and Mr. Davis attempted to engage him in the discussion that the team was having about his strengths and interests. Mr. Mariano asked Danny four questions about these topics and Mr. Davis asked him one question about his interests. Danny was slow to respond (a behavior the team had discussed during the IEP meeting) and not forthcoming with his opinions. After several minutes of trying to engage Danny, Mr. Mariano and Mr. Davis stopped this effort and the conversation proceeded much more rapidly.

Mr. Mariano asked Mr. Davis a substantial number of questions (17) about Danny's transition plan. This number was so large in part because Mr. Mariano opened each transition plan topic (following the order of topics included in the transition plan document) by posing it as a question to Mr. Davis. For example, to introduce the topic of employment, Mr. Mariano asked Mr. Davis: "What would we say is an employment goal? How could we like measure his employability? What would be some good gains for him to make?" The other educators asked a total of five questions of Mr. Davis. These were predominantly clarifying questions, trying to find terms to capture Mr. Davis's

ideas. For example, when Mr. Davis was explaining that an employment goal he had for Danny was to interact positively with customers, the SLP asked if they should use the term “social skills” to describe this goal in the transition plan.

In contrast to the IEP discussion, none of the educators – including Mr. Mariano – articulated any clear concerns to Mr. Davis. However, Mr. Davis described four concerns that he had, including a concern about Danny’s cleanliness. Mr. Mariano and OT 1 followed Mr. Davis’s comment on this topic with a handful of questions that pushed him to describe more specifically his concerns, but that was far as the conversation went.

Danny received seven compliments during the time he was at the meeting. Two of these compliments came from Mr. Mariano and one came from OT 1. Mr. Davis gave Danny four compliments, saying he was good mechanically, good with design, had an “awesome” vocabulary, and “his imagination is just frickin’ money.”

Parental participation. Because he missed the IEP segment of the meeting, Mr. Davis did not participate in helping creating Danny’s IEP. However, at the conclusion of the meeting, Mr. Mariano tried to arrange a time to go over the IEP with Mr. Davis. They were unable to find a time that worked and did not meet to discuss the IEP before the school year ended. Nevertheless, Mr. Davis was quite central to the development of Danny’s transition plan. Mr. Mariano described how he facilitated the transition plan:

I’ve never done a transition plan. That was probably pretty obvious. So the basis for me was, what do we do for this kid who clearly, right now, could not survive independently...I don’t know if you’ve ever been to a wraparound meeting? But I kind of envisioned it as going that way, with the family, and Danny a little more if he would have been [willing], saying these are the needs I have as a family and as

a child, here's the strengths we have, and moving along here's what we're going to need from you guys. This is how you can help us...I drew on my social work [background], having run wraparound meetings before and basing it on the parent.

Mr. Mariano had not drafted the transition plan prior to the meeting. He used the outline of the transition plan document to guide how he facilitated the five transition topics the team discussed. Mr. Mariano introduced each topic of discussion by asking Mr. Davis for his input (e.g., "What about independent living? What would be a goal for him?" and "And then what about education and any training along with education, like vocational or...?"). This process gave Mr. Davis the opportunity to be upfront and explicit about his goals, vision, and concerns for Danny as he transitioned into high school in the coming months and into life after high school several years later. Because Mr. Mariano had not prewritten a draft, Mr. Davis's remarks became the basis for what was formally included in the transition plan document.

For most of the topics, the educators responded to Mr. Davis's remarks by seeking clarification, but not adding their input. An example of this was the discussion about employment goals for Danny:

Mr. Mariano: What would we say is an employment goal? How could we like measure his employability? What would be some good gains for him to make?

Mr. Davis: Um, understanding money.

Mr. Mariano: Value?

Mr. Davis: Value, how to give back proper change, those types of things. Appearance, well I don't know if it'd say appearance, but how do you call that, appropriate attire for work? I guess proper presentation...How to interact with people at a job level...And to realize that the person you're dealing with may not always be in a pleasant mood, but to learn not to take something so serious. If somebody is like "this is wrong" to not take it like, okay, where

you're feeling it's your fault, where it's really like they're just having a poor day or something like that. What is that called?

Mr. Mariano: Conflict resolution? Or...

SLP: Like social skills?

Mr. Davis: Yeah...and like you have the angry customer at your register and no matter what you do, they're still going to be upset. How to deal with that. Because, I mean, he's going to run into that. And right now, I don't mean to laugh, but it probably wouldn't go so well. He'd end up getting fired.

SLP: Interpersonal skills and recognizing different perspectives?

Mr. Davis: Yeah, a lot of social, personal perspectives.

The educators behaved differently when the team discussed independent living and hygiene. During these discussions, Mr. Davis remarked that he was concerned with Danny's cleanliness, among other concerns. Mr. Mariano picked up on this issue. He and OT 1 questioned Mr. Davis about it, attempting to emphasize the issue of personal hygiene. Mr. Davis's short, affirmative responses were not a clear indication that he prioritized this same concern:

Mr. Mariano: ...What else would he need to be able to do?

Mr. Davis: Um, to learn how to, cleanliness for one. Like keeping his house clean. Self-management. And understanding of money and budgeting.

Mr. Mariano: You said keeping his house clean, what about it? Hygiene? I know you mentioned hygiene before, but what about personal hygiene?

Mr. Davis: That's what I was also figuring into it.

OT 1: On his own? On his own initiative?

Mr. Davis: Yeah.

Mr. Mariano: Shaving if he needs to?

Mr. Davis: Yeah.

Mr. Mariano: Haircuts if he need to?

Mr. Davis: Yeah.

OT 1: Do you have to remind him, or?

Mr. Davis: If I didn't say, if I let it go an entire week, he would not take a shower or a bath unless I told him. Or not told him, but asked him to. Kind of on the flip side of that is teaching him, like, I may wear one pair of jeans and I can maybe get a second wear out of that. But last time we did laundry, he wore a new pair every single day, which is fine, but, if you're on a budget, like we are at the moment, being able to stretch it to what's appropriate.

OT 1: To self-manage that.

Mr. Davis: Yeah.

On one transition topic, Mr. Mariano offered a suggestion before inviting Mr. Davis to comment. Mr. Davis disagreed with the suggestion and through the exchange that followed, Mr. Davis's thoughts were fleshed out and recorded into the transition plan:

Mr. Mariano: Um, up next is his graduation plan, and the option it gives me is standard credit format or IEP determined? I'd be more leaning toward IEP determined?

Mr. Davis: Yeah. But I also, I don't want him to just, I don't want him to be one of those kids who just gets pushed through the system...

Mr. Mariano: Because you have an IEP?

Mr. Davis: Yeah. I want some responsibility put on him...

Mr. Mariano: To grade him fairly based on his participation and effort but to allow him to participate in general education, get the concepts, and maybe he's not doing A work necessarily, but not, um, really ding his GPA...

Mr. Davis: And I agree with that, too, but also my concern is...in the real world they're not going to do it like that. They'll be like, well, either you meet those requirements or if you don't, then I'm sorry we can't hire you...

Mr. Mariano: So be a nice guy, but you also have to have these

Mr. Davis: Yeah, you have to have A, B, and C.

Distribution and enactment of power and authority. Observing the two segments of the meeting (first without Mr. Davis present and then after he arrived) gave me an opportunity to witness how the educators' participation compared "behind the curtain" and "on stage" in front of the parent. The two segments of the meeting were

differentiated in several ways that were pertinent to how power was distributed during the meeting: which team members contributed more prominently to the discussion, the type of knowledge that was central to the discussion, and how the educators expressed their concerns about Danny.

Before Mr. Davis arrived, dialogue between team members was collegial. Each educator was given the space and time to present on his or her area of work with Danny. There was also the space and time for the educators to deliberate on their approaches to shared responsibilities, such as how to motivate Danny to engage in and complete tasks and how to encourage him to respond more appropriately to other people. The team also had a lengthy discussion of Danny's personal hygiene – what issues he was having and how best to address those issues with him and his father. The dialogue was very forthright:

OT 1: ...The thing I didn't take out yet was the self-care...

OT 2: I think it's good to keep that in.

...

OT 1: Should we just leave it in then?

Mr. Mariano: I think we should.

OT 2: Yeah, that would be best.

Mr. Mariano: Yeah, because it's not a consistent skill that he's demonstrated and I think especially at high school it's going to come up as a social thing and it's going to be a source of contention.

OT 2: Yes.

SLP: Have you noticed a change in body odor? Is he showering more often?

Mr. Mariano: He showers regularly, but

SLP: Puts on his dirty cloths again?

Mr. Mariano: But puts on his dirty cloths again. So it's the cloths...he's really dealing with the pets and his dad, and his dad smells the same way.

SLP: Does he?

Mr. Mariano: Yeah.

SLP: Cause his dad looks tidy, I thought...What about talking to his dad about strategies, like when he's in the shower take his dirty cloths so he can't put them back on?

Mr. Mariano: Well his dad is the same. He doesn't have the self-awareness to do that.

This exchange, which continued for several more minutes, positioned the educators as collaborators – sorting out what they knew collectively to develop a strategy to achieve a shared goal.

The shared challenges of the educators also created an equality of power among them. OT 1's questions to the other team members initiated this dynamic. The SLP had explained the challenge of getting Danny to respond when he was tired – it usually took her “three to five prompts and then it takes about 15-20 seconds, but we get there eventually” – and OT 1 asked: “And you would recommend that when people interact with him?” Shortly thereafter she explained to the team: “That's why I kind of asked the question about how much, how persistent do you go with him. Because I used to not be persistent because I didn't know if it would set him off.” As this example illustrates, the educators were willing to solicit advice from one another and acknowledge how they were challenged by their work with Danny. They did not appear concerned with presenting themselves as having all the answers. For example, in a different exchange, Mr. Mariano suggested a strategy for motivating Danny and when he was asked if he had tried that strategy before he replied “I haven't, I'm just kind of thinking out loud.” This was the only time throughout all of my observations that I heard an educator make such a comment.

When Mr. Davis arrived, the content of the discussion shifted away from the professional knowledge of the IEP to the personal knowledge (goals, vision, and

concerns) of the transition plan. In addition, much of the direct and forceful questions that were asked during the IEP ceased. Because of these factors, as well as Mr. Mariano's efforts to make Mr. Davis feel welcome despite having arrived quite late, Mr. Davis was able to share power and authority with the other team members.

Mr. Mariano recognized the potential for an awkward situation when Mr. Davis arrived so late to the meeting. As a result, he quickly shared in the blame and invited Mr. Davis to join the conversation:

Mr. Mariano: Good morning.

Mr. Davis: Sorry I'm a little late.

Mr. Mariano: Yeah, yeah we were just talking about [pause] I hope I didn't give you the wrong time? We started at 7:00.

Mr. Davis: Oh gosh, I'm sorry.

Mr. Mariano: It's okay. I knew it was pretty early and it was on Friday when we talked. We've talked a lot about his IEP, but I still want to get your input.

Throughout the remainder of the meeting, and within each topic of discussion, the conversation revolved around Mr. Davis's goals, vision, and concerns for Danny's upcoming transition. Within this domain of knowledge, Mr. Davis was competent. Mr. Davis expressed his interest in Danny staying active in the arts, taking courses that challenged him and built upon his skills and interest in design, and shared his concerns about Danny's ability to live independently and maintain a job and a home. His knowledge of these topics was never challenged and even though Mr. Mariano facilitated the meeting Mr. Davis maintained a level of control over the direction of the conversation. For example, when OT 1 and Mr. Mariano were pursuing the topic of personal hygiene, Mr. Davis deflected any implication of personal responsibility from the line of questions and changed the subject when he was ready:

- Mr. Davis: If I didn't say, if I let it go an entire week, he would not take a shower or a bath unless I told him...Kind of on the flip side of that is teaching him, like, I may wear one pair of jeans and I can maybe get a second wear out of that...being able to stretch it to what's appropriate.
- OT 1: To self-manage that.
- Mr. Davis: Yeah.
- Mr. Mariano: So like you maybe wear a different pair of pants every day of the week, but then go back and
- Mr. Davis: Recycle.
- Mr. Mariano: Recycle that.
- Mr. Davis: And you can interchange your shirt with it...
- Mr. Mariano: Yeah, but kind of doing that assessment like I just wore it once, so
- Mr. Davis: Yeah, yeah. [pause] Time management would be a big one...or I don't know if it's self-management, or I want to do what I want to do, you know what I mean?

In some instances, the educators attempted to assert their professional authority into the transition plan. This occurred, for example, when the educators tried to name a phenomenon Mr. Davis was describing, such as identifying the concern Mr. Davis had for Danny's ability to interact with angry customers without getting fired as "conflict resolution" or "interpersonal skills and recognizing different perspectives." Despite these instances, which Mr. Davis responded to but not enthusiastically, Mr. Davis and his thoughts remained the focus of the transition plan discussion.

In the one exchange when Mr. Davis's knowledge crossed into the domain of professional knowledge, his interests were given deference. This occurred when he and Mr. Mariano were discussing Danny's graduation requirements. Mr. Mariano asserted his professional knowledge – to use an IEP determined graduation standard – which Mr. Davis agreed to, but also pushed back on what he perceived to be some of the implications of this decision (letting Danny slide by without challenging him in class). By

applying his personal experience to these implications, Mr. Davis reclaimed his authority over this domain. In the context of the transition plan meeting that had been so heavily focused on his opinions, this worked. Mr. Davis explained:

I don't want him to be one of those kids who just gets pushed through the system. He's got an IEP, so we're not going to really focus on the academics and make sure. I just want him to succeed and do really well. And sometimes I feel like being in a system like this, I was in the system as well, similar, and because I was in the program there weren't too many severe penalties...you're just one of those kids who we'll just filter through...I want some responsibility put on him. Not necessarily put on him. I'm not sure how that works, but I want him to be challenged.

Building a parent-teacher relationship. In both the IEP discussion (without Mr. Davis) and the transition plan discussion (with Mr. Davis), Danny's strengths were described before his challenges. During the IEP, his strengths were brought up in the context of each subject area being discussed (e.g., his success using an online reading program was discussed before the challenge of getting him to think critically about texts and his interest in using the computer with the OTs was discussed before his challenges using the keyboard).

Mr. Mariano waited until the transition plan to have a general discussion of Danny's strengths and interests. When Mr. Davis arrived, Mr. Mariano had just asked the team a question about setting goals for Danny. Mr. Davis sat down and Mr. Mariano made a subtle shift in the question he posed so that instead the conversation became

about the skills Danny had learned during middle school that would carry forward to high school:

Mr. Mariano: I guess we have some time. I just want to look at this transition plan a bit and I have some questions for you guys...what do you see as his top three goals for high school?

OT 2: Specifically or globally?

[Mr. Davis enters the room and joins the team at the table]

Mr. Mariano: Good morning.

Mr. Davis: Sorry I'm a little late.

Mr. Mariano: Yeah, yeah we were just talking about. I hope I didn't give you the wrong time? We started at 7:00.

Mr. Davis: Oh gosh, I'm sorry.

Mr. Mariano: It's okay. I knew it was pretty early and it was on Friday when we talked. We've talked a lot about his IEP, but I still want to get your input.

Mr. Davis: Okay.

Mr. Mariano: We were just talking about his transition plan...We were talking about his needs, like what have we given him here [during middle school] to help him be successful?

In addition to acknowledging Danny's strengths before discussing his challenges and concerns about his transition into high school, Mr. Mariano was intentional in not pushing Mr. Davis too far on the sensitive topic of Danny's hygiene. He also needed to help regulate how much the other team members pushed this topic that had been so focal during the IEP discussion. Mr. Mariano reflected:

That's one of those things where you can only beat a dead horse so much before you lose him or just piss him off. You hope that at some point it's in there, but...you only have control over so much...so it's like make a strong point about it [with Mr. Davis] and then do what you can with Danny...Then letting other people around the table know that [Mr. Davis is] part of this team and if you want to keep him a part of this team it's not by not addressing it...it's not fair not to,

but we did address it, so it's like you're not his maid, you only have this much control.

Mr. Mariano was aware that Mr. Davis had a contentious relationship with the staff at Danny's elementary school. His elementary special education teacher warned Mr. Mariano that Mr. Davis "lived in squalor," did not care enough to be involved in Danny's education, and that she had called Child Protective Services on him a couple times. Mr. Mariano "took this as a challenge. I'm gonna be down with this dad." He was careful not to invoke the past relationship Mr. Davis had with the elementary school, aware that the topic of personal hygiene was sensitive by nature and due to Mr. Davis's history with the district. From this perspective, Mr. Mariano did not use the IEP meeting to build a relationship with Mr. Davis, but used it to protect the relationship he had worked on for two school years.

Defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting. Whether or not Mr. Davis had been present for the IEP segment of the meeting, Mr. Mariano thought the meeting was foremost about figuring out what supports were "best for [Danny], without enabling him." Mr. Mariano was very concerned about Danny and his transition into high school. The IEP team, along with other service providers who worked with Danny but who were not present at the IEP meeting, had been meeting regularly to discuss services for Danny throughout the school year. Therefore, according to Mr. Mariano, the IEP meeting was not too different than conversations the team previously had. He explained that "There is a lot of collaboration that happens [for Danny]...and I think it's to his benefit, but I still think people are trying to figure out how to best serve him, maybe

without necessarily losing him.” So the IEP meeting was an extension of this effort to figure out how best to serve him.

I was unable to contact Mr. Davis after the IEP meeting and therefore did not get to hear his thoughts on the purpose of the meeting.

Selected Quote

I want to be genuine to the relationship. I mean I’ve called parents out because I thought they couldn’t drive when they came to an IEP meeting. I said “Are you okay to drive because you smell like alcohol?” Or I call parents up and say “I called CPS because of this today. It’s my legal obligation, I value you as a parent and if they call you, if CPS calls you, they have an array of services, take advantage of it. I didn’t call them because I think any less of you”...The honesty and integrity that I feel like needs to be given, I feel that if I’m not honest with a family, I’ve let them down. I feel like I cheated them. It’s like a weird code of honor.

-Mr. Mariano discussing being honest with parents

Summary of Major Themes and Findings

In Chapters V and VI, I identified the four major themes that emerged from my data (parental participation; distribution and enactment of power and authority; building parent-teacher relationships; and defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting), and presented examples of how these themes were present during the IEP meetings I observed and in the interviews I conducted. In the next chapter, I revisit these themes and discuss their implications in general, how structuration theory can be used to inform an analysis of IEP meetings, and the significance of these findings to an analysis of special education law.

Chapter VII

Discussion

In the previous chapter, I described four major themes from my observations and interviews as they emerged within each IEP meeting. In this discussion, I examine significant overall findings and return to these major themes to examine how they compare across the IEP meetings. I also compare and contrast these findings to the existing scholarship on IEP meetings and discuss their potential significance for understanding the experience of parents and special educators in IEP meetings. I analyze each theme using applicable structuration theory constructs, demonstrating how this theory can be a useful analytic tool for examining and understanding the dynamic interactions and relationships present in IEP meetings. Finally, I discuss legal considerations that the IEP meetings raised and the relevance of these considerations for parental empowerment in educational decision-making within the context of IEP meetings.

I initially designed this study as an examination of parental participation in IEP meetings, with a particular interest in how parents of color are, or can be, empowered in educational decision-making for children who receive services for EBD. However, as I explained in Chapter IV, Mr. Mariano became a more central focus of this study due to the evolving nature of qualitative inquiry and my challenges recruiting participants. Therefore, in addition to observing how educational decision-making was performed during the IEP meetings, I explored how Mr. Mariano used IEP meetings to build and/or strengthen his relationships with parents. Consequently, while parent empowerment continued to be the primary analytic focus of this study, the findings that emerged, and

my discussion of these findings here, are appreciably influenced by the experiences and reflective lens of one special educator, as well as by the bias of my own interpretive lens. The findings represent the first-hand perceptions of the parents who participated in the study only to a limited extent.

Despite the bias of these data, they are informative to my two central research questions. First, I was interested in examining how a skilled special educator facilitated IEP meetings for students identified as EBD, and how the influences of structure and agency interacted in and affected this process. Second, I wanted to understand how parent participation was influenced by structure and agency, how parent participation influenced the IEP meetings, and in what ways these factors affected how educational decision-making happened during the meetings. Epstein (2001) distinguished parental participation and involvement in special education planning from parental empowerment. I too make this distinction, and in what follows examine how these concepts (participation/involvement and empowerment) overlap and how they are separate.

Comparison of General Findings to Previous Research

This study confirmed a significant finding that is very consistent in previous IEP meeting research (e.g., Valle & Aponte, 2002; Lytle & Bordin, 2001): school personnel – and specifically the special education teacher – dominate IEP meeting dialogue and decision-making. As other researchers (e.g., Goldstein et al, 1980; Martin et al. 2004) have found, the special educator in this study facilitated each of the IEP meetings and, to a large extent, pre-set the agenda for each meeting. In addition, much of the discussion during these meetings was initiated by and revolved around the information that Mr. Mariano had included in his draft of each IEP – drafts that he completed without

significant input from other team members (although I note that other service providers, such as SLPs and OTs, completed “their” sections of the IEP. However they too did this without input from the other team members).

The lack of a strong administrative presence in any of the four IEP meetings added to Mr. Mariano’s leading presence in these meeting. There was no administrator at Danny’s meeting. In each of the three other meetings, Ms. Evans – who served as the administrative representative – played only a minimal role during the IEP (including leaving ten minutes into Calvin’s meeting). She served as the facilitator – and was the dominant participant – during Ben’s re-evaluation, but even at that meeting her role was minimal when the IEP was discussed. As a result, Mr. Mariano’s ability to dictate the discussion topics, amount of time spent addressing each topic, the content of the conversation within each topic, and the goals, objectives, and service plan (e.g., accommodations, modifications, and service matrix) during the IEP meetings was nearly unchecked by the only other individual at the meeting that commanded a high level of recognized institutional authority.

However, even though Mr. Mariano’s authority was not directly or indirectly challenged by an administrator, at no point during any of the four IEP meetings did Mr. Mariano appear to abuse the additional authority this bestowed upon him. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that Ms. Evans would have intervened or added additional or alternative discussion points had she felt it was necessary (e.g., because Mr. Mariano did not represent the interests or obligations of the school or was not attentive to the parents’ interests). The role Ms. Evans assumed during the IEP meetings was unclear and her participation need not have been limited to intervening only if things went astray.

Because she remained largely an observer,¹² the effect on the meeting and on the IEP team was that Mr. Mariano controlled most of the key elements of the discussion.

A second finding consistent with previous research was that decisions made prior to the meeting were not changed during the meeting. Rupp and Gaffney (2011) found that conversations between educators prior to the IEP meeting they observed inordinately influenced the final decisions the team arrived at during at the meeting. Mr. Mariano did not engage in extensive discussion with other educators about the IEPs prior to the meetings¹³ and the decisions he made about the students' goals and objectives, modifications and accommodations, and service matrixes, stood. The parents did not generally contribute to making decisions about these critical elements of the IEP. Instead, Mr. Mariano routinely just explained the decisions he had made to the parents – and at times these explanations were minimal, such as during Ben's 12.5-minute IEP meeting.

Even when parents were involved in the discussion of these critical elements of the IEP, Mr. Mariano's initial decisions remained the final decisions. For example, when Mr. Mariano initiated a team discussion about pushing Alfonso into an additional general education class (a change to his service matrix), Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams went along with this decision. Although Ms. Acosta indicated her interest in having Alfonso take general education classes, the team did not discuss why this would be a good idea, or if they anticipated any challenges with making this change. In contrast, Mr. and Ms.

¹² Mr. Mariano explained to me that he believed Ms. Evans was hesitant to have a strong voice in the meetings because their relationship was more akin to a colleague-to-colleague relationship than an administrator-to-teacher relationship and she did not want to, or felt uncomfortable with, assuming authority over him.

¹³ Although Mr. Mariano's familiarity with his students' progress and upcoming work in their outside classes was evidence that he engaged in, at least somewhat, regular communication with his students' other teachers.

Barnes's challenge to the proposed service matrix for Ben was refuted. Mr. and Ms. Barnes argued that Ben continued to need writing support in the self-contained classroom. However Mr. Mariano and Ms. Evans defended their position to remove these services, explaining why their decision was reasonable and supported by objective evidence. Ultimately, the educators' previously determined decision to remove services remained the final decision on the IEP.

Some of my findings were not consistent with previous research. An instance of this was with regard to the experience of parents of color. It is, however, important to emphasize here that the small number of IEP meetings I observed for this study, my limited contact with the parents outside of the IEP meetings, and my research methods make this finding limited to the context in which *these specific* IEP meetings occurred.¹⁴ With an understanding of this limitation, the two parents of color (Ms. Collins and Ms. Acosta) did not appear to be – nor did they acknowledge feeling – marginalized during their IEP meetings because of race, ethnicity, or cultural identity. In fact, Ms. Collins contributed more to the discussion at Calvin's meeting than any of the other parents at the IEP meetings. Her comments also yielded the most response and regard from the educators. For example, her concern about Calvin's performance in science prompted a discussion that lasted longer than any other segment of his IEP meeting and engaged several members of the team in urging Calvin to work up to his potential (through improved attendance and by using his daily planner). Harry (2008) and Rao (2000) are

¹⁴ While this is generally true of qualitative research – the purpose of which is to interact with and build upon theory, not to produce generalizable findings – I emphasize this design limitation here intentionally to avoid giving a false impression of what can be learned from my findings.

among the scholars who have found that parents of color (including non-immigrant parents of color, as are Ms. Collins and Ms. Acosta) are often marginalized by culturally laden practices performed during IEP meetings and in educational decision-making. In contrast to Harry and Rao's findings, both Ms. Collins and Ms. Acosta communicated that they felt comfortable expressing themselves at their respective IEP meetings and that they believed Mr. Mariano was responsive to their concerns.

The significance of Ms. Collins and Ms. Acosta's perceptions of feeling heard and respected during the meeting and by Mr. Mariano is that it demonstrates the possibility for parents of color to be contributing IEP team members despite the underlying cultural and institutional barriers to their participation. One way this may happen is when the special educator adopts a posture of cultural reciprocity (Harry et al., 1999). However, in this case Mr. Mariano did not explicitly consider how parents' racial or ethnic identities affected their beliefs, knowledge systems, and/or involvement in the meetings. Instead, by his own admission, he more generally identified all of the families as having a shared culture – that of being a family of a child receiving EBD services. Within this framework, Mr. Mariano focused on giving the parents a space to be heard and making sure they felt that they had a voice in the meeting. This practice shares with Harry et al.'s (1999) notion of cultural reciprocity an emphasis on creating space for the family's beliefs, knowledge systems, and communication styles to be asserted during the IEP meeting. However, it also has the effect of not directly addressing these elements as factors in the family-school relationship or making sure that these elements are considered when the IEP is created. By not acknowledging the cultural elements of the exchange or explicitly valuing cultural differences that may be relevant to the IEP, the educator retains a position of

power. Cultural or family knowledge is considered pertinent only when the educator chooses to accept it, and it's status as needing to be approved by the dominant authority is unchanged. The educator remains a gatekeeper to parents' involvement, empowerment, and their equality on the IEP team.

A second finding that was inconsistent with previous research was the role that gender played in parental participation.¹⁵ While an analysis of gender was not the focus of my study and has not been extensively studied (at least explicitly) in the IEP literature, some scholars have suggested that gender may be a factor in how parental participation is received and responded to during IEP meetings. Rao (2000), Rogers (2002), Cho and Gannotti (2005) described the challenges mothers experience trying to advocate for their children in special education. However, the literature is not conclusive on the effects of gender in IEP meetings. For example, Mueller and Buckley (2014) found that fathers felt distanced from IEP teams and invisible during IEP meetings, despite being active participants in the meetings and in their children's education in general.

In my study, when both parents were present the mothers were more actively involved than were the fathers (e.g., Ms. Barnes's participation was nearly twice as much as Mr. Barnes's and Ms. Collins's was more than Mr. Collins's) – although none of the parents – mothers or fathers – was significantly involved in educational decision-making during the IEP. However, the educators' responses to parents appeared to be more related to the type of knowledge a parent evidenced, the type of question a parent asked, or the type of concern a parent expressed than to the parent's gender or the quantity of that

¹⁵ As with my discussion of race, I emphasize that my findings and assertions about the role of gender for parents in IEP meetings should be understood as limited to the specific context of these IEP meetings.

parent's involvement in the meeting. For example, by repeatedly indicating that she was primarily interested in hearing if Alfonso was adjusting socially to school, Ms. Acosta helped create a meeting dynamic that distanced her from engaging in educational decision-making. Yet, even though Mr. Adams was more involved in asking questions and receiving information about the content of Alfonso's IEP, he too was not significantly engaged in educational decision-making. In Ben's meeting, Ms. Barnes took the lead in asserting her and Mr. Barnes's interest in Ben continuing to receive his current level of services. Ultimately, neither Ms. Barnes nor Mr. Barnes successfully convinced the educators to change their minds. In Calvin's meeting, because of Mr. Collins's off-topic remarks and humorous commentary, Ms. Acosta was positioned as the "serious" parent and the team responded to her academic and behavioral concerns for Calvin by taking a significant amount of time to address them.

The two findings just discussed – the role of race, ethnicity, and culture and gender in IEP meeting participation – are connected to a broader finding that this study revealed. Although parents were largely excluded from educational decision-making, they did actively participate in general discussion during the IEP – making comments to Mr. Mariano and the other educators, making comments to and asking questions of their own child when present, (occasionally) asking questions of Mr. Mariano or the other educators, and actively listening to the discussion when they were not contributing to it. The number of comments that parents made during each of the IEP meetings can be viewed as evidence that parents were fully involved in the meetings. Table 12 compares team member participation across the four meetings I observed.

Table 12

Comparison of team member participation across IEP meetings

	Team member	Total remarks	Remarks minus utterances	Questions & comments to student	Compliments to/about student	Concerns about student
IEP #1	Mr. Mariano	74	73	19	4	5
	Alfonso's parents	78	58	27	4	1
	Alfonso	59	57			
IEP #2	Facilitator	45	45		5	1
	Ben's parents	47	43		0	4
IEP #3	Mr. Mariano	101	96	21	4	1
	Calvin's parents	187	124	40	2	4
	Calvin	84	83			
IEP #4 (transition plan)	Mr. Mariano	57	55	8	2	0
	Danny's father	63	58	3	4	4
	Danny	14	14			

In two meetings, the parents (mother and father combined) made more remarks (excluding utterances) than Mr. Mariano. In Calvin's meeting, Calvin's parents made 124 remarks compared to 96 by Mr. Mariano. In Danny's meeting, Danny's father made three more remarks than Mr. Mariano (58 compared to 55). In the other two meetings, even though Mr. Mariano contributed more frequently to the discussion, the parents were far from silent team members. In Alfonso's meeting, Alfonso's parents made approximately four remarks for every five of Mr. Mariano's remarks (58 compared to 73). In Ben's meeting, Ben's parents made almost the same number of remarks (43) as the meeting facilitator (45; Mr. Mariano and Ms. Evans each facilitated half of the meeting). This level of participation indicates that parents were not simply passive members of the IEP teams; they were actively involved in discussion with the other team members. However, it is also important to understand how the parents' involvement illustrates the distinction

between active general involvement and active participation in IEP decision-making. Parents were able to maintain a high level of involvement in conversation without being active participants in decision-making. One significant implication of this finding is that when parents are involved in general IEP discussion, it can be difficult to recognize that they have been excluded from participating in decision-making.

A third factor pertinent to parent involvement was the students' presence and participation in the meeting. Much of the literature on student participation in IEP meetings focuses on how students are taught to be self-advocates and engage in self-determination vis-à-vis their education (Test et al., 2004). Test et al. (2004) explained, however, that this body of literature has yet to examine how efforts to more thoroughly and effectively involve students in their IEP meetings may influence parental engagement in educational decision-making during IEP meetings. In this study, when a student attended the meeting and willingly contributed to the discussion, much of the discussion was directed toward him. This was the case in Alfonso and Calvin's meetings. Both were actively involved in their meetings (despite initially appearing uncomfortable and not knowing how to participate). Alfonso spoke more often than either of his parents and Mr. Mariano and each of his parents directed a number of comments and questions to him. Calvin spoke more often than his father, though less often than his mother, and the other team members directed a number of comments and questions to Calvin. In both of these meetings, the focus on involving the student seemed to take the place (at least to some extent) of efforts to involve the parents in the discussion. This appeared to be an effort to provide each student the opportunity to assume some responsibility for his own education (i.e., an effort to teach self-determination), but it simultaneously transferred responsibility

and opportunity away from the parents and from the obligating the educators to involve the parents.

When the student was not present (which occurred at Ben's meeting) or not an active participant (at Danny's meeting), the conversation was directed toward the parent(s). Although federal regulations require students to be invited to participate in the development of their transition plan – and the literature suggests a recent push to involve adolescents in the process of developing their own IEPs – when this transfer of responsibility is not explicitly acknowledged – either before or during the meeting – it may (inadvertently and) simultaneously become a transfer of opportunity, resulting in parents having an even more reduced role in the IEP meeting and the educational decision-making process.

Significance of Emergent Themes

The four major themes that emerged from this study have meaningful implications for understanding the ways in which parents are involved in IEP meetings and the experiences of parents and special educators in these meetings. In this section, I examine some of the principal implications of each theme, how the concepts of structuration theory can be used to analyze parent participation, and what legal implications the IEP meetings revealed.

Parental Participation. The theme of parental participation pertains to how parents' interests, concerns, and questions were addressed during the IEP meetings and what efforts the educators – in particular Mr. Mariano – made to increase parent participation in these meetings. Through this theme I examined how the educators and parents were responsive to one another. This included how the educators were responsive

to parents' input and perspectives and how the parents were responsive to the educators' attempts to get the parents involved, offer their input, and share their perspectives.

The literature typically describes parent participation in IEP meetings as minimal, and when parents do participate it is often because they are invited by the educators to respond to specific questions (Goldstein et al., 1980; Vaughn et al., 1988; Martin et al., 2004). In this passive model of participation, the educators orchestrate the meeting and guide when and how parents are involved in the conversation and educational decision-making (Martin et al., 2004). This model of participation does not facilitate active parent participation, collaboration with the other team members, or parental empowerment to initiate or express novel ideas or ideas that challenge other team member's perspectives.

This study revealed a complex relationship between active, self-initiated parent participation and educator-driven parent participation. At least one parent at each meeting was actively involved in the discussion – and at times their involvement influenced what was discussed – but parental participation did not typically seem to affect the content of the IEP. In each meeting, Mr. Mariano (and Ms. Evans at the reevaluation) gave the impression that the draft of the IEP was a “working document” subject to change based on the discussion and input of the parents and other members of the team. Despite this stipulation, in most instances what the parents expressed interest in discussing did not have a direct bearing on the content of the IEP. The educators usually had to actively solicit parental engagement on issues that directly bore upon the content of the IEP. In consequence, while the parents' self-initiated contributions may have influenced the educators in other ways (e.g., they became aware of what concerns a parent had about their child), the educators maintained control over the IEP. As a result, the teams'

discussions during the IEP meetings did not typically alter the content of the IEP documents.

When Mr. Mariano asked general questions to elicit parent involvement – such as “Do you have any questions or anything to add?” – the parents did not typically respond with a comment or question that was related to the content of the IEP. Alternatively, when Mr. Mariano asked more specific or targeted questions – such as “What do you think about X?” – the parents typically answered his question more directly (such as when Mr. Mariano asked Mr. and Ms. Collins to weigh in on what grading scheme should be used for Calvin in science). These findings suggest that when educators leave the door open wider for parents to initiate discussion they may be less successful at eliciting parent input than when they guide parental participation. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that even if parents are interested in participating, they may not know how they can offer meaningful input unless they are provided some direction as to what type of input would be helpful. An example of this is how early on in Alfonso’s meeting Ms. Acosta – who was demonstrably interested in being involved in the meeting – expressed that her main interest was in making sure that Alfonso was adjusting well to Clampett Middle School, but she did not express any specific interests beyond that or make any contributions that affected the content of the IEP.

Though not directly comparable because it did not take place not during an IEP meeting, Mr. Davis’s participation in Danny’s transition plan meeting demonstrated how prompting a parent to make contributions on specific topics could elicit a high level of on-topic participation. During the transition plan phase of Danny’s meeting, Mr. Davis was highly participatory. Mr. Mariano guided the discussion in terms of what topics

would be discussed, but he opened the discussion topics with a targeted question to Mr. Davis (and initially also to Danny, until he did not respond on several occasions). Each time, Mr. Davis responded with an on-topic reply that was discussed by the team and then incorporated into the written transition plan.

The place where Mr. Mariano most actively solicited parent involvement during IEP meetings was the teams' discussion of each of the students' strengths. He left this section of the IEPs blank (he did not create a draft of the section prior to the meetings), thinking it might provide an easy opportunity for parents to contribute to the discussion. This resulted in varying levels of success. For example, Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams did not participate in the discussion of Alfonso's strengths, but Mr. and Ms. Collins offered several suggestions for strengths that should be included in Calvin's IEP. However, the content of the strengths section of an IEP does not directly influence the services the student receives or the obligations of the school to the student. Even if parents are highly involved in the discussion of the student's strengths, it has no express bearing on the services the student receives.

When parents had strong feelings about what the IEP should include, the educators were receptive to these ideas when they fit within the educators' preexisting beliefs, but resistant when the parents' perspectives challenged their beliefs. When Mr. and Ms. Barnes challenged the educators about Ben's services, they were met with resistance. They were told that Ben did not need the services they were interested in him receiving, and their interests were diverted away from the content of the IEP into a discussion of enrolling Ben in a high school that was a good fit for his special needs. In contrast, when Mr. and Ms. Collins asked for Calvin to be evaluated for a reading

disability (which would increase the services he received), the educators agreed to conduct this evaluation. The educators did not necessarily think that Calvin had a reading disability, but Mr. Mariano did believe that Calvin struggled a bit with reading and the request did not challenge a position he or Ms. Evans had already taken on the matter – whereas with Ben they had taken a position that he did not need the additional services.

Another facet of this theme is team members' perceptions of the importance of having active parental participation *during* the meeting. Gerber et al.'s (1986) research indicated that educators did not perceive parental participation to be an important element of an IEP meeting. More recent research has indicated a shift in this thinking, suggesting that special educators value the participation and input of parents (Trainor, 2010).

However, Trainor (2010) also argued that educators may not be sufficiently knowledgeable about what resources a parent needs to have (e.g., reading ability or knowledge of educational jargon and special education law) to actively collaborate in IEP meetings. Many educators make unfounded assumptions about parents' ability to collaborate, given these resource-based obstacles. According to Trainor, these assumptions, and the consequences that flow from them, may be particularly salient in cross-cultural school-parent interactions. Mr. Mariano, however, took a different position. He acknowledged the importance of having parents actively involved in the IEP meeting, but he considered this to be only one element of an overall goal to have the parents of his students involved in their children's education. To achieve this goal, Mr. Mariano wanted the parents to be involved in many aspects of the classroom. He wanted them to attend and participate in IEP meetings, but he also wanted them to attend family nights and conferences, attend other meetings such as manifestation determinations, to call him

when they wanted to talk about their child and to be available when he wanted to talk to them. In sum, Mr. Mariano recognized the significance of the IEP, but his perspective was more oriented toward broader inclusion of parents. He understood the unique legal significance of IEPs – and consequently IEP meetings – but IEP meetings did not seem to Mr. Mariano to be more important than other parent interactions. He believed that the IEP meeting was not the only opportunity for parents to be involved in educational decision-making for their children and explained to me that many modifications of the day-to-day educational strategies and approaches he used (at times the product of conversation with parents) were not reflected in his students' IEPs.

Structuration analysis. The dynamism between structure and agency was active in the negotiation of parent participation throughout the IEP meetings. The IEP document itself can be considered a structure of the IEP meeting process. It provides topics for discussion and the team is required to complete its sections based upon the student's needs. What is entered into the IEP, however, is an act of agency. The words that get included and their meaning are not preset. Attention is drawn to this feature of the IEP when an educator explains that the IEP is a “working document.” More subtly, this feature of IEPs is also active whenever an educator solicits input from parents, for example asking if they are satisfied with a particular section of the plan or have anything to add to it. From this perspective, the creation of the IEP is in theory a highly agentic process, one in which parents have the opportunity to participate and influence.

However, parental participation – and thus their agency – may be curtailed by educators' authoritative participation in the IEP process. When this activation of authoritative resources is repeated across time and space, it can become a structural

feature of IEP meetings that creates greater opportunity for educators to assert their agency and lesser opportunity for parents to assert theirs. This structure was present in two ways in this study. One way was the types of questions Mr. Mariano asked to solicit parental input. Parents did not typically offer meaningful responds to his general questions. They were more likely to answer his directed or targeted questions with a contribution that had the potential to influence the content of the IEP.

The other way this structure of educator dominance was upheld was through the way Mr. Mariano directed parental participation with regard to generating a draft of the IEP. Mr. Mariano drafted the IEPs by himself (excluding the sections drafted by the SLP and OTs) but chose to leave the student strengths section of the present levels of performance undrafted prior to the meetings (he did draft the remainder of the present levels of performance, including the results of students' formal academic and behavior skills assessments). Mr. Mariano intended for this to be a method of involving the teams – including the parents – in the IEP meetings and in drafting the IEPs. The student strengths section is important for some purposes. For example the present levels of performance – where the student strengths are included – is generally the first substantive section of the IEP and therefore the section a teacher who is working with a student for the first time is likely to read initially. Also, if it is the first topic discussed at the IEP meeting it can help frame how the team will talk and think about the student in general. However, the student strength section does not affect the most important parts of the IEP: the service matrix, goals and objectives, and behavior intervention plan. Furthermore, student strengths are only one element of the present levels of performance. The remainder of the present levels generally reports the student's scores on formal academic

and behavioral assessments. Within the special education knowledge hierarchy, this objective information may be viewed as a more accurate measurement of the student's capabilities and potential than the subjective descriptions of the student captured in a team discussion of the student's strengths. Through both of these methods – asking questions and leaving the student strengths section for the team to develop – special educators use their situated power, or their social identity, and authoritative resources to channel parents' agency.

Mr. Mariano also used his agency to affect the participation of parents when he minimized the importance of the IEP meeting and, to some extent, the IEP itself. This approach to IEPs has the potential either to constrain or enable parental agency. Parents have established legal rights that are attached to IEP meetings, such as the right to be present and involved when the IEP is created. By minimizing the importance of these meetings – whether that means doing less to prepare for them or being okay with leaving out issues that are important to discuss – Mr. Mariano, through his practical (tacit) consciousness, may be inadvertently constraining the agency of parents to express their legal rights to the fullest extent. In contrast, when Mr. Mariano – through his discursive consciousness – extends “the IEP conversation” beyond the IEP meeting by minimizing the importance of the meeting as a formal event, he may be enabling greater opportunity for parental participation and the assertion of parental agency. Parents have greater opportunity to express their agency when they have real opportunities to modify or create new educational plans for their children at multiple points throughout the school year. Answering this question – whether in these specific IEP meetings Mr. Mariano enabled or constrained parent participation or educational decision-making – was not the purpose

of this study. However, it illustrates how structure and agency interact within the special education system and how the agency of actors involved in the IEP process can build structures that enable parents to take an active role in the education of and educational decision-making for their children outside of IEP meetings. This example demonstrates how even if agency is constrained in one context, it may be enjoyed more fully in another. IEP meetings are significant to the education of children with disabilities, but the full picture of parental empowerment in special education is complex, multifaceted, and cannot be understood just by examining IEP meetings.

Distribution and enactment of power and authority. This theme built upon the concept of knowledge types as possessing persuasive power within the contexts of parent-teacher communication, special education meetings, and educational decision-making (Kalyanpur et al., 2000; Skrtic, 1995). The possession of a particular type of knowledge may be associated with role or professional status, but because I took the analytic perspective that power was also contained within knowledge – that status alone does not convey the totality of one’s power – team members of different status could, at times, possess valued knowledge. Consequently, here I analyze the prominent instances of when and how Mr. Mariano (and, to a lesser extent, the other educators) and the parents positioned themselves as having expertise, their efforts to assert that expertise, and how this was received and responded to by the other IEP team members.

Most accounts of IEP meetings that analyze power dynamics between team members have concluded that power is inequitably distributed among team members. Special educators possess more power than the other team members and activate and display this power through overt and subtle expressions and discourse. Valle and Aponte

(2002) explained how educators used a professional and authoritative discourse to dominate the informal and personal discourse of parents. They argued that this authoritative discourse suppressed the possibility of genuine collaboration. Kalyanpur and Harry (1999) explained that the “objective” knowledge system and discourse of special educators decontextualizes students’ disabilities and is often at odds with parents’ more personalized and contextualized understanding of their child’s disability and its educational implications. Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2012) identified three strategies through which schools undermine the equity of parental contributions to IEP meetings. They suggested that schools use a discourse that precludes deep parental understanding of issues, rely on school policies to defend their position on controversial issues and issues that parents challenge, and conduct meetings according to bureaucratic structures that promote efficiency over collaborative decision-making.

Despite Mr. Mariano’s interest in parental collaboration and his concern that parents are often ostracized from meaningful participation and educational decision-making, the IEP meetings I observed confirmed many of these inequitable dynamics. At times this appeared to be primarily the result of Mr. Mariano’s actions, but many times it also appeared to be the result of the combination of Mr. Mariano’s practices and the parents’ acceptance of, response to, and (not infrequently) initiation of these practices. Mr. Mariano expressed an interest in *not* being a domineering figure in IEP meetings (as well as other interactions with parents). He explained that outside of our interviews he spent time reflecting on this idea and thinking about how the inclusion of parents was critical to the educational progress and overall development and well being of his students. He explained to me that one of his motivations for transitioning from being a

school social worker to becoming a special educator was to disrupt what he perceived to be the authoritarian regime many special educators use to lead their classrooms.

There was, however, a tension between these expressed ideals and the image Mr. Mariano was attempting to present to the parents. He wanted them to understand that he was informed, competent, and capable of making important decisions about the education of their children. He also wanted them, at least at times, to contribute to the educational decisions the IEP team made. This tension between being a collaborator and a leader was not inherent in occupying these two stances, but the moves Mr. Mariano's used to demonstrate to the parents his capacity as an effective educator positioned him as an authority figure. By assuming this position, Mr. Mariano activated the traditional special education knowledge and status hierarchy (Kalyanpur et al., 2000).

Mr. Mariano established authority through several commonly used practices. The simple act of drafting the IEP prior to the meeting necessitated that conversation on the substantive elements of the IEP began from a starting place of Mr. Mariano's beliefs about his students' ability, performance, and the proper approach to educating them. This practice is not uncommon, and indeed not drafting the IEP prior to the team meeting may create more challenges during the meeting. It would likely extend the amount of time needed for the meeting or, perhaps more significantly, result in an even greater imbalance of participation among team members than is typically observed. However, it also contributes to an inequitable distribution of power because a great deal of deference is given to the contents of the draft.

The act of setting the meeting agenda and facilitating the meeting ensured that Mr. Mariano maintained a level of control over the discussions. Even in the instances

when Mr. Mariano stated that the agenda for the meeting was flexible, no other team members interjected to amend to his agenda. Instead, when other team members had agenda items they were interested in discussing, they waited until an opportune time during the meeting to raise the issue. Waiting for an opportune time was generally effective in getting the desired conversation to happen, but this submissiveness to the stated agenda supported the power structure that Mr. Mariano created when he established the agenda.

In addition, Mr. Mariano's facilitation style upheld this power structure. With the exception of the student strengths discussions, he opened each segment of the IEP meetings (e.g., the discussion of the students' functional behavioral assessment or mathematics progress and goals) by having either himself or another educator comment on the student's performance in that area. After these initial comments the parents were asked for their input and questions, or parents interjected on their own initiative.

This initial display of power and authority was enough to establish a tone for the meeting that positioned the educators – and specifically Mr. Mariano – as dominant (though, again, it appeared that this was established without a malicious intent). From there, Mr. Mariano tended to then make moves to include the parents and elicit their knowledge, thoughts, and goals. Parents contributed in multiple ways, most of which did not challenge the educators' position within the educational (or meeting) hierarchy. Parents engaged in sharing personal knowledge with the team (e.g., when Ms. Acosta explained that Alfonso just did not seem happy at his previous school or when Mr. and Ms. Collins explained that Calvin had a lot of musical potential). This type of knowledge fits within the status quo knowledge hierarchy and, therefore, is often accepted by

educators – though it's authoritative value is only rarely accepted – because it does not threaten the authority of their professional knowledge (Skrtic, 1995).

Parents also tried, albeit infrequently, to contribute professional knowledge. When this occurred, the response of the educators corresponded with the influence the assertion had on the established hierarchy of authority. I will discuss several examples that illustrate the contours of this dynamic. One example surfaced when parents asserted professional knowledge, but then reaffirmed the educator's authority and so the parents' statements were not challenged. This sort of exchange was present when Mr. Adams explained to the IEP team about an anger management strategy that Alfonso had been using (based on a summer program he attended) of which the educators were unaware. Mr. Adams gave a short explanation of the program and the specific skill he was referencing, but then retracted from his position of (temporary) authority by asserting that he had only limited knowledge of the subject. Mr. Mariano was then able to acknowledge the skill and provide affirmation to Alfonso for using it without having to adjust his recommendations for what behavioral accommodations and modifications would be appropriate for Alfonso to receive in school.

A second dynamic occurred when parents made an assertion that was not inconsistent with the educators' beliefs but didn't live up to their standards. An example of this was when Mr. Collins tried to encourage Calvin to work for higher grades. If he earned higher grades, he would get to join Mr. Collins on a summer trip. Mr. Mariano followed Mr. Collins's explanation with one of his own. Instead of challenging Mr. Collins's rationale directly, Mr. Mariano asserted that it was important for Calvin to work up to his potential as a matter of principle (that people should be internally motivated to

achieve to their potential) and not be motivated by external rewards. Calvin had appeared to be motivated by Mr. Collins's rationale, but Mr. Mariano's explanation served not only to provide an alternative reason for Calvin to work hard, it also established that his framework – based on his position as a professional educator – was superior. In this way, Mr. Mariano affirmed the knowledge hierarchy, but did so without expressly contradicting the parent's knowledge system.

Perhaps the most interesting dynamic with respect to the knowledge hierarchy occurred when parents made an assertion that was inconsistent with or contradicted the educators' beliefs. When the educators were forced to choose between abandoning or maintaining a previously stated position, they asserted their authority and discredited the parents' assertion. When the educators found a way to justify the parents' assertion within the educator's existing paradigm, the parents' assertion was validated. This juxtaposition was evident in exchanges Mr. Mariano had with Mr. and Ms. Barnes and with Mr. and Ms. Collins. Mr. and Ms. Barnes thought that Ben should continue to receive the same level of services he had previously received. Ms. Evans and Mr. Mariano wanted to reduce them. Both Mr. and Ms. Barnes asserted the importance of maintaining Ben's current program. Their assertions expressed a position founded in professional knowledge (i.e., what were the appropriate areas of specially designed instruction for Ben), but the "evidence" they used to support their position was based on personal knowledge (i.e., their previous experience raising a child with EBD). Both Ms. Evans and Mr. Mariano responded by discrediting this knowledge. Ms. Evans referenced the assessment she performed on Ben, maintaining that the results of this assessment were authoritative and demonstrated that Ben did not need to continue receiving special

education services in written communication. Mr. Mariano directly discredited Mr. and Ms. Barnes's evidence by explaining that it was not valid to apply their past experience with another child to Ben's educational plan. Mr. and Ms. Barnes reasserted their position, but to no avail. The educators maintained their position, and without reaching consensus or agreement, the IEP stood as it was drafted: Ben was no longer going to receive services for written communication.

At Calvin's meeting, Mr. and Ms. Collins asserted that Calvin needed services for reading that he had not been receiving. The result of this exchange, however, was quite different from the exchange with Mr. and Ms. Barnes: the educators agreed to assess Calvin for the requested services. Just as Mr. and Ms. Barnes had based their position on personal experience, Mr. and Ms. Collins thought that Calvin needed specially designed instruction for reading based on their experience of reading with him outside of school and their (secondhand) knowledge of how he performed during examinations. They had not performed any formal assessments of him and he had not received reading services in the past. However, Ms. Collins had identified a very specific area of concern (that Calvin had trouble with reading comprehension on homework assignments, but not when he was reading novels) and the educators had not expressly staked out a position on the issue. Mr. Mariano had drafted the IEP and did not include a recommendation that Calvin's reading ability be assessed, but he had not explicitly determined or stated that Calvin did not need reading services (which the educators had done in Ben's meeting). Therefore, Mr. Mariano was able to support the parents' assertion and request – and he added anecdotally that he had been surprised that Calvin had not previously qualified for reading services – without disrupting his position of power. In fact, his agreement (to

which Ms. Evans also agreed) to assess Calvin fit within the existing knowledge hierarchy because the educators' assessment tools were still positioned as the final authority on whether services would ultimately be provided.

Mr. Mariano's beliefs about what parents understand during IEP meetings – and generally what they understand about educating students with disabilities – also has implications for understanding his philosophy and practice of parental empowerment and power-sharing within the context of educational decision-making. In reflecting upon Ben's IEP meeting, Mr. Mariano explained that he was satisfied that he was able to speak with Mr. and Ms. Barnes "at their level." This concept embodies a tension between the professional hierarchy of special education and parental empowerment. Mr. Mariano expressed a belief that the parents are not capable of understanding or discussing the IEP at the level of the professionals (the educators). There may be myriad reasons for this beyond the commonly used explanation that parents lack familiarity with educational jargon. Whatever the explanation, this position affirms the higher status of educators and the appropriateness of them controlling the outcomes of the IEP meeting. It positions parents as subordinate, capable of understanding only simplified versions of the IEP, and aligns with what I have argued are outdated models of parental participation in IEP meetings where parents are passive recipients of knowledge. However, if parents truly do not understand what is included in the IEP as it is written, or what educators are saying when they speak as they would to colleagues, then not explaining the IEP "at their level" would further remove the parents from any meaningful involvement in educational decision-making.

This tension raises two concepts relevant to parental empowerment in IEP meetings. If educators understand the concept of having a discussion *at the parents' level* as synonymous with bringing the discussion *down to the parents' level* then this represents a belief that falls in line with, and reaffirms, the higher status of the educators. This is inconsistent with a philosophy of full parental inclusion and empowerment in IEP meetings. To be committed to an authentic version of parental empowerment, an educator must conceptualize meeting at parents' level not as a process of simplifying or bringing down the level of the conversation, but instead understand it to mean communicating through a shared framework of terms and concepts. The need, assuming there is one, to meet with parents at a different level (i.e., "their level") also raises the question of whether the IEP benefits from being written and discussed in a manner that necessitates this *multiple versions* approach. Put another way, does the student ultimately benefit from having an IEP that is written so that educators understand it but it must be interpreted to parents? If it does, does this challenge the fundamental principle that parents can be meaningfully involved in IEP decision-making? Does this relegate the role of parents to a lesser status team member, capable of occasionally providing information to the rest of the IEP team, but not capable of offering suggestions for the IEP that could stand on their own (i.e., without being reinterpreted *upwards* by the educators)? Is full participation, not to mention empowerment, possible if parents cannot participate at the level of the IEP as it exists? If the IEP is not substantively enhanced by being written and communicated at a level that requires interpretation, then the practice of writing IEPs in this manner serves to do little more than position parents as subordinate to educators in the realm of IEP creation and educational decision-making.

Structuration analysis. The inequitable distribution and enactment of power in the IEP meetings reproduced a structure of disparity in participation at the meetings. Mr. Mariano, and occasionally Ms. Evans (as well as the various other educators and specialists who attended the meetings) possessed professional knowledge – the ability to accurately diagnosis the causes of learning difficulties and behavioral challenges and knowledge of educational strategies likely to succeed with students. This knowledge was asserted throughout the IEP meetings. It was Mr. Mariano’s possession of this knowledge that enabled him to write drafts of the IEPs for review at the meetings. The activation of this resource also contributed to a structure wherein this was the type of knowledge appropriate to IEPs. Other types of knowledge had only minimal relevance to the IEP and parents were not expected, or likely, to have a complete understanding of the relevant professional knowledge. This is another example of how Mr. Mariano’s agency – his activation of the professional knowledge discourse – served to constrain the agency of the parents.

This negotiation of situated power between Mr. Mariano and the parents illustrates the ways in which agency can develop and reproduce structure. When parents attempted to assert professional knowledge or offered opinions that, in the minds of the educators, required the support of professional knowledge – and access to the allocative resources of the school and the educators – the educators used their higher institutional status to act as gatekeepers for whether this knowledge was accepted for discussion and incorporated into the IEP. Whether they accepted this knowledge (as they did in the exchange with Ms. Collins about Calvin’s needs for reading support) or rejected it (as happened in the exchange with Mr. and Ms. Barnes about writing support for Ben), the

educators used their agency to uphold a structure that supported their position of dominance in the context of IEP meetings. It is important to note that this negotiation of power may not have occurred within the discursive consciousness of the educators or for the purpose of suppressing parental participation, but instead was undertaken to uphold a structure that seemed to the educators to be of value and importance.

Mr. Mariano's interest in speaking to parents "at their level" is another example of how the agency of one actor can be used to enable or constrain the agency of another actor and simultaneously challenge or reproduce structures. When this strategy is a way of making information accessible to parents when it otherwise would not be, it enables agentic action by the parents. It gives them the opportunity to choose to participate in the IEP process based on a real understanding of the process and content of the IEP. It may also be a way to demonstrate the subordinate position of the parents (because they do not understand the IEP) and the dominant position of the educator (because the educator does). Following this path, a parent may be more informed, but less likely to participate in a way that meaningfully contributes to developing the IEP.

Building a parent-teacher relationship and purpose of the meeting. This section discusses two related themes: 1) how Mr. Mariano used the IEP meetings to develop relationships with the parents of his students and 2) how these two parties (Mr. Mariano and the parents) conceptualized the purpose of the IEP meetings and how they enacted that purpose. Both of these themes include process as well as outcome-based considerations. The purpose of discussing these themes together is to balance the perspectives they present. Relationship building was a significant consideration in Mr. Mariano's approach to and facilitation of the IEP meetings, as well as a theme he

reflected upon after the meetings. It was one of the prominent purposes for convening the IEP team, in his mind. However, none of the parents expressed a similarly strong belief that the IEP meetings were held for this purpose. Instead, the parents stated that they were already pleased with their relationship with Mr. Mariano (and a few indicated that this relationship was a significant improvement from the one they had with their child's previous special education teachers) and did not necessarily consider relationship building a central element of the meeting. Therefore, by including a discussion of the purposes theme here, I am also able to include the parents' perspectives on the meetings.

Having a collaborative relationship with parents is predicated on establishing effective and responsive communication (Blue-Banning et al., 2004) and conceptualizing a parent's role or involvement in their child's education as critical to the child's academic progress (Epstein, 2001). Of particular relevance to the themes addressed here, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) found that frequent and honest communication between special educators and parents that emphasized the whole child helped facilitate a strong parent-school relationship. Addressing a parent's ideas, concerns, and perspectives – such as by discussing them during an IEP meeting and then including them in the IEP – helped to communicate that parents had equal status in the relationship and helped to foster parent involvement in educational decision-making. Epstein's (2001) research is also informative about how educators can better build upon parents' involvement in their children's education. She suggests that by conceptualizing the myriad ways that parents are involved in their children's education as contributing to the child's overall educational development, teachers simultaneously conceptualize parents as educational decision makers. By adopting this conceptual stance, educators may be more willing to

engage in wide-ranging discussions with parents about how to support a student academically, socially, and behaviorally – which may well result in the creative thinking necessary to develop effective and well-rounded IEPs for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

For Mr. Mariano, the IEP meeting was one way to include parents in the education of their child. It was a component of his long-term vision for making parents feel more comfortable participating in his classroom and being involved in the school. Mr. Mariano's goals were modest, and he mentioned to me several times that he believed many of the parents of his students had been scarred by negative interactions with previous schools and teachers. He believed that some of the parents had negative experiences when they were students (whether or not the parent had been in special education, which some had), but for others these experiences came from interacting with schools as parents of a student with a disability (for example, feeling blamed for their child's behavioral challenges). As a result, Mr. Mariano tried to make the IEP meeting experience as welcoming and positive as possible.

To accomplish this, Mr. Mariano maintained what I call a *good news narrative*. He focused on the students' strengths throughout the IEP meeting, calling attention to their global strengths and their strengths within each subject area, as well as making (in each of the four IEP meetings) a case that the student had made significant academic and/or behavioral improvements. Mr. Mariano raised concerns about his students, but he did not overemphasize these or dwell on them. Despite the fact that all four of his students were receiving specially designed instruction for emotional and behavioral disabilities – and typically also for other specific learning disabilities and related services

—Mr. Mariano attempted to create the mood of (for Alfonso, Ben, and Calvin) optimism and confidence that the students were heading in the right direction or (for Danny) hopefulness that the student could become successful in the future.

Another element of Mr. Mariano's strategy to build his relationship with the parents was accomplished just by the act of the parents attending the IEP meeting. He did not remember the exact statistic when he explained it to me, but during a staff training the previous year, Mr. Mariano had learned that if a parent comes to the school for X number of events per year — regardless of what the events are (e.g., IEP meetings, parent conferences, or back-to-school nights) — the parent becomes more likely to view the teacher as an ally in the child's education. Mr. Mariano believed in the validity of this idea and I observed him using IEP meetings as an opportunity to remind parents of upcoming events (classroom specific and school-wide) in which they could participate. In Alfonso's meeting, he made sure that Ms. Acosta and Mr. Adams signed up to attend a family night he was hosting the following week.¹⁶ Mr. Mariano believed that regardless of their level of participation, just having the parents at the IEP meeting was a small victory. He also believed that, over time, even the parents who were initially the most reserved became more open with him and engaged in meetings. Mr. Barnes was an example of this. Even though Mr. Barnes spoke infrequently (in fact he made the fewest verbal contributions of any parent in the study), after the meeting Mr. Mariano remarked to me how much more engaged Mr. Barnes had become over the past two years.

¹⁶ When I interviewed Ms. Acosta, she mentioned how much she had liked the event and that it was a great opportunity for parents to get together and talk about how to support "our special needs children" in school.

A third strategy that Mr. Mariano used to develop his relationships with the parents was to allow time during the meetings for non-IEP related discussion. This was an opportunity to build a genuine connection with the parents, and an opportunity for their interests and/or topics they felt comfortable talking about to become part of the conversation. It also served to provide a diversion – either from spending the whole time talking about school or when the conversation turned to a topic about which the parents seemed uncomfortable discussing. Essentially, these off-topic discussions were a way to balance the conversation so that parents stayed engaged through long meetings and difficult topics. This strategy was most apparent in Calvin’s IEP meeting – where the conversation veered in and out of IEP-related discussion – but it was present, to some extent, in the other meetings and contributed to a friendly vibe between the IEP team members. This was not a strategy just for the parents’ benefit. Mr. Mariano explained that one of his personal traits is that he wants to connect with people on a personal level and he feels less satisfied when IEP meetings focus solely on going over the information in the IEP.

In addition to his goal of building relationships, Mr. Mariano had more individualized goals for each IEP meeting. These goals ranged from wanting the team to brainstorm ideas for academic and behavioral interventions (at Danny’s meeting) to wanting to inform the parents why the IEP he had drafted was a good fit for the student’s needs (at Ben’s meeting). Thus, some of these goals aligned with a philosophy and practice of including parents in the creation of the IEP and others relegated parents to the role of information recipients.

The parents, too, had things they wanted to get out of the meetings or purposes for participating in them. These purposes ranged from general to specific. Ms. Acosta wanted to make sure that Alfonso was adjusting well to being in a new school and Mr. Davis articulated a general concern for Danny's future in school and his future ability to live independently, while Mr. and Ms. Barnes wanted to discuss Ben's transition into high school and Ms. Collins had three specific concerns she wanted the team to address.

However, none of the team members – Mr. Mariano or any of the parents – expressly communicated their priorities to one another prior to or at the outset of the meetings. Mr. Mariano did provide an (informal) agenda for each meeting, but he did not use this as an opportunity to communicate his goals for the meeting in as straightforward a manner as he explained them to me afterwards. The participants indicated in our interviews that they did not discuss with Mr. Mariano the purpose of the meeting prior to it (though Ms. Acosta did mention several of her concerns to Mr. Mariano beforehand). Consequently, it was *during* the IEP meetings that these priorities were expressed, though this was not always done explicitly. Among the parents, Mr. and Ms. Barnes were the most explicit about expressing their priorities. Mr. Barnes informed the team that “since we’re at this meeting, we wanted to make a definite point of [raising our concern about sending Ben to the neighborhood high school], and bring it to whoever’s attention.” At Calvin’s meeting, Ms. Collins addressed each of her three areas of concern, but did so throughout the meeting as they became relevant to the topic of discussion (that is, she brought up her concerns in a reactive manner rather than proactively making sure the team was going to address her concerns). Ms. Acosta, Mr. Adams, and Mr. Davis were not explicit about their interests, leaving it up to the team to determine whether their

interests and concerns were addressed at the meeting (if, in fact, that was something the other team members were thinking about during the meeting). Similarly, Mr. Mariano's interests were not made explicit to the parents.

For the most part, Mr. Mariano and the parents seemed to be satisfied with the IEP meetings. However, there was no mechanism for ensuring that this was the case. Understanding each team members' goals for the meeting may be an important element of making sure that each member is satisfied with what gets discussed at the meeting and increasing the likelihood that parents feel like they did, or had a real opportunity to, meaningfully participate in the meeting. In addition, when a purpose for the meeting is established – collectively or even if the special educator defines it, prior to the meeting or at its outset – parents may better understand how their beliefs and perspectives, knowledge of their child, and experiences with their child can contribute to the discussion. It may help parents feel more confident that there is a space for them to be a valued, contributing member of the IEP team.

Structuration analysis. Several aspects of these themes – relationship building and defining, developing, and enacting the purpose of the meeting – revealed how the IEP team members negotiated between structure and agency. Central among these aspects was Mr. Mariano's focus on relationship building. IEP meetings are intended to be cooperative efforts, with parents and educators working together to create an educational plan (e.g., Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001; Blue-Banning et al., 2004). This does not demand that such a high priority is placed on building a strong relationship between team members. Mr. Mariano pushed back against the structure of IEP meetings by using them as an opportunity to further his community-building interests (i.e., notifying parents of,

and getting them to commit to attending, other school events) and by reserving time for, and encouraging, off-topic conversations aimed at connecting with families on a personal level. As much as these were strategies for being better able to work with his students to help them academically, behaviorally, and emotionally, building a community and connecting with people were also aspects of Mr. Mariano job that he enjoyed the most. Mr. Mariano's approach to the IEP meetings was that they were flexible. He asserted his agency and power in an effort to make the meetings feel more friendly and informal, even though he was aware that he did not have complete authority to create the framework for the meetings because he was also obligated to cover certain topics (e.g., accommodations and modifications the student would receive in the classroom and a student's learning goals and objectives).

The parents' agency also affected the structure of the meetings. When the parents voiced a specific issue that they wanted to discuss (such as Mr. and Ms. Barnes wanting to talk about Ben's high school options), their agency was a tool with the potential to produce a new structure for the meeting – one that involved parent voice and interest. However, when parents did not articulate specific issues they were concerned about, their agency – specifically their lack of asserting themselves – reinforced a meeting structure wherein the educators orchestrated the discussion.

Furthermore, even when parents had specific issues to discuss, the way they brought these issues to the attention of the team was relevant to how these acts of agency affected the structure of the meeting. By not notifying the team at the outset of the meeting that they had specific issues to discuss, the agency of the parents had to contend against the established structure that the educators would dictate the content of the

meeting. This structure consequently defaulted to the general institutional dominance of Mr. Mariano, as the special educator and a representative of the school, and his specific actions to lead the team through the meeting (e.g., creating the meeting agenda and drafting the IEP – practices that became routines of the IEP meeting process). This example shows how the structure of the IEP meetings was influenced by the agency of the team members, and how the influence of their agency was negotiated through specific agentive acts and their situated power vis-à-vis the other team members. That this structure played out across the meetings demonstrates how Mr. Mariano was active in carrying it forward, an act that further establishes these features as structures of the IEP meeting. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, the parents likely also carried forward expectations and patterns of interaction from previous IEP meetings.

Applying a Legal Standard of “Meaningful” Opportunity to Participate

The core legal protections of IDEA provide parents with procedural safeguards that ensure their child has the opportunity to receive FAPE. The safeguard most relevant to the current study is parents’ right to meaningfully participate in the creation of their child’s IEP (*Target Range*, 1992). As the ruling in *Target Range* explained, while serious technical violations of the procedural safeguards may result in the loss of FAPE, courts are more concerned with whether the school district has complied with the spirit and intent of the law. Commentators have argued that there is limited enforcement of parents’ right to meaningfully participate because it is very difficult to prove in a due process hearing or in court that the right was violated (Zirkel, 2013). Furthermore, schools are not compelled to incorporate parents’ suggestions or input into the IEP, as long as the IEP team *considered* what the parents questioned, suggested, or explained (Meyer, 2011). The

IEP meetings that were the subject of the current study demonstrate how complicated it is to ensure that parents' rights are protected, that parents had a real and meaningful opportunity to help create their child's IEP, and that they were respected as equal members of the IEP team.

Two meetings – Danny and Ben's – illustrate the complexity of ensuring parents' rights in the creation of effective IEPs. In its totality, Danny's IEP meeting is the only one of the four that I observed that a court would likely find to have violated a parent's right to meaningfully participate in creating the IEP.¹⁷ To recap, an IEP team is allowed to hold the annual IEP review without a parent only if the parent affirmatively indicates that he does not wish to participate, or if the school's failed efforts to get the parent to take part in the meeting demonstrate this (*Doug C. v. Hawaii*, 2013). At Danny's meeting, Mr. Mariano and the other educators elected to hold the IEP meeting – where they reviewed and discussed a draft of the IEP, and made changes to it – despite Mr. Davis's absence. Mr. Davis had expressed to Mr. Mariano that he wanted to participate in the meeting, had agreed to attend the meeting, and gave no indication to Mr. Mariano that he refused his right to participate in the meeting. It is unlikely that Mr. Davis's tardiness to the meeting, though he was nearly an hour late, was sufficient cause for holding an IEP meeting without him and not rescheduling the meeting for a later time. However, in spite of the violation of this procedural safeguard, there was more interactive problem solving, question asking, deliberation, and collaboration at Danny's IEP meeting than at any of the other three meetings. Therefore, although it was likely a violation of IDEA to hold the

¹⁷ In addition, the meeting likely violated IDEA because no administrative representative of the school was present.

IEP meeting, the team members (educators) who were present at the meeting seemingly fulfilled the spirit and intent of IDEA with regards to the IEP meeting being a cooperative, collaborative process in which team members discuss and decide upon what interventions and services are most likely to be effective with the student. It is also interesting that this collaborative dynamic carried over, at least somewhat, into the creation of Danny's transition plan – the part of the meeting in which Mr. Davis was present and, consequently, highly engaged and involved.

In comparison to Danny's meeting, Ben's IEP meeting most likely satisfied IDEA's procedural safeguards. Mr. and Ms. Barnes were present at the meeting and participated throughout it. They voiced their opinions, including their disagreement with the determination that Ben no longer needed specially designed writing instruction, and the other IEP team members present at the meeting responded to these concerns. The educators ultimately did not agree with Mr. and Ms. Barnes's assessment of Ben's needs and the final version of the IEP reflected the educators' decision to remove writing services. Under the case law interpreting IDEA, this is likely sufficient to demonstrate that the parents had a meaningful opportunity to participate in the creation of the IEP. The school may be obliged to listen to the parents' concerns and opinions about what services their child should receive, but the school is not obligated to acquiesce to the parents' wishes (and the parents would have to file a due process complaint if they wished to challenge the appropriateness of the IEP).

In sum, it would appear that, even with the procedural safeguards, IDEA fails to provide strong protections for parents who are effectively shut out of IEP decision-making by more institutionally powerful team members. Yet neither Danny nor Ben's

parents (at least at the time of my last communication with Mr. Mariano) had taken action to challenge the IEP – whether through the official channel of filing a due process complaint or by more informally bringing the issue to Mr. Mariano’s attention. One possible conclusion from this is that it aptly illustrates the phenomenon that because parents generally have low status on IEP teams, they often do not exercise their legal rights, despite having substantial procedural rights to be part of the educational decision-making and IEP writing process.

The pre-meeting creation of a draft IEP is another illustration of a tension between the protection of parents’ rights to meaningfully contribute to the IEP and what is legally allowable for purposes of efficiency. In three of the IEP meetings (Alfonso, Ben, and Calvin’s), Mr. Mariano had drafted a significant portion of the IEP prior to the meeting. In each case he left only the student strengths section blank in his draft. The Ninth Circuit has authorized this practice (*B.B. v. State of Hawaii*, 2006) and it may be very necessary for an IEP meeting to run smoothly and cohesively, cover all of the required topics, be developed thoughtfully, and be completed in a reasonable amount of time. In addition, it is reasonable to think that if no draft of the IEP were created before the meeting, the educators would play a substantial role in creating the IEP during the meeting. On the other hand, as witnessed in Alfonso, Ben, and Calvin’s meetings, the draft IEPs served as the starting place for the discussion of each section of the IEP, but the drafts more or less became the final versions of the IEPs because very few revisions were made to them. Danny’s IEP meeting varied from this pattern. At this meeting, Mr. Mariano left more of the IEP undrafted and sought more input from the other team members (as did some of the other educator’s for “their” sections of the IEP). This was

one way that the conversation about Danny's IEP transpired with more of a collective problem-solving dynamic than the other meetings. It is difficult to conceptualize how a legal standard could capture this dynamic (and it is especially unlikely that IDEA could be interpreted to require a certain amount of "blank slate" discussion), but this circumstance is another demonstration of how the procedural safeguards for parents – as mitigated by the school's rights and allowances – may be insufficient to overcome, or balance out, the substantial institutional power and authority of the educators and, in particular, the special educator.

Summary of Discussion

In this chapter, I compared important themes that arose across the IEP meetings I observed, discussed the significance of these themes for understanding the IEP meetings experiences of parents and special educators, and used structuration theory and legal analysis as analytic tools for interpreting parental participation in these meetings. In the next chapter, I conclude my dissertation by discussing how this study has contributed to the literature, including the substantive, methodological, and theoretical implications this study has raised.

Chapter VIII

Conclusion

Two research questions guided this study. The first question asked how a skilled special educator facilitated IEP meetings for students identified as EBD. Through this question, I sought to investigate how a teacher could empower parents in the IEP process by asserting agency and working through, as well as challenging, structural features of special education. The second question asked how parental participation influenced IEP meetings, including its influence on educational decision-making and the participation of the other IEP team members. Both questions arose, fundamentally, out of my interest in parental involvement, participation, and empowerment in critical educational decisions for students identified as EBD and from my interest in applying the theory of structuration as a means to understand the process and purpose of IEP meetings.

In this concluding chapter, I respond to these guiding questions and briefly summarize two key findings from this study. I then address what I believe to be the modest contributions this study makes to research, addressing the significance of my study to the substantive, methodological, and theoretical development of IEP meeting research. I also discuss implications for practice in each of these areas. Next, I discuss several limitations of this study and reflect on how my participation, as the researcher in this study, contributed to these limitations. I then reflect on how future research can build upon and expand this study. I conclude by expressing my gratitude to Mr. Mariano for allowing me learn from his practice and with a final thought on the possibility and potential for IEP meetings to embody a spirit of cooperation and shared decision-making.

Key Findings

Two key findings emerged from this study and, in many ways, framed the analysis and discussion of the other findings I explicated in the previous chapter. First, most parents did not actively participate in the educational decision-making aspects of the IEP meetings. This finding is consistent with most previous research. Second, at least one parent in each meeting participated in the general discussion to a marked degree. This finding is not consistent in the IEP research literature.

Making decisions. It was not surprising to find that parents were not actively involved in IEP decision-making. Previous IEP meeting research has not focused on students with EBD – instead it has examined other disability categories or looked across categories – but the research literature has consistently shown that parents are marginalized in the IEP process and are excluded from participating in educational decision-making at IEP meetings (e.g., Goldstein et al, 1980; Vaughn et al., 1988, Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). To an even greater extent, parents of color have negatively experienced IEP meetings and felt shut out of decision-making (e.g., Rogers, 2002; Salas, 2004; Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008). In this study, the parents of students with EBD were by and large excluded from educational decision-making, but contrary to what most other scholars have found (e.g., Harry, 2008) these parents expressed satisfaction with the process and did not appear to feel marginalized. Parents in a few other studies have reported similar experiences (Lynch & Stein, 1987; Bailey, Skinner, Rodriguez, Gut, & Correa, 1999; Esquivel et al., 2008). Interestingly, while I was able to interpret marginalizing aspects of the IEP meetings, this was not necessarily the how the parents themselves experienced the meetings. Even Mr. and Ms. Barnes did not appear to feel

marginalized when their efforts to challenge Ms. Evans and Mr. Mariano and make a substantive contribution to the IEP were explicitly refuted. Despite being refuted, Mr. and Ms. Barnes remained engaged in the discussion for the duration of the meeting and mentioned to me afterward how much they enjoyed working with Mr. Mariano.

Two factors seemed to exclude parents from contributing to educational decisions. One was that the special educator, Mr. Mariano, was the focal point of the process of the meeting (the students were the substantive focus). He directed the course of the meeting, from setting an (informal) agenda to guiding the discussion through the segments of the meeting. At times, other educators took temporary control of the discussion, such as when the math teacher would discuss a student's progress and future goals and objectives for math. The parents, however, never did – at least when the conversation pertained to school related topics. Mr. Mariano assumed a dominant role in these meetings (though I note the important distinction between making a conscious effort to lead a meeting – which is what I observed Mr. Mariano doing – and dominating a meeting for the purpose of subverting parental participation in the IEP process). This posture is familiar to the IEP meetings described in the research literature (e.g., Martian et al., 2004) and reinforces one of the central structural features of IEP meetings.

Through asserting his agency and initiating control of the meetings by setting the agenda and leading the discussions, Mr. Mariano activated the other team member's memories of how IEP meetings are conducted (e.g., this was how previous IEP meetings that the parents and other educators attended were conducted) and signified that this IEP meeting would be conducted in a similar manner. His position as the special educator endowed him with the social capital and authoritative resources to convincingly assume

this position as group leader. The other actors – parents and other educators – affirmed this positioning by not asserting their agency to challenge Mr. Mariano’s actions. Thus, through Mr. Mariano’s actions and the others’ inactions, the structural feature of the special educator being the procedural focal point of the IEP meeting was enacted and reinforced across each of the meetings.

Another factor that contributed to the exclusion of parents from educational decision-making was the permanence of the draft IEP. As with the first factor, Mr. Mariano played a central role in shaping the draft and wrote the majority of each draft. The IEPs were not changed significantly from draft to final version. Ruppap and Gaffney (2011) also observed this phenomenon, which illustrates another structural feature of IEP meetings. However, in contrast to the first factor in which the special educator’s dominance is consciously performed during the meeting, authoring a draft of an IEP is an act of agency and a performance of dominance that is manifest prior to the meeting. When the draft is presented to the team it is, in theory, susceptible to the influence of the other IEP team members who attend the meeting, although this is an unlikely and infrequent occurrence.

Mr. Mariano assumed a leadership (and dominant) role from the beginning of the meetings I observed. This exercise of agency, and the parents’ acceptance of Mr. Mariano’s role as leader, contributed to the permanence of the draft IEP. Because the parents assumed a role as recipients of knowledge about their children – with Mr. Mariano (and the other educators) being distributors of this knowledge – it followed that Mr. Mariano’s draft IEPs were given deference. The parents would have had to activate a new rule or set of rules (schemas) to interrupt this pattern of behavior and suggest that the

team make, or at least consider making, substantive changes to the draft IEP.

Alternatively, if Mr. Mariano had applied a different set of rules or schemas by not assuming a leadership role, the draft IEPs may not have retained their permanence (however, as framing documents, they still would likely have a substantial influence on the meetings and the final IEP document).

Participating more generally. Parents were not active participants in educational decision-making, but they were actively involved in other elements of the IEP meetings – asserting their agency to be general participants but not to be decision-makers. There were also several other common features of the parents’ participation in the meetings. The parents did not use Mr. Mariano’s attempt to facilitate discussion of the student strengths portion of the present levels of performance to engage actively in the meetings. The parents did, however, engage with Mr. Mariano when he asked directed or targeted questions. More typically, though, the parents’ contributions were impromptu but of little consequence to the discussion. Frequently, the parents participated by agreeing with others’ comments.¹⁸ Occasionally, they participated by adding some detail to others’ comments based upon their knowledge of their child, such as their knowledge of his interests or challenges. However, these contributions – agreeing with others and adding details – did not spur additional or new conversation nor did they appear to influence what was included in the IEP.

¹⁸ Perhaps surprisingly there was not much disagreement among the team members throughout any of the meetings. Raising a disagreement is an opportunity (1) for parents’ contributions to influence the IEP meeting or (2) for the educators to dismiss the parents’ concerns, impose their power to direct the IEP meeting, and reinforce the typical hierarchy of participation.

Even when parent input is not sought, or explicitly accepted, parental participation in an IEP meeting can potentially influence the IEP itself (e.g., a parent's comment can spark an idea for an IEP goal) or more generally how the special educator works with the student (e.g., learning from the parent ways to motivate the student or topics that interest the student). This conceptualization of parental input aligns with how Trainor (2010) suggests special educators have come to understand the importance of parental involvement and participation in IEP meetings. However, it also underscores a recurring theme that even when parent contributions are valuable, they must be reframed – by educators – to be applicable within an educational context.

The parents of Mr. Mariano's students indicated that they felt heard and respected – in and out of the IEP meetings. Whether or not their participation had an appreciable impact on the IEP meeting or on how Mr. Mariano or the other educators viewed their students, the parents' participation seemed to matter to them. Notably, the two parents I was able to interview – who explicitly expressed to me that Mr. Mariano treated them with respect and listened to them – were women of color. Mr. Mariano tried to create a space at the IEP meetings for parents to be involved. He tried to do this overtly by asking the parents to talk about their children's strengths. He also tried to do this more subtly, such as letting the conversation meander into non-IEP topics that the parents brought up or in the way he non-verbally showed he was listening to the parents when they spoke. He did not consciously consider how parents' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities may influence how they interacted with educators in IEP meetings, but Mr. Mariano was able to cultivate an environment at the IEP meetings in which parents felt safe to express their feelings, knowledge, and beliefs.

This finding is another example of how structural features of the IEP meetings where reinforced through the agency of the primary actors. Mr. Mariano used his agency to solicit parental input – though in doing so he constrained parental participation to those portions of the discussion he thought most appropriate for the parents to contribute (i.e., the student strengths section or whenever he asked a targeted question). The parents used their agency to make impromptu contributions – contributions that added to the discussion but were not typically able to dictate its direction. Both types of agentic action – Mr. Mariano and the parents’ – reaffirmed the special educator’s structural position as the leader of and primary decision maker at the IEP meeting. This provided space for the parents to be involved in the meeting and the discussion, but did not create the opportunity for them to participate equally in educational decision-making.

Synthesis of key findings. The interaction of these two findings, that parents were not involved in educational decision-making, but were involved in general discussion, addresses the substantive purpose of this study and my inquiry into parental participation in IEP meetings. What kind of voice do parents have at IEP meetings for students identified as EBD? One interpretation of these data that I find intriguing is the notion of replacing parental involvement in decision-making with other forms of (positive) involvement. How do these other forms of involvement mask the deficit of collaborative decision-making? I previously introduced an analogous notion, discussing how when students participate in their own IEP meetings – an encouraged practice (Test et al., 2004) – parents may be less involved. Similarly, when parents are more involved in general discussion, they may be less involved in directly contributing to making educational decisions during the meeting – an example of how actors’ own actions can

(psychologically) constrain their agency. In this circumstance, it may be more difficult for educators (or even the parents themselves) to recognize how one form of participation has replaced the other. This finding illustrates the difference between participation in an IEP meeting and parental empowerment in educational decision-making. A meeting may feel interactive to the team members, but still exclude parents from substantive involvement in decision-making.

A second related discussion point is how Mr. Mariano's broad conceptualization of parent involvement may have decreased his efforts to ensure that parents were actively involved in the IEP meetings. Here too the research literature urges teachers to recognize the different ways that parents are involved in their children's education and conceptualize parent involvement beyond traditional notions (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Epstein, 2001). Because Mr. Mariano conceptualized parent involvement as a process and a relationship that occurs and develops over the course of the two years he teaches a student, he deemphasized the significance of any one interaction or meeting. Although he recognized that IEP meetings have some unique characteristics (e.g., the goal of creating the IEP document), he did not rigidly consider IEP meetings to be different from the rest of his interactions with parents. In addition to the intention that it be a collaborative process, the IEP meeting provides parents with some measure of assurance that their children will receive an appropriate education, given each child's individual needs and the IEP team's goals for each child. By thinking about parental involvement across school contexts, Mr. Mariano provided these assurances through other mechanisms, too. He understood IEPs as fluid. He recognized that while the IEP identifies a limited number of specific items that he becomes obligated to work on with each student, the

whole of his work with each student is significantly greater than the IEP. He also believed that the IEP should be readdressed throughout the school year, not only formally through additional IEP meetings but also informally through conversing with parents and other teachers about students' emerging needs.

Mr. Mariano's social identity helped generate his conceptualization of IEP meetings and his situated power allowed him to act upon this conceptualization. His social identity as a progressive educator interested in challenging the special education status quo was satisfied by elevating the importance of all of his interactions with his students' parents (and consequently diminishing the significance of IEP meetings). This allowed him to transpose what he believed were valuable frameworks he learned as a school social worker – working closely with families and valuing their contributions to their children's education and overall growth and development – to his work as a classroom teacher. His position as a special educator provided him social capital (the parents regarded him as a professional educator with specialized knowledge and skills necessary to effectively educate their children) that afforded him the opportunity to enact these frameworks, frameworks that were informed by his cultural schema. Mr. Mariano's situated power was further enhanced because no other members of the IEP teams asserted their agency to challenge his power. Ms. Evans, who also may have possessed a high level of situated power as a school administrator, refrained from actively participating in the IEP meetings she attended and the parents did not challenge Mr. Mariano's authority, even in the few instances where they disagreed with him. In consequence, through his situated power, Mr. Mariano asserted the agency to conceptualize and conduct IEP

meetings in a manner that respected the meetings' importance but did not overvalue the meetings' significance with respect to his ongoing communication with parents.

This analysis also illustrates how structural features guide IEP meetings, but are not deterministic of how IEP meetings are enacted. Because Mr. Mariano was able to assert a high level of agency in how he led the IEP meetings, he was able to manipulate some of the structural features, including projecting his interpretation of the significance of the meetings onto the rest of the team.

Significance and Implications

This study makes several contributions to the special education research literature and to the multicultural special education research literature. It also has implications for EBD teachers. In this section, I describe the substantive, methodological, and theoretical significance of this study.

Substantive contributions and implications. This study raises important questions that touch upon the structure and practice of special education, a framework for theorizing and practicing multicultural special education, and special education law. I address each of these topics below.

IEP meeting research and practice. A number of structural obstacles impeded parental participation during the IEP meetings I observed. Some of the significant obstacles were discussed in the previous section of this conclusion. This study is not the first to describe how the role of the special educator in IEP meetings curtails parental participation and empowerment, although unlike most previous research it does focus on the experiences of parents whose children are in EBD classrooms. By applying a structuration analysis to these obstacles, this study emphasizes the role of agency – both

the special educator and parents' – in imposing and reinforcing these obstacles. The IEP document is a structure that is imposed upon the IEP team by a higher authority (i.e., the school district creates the IEP in a format that is, at a minimum, compliant with IDEA regulations). The educational differences between special educators and parents (whether the special educators has more education in general or just more field-specific education) also create structural obstacles. My previous discussion of how Mr. Mariano brought the IEP “down” to the parents' level – and two interpretations of this process – is an example of how team member differences can create structural communication challenges.

The enactment of the IEP meeting is in many ways an agentic process. Mr. Mariano explained to me that he did not recall being told how to run an IEP meeting by his supervisor, rather he developed his practice based mainly on his observation of and participation in IEP meetings as a school social worker and to a lesser extent from his special education teaching certification program. His beliefs about the significance – or the lack of special significance – of the IEP are also related to how he exercises his agency with regard to whether or not he attempts to fully include parents in helping make educational decisions at IEP meetings.

The parents' actions and inactions also contributed to the structures of the meetings. By not asserting their own agenda for the meeting, for example, parents reinforced the structure that the special educator runs the IEP meeting and sets the agenda. Similarly, by not requesting an advance copy of the draft IEP, parents must rely on their initial impressions of the IEP during the meeting – whether it seems accurate, adequate, and reflects their goals for their child. Because the language of IEPs, in terms of the technical language that is used and the concepts it embodies, is generally less

familiar to parents (even parents of middle school students who have been attending IEP meetings since their children were in elementary school), it reinforces the structure that parents are largely passive participants in IEP decision-making.

The findings of this study indicate that it is unlikely that simple “fixes” to the status quo IEP process will encourage a significant change in patterns of parental participation. Mr. Mariano tried several strategies to encourage participation, such as his approach to discussing student strengths and soliciting parental input at specific moments during the meeting. These did not generally have the effect of substantially increasing parental participation. Rather, it is more likely that to substantially change the interactive dynamics of IEP meetings, larger and more creative change is necessary. The data from this study do not provide empirical substantiation for any specific proposal for change, but they do generate some suggestions for future investigation.

Two particular suggestions grow out of the structuration framework, applying a theory of agency as a transformative approach to addressing structure. One suggestion proposes that teachers explicitly acknowledge to parents, and the rest of the IEP team, the power dynamic, or situated power, among the members of the team. This act includes naming that there is an existing power dynamic, that not all team members are equally situated, and through doing so implicitly and (ideally) explicitly acknowledging that these dynamics are, at least in part, responsive to a re-balancing if the team believes that is important. The other suggestion, related to the first, is that special educators and parents communicate about what is the role that parents play in IEP meetings. This would require teachers and parents to move beyond the easy-to-say motto that parents “know their child best” and do the more difficult work of identifying how this knowledge (and any other

knowledge that parents contribute to the process) transfers to meaningful parental participation in educational decision-making.

More radical changes are also welcomed, including larger scale reconceptualizations of the IEP meeting process (Rosenbaum, 2001). In this study, I observed a caring, well-intentioned, and well-equipped special educator conduct four IEP meetings that followed a similar script. The majority of each meeting was spent going through the IEP document (albeit drastically improved from the dreaded word-for-word recitation) and explaining goals and objectives that:

- 1) Represent only a fraction of what will actually be taught to the students.
- 2) Are likely selected more because they are specific and measurable than because they ultimately identify what is most important for the students to learn.
- 3) Quite likely lack much specific meaning to parents because parents are less familiar with the sequence of knowledge and skills that students learn to progress in their academic, behavioral, and social/emotional development.
- 4) Structurally and systematically distance parents from educational decision-making because they focus on a knowledge domain more compatible with the teachers' professional knowledge than the parents' personal knowledge, expertise, and experience.

This study did not identify specific strategies for avoiding these undesired outcomes, but it does raise the question of whether it is necessary to spend the IEP meeting going over the IEP – instead of engaging in some other form of productive

discussion or a discussion that actually produces ideas that influence the content of the IEP – in order for parents to be satisfied that they are familiar with their child’s IEP.

Multicultural special education. My research interests and my intentions with this study were to examine how race, ethnicity, and culture interacted with parental experiences and empowerment in IEP meetings. However, these were not the results that emerged from my research. Nevertheless, throughout the study I tried to elicit this information from my participants, although they were largely not forthcoming on the subject. My inability to collect this data points to one of the greatest challenges of my academic interests: articulating a theory of multicultural special education that is conceptually rich as well as being tangible and articulable on the ground, where teachers practice. Banks (2004) conceptualized and developed the framework of multicultural education theory and practice and included special education within its scope. Blanchett (2006) has articulated the ways in which White privilege operates within and is perpetuated and reinforced by the special education system. Harry (2002; Harry et al., 1999) has examined the experiences of parents of color in special education. In addition, researchers concerned with racial and cultural issues in special education have documented extensive issues with bias and disproportionality in identifying students for high incidence disabilities, such as EBD (e.g., Losen & Orfield), and have begun to document discrepant disciplinary and exclusionary practices and outcomes for students of color in special education (e.g., Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

The existing scholarship, however, insufficiently assists teachers (and researchers) in understanding the ways in which racial, ethnic, and cultural issues are present in IEP

meetings and simultaneously in understanding ways that teachers can use knowledge of students and parents' racial, ethnic, and cultural identities to inform their approach to conducting IEP meetings and developing the content of the IEP. My interviews illustrate the importance of developing a theory of multicultural special education beyond the study of disproportionality in disability identification and discipline. When I spoke with the two parents of color about racial and cultural issues in their IEP meetings, both of them quickly commented that there were no issues related to race or culture and reframed the discussion to focus on their child (I will return to this point in my discussion of limitations, commenting on whether these responses were a product of me as a researcher). The response I received from Mr. Mariano when we discussed this topic was also informative. Mr. Mariano, like the parents, reframed my question, directing his comments not at the racial, ethnic, or cultural identity of parents, but instead focusing on the shared experience of parents of students with EBD. He described EBD as a culture and the associated experiences of parents as a cultural identity. I don't personally, nor do the results of this study, challenge Mr. Mariano's assertion, but it is interesting for two reasons.

First, the evasiveness of Mr. Mariano's response was not, I believe, a product of disinterest in race and culture issues or of disbelief that these issues influence special education and IEP meetings. Because the theory of multicultural special education remains underdeveloped at a philosophical level and little scholarship addresses its practical applications, it is reasonable to expect that special educators would have difficulty engaging in conversation about the racial and cultural implications of their interactions with parents. Second, his comments could be interpreted in two ways that are

troubling. One interpretation of his response is that the students identified as EBD, a universe of students stigmatized as a whole and composed disproportionately of students of color, has been “raced” as students of color and consequently marginalized as less valued members of the school community (Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). Another interpretation is that race and disability have been conflated, resulting in the erasing of racial identity and the promotion of disability as one’s defining characteristic (Ferri & Connor, 2005). In the first interpretation, racial identity becomes an impediment to acceptance in the larger school community; in the second, it isn’t counted. Connor (2008) has documented school and life experiences of people of color with disabilities, letting their stories illustrate the importance of understanding their racial and disability identities as intersecting and interacting, as well as each having a unique influence on the individual. A conceptual framework for multicultural special education can grow out of this type of knowledge and these stories. Yet, as often is the case, the more challenging work is moving from a rich and thorough conceptual framework to a framework of practice that is accessible, informative, and helpful for special educators.

Special education law. Finally, this research also makes substantive contributions to the study of special education law. In particular, the data illustrate some of the limits of the law (specifically IDEA regulations) in protecting parents’ right to be involved in educational decision-making for children with disabilities. Under Ninth Circuit case law interpreting IDEA, parents have a right to participate meaningfully in IEP meetings. Many procedural safeguards are required to ensure that this right is protected. However, as these data illustrate, while these protections sufficiently ensure that no IEP decisions are formally made without a parent being present, many decisions can still be made

informally without parental input and parents may still be excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making.

Ben's IEP meeting is illustrative. In that meeting, Mr. and Ms. Barnes attempted to assert their right to be involved in making a decision regarding Ben's special education programming (whether he should continue to receive writing services). Their opinion was rejected and their request for services denied. Ostensibly, their input, perspectives, beliefs, and goals for Ben were ignored by the educators, who had determined before the meeting what the appropriate services going forward would be for Ben. This scene calls into question whether Mr. and Ms. Barnes had the opportunity to be meaningfully involved in this important decision. They had the right to attend Ben's IEP meeting, voice their opinion, and have their opinion be considered, and a denial of any of these rights would be a clear violation of federal law. However, neither IDEA nor the interpreting case law require that parental input actually influence the content of the IEP or any educational decisions the IEP team makes.

As a general principal, the law is not intended to mandate desirable behavior. It, instead, protects against undesirable behavior by making it illegal or punishable. In *Rowley*, the Supreme Court applied this logic to IDEA. In Ben's IEP meeting, that logic was tested against the purpose and spirit of IDEA. Was Mr. and Ms. Barnes's participation in the IEP meeting meaningful? Were their opinions and goals considered? Did their participation matter with regard to the final content of the IEP or the process of the meeting? When educators exercise the full potential of their agency in dictating the terms of the IEP, does this create a structural barrier to parental participation that outweighs the procedural protections guaranteed under IDEA?

Most of these questions are unanswerable, and, potentially, that is where the limits of IDEA should be evaluated. It is clear from a legal perspective that parents' opinions do not need to drive the IEP, nor do they even need to be included in the IEP so long as the IEP team has "considered" them. IDEA puts parents at the IEP table. It allows them to be part of the IEP conversation. What is unclear is how IDEA ensures that parents who come to the table and participate in the conversation are treated as equal partners in the decision-making process. This is unclear because IDEA does not provide a sufficient mechanism for determining if and how parents' opinions and perspectives were considered, and how their participation influenced the IEP process. Furthermore, currently there is no way for parents to document whether they are dissatisfied with the outcome or process of the IEP, except by filing a due process complaint.

It seems reasonable and feasible to address both of these concerns – how parents' input was considered and whether the parents agree or dispute the IEP as written – within the IEP itself. These concerns could be addressed by adding two sections to the IEP for the team to complete at the meeting. The first would require the team to provide a short explanation of why any parental input or suggestion was rejected. The second would provide parents the space to write in any comment they feel necessary, including whether they disagree with any part of the IEP or would like for it to include additional information. These suggestions would accomplish at least two important goals. First, they would offer reasonable procedural safeguards to protect an existing right that is not sufficiently protected by the current safeguards. Second, they would encourage the IEP team to spend at least part of the meeting being reflective about the IEP process.

Methodological implications. The research methods I used in this study have implications for two methodological issues in special education and IEP meeting research. One issue this study raises is the challenge and significance of participant selection. As I discovered, research at the intersection of race, ethnicity, culture, and disability is contested, making it difficult to find districts, teachers, and parents willing to participate in such a study. Some school district administrators I spoke with were concerned about the privacy of their parents and students. Other administrators were concerned with the privacy of their teachers. One parent advocacy group I spoke with was skeptical that I, as a former special education teacher, could adequately voice the experiences and perspectives of the parents with whom they worked and served as advocates. As I encountered it, the field was on the whole very distrusting. When I finally did receive permission from a school district to conduct my study, one of the district special education administrators introduced me to the middle school EBD teachers who then vetted my access to the parents of their students.¹⁹ In comparison, prior to this study, I had interviewed a number of parents I met through a statewide special education parent advocacy group, about half of whom were parents of color. The stories from these parents – although they were a self-selected group – contrasted sharply with the experiences and perspectives of the parents who participated in my study based on what I learned through my observations and interviews. As a group, the parents connected to the advocacy group expressed that they were discontent with the education their children were receiving from the special education system and that they felt marginalized in – if not fully excluded

¹⁹ I mention this not to suggest that these teachers intentionally excluded certain parents from participating in my study, but to demonstrate how the process restricted my direct access to parents.

from – the IEP process. These contrasts have methodological implications and suggest that research on parents of students in special education should be understood as very contextual, considering the particular setting of the research and the process of participant selection.

This study also raises methodological issues of how best to study parent empowerment within the special education context. I chose to investigate IEP meetings as a potential site of parent empowerment (or, conversely, the marginalization or disenfranchisement of parents) because of the importance of the IEP and its centrality to special education law and service delivery. During the course of this study, I became convinced that, at least in the context of Mr. Mariano's classroom, parent empowerment is a broader concept that relates to how parents interact with schools and special educators across formal and informal settings. Parents and EBD teachers interact in formal settings such as at manifestation determination meetings and at designated (though less formal) settings such as at parent-teacher conferences. More commonly, parents and EBD teachers interact informally, such as speaking on the phone, communicating over email, or talking when the parent comes to a school event or to pick up their child after the school day. Mr. Mariano viewed each of these instances as opportunities to build his relationship with parents and have them take part in the education of their children. This conceptualization of parent-teacher interactions suggests a broader approach to investigating parent empowerment in the context of special education. It proposes, as Mr. Mariano suggested to me, that when parents do not actively participate in IEP meetings or in IEP decision-making, they might, nevertheless, be

empowered educational decision-makers because of their participation in other aspects of their child's special education services.

Theoretical contributions. This study makes a modest contribution to the theoretical development of research in the field of special education and on IEP meetings. No published study has employed structuration theory as an analytic tool for inquiry into IEP meetings or any other aspect of special education. In this study, I used structuration theory as a theoretical framework to analyze how special educators and parents alternately deal with, contribute to, and challenge IEP structures and other structures of special education that influence IEP meetings. This study's findings elucidate how IEP meetings exist as a product of structuration – the interaction of special education structures and the individual and collective agency of IEP team members across time and space.

The IEP meeting is a structural feature of parent-teacher interactions within the special education system. IEP meetings are imposed structures, structures created by agents who are not members of the IEP teams. Consequently, IEPs – and the requirement of having an annual IEP meeting – constrain the agency of the team members by directing the development of an educational program for every student with a disability and, to a limited extent, the procedures that must be followed to create the IEP. However, the requirement of having an IEP meeting in which parents have a right to participate simultaneously creates the opportunity for actors – including parents – to exercise their agency in the development of the IEP. At a higher level, even the very existence of IEPs and IEP meetings is an act of collective agency. Through IDEA, members of Congress developed the concept of IEPs and imposed this structure upon public school districts and

special educators. Through this agentive action, the IEP has become the framework of special education service delivery and the blueprint for specially designed instruction (Winzer & Mazurek, 1998; Fish, 2006; Mueller, 2009).

The findings of this study indicated that the structural features of the IEP were highly influential on the course of the IEP meetings. Despite differences in the substantive conversation during each of the IEP meetings I observed, all of the meetings followed a format of using the IEP document as a guide for what items and issues would be discussed at the meeting and the order in which the discussion would occur. These structural features are encouraged by the design of the IEP document, but their enactment relies on the agency of the participating actors (e.g., the team could choose to spend the majority of its time discussing issues not prominent in the IEP or it could elect to begin with a conversation of the FBA and BIP despite these sections coming toward the end of the IEP document).

One of the most influential structural features of the IEP meetings was the centrality of Mr. Mariano to the enactment of the meetings and the development of the IEPs. This was an act of individual agency (Mr. Mariano asserted himself in this role) and collective agency (the rest of the team members acquiesced to him assuming the leading role). It was an agentive move that was reproduced at all of the IEP meetings, and consequently it may be interpreted as structural feature of IEP meetings – a feature that is replicated across time and space. It is not, however, an inherent feature in the enactment of IEP meetings because IEP teams could decide, properly within the bounds of IDEA, to run meetings differently (e.g., more democratically or by sharing responsibility for facilitating the meeting).

In his role as leader of the IEP meetings, Mr. Mariano activated his authoritative resources to simultaneously enable and constrain parental participation in educational decision-making. His moves to encourage parents to contribute to the discussion enabled their participation by inviting them into the conversation (and potentially opening the door for them to be involved in educational decision-making). It also created a routine through which the parents generally did not contribute substantively to the discussion without Mr. Mariano's invitation. Through this routine – initiated by Mr. Mariano and followed by the parents – the parents' potential to be fully participatory members of the IEP team was psychologically constrained (i.e., parents became used to responding to Mr. Mariano rather than initiating discussion topics or issues, even though they were not precluded from initiating discussions). The parents' agency was further constrained by the permanence of the draft IEPs (a product to which the parents did not contribute) and Mr. Mariano setting the agenda for the meetings without input from the other team members and keeping the teams focused on the agenda to the extent that he thought it was important. Finally, Mr. Mariano's (and Ms. Evans's) situated power was displayed most prominently – to the effect of constraining parental participation – when Mr. and Ms. Barnes asserted that Ben needed to continue receiving writing services. This power display reinforced a structural feature of the special education knowledge hierarchy by excluding parents from possessing professional knowledge and devaluing the contribution of their personal knowledge.

Many of the significant IEP meeting issues the field of special education confronts today have existed for decades. Parental involvement in IEP meetings is a prime example. As early as 1980, Goldstein et al. (1980) identified the issue of parents

being passive members of the IEP team. This issue has been raised repeatedly since then (e.g., Clark, 2000; Muller, 2009), despite changing attitudes about parental involvement (e.g., Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Trainor, 2010). More recent research on the IEP experiences of parents who are outside of the cultural mainstream has expanded our understanding of the depth and breadth of the challenges parents of color, in particular, face in IEP meetings (e.g., Salas, 2004; Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008). The persistence of these issues indicates a need to do more than identify a recurring problem. Developing new analytic frameworks, or newly applying existing analytic frameworks to IEP meeting research (as I did here), is necessary to advance the field. Current paradigms have not sufficiently addressed the issue of the marginalization or disenfranchisement of parents of students with disabilities and parents of color in particular. Like Valle and Aponte (2002) and Rogers (2002), I add an applicable and informative theoretical framework to the milieu, and explore and explain the relevance of structuration theory to the analysis of power and educational decision-making in IEP meetings.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Mr. Mariano is a uniquely qualified teacher. His previous training and career as a school social worker gave him the opportunity to work closely with families in a school setting and to understand the special education system from a non-teacher perspective. Much can be learned from observing and analyzing Mr. Mariano's practice, but it is important to recognize that his strategies for and skill in working with parents have been developed over the course of a career and with extensive training. It is not necessarily realistic to believe that all teachers could experience the success he has experienced working with parents just by imitating his

approach. His practice is nuanced and his relationships with parents go well beyond the work I observed him doing in IEP meetings.

The parents who participated in this study represented a self-selected group. My participant selection criteria set narrow standards for who could participate in this study (parents of middle school students identified as EBD). Among those parents who met the criteria within the participating school district only four parents or sets of parents consented. There are many reasons that people do not consent to participate in a study, but one reason particularly relevant here is that parents may fear exposure of private information or having their child's behavior exposed to someone with whom they are unfamiliar. For example, one grandparent (who was her grandson's guardian) initially agreed to participate in this study, but revoked her consent just before the IEP meeting because her grandson had been disciplined for what I was told was serious misconduct. It is also reasonable to assume that the parents who consented to participate were those who had more positive relationships with Mr. Mariano.

Other limitations of this study were the result not of whom I recruited to participate, but in how I initially conceptualized parental involvement and consequently how I designed and implemented the study. When I began this study, I believed that I could gain an understanding of parental involvement and empowerment in IEP meetings by analyzing IEP meetings as discrete instances of parent-teacher interactions. I believed that this would provide insight into how parents are involved in educational decision-making for their children and how parents are excluded from this process. My data did reveal findings that addressed the issues of parental involvement and exclusion in IEP meetings. However, my data also suggested that IEP meetings are not isolated events and

they may be better understood as one of a number of important parent-teacher interactions for students with EBD that occur during the school year.

A parent's experience in an IEP meeting – whether the parent is actively involved in educational decision-making during the meeting or not – is informed by the parent's ongoing relationship with the teacher. This conceptualization of parent involvement was illustrated by Mr. Mariano's comment that "every conversation [with a parent] is kind of like an IEP – you're talking about their child's program in some form or the other" and Ms. Collins's comment that her communication with Mr. Mariano occurred "almost daily some weeks." Because parent-teacher relationships occur across time and space – sometimes occurring across multiple school years, as did Mr. Mariano's relationship with Mr. and Ms. Barnes and Mr. Davis – analyzing parent involvement in educational decision-making at one point in time provides a potentially limited perspective on how parents are involved or how they are excluded from active participation in educational decision-making. Analyzing parent empowerment by investigating parent-teacher interactions multiple times during the course of a school year, including interactions at formal and informal settings, would provide a more holistic perspective of parent involvement in educational decision-making. It would also be more informative of how IEP team members asserted their agency in different contexts and the effect this had on the development, reinforcement, or deconstruction of IEP and special education structures.

Three data points highlighted the limitations inherent in my study design. Mr. Mariano's emphasis on building relationships with parents – one of the emergent themes discussed in Chapters V-VII – was central to my reconceptualization of parent

empowerment in the IEP process as occurring across time and space. During our interviews, he described his efforts to communicate frequently with parents and to involve them in his classroom. During the IEP meetings I observed, he invited parents to attend school and classroom events and encouraged them to follow up with him once they had spent time thinking about the IEP after the meeting. The idea that discussions between parents and teachers that affect the IEP meeting occur on an ongoing basis was also a theme that emerged from interviews I had with nine other EBD teachers during the time when I was conducting this study. These teachers described working with parents during IEP meetings as well as communicating with parents about their children's progress and emerging challenges on a monthly or weekly basis and during formal interactions such as manifestation determination meetings. My observations of the parents also confirmed this limitation. I observed that their participation in IEP meetings did not directly influence the educational decision-making that occurred in the meetings, but nevertheless the parents expressed that they were happy with the outcomes of the meetings and with their relationship with Mr. Mariano. This information was a clue that they may not have perceived their involvement in educational decision-making to be contained to what occurred during the IEP meeting. I discuss examples of non-IEP meeting settings that may be important for future research to investigate in the section that follows.

My "biographically situated" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) relationship to this study presented a further limitation in this research. In Chapter IV I discussed how my personal identity influences the lens through which I view and analyze the world of special education. My identity also had implications for my ability to align this study with my

interests in research on race, ethnicity, and culture. Despite my interest in addressing issues of race and culture with the parents in this study, I found it difficult to engage with the parents in deep discussion on these topics. It was a challenge to make a connection with the parents that facilitated their trust, understanding of the issues I was interested in learning about, and willingness to educate me through their experiences. I believe that my identity played a role in how I experienced these challenges. The fact that during my two interviews with parents, neither parent made even one negative comment about the IEP process or expressed any discontent in their child's education – whether directed specifically at Mr. Mariano's class or more generally at the school or the special education system – was an indication that I was not endearing a level of trust that made the parents feel comfortable sharing all of their thoughts and beliefs about the IEP meetings (that this absence of discontent was in such stark contrast to my interviews with the parents connected to the advocacy group was another indication that I had not earned the parents' trust). The parents were gracious in their interviews with me and expressed that they were glad that they could participate in the study, but I perceived that our conversations did not delve deeply into their true feelings regarding their concerns about their children's education and their role in the IEP process. Many factors likely contributed to these communication challenges – including the parents not wanting to say anything that could negatively affect their child's education if I reported it to Mr. Mariano (despite my assurances that our conversation would be kept private) – but two important factors relate to my identity.

I am a White male graduate student who has not personally experienced feeling disenfranchised because of my identity and who does not identify as a member of a

traditionally marginalized group – such as parents of color whose children have been identified as EBD. Outside of a university setting I have limited experience having conversations with parents about how their racial and cultural identity affects their engagement with their children’s schools and teachers. In this study, I approached issues of race and culture in a straightforward manner, asking parents directly if and how they believed the IEP meeting and their child’s IEP took their family’s racial and cultural identity into consideration. I also tried to address these issues more indirectly by asking parents about their communication and interaction preferences, what they perceived was their role in the IEP process, and their goals for the meeting. Neither of my approaches produced responses that spoke directly to the influence of race and culture on parents’ IEP meeting experiences.

My lack of familiarity with the parents’ experiences made it difficult for me to design interview questions that addressed racial and cultural issues that were meaningful to the parents and made it difficult for me to create an interview environment where it was comfortable for the parents to share their experiences, thoughts, and perspectives on these topics. My background and identity also likely reflect the backgrounds and experiences of many of the educators in the special education system with whom these parents have worked. Because I did not establish a relationship with the parents that was independent of the school (due to requirements imposed by the district, Mr. Mariano helped facilitate all recruitment of parents for the study) I was not able to overcome an image of being aligned with the school – a concern raised by one of the parent advocacy groups I contacted about helping recruit parent participants. The relationship I developed with Mr. Mariano during the course of this study – shaped by the many similarities we

shared, including professional and personal experiences and interests – also undoubtedly influenced how I related to the parent participants, how I was perceived by them, and how I interpreted the data.

Future Research

Three strands of future research grow out of this study. Future research could explore the nature of parent-teacher interactions across multiple formal and informal special education settings. Manifestation determination meetings are another important formal special education setting with significant legal implications. Like IEP meetings, manifestation meetings present a potential opportunity for parents to contribute to group discussion and thinking regarding the connection between a student's disability and the student's behavior, as well as an opportunity to discuss how a student's cultural identity and cultural practices influence his or her behavior. Manifestation determination meetings are subject to many of the same constraints on collaboration discussed in my literature review of IEP meetings and observed in this study, such as being directed and dominated by special education teachers and school mental health experts. In addition to formal meetings, informal interactions between parents and special educators – such as impromptu parent-teacher conferences, email exchanges, and phone calls – are important interactions to study because they likely make up the majority of parent-special educator communication. As Mr. Mariano explained to me, many day-to-day educational decisions are made during these interactions. Studies that investigate the connection between parental involvement in IEP meetings, parent involvement in other formal and informal settings, and parent empowerment would be a valuable contribution to the research literature.

Future IEP meeting research should also focus more directly on parents. I initially intended to focus this study on parental experiences in IEP meetings and parents' perceptions of their involvement in decision-making. This study instead placed one teacher's practice at its center. I discussed the reasons for this change of focus in Chapter IV. However, despite the challenges I experienced conducting this study (e.g., attaining agreement from school districts to permit my research and the challenge of recruiting parents to participate and earning their trust), it is important to continue parent-focused research. Research should also continue to look specifically at the experiences of parents of students in EBD programs. I maintain my belief, stated in the opening chapter, that students receiving EBD services are uniquely stigmatized within the special education system (and the larger school community) and that their parents have had unique experiences in and may have unique perceptions of IEP meetings. Part of this stigmatization comes from a deep-seated macro cultural belief that children's behavior can be traced to, and may be the direct result of, their parents. For these reasons, continuing to examine IEP meetings in the EBD context, and not simply assuming that parents of students across disability categories experience IEP meetings the same way, is important.

Future research should also examine the relationship between student and parent involvement in IEP meetings. In this study, I observed that when students were present at their IEP meeting and involved in the discussion, much of the conversation was directed toward them. Although there were positive implications of this practice, it also seemed to negatively influence parental participation. Future research could explore the relationship between student and parent involvement in greater depth. It is important for the multiple

goals for IEP meetings to fit together so that both students and parents can participate in IEP meetings and feel appropriately empowered (recognizing that students and parents may not be empowered in the same way) to help make decisions and create a vision for the IEP and address how student, parent, and teacher participation in IEP meetings can improve simultaneously.

Final Thoughts

By all accounts, Mr. Mariano is an exceptional teacher and the sort of educator we need teaching EBD programs. He is adept at working with behaviorally challenging students and with parents. He is compassionate, spends time reflecting on his practice and his interactions with students and parents, and positively conceptualizes and frames the contributions parents make to their children's education. Much of my analysis and discussion has focused on how parents were subordinate in IEP educational decision-making, but it is important to emphasize that any criticism the reader perceives I have directed at Mr. Mariano's practice is best understood as criticism of the inequitable system that he inherited. To open one's self and one's practice to the type of in-depth (and in many ways microscopic) analysis that I have undertaken here requires a great deal of courage and trust. I hope that my admiration for Mr. Mariano has come across in this dissertation.

IEP meetings seem to pose a unique challenge to special educators. Research spanning the last 35 years has shown that parents are routinely excluded from meaningful participation in the IEP process, despite federal law that seeks to protect this parental right. It appears that, at least for some special educators, attitudes about parental participation in the IEP process are changing. However, the field as a whole has yet to

directly confront how to move from articulating to acting upon these changing beliefs. The absence of a developed and accessible framework for understanding and discussing race and culture within the special education context complicates this process further, especially for teachers working across cultures or in multicultural classrooms, schools, and communities – the case for many EBD teachers. However, if “all structural properties of social systems...are the medium and outcome of contingently accomplished activities of situated actors” (Giddens, 1984, p. 191) then exceptional teachers can make a difference. They can think creatively and broadly about ways to involve parents in their child’s education and in educational decision-making. They can facilitate IEP meetings to be more focused on embracing the spirit of IDEA than merely ensuring compliance with it. When this happens, parents can sit down at the table at their child’s IEP meeting confident that their participation is welcome, appreciated, respected, and will have a meaningful influence on the discussion and the decisions the IEP team makes.

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