

Exploring Engagement through Families' Voices: A Mixed Methods Study

Mischa Shiomi McManus

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2024

Reading Committee:

Angel Fettig, Chair

Kathleen Artman Meeker

Ann Kaiser

Marieka Klawitter

Chun Wang

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Special Education

©Copyright 2024  
Mischa Shiomi McManus

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Exploring Engagement through Families' Voices: A Mixed Methods Study

Mischa Shiomi McManus

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Angel Fettig

Department of Special Education

Current research has begun to explore the experiences of families working to access school-based special education services, and the initial findings play a critical role in moving toward services with a level of high-quality engagement for all families. The limited number of studies that include Nondominant families report feelings of 1) uncertainty around where to start when it comes to services, 2) intimidation tied to the systems present in navigating services, and 3) not being welcome when working to communicate and collaborate with schools, educators, and related service providers. This mixed methods study aimed to 1) explore and understand the barriers to high-quality engagement with school-based special education services, 2) examine the experiences Nondominant families have had with school-based special education services, and 3) learn about Nondominant families' unique perspectives, concerns, priorities, and the self-identified supports for feeling engaged.

Results suggest Nondominant parents and caregivers rely on support from friends, family, and members of their community - these relationships provide a sense of intimacy, trust, and identity. Parents and caregivers report that IEP team efforts to collaborate and accommodate

communication of their preferences are necessary to feel respected and engaged in their role as equal partners. Parents and caregivers expressed joyful feelings when sharing the positive impact of having their culture and expertise acknowledged and centered when a member of their community is also a member of their child's IEP team. This study makes an important and rare contribution to the current literature on family engagement with school-based special education services: highlighting the voices of parents and caregivers and allowing their own words to guide future conversations about the priorities and concerns they hold for their children.

## **Acknowledgments**

I find it difficult to convey my gratitude for the various individuals who have tirelessly supported me throughout the past four years. Completing a doctoral program and conducting a dissertation study are not tasks for the faint of heart, and my support system was truly unflappable. I have envisioned achieving this milestone for as long as I can remember, and it has been an incredible experience watching everything come together.

First, this dissertation study would not have been possible without the parents and caregivers who participated. I am grateful for the mothers who engaged with me while developing my instruments and the parents and caregivers who gave their time, energy, and trust to this study. Their participation and the data collected directly from them have the potential to ensure future parents and caregivers of children receiving school-based special education services feel supported in their engagement efforts. It was an honor to learn from their experiences and to have the opportunity to amplify their voices.

Without the expertise and feedback my committee so generously shared, this dissertation study would not be what it is. My advisor and committee chair, Dr. Angel Fettig, has been my trusted guide since Day 1. I am most grateful for the sacrifices she made and the countless hours she spent supporting me through writing this dissertation. On both an academic and personal level, she has been a solid mentor who ensured I always knew I had her support. She modeled the importance of following my passions while instilling in me the importance of giving back to the individuals and communities I work with. I would also like to thank my committee members, Drs. Artman-Meeker, Kaiser, Klawitter, and Wang. You each contributed your unique expertise, knowledge, and guidance. Thank you to my committee for strengthening and improving my research skills and the overall quality of my research.

The Early Childhood Intervention Doctoral (ECiDC) significantly supported this study. This support took many forms over the past four years, including financial support, direct support from the faculty and staff who provided guidance, and support for my growth as a scholar, a researcher, and a human. Dr. Mary Beth Bruder was our fearless leader, and I am so grateful for her work and example.

My family has always encouraged me to pursue my dreams, both big...and even bigger, and earning my doctoral degree is just about the biggest dream I have ever had. My mom is my #1 cheerleader, and I will never find the right words to convey how incredible and impactful she has been through every twist and turn we have navigated together. She is superwoman, and I certainly would not have been able to complete this dissertation without her picking up my phone calls – sometimes multiple calls a day. And last but – absolutely – not least, my dad. He was – and still is – my hero, and he has found little ways these past four years to let me know he is here rooting for me, excited for me, and so proud of what I have done. I love you, dad.

## **Funding Acknowledgements**

This dissertation was made possible with funding from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Grant # H325H1900004: Early Childhood Intervention Doctoral Consortium (ECiDC).

## Table of Contents

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Chapter One: Introduction.....  |  |
| Family Engagement Studies.....  |  |
| Definitions of family engagement.....   |  |
| Activities associated with family engagement.....   |  |
| Standards for family engagement.....  |  |
| Lack of Studies Involving Families.....   |  |
| Receiving special education services.....   |  |
| Nondominant families.....   |  |
| Factors limiting family engagement.....   |  |
| Existing strategies for increasing family engagement.....                                 |  |
| Purpose of the study.....   |  |
| Chapter Two: Literature Review.....   |  |
| Conceptual Framework.....   |  |
| Lack of consensus around how to define family engagement.....                             |  |
| Variations in the literature related to activities associated with family engagement..... |  |
| Limited understanding of.....   |  |
| Family engagement related to special education services.....                              |  |
| What family engagement looks like for Nondominant families.....                           |  |
| Current literature tells a one-sided story about family engagement.....                   |  |
| Positionality Statement.....  |  |
| Chapter Three: Methods.....   |  |
| Research Design.....  |  |
| Phase One: Survey.....  |  |
| Instrument Development.....   |  |
| Participants.....   |  |
| Recruitment and Distribution.....   |  |
| Instrument: Online Survey.....  |  |
| Data Collection and Analysis.....   |  |
| Mixed Methods Data Analysis: Development.....   |  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Phase Two: Interview.....                             |  |
| Instrument Development.....                           |  |
| Participants and Recruitment.....                     |  |
| Instrument: Interview Protocol.....                   |  |
| Data Collection and Analysis.....                     |  |
| Mixed Methods Data Analysis: Integration.....         |  |
| Chapter Four: Results.....                            |  |
| Phase One Findings.....                               |  |
| Ethnic Breakdown of Survey Respondents.....           |  |
| The Importance of Relationships.....                  |  |
| The Role of Collaboration.....                        |  |
| The Truth Behind Positive Experiences.....            |  |
| The Opportunity to Speak in Meetings.....             |  |
| The Need to Find a Communication Match.....           |  |
| The Importance of Community.....                      |  |
| Mixing for Development.....                           |  |
| Phase Two Findings.....                               |  |
| The Importance of Relationships.....                  |  |
| The Role of Collaboration.....                        |  |
| The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings.....             |  |
| The Need to Find a Communication Match.....           |  |
| The Importance of Community.....                      |  |
| Overall Experiences.....                              |  |
| Mixing for Complementarity.....                       |  |
| Collaboration Rooted in Communication.....            |  |
| Community and its Role in Engagement Experiences..... |  |
| The Importance of Friends and Family.....             |  |
| Chapter Five: Discussion.....                         |  |
| References.....                                       |  |
| Appendix A.....                                       |  |
| Appendix B.....                                       |  |

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, family engagement studies have consistently reported positive outcomes for children and their families, including increases in academic achievement (i.e., math and literacy skills), improved attendance, and enhanced social-emotional skills (Gross et al., 2019; McCarthy et al., 2023; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Though limited, research specific to children with special needs suggests that family engagement can lead to positive outcomes for children receiving school-based special education services and their families (Akamoglu et al., 2018; Brandon, 2009; Brassart et al., 2016). Overall, existing studies assert that family engagement is critical in supporting and expanding families' roles in their children's educational success (Banks et al., 2023; Garbacz et al., 2020; Keys, 2014; Sanders, 2014; Walsh et al., 2016).

The current literature provides a variety of definitions for family engagement or parent involvement, but the concept of family engagement remains a relatively new one, so the available definitions are limited (Akamoglu et al., 2018; Banks et al., 2023; Brandon, 2009; Brassart et al., 2016; Garbacz et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2019; Ishimaru 2014, 2019; Keys, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2023; Sanders, 2014; Van Voorhis et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2016). McCarthy et al. (2023) share their broad definition of family engagement as a “description of how families support their child's learning and education within the conventional school environment” (McCarthy et al., 2023, p.50). General activities associated with this broad definition of family engagement include 1) supporting the completion of homework and other schoolwork, 2) families' academic expectations and goals, 3) educational or learning activities done in school, and 4) families' methods of communication internally (i.e., within the family) and externally (i.e., with educators; McCarthy et al., 2023).

The current literature is not alone in producing broad and varied definitions and activities for family engagement. National organizations provide definitions that also fail to include specific language in support of developing authentic engagement. The United States Department of Education (USDE) defines family engagement as parents and educators participating in “regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (United States Department of Education, 2015). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines family engagement as parents and schools working together to support and improve students’ learning, development, and health (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). The National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (NAFSCE) defines family engagement as a shared responsibility to actively support children’s learning and development (National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement (n.d.)). While the idea of shared responsibility between educators and families to support children’s learning is consistent across definitions, they ultimately provide limited guidance for identifying, developing, and implementing strategies to increase authentic engagement (Gross et al., 2019).

With such variation in definitions, it is no surprise that studies have failed to produce a set of activities linked to family engagement. In addition to McCarthy et al. (2023), two examples of activities tied to family engagement include Van Voorhis et al. (2013) and Fantuzzo et al. (2000). While both studies are dated, they provide a glimpse into indicators of family engagement that still exist in the current literature. Van Voorhis et al. identified four indicators. The first two are directed at families 1) learning activities at home to promote children’s literacy and math skills and 2) participation in school and classroom activities. The other two are directed at educators: 3) engaging families through educator-driven activities designed to make them feel

included and welcome, and 4) parenting activities supporting understanding how to promote their children's developmental well-being (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Fantuzzo et al. focused on three types of involvement 1) school-based (i.e., participation in school and classroom activities), 2) home-school (i.e., family-educator communication), and 3) home-based (i.e., activities families engage in outside of school; Fantuzzo et al., 2000). These available examples of family engagement activities indicate that the field is still in the early stages of understanding what family engagement looks like for all families. These activities are especially vague and unhelpful in understanding how to engage families receiving school-based special education services.

Family engagement specific to school-based special education services faces a serious challenge. The current literature has only begun to highlight efforts to define, support, and increase family engagement for families whose children are typically developing (i.e., are not receiving school-based special education services to address a diagnosed disability; Garbacz et al., 2020; Keys, 2014). Even these initial efforts have largely excluded Nondominant<sup>1</sup> and White families whose children have a diagnosed disability and are receiving school-based special education services (Sanders, 2014). Moreover, the lack of consensus across the existing literature on family engagement (i.e., a definition and set of activities) has potentially negative consequences for all families (Gross et al., 2019).

Findings reported on behalf of families with typically developing children assert how critical family engagement is to children's educational success (Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Garbacz et al., 2020; Keys, 2014; Sanders, 2014; Van Voorhis et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2016). However, the literature has yet to consistently report findings for all families, including those whose

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "Nondominant families" was selected for this study to employ a consistent term when referring to the complex experiences of families historically marginalized and minoritized based on race, class, and/or language through traditional systems of oppression (Ishimaru, 2019).

children receive school-based special education services. This gap in the literature negatively impacts families of children with special needs, especially Nondominant families. Moreover, this gap 1) stems from special educators reporting a lack of confidence when attempting to engage specifically with Nondominant families and 2) families having low expectations of engagement opportunities with their children's school-based special education services. Further research is needed to understand how to develop and maintain authentic family engagement for all families (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017; Kea, 2023).

An obstacle to family engagement for families receiving school-based special education services is that they often do not fit the common indicators associated with traditional engagement efforts. Gross et al. (2019) provides an example of how educators can fail to acknowledge nontraditional engagement efforts. This results in educators making assumptions that some families are not truly engaged in their child's education. They give the example of educators solely using parent attendance at school events as an indicator of engagement. Based on traditional assumptions, families consistently in attendance at school events are assumed to be supportive and engaged. This means educators assume that families not consistently in attendance are removed and disinterested. However, making such assumptions may lead to incorrect conclusions about families' investment in their child's education. Many factors (i.e., cultural beliefs, work schedules, childcare needs, etc.) may lead some families to place more value on what educators would consider less traditional indicators of engagement (Gross et al., 2019). Updated indicators would be a crucial step toward educators acknowledging these nontraditional engagement efforts made by families.

There have been some efforts to take steps toward providing special educators the guidance necessary to accept an updated set of standards for engagement. The Council for

Exceptional Children (2020) composed a set of standards and components for K-12 special educators looking to engage with all their children's families. Embedded within these standards are three standards (i.e., Standards 1, 2, and 7) and five components (i.e., Components 1.2, 2.2, 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3) that provide special educators with guidance specific to family engagement with Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services.

Standard 1 encourages special educators to “advocate for improved outcomes” for children and their families, and it asserts the importance of recognizing families’ “social, cultural, and linguistic diversity” when doing so (CEC, 2020). The component associated with Standard 1, Component 1.2, sets expectations for special educators to address “the unique needs of those with diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds” (CEC, 2020). Standard 7 emphasizes the importance of educators implementing culturally responsive practices when engaging with families. Specifically, Component 7.1 asserts how critical it is that special educators engage with families via “communication, group facilitation, and problem-solving strategies in a culturally responsive manner” (CEC, 2020). While it is promising that three of the seven standards and five of the 23 components highlight strategies for increasing family engagement with Nondominant families, only time and more studies reporting on families’ experiences with such strategies will confirm their efficacy.

Despite some efforts in research to expand the standards and indicators used to measure how engaged families are in their children's education, family engagement in practice continues to be associated with more traditional indicators of involvement (i.e., volunteering at or attending school events; Shiller et al., 2020). According to Shiller, the research on family engagement confirms that families who demonstrate traditional engagement efforts have more positive experiences with their child's school (Ishimaru, 2019a, 2019b; Lareau, 2003). Any nontraditional

efforts made by families to engage may go unnoticed or be misunderstood by educators (Shiller et al., 2020). The existing disparities between traditional engagement efforts (i.e., those made by traditional families), and the often less traditional efforts made by Nondominant families may begin to fade as educators can “transcend traditional modes of family engagement” (Shiller et al., 2020, p.7). However, family engagement studies will need time and more research involving Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services before this statement can be confirmed.

Family engagement has been described as “a value-loaded term” (Gross et al., 2019, p.748). Many of the traditional family engagement indicators highlighted within the existing literature may not be achievable for all families. Specifically, families with ties to Nondominant cultures and communities will continue to face challenges when engaging with their children’s educators and service providers. Ishimaru (2014) asserts that indicators tied to traditional engagement activities assign value to parents who support learning in traditional ways but fail to assign value to families who support learning in ways that are aligned with their cultural and communal practices and values (Ishimaru, 2014, 2019; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). This is especially alarming considering recent reports on the diverse ethnic and cultural identities of many children receiving school-based special education services.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2022) reports that of the 49.4 million students enrolled in public schools at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, 45% were White, 29% were Hispanic, 15% were Black, 6% were Asian, 5% were multiracial, 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.4% were Pacific Islander (National Center for Education Statistics 2022). The NCES also reports (2022) that the number of students receiving school-based special education services was 7.3 million for the 2021-2022 school year,

equivalent to 15% of all students enrolled. Fifty-six percent of public-school students receive school-based special education services identify as Nondominant. However, many special educators report a lack of confidence when working with Nondominant children and engaging with their families (Banks et al., 2023; Fowler et al., 2019). These reported low confidence levels among special educators lead to negative outcomes disproportionately impacting Nondominant children and their families.

These negative outcomes include higher rates of 1) low academic performance, 2) discipline, and 3) high school dropout. The literature ties such outcomes to a cultural mismatch between Nondominant children and their educators (Ford, 2012). With approximately 83% of educators identifying as White females, it should be no surprise that Nondominant families and predominantly White educators would find it difficult to establish a sense of cultural or communal engagement with one another. Nondominant families have not been provided with consistent opportunities to experience the positive outcomes of authentic family engagement (Banks et al., 2023).

Accessing authentic engagement for all families receiving school-based special education services remains an uphill battle. Even though the current literature reports that authentic engagement is important to all families' quality of experiences, the current literature also reports a lack of attention given to families receiving school-based special education services (Zagona et al., 2019). Historically, these families have had to take on the role of advocate as a response to this lack of engagement (Morgan & Stahmer, 2021). Despite the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA 2004) mandating that schools engage families "as equal partners in all phases of educational assessment, planning, and treatment of their children who receive

special education services,” families receiving school-based special education services are not experiencing this level of engagement (Morgan & Stahmer, 2021).

Several factors can limit families’ engagement with school-based special education services. According to the current literature, these factors include 1) feelings of distrust from families, 2) families’ lack of follow through on recommendations, 3) misalignment between funds of knowledge (i.e., family and educator/provider), and 4) issues stemming from cultural differences (Kaiser et al., 2022; Morgan & Stahmer, 2021). Educators and providers report distrust as a primary barrier to family engagement with school-based special education services (Burkett et al., 2015; Locke et al., 2020; Magaña et al., 2015). This distrust likely stems from families’ perceived lack of knowledge about the services provided (Stahmer et al., 2019).

Such barriers are reinforced by deficit-based approaches, which further decrease family engagement. Replacing deficit-based approaches rooted in challenges with assets-based approaches that highlight opportunities is the paradigm shift that is needed for all families to move toward authentic engagement with their child’s school-based special education services (Brandon, 2009; Brown et al., 2019; Stahmer et al., 2019). The continued presence of deficit-based approaches impedes the establishment of an environment promoting authentic family engagement for all families (Stahmer et al., 2019).

Current research has just begun to explore the experiences of families working to access school-based special education services, and the initial findings play a critical role in moving toward practices supportive of all families (Kaiser et al., 2022). According to these initial findings, families consistently report feelings of 1) being seen as deficient, lacking, misunderstood, and inconvenient (Brown et al., 2019; Morgan & Stahmer, 2021; Paris, 2012; Stahmer et al., 2019), 2) uncertainty around where to start when it comes to seeking school-based

special education services for their children (Brandon, 2009; Kaiser et al., 2022), 3) being intimidated by the systems and structures present in navigating the world of school-based special education services, and 4) a pervasive sense that they are not welcome (Brandon, 2009; Fong et al., 2021; Kaiser et al., 2022; Morgan & Stahmer, 2021; Stahmer et al., 2019).

Nondominant families specifically report experiencing microaggressions, micro-insults, and micro-invalidations when working to engage with their children's school-based special education services (Kaiser et al., 2022). For example, Black mothers share experiences of being described as “adversarial, dysfunctional, uncaring” and being told they are “untrustworthy source[s] of information” when meeting with members of the educational team providing school-based special education services to their child (Morgan & Stahmer, 2021, p49). Nondominant families also report feeling undervalued by educators and providers “who do not understand their child and culture” and consistently experiencing institutional bias (Stahmer et al., 2019, p753). This combination of uncertainty and intimidation, with feeling unwelcome in response to micro-aggressions, -insults, and -invalidations, has created an environment oppositional to authentic family engagement.

Despite the important role knowledge plays in accessing services, families often report that they receive limited guidance and information specific to the services their child is receiving (Stahmer et al., 2019). Current literature asserts that families, especially those from historically marginalized communities, have less access to the specific knowledge and information required to authentically engage with school-based special education services (Morgan & Stahmer, 2021). As a result, these families report experiencing limited engagement with their children's educators and service providers (Morgan & Stahmer, 2020; Stahmer et al., 2019). Recent studies report that

when families experience limited opportunities for engagement with educators and service providers, they experience reduced feelings of agency, limiting families' efforts to engage.

The current literature offers little evidence for supportive engagement strategies for all families. What it offers related to family engagement strategies are as varied and inconsistent as the existing definitions of family engagement itself. Fortunately, there are some existing strategies within the findings, even if the evidence of their effectiveness has yet to be studied with all families. These include the importance of 1) communication, 2) shared understanding, and 3) learning about families' specific cultural and community concerns, priorities, and goals for their children. Historically, families are expected to seek out educators, but the literature does offer some evidence that when educators actively implement such strategies, families respond and engage (Banks et al., 2023; Kea, 2017, 2023).

Communication, shared understanding, and learning from families are all strong indicators of high-quality family engagement. Unfortunately, these studies highlight a serious weakness - a gap - within the existing literature on family engagement: the absence of families' voices (Gross et al., 2019). While the current literature is beginning to produce more studies supporting the development and sustainability of family engagement with school-based special education services, participants are mostly educators and service providers. There is a distinct lack of input from the families involved in services. The current literature provides strategies for family engagement based on the experiences and perspectives of largely White female special educators and service providers (Banks et al., 2023). This gap in the existing literature reveals a critical need in research related to family engagement with school-based special education services. This need can only be met by studying and better understanding what increases family engagement for all families receiving school-based special education services.

The purpose of this proposed study is to challenge this one-sided, one-dimensional understanding of family engagement with school-based special education services by engaging directly with families. Only once families' voices have been amplified will the literature grow, and our overall understanding of family engagement will become clearer. Currently, the literature does not provide educators or families with consistent indicators or strategies to support authentic family engagement with school-based special education services. Meeting all families' needs will require breaking down barriers to family engagement by communicating to families that they are valued and equal partners in their children's education with the potential to contribute important knowledge and resources.

The research questions developed to meet the objectives of this proposed study are:

- What activities do families feel increase their engagement? Do Nondominant families engage through similar activities? (Quantitative)
- How have families' experiences impacted their engagement with school-based special education services? (Qualitative)
- What would engagement ideally look like for families? (Quantitative and Qualitative)

Social capital theory is about how individuals and institutions engage with one another. Cohen and Prusak (2001) define social capital theory by focusing on the "role and function" social capital plays between individuals and institutions. More recently, social capital theory has been employed by studies seeking to understand the imbalance that occurs when families with less traditional social capital engage with schools. Engagement cannot grow while schools and educators continue to perpetuate the importance of traditional social capital and fail to recognize less traditional forms of social capital (i.e., relational networks). Cohen and Prusak's definition provide an important reminder that traditional institutions (i.e., schools) best serve the families

with whom their outdated norms, expectations, and values align; families who hold the same type of social capital associated with these institutions (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Harry, 2008; Hong, 2019; Ishimaru, 2014).

One way to increase engagement through social capital is to support the families that stand to benefit most from pushing back against institutions that continue to engage through traditional forms of social capital. This requires developing practices and strategies to increase family engagement via family-educator partnerships rooted in the power of each family's nontraditional capital (i.e., relational networks). Increasing recognition of families' nontraditional forms of social capital is the only path to securing the resources necessary for them to be empowered and equal partners in their child's services (Coleman, 1990; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Goddard, 2003; Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995; Putnam, 1995, 2000).

One form of social capital families can benefit from is relational capital. Relational capital involves the development of relational networks (i.e., building ties between individuals). An oft-cited article applying social capital theory and relational networks to educational settings was written by Goddard (2003), referencing an important Coleman article (1990). Goddard picks up Coleman's discussion about building relationships as an antidote to traditional institutional expectations (i.e., educator expectations for how families engage). Both authors highlight the power of social supports (i.e., family-educator partnerships) in nontraditional social capital like relational networks (Coleman, 1985, 1990; Goddard, 2003). They assert the importance of social support facilitating success for families and their children. Building upon Coleman's foundational works on social capital in educational settings, Goddard states, "...strong relationships can have positive effects because they constitute a form of social capital that is of

value” to families (Goddard, 2003, p.59). Strong relational networks could be the key to effective and high-quality family engagement in school-based special education services.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The current literature on family engagement remains fractured in many respects, but there is consensus among findings that family is an important influence on the development of young children (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Epstein, 1995; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; McCarthy et al., 2023). Researchers studying family engagement agree that home and school environments impact a child's development and can lead to positive outcomes when aligned (Walsh et al., 2016). The potential for family-educator partnerships to lead to such positive outcomes for children and their families is an idea consistently reported by family engagement studies. Unfortunately, the current literature provides limited information related to strategies for engaging all families. Inconsistent definitions and a varied set of engagement activities further divide the family engagement field (Walsh et al., 2016).

Studies show that families across all income levels and ethnic backgrounds use good parenting strategies with their children at home. However, most families report that they need more and better information about how to help their children in ways that produce tangible results (Epstein, 2010; Epstein et al., 2009; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). While there is agreement that families are better equipped to engage when provided with appropriate knowledge and resources, the literature is clear that a one-size-fits-all approach to family engagement is not practical for all families (Keys, 2014). Authentic family engagement depends on the specific and unique environmental factors impacting each family (Keys, 2014).

One of the original models developed for family engagement, the developmental-ecological model, provides a conceptual framework for understanding how both home and school factors are woven together within the concept and practice of family engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Keys, 2014). Informed by this early model,

Epstein's (1995) seminal article on family engagement involved developing a framework to identify how families may engage in their children's education. Epstein acknowledged the influence of home and school on a child's development and the bi-directional influence of home and school (Epstein, 1995; Fantuzzo et al., 2000). The framework identified six activities necessary to engage families and schools: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration (Epstein, 1995; McCarthy et al., 2023).

Over the years, Epstein's framework has drawn criticism for defining the role of families through the lens of schools and the activities schools believe to be important indicators of family engagement. Researchers have also highlighted issues with Epstein's failure to acknowledge how culture influences a family's understanding of and approach to engagement. Almost 30 years after Epstein introduced this framework, researchers have found that schools often define involvement based on White, middle-class families' understanding of and approach to engagement. These researchers note that this limited definition fails to reflect the variety of ways that other cultures may engage with schools on behalf of their children (McCarthy et al., 2023). While Epstein's early work and framework have been critiqued - and updated - by recent research, one outcome remains: the field must identify the specific and unique resources needed to enhance family involvement for all families (Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

Unfortunately, many barriers impede authentic home-school connections (Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Haines et al., 2017; Ishimaru, 2014, 2019; Turnbull et al., 2015). One universal barrier identified and reported across the limited literature on family engagement for all families is tied to the fact that many surveys conducted over decades indicate that families are unable to access clear information, ideas, and supportive strategies to interact with their children in practical ways (Elbaum et al., 2016; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). In addition to universal barriers for all families,

the literature lists the common barriers families receiving school-based special education services experience. These barriers include cultural and/or linguistic diversity, economics, family composition, parent educational level, school-home communication, parent-teacher interaction, the success of the child in school, and personal constraints (e.g., time, transportation, and childcare; Brandon, 2007; Brandon & Brown, 2009).

For all families receiving school-based special education services, existing barriers to engagement highlight the reality that educators continue to fail to consider their needs. Many school-based efforts to engage these families default to an outmoded set of deficit-based strategies to “fix” them (Ishimaru, 2019). In addition to approaching engagement to fix families, the current literature reports that all families receiving school-based special education services consistently experience educators focusing on deficits, weaknesses, and a general lack of acceptance of their children (Zagona et al., 2019). Without research highlighting the strengths of families and their children receiving school-based special education services, deficit-based perceptions will create a more profound disconnect between families and educators (Elbaum et al., 2016; Mueller & Buckley, 2014).

Barriers to family engagement are often written deficit-based, which unfortunately aligns with the literature’s assertion that attempts to engage families receiving school-based special education services, including Nondominant families, are often grounded in negative perceptions (Brandon & Brown, 2009). An example of this is evident in a list of barriers that disproportionately impact Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services 1) the inability to communicate with families via paperwork or in meetings (i.e., documents written at an inappropriate reading level, failing to translate documents, not providing interpretation; using jargon and technical terms during meetings), 2) a lack of consideration of

families' schedules when planning activities, and 3) a general lack of positive attitudes toward Nondominant families (Kea 2017, 2023). With there being a limited number of studies included in the current literature that focus on how to overcome these barriers when engaging Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services, there is a clear need for future research to center around strengths-based approaches to supporting this understudied population (Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

The following sections summarize various gaps in the current literature related to family engagement. This review starts with the literature's failure to reach a consensus on defining family engagement. Next, a look at the variations in the current literature when searching for activities associated with family engagement in schools. One of the significant gaps in the current literature is tied to a limited understanding of what family engagement looks like for families receiving school-based special education services and Nondominant families - two types of families who would most benefit from high-quality engagement with schools. This summary will conclude with a look at responsibility. The current literature tells a one-sided story about family engagement. It is a story in which families are responsible for finding ways to engage with their child's educator all while their voices are left out of family engagement studies.

### **Lack of consensus around how to define family engagement**

Family engagement definitions remain broad and varied. The concept of family engagement continues to lack an adequate definition across the literature (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). In addition to variations in the existing definitions for family engagement, the current literature references the concept inconsistently. The terms family engagement, family involvement, parent engagement, and parent involvement can all be found within the literature, which can cause confusion and distract from producing a consistent definition. Recently, researchers have started

advocating for a collective shift away from the term “parent engagement” and toward the use of the term “family engagement” to capture a more accurate description of all types of families (i.e., parents and caregivers). Although new, this movement has the potential to provide educators with a broader and more flexible understanding of how to approach engaging with all families (McCarthy et al., 2023).

Despite many family engagement researchers’ attempts to reframe and redefine the concept, current research reports that many educators still define engagement as one-directional and educator-driven (McCarthy et al., 2023). The term “involvement” has been used in the literature to describe families’ partnerships and interactions with their children’s educators (McCarthy et al., 2023). As such, the idea of family involvement is driven by educators and their expectations of how families should be involved in their child’s education. On the other hand, the term “engagement” provides a broader description of how families support their child’s education within the school environment and the home and community environments (McCarthy et al., 2023). Under the umbrella of “engagement,” activities expand from being educator-driven to including 1) families’ academic expectations and goals for their children, 2) educational and learning activities families may participate in outside of the home, and 3) families’ communication preferences and expectations for educators. The term “family engagement” shifts to a bi-directional and more equitable approach to engaging families (Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

Current studies assert that many educators, especially those who are socioeconomically advantaged and who have attained a higher level of education than the families of the children they teach, share that they have strong negative perceptions of these families (i.e., families with lower incomes and education). Such harmful perspectives often lead these educators to assume that families with lower incomes and less formal education do not value education or care about

their children's educational success (Banks et al., 2023; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Future research is necessary to amplify families' voices to assert which strategies are needed to help educators adopt a more strengths-based perspective when engaging with families. Recognizing and respecting all families' strengths and learning how to communicate with every family in a way that supports their child's educational success is critical to authentic family engagement (Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

### **Variations in the literature related to activities associated with family engagement**

Much like the variations in definitions of family engagement within the current literature, there is no consensus on a set of activities associated with family engagement. Few studies describe the specific at-home activities related to family engagement in which families support their child's educational journey (McCarthy et al., 2023). Most studies conducted to understand and define family engagement and its associated activities have focused on the perspectives and experiences of educators and service providers, so activities continue to relate to school-based opportunities. This is evident in the surveys used by studies included in the current literature (Elbaum et al., 2016). Survey items have been designed to collect information about specific, and often traditional, activities (i.e., volunteering, attending PTA meetings, and attending parent-teacher conferences) that fail to fully encompass family engagement as authentic bi-directional communication and collaboration between families and educators (Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

More studies are needed that specifically identify which family engagement activities are considered most essential and effective based on the perspectives and experiences of a diverse sample of all families interacting with school-based special education services (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). While specifics around activities remain divergent, recent research advises an overall movement toward positioning families as partners in communication and collaboration to sustain

authentic family engagement (Ishimaru, 2019a; Shiller et al., 2020; Warren et al., 2009). This call for a significant shift toward partnering with families will require educators to “transcend traditional modes of family engagement” (Ishimaru, 2019a; Shiller et al., 2020, p.7). By reimagining how families engage with their child’s education, families and educators can expand the activities associated with family engagement.

Currently, the literature fails to provide a cohesive - and inclusive - set of activities tied to family engagement. Based on a review of existing studies, family engagement activities can be divided into five categories: supporting learning activities at home, family engagement at/within the home, outreach from educators to families, supporting learning activities at school, family engagement at schools/with educators (Latunde, 2018; McCarthy et al., 2023; Shiller, 2020; Van Voorhis et al., 2013; Walsh et al., 2016). Supporting learning activities at home often include families supporting their child’s skill development in math and/or literacy (i.e., supporting homework and other classwork; engaging in other academic-related activities). Family engagement at home or within the home involves activities tied to supportive parenting and the parent-child relationship. Outreach from educators to families typically includes practices or strategies educators use to engage families at home or school. Supporting learning activities at school and family engagement at schools or with educators are both often tied to traditional activities expected by educators (i.e., attending open-house events, parent-teacher conferences, and/or volunteering in classrooms as tutors, helpers, or guest lecturers and field trips, participating in workshops, attending meetings, participating in committees, etc.; Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

These five categories reflect a more traditional and restrictive approach to family engagement, with educators expecting families to do the heavy lifting. National models for

family engagement emphasize the importance of educators doing the heavy lifting (i.e., engaging in bi-directional, regular, day-to-day communication with families). However, studies reviewing these models have found that communication is the least often incorporated concept in state-level standards (Walsh et al., 2016). This emphasis on bi-directional communication and collaboration without clear supportive strategies or standards seems to be a common disconnect across the current literature and national models. In addition to national models failing to provide standards to support bi-directional communication and collaboration, state models seem to include families as being part of a child's education contextually but do not include families in a multidimensional sense (i.e., as a complex construct involved in the home, school, and community contexts within which a child develops; Walsh et al., 2016).

To expand the existing categories of family engagement activities to reflect all families, the individuals involved in family engagement studies and developing family engagement standards must consider "infusing their documents with family involvement concepts" (Walsh et al., 2016, p.1052). Families' voices are largely missing from the conversations about what defines and describes family engagement in today's homes and schools. The majority of studies rely on the experiences and perspectives of educators. The current literature has yet to shift the spotlight from educators to families when working to understand family engagement (Brandon & Brown, 2009). Research indicates that families of all backgrounds want to be involved in their children's education, so when families' insights are solicited, they gain a sense of ownership over engaging (Brandon & Brown, 2009).

### **Limited understanding of family engagement related to special education services**

The experiences, perspectives, and needs of families with children receiving school-based special education services have largely been excluded from outcomes reported by family

engagement studies (Thomas, 2007). In addition to a general lack of families' voices being included in conversations about family engagement in research contexts, families whose children receive school-based special education services face additional barriers to accessing the knowledge and resources necessary to achieve authentic engagement with their child's educational team (i.e., educators and service providers; Zagona et al., 2019). After children receive a diagnosis, educational teams present various school-based special education services and make service recommendations to families (Zagona et al., 2019). A disconnect occurs once the recommended services have been offered by educational teams and accepted by families. Families are often left to take responsibility for navigating the services their child is receiving (Magaña et al., 2012; Smith, 2020). Families have described conversations with educational teams about their children's services as educator-driven (Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Zagona et al., 2019). Families also report meeting with members of their child's educational team who were not open to their input or did not respond to their ideas (Elbaum et al., 2016). Some families filed complaints in response to not being given opportunities to provide input or participate in their child's service delivery (White, 2014; Zagona et al., 2019).

The reasons for this disconnect between families and educators are varied. They include 1) a lack of systematic approaches to establishing engagement initiated by educators (Bryk, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2010), 2) a lack of partnership-building between families and educators (Mapp & Hong, 2010), 3) different perspectives between families and educators on what meaningful family engagement looks like (Lawson, 2003), 4) cultural differences leading to mistrust (LaRocque et al., 2011; Mapp & Hong, 2010), and 5) limited supports (i.e., resources and knowledge) for educators seeking to engage families (LaRocque et al., 2011). However, because studies assert that authentic family engagement leads to positive outcomes for all

families, strategies for overcoming the barriers families receiving school-based special education services face are essential (Francis et al., 2016a). Although the current literature demonstrates the importance of meaningful family engagement, there is little research documenting families' experiences engaging with school-based special education services (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009).

The research that does discuss engagement for families receiving school-based special education services suggests that family engagement seems to be absent from or misunderstood throughout the special education process (i.e., diagnosis, team meetings, service delivery; Brassart et al., 2016; Gerzel-Short et al., 2019; Zagona et al., 2019). Available studies on family experiences with school-based special education services assert that families want to be treated as equal partners alongside their child's educational team (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019; Zagona et al., 2019). They appreciate when teams seek their input and emphasize the importance of educators genuinely listening to them and demonstrating respect toward their concerns and requests (Francis et al., 2016a; Zagona et al., 2019). While the studies reporting these family preferences do not use the term family engagement, their descriptors are closely aligned with the definitions provided in the general family engagement literature. These researchers expressed the need for equal communication and collaboration when working to foster successful partnerships between educators and families (Zagona et al., 2019). In other words, family engagement.

Family engagement is particularly important for children with special needs as they face unique challenges that can impact their educational success (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Huscroft-D'Angelo et al., 2022; A. P. Turnbull & Turnbull, 2017). Despite empirical evidence linking family engagement and positive outcomes for all involved (i.e., children, families, educators), little information is available in the current literature about how to create and sustain engagement within the world of special education services (Giovacco-Johnson, 2009). Studies seeking to

understand families' experiences with school-based special education services call for a move toward increasing family engagement to determine potential future directions guiding practices supportive of families' interactions with educators (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013; Zagona et al., 2019). Findings report a continued need for educational teams "to use specific strategies for listening to parent input throughout the process," which sounds like a call to increase studies designed to explore families' experiences, perspectives, and needs when engaging with the school-based special education services their child is receiving (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Zagona et al., 2019, p.124). To advance special education practice and research, there is a need to identify and implement family engagement strategies that lead to positive outcomes for all families (Zagona et al., 2019).

The experiences and perspectives of families of children with special needs have the potential to provide insight into what family engagement means to them. Understanding these experiences and perspectives is a critical first step toward developing meaningful engagement (Francis et al., 2016b). There is a growing body of literature documenting disparities in the diagnostic process, but little is known about service access and care (i.e., engaging with families; Smith, 2020). Several studies have found that all families experience difficulties accessing school-based special education services, yet studies examining family experiences with services remain limited (Kohler, 2000; Kraus et al., 2003; Thomas, 2007; Ruble et al., 2005). Studies on how families engage with school-based special education services remain limited (Green, 2005; Hare et al., 2004; Hastings & Johnson, 2001; Kraus et al., 2003; Luther et al., 2005; Thomas, 2007). With such limited literature on family engagement with school-based special education services, a review of the literature related to family engagement with research- or clinic-based services (i.e., parent-implemented or mediated interventions) was conducted.

The literature on parent-implemented intervention (PII) studies revealed discussions, conclusions, limitations, and implications with statements and recommendations related to family engagement. Even though the concept of family engagement with school-based special education services was missing from the general literature on family engagement, it was included to some extent in the literature on PIIs. This is not surprising, considering one of the goals of PIIs is “to harness parents’ intrinsic strength, insight, and motivation to support their children’s development” (Oono et al., 2013; Trembath et al., 2019, p.1303). Another goal of PII studies is to provide opportunities for families to experience feelings of empowerment when engaging with the services their child is receiving (Guralnick et al., 2008; Trembath et al., 2019). PIIs aim to provide a structured and practical way for families to support their children’s development (Divan et al., 2015; Trembath et al., 2019). The general literature on family engagement could benefit from conducting additional research with similar goals to those linked to PII studies designed to highlight the unique strengths, knowledge, and skills of families whose children have special needs.

PIIs are designed to provide parents with the skills necessary to support their children and to experience an increase in their “sense of competence, reduce stress, and improve family cohesion” (Nevill et al., 2018, p.84). Equipping parents with the knowledge and resources to engage their child in an intervention increases the opportunities a child must develop the skills targeted by a PII. This strategy (i.e., parents implementing interventions with their children in the home environment) has improved a child’s skills (Ingersoll et al., 2016; Kasari et al., 2015; Wetherby et al., 2014). Increasing parents’ competence and children’s skills have also been reported as positive family engagement outcomes. Unlike the literature on family engagement, which lacks findings specific to families of children receiving school-based special education

services, there has been rapid growth in PII research examining the effectiveness of interventions tailored to families of children with special needs in the past 15 years (Guralnick et al., 2008; Nevill et al., 2018; Trembath et al., 2019).

Unfortunately, much like the general literature on family engagement, PII studies lack consensus when discussing and making recommendations for family engagement (Trembath et al., 2019). PII researchers assert that improving the quality and consistency of studies could help to ensure these interventions are poised to lead to positive outcomes for children and their families. However, continued variability among findings diminishes overall understanding of families' experiences, perspectives, and needs when engaging with these intervention studies (Reichow et al., 2018; Trembath et al., 2019).

Families' experiences, perspectives, and needs regarding family engagement depend on their culture, beliefs, and parenting practices. These contextual factors are unique to each family, meaning their approaches to engaging with educators will also be unique. Considering these contextual factors is foundational to establishing authentic engagement with families. Capitalizing on each family's strengths, interests, and preferences is critical (West et al., 2016). However, according to the current literature, PII studies' efforts to orient engagement around contextual factors influencing families have not yet translated to family engagement studies' efforts to support families receiving school-based special education services. Increasingly, families are being placed at the center of attempts to support engagement with intervention research (i.e., PII studies) but not with family engagement research (Trembath et al., 2019).

While the research on PII studies helps to fill some gaps in the family engagement literature specific to families receiving school-based special education services, Nondominant families have been left out of the conversation. In other words, PII studies largely exclude

Nondominant families. Most participants in PII studies are White families with middle-class incomes who completed at least some college (Pierce et al., 2014; Trembath et al., 2019; West et al., 2016; Wong et al., 2014). The literature found that studies do not adequately include or report participants whose race or ethnicity is something other than White (West et al., 2016). The representation of Nondominant families in the literature related to research-based special education services (i.e., PIIs) is not a common topic addressed in the literature (Klingner et al., 2005; Bos & Fletcher, 1997; Kistner & Robbins, 1986; Pierce et al., 2014; West et al., 2016).

The literature on all families receiving school-based special education services is minimal. Nondominant families have been excluded from the literature on families participating in research- or clinic-based special education services (i.e., PIIs). Researchers report that Nondominant families are less likely to participate in intervention research even if recruited (Hilton et al., 2010; Pierce et al., 2014). These researchers list barriers very similar to those families experience when seeking engagement with their child's school-based special education services. Nevertheless, findings of extremely limited diversity among participants in the literature on intervention research "further underscore concerns" about the continued exclusion of a large population of families from the literature (West et al., 2016, p.161). This results in a literature base devoid of the diversity needed for high-quality family engagement for all families receiving special education services.

Across over four decades of research, reports confirm that passive family engagement results from a lack of educators promoting active engagement (Mueller, 2017). The current literature asserts "the importance of a positive and inviting school culture" where families feel welcome and are encouraged to be actively engaged (Ferguson et al., 2010; Haines et al., 2015, p.299; Head Start, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In these school cultures, all families'

experiences and perspectives are appreciated and families have access to guidance from educators that enables them to contribute meaningfully to their child's education (Mapp, 2013). A key element in co-creating a positive school culture with families is to develop and foster engagement practices, such as having an "open door policy" where all families feel encouraged to contribute to the school in ways that work for them and where all families feel welcome. According to the few studies on engaging families receiving school-based special education services, families report feeling that a positive - and engaging - school culture was guided by the beliefs, values, attitudes, and expectations of educators and service providers; Francis et al., 2016a; Haines et al., 2015, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2007). If family-educator partnerships can center these beliefs, values, attitudes, and expectations on inclusive and equitable practices, all families can feel valued as educational community members.

### **Limited understanding of what family engagement looks like for Nondominant families**

Currently, there is a lack of research explicitly exploring how cultural influences impact family engagement (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). There are too few studies to draw clear conclusions about how cultural differences impact families' needs and preferences when engaging with educators (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Van Voorhis et al. (2013) conducted a literature review of 95 studies looking at family engagement in general. One of their findings asserted that future research on family engagement must highlight cultural differences in families' needs and preferences and whether this affects schools' efforts to design activities to promote family engagement (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). To underscore the importance of expanding the current literature's understanding of family engagement for Nondominant families, several studies in their review indicated that Nondominant families may benefit most from family engagement (Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

According to the current literature, Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services may feel less confident supporting their child with academic tasks at home unless educators provide them with guidance (i.e., supportive strategies; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Based on their review, the authors assert that, when given direction, Nondominant families can become more engaged with their children. In other words, the authors claim that educators engaging with Nondominant families increases the engagement Nondominant families experience at home (Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, traditional assumptions about and expectations for family engagement with educators stem from a narrow scope of “normative practices” (Ishimaru, 2014, p.2). When Nondominant families, especially those whose children receive school-based special education services, do not adhere to those assumptions and expectations, they are mischaracterized as “disinterested” in their child’s education, and their approaches to engagement are viewed as deficient (Ishimaru et al., 2014, p.2). The small body of research on family engagement often reinforces these racialized assumptions and expectations (or lack thereof) that influence how mostly White educators (i.e., approximately 83% of educators self-identify as White females; Banks et al., 2023) perceive and understand Nondominant families (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017)

In research, few empirical studies have examined efforts to build more equitable partnerships between Nondominant families and educators. In practice, schools’ efforts to engage Nondominant families are rooted in an “outmoded set of deficit-based strategies” (Ishimaru, 2019, p.351). So, it is no surprise that many Nondominant families feel unwelcome at their children’s school and powerless in the decisions that affect their children’s education (Ishimaru, 2014). When combined with the barriers families receiving school-based special

education services face, Nondominant families whose children have special needs face nearly insurmountable obstacles to engaging with educators and service providers.

Traditionally, educators best serve families whose norms, expectations, and values align with theirs (Ishimaru, 2014). More recent research in the field has begun to explore how educators can expand their efforts to build partnerships with families based on an updated set of engagement strategies reflective of Nondominant families' norms, expectations, and values (Ishimaru, 2014). Many Nondominant families seeking engagement with the school-based special education services their children receive possess nontraditional social capital (i.e., forms of power and resources), which can limit their ability to build partnerships with educators that can provide "solidarity, support, or access" (Haines et al., 2017; Ishimaru, 2014. P.3; Turnbull et al., 2000). The current literature shows that educators' increased acceptance of nontraditional forms of social capital can lead to better family engagement, more equitable collaboration, and greater familial influence in making decisions about children's education (Ishimaru, 2014).

Researchers must understand the substantial family engagement challenges facing educators and Nondominant families (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). As it is, educators continue to ignore or dismiss Nondominant families' perspectives due to a lack of understanding, which has resulted in families feeling silenced, undervalued, distant, and, above all else, powerless in their children's education (Latunde, 2018). Family engagement literature has largely overlooked the power dynamics between Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services and special educators (Latunde, 2018). Despite research not addressing power in family-educator partnerships, these power dynamics remain a barrier to high-quality engagement (Latunde, 2018).

The literature that does acknowledge Nondominant families' powerlessness when engaging with educators through traditional approaches does so by discussing social capital. Social capital refers to the "network of reciprocal social relations" and the resources involved in engaging with these family-educator partnerships (Putnam, 2000). The purpose of social capital is to enable individuals "to accomplish their goals, make their lives more productive, and to potentially gain institutional support, including access to knowledge and resources" (Ishimaru, 2014, p.4). Social capital is a crucial theoretical construct explaining how Nondominant families gain the power, knowledge, and resources they need to engage with educators authentically (Ishimaru, 2014). More research is needed to understand and support Nondominant families with children receiving school-based special education services to access the power, knowledge, and resources required to feel "honored, appreciated, and respected" when engaging with educators (Gross et al., 2019, p.758).

As practiced in most schools and reflected in the research literature, family engagement avoids power issues and assigns Nondominant families a passive role in their children's education. However, family engagement can cast families as partners alongside their children's educational teams. (Ishimaru, 2019; Shirley, 1997). Rather than seeking to simply involve "hard-to-reach" parents (i.e., Nondominant families engaging with school-based special education services), the literature on family engagement reveals the need for "hard-to-access" approaches (i.e., the traditional engagement strategies employed by schools) to fundamentally change their goals, values, routine practices, and expectations (Ishimaru, 2019, p.354).

A lot is written between the lines of existing studies on family engagement specific to Nondominant families. Especially when studies are describing the types of families with which educators engage. Three types of parents appear in the current literature. The "good parent"

supports students where, when, and how educators expect based on traditional assumptions and activities (e.g., participating in fundraisers, volunteering in the classroom, supporting children with homework, and encouraging their child to set academic and career goals). These parents attend school functions, actively participate in conferences with educators in ways that align with the school's expectations, and never question educators' professional judgment or authority. Their behaviors are in sync with the traditional expectations and assumptions associated with White families (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017).

The “problem parent” is often associated with African American families. These families are perceived as disruptive to educators (i.e., challenging educators in ways that undermine educators' professional judgment and authority (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). The current literature asserts that educators may have the misconception that African American families are “apathetic, disinterested, or indifferent” to their child’s school-based special education services and may not work to encourage these families to engage (Brandon & Brown, 2009, p.87).

Then there is the “hard to reach” parent (sometimes “lazy” parent). This pejorative term tends to be code for Latino/parents, immigrant or refugee parents, and sometimes American Indian or Indigenous American families who are presumed not to care about their child’s school-based special education services. These racialized assumptions are evidenced by their absence from school events or lack of response to communications from the school (Ishimaru, 2019; Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). The current literature has failed to combat these stereotypes. This gap in the literature regarding how Nondominant families working to engage with the educational teams providing their child’s school-based special education services create opportunities to engage with their children’s education has been limited based on educators’ knowledge of and appreciation for the preferences and modes of Nondominant families’

participation (Latunde, 2018). Understanding the effective ways Nondominant families engage with their children's school-based special education services would enable educators to offer more culturally appropriate engagement opportunities (Latunde, 2018)

### **Current literature tells a one-sided story about family engagement**

Historically, families are expected to seek out educators, but studies show that when educators seek, families respond and engage (Ishimaru, 2014). Less is known about how families receiving school-based special education services seek, respond, or engage because their perspectives and experiences have not been consistently included in family engagement studies and are missing from the current literature (Brassart et al., 2016). The literature has focused on the assumptions and expectations of educators and service providers, leaving families' voices out of the conversation (Sanders, 2014). Furthermore, despite the generally positive findings of studies focused on engagement for all families, the application of these research findings in schools is rare and often occurs with families who are already engaged (i.e., White families whose children are in the general education program; Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

While many studies indicate that all families want more and better guidance from educators on how to help their children's skill development at home, more research is needed to determine whether these research findings are reproduced for families with children receiving school-based special education services (Van Voorhis et al., 2013). The few studies that have included more diverse populations of families (i.e., families receiving school-based special education services and Nondominant families) found that all families respond to "clear and feasible ideas" for engagement (Van Voorhis et al., 2013, p.24). Researchers encourage future studies on family involvement to focus on outcomes with more diverse populations (Ishimaru, 2014, 2019, 2021; Keys, 2014; Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

With specific research done on the cultural differences among Nondominant families and their impact on family engagement being absent from current research (Keys, 2014), conducting studies to clarify and expand roles for Nondominant families about communication is increasingly important (Garbacz et al., 2020). Fantuzzo et al. (2004) highlighted this need in their discussion of future research almost a decade ago. For over a decade, Keys (2014) was the only study recognizing this as a needed area of research development. In the almost ten years since Keys (2014) published their findings about family engagement specific to families living in rural settings and participating in Head Start programs, very few studies have picked up where Keys left off (Brassart et al., 2016; Gerzel-Short et al., 2019).

The current literature contains studies on how changes among educators can lead to a collective feeling of increased engagement, but families' voices are often left out of the conversation (Ishimaru, 2014). Studies have offered strategies to provide educators with opportunities to increase engagement among their families (Brassart et al., 2016). However, the opportunities and strategies being presented to families are limited. There is a gap in the literature regarding how opportunities can be created to engage families left out of past research (i.e., families receiving school-based special education services and Nondominant families; Latunde, 2018). This gap also includes a limited understanding of how families create opportunities to engage with their child's education and a lack of knowledge of and appreciation for how these families seek engagement (Latunde, 2018; Reynolds, 2010).

Understanding how Nondominant families support their children's learning at home and school would enable educators to offer appropriate engagement opportunities (Latunde, 2018). Families have a unique knowledge of their child's strengths, preferences, and needs, and they are essential participants in conversations and collaboration. Engaging them in decisions about their

child's education is necessary (Zagona et al., 2019). Studies show that families appreciate being treated as equal partners, and they appreciate when educational teams seek their input.

Unfortunately, in practice, families have described conversations with educators about their child's services as educator-driven because educators leave little room for the families to respond, contribute, or discuss (Zagona et al., 2019). Families emphasize the importance of educators truly listening to them and demonstrating respect toward their concerns and requests. To foster successful partnerships between educators and families, researchers have expressed the need for high-quality communication and equal partnership (Zagona et al., 2019).

To determine potential future directions in research and in practice that support family engagement with schools, it is important to examine families' perspectives and experiences (Zagona et al., 2019). There is a disconnect between families' expectations of educators and vice versa. This disconnect reflects the need for educators and service providers to increase efforts to gather the perspectives of families to improve engagement (Zagona et al., 2019). Educators need to implement specific strategies for encouraging and listening to input from all families (Zagona et al., 2019). To advance family engagement for families receiving school-based special education services, there is a need to identify strategies for bi-directional communication and equitable collaboration that educators can consistently initiate and implement to ensure family engagement (Zagona et al., 2019).

Findings reported by many research studies are based on a participant pool of primarily White female educators. This has led to family engagement approaches that directly reflect educators' experiences and perspectives and exclude families' experiences and perspectives. Also, like the educator-driven conversations reported by families, family engagement research is educator-driven. In addition to family engagement in research and practice being led by

educators, family engagement often occurs from educators to families through a deficit-based lens. Research shows that interactions between educators and families focused on issues or problems can undermine family engagement, especially because this type of interaction is typically one-directional and leaves little room for families' input (Garbacz et al., 2020).

Bidirectional communication within family-educator partnerships significantly impacted positive child outcomes (Garbacz et al., 2020). Family-educator communication has been positioned as a critical factor in promoting positive family-educator partnerships (Garbacz et al., 2020). Among the studies investigating the role of families and family engagement, proactive educator outreach to families has been identified as a particularly promising strategy (Garbacz et al., 2020). Research is needed on proactive outreach from educators (Garbacz et al., 2020). Research on how educators engage in proactive outreach is necessary to understand how outreach may be increased (Garbacz et al., 2020).

When educators fail to ensure families' sense of belonging, families cannot optimally participate in their children's education (Latunde, 2016, 2018). Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services actively support their children's education despite a lack of invitation from educators and limited opportunities to engage (Latunde, 2018). They advocate for their children, engage in activities at home to support their child's skill development, and provide educational opportunities outside of school. However, families continue to advocate for, engage with, and support their child's education without the guidance and recommendations of educators that would increase their confidence. Even though families have historically been expected to demonstrate their capacity for engagement in traditional ways, they have done so without the support of research-backed practices. Educators, on the other hand, have access to such practices. However, there is still a high level of variability among the practices

recommended by studies, and educators often abandon such practices once they feel enough families have had the opportunity to engage.

An example of recommended practices for family engagement comes from the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). CEC and other organizations concerned with developing children with disabilities and supporting their families have composed recommended practices for special educators (CEC, 2020). Still, the gap between best and implemented practices remains (Coogle et al., 2019). Embedded within these standards are three standards (i.e., Standards 1, 2, and 7) and five components (i.e., Components 1.2, 2.2, 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3) that provide special educators with guidance specific to family engagement (CEC, 2020). While it is promising that three of the seven standards and five of the 23 components highlight strategies for increasing family engagement with Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services, only time and more studies reporting families' experiences with such strategies will confirm their efficacy (CEC, 2020).

Efforts to engage families of children with special needs and other families receiving school-based special education services who share similar cultural and communal connections may create more culturally responsive opportunities for Nondominant families to feel comfortable engaging. This relational approach leverages valuable forms of social capital (i.e., cultural and communal knowledge) that Nondominant families already possess and the unique skills they bring as team members. It also challenges more conventional approaches to family engagement that are one-directional, not only in terms of communication but also presumed expertise and capacity for partnerships. Nondominant families are rarely presumed to possess the expertise and capacity to engage with their child's school-based special education services. A growing corner of the literature suggests that families receiving school-based special education

services - Nondominant and White - possess “funds of knowledge” and resources that educational teams would benefit from acknowledging and engaging.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there is a clear gap in the current literature regarding understanding family engagement for families receiving school-based special education services. This gap fuels a disconnect between these families and the educators and service providers working with their children. The disconnect stems from deficit-based perspectives and strategies still in practice in schools. There is no other remedy for this gap and disconnect without an increase in studies focused on families’ voices (i.e., their experiences engaging with school-based special education services). While all families face challenges along their child’s educational journey, families of children with disabilities - White and Nondominant - face additional barriers. The most significant barrier to future authentic engagement between families and educators is rooted in the lack of families’ voices highlighted in the current literature. Amplifying families’ voices through research is a critical step in giving families increased opportunities to make their voices heard when engaging with their children’s educators and service providers.

## **Positionality Statement**

The systemic marginalization targeting communities based on their ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic identities deeply resonates with the primary researcher due to her family’s lived experiences. Their shared histories have heavily influenced the primary researcher’s identity as a multiethnic woman raised in a multigenerational household with a mixture of Japanese and English spoken among family members. The primary researcher’s maternal grandparents’ lived experiences were intentionally shared throughout her childhood and adolescence to ingrain in her the family’s unique set of values and beliefs.

The stories with which the primary researcher grew up involved difficult memories shared of their time spent incarcerated in Japanese internment camps during World War II. As a result of surviving the mass roundups, arrests, and incarceration that transpired during that time, her family developed a set of expectations, assumptions, and concerns tied to the aggressive forms of racism they faced. One family saying that grew from their lived experience was, “The nail that sticks out gets hammered back down.”

The primary researcher’s subjectivities have affected her current research interests in various ways. For instance, the results of the literature review directed the primary researcher to the need for research focused on exploring a more comprehensive understanding of families’ experiences with, perspectives on, and priorities for engagement with school-based special education services, especially those of Nondominant families. She might not have recognized this need if the concept of Nondominant populations - marginalization based on ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic identities - had not resonated with her family’s experiences.

As a special educator and administrator in a school district that served a large population of Nondominant families, including immigrants whose ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities were distinctly different from their White peers, the primary researcher developed strong relationships within the community. These relationships made her feel connected to her family’s history. They inspired her to pursue a path into higher education in hopes of engaging in research with the potential to positively impact similarly ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse and marginalized populations.

The primary researcher’s former students were also diverse in terms of their diagnoses. They had a wide range of needs and received a variety of educational and related services to address these needs. Earning a Master’s in Special Education with a focus on Moderate/severe

disabilities allowed the primary researcher to work with students who had significant needs as well as unique strengths and to support their families.

Working with a team of educators and service providers (i.e., general educators, other special educators, speech/language pathologists, school psychologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, orthopedic therapists, adapted physical education specialists, etc.) to provide comprehensive support for each student provided the primary researcher with a wealth of experiences engaging families receiving a variety of services. The primary researcher found her work to understand and address each student's family's priorities, goals, and concerns to be extremely rewarding. Due to a personal understanding of families being made to feel excluded and marginalized, it was critically important that the primary researcher ensure all families feel included, supported, and engaged.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the barriers to engagement and the preferences for engagement for all families whose children are receiving school-based special education services. A secondary purpose was to challenge the one-sided, one-dimensional understanding of family engagement with school-based special education services by engaging directly with families. The research questions developed to meet the objectives of this study were:

- What activities do families feel increase their engagement? Do Nondominant families engage through similar activities? (Quantitative)
- How have families' experiences impacted their engagement with school-based special education services? (Qualitative)
- What would engagement ideally look like for families? (Quantitative and Qualitative)

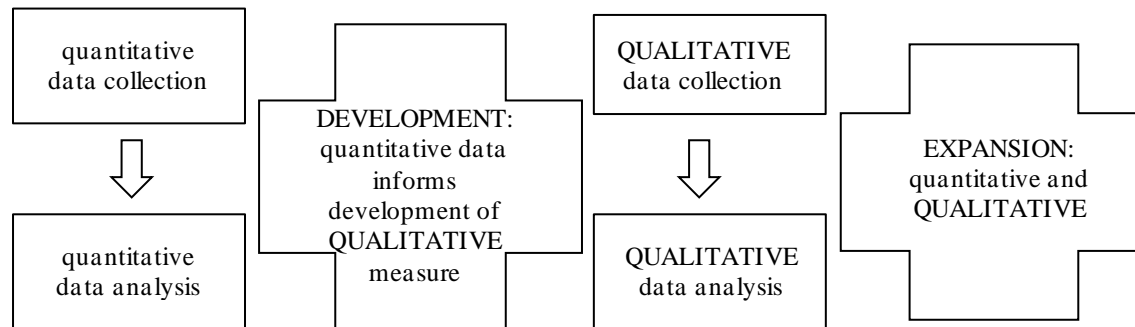
### **Research Design**

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design (see Figure 1 and Table 1 for design; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Love et al., 2023) was used to address each research question in a sequential, developmental, and integrated way. This design allowed for examining families' experiences and preferences from multiple vantage points and supported amplifying the voices of its participants. Analysis of the quantitative data collected during Phase One was used to 1) inform the development of a qualitative component (i.e., an interview protocol) implemented during Phase Two and 2) facilitate an increased understanding and expansion of the quantitative results during qualitative analysis. The quantitative data and preliminary analysis of quantitative results were frequently revisited and consistently integrated throughout analyzing the qualitative data to ensure full integration of quantitative and qualitative components and data (i.e., mixing

for development and then for integration; Love et al., 2022). Integrating quantitative and qualitative data allowed the primary researcher to expand on Phase One findings to, “build stronger conclusions, initiate new understandings, and gain a more complete picture of underlying mechanisms” during Phase Two development and analysis (Love et al., 2021. p.64).

Figure 1

*Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design*



The current literature supporting mixed methods research offered several ways to consider mixed methods data analysis. However, one approach felt most appropriate for this study: integration. Integration was vital to taking advantage of the benefits of mixed methods research because it 1) provided researchers with the opportunity to support findings across methods (i.e., quantitative and qualitative), 2) “investigate nuance and divergence” within findings, and 3) produced a comprehensive look at a particular phenomenon through combining methods (Bazeley, 2018; Love et al., 2023, p.2). For this study, integration occurred by using the results from conducting quantitative data analysis (i.e., Phase One) to develop an interview protocol (i.e., the measure implemented in Phase Two) and to analyze and expand both the resulting qualitative and quantitative data together (Bazeley, 2009, 2012; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). During the data integration phase, efforts were made to connect and compare the two phases (i.e., Phase One and Phase Two) and their associated instruments (i.e., survey and

interview protocol) to create a more comprehensive understanding of families’ experiences, perspectives, and priorities related to engagement with school-based special education services.

Table 1

*Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Integrative Analysis*

| <b>Phase One:<br/>quantitative</b>  | <b>Purpose</b>   | <b>Phase Two:<br/>QUALITATIVE</b>  | <b>Purpose</b>   |
|---|--|--|--|
| Research Question 1:<br>What activities do families feel increase their engagement?<br>Do Nondominant families engage through similar activities?<br><br>quan survey   quan survey analysis | Development of QUALITATIVE component (i.e., interview protocol; Love et al., 2023) | Research Question 2:<br>How have families’ experiences impacted their engagement with school-based special education services?<br><br>QUAL interview   QUAL interview analysis | Data Integration: Expansion (Love et al., 2023)<br><br>Research Question 3:<br>What would engagement ideally look like for families? |

**Phase One: Survey**

*Instrument Development*

There were four steps within the survey development process: 1) initial conversations with two mothers, including seeking feedback on survey questions, 2) providing the same two mothers from those initial conversations with an updated set of survey questions to review and respond to any additional feedback, 3) consultation with two experts (i.e., a researcher knowledgeable in mixed methods research and a researcher knowledgeable in survey development) to ensure the survey met standards for rigor, and 4) piloting the final draft of the survey (see Table 2) with a second set of mothers. All families involved in the survey development process were provided with a stipend.

For the first step, the primary researcher contacted two mothers whose children are currently receiving school-based special education services about their interest in having a conversation about their experiences with 1) school-based special education services in general (i.e., IEP development and meetings about services) and 2) engaging with their child's school(s) (i.e., communicating and collaborating with their child's educational team). Before the mothers agreed to engage in the survey development process, the primary researcher told them they would be presented with potential survey questions to get their feedback about the readability, clarity, and relevance of each question and the set of answer choices provided. Both mothers were contacted through email, and each agreed to meet via Zoom for one hour. The two mothers self-identified as women of color who felt fortunate to have access to any resource their child needed along their journey with school-based special education services. They both stated the importance of supporting a survey that could help families receiving school-based special education services who may not have access to the same type and quality of resources.

The meetings took place between October 2nd and October 5th via Zoom. To start each conversation, the primary researcher described the study overall. The primary researcher also shared the intended outcomes of the meeting with each mother. Those outcomes included gaining a deeper understanding of their experiences with school-based special education services and feedback specific to each survey question and answer option's readability, clarity, and relevance. Before moving forward, the primary researcher ensured each mother felt comfortable with the plan. The conversations were intended to be unstructured to ensure each mother was allowed to take the time to share their experiences as well as their feedback on the survey questions.

To start the conversation, the primary researcher screen-shared the survey and read through each section with the mothers. At the end of each paragraph, the primary researcher asked the mothers for feedback. The primary researcher also asked how the mothers felt about the terms used (i.e., a child with a disability vs. a child with special needs, educational team vs. IEP team). The survey was used as a loose guide for each conversation. Both mothers shared stories of their experiences related to the subject of the survey questions, which seemed to help them feel more comfortable with the process of both sharing and giving feedback related to the survey.

The primary researcher took notes throughout each conversation, encouraging the mothers to do most of the talking. Some notes were taken directly on the survey document (i.e., feedback specific to the survey). Others were made on a separate document (i.e., stories shared by the mothers about their experiences with IEP teams and with services) to revisit later when incorporating their experiences and recommendations. For example, the feedback specific to the survey included recommendations to write an introduction to the survey that encouraged parents to complete the survey to help other families. One of the mothers supported the primary researcher by rewriting survey questions to ensure readability and clarity (i.e., ask if parents participate in their child's IEP rather than asking if they are the education rights holder). The primary researcher was encouraged by both mothers to include specific examples for questions to help parents answer (i.e., give specific examples of what educational- and language-based supports from educational teams are).

At the end of each conversation, the mothers asked to be emailed the survey once their feedback had been incorporated into the survey questions. Each mother stated that having the time to read through the questions independently and provide additional feedback was preferred

over a second meeting. At this time, the primary researcher shifted into the second phase of the survey development process.

For the second step, the primary researcher updated the survey following the initial meeting with the first mother but did not send a new survey draft for her to review until after meeting with the second mother. A week after the initial meeting with the second mother, the primary researcher emailed both mothers with the updated survey and a request to review the questions and answer choices before sending any additional feedback or recommendations. After a week, the primary researcher checked in with both mothers to see if they had the opportunity to review the updated survey. After reviewing the updated survey, both mothers were thrilled with the final instrument, as said via email.

In addition to expressing her endorsement of the updated survey, one of the mothers encouraged the primary researcher to make sure the survey question about how an IEP team had made a parent or caregiver feel like an equal partner included an answer choice about “understanding family and child needs” (i.e., whether the IEP team demonstrates an understanding of a child's unique needs and challenges and if they incorporate this understanding into the IEP). This mother also expressed the importance of asking respondents about collaborative goal setting (i.e., whether the IEP team actively involves parents or caregivers when writing IEP goals and whether these goals align with the parent’s or caregiver’s priorities for their child). The primary researcher made edits to the survey (see Table 2) to incorporate this feedback.

The third step in the survey development process involved the primary researcher consulting with two experts. The first expert was a researcher knowledgeable in quantitative data collection and analysis and mixed methods research, and the second expert was knowledgeable

in survey development and analysis. The first expert provided the primary researcher with feedback and recommendations to improve the survey's structure, to ensure each question would lead to collecting data supportive of addressing the research questions, and to align each section, question, and answer choice with the current literature. This expert also provided the primary researcher with suggestions specific to the overall mixed methods design of the survey. Feedback, recommendations, and suggestions were provided during in-person weekly meetings, via comments in Google documents, and through email exchanges.

The second expert and the primary researcher met via Zoom. The expert shared their screen so that they could review each section, question, and answer choice with the primary researcher. The primary researcher took notes directly in the document. This second expert supported the primary researcher in thinking through the desired sample size for the survey and the data analysis plan for each question individually and for the survey. Both experts were then provided an updated survey once the primary researcher integrated their feedback, recommendations, and suggestions. Feedback provided on the updated survey was minimal but important. For example, recommendations were made to include branching logic for the question about ethnicity and ensuring "Select all that apply" was an available option when appropriate. Both recommendations were incorporated.

Two additional mothers were recruited from a local community-based organization (CBO) that supports diverse caregivers with children with disabilities for the fourth and final step in the survey development process. Like the mothers involved in the first and second steps of the survey development process, these two mothers self-identified as ethnically and linguistically diverse. Unlike the first two mothers, who shared how fortunate they felt to have the resources available to middle- and upper-class families, the second set of mothers reside in low-income

communities. The primary researcher offered to meet with these mothers in their community or via Zoom to ensure transportation would not hinder their participation. Interpreters were present during each conversation to capture the mothers' experiences and feedback accurately.

The first meeting occurred on October 13 with the mother and the Case Manager from the CBO, who acted as interpreter. Like the start of the conversations with each mother in the first and second phases of the survey development process, the primary researcher started the meeting by sharing an overview of the study and the intended outcomes for the meeting with the mother and Case Manager. The primary researcher told the mother that they would read through each question and answer choice before asking for her feedback and recommendations to improve readability, clarity, and relevance. Both the mother and the Case Manager were on board with this plan, and as they moved through the survey, they became more candid in the feedback they provided. For example, the mother stated that she liked the answer option of "Prefer not to answer" for the questions about the parent's education, income, and age. She stated that she knew families who would feel judged if they were required to provide that information, and she felt confident that they would not finish the survey if they could not move on to other questions without answering. The mother also asserted the importance of multiple-choice questions. She shared with the primary researcher that she was more likely to complete a survey if she did not have to think about how to spell a word or try to translate a term from Spanish to English to answer.

The Case Manager, who shared that she was also the mother of a child receiving school-based special education services, also provided feedback during the piloting process. She encouraged the primary researcher to include the answer option of "None of these" and to ask which school district their child was currently enrolled in. The mother and the Case Manager

talked with the primary researcher about whether the survey should indicate to respondents that their answers should be based on their child's current rather than past placement. Ultimately, they all agreed that having parents answer based on their experiences with their child's IEP team would help them know how to answer and help the primary researcher align their answers with their current placement and services.

Following this meeting, the primary researcher made significant changes to the survey in preparation for piloting the newest survey draft with the second mother from the same CBO. The primary researcher and second mother met on October 17. The Case Manager from the CBO provided interpretation services. The mother was home with a sick child, so the meeting was via Zoom. The primary researcher screen-shared the survey and read through each section, pausing to check in with the mother after each question. This mother confirmed a few pieces of feedback provided by the first mother: 1) multiple choice answer options were more helpful for parents or caregivers than open-ended questions, 2) the term "IEP team" can be recognized by all parents or caregivers regardless of their primary language, and 3) "None of these" was a good option to offer respondents consistently. The mother also gave the primary researcher some new feedback. She encouraged the primary researcher to keep questions with multiple answer choices on separate screens to keep respondents from feeling overwhelmed. She also felt five options were better than six for the question, asking respondents to rank answer choices. She provided the primary researcher with additional answer choices for the question about engagement activities. The primary researcher incorporated the mother's feedback during the meeting, and the mother expressed excitement about seeing changes made based on her recommendations.

Throughout the survey development process, the survey questions (see Table 2) needed to reflect an understanding that families responding to the survey may have limited time and

energy. The overall goal was to create a survey that would take families only ten to fifteen minutes while still providing ample data for analysis. Questions were written to be easily readable and understandable. Questions also included consistent language. Question answers were written to be both comprehensive and transparent. It was essential to provide families with several options while including examples of answers to help them decide which to choose. Survey question answer choices that offer multiple options seemed the most appropriate way to collect information from parents quickly. Moving families through the survey quickly because they understood what was being asked and the clear answer options were critically important to increasing the number of valid responses.

To support families with completing the survey both efficiently and effectively (i.e., to ensure they did not click through questions without reading the question or selecting the answer most aligned with their experiences), the survey 1) included questions written to be inclusive of respondents whose reading level may reflect the average reading level in the United States (i.e., a 7th or 8th-grade reading level), 2) offered answer choices in multiple-choice format with the option to select more than one, 3) offered answer choices with examples to help them select without spending too much time on any one answer choice, 4) allowed respondents the option to write in an answer that may not be included in the available options, and 5) provided respondents with an incentive to complete the entire survey (i.e., entry into a weekly lottery to receive a \$100 gift card).

Both mothers who participated in piloting the survey asserted the importance of respondents understanding 1) that their responses were anonymous and 2) that they could receive compensation for completing the survey. Considering this, the primary researcher explored how to keep respondents' answers anonymous while still being able to offer and provide an incentive

(i.e., entry into a weekly lottery to receive a \$100 gift card) for them to complete the survey. To enter respondents into the weekly lottery, the primary researcher needed to ask each respondent for their first and last name and email address. The primary researcher also needed the names and email addresses of the survey respondents willing to be interviewed during Phase Two of the study. To keep respondents' answers anonymous, the primary researcher added a question at the end of the survey: "Are you interested in being entered into a weekly lottery to receive a \$100 gift card?" The two answer choices were "Yes" and "No". If "Yes" was selected, the respondent was asked for their first and last name and email address. On the same page where they entered their information to be entered into the lottery, they were given the option to check a box that said, "Check this box if you are interested in participating in a follow-up interview and receiving a \$50 gift card as compensation for your time." Their name and email address were saved separately from their survey answers. Respondents interested in being interviewed only needed to enter their information once. If they checked the box indicating their interest in being contacted to schedule an interview, they were asked a final question: "What language are you most comfortable speaking during the interview?"

### ***Participants***

Survey respondents were parents and caregivers of young children with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) receiving school-based special education services. Inclusion criteria included 1) parents and caregivers of a child who 2) is receiving school-based special education services, and 3) is between the ages of three and eleven (i.e., preschool through fifth grade). In addition to English, the survey was translated into the languages most spoken by families accessing the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI; i.e., Spanish, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and Somali; King County, 2021) and the California Department of Education (CDE;

Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin, and Arabic; CDE, 2023) using a professional translation service - The Word Point.

The total number of survey respondents was 312. Respondents were asked about their ethnicity, primary language, and income level to determine the level of diversity across respondents. Respondents included a diverse sample of parents and caregivers (i.e., ethnically, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse) and represented the larger population of families (i.e., parents and caregivers) of children receiving school-based special education services.

### ***Recruitment and Distribution***

The recruitment plan for Phase One of this study started with identifying the individual contacts and organizations that would be contacted to support recruiting survey respondents. The primary researcher worked to connect with a representative from each recruitment site to establish a sense of trust that can be conveyed to potential respondents. Developing a connection with someone from each recruitment site that parents and caregivers are familiar with encouraged their participation in the study. The primary researcher contacted the following organizations to enlist their support in recruiting survey respondents: Club 21 Learning and Resource Center (Altadena, CA), The Arc of King County (Renton, WA), Childhood Autism Support for Parents (Seattle, WA), WSA Parent Ambassadors (WA), Seattle Special Needs Parent Teacher Association (PTA; Seattle, WA), Northshore Special Education PTA (Seattle, WA), The Arc of Snohomish (Everett, WA), Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF; WA), Open Doors for Multicultural Families (ODMF; Kent, WA)

Recruitment efforts also included contacting individuals from the primary researcher's network. This included scholars and faculty from the Early Childhood Intervention Doctoral Consortium (ECiDC), the University of Washington (UW), and the Associate Director of the

Early Childhood Personnel Center (ECPC). While recruitment efforts were initially focused within Washington and California, the survey was not geographically restricted (i.e., a parent or caregiver living outside WA or CA with access to the survey link could submit a response). To keep track of where surveys were being submitted in the country, a question asking in which state the respondent lived was added.

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the study, the primary researcher contacted the organizations and individuals identified as part of the recruitment plan via email to share the study's aims and request support for recruiting respondents. Initial emails were sent out to 80 contacts on January 22, the day the survey was opened for responses. A follow-up email was sent on February 8, and a final reminder email was sent on February 13. The first follow-up email was sent to 49 contacts from the 80 contacts included in the initial email. The second follow-up email was sent to the original 80 contacts. Most contacts received three emails seeking support for sharing the survey with potential respondents.

The survey was open between January 22 through February 23. When the survey was open, the primary researcher checked four markers. These markers were helpful as the primary researcher took stock of the progress toward reaching the desired sample size (N = 200-300). The primary researcher tracked how many respondents 1) have successfully finished the survey, 2) did not qualify to take the survey after completing the screener, and 3) passed the screener but never finished the survey (Qualtrics, 2023). The primary researcher tracked these three markers once a week to determine if the current recruitment plan was leading to securing the projected sample size. After three weeks, the primary researcher's tracking efforts led to the closing of the survey on February 23. The survey was open for 34 days and collected 312 responses.

The fourth marker the primary researcher ran as survey responses were being collected was related to quota sampling. As responses were collected, the primary researcher determined that the diversity among respondents (i.e., markers of diversity include ethnicity, language, education level, and socioeconomic status) appropriately represented the larger population (Im & Chee, 2011). No additional steps had to be taken to adjust recruitment strategies to reach a more diverse population of potential respondents.

Diversity among respondents was a marker reviewed weekly. The survey was open to later analyze responses from families reporting demographics most traditionally seen in research contexts (i.e., White, upper-middle class, college-educated) with those of families identifying with historically underrepresented and marginalized populations (i.e., Nondominant families). The primary researcher achieved a large enough sample size within each demographic cell. To support the validity of percentages reported during data analysis, families from each ethnic category were represented (i.e., Black or African American, Asian or Asian American, Hispanic or Latin/o/a/e, White or European). The primary researcher achieved a minimum of 20 respondents for larger ethnic categories (i.e., Black or African American, Asian or Asian American, White or European) and 5-10 respondents for cells tied to a smaller population (i.e., American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawai`ian or Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern or North African). Survey respondents who identified as Hispanic or Latino/a/e came in between larger and smaller cells at 12 responses. This plan for recruiting participants was comprehensive (i.e., open to receiving responses from all families) and targeted (i.e., seeking responses representative of Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services). It was critically important to be able to support findings by confirming results that capture the voices of families across ethnic backgrounds. It was equally important to reach a sufficient

sample size and representation of all families to produce results that were both statistically and practically significant (Nimon, 2011).

***Instrument: Online Survey***

While data cannot be assumed to be reliable, developing a reliable instrument (e.g., survey—see Table 2) was important for achieving more consistent reliability during data collection and analysis (Nimon, 2011). For Phase One of this study, participants completed an online survey of quantitative questions (e.g., multiple-choice, ranking, scales) seeking responses to address the quantitative research questions composed for this study. The survey was housed within Qualtrics and sent out via a link provided directly to individual contacts and organizations.

Two security features available through Qualtrics were enabled to ensure authentic responses: 1) bot detection and 2) flagging multiple submissions. Both features were enabled before opening and distributing the survey. Bot detection identified responses that were likely submitted by a bot. This feature did not block them but used a symbol to indicate to the primary researcher which responses were likely submitted by a bot. Flagging multiple submissions detected possible multiple submissions from the same respondent and flagged them for the primary researcher to review. The primary researcher had determined the importance of allowing respondents to return to the survey after starting it and pick up where they left off, but flagging multiple responses was crucial in detecting whether a previous respondent had submitted a new survey response. By taking advantage of the features available in Qualtrics, the primary research minimized fraudulent or multiple submissions (i.e., bots and people looking to increase their access to incentives).

Table 2

*Sample Survey Questions*

| Theme  | Survey Questions   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Block 0:<br/>Screeners</b></p>               | <p>Does your child qualify for special education services?</p> <p>Please enter your child’s birth month and year into the provided box.</p> <p>Are you the primary parent or caregiver attending your child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings?</p>   |
| <p><b>Block 1:<br/>Demographics</b></p>            | <p>Which diagnoses does your child have?</p> <p>Which ethnicity best describes your child?</p> <p>If your child’s ethnicity differs from your own, which ethnicity best describes you?</p> <p>Do you primarily speak a language other than English? If you selected “Yes,” please specify which language you primarily speak in the box provided.</p> <p>What is your highest educational degree?</p> <p>Within which income bracket did your 2022-2023 household income fall?</p> <p>What is your current age?</p> <p>What type of program is your child currently participating in?</p> <p>Which services is your child (or you) currently receiving?</p>  |
| <p><b>Block 2:<br/>Engaging with IEP Teams</b></p> | <p>Which statement best describes your experiences overall engaging with your child’s current IEP team (i.e., teacher(s) and service providers)?</p> <p>Please rank from 1 (most supportive) to 6 (least supportive) the supports that have helped you engage with your child’s current IEP team when discussing the services your child will receive/is receiving.</p> <p>Please select the things your child’s current IEP team has done to make sure you feel engaged in the services your child is receiving.</p> <p>In general, in what ways has your child’s current IEP team made you feel like an equal partner in your child’s education?</p> <p>If “Attempts by teachers and service providers to build a relationship with you”</p> |

was selected as part of your answer to the previous question, what did that look like?

What has your child's current IEP team done to make sure you can fully engage in IEP meetings during which there are conversations about the services they receive?

**Block 3:  
Communication  
with Your  
Child's IEP  
Team**

How have your child's current teachers or service providers communicated with you/your family regarding your child's services?

What is (are) your preferred type(s) of communication?

Has your child's current IEP team accommodated your communication preferences?

**Block 4:  
Collaboration  
with Your  
Child's IEP  
Team**

Which of the following types of collaboration has your child's current IEP team engaged you in?

Which of the following activities do you find to be collaborative?

Other than you, which of your child's current IEP team members has been the most collaborative?

When collaborating with your child's current IEP team, did it feel like your voice (i.e., experiences, opinions, needs) was heard?

**Block 5:  
Engaging  
through  
Partnerships**

Would you say you have had the opportunity to develop a partnership with at least one of your child's current teachers or service providers?

Which of the following are important to you when working to develop a partnership with an educator or related service provider working with your child?

Would you say you have had the opportunity to develop partnerships with other parents/caregivers within your child's school community?

How did you develop partnerships with other parents or caregivers?

---

***Data Collection and Analysis***

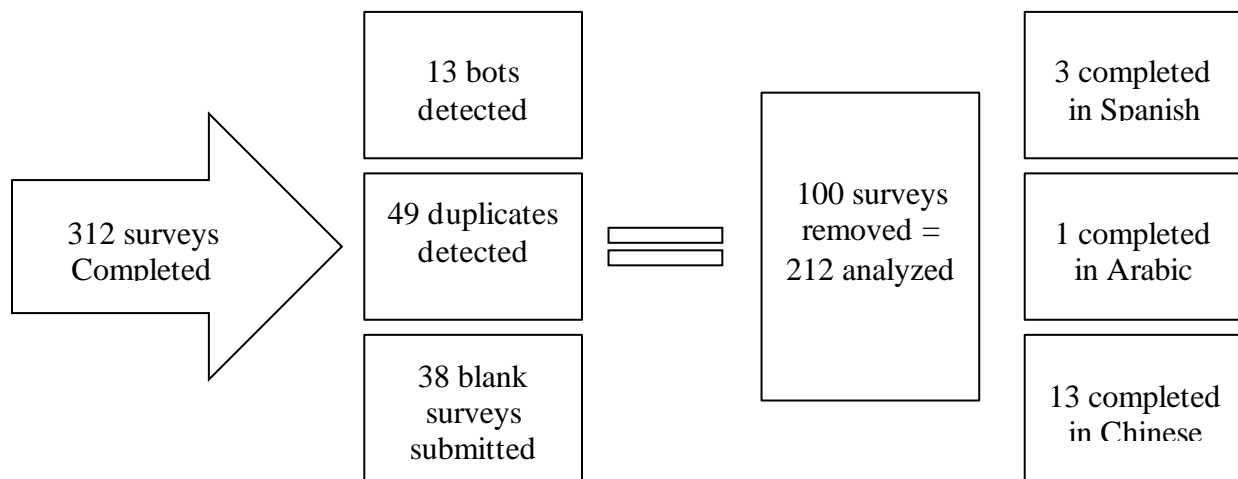
The primary researcher set up the digital delivery of the survey to ensure respondents had options for completing the survey within the time frame they had available. Respondents could save what they completed from the survey so they could return later to finish. Survey

respondents were also allowed to complete only part of the survey if they ran out of time (i.e., the survey closed before they submitted) so that at least partial data could be received from their submission. Translated versions of the survey were provided for parents or caregivers who spoke a primary language other than English (i.e., Spanish, Mandarin, Somali, and Arabic) Translating the survey was performed by a professional translation service, The Word Point. Providing options for completing the survey that respect each family’s time, primary language, and reading level was necessary to reach a large and diverse sample.

Figure 2 indicates how many of the final 212 completed surveys were accessed via one of the other languages offered by the survey. One survey was completed in Arabic, three in Spanish, and 13 in Mandarin. The other 195 were completed in English. Figure 2 also shows how the raw survey data downloaded from Qualtrics was filtered. Blank surveys, duplicates, and detected bot responses were removed from the raw data, and the resulting 212 surveys were each entered into the codebook by the primary researcher.

Figure 2

*CONSORT Chart*



According to Love et al. (2022), quantitative data collection and analysis should follow standards for rigor according to the specific quantitative design used (Gersten et al., 2005;

Horner et al., 2005; Nimon, 2011; Thompson et al., 2005). The primary researcher's data collection and analysis approach addressed these standards for rigor. The data collection process started with the primary researcher sharing the survey link via email directly to individuals and organizations in a position to support the recruitment of potential respondents (i.e., parents or caregivers). The survey was designed to be completed online and within the timeframe a parent or caregiver has available to them (i.e., 15 minutes, depending on how each respondent moved through reading and selecting answer choices. This time frame was confirmed by each mother and expert involved in the survey development process. Each completed survey was stored in Qualtrics.

Descriptive statistics (i.e., chi-square tests for independence) and data visualization (i.e., graphs) were implemented as quantitative analysis approaches to address the quantitative research questions. Each approach allowed for exploring and establishing interesting or informative patterns within the data. Chi-square tests for independence were applied to determine what type - if any - of relationship exists within the theme identified from the survey data (i.e., communication, collaboration, community). Creating visuals based on the analysis conducted was done to present findings in a clear and jargon-free manner, but, more importantly, visual analysis was done to make findings more accessible for sharing with the families who may benefit from them.

### **Mixed Methods Data Analysis: Development**

As an explanatory sequential mixed methods study, the data analysis design included an intent to develop the qualitative instrument involved in Phase Two of this study based on findings from the quantitative data collected during Phase One. Development and integration were implemented during the mixing phases to strengthen and expand the overall findings by

connecting the quantitative and qualitative data results (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). The findings identified from the survey were used to inform the development process for designing the Phase Two instrument (i.e., the interview protocol). Information regarding the experiences and supports identified by survey respondents (i.e., parents and caregivers) as being important when engaging with IEP teams helped to directly develop interview protocol questions that would further explore phenomena present in the survey data. In addition, information regarding the collaboration, communication, and community between families and IEP teams informed the development of questions and expanded on survey responses.

## **Phase Two: Interview**

### ***Instrument Development***

The process of developing the interview protocol was broken into four steps: 1) an initial conversation seeking feedback on a draft of interview questions, 2) updating the first draft of interview questions based on feedback, 3) consultation with two experts (i.e., a researcher knowledgeable in mixed methods research and a researcher knowledgeable in quantitative data collection and analysis) to ensure the interview protocol met rigorous standards for qualitative research based on quantitative analysis, and 4) piloting the final draft of the interview protocol with a parent.

The primary researcher contacted one of the parents who supported the survey development process to develop the interview protocol. This mother had previously agreed to engage in the interview protocol development process during the survey development process. The primary researcher shared that, like the survey development process, they would be presented with potential interview questions to get their feedback about the clarity and relevance of each question, and they were interested in participating. The primary researcher reached out to

this mother via email to schedule a meeting via Zoom to review the draft interview protocol questions.

Before meeting with the mother, the primary researcher analyzed the survey data and worked to tie the interview questions (see Table 3) to the initial findings from this quantitative data analysis. Once initial analysis was conducted for the quantitative data collected from the survey, the primary research used the findings to inform the initial development of the interview protocol. This piece of the process was a crucial one. The Phase Two instrument (i.e., the interview protocol) was designed to highlight parents' and caregivers' voices with questions directly from their survey responses. An example of how the quantitative findings were used to support updating interview protocol questions involved an important finding: survey respondents who identified as being ethnically diverse (i.e., not White) reported that they were given fewer opportunities by their child's current educational team (i.e., IEP team) to share without interruption during the meeting than White respondents. The interview questions written to explore this finding further were: 1) "Diverse respondents report having fewer opportunities to share without interruption during IEP meetings with their child's current IEP team. Has this been your experience? Tell me more about that, 2) Please describe how your child's current IEP team provides you with opportunities to share (i.e., before, during, and after IEP meetings), and 3) What could your child's current IEP team do to give you more opportunities to share feedback, ideas, and concerns about your child's current services?"

Analyzing the survey data included creating a codebook with each answer option for survey questions separated into individual variables. Once the codebook was completed, the primary researcher used both Google Sheets and SPSS, a software used for statistical analysis, to create visuals of the data and to run chi-square tests for independence. The results (i.e., graphs

and chi-square test summary tables) led the primary researcher to develop six themes: 1) The Importance of Relationships, 2) The Role of Collaboration, 3) The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings, 4) The Truth Behind Positive Experiences, 5) The Need to Find a Communication Match, and 6) The Importance of Community. Draft interview questions were then written to address and further explore each theme.

After engaging with the initial quantitative data and using the findings to inform the development of a draft of the interview protocol, the primary researcher moved into the first phase of instrument development: a conversation with a parent to receive feedback. This conversation took place on March 13 after the completion of the quantitative analysis. To start the conversation, the primary researcher shared the themes identified from conducting an initial analysis of the survey data. The primary researcher explained that the draft interview questions were developed to gain a deeper understanding of the specific experiences reported by survey respondents. The primary researcher also shared that the plan was to interview survey respondents who identified as ethnically diverse (i.e., Nondominant parents and caregivers). The mother expressed her satisfaction with this plan. Much like the meetings during the survey development process, this conversation was unstructured to ensure the mother had space to share her experiences and provide feedback on the interview questions.

To start the conversation, the primary researcher screen-shared the interview protocol and, together with the mother, read through the interview protocol section by section. The primary researcher had already emailed the mother a PDF of the draft interview protocol, so she was familiar with the questions. After reading each interview question, the primary researcher asked the mother for her reaction and feedback. The mother provided clear feedback about the

order of interview questions, the clarity of each question, and the importance of ending the interview on a positive note.

The primary researcher took notes throughout the meeting, encouraging the mother to do most of the talking. Based on the feedback provided, the primary researcher rewrote and reordered the interview questions to ensure each question was written to support parents' or caregivers' understanding of each question. The order of the questions was determined based on which questions would help to initially develop a sense of trust as interview participants moved through the interview.

Once the draft interview protocol was updated based on the mother's feedback and recommendations, the primary researcher shifted into the third phase of the interview protocol development process. The third phase of the interview protocol development process involved the primary research consulting with two experts. The first expert was a researcher knowledgeable in quantitative data collection and analysis, and the second was a researcher knowledgeable in mixed methods research. The first expert provided the primary researcher with feedback and recommendations specific to the initial survey analysis that drove the design of the interview protocol. This expert also provided the primary researcher with confirmation that the themes identified from the initial survey data analysis were valid. Feedback, recommendations, and suggestions were provided via Zoom, comments on Google documents, and email exchanges.

In addition to having extensive knowledge in mixed methods research, the second expert also had expertise in qualitative data collection and analysis. This expert supported the primary researcher by reviewing the initial data collected and analyzed from Phase One and confirmed that the interview questions written would address the qualitative research questions. Plans for

engaging in the integration of both data sets using mixed methods analysis strategies were discussed with this expert. This expert received an updated interview protocol once the primary researcher had integrated their feedback, recommendations, and suggestions post-meeting with the mother during the first phase of interview protocol development.

The same two mothers from a local CBO who helped the primary researcher pilot the survey during the final phase of the survey development process were contacted via CBO staff to seek their support with the piloting process for the interview protocol. The primary researcher offered to meet with these mothers in their community to ensure transportation would not hinder their participation, and the CBO was willing to provide childcare accommodations during each meeting. Interpreters were also available to be present during the piloting process to ensure each mother's feedback was accurately captured. One of the mothers agreed to pilot the interview protocol, but the second mother turned down the invitation.

The meeting to pilot the interview protocol took place on March 19. Like the start of the conversation with the mother in the first phase of the interview protocol development process, the primary researcher started the meeting by reviewing the study and the intended outcomes for the piloting process. The primary researcher informed the mother and her Case Manager, acting as an interpreter that each question would be read aloud before asking for feedback and recommendations to improve clarity and relevance. The piloting process started once the mother and the Case Manager - a mother of a child receiving school-based special education services - indicated they were on board with this plan. Following the piloting process, the primary researcher made minor changes to the interview protocol. Both mothers and the interpreter involved in the interview protocol development process were provided with a stipend.

### ***Participants and Recruitment***

During the interview protocol development process, the primary researcher contacted the survey respondents who indicated on the last screen of the survey that they were interested in being contacted about participating in a follow-up interview. The primary researcher randomly selected 15 survey respondents who provided their names and email addresses. Included in this initial email was a Google form asking for their name, ethnicity, and which language they felt most comfortable being interviewed in. Twelve survey respondents indicated they were ethnically diverse (i.e., Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino/a/e, American Indian or Alaska Native). Eleven survey respondents who submitted the Google form responded to an email from the primary researcher asking for the days of the week and times of day they were available for an interview. The primary researcher contacted five more randomly selected survey respondents who indicated their interest in doing a follow-up interview and scheduled three more interviews, which brought the total number of interviews to 14.

For Phase Two, participants needed to be representative of the diverse population of parents and caregivers of children receiving school-based special education services. With survey respondents comprised of half White (i.e., 54%) and half ethnically diverse (i.e., 46%) parents and caregivers, interview participants needed to identify with the ethnically diverse population of survey respondents to explore their experiences more deeply. All interview participants were from Nondominant communities (i.e., 13 identified as Black or African American and one as Hispanic or Latino/a/e).

The recruitment plan for Phase Two of this study started with identifying survey respondents who indicated their interest in being interviewed at the end of the survey. Once the primary researcher created a list of the survey respondents who indicated via the survey that they would be interested in participating in a follow-up interview, emails were sent to individuals

randomly selected from the list. The email template was drafted and sent to the primary researcher's advisor to review before being sent out to the parents and caregivers who provided their email addresses to be contacted to schedule an interview. The primary researcher sent a second email following up with two potential interview participants who had not responded a week after the initial email.

Diversity among interviewees was necessary for amplifying the voices of families identifying with historically underrepresented and marginalized populations (i.e., Nondominant families). The primary researcher decided to interview only survey respondents who identified as ethnically diverse to further explore their experiences since over half of survey respondents were White (i.e., 54%). The plan for recruiting interview participants was designed to ensure findings were inclusive and representative of the Nondominant population of families receiving school-based special-education services. It was critically important to be able to report findings tied to the experiences of Nondominant parents and caregivers whose voices were largely missing from the current literature.

***Instrument: Interview Protocol***

Participants were interviewed by the primary researcher using an interview protocol of qualitative questions seeking responses to address the qualitative research questions composed for this study. The interview protocol was created using Google Docs, and a copy of the original interview protocol was made and filled out for each individual interview. The interview protocol was designed to take approximately 30 minutes, hoping parents or caregivers would have time to complete the full interview. However, interviewees would be allowed to complete only part of the interview if they ran out of time so that partial data could still be collected. The primary researcher offered several meeting times to ensure each interview was scheduled at the best time

for the interviewees. Providing options for completing the interview that respected each family's time, language, and capacity is necessary and important.

Table 3

*Sample Interview Themes and Questions*

| <b>Section</b>                               | <b>Interview Questions</b>   |
|--|--|
| <b>The Importance of Relationships</b>       | <p>Diverse respondents ranked Relational support - opportunities to meet with other families receiving services - as the least helpful when engaging with their child's current IEP team.</p> <p>Why do you think this type of support was consistently ranked lowest by respondents?</p> <p>Would you say that school-based relationships are as important as the relationships you have outside of your child's school when it comes to making you feel supported as a member of your child's current IEP team?</p>              |
| <b>The Role of Collaboration</b>             | <p>Diverse respondents consistently ranked Collaboration low in comparison to other types of support for engaging with their child's current IEP team.</p> <p>What types of collaboration have been helpful when engaging with your child's current IEP team?</p> <p>What type of collaboration do you wish to have with your child's current IEP team?</p>  |
| <b>The Opportunity to Speak in Meetings</b>  | <p>Diverse respondents report having fewer opportunities to share without interruption during IEP meetings with their child's current IEP team.</p> <p>Has this been your experience? Tell me more about that.</p> <p>Please describe how your child's current IEP team provides you with opportunities to share (i.e., before, during, and after IEP meetings).</p> <p>What could your child's current IEP team do to give you more opportunities to share feedback, ideas, and concerns about your child's current services?</p> |
| <b>The Truth Behind Positive Experiences</b> | <p>Diverse respondents consistently selected "Always positive" and "Mostly positive" to describe their overall experiences engaging with their child's current IEP team.</p> <p>Has this been your experience? Tell me more about that.</p>  |

What has your child's current IEP team done that has led to a positive experience with them? A negative experience?

What would you like your child's current IEP team to do differently to ensure more consistent positive experiences?

**The Need to Find a Communication Match**

Diverse respondents do not feel their child's current IEP team accommodates their communication preferences.

Has this been your experience? Tell me more about that.

Could you share an example of a communication exchange with a member of your child's current IEP team that felt supportive or helpful (e.g., via email, phone, text message, or in person)?

**The Importance of Community**

Many diverse respondents indicated that they do not have a member of their community on their child's current IEP team.

What does community mean to you when working with your child's current IEP team?

How do you feel (or would you feel) about having someone on your child's IEP team who shares your ethnicity?

**Conclusion**

What are three things your child's current IEP team could do to make you feel like the next IEP meeting was a success?

---

***Data Collection and Analysis***

Participant information for each interview was de-identified by replacing names displayed on Zoom with identification codes and using the same identification code for interview protocols, recordings, and transcripts. All electronic information was stored on a password-protected laptop and in a password-protected electronic database to protect confidentiality. Data from the interview protocols completed during each interview was analyzed descriptively (i.e., using thematic analysis) to identify themes within the data and patterns among participant responses. Each interview was recorded via Zoom and transcribed through GoTranscript for data

analysis. The primary researcher filled out an interview protocol to document each interview, making specific notes of things likely missing from a transcript (e.g., participant emotions).

Each transcript was analyzed using thematic analysis based on deductive and inductive coding techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020; Terry et al., 2017). The primary researcher acted as the primary coder and completed consensus coding with a secondary coder (i.e., the primary researcher's advisor) to conduct thematic analysis within each transcript and across all transcripts. This process was conducted in stages (Terry et al., 2017). Across all stages, the primary researcher/coder and secondary coder engaged in ongoing reflection and discussion to maintain minimal bias while analyzing the data collected from the interviews.

In stage one, the primary coder randomly selected two transcripts to read. The primary coder drafted a codebook based on this initial analysis. The primary coder shared the draft of the codebook with the secondary coder and randomly selected two more transcripts for them to read. Both coders took separate notes about themes present in the transcripts they read. This process allowed each coder to become familiar with the transcripts they coded as related to the whole data set. This process was meant to ensure that the themes were aligned with the codes, the data, and the research questions. Themes were defined and named by the primary researcher. This allowed the primary researcher to refer to themes by labels and to provide definitions, and examples that were relevant to and aligned with the research questions and framework (Terry et al., 2017). Four quality indicators, according to Brantlinger and colleagues (2005), for data analysis, were addressed in this stage of the study: 1) participants are appropriate and represented fairly, 2) questions are reasonable, 3) sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality, and 4) data analysis conducted in a meaningful way and connected to related research.

In stage two, the primary researcher confirmed the codebook. The primary researcher developed themes based on the research questions and tied them to the themes identified during the quantitative analysis of the survey data. The notes taken and shared between the primary researcher/coder and secondary coder and the codes agreed upon and established were used to confirm the codes included in the codebook. The primary researcher and secondary coder agreed upon the codebook before the primary coder finished coding all transcripts.

The member-checking process was conducted with participants one month after completing all interviews. Data findings were summarized and sent to participants for verification. Participants were emailed with Yes/No questions about whether they agreed with the findings and asked to edit, add to, or modify them. Eleven of the 14 interview participants engaged in the member-checking process. Ten interview participants responded to the email in agreement with the summary of findings. One participant disagreed with the finding related to parents and caregivers reporting positive experiences with having a member of their community on the IEP team, saying, “Most people do not identify with my family because we are a multiethnic family with more than one special needs child that has a progressive genetic disorder.” Due to their unique situation, this interview participant does not feel like part of a larger community.

### **Mixed Methods Data Analysis: Integration**

Following Phases One and Two of the study, data was compared across both phases. The primary quality indicator implemented for this second round of mixed methods analysis stemmed from the indicators conceptualized by Leko et al. (2022): integration. Before completing both phases of the study, the primary researcher developed mixed-methods-specific research questions to be addressed through the planned relationship between the quantitative and

qualitative phases (Fetters & Molina-Azorín, 2017). During this integration phase, the primary researcher revisited the theoretical framework developed to inform qualitative data collection and analysis and contribute to systematically integrating qualitative and quantitative data (Collins et al., 2012; Kozleski, 2017). Integrating quantitative and qualitative data resulted in qualitzing quantitative data to support identifying patterns, adding descriptive meaning, enhancing reliability, and supporting analysis responsive to a particular population (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2019).

The primary researcher adhered to the guidance of a shared framework when making decisions across all phases of the study and created a joint display to visually represent the work done to integrate data collection across Phase One (i.e., quantitative) and Phase Two (i.e., qualitative), to engage in intentional mixed methods research (i.e., intentional data collection, analysis, and integration; Leko et al., 2022; Love et al., 2021; Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006).

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The study's findings are provided in multiple parts. First, six quantitative findings from Phase One, survey analysis, are identified. Then, the interview protocol development based on the findings from Phase One is described. The themes from Phase Two are then presented as they relate to the analysis conducted. Finally, mixed methods findings related to how the data from Phase One and Phase Two complement each other will conclude the chapter.

### **Phase One (Quantitative) Findings**

The first research question focused on activities parents and caregivers (N = 212) felt increased their engagement, asking, “Do Nondominant families engage through similar activities?” To address this question, demographic information about the participants was presented first, followed by these key findings: 1) The Importance of Relationships, 2) The Role of Collaboration, 3) The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings, 4) The Truth Behind Positive Experiences, 5) The Need to Find a Communication Match, and 6) The Importance of Community. The survey analysis results were presented through data visualization (i.e., charts) and hypothesis testing (i.e., Chi-square tests of independence) related to each identified finding.

### ***Demographic Information of Survey Respondents***

The ethnic composition of the survey respondents influenced choices related to data visualization and running the chi-square tests for independence. Primarily, the decision to compare differences in responses between Nondominant and White survey respondents was made to allow for more equally weighted data analysis. The various ethnic categories (i.e., Black or African American, Asian or Asian American, Hispanic or Latino/a/e, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern or North African, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander) will be

presented under a single category - “Nondominant” - throughout the presentation of survey data results. However, it is necessary to highlight the categories as separate entities initially.

Figures 3a and 3b present information about survey respondents’ self-identified ethnicities. Figure 3a shows there were survey respondents from each ethnic category offered as an option. Black or African American respondents represent the highest population (21%) behind White or European respondents (54%). Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander respondents had the least representation (0.47%), and Middle Eastern or North African respondents were minimally represented (0.94%). Asian or Asian American respondents, Hispanic or Latino/a/e, and American Indian or Alaskan Native respondents were also represented.

As is evident from Figure 3b, White survey respondents made up about half the total respondents, 54%. All other ethnicities were collapsed into a single group— “Nondominant”— making up 46% of total respondents. The decision to create two groups of survey respondents (i.e., Nondominant and White) allowed for more equally weighted data analysis.

Figure 3a

*Survey Respondents - All Ethnic Categories*

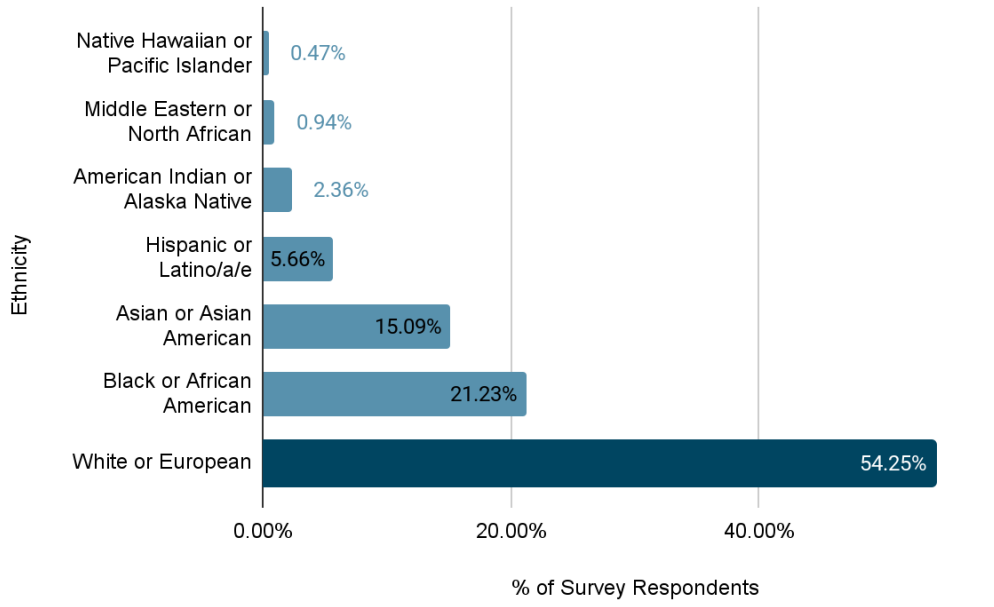
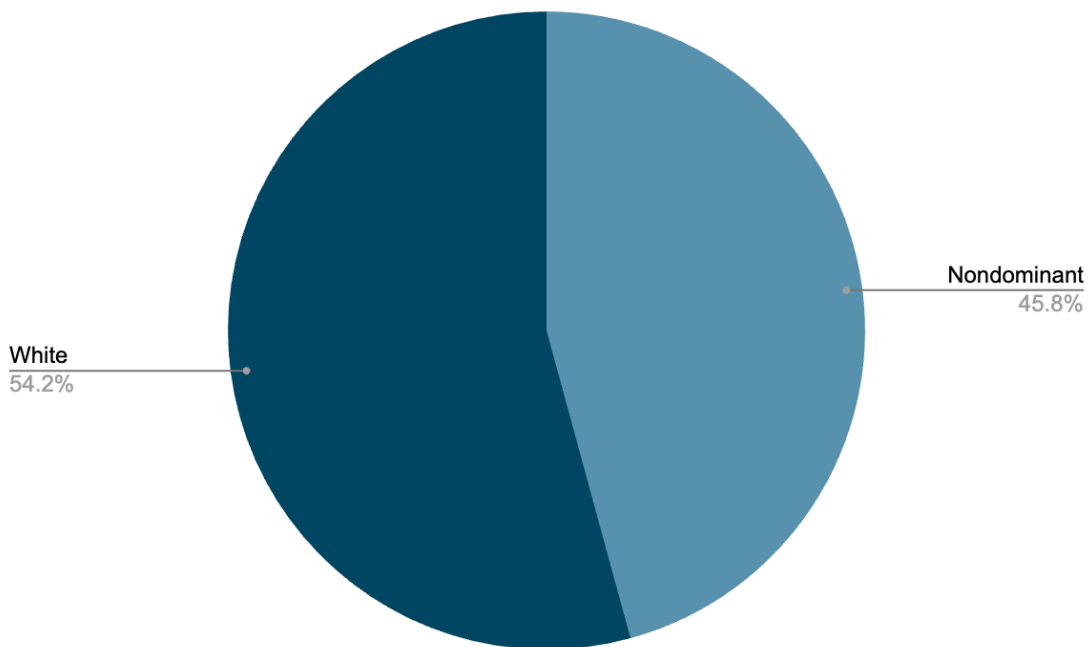


Figure 3b

*Survey Respondents - Nondominant and White*



Survey respondents were asked several questions to develop a more well-rounded idea of each respondent's background, including location (i.e., state), ethnicity, primary language, education, income, and age. Table 4 includes select demographic information provided by survey respondents. Many respondents (i.e., 55%) selected English as their primary language. Thirty-five percent of respondents were between the ages of 34 and 41, but the highest percentage of respondents (i.e., 37%) were 42-49 years old. Regarding education, the percentage of respondents who indicated earning a Bachelor's Degree was equal to those with a Master's Degree (i.e., 34%). Twenty-seven percent of respondents reported their annual income the previous year was between \$88,001 and 190,000. One statistic not included in Table 4 is that 97% of survey respondents indicated being the primary caregiver for their child.

Table 4

*Select Demographic Information - Survey Respondents*

| <b>Demographic Categories</b> | <b>All respondents N (%)</b> | <b>White N (%)</b> | <b>Nondominant N (%)</b> |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Total                         | 212 (100)                    | 115 (100)          | 97 (100)                 |
| <b>Primary Language</b>       |                              |                    |                          |
| English                       | 116 (55)                     | 100 (87)           | 16 (17)                  |
| Arabic                        | 4 (2)                        | 0 (0)              | 4 (4)                    |
| Mandarin                      | 53 (25)                      | 1 (1)              | 52 (54)                  |
| Spanish                       | 16 (8)                       | 0 (0)              | 16 (17)                  |
| Other                         | 23 (11)                      | 14 (12)            | 9 (9)                    |
| <b>Age</b>                    |                              |                    |                          |
| 18-25                         | 3 (1)                        | 0 (0)              | 3 (3)                    |
| 26-33                         | 29 (14)                      | 4 (4)              | 25 (26)                  |
| 34-41                         | 69 (33)                      | 37 (32)            | 32 (33)                  |
| 42-49                         | 81 (38)                      | 53 (46)            | 28 (30)                  |
| 50-57                         | 20 (9)                       | 12 (0)             | 8 (8)                    |
| 58-66                         | 1 (.5)                       | 1 (1)              | 0 (0)                    |
| 66-73                         | 4 (2)                        | 3 (3)              | 1 (1)                    |
| Prefer not to answer          | 5 (2)                        | 5 (4)              | 0 (0)                    |
| <b>Education</b>              |                              |                    |                          |
| Some high school              | 1 (.5)                       | 0 (0)              | 1 (1)                    |
| High school                   | 7 (3)                        | 1 (1)              | 6 (6)                    |
| Some college                  | 15 (7)                       | 10 (9)             | 5 (5)                    |
| Associate's                   | 17 (8)                       | 10 (9)             | 7 (7)                    |
| Bachelor's                    | 73 (34)                      | 30 (26)            | 43 (44)                  |
| Master's                      | 70 (33)                      | 44 (38)            | 26 (27)                  |
| PhD                           | 17 (8)                       | 8 (7)              | 9 (9)                    |
| Other                         | 8 (4)                        | 8 (7)              | 0 (0)                    |
| Prefer not to answer          | 4 (2)                        | 4 (4)              | 0 (0)                    |
| <b>Income</b>                 |                              |                    |                          |
| \$0-22,000                    | 11 (5)                       | 6 (5)              | 5 (5)                    |
| \$22,001-44,000               | 18 (9)                       | 6 (5)              | 12 (12)                  |
| \$44,001-66,000               | 26 (12)                      | 5 (4)              | 21 (22)                  |
| \$66,001-88,000               | 30 (14)                      | 6 (5)              | 24 (25)                  |
| \$88,001-190,000              | 57 (27)                      | 44 (38)            | 13 (13)                  |
| \$190,001+                    | 53 (25)                      | 38 (33)            | 15 (16)                  |
| Prefer not to answer          | 17 (8)                       | 10 (9)             | 7 (7)                    |

### *The Importance of Relationships*

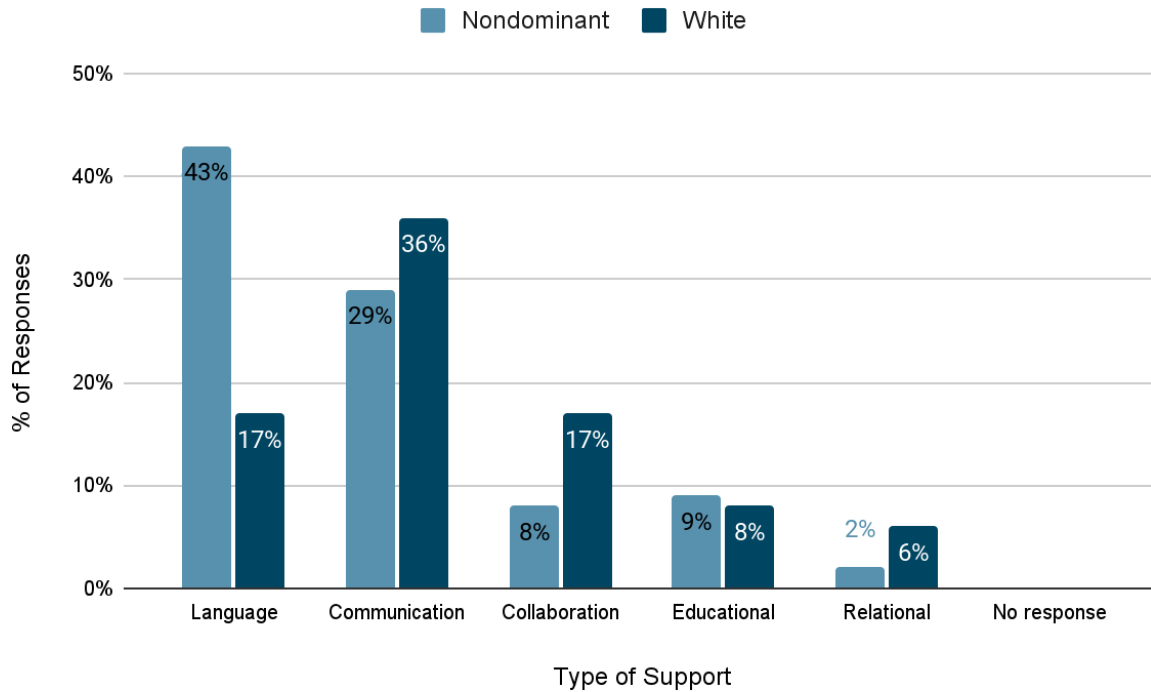
The first identified finding was *The Importance of Relationships*. This finding covers relationships with current IEP team members and those with other parents and caregivers of children receiving school-based special education services. It addresses the original research question by seeking to understand the impact relationships have on how parents and caregivers engage.

Survey respondents were asked to rank the following supports for engaging with their child's current IEP team: 1) Language, 2) Communication, 3) Collaboration, 4) Educational, and 5) Relational. Communication support (i.e., consistent communication from teachers or service providers) was ranked as the most important support by 33% of survey respondents, followed by Language (29%). Survey respondents ranked relational support (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families receiving services) as the least important support (4%). It is important to note that over 13% of survey respondents did not answer this question.

Figure 4 provides an additional layer of data by comparing how Nondominant and White survey respondents ranked each type of support. Nondominant survey respondents ranked Language (i.e., translation or interpretation services, clearly written without too much jargon) highest among supports (43%) and Relational (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families receiving services) lowest (2%), with only two Nondominant survey respondents ranking that support as most helpful when engaging with their child's IEP team. Nondominant and White survey respondents matched in their equally low ranking of Educational support (9% Nondominant, 8% White; i.e., training and workshops specific to understanding the IEP process and presentations for families). Eleven percent of respondents did not answer this question.

Figure 4

*Comparing Ranking of Supports*



Given that relational support ranked the lowest among all survey respondents, the next step was to look at the data on how survey respondents develop relationships—a major component of Relational support. Figure 5 compares Nondominant and White survey respondents’ responses to the question, “How did you develop relationships with other parents and caregivers?” This question gets to the heart of how survey respondents access Relational support.

Nondominant survey respondents indicated that they mostly develop relationships with other parents and caregivers through the PTA (41%) or at school (38%) and are least likely to develop relationships with them outside school (8%). White survey respondents indicated that they mostly develop relationships with other parents and caregivers equally at school (30%) and outside school (30%). At school, both Nondominant and White parents nearly equally selected it

as the place where they are most likely to develop relationships with other parents and caregivers. This question was the most skipped, likely because it was the last question of the survey and because it was only answered by survey respondents who indicated “Yes” to the previous question, “Would you say you have had the opportunity to develop relationships with other parents/caregivers within your child’s school community.”. Thirty-seven percent of respondents did not answer this question.

Figure 5

*Where Relationships Between Families are Developing*

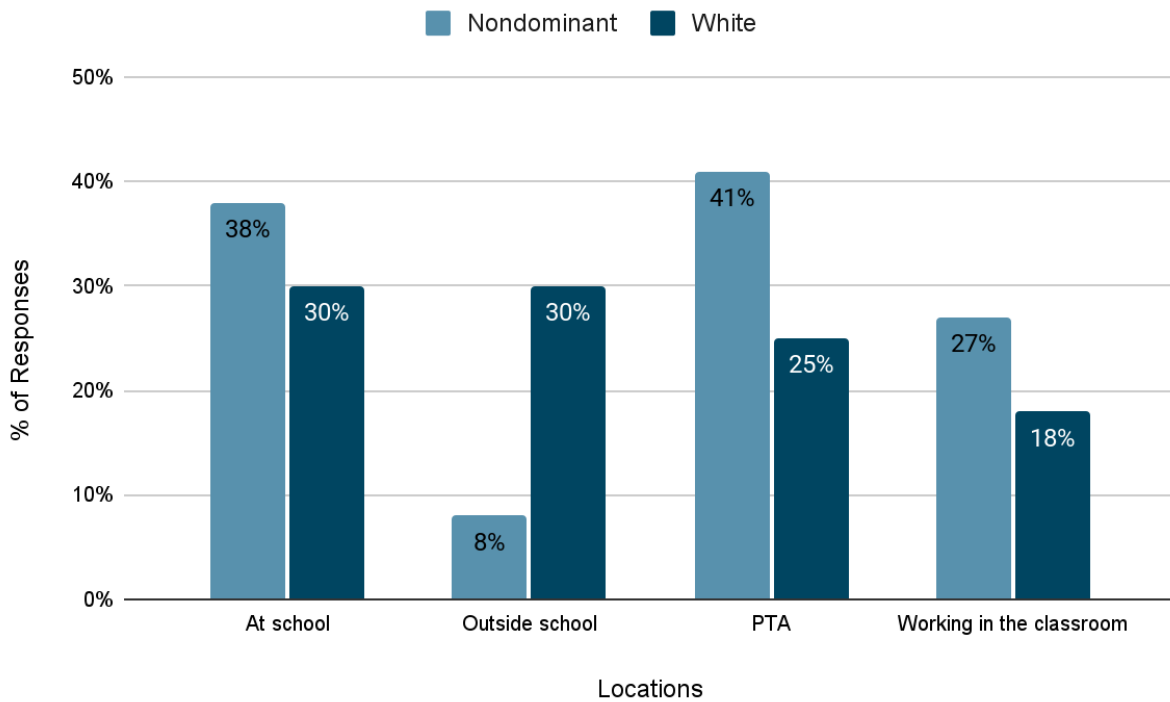
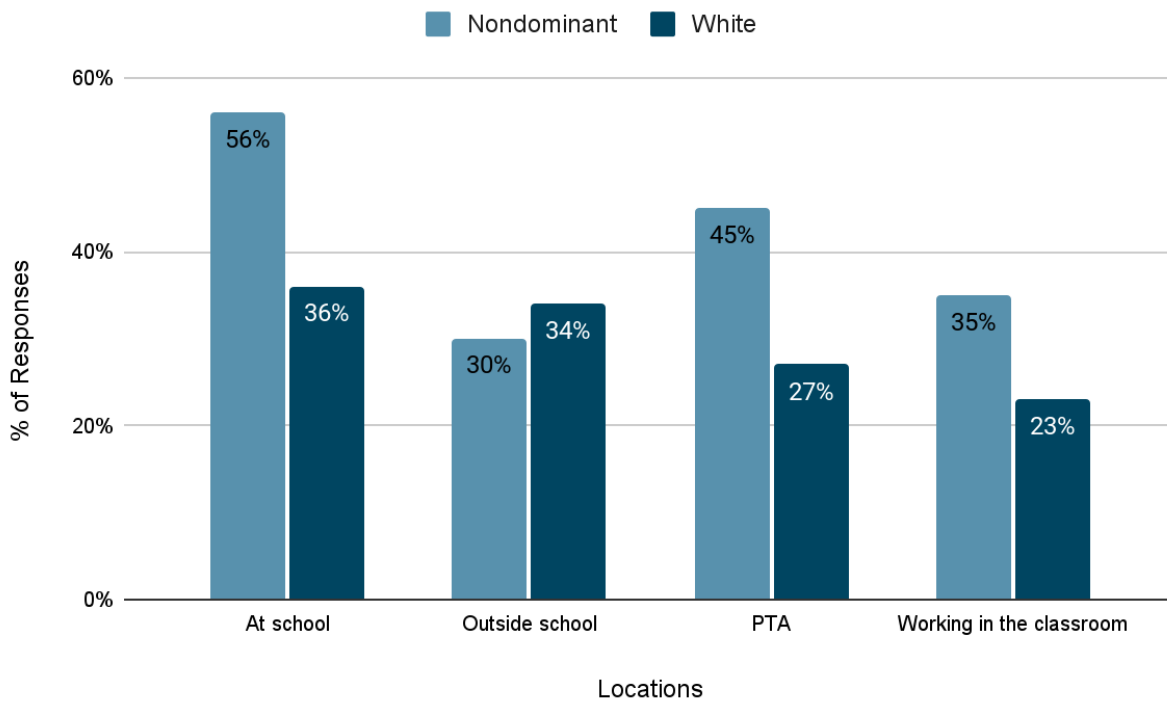


Figure 6 shows where respondents find collaboration outside of IEP meetings. Notably, responses about where the relationship develops (Figure 5) and where collaboration occurs (Figure 6) show consistency. Collaboration at school (56%) and developing relationships at school (38%) were selected by Nondominant survey respondents more often than collaborating outside school (30%; e.g., while chaperoning) or developing relationships outside school (8%).

White survey respondents indicated that they develop relationships with other parents and caregivers outside school (30%) more frequently than Nondominant families (8%), and they also selected collaboration outside school (34%; e.g., while chaperoning) as an important collaborative activity more than Nondominant families (30%). This question was skipped by 22 survey respondents (10%).

Figure 6

*Where Collaboration Is Occurring*



Chi-square tests for independence are used to compare observed results with expected results. The purpose of this test is to determine if a difference between observed data and expected data is due to chance or if it is due to a relationship between the variables you are studying (Pallant, 2005).

The chi-square test for independence results shown in Table 5 confirms the relationship between how survey respondents ranked Relational Support and their ethnic identity (i.e.,

Nondominant or White) for the purposes of this nonparametric test. The null hypothesis developed for this finding states that there is no relationship between the ranking of Relational Support and the respondent’s ethnic identity (i.e., Nondominant or White).

The significance level,  $p = .008$ , was smaller than the significance level chosen for all chi-square tests conducted with and presented in this section ( $\alpha = .05$ ), so the null hypothesis is rejected. The chi-square test results are significant and suggest an association between Relational Support ranking and a parent or caregiver’s ethnic identity. Based on the results, the following statement can be made: An association was found between Relational Support and ethnic identity. However, it is important to note that even though less than 20% of cells have expected cell frequencies of less than 5, the results potentially violated the assumption that all cells met the minimum expected cell frequency.

Table 5

*Chi-square Test for Independence - Relational Support*

|                           | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|--|
| <b>Pearson Chi-Square</b> | 15.555*      | 5         | .008                                     |
| <b>Likelihood Ratio</b>   | 15.982       | 5         | .007                                     |
| <b>N of Valid Cases</b>   | 212          | --        | --                                       |

\*2 cells (16.7%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.58.

***The Role of Collaboration***

The second finding, *The Role of Collaboration*, was identified to further explore the original research question, “Do Nondominant families engage through similar activities?” Since collaboration is tied to engagement, the visuals created, and the chi-square test run continue to

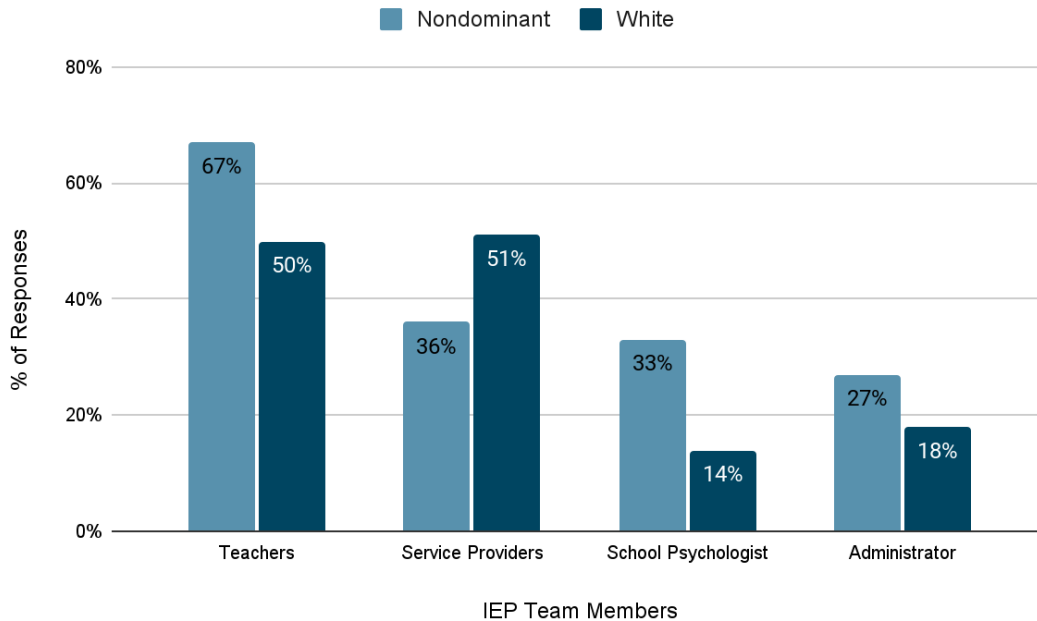
tell the story of how survey respondents engage. In this section, engagement activities are analyzed through the lens of collaboration.

In Figure 7, the data shows that Nondominant survey respondents find their child's teachers to be the most collaborative IEP team members. White survey respondents selected service providers as the most collaborative IEP team members (51%), with teachers close in count (50%). White survey respondents predominantly selected teachers and service providers as the most collaborative IEP team members. Nondominant respondents find teachers to be the most collaborative IEP team members (67%), with school psychologists and administrators half as likely to be selected (<50%). The collaborative activities survey respondents could explain this selection, as shown in Figure 8. Nine percent of respondents skipped this question.

Across all survey respondents, "sharing ideas, concerns, and needs" was selected most often (59%). "Discussing services" was the second activity selected as feeling collaborative (54%). Both activities occur in collaboration with teachers and service providers. "Writing IEP goals," the third most selected collaborative activity (42%), is also something parents and caregivers would do with their child's current teacher and service providers. Only 8% of respondents skipped this question (18).

Figure 7

*Most Collaborative IEP Team Members*

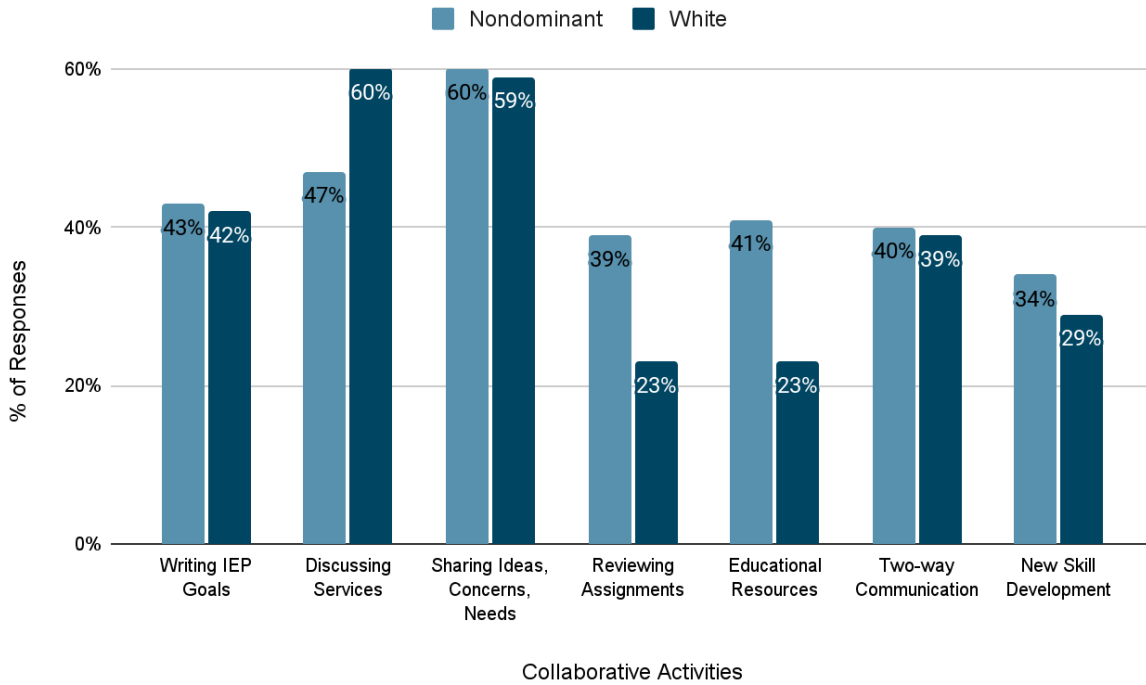


When survey respondents were asked to identify which activities felt collaborative when working with their child’s IEP team, no clear pattern was presented across responses.

“Discussing services” and “sharing ideas, concerns, and needs” were the two activities White survey respondents identified as feeling collaborative. Sixty percent of nondominant respondents chose “Sharing ideas, concerns, needs” most often. Nondominant survey respondents selected “New skill development” at least 34%. The same number of White respondents, 34, chose New Skill Development among the collaborative activities they found least supportive. Overall, responses show similarities in activities that feel collaborative. Survey respondents across ethnicities value collaboration involving opportunities to discuss and share with their child’s current IEP team members. The Chi-square test for independent test results for Collaboration Support is presented in Table 6 to wrap up findings related to collaborative activities and support.

Figure 8

*Collaborative Activities - Related to IEPs*



The chi-square test for independence results shown in Table 6 confirms the relationship between the collaborative activities survey respondents select and their ethnic identity. The null hypothesis developed for this finding is that there is no relationship between the most collaborative activities and the respondent's ethnic identity (i.e., Nondominant or White).

The significance level is  $p = .015$ , so the null hypothesis is rejected. The chi-square test results are significant and suggest an association between collaborative activity selection and a parent or caregiver's ethnic identity. The following statement can be made based on the results: An association was found between selected collaborative activities and ethnic identity. However, it is important to note that even though less than 20% of cells have expected cell frequencies of less than 5, the results potentially violated the assumption that all cells met the minimum expected cell frequency.

Table 6

*Chi-square Test for Independence - Collaboration Support*

|                           | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Asymptotic<br/>Significance (2-<br/>sided)</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|---|
| <b>Pearson Chi-Square</b> | 14.025*      | 5         | .015  |
| <b>Likelihood Ratio</b>   | 14.307       | 5         | .014  |
| <b>N of Valid Cases</b>   | 212          | --        | --  |

\*2 cells (16.7%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.66.

***The Truth Behind Positive Experiences***

The third finding identified through analysis of survey data (i.e., data visualization and Chi-square tests for independence), *The Truth Behind Positive Experiences*, addresses the research question - “Do Nondominant families engage through similar activities?” - from a different perspective. Survey respondents were asked to select the statement that best described their overall experiences engaging with their child’s current IEP team. The statements offered were 1) Always positive, 2) Mostly positive, 3) Sometimes positive and sometimes negative, 4) Mostly negative, and 5) Always negative. Collecting data on overall experiences helped to confirm that data specific to engagement activities led to positive, negative, or neutral outcomes.

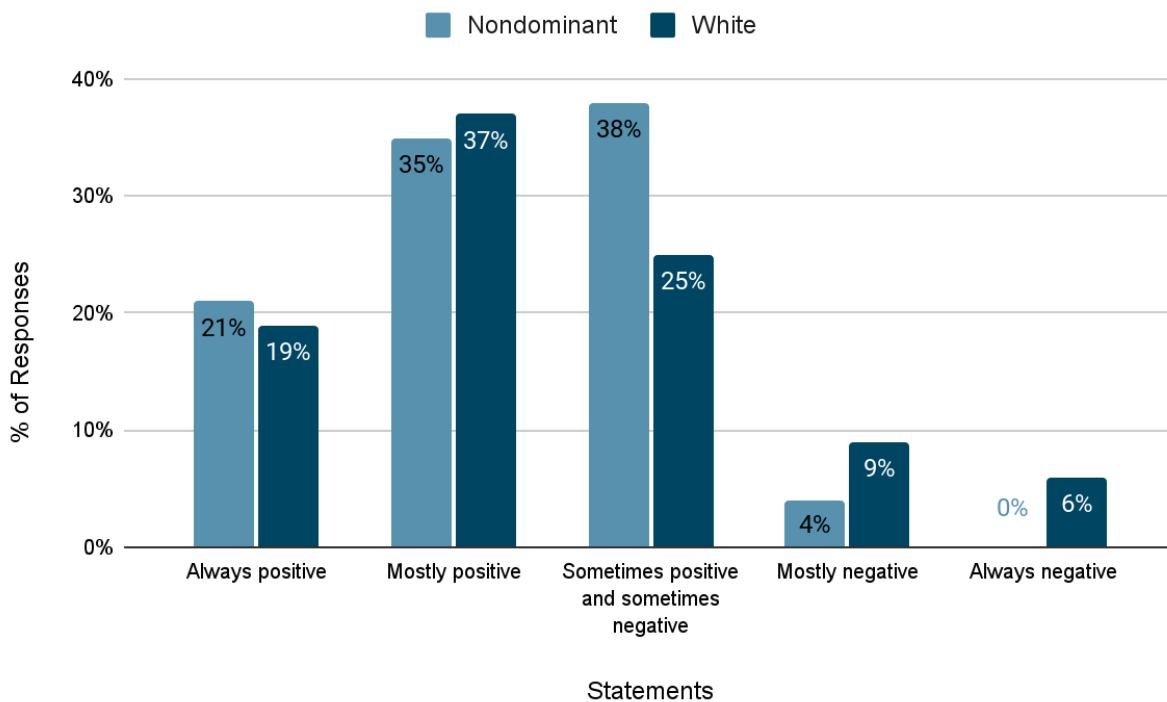
When looking at responses from all survey respondents, “Mostly positive” was the statement selected most often at 36%. Respondents selected “Always negative” least frequently, with only 3% selecting that statement. “Sometimes positive and sometimes negative” was the second most selected statement by survey respondents (32%). The next step was to analyze the data by comparing Nondominant and White survey respondents’ statements.

As seen in Figure 9, White survey respondents selected statements indicative of a spectrum of overall experiences from “Always positive” to “Always negative.” Nondominant

survey respondents did not select “Always negative” to describe their experiences engaging with their child’s current IEP team. And only four Nondominant survey respondents selected “Mostly negative.” Overall, Nondominant survey respondents selected “Sometimes positive and sometimes negative” (38%), with “Mostly positive” a close second at 35%. Overall, White survey respondents selected “Mostly positive” (37%), with “Sometimes positive and sometimes negative” a distant second at 25%. As the first question of the survey, this was the least skipped question, with just 4% of respondents not answering.

Figure 9

*Overall Experiences*



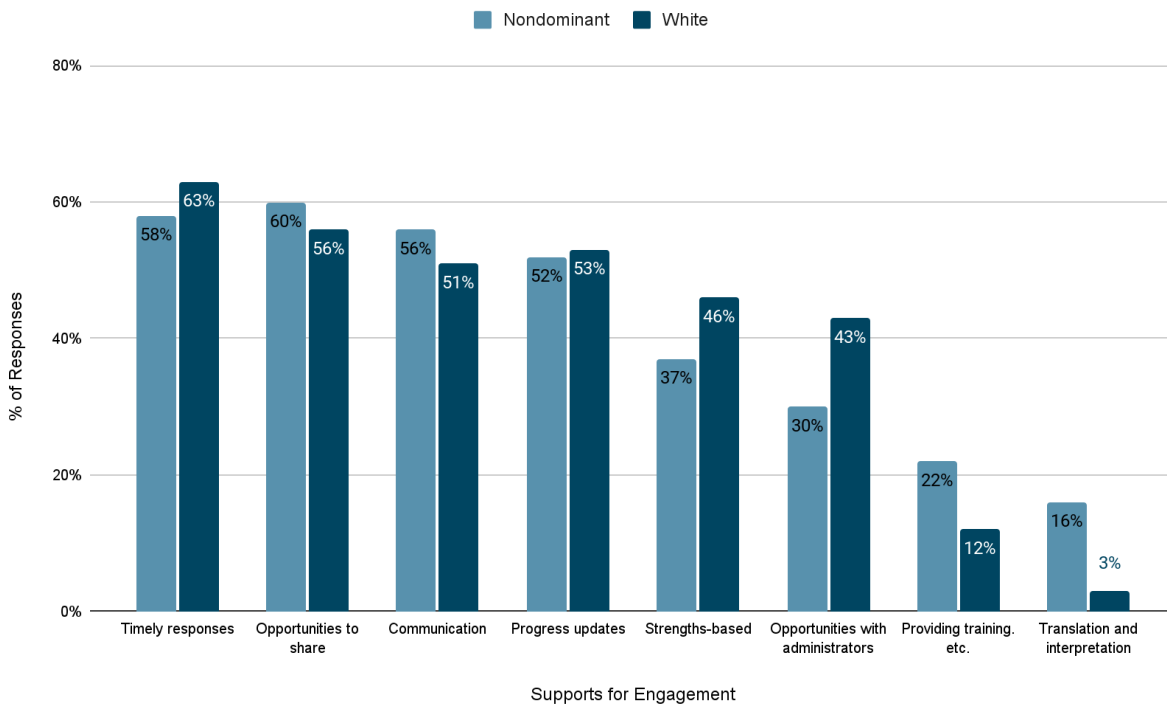
To expand upon survey respondents’ overall experiences, data analysis was conducted to understand the activities parents and caregivers need to be able to engage with IEP teams. Survey respondents were asked to select things their child’s current IEP team had done to make them feel engaged. Figure 10 shows that White survey respondents felt “Timely responses” from

teachers and service providers to requests or questions are necessary to feel engaged (63%). In addition to “Timely responses,” “Opportunities to share,” “Progress updates,” and “Communication” were also selected as important when engaging positively with their child’s IEP team (56%, 53%, and 51%, respectively).

Nondominant survey respondents selected “Opportunities to share” priorities, concerns, and goals (60%) as an important part of engaging with their child’s current IEP team. “Timely responses,” “Communication,” and “Progress updates” were also selected as necessary for engagement (58%, 56%, and 52%, respectively). Overall, data from this question about engaging with IEP teams shows similar selections made by Nondominant and White survey respondents and confirms why teachers and service providers were identified as the most collaborative IEP team members. Five percent of survey respondents skipped this question.

Figure 10

*What Parents Need to Engage*



The chi-square test for independence results in Table 7 confirms the relationship between survey respondents' overall experiences and ethnic identity. The null hypothesis developed for this finding is that there is no relationship between overall experiences engaging with IEP teams and the respondent's ethnic identity (i.e., Nondominant or White).

The significance level is  $p = .056$ , so the null hypothesis is not rejected. The chi-square test results are not significant and do not suggest an association between overall experiences engaging and a parent or caregiver's ethnic identity. The following statement can be made based on the results: An association was not found between overall activities and ethnic identity. Notably, more than 20% of cells have expected cell frequencies of less than 5 (i.e., 33.3% or 4 cells), so the results violated the assumption that all cells met the minimum expected cell frequency.

Table 7

*Chi-square Test for Independence - Overall Experiences*

|                           | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|--|
| <b>Pearson Chi-Square</b> | 10.766*      | 5         | .056                                     |
| <b>Likelihood Ratio</b>   | 13.486       | 5         | .019                                     |
| <b>N of Valid Cases</b>   | 212          | --        | --                                       |

\*4 cells (33.3%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.20.

***The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings***

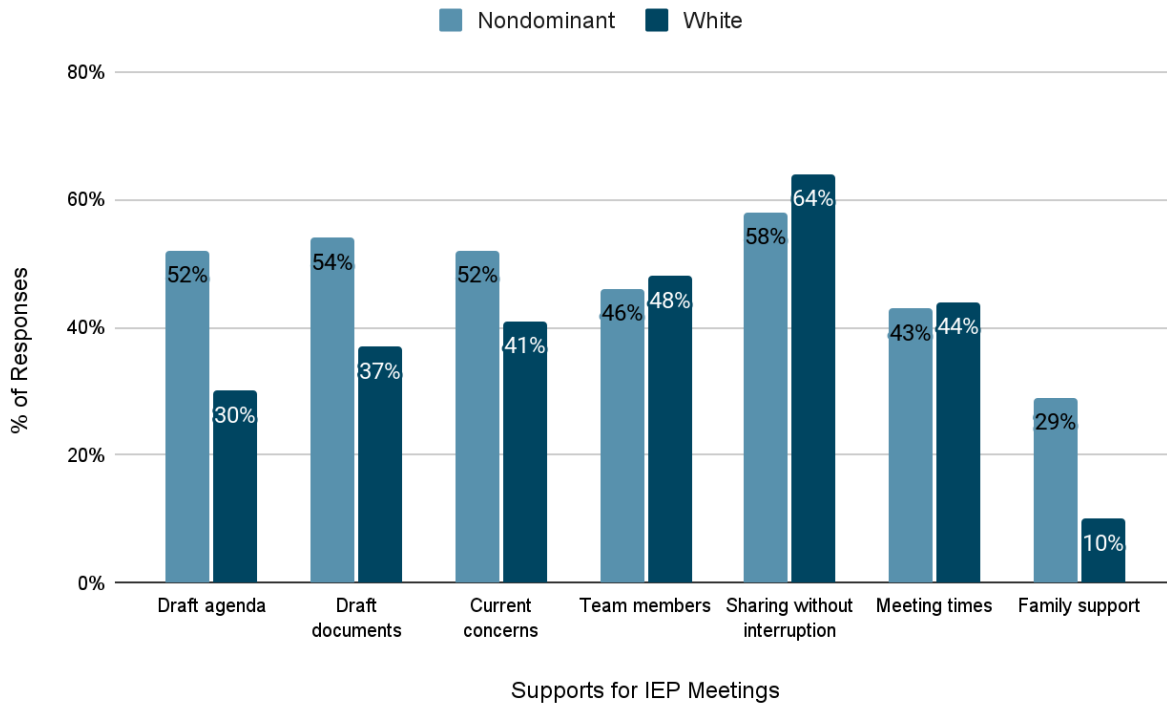
In the previous finding, *The Truth Behind Positive Experiences*, analysis was conducted to understand the things IEP teams do that help survey respondents feel engaged, which may contribute to their reporting having positive experiences. This next finding seeks to pinpoint why

some survey respondents indicated that they have had negative experiences with their child's current IEP team. First, an analysis highlighted how IEP teams make survey respondents feel fully engaged in IEP meetings.

Survey respondents were asked about things their child's IEP team does to ensure parents and caregivers fully engage during IEP meetings. Figure 11 displays the breakdown of how survey respondents answered this question. The item in Figure 11 to focus on is "Sharing without interruption." The highest number of both Nondominant and White respondents selected "Sharing without interruption during the meeting" as something that helps them engage. Seventy-four survey respondents who self-identified as White indicated that their child's current IEP team allows them to share during IEP meetings without being interrupted. Of the 115 White survey respondents, 64% reported being able to share without interruption. By comparison, 56 Nondominant survey (58%) respondents indicated that they could share without interruption. To further explore things IEP teams can do to make parents and caregivers feel fully engaged, Figure 11 breaks down what can be done to build partnerships that lead to engagement. Fourteen survey respondents did not answer this question.

Figure 11

*How IEP Teams are Engaging Parents*



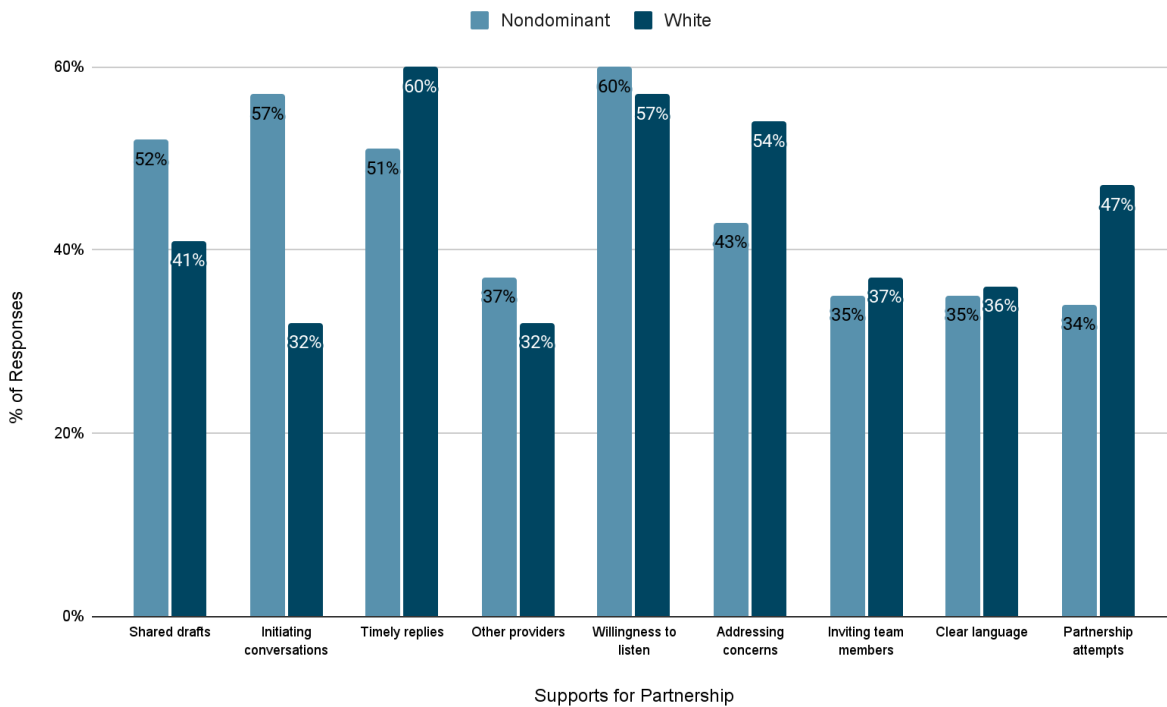
As shown in Figure 12, when asked to indicate the ways their child’s current IEP team has made them feel like an equal partner, White survey respondents selected “Timely replies” most often as an action that makes them feel like an equal partner in their child’s education (60%). Closely following that primary choice, White survey respondents selected a “Willingness to listen” and respond to the feedback they provide (57%) and “Addressing concerns” you have shared with them in a timely manner (54%) as close second and third actions necessary to feel like equal partners.

Nondominant survey respondents primarily selected an IEP team’s “Willingness to listen” and respond to the feedback they provide as an important part of feeling like an equal partner in their child’s education (60%). The second answer option most selected by

Nondominant survey respondents was “Initiating conversations to check in with you about your priorities, concerns, and goals for your child (57%; i.e., in person, through email, over the phone). These selections are related in that they involve communication, which will be further discussed as part of the data analyzed in association with the next finding, *The Need to Find a Communication Match*. Six percent of respondents skipped this question.

Figure 12

*How IEP Teams Build Partnerships with Survey Respondents*



The chi-square test for independence results shown in Table 8 confirms the relationship between survey respondents’ having opportunities to speak without interruption during IEP meetings and their ethnic identity. The null hypothesis developed for this finding is that there is no relationship between having opportunities to speak without interruption and the respondent’s ethnic identity (i.e., Nondominant or White).

The significance level is  $p = .129$ , so the null hypothesis is not rejected. The chi-square test results are not significant and do not suggest an association between opportunities to speak without interruption and a parent or caregiver’s ethnic identity. Based on the results, the following statement can be made: An association was not found between opportunities to speak without interruption and ethnic identity. It is important to note that the results did not violate the assumption that all cells met the minimum expected cell frequency.

Table 8

*Chi-square Test for Independence - Opportunities to Speak Without Interruptions*

|                           | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|--|
| <b>Pearson Chi-Square</b> | 4.094*       | 2         | .129                                     |
| <b>Likelihood Ratio</b>   | 4.157        | 2         | .125                                     |
| <b>N of Valid Cases</b>   | 212          | --        | --                                       |

\*0 cells (.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 6.41.

***The Need to Find a Communication Match***

To continue the findings in the data specific to communication and its ties to engagement and partnership, this next finding will discuss the importance of finding a communication match. Survey questions related to communication covered the current types of communication respondents have received (i.e., phone, text, email, in person), respondents’ communication preferences, and whether IEP teams are accommodating these preferences. Communication is a foundation for collaboration, developing partnerships, and building relationships.

Figures 13a and 13b show basic data that, while simple, is important to IEP teams and parents or caregivers seeking to build partnerships, develop relationships, and engage as equal partners. For both Nondominant (82%) and White survey respondents (86%), communication via

email was the most common. Communicating via text occurs the least (41% of White respondents selected it, and 30% of Nondominant respondents).

This is not surprising considering that for a related question about attempts by teachers or service providers to build partnerships with parents and caregivers, Nondominant and White survey respondents selected “Exchanging phone numbers to text or talk provide updates about your child at school and/or for you to provide updates about your child at home” less often than the other two options (i.e., 19 survey respondents selected exchanging phone numbers versus 22 and 24 respondents who selected the other two options respectively).

It is worth noting that 101 White survey respondents indicated their communication preferences are being accommodated, with 79 Nondominant respondents reporting having their preferred type of communication accommodated. Fourteen respondents skipped both questions about communication preferences and how accommodating their child’s IEP team has been.

Figure 13a

*Current Communication*

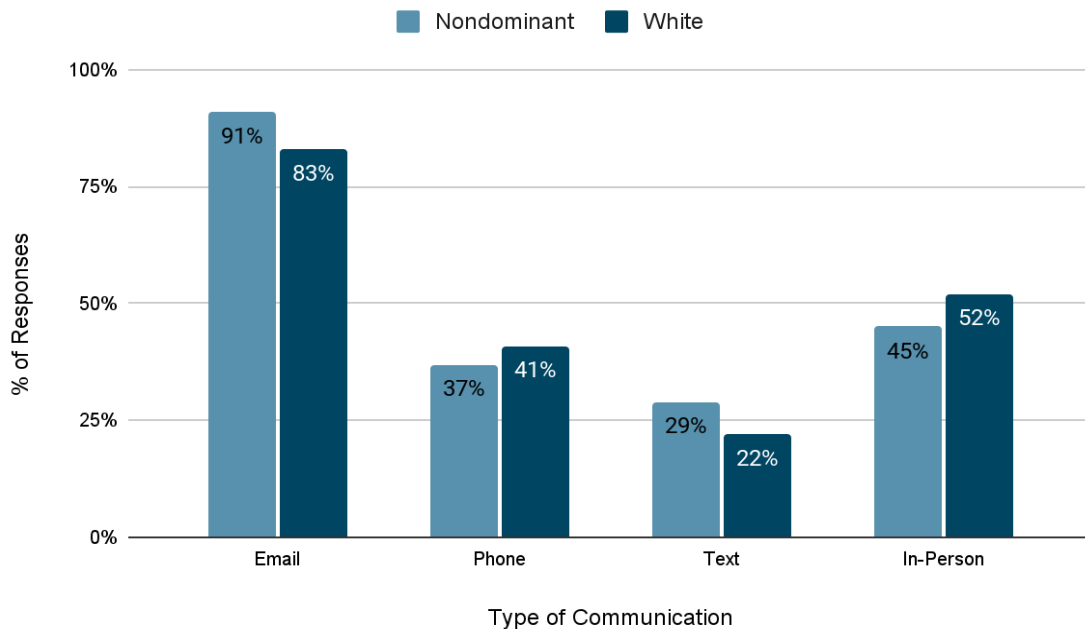
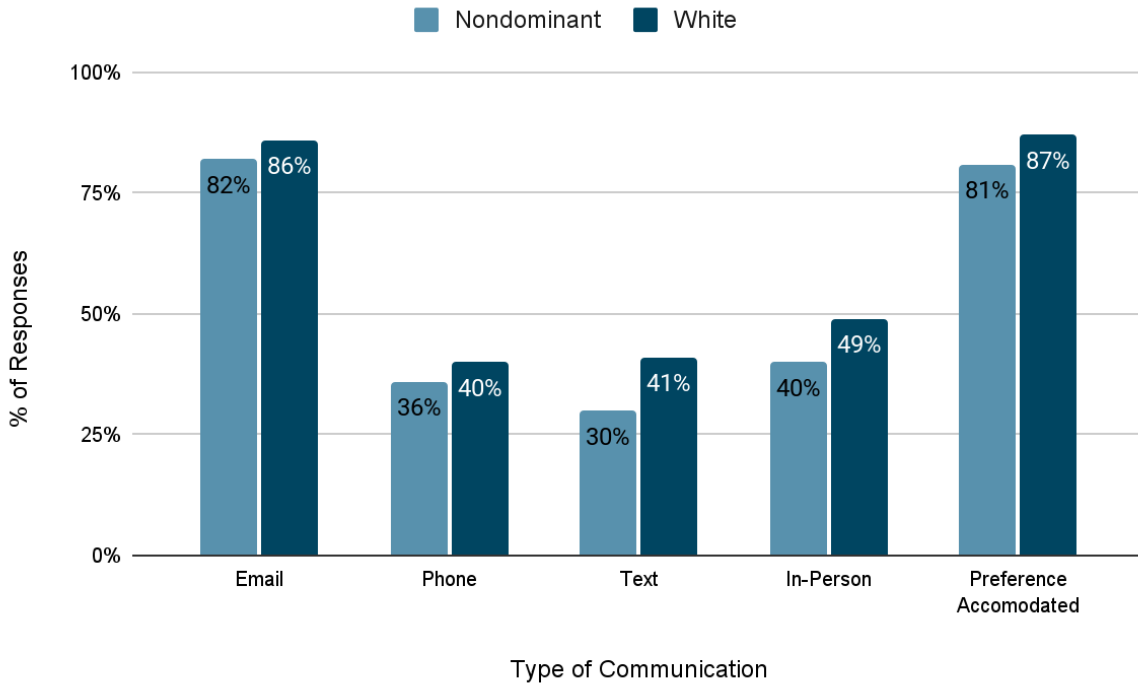


Figure 13b

*Preferred Communication*



The chi-square test for independence results in Table 9 confirms the relationship between communication support and a survey respondent's ethnic identity. The null hypothesis developed for this finding is that there is no relationship between communication support and the respondent's ethnic identity (i.e., Nondominant or White).

The significance level is  $p = .443$ , so the null hypothesis is not rejected. The chi-square test results are not significant and do not suggest an association between communication support and a parent or caregiver's ethnic identity. The following statement can be made based on the results: An association was not found between communication support and ethnic identity. However, it is important to note that even though less than 20% of cells have expected cell frequencies of less than 5, the results potentially violated the assumption that all cells met the minimum expected cell frequency.

Table 9

*Chi-square Test for Independence - Communication Support*

|                           | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Asymptotic<br/>Significance (2-<br/>sided)</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|---|
| <b>Pearson Chi-Square</b> | 4.785*       | 5         | .443  |
| <b>Likelihood Ratio</b>   | 4.853        | 5         | .434  |
| <b>N of Valid Cases</b>   | 212          | --        | --  |

\*2 cells (16.7%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.83.

***The Importance of Community***

For the final finding, the idea of community is explored within the data. Analyzing the data started with looking at The Importance of Relationships, then exploring The Role of Collaboration, followed by diving into responses related to *The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings*. Understanding data tied to The Truth Behind Positive Experiences led to understanding The Need to Find a Communication Match. And now, before presenting the results of analyzing data related to The Importance of Community, revisiting the original research question is necessary: Do Nondominant families engage through similar activities? This final finding will wrap up the efforts to ensure the analysis has fully addressed the research question.

Figure 14 displays two related data sets resulting from the questions: 1) Is someone on your child's current IEP team a member of your community (i.e., shares the same culture and/or language as you)? and 2) Is this the same person from your child's current IEP team you developed a partnership with? The graph shows a clear discrepancy between answers provided by Nondominant survey respondents and White survey respondents. Nondominant parents and caregivers responded "Yes" to both questions half as much as White parents and caregivers. In

other words, White respondents are 50% more likely to have a member of their community on their child’s current IEP team and the opportunity to develop a partnership with this person. Nine percent of respondents did not indicate whether they have a member of their community on their child’s current IEP team. It is important to note that the second question, “Is this the same person from your child’s current IEP team you developed a partnership with?” was only available to and answered by survey respondents who selected “Yes” for the previous question, “Is there someone one you child’s current IEP team who is a member of your community?”

Figure 14

*Developing Partnerships with Community Members on IEP Teams*

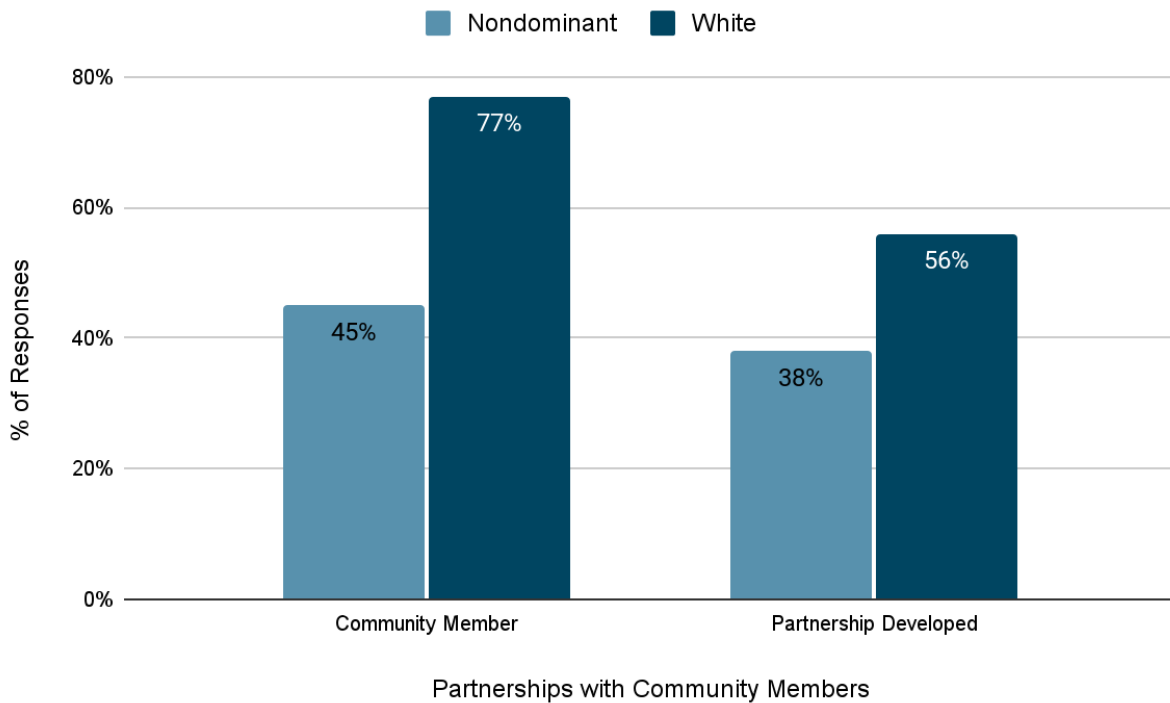
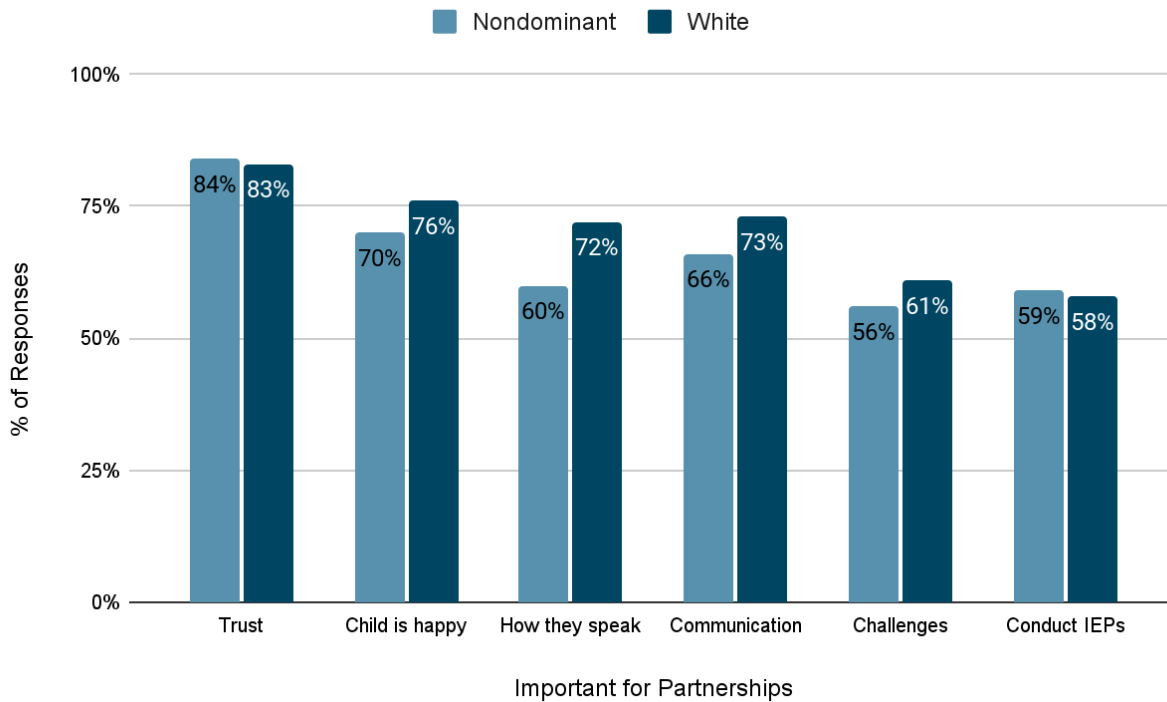


Figure 15 shows the individual components necessary for parents and caregivers to build a sense of community with their children’s current IEP teams. For both Nondominant (84%) and White (83%) survey respondents, Trust was selected as the most important component. Chi-square tests for independence were run for each component, and the two statistically significant

components were “How they speak about your child” and “How they communicate with you (i.e., strengths-based; sharing goals, strategies, etc.).” Both statistically significant components align with other data analyses in this section. Survey respondents consistently selected answer options related to communication. Specifically, how people speak or allow them to speak, share, or discuss ideas, goals, and concerns. Survey respondents also consistently selected answer options highlighting collaboration. For example, collaboration support was defined as working together, sharing updates, and sharing resources. Nine percent of respondents did not answer this question.

Figure 15

*Important for Building Community with IEP Teams*



The chi-square test for independence results in Table 10 confirms the relationship between how an IEP team member speaks about a child and a survey respondent’s ethnic identity. The null hypothesis developed for this finding is that there is no relationship between

how an IEP team member speaks about a child and the respondent’s ethnic identity (i.e., Nondominant or White).

The significance level is  $p = .002$ , so the null hypothesis is not rejected. The chi-square test results are significant and suggest an association between how an IEP team member speaks about a child and the parent or caregiver’s ethnic identity. Based on the results, the following statement can be made: An association was found between how an IEP team member speaks about a child and ethnic identity. It is important to note that the results did not violate the assumption that all cells met the minimum expected cell frequency.

Table 10

*Chi-square Test for Independence - How They Speak About Your Child*

|                           | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|--|
| <b>Pearson Chi-Square</b> | 12.178*      | 2         | .002                                     |
| <b>Likelihood Ratio</b>   | 12.369       | 2         | .002                                     |
| <b>N of Valid Cases</b>   | 212          | --        | --                                       |

\*0 cells (.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.69.

The chi-square test for independence results in Table 11 confirms the relationship between communication in developing partnerships and survey respondents’ ethnic identity. The null hypothesis developed for this finding is that there is no relationship between communication in developing partnerships and the respondent’s ethnic identity (i.e., Nondominant or White).

The significance level is  $p = .017$ , so the null hypothesis is not rejected. The chi-square test results are significant and suggest an association between communication in developing partnerships and a parent or caregiver’s ethnic identity. The following statement can be made

based on the results: An association was found between communication in developing partnerships and ethnic identity. It is important to note that the results did not violate the assumption that all cells met the minimum expected cell frequency.

Table 11

*Chi-square Test for Independence - Communication in Developing Partnerships*

|                           | <b>Value</b> | <b>df</b> | <b>Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)</b> |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|--|
| <b>Pearson Chi-Square</b> | 8.185*       | 2         | .017                                     |
| <b>Likelihood Ratio</b>   | 8.336        | 2         | .015                                     |
| <b>N of Valid Cases</b>   | 212          | --        | --                                       |

\*0 cells (.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 8.69.

**Summary**

Nondominant survey respondents ranked Language (i.e., translation or interpretation services, clearly written without too much jargon) highest among supports for engagement (43%) and Relational (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families receiving services) the lowest at 2%. Nondominant survey respondents indicated they mostly develop relationships with other parents and caregivers through the PTA or at school (38%) and are least likely to develop relationships with them outside school (8%). The chi-square test for independence results indicated an association between Relational Support and ethnic identity.

Survey respondents across ethnicities selected opportunities to discuss (54%) and share (59%) with their child’s current IEP team members as the two most supportive activities when collaborating with their child’s current IEP team. The data shows collaboration is important to parents and caregivers within school contexts. The chi-square test for independence results indicated an association between selected collaborative activities and ethnic identity.

White survey respondents selected statements indicative of a spectrum of overall experiences from “Always positive” to “Always negative.” Overall, Nondominant survey respondents selected “Sometimes positive and sometimes negative” (38%), with “Mostly positive” a close second (35%). For White survey respondents, the data was reversed, with “Mostly positive” (37%) selected most and “Sometimes positive and sometimes negative” a distant second (25%). The chi-square test for independence results indicated no association between overall activities and ethnic identity.

Sharing without interruption during IEP meetings was the most selected support for feeling engaged. Of the 115 White survey respondents, 64% can share without interruption. By comparison, 56 Nondominant survey respondents indicated they could share without interruption, equaling 58%. The chi-square test for independence results indicated an association was not found between opportunities to share without interruption and ethnic identity.

Communicating via text occurs the least, but Nondominant survey respondents indicated using this type of communication more than White survey respondents. Out of 115 White survey respondents, 101 indicated that their communication preferences are being accommodated, with 79 out of 97 Nondominant respondents reported having their preferred type(s) of communication accommodated. The chi-square test for independence results indicated no association between communication support and ethnic identity.

White respondents are 50% more likely than Nondominant survey respondents to have a member of their community on their child’s current IEP team and the opportunity to develop a partnership with this person. Trust was selected as the most important component for both Nondominant and White survey respondents. Chi-square tests for independence were run for each component, and the two statistically significant components were “How they speak about

your child” and “How they communicate with you (i.e., strengths-based; sharing goals, strategies, etc.).”

### **Mixing for Development**

Analyzing survey data produced several important outcomes for developing the interview protocol (Phase Two). The first was specific to survey respondents’ approaches to relationships (i.e., relational support and relationships outside their child’s school). In addition to findings tied to the relationships, other findings highlighted the roles of collaboration, communication, and community as they related to specific interactions with IEP teams and broader experiences overall.

Each quantitative finding presented in the previous section was used to develop questions for the interview protocol utilized for data collection during Phase 2. The interview protocol questions were designed to expand upon the findings from the quantitative data analysis conducted. For example, there was a quantitative finding about how survey respondents can speak, share, or discuss ideas, goals, and concerns during IEP meetings. This finding was the basis for the interview protocol questions about participants’ experiences with being interrupted during meetings and how they have been able to share ideas, concerns, and/or feedback related to an IEP meeting. The next section will present a breakdown of the qualitative themes that were extracted or that emerged from the data collected from interview transcripts.

### **Phase Two (Qualitative) Findings**

The second research question explored, “How have families’ experiences impacted their engagement with school-based special education services?” The interview aimed to collect qualitative data that amplified the voices of the 14 randomly selected Nondominant survey respondents (i.e., parents or caregivers). The following themes, driven by quantitative findings,

informed the development of the interview protocol used to guide each interview: 1) The Importance of Relationships, 2) The Role of Collaboration, 3) The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings, 4) The Truth Behind Positive Experiences, 5) The Need to Find a Communication Match, and 6) The Importance of Community.

These quantitative findings served as initial qualitative themes and provided the basis for the initial thematic analysis conducted. These six themes drove deductive coding, while inductive coding revealed additional themes. Each theme will be presented, described, analyzed, and elaborated on through direct interview quotes. Some quotes were selected to represent commonalities identified across interview participant statements. The codes presented below stem from the themes frequently appearing throughout interview transcripts. All interview participants were assigned a participant ID.

### ***The Importance of Relationships***

The codes related to the importance of relationships include 1) Relational Support and 2) Relationships Outside School. Transcripts were coded specifically to interview participants' neutral, positive, or negative statements. These three categories were designed to allow for further comparison across participants' responses.

#### **Relational Support - Neutral**

Several instances across all interviews occurred when a participant shared a neutral statement or opinion about relational support. When participants were asked why they thought survey respondents consistently ranked relational support (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families whose children receive school-based special education services) lower than other types of support, their responses were hypothetical in nature.

One interview participant stated, “I think [when it comes to meeting] other families...our services are different, so our problems are different” (01-03-20). A couple of participants provided responses in which they sought to understand the perspective of survey respondents who ranked relational support low even though they felt it was an important type of support. This first response alluded to the low ranking being the result of negative experiences:

Personally, I think meeting with family is another good way to help, but since it was ranked the lowest, I think it's just maybe bad experiences they've had. Maybe they tried to get to know them and it was a little bit difficult, or they found out the parents were not being straightforward or truthful with them. I think those can be the reason why they feel it should be ranked low. (13-03-27)

This second response indicated that they thought meeting with other families could be a positive experience for some:

For me, it's a personal rating. It may be low for some people and high for some people...it's a time to meet with other families and get to understand other people, what they are passing through and to also share your feelings with them and they share theirs with you. I think you could help each other from doing that. (11-03-26)

This interview participant’s response included both a positive and negative side to experiencing relational support: “I think we can both share our experiences, but at times, if it [be]comes to[o] personal, then I start to feel uncomfortable. I often have that” (03-03-21). Adding, “I often have that,” made this response the most personal of the responses coded as neutral.

### **Relational Support - Positive**

There were a few positive statements about relational support coded across all transcripts. A theme that runs through these positive statements is sharing. One participant felt it would be

helpful to share experiences: “I think meeting other families, asking them questions, and sharing their experience will be really helpful to learn from what they are passing through” (01-03-20).

Another participant referred to sharing specifically about their children, saying:

We are going to come out with a good plan of taking care of our children well and would share the things our children are going through, the problems. We are going to share between us and would know the next step to do and next step to support our children. (06-03-25)

The third participant who spoke about relational support positively would connect with other families by “sharing stories and tips on how to make our lives better” (09-03-26).

### **Relational Support - Negative**

Of the 14 interview participants, several made negative statements about relational support. These negative statements coded across transcripts included more detail than the neutral or positive statements made. Many negative statements included the interview participant's actual negative experience when meeting with other families. In other words, while the neutral and positive statements were made in a mostly hypothetical sense, the negative statements were rooted in experiences.

This first negative statement about relational support involves expectations not being met when meeting with other families:

I, personally, had a bad experience while I met with other families, because when you meet with other families, you have this expectation. You want to get something. You want answers to your questions, but when you get there, you didn't really get [it]. I'll say that was one of the reasons why it was ranked the lowest. I thought I would get answers to my questions because I saw them as someone who had more experience than I had.

[When] I got there, I didn't get answers to my questions. It just made me have more questions that were left unanswered. (08-03-26)

The interview participant who made the statement above sought relational support from families they thought would answer their questions and provide expertise as parents or caregivers with more experience. After engaging with these families, their disappointment led them to rank relational support lowest among the various types of support available.

A second interview participant shared a negative experience meeting with other families and took their critique of the process further. This participant felt that a parent they interacted with was rude, sharing, “I feel like the people that ranked it low, maybe they didn't have good experience meeting other parents. I had like a bad experience meeting [with] parents. I didn't like the way she talked. She was just talking so rudely” (12-03-27). While the participant did not elaborate past stating that the other parent was rude, this negative experience was enough for them to rank relational support in general lowest among supports.

Two interview participants indicated that privacy or discretion is more important than sharing information to engage with other families. One of these two participants stated they felt uncomfortable discussing things about their child with others. They felt that “...you won't be able to talk freely” (14-03-29). The second participant included the importance of privacy in their negative statement about relational support stating, “...other families may not be willing to hear some crucial things, information about their child. Many people are discrete with [such] information” (10-03-26). This participant asserted, “I believe strongly that that's the reason why [survey respondents ranked relational support low]”.

Three interview participants referred to their child[ren]'s needs as the reason they had negative feelings about meeting with other families. One participant felt that their children's

challenging behaviors held them back from seeking out opportunities to engage in relational support, stating, “I think it's ranked low because if we have challenging behaviors or needs from our kids, it can be very difficult to have opportunities to gather, and share, and support each other” (04-03-23). A second interview participant shared that they try “...to keep [their] child away from other family just so you can control your own child” (02-03-20). While both interview participants held back from engaging with other families due to concerns about their child[ren]’s behavior, another participant’s concerns were specific to the mobility support their child requires to leave their home:

...it's sometimes difficult to go out in public places...it's not going to be much chance for me to meet people outside my home, unless they come to me...my oldest is in a wheelchair. He has mobility issues. Getting physically out of the house just requires a lot of equipment. It's just a little bit more work and effort to get out of the house versus staying in the house. (07-03-26)

For all three interview participants, the expectation of a negative experience while meeting with other families (i.e., managing challenging behaviors or mobility concerns) led them to rank relational support lowest among the support parents and caregivers find most engaging. All three interview participants confirmed that their negative experiences led them to rank relational support lowest.

### **Relationships Outside School - Neutral**

Across transcripts, codes specific to interview participants’ feelings about the importance of relationships outside of their child’s school as compared to those developed with the faculty and staff providing their child’s school-based special education services were categorized as neutral, positive, or negative statements. Neutral statements made by interview participants felt

that outside relationships and relationships within their child's school were equally important.

One participant shared:

Yes, every relationship, it's really good. Relationship, I would say is the first thing and the most important thing, no matter who you have those relationships with. I think having relationships with people outside school and in the school where your child stays or your child learns is really nice, and it's as important as having those relationships with your family. (13-03-27)

As is clear from this quote, the participant felt strongly about establishing relationships with the individuals at their child's school and with family and others outside the school environment.

Another participant reinforced the importance of balancing relationships outside of and within their child's school by stating, "...it's important for you to have good relationships in school and with families and friends. I would say they're both important" (08-03-26). While this participant felt relationships were important, another participant focused on their happiness in relation to others and shared, "I don't care which relationship. What I'm really after is just being happy. Being in a school relationship or outside family or with other friends, once it makes me happy, then I'm okay with it" (03-03-21).

### **Relationships Outside School - Positive**

Many interview participants made positive statements about establishing relationships outside their child's school. These participants felt that relationships with friends, family, and others from their communities were more important and supportive than with teachers and other families from their child's school. It is important to note that while their statements focused on the positive aspects of relationships outside their child's school, they did not include negative comments about interactions at their child's school.

Two participants included a positive statement about their child's teacher. Still, they ultimately felt that relationships with friends and family were more important: "You having a relationship with your child's teacher is good because you get first-hand information about your child's progress" (09-03-26) and "Those relationship[s] [with] the teachers, they're going to tell me how my child is behaving in school" (06-03-25). The other interview participants prioritized relationships outside their child's school.

Interview participants consistently shared that relationships with friends, family, and community members provided a sense of intimacy, trust, and identity. This interview participant pointed to a discrepancy in intimacy between relationships outside their child's school and those within, stating:

The way you go about with your friends and family, there is a very big difference there with the school. The school, you're only taking your child there to care and also acquire the knowledge, but in the family, you have that intimacy. (02-03-20)

A participant likened their friends and family to a "village" of support for their child by sharing that, "I would say the family relations are more important because with my children...they need a level of supervision, I'm not able to just have anyone be a part of the community of helping to be in their village" (04-03-23). This quote highlights that the participant's positive statement about relationships outside school stemmed from their need to trust the individuals supporting their child in their absence.

According to another participant, "Relationships [outside school] are really important because at the end of the day, they're the ones that would help" (09-03-26). This participant acknowledged that a relationship with their child's teacher is important and said that discussing

schoolwork with other parents was nice, but, ultimately, sought help from the individuals outside their child's school.

As for community identity, an interview participant stated that relationships are important "especially with the community, because that's where [my child is] based, they identify with the community" (12-03-27). This final positive statement summarized why most interview participants found relationships outside of school more important: the strength and trust they feel within their community.

### **Relationships Outside School - Negative**

There was one instance of coding a negative statement about relationships outside school across all interviews:

For me, the relationship with the IEP team in the school, it's [more] important than the relationship outside the school, because in the school, they get support from teachers [and] other professionals. They...teach them positive things and support them educationally. When it comes to the outside world, they meet so many people [who] might just look down on them. Won't really understand their feelings outside the school world. (11-03-26)

This statement was interesting because it highlights two things: 1) how relationships within the school lead to positive feelings and 2) how relationships outside the school can lead to negative experiences. Unlike the interview participants' positive statements, which focused on what their friends, family, and community offer rather than stating negatives about their child's school, this statement did the opposite. For them, the school was a place of positivity and support, and their community was potentially a place of negativity and a lack of support for their child.

Overall, interview participants had negative feelings toward relational support (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families) and positive feelings about finding support from relationships outside their child's school (i.e., friends, family, and community). Relationships are important to parents and caregivers of children receiving school-based special education services, but there is a spectrum of support across which interview participants identified.

### ***The Role of Collaboration***

The code related to the role of collaboration was Collaboration Experiences. Transcripts were coded specific to neutral, positive, or negative experiences relayed by interview participants. Interview participants were asked about the types of collaboration with their child's current IEP team that they found supportive and made them feel like equal partners.

#### **Collaboration Experiences - Neutral**

The statements about experiences with collaboration coded as neutral allude to a lack of consistent collaboration with their child's current IEP team. For example, one participant stated that they "collaborate with the teachers" in the event "any issue or any problem comes up with my child...they *might* be able to keep me posted on it" (02-03-20). Another participant shared that collaboration is friendly, but meetings occur "*not really often*" (08-03-26). The third participant summarized the collaboration they have experienced as, "*Once in a while*, I get email, but I would like the email to be a regular thing, not just a *once-in-a-while something*" (12-03-27). Overall, neutral statements indicated participants wanted more collaboration even if they felt good about the types of collaboration they received.

#### **Collaboration Experiences - Positive**

Positive statements made by participants about collaboration experiences were positive and therefore coded accordingly. These statements include satisfaction with feeling heard, seeing

improvements, experiences with success, and a common understanding. One interview participant shared that their child's current IEP team has listened to them:

I feel like I have a very good team for him because I was able to identify what I believed he needed as a one-on-one. I told [the team] that I felt like he needed someone that looked like him. I didn't care if it was male or female but they needed to be African American. I preferred it to be an African American male, and they listened. They listened. (04-03-23)

This participant's experience collaborating was positive because the team listened to them. Other participants felt their experiences were positive because they saw improvements - in their child and, in the case of this participant, in themselves:

They've actually made life easier. When I started, [it was] not actually easy having him with that disability but with the relationship with [the team], I think it's improving a lot.

There's actually positive improvement now and I'm happy with it. (03-03-21)

Another participant associated seeing their child experience success as the result of positive collaboration. This participant summarized their positive experience by saying, "He's being more successful because...they're willing to collaborate" (04-03-23). Participants attributed their positive experiences to a team's willingness to collaborate, which can lead to a common understanding that paves the way for future positive collaboration.

As this participant stated, "If we collaborate well, [then we have] a good understanding supporting collaboration and quality understanding" (11-03-26). Such quality understanding stems from "sharing ideas, concerns, and things your child needs for the progress of your child" (13-03-27) and making parents and caregivers feel like a part of the team. One participant shared

a story about their child's current IEP team members taking turns bringing snacks to each meeting:

They would put [the snacks] in the center of the table and they would say, "Oh, we brought these for everybody." I felt included. I think, "Oh, okay. I'm part of the team." Something as simple as just laying some snacks [out and] say[ing], "Hey mom, you're welcome to have one." Then you would just feel a little bit more open. (07-03-26)

This anecdote highlighted how even a seemingly small offering can positively impact parents and caregivers participating in IEP meetings. Overall, a common theme across positive statements was interview participants feeling like part of their child's current IEP team.

### **Collaboration Experiences - Negative**

While positive statements were associated with being treated like an equal partner, negative statements centered around interview participants feeling left out of opportunities to collaborate and communicate. While this interview participant stated that the team was "trying," they also sensed, "They don't want me to know what is actually happening. I feel bad about it because at times, I feel like as a parent, I need to know what is really wrong" (03-03-21).

While this interview participant felt badly about being left out, another participant indicated that, even though they share ideas and concerns, they were ignored:

I won't say they've been very cooperative. The fact that most of your concerns that you share with them, they are not acted upon, they just look at it as if you are just talking most of the time. These are real concerns that need to be acted upon. I would say they are not really cooperative. (12-03-27)

This participant's statement indicated that their child's current IEP team failed to engage in actual collaboration, relying on the performance of letting the parent or caregiver talk without making real changes through collaboration.

Another participant shared a story about a negative experience stemming from a mismatch in collaborative efforts. This participant shared that they received many calls from their child's school in response to his behaviors. They attempted to collaborate with the team by sharing ideas about how to address his more challenging behaviors, but rather than listen and collaborate, the team just continued to call when his behaviors were becoming challenging. The participant's response to the team was:

"I can't continue to take calls in the middle of my workday or show up in the middle of my workday and think that I'm still going to have a job. I need you guys to collaborate.

He needs a one-on-one." (04-03-23)

The participant finished the story, stating, "I feel like once I identified that, it became a situation in which they actually began to listen". This participant had to threaten to no longer answer their phone to push the team to collaborate with them (i.e., listen and act on their ideas) and collaborate with one another. The statements coded as negative experiences with collaboration all have one thing in common: a lack of feeling treated as a collaborative partner.

Overall, interview participants' statements about their experiences collaborating with their child's current IEP team provided either clear anecdotes about successful experiences or negative stories in which IEP teams attempted to collaborate but were never able to ensure consistent opportunities for parents and caregivers to feel like equal partners.

### ***The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings***

The code related to opportunities to speak in meetings was Opportunities to Speak/Share. Transcripts were coded based on neutral, positive, or negative experiences interview participants shared specific to speaking during or sharing in relation to IEP meetings. Interview participants were asked about their experiences being interrupted while speaking or sharing during a meeting.

### **Opportunities to Speak/Share - Neutral**

Overall, neutral opportunities to speak or share were coded based on interview participants stating that their child's current IEP team does make attempts but ultimately fails to see those attempts all the way through. These neutral statements could be summed up by this interview participant stating, "I think for now they're doing their best. They're doing their best for now" (05-03-25). Another participant expanded on this initial statement by asserting, "The team is actually trying [and] I can't actually put the whole blame on them. They're trying to...build greater opportunities...when we have our meetings, they try to tie me along" (03-03-21). These interview participants' statements lacked either total positivity or total negativity. Simply put, they seem to have accepted the efforts but were frustrated over no real opportunities being provided.

This participant also acknowledged efforts being made by sharing that "Maybe parents are not given opportunity to speak, or if at all they are given opportunity to speak, they don't get to express themselves fully" (09-03-26). Yet again, this statement was neutral because the participant indicated that opportunities may have been provided, but not to the fullest extent.

### **Opportunities to Speak/Share - Between Neutral and Positive**

Interview participants made no clear positive statements about opportunities to speak or share. However, there were statements in which the interview participants felt positive about

their efforts to speak or share. The following statements fall somewhere between being neutral and having positive aspects.

This first statement provided a concise summary of how interview participants felt about being able to speak or share in IEP meetings without being interrupted. The participant asserted that "...when they don't interrupt, allowing you to hear your opinions and all of that. To me, that's a very, very great-- It's a very positive one for me" (10-03-26). This same participant also concisely stated feeling "...good because they allow me to share my opinion".

A common theme across statements coded as positive was respect. Some interview participants felt respected because of their experience in special education. Other interview participants shared about interactions that led to their earning the team's respect and having positive experiences.

This participant had worked as a special education teacher before becoming a parent, sharing, "I think I'm well respected. I try to do my part with certain things just from things that I remember when I used to do IEPs" (07-03-26). This participant felt that their experience as a special education teacher earned them respect from their child's current IEP team.

Another participant working as a special education advocate shared, "My personality is one where you're going to listen to me. I'm also a person that just works in the advocacy field, so I'm not scared to say, "No, I need to speak" (04-03-23). Much like the participant who previously worked as a special education teacher, this participant had the opportunity to speak without interruption in IEP meetings because they felt comfortable doing so because of their profession.

Interview participants whose professions were outside the field of special education attributed their being able to speak without interruption to their personality, with one participant stating:

Speaking in meetings, it's not really for everyone, but I always speak in meetings. I don't feel scared. Sometimes you get interrupted because some people tend to be rude and whenever they don't just like your opinion, they just interrupt you. (08-03-26)

This participant had experienced being interrupted, but they refused to let those experiences stop them from speaking up and asking not to be interrupted in subsequent conversations. Not all statements coded as positive were purely positive experiences, but the participants who made the statements indicated feeling positive about their experiences.

### **Opportunities to Speak/Share - Negative**

Other interview participants interrupted while speaking during an IEP meeting made statements coded as negative because they felt negatively about the experience. For example, this participant stated, “Yes, I've been interrupted. Like I wasn't given the opportunity to share [during] my child's IEP. That has really made me feel so much bad. Not speaking out what my child is going through, that has really made me feel bad” (06-03-25).

Another participant shared a statement that highlighted their overall negative experience speaking during IEP meetings:

Most times, I get interrupted by the IEP team. Most times, they tend to get the meeting done faster. They won't really give me the opportunity to express myself as I want to. Most times, also, they'll talk over me. Since they are professionals, they feel they know more than me, know more than I do. The opportunity given to me to talk at that time is very slim. (11-03-26)

This participant expressed frustration over their child's current IEP team asserting their knowledge and failing to provide them with consistent opportunities to speak. This same sense of

frustration was a common theme across the statements coded as negative. Another participant shared:

Yes, it's something very particular to these IEP meetings. Most of the time, you can be speaking, and they just tell you your time is up. At the end of the day, you end up not even sharing your concerns and what you really need to say. (12-03-27)

Both participants address the issue of time as being a contributing factor to their being interrupted. Other participants attribute the lack of opportunities to speak was the result of people being rude:

I want to speak or express myself in meetings, but often times, I get interrupted. I just find it rude. I think it's not nice. It just brings someone down. I've experienced that before, and it's not really nice. It's a very bad thing because you prepare yourself before coming to the meeting to share opinions, and when you get to the meeting, even before expressing yourself, you've been interrupted rudely. (13-03-27)

Another participant echoed this sentiment by saying, “That's why I don't like going there. They always interrupt while I'm talking, which is very bad. I'm always being interrupted, which I really dislike” (14-03-29). Overall, negative statements about opportunities to speak or share during IEP meetings were filled with participants reporting their frustration over being interrupted and feeling bad about how they were treated.

### ***The Need to Find a Communication Match***

Three codes were included to explore finding a communication match: 1) Communication Preferences, 2) the accommodation of Communication Preferences, and 3) Communication Exchange Examples. The second set of codes related to accommodating an interview participant's communication preferences was split between accommodated and not.

The third set of codes, examples of communication exchanges, were also divided into positive and negative categories.

### **Communication Preferences**

Coding communication preferences did not involve interview participants' feelings or experiences tied to communicating with their child's current IEP team. The process of coding communication preferences was specific to statements about the type(s) of communication each participant preferred. Communication preferences shared by interview participants varied, from a preference for in-person communication to a preference for emails only.

Participants who prefer in-person communication explained their preference as "...something that can be flexible. I can meet the teacher in my child[']s school visually and share the experience [with them]" (01-03-20). Or "A face-to-face meeting is really helpful. You get to just notice their reaction to questions you ask, like the facial expressions, so face-to-face is really helpful" (09-03-26). As is evident from these quotes, participants who indicated a preference for in-person communication appreciated the opportunity to share the moment and found facial expressions to be helpful.

One participant stated a preference for communication via online platforms, like Zoom: "I can be busy sometimes. Going in-person [doesn't let] me do some things I have to do at home, even at work. When it's online, I would be able to be doing things, then I'll listen to what they're saying and that would be great. [It's] better than in-person. (06-03-25)" Convenience was a theme across participant's responses, with another participant saying, "For convenience's sake, just an email would be nice also" (09-03-26). Other statements from interview participants who prefer email were equally concise: "They call me. Sometimes, they email me...Very helpful" (02-03-20). And "Yes, email is my preferred way" (11-03-26).

Regarding participants who prefer phone calls, statements included how *nice* it is to receive a call from a team member. One participant shared, “Mostly, they call, and it's really nice of them to call” (08-03-26). And another stated, “A phone call would be nice because you just listen to their voice” (09-03-26).

### **Communication Preferences - Accommodated**

This next code was assigned to statements made by interview participants indicating that their child’s current IEP team accommodates their communication preferences. Many of the interview participants who answered this question felt accommodated, with one stating, “They text me. Like when they call, that means something really must be wrong. They know to text me or send me an email. Then if it's an escalated situation, they know to go ahead and call me” (04-03-23). This participant’s statement made it clear that their child’s IEP team not only accommodated their communication preferences but that the type of communication they used (i.e., text or phone call) was an immediate indication to the participant what type of situation was occurring with their child.

Another participant shared a specific story to represent just how accommodating their child’s current IEP team was:

I haven't had any problems with them accommodating. This year, for my oldest child, our family caught COVID for Halloween, and I had the IEP meeting scheduled [that] week. It was the night before our IEP meeting, and I messaged the teacher. She said, it's not a problem and we made it a Zoom meeting. (07-03-26)

While this participant’s experience was the result of a one-time situation, it was clear that the team was consistently accommodating, and the participant knew this request for accommodation would not be any different.

This participant was pleased overall with their team's commitment to being accommodating: "My IEP team, yes, they are really nice when it comes to phone calls. They always call. When they can't get to you, they email you. I'll say they're always good in that aspect" (13-03-27). Another statement summarizing a participant's overall experiences with being accommodating was: "The experiences have been very wonderful. Most times we meet in person. When the schedule is very tight, we do it online. It has been a very great process communicating with my IEP team" (05-03-25).

### **Communication Preferences - Not Accommodated**

Interview participants who reported that their communication preferences were not being accommodated generally felt that the lack of accommodation stemmed from IEP teams communicating in ways that were easiest or most accessible to them. For example, one participant stated, "Most times, we do meet up in-person. I actually didn't like that. I spoke to her [about] meeting online but she said it's better she meets in-person" (06-03-25).

Another shared that they:

...really wanted to have them send me weekly updates via email, but they tend not to do that. It can be really frustrating because you really just want to know what's going on with your child while in school, but you're not getting that information as regularly as you want. (09-03-26)

Both participants told their teams what they preferred, and both felt frustrated that their teams did not accommodate their preferences.

A third participant summarized this feeling of frustration over not being accommodated by saying:

I feel that they just go with what works best for them at the moment because there are

times when I really just want to share my concerns or what I noticed, but I don't get to do that because the teachers always seem so busy, they seem so dismissive. (12-03-27)

The participants who reported not being accommodated often felt like a team was “dismissive” of their preferences.

### **Communication Exchange Example - Positive**

Examples of communication exchanges between interview participants and IEP team members that were coded as positive had a common theme: team members holding space for parents and caregivers. For example, “Me and my child, we sit together, we talk to the school counselor who was explaining what is going on, the way forward to come out of this problem. That was really helpful” (01-03-20). Another example was a statement made by a participant who “felt something was wrong” with their child:

That was one of the positive experiences I've had with this team. I just shared my concern with them, and someone was there to listen and just calm me down, and try to treat all my concerns and just tell me that everything's going to be all right and okay, and just gave me advice. (09-03-26)

And finally, a participant talked about one team member in particular who is “always showing extra care, one-on-one asking me and showing concern. That's really one that stood out for me” (10-03-26). Overall participants appreciated feeling like they were given time with an IEP team member who made them feel heard and supported.

One participant shared about a time they had been interrupted during an IEP meeting and how a team member checked in after to see how they were feeling:

One time, I was interrupted in the meeting. She was rude and stuff like that. Immediately after the meeting, I just got home and got a call and I was like, what's the call for? I just

left the meeting. They just called to apologize and they felt that it was also rude for someone to interrupt. I felt bad from being interrupted, but immediately after the call, I just felt loved and I was really, really happy. (08-03-26)

This story felt significant because the participant felt such strong, positive emotions directly after having had such a negative experience because a team member reached out to apologize.

### **Communication Exchange Example - Negative**

Examples of communication exchanges that were coded as negative all included participants feeling evaded by team members. For example, one participant shared that their attempts to communicate with members of their child's current IEP team were:

...mostly negative because I'm not being given a chance to explain myself and I want to ask questions, so I always feel bad. I think that's why it's mostly negative. When I got there, I went for the first time, second time, third time, and I feel I'm not allowed to talk or explain my emotions, express myself. (14-03-29)

Much like this participant, who has had multiple negative experiences when attempting to communicate with an IEP team member, another participant often feels rushed when trying to make opportunities to share:

Mostly face to face, like when I get to pick up my child from school, I just noticed that they tend to rush through these engagements, and it's not meant to be like that. It's just nice [to have] a designated time when they can hear your concerns and listen to [your] feedback, but now the opportunities are not being given. (09-03-26)

This participant was not being given "designated" opportunities to communicate with members of their child's IEP team, and their attempts to communicate concerns and share feedback left them feeling rushed.

Finally, a participant told a story about a time they felt “disconnected” when they did not receive the feedback they had requested:

It was a face-to-face conversation. I was just trying to get her to tell me [about] the assignment that was given. I noticed that it's something [my child was not] familiar with, he was so disconnected, and I had my concerns. The next day when I was picking him up [from] school, I was trying to explain and trying to understand what is happening for him. I didn't get the feedback I wanted-- or how would I put it? The conversation was not forthcoming enough. (12-03-27)

This story aligned with the general theme of participants feeling frustrated with and disconnected from their child’s current IEP team because their communication preferences were not consistently accommodated or respected.

### ***The Importance of Community***

The codes associated with the importance of community included 1) Community and 2) Community Member on IEP Team. For the second code only, transcripts were coded depending on the interview participants' neutral, positive, or negative responses to having a community member on their child’s current IEP team. The first code, Community, was treated as a single code and was assigned to participants’ descriptions of their preferences for community.

#### **Community**

For some interview participants, the idea of community centers around commonality. For example, one participant shared their vision of the community as “a group of people [who] become one characteristic or take [up] common characteristics” (01-03-20). Another participant asserted that they see community as:

...a group of people you understand or group of people that share the same opinion, the same knowledge, the same language as you. Having those kind of people in the meeting, you feel reassured and you're not scared of expressing yourself. (13-03-27)

While both participants' descriptions of the community include sharing commonalities and characteristics, the second quote moved past the concept of community and into the importance of being a member of a community.

The importance of being a member of a community is evident in this next statement: "I define it upon my children being able to look at their educator and see themselves in some way" (04-03-23). This participant appreciated having the opportunity to ensure their children see themselves represented as members of their community and their IEP team. Another participant made a similar statement about the importance of seeing oneself reflected in a community:

Community to me would be seeing someone that I just share the same color as you, just give you one kind of security, and just someone that actually shares your belief and your color and would drive what concerns you, that's a community for me. (09-03-26)

These statements indicating an appreciation of being part of a community that shares common characteristics, knowledge, language, and ethnicity, leads directly to the next sections, which coded participants' feelings about having a member of their community on their child's current IEP team.

### **Community Member on IEP Team - Neutral**

A few interview participants made neutral statements about having a member of their community on their child's current IEP team. These statements were coded as neutral because they did not indicate positive or negative feelings. For example, one participant stated, "I'll not feel okay, or sometime I'll feel okay depending on how the person behaves and how the person

reacts to me and my child” (01-03-20). A similarly worded statement from another participant was: “I am not a biased person. Having someone [from my community], I feel like we should understand each other. I feel like having [someone from my community] or not does not necessarily mean any huge difference [for me]” (10-03-26).

Another participant asserted that they simply want “good” people, regardless of whether they are people from their community or not, stating:

Depending on the behavior and how the person presents himself or herself to me, that's when I can say, "Okay, I don't want this person. [Or] this is the person I want." I'm not choosing anyone. Anyone can come. The person [does not need to] be from my own culture or my ethnic[ity] or from my race. No, no. I don't want that. If you are good, then you can come [and work with] my child. (06-03-25)

### **Community Member on IEP Team - Positive**

The following statements interview participants made in response to being asked how they would feel about having a member of their community on their child’s IEP team were overwhelmingly positive. There was no question among these participants that having a member of their community with them on the team would be anything other than a positive experience. One participant provided a concise statement summarizing this sentiment: “It would be very nice and comforting” (09-03-26).

Some participants’ statements focused on how having a member of the community on the IEP team would have a positive impact on their child:

Yes, someone being from my community, it's going to be helpful to my child. In most cases, you might even relax your mind that you have someone you know very well around your child, because you just take it to be your family member. (02-03-20)

Another participant echoed this same sentiment by saying:

It's an added advantage to the child, having someone that speaks the same language, have the same beliefs. The child would tend to really be free with such a person. The person would really help out in supportive ways, being able to share in other languages with the child and to make the child feel very welcomed that he has these community members around him. (05-03-25)

These participants' statements made it clear that having a member of their community working with their child would be helpful and very welcome, specifically for their child's needs.

Other participants' statements centered around how having a member of their community on the IEP team would have a positive impact on their experiences engaging during meetings and with team members. This participant did not hold back their positive feelings when saying:

I'll feel so happy and delighted because we can get to understand. Because when [they] see me, see my race, you feel happy to see me and I feel happy to talk [with] you more. Because I think seeing someone of the same race actually opens more, there's more communication than someone that's not in the same race. (03-03-21)

Another interview participant shared a specific example of the positive impact of having members of their community on the IEP team:

It's really cool. The principal is African American. [My child's] special education teacher is African American. Two of the parents that are part of the team, they're African American. I definitely feel like at both schools, that both of my sons are able to see themselves in their [special education] team. (04-03-23)

The final two statements highlight an increase in confidence the participants experienced because of having a member of their community present on the IEP team. The first statement indicated that:

It was really amazing because I didn't really feel down anymore. I felt bold and confident when I wanted to speak because normally, I always feel I wasn't heard enough or they wouldn't get what I wanted to say. With people who hear me, people with the same ethnic background as I am, I felt more confident and more bold.

And similarly, this same participant stated:

I feel more confident when speaking, and I feel supported. It's nice for you to go to a meeting and you feel like someone has your back, someone's supporting you, someone listens to you. Though the rest may listen, but having someone you are sure is listening to you is really nice, yes. (13-03-27)

Overall, the positive statements participants provided about having a member of the community on the IEP team were solidly in favor of there being someone who made them feel seen (i.e., shared their ethnicity, language, and culture), someone who values their voice (i.e., listened to them, supported them, made them feel respected), someone with whom they identify.

### **Community Member on IEP Team - Negative**

Only one interview participant made a statement about having a member of their community on the IEP team that could be coded as negative. This participant shared concerns about a member of their community potentially threatening confidentiality. While this statement was made mostly out of concern for their child's information remaining confidential, it felt important to share a negative perspective:

About having someone from my community in my IEP team, I don't think it's ideal. I feel

because most students tend to relate with the people they don't know, share their feelings with the people they don't know very well, so their data, their personal lives can be secure. I [prefer] to work with [people outside my community] more than people in my community because I feel safe and I feel my child's personal information are also safe.

Overall, interview participants' statements indicated an overwhelming positive association with the idea or reality of having a member of their community on their child's current IEP team.

### ***The Truth Behind Positive Experiences***

The interview protocol included a question about participants' overall experiences engaging with their child's current IEP team. The codes employed because of that question included 1) Overall Experiences. Transcripts were coded based on whether an interview participant's overall experiences were described as neutral, positive, or negative experiences.

#### **Overall Experiences - Neutral**

Most interview participants provided concise and neutral statements about their overall experiences working with their child's current IEP team. For example, this participant responded to the question about how they would describe their overall experiences by stating, "Mostly positive and sometimes, I do have some negative experience" (01-03-20). Another participant briefly shared that their overall experiences are "Sometimes positive and sometimes they are not" (02-03-20). A third neutral statement indicated a slightly more positive overall experience but asserted, "...there are some negatives. I won't give them always positive" (03-03-21).

Another participant had a slightly different response to the question, sharing, "I think over the years, they've had to learn what I will allow, and what I won't allow" (04-03-23). And

one participant elaborated, stating, “It's just sometimes neutral. Sometimes [a meeting] can be positive, sometimes negative, so it just depend on how the meeting goes” (08-03-26).

### **Overall Experiences - Positive**

Two of the interview participants who shared that their overall experiences have been positive provided specifics. They both appreciated being heard, being able to share, and feeling accommodated. The first participant shared that their experiences are positive:

Whenever you feel your opinion are being heard, when you share an opinion...whenever you [give] your opinion and you feel they're trying to use your opinion...it's positive. It's always nice for everyone and you just feel loved and heard in the meeting. (08-03-26)

The second participant’s positive experiences stem from their IEP team:

...contact[ing] me before scheduling a meeting to know if I would be available. Also, opportunities to speak in the meetings, to express myself in the meetings. Also, an alternative way of attending the meetings. (11-03-26)

### **Overall Experiences - Negative**

Overall, interview participants who reported feeling their experiences were mostly negative included in their statements concerns over not being listened to, not having opportunities to speak or share, and a lack of accommodation of their preferences. Two quotes were selected to represent these negative sentiments. The first was concise: “Actually, sometimes, I stay confused” (01-03-20).

And the second is an important anecdote about a participant who felt disrespected by a team member who did not take their concerns seriously:

When I called for the IEP meeting, the vision teacher did not show up to. I did all this

work for my child, and I requested this one IEP and she didn't come - I felt disrespected. I felt like she didn't take my [concerns] serious[ly]. It was something that [my child] needs. I [was] showing effort. Nobody needs an award, but at least [the team could] verbalize, "Hey, we see that you're trying hard and going out of your way." Just to say, "Hey, we see you." (07-03-26)

This story highlighted a common theme among participants who had negative experiences: a sense of disrespect or a lack of acknowledgment of their concerns.

### *Summary*

In general, neutral and positive responses to questions about relational support were hypothetical, meaning their responses included hypothetical situations - either neutral or positive - they imagine while answering the survey question about relational support. A theme across positive statements was the potential for opportunities to share. As for negative statements coded across transcripts, they generally contained more detail than the neutral or positive statements made. For example, negative statements contained examples of negative experiences interview participants had when meeting with other families. While the neutral and positive statements were made in a mostly hypothetical sense, the negative statements were rooted in experiences.

Many interview participants made positive statements about establishing relationships outside of their child's school. These participants felt that relationships with friends, family, and others from their communities were more important and supportive than relationships with teachers and other families from their child's school. Interview participants consistently shared that relationships with friends, family, and community members provided a sense of intimacy, trust, and identity.

Positive statements made by participants about collaboration experiences included feeling overall satisfaction with being heard, seeing improvements, experiencing success, and creating a common understanding. A common theme across positive statements was interview participants being made to feel like part of their child's current IEP team. While positive statements were associated with being treated like an equal partner, negative statements centered around interview participants feeling left out of opportunities to collaborate and communicate.

Interview participants did not make clear positive statements about opportunities to speak or share. However, there were statements made in which the interview participants felt positive about the efforts they had made to speak or share. A common theme across statements coded as positive was respect. Overall, negative statements about opportunities to speak or share during IEP meetings were filled with participants reporting their frustration over being interrupted and upset about how they were treated.

Interview participants who reported that their communication preferences were not being accommodated generally felt that the lack of accommodation stemmed from IEP teams communicating in ways that were easiest or most accessible to them. Examples of communication exchanges between interview participants and IEP team members that were coded as positive had a common theme: team members holding space for parents and caregivers. Overall, participants appreciated feeling like they were given time with an IEP team member who made them feel heard and supported.

Statements made by interview participants in response to being asked how they would feel about having a member of their community on their child's IEP team were overwhelmingly positive. These statements were solidly in favor of having someone who made them feel seen

(i.e., shared their ethnicity, language, and culture), someone who values their voice (i.e., listened to them, supported them, made them feel respected), and someone with whom they identify.

### **Mixed Methods Findings - Mixing for Complementarity**

The third research question, written to support mixed methods analysis, asked, “What would engagement ideally look like for families?” Quantitative findings from Phase One and qualitative themes from Phase 2 were integrated to address this question. Table 12 presents the six original findings/themes, mixes them for complementarity, and reveals the three integrated results as the main findings that will be further discussed in the next chapter. The quantitative findings and qualitative themes are: 1) The Importance of Relationships, 2) The Role of Collaboration, 3) The Opportunity to Speak In Meetings, 4) The Truth Behind Positive Experiences, 5) The Need to Find a Communication Match, and 6) The Importance of Community. Table 12 presents each integrated finding alongside select quantitative and qualitative data to highlight the story told through the mixing process.

The integrated mixed methods findings that summarize what engagement ideally looks like for families include: 1) Collaboration Rooted in Communication, 2) Community and its Role in Engagement Experiences, and 3) The Importance of Friends and Family. These integrated findings act as the link between the six findings/themes that guided both quantitative and qualitative data analysis and the main findings presented in Chapter 5 that have the potential to provide significant recommendations to the current literature on family engagement. Those findings center around Nondominant parents and caregivers and how they 1) value collaboration involving opportunities to share feedback, concerns, and questions with members of their child’s IEP team, 2) consistently identify relationships with friends, family, and community members as important for providing a sense of intimacy, trust, and common identity, and 3) share

overwhelmingly positive feelings and experiences related to having a community member on their child's IEP team.

### ***Collaboration Rooted in Communication***

The first integrated finding, *Collaboration Rooted in Communication*, combines three of the original findings/themes, including 1) *The Role of Collaboration*, 2) *The Need to Find a Communication Match*, and 3) *The Opportunity to Speak in Meetings*. This integrated finding addresses an important theme across quantitative and qualitative data: Nondominant parents and caregivers consistently report satisfaction with collaboration when their expectations are met by their child's IEP team. These expectations include 1) opportunities provided for supportive collaboration activities (i.e., sharing concerns, ideas, and needs) and 2) efforts made to develop equal partnership (i.e., timely replies, addressing concerns, and a willingness to listen). Overall, survey respondents report satisfaction with opportunities to develop equal partnerships with their child's IEP team and find collaborative activities offered by members of their child's IEP teams to be beneficial. Statements made by interview participants echoed this general satisfaction with collaboration. As the quotes selected for Table 12 state, sharing concerns and information in a bidirectional manner are two key components for ideal engagement is team members being open to collaboration.

For Nondominant parents and caregivers, integrating both data sets revealed an interesting combination of findings related to communication: survey respondents reported their communication preferences were being accommodated, but interview participants consistently shared experiences of being interrupted during IEP meetings or dismissed when approaching a team member to share a concern. While many survey respondents indicated their communication preferences are being accommodated by their child's IEP team, interview statements provided a

contradictory story. In interview statements, the participants who reported not having their communication preferences accommodated shared that they feel their communication needs are being dismissed. When asked to elaborate on feeling dismissed, the participant whose statement is included in Table 12 described feeling like members of their child's IEP team communicate in a way that feels most convenient to them. This type of convenient communication made the participant feel dismissed. Other participants shared anecdotes about asking, sometimes repeatedly, for their communication preferences to be accommodated. These requests result in push back and, sometimes, their preferences continue not to be accommodated. Currently, the integrated findings confirm communication efforts are not consistent enough for ideal engagement.

The final finding contributing to this integrated theme centers around parents and caregivers being provided opportunities to speak without interruption during IEP meeting. While survey data was split between Nondominant parents who have had uninterrupted opportunities to speak and those who have not, interview participants shared stories revealing the pain and frustration they feel when interrupted or when not allowed to speak at all. The interview participants who have had positive experiences when speaking or sharing in IEP meetings felt respected and supported as equal partners in collaboration efforts. Overall, ideal engagement between Nondominant parents and caregivers and IEP teams is rooted in consistent opportunities to feel heard, bidirectional communication that accommodates preferences, and generally being show respect as equal partners in collaboration. Nondominant parents and caregivers seek increased feelings of engagement and equal partnership with their child's IEP team.

### ***Community and its Role in Engagement Experiences***

The second integrated finding, *Community and its Role in Engagement Experiences*, pairs two of the original findings/themes - *The Importance of Community* and *The Truth Behind Positive Experiences*. The quantitative data associated with community indicated that Nondominant survey respondents are not being given consistent opportunities to work with IEP team members who are members of their community (i.e., individuals who share their ethnic background, language, culture). When asked about experiences with members of their community also being members of their child's IEP team, participants provided overwhelmingly positive responses. These positive experiences were directly tied to parents' and caregivers' feelings about their overall engagement experiences.

Survey respondents and interview participants were asked to summarize their overall experiences engaging with their child's current IEP team. Nondominant survey respondents were hesitant to summarize their overall experiences engaging with IEP teams as positive. As shown in Figure 16, when asked to elaborate on their mostly "Sometime positive and sometimes negative" survey responses during interviews, participants shared experiences that were negative, positive, and somewhere in between. Overall, as indicated in Table 12, less than a quarter of Nondominant survey respondents selected "Mostly positive" to describe their overall experiences. Even with interview statements providing a glimpse into parents' and caregivers' positive experiences working with their child's IEP team, the narrative told by integrating both data sets suggests there is room for improving engagement between Nondominant families and the IEP teams they work with.

One approach to improving engagement is tied to increasing a sense of community during interactions between parents and caregivers and IEP team members. The second integrated finding, *The Importance of Community*, ties together data to confirm how important it

is for Nondominant parents and caregivers to have members of their community present on their child's IEP team to work toward improved engagement. One of the quotes included in Table 12 points to Nondominant parents and caregivers finding value in engaging with IEP teams that include members of their community. Having the opportunity to see themselves (i.e., their ethnicity, language, culture, etc. are shared by other IEP team members) reflected in other members of their child's IEP team is a necessary component for more ideal engagement opportunities. This second integrated finding confirms how critical it is for IEP teams to be representative of the home and community contexts in which Nondominant parents and caregivers exist.

### ***The Importance of Friends and Family***

The final integrated finding, *The Importance of Friends and Family*, seeks to address data related to relational support. While only 4% of Nondominant survey respondents ranked relational support (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families whose children receive school-based special education services) as being an important support when engaging with IEP teams, when interview statements were added to this survey data, it became clear that Nondominant parents and caregivers do in fact highly value relationships. However, their statements revealed that the relationships they value most are those with friends and family. Overall, Nondominant survey respondents reported feeling uncomfortable seeking support and relationships with other families from their child's school and focused on building a support system outside of the school environment through intimate relationships with friends and family.

A small number of Nondominant survey respondents (i.e., 8%) reported developing relationships with other families from their child's school outside of the school environment. Quotes from interview participants expanded on their relationship preferences. The participant

quoted in Table 12 shared how important it is to build a village of support for a child and for the parent or caregiver. Interview participants consistently shared concerns about meeting with other families from their child’s school. They did not feel comfortable building a support system with anyone other than their own friends and family. Based on the integrated data sets, Nondominant parents and caregivers consistently report ideal engagement with their child’s IEP team taking place when the interactions and relationships reflect the support, understanding, and trust they have with their friends and family.

With 96% of Nondominant survey respondents choosing other supports (i.e., communication and collaboration) as being more important than opportunities to meet with families at their child’s school (i.e., relational support), interview participants were asked to elaborate on the relationships they do find supportive and valuable. Statements made across interviews provided confirmed Nondominant parents and caregivers value relationships outside of their child’s school. A conclusion can be made based on the integration of survey responses and interview statements: Nondominant parents’ and caregivers’ home and community contexts are important to understand when working to provide ideal engagement in school settings.

Table 12

*Quantitative Findings and Qualitative Themes, Integrated Through Mixed Methods Analysis*

| <b>Finding/<br/>Theme</b>            | <b>Quantitative</b>  | <b>Qualitative</b>  | <b>Mixed Methods</b>  |
|--------------------------------------|--|---|---|
| <b>The Role of<br/>Collaboration</b> | 60% of Nondominant respondents identified sharing concerns, ideas, and needs as the most supportive collaboration activities | "Sometimes we have genuine concerns and we want someone to listen and give us advice on how to [address] those concerns" (09-03-26) | Overall, respondents report satisfaction with opportunities to collaborate and collaborative activities offered by members of their child’s IEP teams. Interview statements echo this satisfaction. |
|                                      | 52% of Nondominant   | “Collaboration is good  |   |

|   |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|
|   | respondents reported timely replies, addressing concerns, and a willingness to listen as actions that make them feel like equal partners in collaboration | because [they] pass information to me, then I pass information to [them]. That help[s] us settle the hard issues my child is going through” (06-03-25)   | Many participants feel a key component for ideal engagement is team members being open to collaboration  |
| <i>The Need to Find a Communication Match</i> | 19% of Nondominant respondents report not having their preferred type of communication accommodated   | “I feel that they go with what works best at the moment...the teachers always seem so dismissive...they don't consider [me]” (12-03-27)  | 81% of respondents report their communication preferences are accommodated, but interview statements contradict this. In interview statements, the 19% not being accommodated report their needs are often dismissed. Currently, communication is not consistent enough for ideal engagement   |
| <i>The Opportunity to Speak in Meetings</i>   | 42% of Nondominant respondents report being interrupted while speaking  | “Yes, I've been interrupted. I wasn't given the opportunity to share [during] my child's IEP. That has really made me feel so much bad” (06-03-25)   |  |
| <b>The Importance of Community</b>            | 38% of Nondominant respondents have had the opportunity to develop a partnership with a member of their community on their child's IEP team               | “I [would] feel so happy and delighted because I [would] feel happy to talk [to them] more. I think seeing someone of the same race [would] actually opens [me up] more, there [would be] more communication than someone not [of] the same race” (03-03-21) | While 38% of respondents summarized their overall experiences as “Sometimes positive and sometimes negative,” stories about participants’ experiences engaging with members of their community were always positive. Even statements made hypothetically were overwhelmingly positive. IEP team members from one’s community are an important component for ideal engagement |
| <i>The Truth Behind Positive Experiences</i>  | 21% of Nondominant respondents selected “Always positive” to summarize their overall experiences  | “It's really cool. The principal, special education teacher, and parents that are part of the team [are] African American - [my family]  |  |

---

|  |  |  |   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  |  | are able to see themselves in the team" (04-03-23)   |   |
| <b>The Importance of Relationships</b> | 4% of Nondominant respondents ranked Relational support as supportive when engaging with IEP teams | “The way you [are] with your friends and family, there is a very big difference with the school. Your child acquire[s] knowledge [at school], but in the family, you have intimacy” (02-03-20) | 96% of respondents selected other supports as being more important than opportunities to meet with families at their child’s school. Statements made across interviews provided confirmed Nondominant parents and caregivers value relationships outside of their child’s school. |
|  | 8% of Nondominant respondents report developing relationships with other families outside school   | “Family relations are more important because...I'm not able to just have anyone be a part of the community of helping to be in their village” (04-03-23)                                       | Home and community contexts are important to understand when working to provide ideal engagement in school settings   |

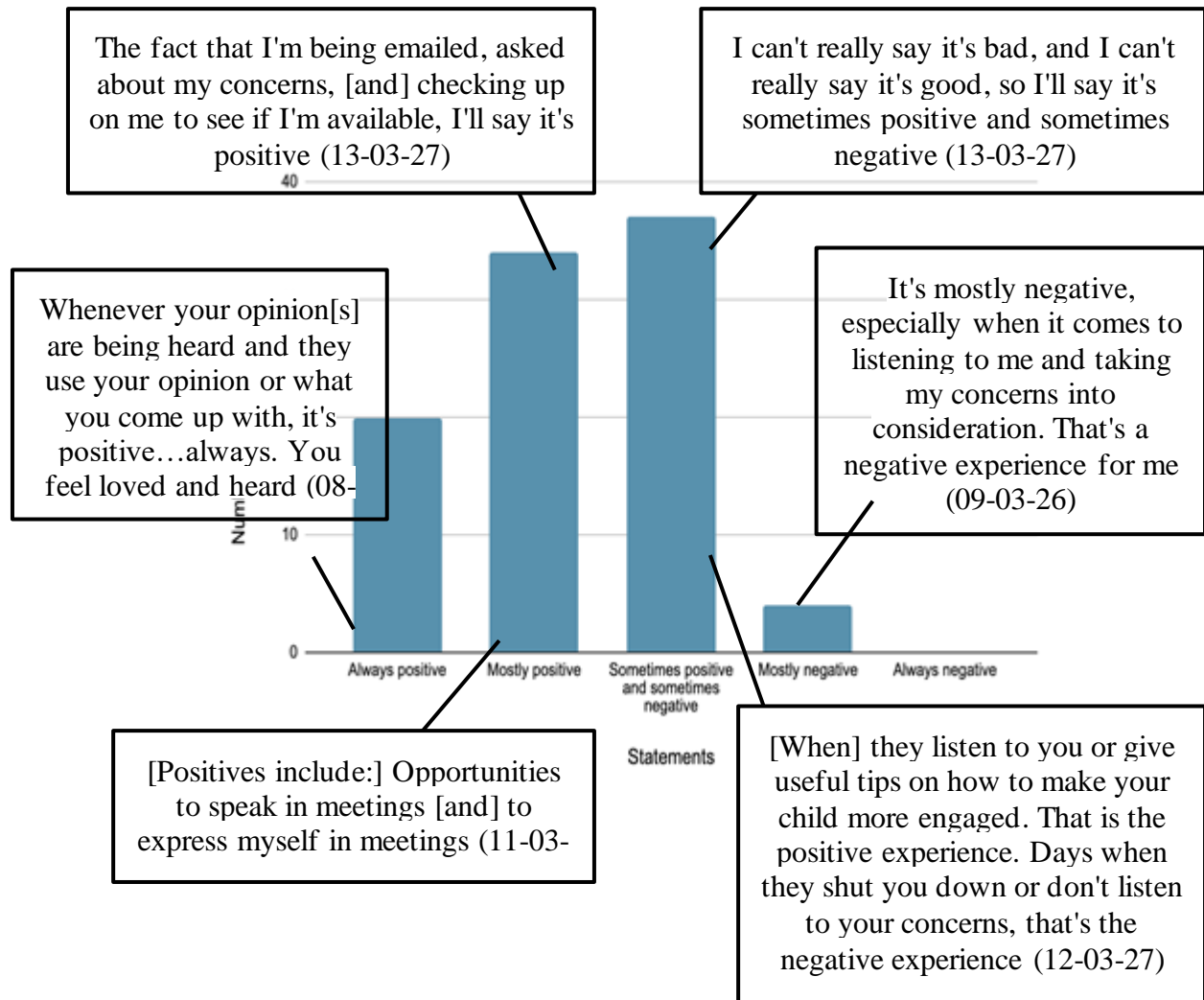
---

Figure 16 provides a more detailed look at *The Importance of Community* and how experiences to engage with members of one’s community in the context of an IEP can influence parents’ and caregivers’ overall engagement experiences. Figure 16 layers qualitative data (i.e., direct quotes) on top of quantitative data (i.e., a chart displaying survey respondents’ overall experiences). The direct quotes included in the call-out boxes outline what Nondominant parents and caregivers report as always and mostly positive experiences, sometimes positive and sometimes negative experiences, and mostly negative experiences. No survey respondents selected “Always negative,” and there were no statements made in interviews by participants who felt their experiences engaging with IEP teams were always negative. This figure provides a glimpse into the various components Nondominant parents and caregivers want to feel they are in an ideal engagement situation.

Looking at Figure 16 as a potential guide reveals what Nondominant parents and caregivers need to feel they are engaging under ideal conditions. For example, interview participants appreciate being asked about their concerns, receiving communication with updates or to check in, feeling heard and seeing changes based on their feedback, receiving respect during IEP meetings. Negative experiences, according to Nondominant parents and caregivers, are the result of feeling like their concerns are not being considered, being dismissed by IEP team members when trying to communicate, and generally struggling to be heard. These takeaways inform future efforts by IEP teams to provide engagement opportunities that Nondominant parents and caregivers find to be ideal to their unique needs.

Figure 16

*Overall Experiences, A Joint Display*



**Summary**

Overall, the positive findings from integrating Nondominant survey respondents' and interview participants' responses include 1) satisfaction with opportunities to develop equal partnerships, 2) appreciation of collaborative activities offered, and 3) opportunities to see themselves reflected in other members of their child's IEP team. Ideal engagement between Nondominant parents and caregivers and IEP teams is rooted in consistent opportunities to feel heard, bidirectional communication that accommodates preferences, and generally being show

respect as partners in community and collaboration. However, the integrated findings confirm efforts are not consistent enough for ideal engagement. Overall, there is room for improving engagement between Nondominant families and the IEP teams they work with. Based on the integrated data sets, Nondominant parents and caregivers report ideal engagement with their child's IEP team taking place when the interactions and relationships reflect the support and trust they have with their friends and family. To summarize the integrated mixed methods findings, Nondominant parents and caregivers made it clear across the quantitative and qualitative data that engagement with their child's IEP team should ideally center around consistent collaboration, bidirectional communication, and the strength that a sense of community can provide.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to challenge the current literature's one-sided, one-dimensional understanding of family engagement with school-based special education services. This study took a unique approach by directly engaging with families and amplifying their voices, a method not commonly implemented across existing studies. This study employed a mixed methods approach to explore the stated purpose through an integrated lens that implemented both an online survey and follow-up interviews.

The study's main findings suggest the following: 1) Nondominant parents and caregivers value collaboration involving opportunities to share feedback, concerns, and questions with members of their child's IEP team, 2) Nondominant parents and caregivers consistently identify relationships with friends, family, and community members as important for providing a sense of intimacy, trust, and common identity, and 3) Nondominant parents and caregivers shared overwhelmingly positive feelings and experiences related to having a community member on their child's IEP team.

Based on these findings, the current study makes a significant contribution to the field, as it is the first to seek and highlight the specific experiences and preferences of Nondominant parents and caregivers working to engage with IEP teams. The study's findings provide a new perspective and expand our overall understanding of family engagement with school-based special education services. By focusing on the specific experiences and preferences of Nondominant parents and caregivers, the results from this study have the potential to significantly expand the current literature's limited exploration of family engagement for all families whose children receive school-based special education services.

### **The Value of Being an Equal Partner in Collaboration**

Survey respondents across ethnicities reported valuing collaboration involving consistent opportunities to share and receive feedback, communicate concerns, and ask questions with members of their child's current IEP team. This finding aligns with existing studies that have reported most families seek more and better bidirectional communication specific to general collaboration efforts and to engagement through specific collaborative activities in ways that produce tangible results (Epstein, 2010; Epstein et al., 2009; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). This finding aligns with assertions made across the current literature that families are better equipped to engage when provided with appropriate collaborative activities and bidirectional communication (Keys, 2014). Study participants consistently reported that the interactions during which collaborative activities and feedback were shared increased their overall positive experiences collaborating with IEP teams.

Nondominant survey respondents selected "Opportunities to share" priorities, concerns, goals, and questions as an important part of ensuring overall positive experiences engaging with their child's current IEP team. Positive statements made by interview participants echoed this identified need for ideal collaboration experiences. They associated feeling overall satisfaction with being heard, seeing improvements, experiencing success, and creating a common understanding. In practice, according to existing studies, multiple barriers impede authentic collaboration efforts (Fantuzzo et al., 2000; Haines et al., 2017; Ishimaru, 2014, 2019; Turnbull et al., 2015). This finding indicates some progress has been made since previous studies identified educators' failure to take families' needs into account as a major barrier to engagement (Ishimaru, 2019). Furthermore, findings indicate that parents and caregivers perceive educators and service providers as dismissive of their questions and concerns. However, when educators

and service providers make efforts to hold space for parents and caregivers, participants reported feeling like equal partners in collaboration.

While positive statements about collaboration were associated with being treated like an equal partner, negative statements centered around real-life experiences interview participants shared about feeling dismissed or left out of opportunities to collaborate with their child's IEP team. Though collaboration is deemed crucial, collaborative strategies were not consistently applied for all families participating in IEP process. Interview participants reported interactions with members of their child's IEP team that left them feeling bad. For example, one participant attempted to share a concern during an IEP meeting and was told there was no time given the need to finish the meeting within the allotted time frame.

One universal barrier identified and reported across the literature on family engagement is tied to the fact that many families are not being provided the support (i.e., time and respect) they need to feel comfortable collaborating (Elbaum et al., 2016; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). This finding takes a step toward increasing research efforts to support parents and caregivers by encouraging educators and service providers to focus on the unique strengths and priorities families bring to an IEP team, which can challenge existing deficit-based perceptions and strategies that continue to create a profound disconnect between families and educators (Elbaum et al., 2016; Mueller & Buckley, 2014).

The concept of engagement within the current literature remains driven by educators and their expectations of how families should be involved in their children's education (McCarthy et al., 2023). Findings from this study further expand the existing concept of engagement from being educator-driven to including 1) parents' and caregivers' expectations and concerns for their children, 2) relationships and activities parents and caregivers value outside of the school

environment, and 3) parents' and caregivers' communication preferences (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). Furthermore, this study's findings echo the current literature's assertion that recognizing and respecting all parents' and caregivers' strengths and priorities, and learning how to collaborate with families in a way that supports their child's educational success is critical to authentic family engagement (Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

One finding tied to collaboration activities that parents and caregivers find most supportive of their engagement centers around being given consistent opportunities to share without interruption during IEP meetings. Past studies conducted to understand engagement and its associated activities have focused on the perspectives and experiences of educators and service providers. This is evident in the surveys used by these studies (Elbaum et al., 2016). Survey items were designed to collect information about educator-driven needs that fail to fully support communication and collaboration between families and educators (Fantuzzo et al., 2000). Findings from this study assert the importance of future research studies centering parents' and caregivers' perspectives and experiences and meaningfully reporting their responses in findings and discussion sections (i.e., treating data collected from parents and caregivers with the same respect as data collected from educators and service providers).

A common theme across interview transcripts was respect. Overall, parents and caregivers who shared negative experiences about being interrupted when speaking during IEP meetings reported frustration over how they were treated. This theme aligns with existing studies reporting families' feeling upset over experiences meeting with members of their child's educational team who were not open to their input or did not respond to their ideas (Elbaum et al., 2016; White, 2014; Zagona et al., 2019). As a result of this study, parents and caregivers were able to share their frustrations. Moreover, they were able to report a specific parent- or

caregiver-driven need - speaking without being interrupted during IEP meetings. This specific and consistently identified need makes an important contribution to the literature and is a key concern for IEP teams to consider when engaging with parents and caregivers.

Findings tied to collaboration efforts join existing studies on families' engagement experiences with school-based special education services. These findings confirm families want to be treated as equal partners alongside their child's educational team (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019; Zagona et al., 2019). Furthermore, they appreciate it when teams seek their input, genuinely listen to them, and demonstrate respect toward their concerns and requests (Francis et al., 2016a; Zagona et al., 2019). The data related to the role collaboration plays when parents and caregivers engage with their children's current IEP teams revealed that 56% of Nondominant survey respondents engage in collaborative activities where teachers and service providers, the most collaborative IEP team members according to survey respondents, are accessible: at their child's school. In general, the data specific to collaboration points to the importance of engaging with parents and caregivers in school contexts. Findings from this study also highlight a general theme of participants feeling heard and more connected to their child's current IEP team when their communication preferences are consistently accommodated or respected.

Another finding related to IEP teams accommodating parents' and caregivers' communication preferences further confirms the important role communication plays in collaboration. Nondominant survey respondents reported fewer instances of having their preferred type(s) of communication accommodated than White or European respondents. Interview participants who reported that their communication preferences were not being accommodated generally felt that the lack of accommodation led to inconsistent collaboration and largely stemmed from IEP teams communicating in ways that were easiest or most

accessible to them. This finding aligns with recent research that advises a movement toward positioning families as partners in communication and collaboration to sustain authentic family engagement (Ishimaru, 2019a; Shiller et al., 2020; Warren et al., 2009). This call for a significant shift toward partnering with families will require educators to honor a common theme that emerged from this study's data: team members holding space for parents and caregivers (Ishimaru, 2019a; Shiller et al., 2020).

The current literature finds that Nondominant families receiving school-based special education services actively support their children's education despite a lack of invitation from educators and limited opportunities to engage (Latunde, 2018). Comparing survey responses confirms this finding. Nondominant parents and caregivers were more likely to select "Mostly positive" or "Sometimes positive and sometimes negative" to summarize their overall experiences engaging with their children's IEP teams. When asked about their overall experiences during interviews, however, Nondominant participants shared experiences during which they felt left out of conversations due to meetings and interactions being educator driven. Studies report families describing conversations with educators about their child's services as one-sided and leaving little room for their responses or contributions (Zagona et al., 2019).

### **The Importance of Relationships Outside the School Environment**

A finding that emerged from the quantitative and qualitative data tied to questions about relationships is about the concept of relational support (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families whose children receive school-based special education services). Only 8% of Nondominant survey respondents indicated they develop relationships with other parents and caregivers at their child's school. Overall, Nondominant parents and caregivers are least likely to develop relationships with other families outside their child's school. In general, Nondominant

parents and caregivers are hesitant to engage with other families from their child's school or have had bad experiences with such opportunities. This finding expands the current literature's understanding of the types of relationships parents and caregivers value.

Specifically, Nondominant parents and caregivers reported relationships with friends, family, and community members to be more important than relationships with other families at their child's school. This finding is a new addition to the current literature: Nondominant parents and caregivers find support in the relationships they build within home and community contexts more so than within school contexts. According to the current literature on family engagement, the idea of engagement is driven by educators and their expectations of how families should be involved within the school environment (Garbacz et al., 2020; McCarthy et al., 2023; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). The concept of family engagement has the potential to provide a broader description of how families support their child's education not only within the school environment but also within the home and community environments (McCarthy et al., 2023). This finding expands the literature's limited description of how parents and caregivers find support outside school environments.

Authentic family engagement depends on the specific and unique environmental factors impacting each family (Keys, 2014). Based on findings from this study, a statement can be made about Nondominant families' feelings about opportunities to meet with other families: parents or caregivers who are hesitant to engage with other families identified concerns and needs based on their "specific and unique environmental factors." Parents and caregivers report a sense of intimacy, trust, and a common identity when in an environment with friends, family, or community members. These participants felt that relationships with friends, family, and others from their communities were the relationships that felt most important and supportive. This

finding addresses the current literature's call for understanding how nondominant families find support at home and in other contexts outside their child's school and has the potential to enable educators to offer more contextually appropriate engagement opportunities (Latunde, 2018).

Most existing studies conducted to understand families' needs when engaging with school-based special education services have focused on the perspectives and experiences of educators and service providers, so activities continue to relate to school-based opportunities rather than focusing on the importance of opportunities (and relationships) outside of school (Elbaum et al., 2016; Zagona et al., 2019). These studies failed to include families in a multidimensional sense (i.e., as a complex construct involved in the home, school, and community contexts within which a child develops; Walsh et al., 2016). This study produced findings related to home, school, and community contexts, which is an important contribution to the current literature. These findings begin to address a gap in the current literature: less is known about how families receiving school-based special education services seek, respond, or engage because their perspectives and experiences have not been consistently included in family engagement studies and are missing from the current literature (Brassart et al., 2016).

Families' relationships, experiences, perspectives, and needs regarding family engagement depend on their culture, beliefs, and specific parenting practices (Trembath et al., 2019). These contextual factors are unique to each family, meaning their approaches to engaging with educators are also unique. Findings from this study align with these statements and confirm that these contextual factors (i.e., supportive relationships with friends, family, and within the community) are foundational to ensuring parents and caregivers feel like equal partners when engaging with IEP teams. These findings assert what the current literature hypothesized: capitalizing on each family's familial and communal relationships and specific strengths,

interests, and preferences is critically important to Nondominant families seeking to engage with their child's IEP team (West et al., 2016). Furthermore, findings from this study confirm that families have a unique knowledge of their child's strengths, preferences, and needs and are essential participants in conversations and collaboration. Engaging them in decisions about their child's education is necessary (Zagona et al., 2019).

### **The Joy of Finding Community in IEP Teams**

Existing studies assert that when educators fail to ensure families' sense of belonging, families cannot optimally participate in their children's education (Latunde, 2016, 2018). This assertion aligns with a study finding specific to Nondominant parents and caregivers consistently expressing overwhelmingly positive feelings about having a member of their community on their child's IEP team. Specifically, Nondominant parents and caregivers tied their positive experiences with IEP team members and, during IEP meetings, were consistently directly to having an IEP team member who was also a member of the parent's or caregiver's community. The current literature states that, traditionally, educators best serve families whose norms, expectations, and values align with theirs (Ishimaru, 2014). Based on this finding, increasing diversity among educators and service providers would result in more Nondominant parents and caregivers feeling aligned with their children's IEP team. Increased diversity within IEP teams would allow for an alignment between families' and educators' norms, expectations, and values. This call for increased diversity within IEP teams stems from a common theme from the study: having a member of their community on the IEP team provides Nondominant parents and caregivers with more opportunities to feel alignment and trust.

Trust was selected as the most important component for both Nondominant and White survey respondents. A gap within the current literature stems from studies focusing on the

assumptions and expectations of educators and service providers, leaving families' voices out of the conversation (Sanders, 2014). This study was designed to lay a foundation of trust with participants by ensuring they felt heard, allowing them to share their expectations, and amplifying their voices to address this gap in existing studies. Participants consistently expressed gratitude for having had the opportunity to share their experiences and express their concerns and frustrations. One result of amplifying the voices of parents and caregivers is confirmation that having someone on the IEP team who shares their ethnicity, language, culture, and unique cultural knowledge ensures a sense of belonging and engagement. Nondominant study participants indicated feelings of comfort, safety, and trust when someone from their community is a member of their IEP team. They consistently identified having a member of their community in IEP meetings with them as an important part of feeling like an equal partner in their child's education.

Efforts to engage parents and caregivers of children receiving school-based special education services with educators and service providers who share similar cultural and communal connections are important for creating more culturally responsive opportunities for Nondominant families. Findings from this study confirm the importance of Nondominant parents and caregivers finding cultural and communal connections with a member of their children's IEP team. According to study findings, these connections encourage Nondominant parents and caregivers to find their voice, to speak in meetings, and to share their questions, concerns, and ideas in IEP meetings. In both practice and in past studies, Nondominant families' voices have been largely missing from conversations about what defines and describes family engagement in today's schools (Garbacz et al., 2020). Many past studies relied on the experiences and

perspectives of educators. This study sought to shift the spotlight from educators to families when working to understand family engagement (Brandon & Brown, 2009).

Current research indicates that families of all backgrounds want to be involved in their children's education, and this study confirms that when families' insights are solicited, they gain a sense of ownership over engagement efforts (Brandon & Brown, 2009). Statements made by interview participants in response to being asked how they would feel about having a member of their community on their child's IEP team were aligned with existing studies reporting the importance of making families feel involved. Their statements were solidly in favor of having someone who made them feel like an equal partner, who values their voice, and who they identify with. Rather than feeling dismissed by educators and service providers, Nondominant participants were able to experience being treated like an equal partner - a team member with ownership - when in IEP meetings with a member of their community.

In practice, families are often left to take responsibility for navigating the services their child is receiving, even though existing studies report that families are not consistently seen as experts by educators and service providers (Magaña et al., 2012; Smith, 2020). According to these existing studies, families have described engaging with IEP teams as educator-driven; some experienced interactions with teams who were not open to their input or did not respond to their ideas, and a few families even reported filing complaints in response to not being given opportunities to speak (Elbaum et al., 2016; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; White, 2014; Zagona et al., 2019). The findings from this study confirm parents' and caregivers' needs for engagement, including the importance of feeling heard, seeing changes based on feedback provided, and having opportunities to speak and be treated like an equal partner at meetings.

Overall, findings from this study related to the joy Nondominant parents and caregivers associated with having a member of the IEP team who shares their culture highlight a key limitation within the current literature. The few studies on family experiences with school-based special education services assert that families want to be treated as equal partners alongside their child's educational team (Gerzel-Short et al., 2019; Zagona et al., 2019). Findings from this study confirm Nondominant families appreciate when teams seek their input. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of educators genuinely listening to them and demonstrating respect toward their concerns and requests (Francis et al., 2016a; Zagona et al., 2019). Nondominant study participants agreed that they are more likely to be treated as equal partners, listened to, and shown respect when a member of their community is also a member of their child's IEP team.

### **The Amplification of Nondominant Families' Voices Through Mixed Methods**

This study's explanatory sequential mixed methods approach supported exploring a significant gap in the current literature: the lack of studies directly reporting the experiences of Nondominant families of children receiving school-based special education services (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Love et al., 2023). This study integrated quantitative (i.e., survey responses) and qualitative (i.e., quotes from interviews) data to make recommendations for updating family engagement strategies to ensure IEP teams offer engagement opportunities specific to the reported needs of Nondominant families. The Phase One survey respondents were able to provide important information related to the unique supports, activities, and preferences required to enhance their engagement experiences. This allowed for the development of interview questions employed during Phase Two to further understand these supports, activities, and preferences by providing participants with opportunities to share anecdotes and experiences unique to their engagement interactions (Leko et al., 2022).

In Phase Two of the current study, participants could share information about their needs through interviews. The quotes gathered from participants sharing personal experiences and anecdotes are a step toward updating the current literature by providing findings tied directly to Nondominant families through a qualitative lens. Additionally, through this study, the field is now positioned to understand better the unique contexts and environments parents and caregivers exist within while exploring how these contextual and environmental factors impact their experiences engaging with IEP teams.

Integrating quantitative and qualitative data resulted in a unique finding: while Nondominant survey respondents were hesitant to report their overall experiences engaging with IEP teams as negative, during interviews, participants shared stories revealing negative interactions and experiences that left them feeling dismissed and disrespected. This final finding does not align with existing studies because it is the first to sound the alarm – an alarm for educators and service providers to pay closer attention to Nondominant parents and caregivers. There are concerns, questions, stories, feedback, experiences, and so much more under the surface of their satisfaction. Accepting that Nondominant parents and caregivers are satisfied with the engagement efforts an IEP team has made fails to dig deeper. Nondominant parents and caregivers have strong voices that grow stronger when engaged and respected.

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The current study has several implications for practice, research, and policy. Future research should continue to explore parents' and caregivers' experiences and needs related to engaging with their children's IEP teams. Future research should consider updating the major factors affecting educators' and service providers' perceptions and approaches to engagement. For instance, it is important to understand how parents' and caregivers' needs align with

educators' and service providers' approaches to engaging. Research targeting the experiences and expectations of all members of an IEP team (i.e., parents and caregivers, educators, service providers, and administrators) could help highlight gaps between team members' goals and expectations. For example, interview participants shared frustrations with district and school policies that felt limiting and decreased their ability to engage with their child's IEP team in consistent and meaningful ways.

A key factor for future research is how to center parents' and caregivers' voices. Findings from this study include direct quotes from participants (i.e., Nondominant parents and caregivers). Like this study, it is important for future studies to intentionally design their research around directly engaging with parents and caregivers. Qualitative data and mixed methods approaches can be especially supportive. Whether through surveys with open-ended questions for respondents to expand on their answers or interviews during which participants are given opportunities to share experiences and anecdotes, future research efforts should ensure families' voices are being meaningfully incorporated and amplified.

Another key factor to consider is the environments most supportive of engaging families (i.e., home, community, or school). For example, parents and caregivers reported the importance of relationships outside of their child's school (i.e., friends, family, and members of their community) in ensuring they feel supported in their efforts to engage with their children's IEP teams. Traditionally, engagement is expected to occur in a school environment rather than in a family's home or community environment. Findings from this study suggest that parents and caregivers may benefit from IEP teams learning about how home and community environments influence their needs, priorities, concerns, values, etc. Future studies should target the factors

present in parents' and caregivers' home and community environments that make them feel engaged to replicate those factors in school contexts, as appropriate.

Future research could benefit from further exploring how to incorporate a parent or caregiver's home and community relationships and supports into the school environment. Furthermore, future research could explore how the home and community environments influence parents' and caregivers' experiences and needs related to engagement. There is a wide variability among parents' and caregivers' experiences and needs when engaging with their children's IEP teams. There is also a wide variability among educators' and service providers' perceptions of and approaches to engaging with families. Like parents and caregivers, these perceptions of and approaches to engagement may be influenced by the environments in which educators and service providers exist (i.e., school, home, and community). Future research is necessary to understand both sides of the story when it comes to engagement between families and educators/service providers.

Future family engagement studies might use a mixed methods approach to explore how educators' and service providers' environments influence their perceptions of and approaches to engaging with families. Finally, future research should explore the structures that guide educators' and service providers' engagement efforts (i.e., trainings, policies, and supports) with families. For example, participants consistently reported being told by educators or service providers that the district enforced time limits for IEP meetings. The district or school-site administration created this policy, and IEP teams were told to enforce it.

Analyzing interview data confirmed the negative impact trainings and policies can have on families' overall engagement experiences. The interview data also provided guidance around how to support families having more consistent positive experiences when engaging with IEP

teams. Some practical suggestions stemming from this study's findings include: 1) allow for longer IEP meetings or schedule two or three meetings over a couple of weeks to ensure there is ample time for parents and caregivers to speak, share concerns, provide feedback, as questions, etc., 2) provide substitutes to allow educators and service providers, if appropriate, to conduct home visits to engage with parents and caregivers in their home and/or community, 3) include parents and caregivers in discussions about professional development offerings and district faculty and staff trainings to ensure culturally responsive and appropriate practices are being incorporated, and 4) district administration should actively seek opportunities to partner with universities conducting studies centered around providing support for exploring and aligning existing training, policies, and supports with current research on engagement with Nondominant families.

Using mixed methods would be beneficial for exploring how educators and service providers are influenced and may be limited in their engagement efforts by the structures put in place to guide them. Analyzing trainings, policies, and supports and integrating that analysis with data from surveys or interviews conducted with educators and service providers has the potential to round out the larger story of family engagement with school-based special education services. Such research also has the potential to inform and update policies that directly influence how educators and service providers perceive and approach engaging with families.

It is important to note that participants reported experiences with educators or service providers who attempted to make accommodations or modifications to show support for a parent or caregiver, even if it put them out of alignment with their district or school site training, policies, and/or supports. Educators' and service providers' perceptions of and approaches to

family engagement as influenced by educational structures may be useful in documenting and formalizing meaningful and effective changes to existing trainings, policies, and supports.

Another practical implication of the study findings is that more work can be done to provide consistent opportunities for Nondominant families to experience the unique support and trust that comes from having a member of their community on their child's IEP team. One way to work toward this critical goal in a meaningful way is to start by diversifying the workforce (i.e., educators and service providers) engaging with families. To ensure that IEP teams are more representative of the families they seek to engage with, district administration, district board members, and active community members must prioritize increased diversity among their faculty and staff. One practical approach is for districts to conduct recruitment within local community colleges and community centers to increase their outreach within the community from which the families they serve come. Having active community members serve on school boards and on hiring committees is another practical step in the right direction.

Finally, the findings from this study help to place our understanding of Nondominant parents' and caregivers' expectations for supportive, collaborative relationships in a better position to understand the unique contexts and environments parents and caregivers exist within (i.e., home and community) while exploring how these contextual and environmental factors impact their experiences engaging with IEP teams. Understanding how Nondominant parents' and caregivers' home and communal contexts make them feel engaged may lead educators and service providers to learn how to meet those expectations within the school contexts and during IEP meetings. Nondominant parents and caregivers indirectly provide a roadmap for increasing engagement by sharing about what makes their relationships with friends, family, and community valuable to them.

## **Limitations**

This research study included several limitations: 1) the generalizability of study findings, 2) the verification of survey respondents, 3) a larger percentage of White or European survey respondents, 4) accessibility, and 5) emotional topics for parents and caregivers.

The first limitation was the generalizability of the study findings. This limitation includes a small sample size and limited geographic generalizability. The generalizability of study findings was limited due to the small sample size. To compensate for this limitation, detailed demographic information (i.e., ethnicity, income, education, location) was collected to demonstrate how the study's results are related to a larger sample. The study was made available nationally, but participants were concentrated in certain states (i.e., Massachusetts, Washington, and California). This potentially limited the geographic generalizability of the results.

Additionally, survey and interview questions were not written specifically for certain state IEP policies. The questions were written to capture parents' and caregivers' needs and experiences. So, this potential lack of geographic generalizability may have had a minimal impact on the study's findings.

The second limitation was the lack of verification of survey respondents. The online survey included a screener (i.e., a set of questions tied to the inclusion criteria created for this study) to ensure potential respondents knew who the survey was intended for. However, other than trusting that respondents answered honestly, there was no mechanism to verify that they met the inclusion criteria. Bot detection and flagging multiple responses were two security measures implemented to ensure that respondents were not unable to submit fake responses or multiple responses that could skew or dilute results.

The third limitation was the larger percentage of White or European survey respondents. Out of the 212 complete survey responses submitted, 115 respondents self-identified as White or European, and 97 self-identified across the other ethnic categories offered as answer options. On the other hand, 100% of interview participants self-identified as non-White (i.e., Nondominant). Interview participants were intentionally selected to ensure that they were Nondominant representatives of the larger population of parents and caregivers whose children receive school-based special education services to amplify the voices of Nondominant parents and caregivers.

A fourth potential limitation was the study's accessibility. The online survey was translated into four languages (i.e., Spanish, Mandarin, Arabic, and Somali) to increase the study's linguistic accessibility. Surveys translated into one of these four languages were submitted by respondents. The interview participants were offered the option to have an interpreter present. None of the interview participants took the option to have an interpreter, but some participants indicated that they were having difficulty understanding some questions. The interviewer made sure to repeat questions and asked if the participant felt comfortable answering after having the question repeated. Each participant confirmed they felt comfortable proceeding with answering the question.

The fifth and final limitation was the emotionality of the study's focus. Survey and interview questions about working with IEP teams, supporting their child receiving school-based special education services, and experiences with other families potentially elicited emotional responses from participants. No survey respondents or interview participants indicated discomfort with the questions. However, the emotional nature of the topics some questions covered had the potential to cause emotional distress, which may have influenced how a question was answered.

## **Conclusion**

Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach and incorporating a strong focus on highlighting families, this study accomplished what it set out to do: learn directly from parents and caregivers. Nondominant parents and caregivers report relying on support from friends, family, and members of their community. These relationships provide a sense of intimacy, trust, and common identity that IEP teams are not consistently providing. These parents and caregivers also report that IEP team efforts to collaborate and communicate fall short of their already low expectations and fail to respect their role as equal partners. On a positive note, Nondominant parents and caregivers expressed joyful feelings when sharing the positive impact of having their culture and expertise acknowledged and centered when a member of their community is also a member of their child's IEP team. This study makes an important contribution to the current literature: meaningfully amplifying the voices of Nondominant parents and caregivers and following their lead as experts in future conversations about the unique priorities and concerns they hold for their children.

## References

- Akamoglu, Y., Meadan, H., Pearson, J. N., & Cummings, K. (2018). Getting Connected: Speech and language pathologists' perceptions of building rapport via telepractice. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 30*(4), 569–585.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10882-018-9603-3>
- Klingner, J. K., Artiles, A. J., Kozleski, E., Harry, B., Zion, S., Tate, W., Zamora Durán, G., & Riley, D. (2005). Addressing the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education through culturally responsive educational systems. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 13*, 38.  
<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v13n38.2005>
- Banks, J., Kea, C., & Coleman, M. R. (2023). Making meaningful connections: Facilitating schoolwide family engagement with culturally diverse families. *Teaching Exceptional Children*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599231182048>
- Bazeley, P. (2009). Integrating data analyses in mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 3*(3), 203–207. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689809334443>
- Bazeley, P. (2012). Integrative analysis strategies for mixed data sources. *American Behavioral Scientist, 56*(6), 814-828. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211426330>
- Bazeley, P. (2018). *Integrating analyses in mixed methods research*. Sage.
- Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J. A., Frankland, H. C., Nelson, L. L., & Beegle, G. (2004). Dimensions of family and professional partnerships: Constructive guidelines for collaboration. *Exceptional Children, 70*(2), 167–184.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290407000203>
- Bos, C. S., & Fletcher, T. V. (1997). Sociocultural considerations in learning disabilities

- inclusion research: Knowledge gaps and future directions. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 12, 92–99.
- Brandon, R. R. (2007). African American parents: Improving connections with their child's educational environment. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 43, 116-120.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10534512070430020301>
- Brandon, R. R., & Brown, M. R. (2009). African American families in the special education process: Increasing their level of involvement. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 45(2), 85–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451209340218>
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 71(2), 195–207.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290507100205>
- Brassart, E., Prévost, C., Bétrisey, C., Lemieux, M., & Desmarais, C. (2017). Strategies developed by service providers to enhance treatment engagement by immigrant parents raising a child with a disability. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 26(4), 1230–1244. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-016-0646-8>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2020). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counseling and Psychotherapy Research*, 1-11.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1992). Ecological systems theory. In R. Vasta (Ed.), *Six theories of child development: Revised formulations and current issues* (pp. 187–248). Philadelphia:

Jessica Kingsley.

Brown, M. R., Dennis, J. P., & Matute-Chavarria, M. (2019). Cultural relevance in special education: Current status and future directions. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 54*(5), 304–310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451218819252>

Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Burkett, K., Morris, E., Manning-Courtney, P., Anthony, J., & Shambley-Ebron, D. (2015). African American families on autism diagnosis and treatment: The influence of culture. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 45*(10), 3244–3254. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2482-x>

Burke, M., & Hodapp, R. (2016). The nature, correlates, and conditions of parental advocacy in special education. *Exceptionality, 24*(3), 137–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2015.1064412>

California Department of Education (2023, May 15). *Facts About English Learners in California*. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/cefelfacts.asp>

Council for Exceptional Children (2020, August 14). *Initial Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators*. <https://exceptionalchildren.org/standards/initial-practice-based-professional-preparation-standards-special-educators>

United States, Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Students with Disabilities. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, May 2023, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>

- Cohen, D. & Prusak, L. (2001). How to invest in social capital. *Harvard Business Review*, 79(6), 86–93.
- Coleman, J. S. (1985). Schools and the communities they serve. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 66, 527–532.
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coleman J. S., Hoffer, T. (1987). *Public and private high schools: The impact of communities*. New York: Basic Books.
- Collins, K. M. T., Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Johnson, R. B. (2012). Securing a place at the table: A review and extension of legitimation criteria for the conduct of mixed research. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 56(6), 849–865. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211433799>
- Coogle, C. G., Larson, A. L., Ottley, J. R., Root, A. K., & Bougher-Muckian, H. (2019). Performance-based feedback to enhance early interventionist’s practice and caregiver and child outcomes. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 39(1), 32–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121419831414>
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Divan, G., Hamdani, S. U., Vajartkar, V., Minhas, A., Taylor, C., Aldred, C., ... Patel, V. (2015). Adapting an evidence-based intervention for autism spectrum disorder for scaling up in resource-constrained settings: The development of the PASS intervention in South Asia. *Global Health Action*, 8, 27278. <https://doi.org/10.3402/gha.v8.27278>
- Elbaum, B., Blatz, E. T., & Rodriguez, R. J. (2016). Parents’ experiences as predictors of state accountability measures of schools’ facilitation of parent involvement. *Remedial and Special Education*, 37, 15–27. doi:10.1177/0741932515581494
- Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share.

- Phi Delta Kappan*, 76, 701-712.
- Epstein, J. L. (2010). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(3), 81-96.
- Epstein, J., Sanders, M., Sheldon, S., Simon, B., Salinas, K., Jansorn, N., and Williams, K. 2009. *School, family and community partnerships: Your handbook for action. 3rd ed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Fantuzzo, J., Tighe, E., & Childs, S. (2000). Family involvement questionnaire: A multivariate assessment of family participation in early childhood education. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(2), 367–376. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.92.2.367>
- Ferguson, C., Jordan, C., & Baldwin, M. (2010). *Working systemically in action: Engaging family and community.* Austin, TX: SEDL.
- Fetters, M. D., & Molina-Azorín, J. F. (2017). The Journal of Mixed Methods Research starts a new decade: The mixed methods research integration trilogy and its dimensions. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 11(3), 291–307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F1558689817714066>
- Fong, V. C., Gardiner, E., & Iarocci, G. (2021). Cross-cultural perspectives on the meaning of family quality of life: Comparing Korean immigrant families and Canadian families of children with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism: the International Journal of Research and Practice*, 25(5), 1335–1348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361321989221>
- Ford, D. Y. (2012). Culturally different students in special education: Looking backward to move forward. *Exceptional Children*, 78(4), 391–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440291207800401>
- Fowler, S., Coleman, M. R., & Bogdan, W. K. (2019). The state of the special education

profession survey report. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 52(1), 8–29.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059919875703>

Francis, G. L., Blue-Banning, M., Turnbull, A. P., Hill, C., Haines, S. J., & Gross, J. M. S.

(2016). Culture in inclusive schools: Parental perspectives on trusting

family-professional partnerships. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 51(3), 281–293.

Francis, G. L., Blue-Banning, M., Haines, S. J., Turnbull, A. P., & Gross, J. M. S. (2016).

Building “Our School”: Parental perspectives for building trusting family-professional partnerships. *Preventing School Failure*, 60(4), 329–336.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2016.1164115>

Furstenberg, F. F., & Hughes, M. E. (1995). Social capital and successful development among at-risk youth. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 580–592.

Garbacz, S. A., Bolt, D. M., Seeley, J. R., Stormshak, E. A., & Smolkowski, K. (2020).

Examining school proactive outreach to families in public middle schools. *School*

*Psychology Review*, 49(4), 493–509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1787081>

Gersten, R., Fuchs, L. S., Compton, D., Coyne, M., Greenwood, C., & Innocenti, M. S. (2005).

Quality indicators for group experimental and quasi-experimental research in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 71(2), 149–164.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290507100202>

Gerzel-Short, L., Kiru, E. W., Hsiao, Y.-J., Hovey, K. A., Wei, Y., & Miller, R. D. (2019).

Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families of children with disabilities.

*Intervention in School and Clinic*, 55(2), 120–126.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451219837637>

- Giovacco-Johnson, T. (2009). Portraits of partnership: The hopes and dreams project. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 37, 127-135.
- Goddard, R. D. (2003). Relational networks, social trust, and norms: A social capital perspective on students' chances of academic success. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(1), 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737025001059>
- Greene, J. C. (2005). The generative potential of mixed methods inquiry. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 28(2), 207–211.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01406720500256293>
- Gross, D., Bettencourt, A. F., Taylor, K., Francis, L., Bower, K., & Singleton, D. L. (2020). What is parent engagement in early learning? Depends who you ask. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 29(3), 747–760. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01680-6>
- Guralnick, M. J., Hammond, M. A., Neville, B., & Connor, R. T. (2008). The relationship between sources and functions of social support and dimensions of child- and parent-related stress. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 52, 1138–1154.
- Haines, S. J., Gross, J. M. S., Blue-Banning, M., Francis, G. L., & Turnbull, A. P. (2015). Fostering family–school and community–school partnerships in inclusive schools: Using practice as a guide. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 40(3), 227–239. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796915594141>
- Haines, S. J., Francis, G. L., Mueller, T. G., Chiu, C.-Y., Burke, M. M., Kyzar, K., Shepherd, K. G., Holdren, N., Aldersey, H. M., & Turnbull, A. P. (2017). Reconceptualizing family-professional partnership for inclusive schools: A call to action. *Inclusion (Washington, D.C.)*, 5(4), 234–247. <https://doi.org/10.1352/2326-6988-5.4.234>
- Hare, D., Pratt, C., Burton, M., Bromley, J., & Emerson, E. (2004). The health and social care

- needs of family carers supporting adults with autistic spectrum disorders. *Autism*, 8(4), 425–444.
- Harry, B. (2008). Collaboration with culturally and linguistically diverse families: Ideal versus reality. *Exceptional Children*, 74(3), 372–388.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290807400306>
- Hastings, R., & Johnson, E. (2001). Stress in UK families conducting intensive home-based behavioral intervention for their young child with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disability*, 31(3), 327–336.
- The Head Start parent, family, and community engagement framework: Promoting family engagement and school readiness, from prenatal to age 8. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/policy/im2011/pfce-framework.pdf>.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement*. Annual synthesis, 2002. Southwest Educational Laboratory. <https://sedl.org/connections/resources/evidence.pdf>
- Hilton, C., Fitzgerald, R., Jackson, K., Maxim, R., Bosworth, C., Shattuck, P., . . . Constantino, J. N. (2010). Brief report: Under-representation of African Americans in autism genetic research: A rationale for inclusion of subjects representing diverse family structures. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 40, 633–639.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Walker, J. M., Sandler, H. M., Whetsel, D., Green, C. L., Wilkins, A. S., & Closson, K. (2005). Why do parents become involved? Research findings and implications. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 105-130.
- Hong, S. (2019). *Natural allies: hope and possibility in teacher-family partnerships*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Horner, R. H., Carr, E. G., Halle, J., McGee, G., Odom, S., & Wolery, M. (2005). The use of single subject research to identify evidence-based practice in special education.

*Exceptional Children, 71*, 165–179.

Huscroft-D'Angelo, J., Farley, J., Hurley, K. D., Lambert, M., & Trout, A. (2022). Engaging parents in special education: An examination of knowledge and access to resources.

*Exceptionality: The Official Journal of the Division for Research of the Council for*

*Exceptional Children, 30*(3), 201–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2021.2006060>

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq. (1997).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

Im, E. O., & Chee, W. (2011). Quota sampling in internet research: Practical issues.

*Computers, Informatics, Nursing, 29*(7), 381–385.

<https://doi.org/10.1097/NCN.0b013e3181f9dc45>

Ingersoll, B., Wainer, A. L., Berger, N. I., Pickard, K. E., & Bonter, N. (2016). Comparison of a self-directed and therapist-assisted telehealth parent-mediated intervention for

children with ASD: A pilot RCT. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders,*

*46*(7), 2275–2284. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2755-z>

Ishimaru, A. M. (2014). When new relationships meet old narratives: The journey towards improving parent-school relations in a district-community organizing collaboration.

*Teachers College Record, 116*(2), 1–56.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811411600206>

Ishimaru, A. M. (2019). From family engagement to equitable collaboration. *Educational*

*Policy, 33*(2), 350–385. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904817691841>

Ishimaru, A. M., Barajas-López, F., & Bang, M. (2015). Centering family knowledge to

- develop children's empowered mathematics identities. *Journal of Family Diversity in Education*, 1(4), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.53956/jfde.2015.63>
- Ishimaru, A. M., & Galloway, M. K. (2021). Hearts and minds first: Institutional logics in pursuit of educational equity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 57(3), 470–502. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X20947459>
- Ishimaru, A. M., Torres, K. E., Salvador, J. E., Lott, J., Williams, D. M. C., & Tran, C. (2016). Reinforcing deficit, journeying toward equity: Cultural brokering in family engagement initiatives. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 850–882. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831216657178>
- Ishimaru, A. M., & Takahashi, S. (2017). Disrupting racialized institutional scripts: Toward parent-teacher transformative agency for educational justice. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(3), 343–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2017.1324660>
- Kaiser, K., Villalobos, M. E., Locke, J., Iruka, I. U., Proctor, C., & Boyd, B. (2022). A culturally grounded autism parent training program with Black parents. *Autism: the International Journal of Research and Practice*, 26(3), 716–726. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211073373>
- Kasari C., Gulsrud A., Paparella T., et al. (2015) Randomized comparative efficacy study of parent-mediated interventions for toddlers with autism. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 83(3): 554–563.
- Kea, C. D. (2009). Connecting rural African American families with differentiated home learning instruction for their preschoolers. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 28(4), 10–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/875687050902800403>
- Kea, C. D., Sirgany, L., & Young, F. (2023). Family engagement: Developing relationship-rich

partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families to improve students' long-term life outcomes. *Teaching Exceptional Children*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599231175187>

Keys, A. (2015). Family engagement in rural and urban Head Start families: An exploratory study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 43(1), 69–76.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-014-0643-8>

“The top six languages.” King County, 2021

Kistner, J., & Robbins, F. (1986). Brief report: Characteristics of methods of subject selection and description in research on autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 16, 77–82.

Kohler, F. (2000). Examining the services received by young children with autism and their families: a survey of parent responses. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 14, 150–158.

Kozleski, E. B. (2017). The uses of qualitative research: Powerful methods to inform evidence-based practice in education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 42(1), 19–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796916683710>

Kraus, M., Gulley, S., Sciegaii, M., & Wells, N. (2003). Access to specialty medical care for children with mental retardation, autism, and other special health care needs. *Mental Retardation*, 41(5), 329–339.

Lareau, A., & Weininger, E. B. (2003). Cultural capital in educational research: A critical assessment. *Theory and Society*, 32(5/6), 567–606.

<https://doi.org/10.1023/B:RYSO.0000004951.04408.b0>

LaRocque, M., Kleiman, I., & Darling, S. M. (2011). Parental involvement: The missing link in

- school achievement. *Preventing School Failure*, 55, 115-122.
- Latunde, Y. (2016). Towards more inclusive schools: An application of hospitality in parental involvement. *International Christian Community of Teacher Educators Journal*, 11, 1-12.
- Latunde, Y. C. (2018). Expanding their opportunities to engage: A case of the African American parent council. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 87(3), 270–284.  
<https://doi.org/10.7709/JNEGROEDUCATION.87.3.0270>
- Lawson, M. (2003). School-family relations in context: Parent and teacher perceptions of parent involvement. *Urban Education*, 38, 77–133.
- Leko, M. M., Hitchcock, J. H., Love, H. R., Houchins, D. E., & Conroy, M. A. (2023). Quality indicators for mixed-methods research in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 89(4), 432–448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00144029221141031>
- Locke, J., Ibanez, L. V., Posner, E., Frederick, L., Carpentier, P., & Stone, W. L. (2020). Parent perceptions about communicating with providers regarding early autism concerns. *Pediatrics*, 145(Suppl. 1), S72–S80. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1895J>
- Love, H. R., & Corr, C. (2022). Integrating without quantizing: Two examples of deductive analysis strategies within qualitatively driven mixed methods research. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 16(1), 64–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689821989833>
- Love, H. R., Cook, B. G., & Cook, L. (2022). Mixed-methods approaches in special education research. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 37(4), 314–323.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ldrp.12295>
- Love, H. R., Fettig, A., & Steed, E. A. (2023). Putting the “mix” in mixed methods: How to integrate quantitative and qualitative research in early childhood special education

research. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/02711214231199268>

Luther, E., Canham, D., & Cureton, V. (2005). Coping and social support for parents of children with autism. *Journal of School Nursing, 21*(1), 40–47.

Magaña, S., Parish, S. L., & Son, E. (2015). Have racial and ethnic disparities in the quality of health care relationships changed for children with developmental disabilities and autism? *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 120*(6), 504–513. <https://doi.org/10.1352/1944-7558-120.6.504>

Mapp, K. L., & Kuttner, P. J. (2013). *Partners in education: A dual capacity-building framework for family–school partnerships*. Austin, TX: SEDL & U.S. Department of Education.

Mapp, K. L., & Hong, S. (2010). Debunking the myth of the hard to reach parent. In S. L. Christenson & A. L. Reschly (Eds.), *Handbook of school-family partnerships*. New York, NY: Routledge.

McCarthy, S., Wilkinson, L., LeChenaye, J., & Perry, T. (2023). The hidden perspective of family engagement: School beliefs and in-home practices of parents and caregivers in an urban high school. *Education (Chula Vista), 143*(2), 48–62.

McDonald, L., Miller, H., & Sandler, J. (2015). A social ecological, relationship-based strategy for parent involvement: Families And Schools Together (FAST). *Journal of Children's Services, 10*(3), 218–230. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-07-2015-0025>

McWayne, C. M., & Melzi, G. (2014). Validation of a culture-contextualized measure of family engagement in the early learning of low-income Latino children. *Journal of Family Psychology, 28*(2), 260–266. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0036167>

McWayne, C. M., Ochoa, W., Segovia, J., Zan, B., Greenfield, D., & Mistry, J. (2023).

- Engagement in the preschool classroom: Brief measures for use with children from ethno-racially diverse and low-income backgrounds. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 64, 177–185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.03.002>
- Morgan, E., & Stahmer, A. (2020). Narratives of single, Black mothers using cultural capital to access autism interventions in schools. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 42, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2020.1861927>
- Mueller, T. G. (2017). Promoting collaborative partnerships with families. In J. M. Kauffman, and D. P. Hallahan (Eds.), *Handbook of Special Education* (2nd ed.; pp. 773-792). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Mueller, T. G., & Buckley, P. C. (2014). Fathers' experiences with the special education system: The overlooked voice. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 39, 119–135. doi:10.1177/1540796914544548
- National Association for Family, School, and C. E. (n.d.). *Family engagement defined*. Retrieved from: <https://nafsce.org/page/definition>.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). *Racial/ethnic enrollment in public schools*. Conditions of education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cge/>.
- Nevill, R. E., Lecavalier, L., & Stratis, E. A. (2018). Meta-analysis of parent-mediated interventions for young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 22(2), 84–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361316677838>
- Nimon, K. (2011). Improving the quality of quantitative research reports: A call for action. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 22(4), 387–394. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.20091>

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Johnson, R. B. (2006). The validity Issue in mixed research. *Research in the Schools, 13*(1), 48–.

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Leech, N. L. (2019). On qualitzing. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches, 11*(2), 98–131. <https://doi.org/10.29034/ijmra.v11n2editorial2>

Oono, I.P., Honey, E.J., and McConachie H. (2013) Parent-mediated early intervention for young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). *Evidence-Based Child Health: A Cochrane Review Journal 8*(6): 2380–2479.

“World Languages.” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2023.

Pallant, J. (2005). *SPSS survival manual 2nd edition: A step by step guide to data analysis using SPSS version 12*. Chicago, IL: Open University Press.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93–97.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244>

Pierce, N. P., O’Reilly, M. F., Sorrells, A. M., Fragale, C. L., White, P. J., Aguilar, J. M., & Cole, H. A. (2014). Ethnicity reporting practices for empirical research in three autism-related journals. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 44*, 1507–1519.

Putnam, R. D. (1995). Tuning in, tuning out: The strange disappearance of social capital in America. *PS, Political Science & Politics, 28*(4), 664–683.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/420517>

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

“Fraud Detection.” Qualtrics, 2023.

Reichow, B., Hume, K., Barton, E. E., & Boyd, B. A. (2018). *Early intensive behavioral*

- intervention (EIBI) for young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD)*. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, 5, CD009260.
- Reynolds, R. (2010). They think you're lazy, and other messages Black parents send their Black sons. An exploration of critical race theory in the examination of educational outcomes for Black males. *Journal of African American Males in Education, 1*, 145-163.
- Ruble, L., Heflinger, C., Renfrew, J., & Saunders, R. (2005). Access and service use by children with autism spectrum disorders in medicaid managed care. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 35*(1), 3–13.
- Sanders, M. G. (2014). Principal leadership for school, family, and community partnerships: The role of a systems approach to reform implementation. *American Journal of Education, 120*(2), 233–255. <https://doi.org/10.1086/674374>
- Shiller, J. T. (2020). Clients or partners: The challenge to engage families in Baltimore's community schools. *Urban Education, 0*(0), 1-28.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920954897>
- Shirley, D. (1997). *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Smith, K. A., Gehricke, J.-G., Iadarola, S., Wolfe, A., & Kuhlthau, K. A. (2020). Disparities in service use among children with autism: A systematic review. *Pediatrics (Evanston), 145*(Suppl 1), S35–S46. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1895G>
- Stahmer, A. C., Vojnoska, S., Iadarola, S., Straiton, D., Segovia, F. R., Luelmo, P., Morgan, E. H., Lee, H. S., Javed, A., Bronstein, B., Hochheimer, S., Cho, E., Aranbarri, A., Mandell, D., Hassrick, E. M., Smith, T., & Kasari, C. (2019). Caregiver voices: Cross-cultural input on improving access to autism services. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health*

- Disparities*, 6(4), 752–773. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-019-00575-y>
- Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. In C. Willig (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology* (pp. 17-36). Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526405555>
- Thomas, K. C., Ellis, A. R., McLaurin, C., Daniels, J., & Morrissey, J. P. (2007). Access to care for autism-related services. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 37(10), 1902–1912. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-006-0323-7>
- Thompson, B., Diamond, K. E., McWilliam, R., Snyder, P., & Snyder, S. W. (2005). Evaluating the quality of evidence from correlational research for evidence-based practice. *Exceptional Children*, 71(2), 181–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001440290507100204>
- Trembath, D., Gurm, M., Scheerer, N. E., Trevisan, D. A., Paynter, J., Bohadana, G., Roberts, J., & Iarocci, G. (2019). Systematic review of factors that may influence the outcomes and generalizability of parent-mediated interventions for young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism Research*, 12(9), 1304–1321. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2168>
- Tucker, V., & Schwartz, I. (2013). Parents' perspectives of collaboration with school professionals: Barriers and facilitators to successful partnerships in planning for students with ASD. *School Mental Health*, 5, 3–14. doi:10.1007/s12310-012-9102-0
- Turnbull, A. P., & Turnbull, H. R. (March-June 2017). *Engaging families and creating trusting partnerships to improve child and family outcomes* [Webinar]. Chapel Hill, NC: The Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.
- Turnbull, A. P., Turbiville, V., & Turnbull, H. R. (2000). Evolution of family professional partnership models: Collective empowerment as the model for the early 21st century. In S. J. Measels & J. P. Shonkoff (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention* (pp.

- 630-650). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Turnbull, H. R., Stowe, M., & Huerta, N. (2007). *Free appropriate public education: The law and students with disabilities*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing.
- Turnbull, A. P., Turnbull, H. R., Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., & Shogren, K. A. (2015). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust*. New York, NY: Pearson.
- United States Department of Education. (2015). *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*. United States Department of Education.
- Valicenti-McDermott, M., Hottinger, K., Seijo, R., & Shulman, L. (2012). Age at diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, *161*(3), 554–556.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2012.05.012>
- Van Voorhis, F.L., Maier, M.F., Epstein, J.L., & Lloyd, C.M. (2013). *The impact of family involvement on the education of children ages 3 to 8: A focus on literacy and math achievement outcomes and social-emotional skills*. MDRC.
- Voulgarides, C. K., & Barrio, B. L. (2021). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the equity imperative: Examining early childhood transitions to special education. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners*, *21*(1), 40–54.  
<https://doi.org/10.56829/2158-396X-21.1.40>
- Walsh, B. A., Sanchez, C., Lee, A. M., Casillas, N., & Hansen, C. (2016). Family concepts in early learning and development standards. *Early Child Development and Care*, *186*(7), 1034–1059. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2015.1076398>
- West, E. A., Travers, J. C., Kemper, T. D., Liberty, L. M., Cote, D. L., McCollow, M. M., & Stansberry Brusnahan, L. L. (2016). Racial and ethnic diversity of participants in research

supporting evidence-based practices for learners with autism spectrum disorder. *The Journal of Special Education*, 50(3), 151–163.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466916632495>

Wetherby A.M., Guthrie W., Woods J., et al. (2014) Parent-implemented social intervention for toddlers with autism: an RCT. *Pediatrics* 134(6): 1084–1093.

White, S. E. (2014). Special education complaints filed by parents of students with autism spectrum disorders in the midwestern United States. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, 29, 80–87. doi:10.1177/1088357613478830

Wong, C., Odom, S. L., Hume, K., Cox, A. W., Fettig, A., Kucharczyk, S.,...Schultz, T. R. (2014). *Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with autism spectrum disorder*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, Frank Porter Graham, Child Development Institute, Autism Evidence-Based Practice Review Group.

Wymbs, F., Doctoroff, G. L., & Chacko, A. (2023). Using conjoint analysis to inform engagement in Head Start parent programs among families who are Spanish-speaking. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 32(8), 2294–2308.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-022-02493-w>

Zagona, A. L., Miller, A. L., Kurth, J. A., & Love, H. R. (2018). Parent perspectives on special education services: How do schools implement team decisions? *The School Community Journal*, 29(2), 105–128.

Zuckerman, K. E., Mattox, K., Donelan, K., Batbayar, O., Baghaee, A., & Bethell, C. (2013). Pediatrician identification of Latino children at risk for autism spectrum disorder. *Pediatrics (Evanston)*, 132(3), 445–453. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-0383>

## **APPENDIX A: SURVEY (PHASE ONE)**

*Intro/Participation* Thank you for taking the time to participate in this survey. You have been invited to participate because you are a parent or caregiver of a child who is receiving or has received school-based special education services.

As a parent or caregiver of a child with special needs, you have a unique perspective based on personal experiences navigating the often-challenging process of working with schools to access special education services. The purpose of this survey is to better understand these personal experiences in hopes of identifying how to educate and empower other parents and caregivers who are new to receiving services.

Should you take the time (approximately 15 minutes) to complete this survey, you can share an experience that another parent or caregiver could relate to and gain strength from. Your responses to the survey questions, while completely anonymous, will be used to support using practices to more fully engage families of children receiving special education services.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary, and you are free to stop at any time. You will have a choice of not answering any question you feel uncomfortable answering.

If you choose to participate, you will automatically be entered into a weekly lottery to receive a \$100 e-gift card as an appreciation for your time. Your preferred email address will be requested at the end of the survey so the gift card can be sent to you.

Please indicate below whether you would like to participate in this survey:

- Yes, I want to participate in this survey
- No, I do not want to participate in this survey (End survey)

Skip To: End of Survey If Intro/Participation = No, I do not want to participate in this survey

(End survey)

End of Block

**Start of Block 0: Screener**

-) Does your child qualify to receive special education services?  Yes  No

-) Select your child's birth month and birth year:

- January  2020
- February  2019
- March  2018
- April  2017
- May  2016
- June  2015
- July  2014
- August  2013
- September  2012
- October  2011
- November  Year not listed
- December

-) Are you the primary parent or caregiver attending your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings?  Yes  No

**Start of Block 1: Demographics**

-) Which diagnoses does your child have? Select all that apply:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder  ADHD  ODD
- Emotional Disturbance  Orthopedic Impairment  Traumatic Brain Injury
- Deaf-Blindness  Hearing Impairment  Other Health Impairment
- Visual Impairment/Blindness  Deafness  Intellectual Disability
- Specific Learning Disability  Developmental Delay  Multiple Disabilities
- Speech/Language Impairment  Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)

-) Which ethnicity best describes your child? Select all that apply:

- American Indian or Alaska Native  Asian or Asian American
- Black or African American  Hispanic or Latino/a/e
- Middle Eastern or North African  Native Hawai`ian or Pacific Islander
- White or European  My ethnicity is best described as: (Please use the box below to provide a description.)
- Prefer not to say

-) If your child's ethnicity is different from yours, which ethnicity best describes you? Select all that apply:

- American Indian or Alaska Native  Asian or Asian American
- Black or African American  Hispanic or Latino/a/e

- Middle Eastern or North African
- White or European
- Prefer not to say
- Native Hawai`ian or Pacific Islander
- My ethnicity is best described as: (Please use the box below to provide a description.)

-) Do you primarily speak a language other than English?  Yes  No

1) If you selected “Yes,” please specify which language you primarily speak in the box provided.

-) What is your highest educational degree?

- Some high school
- High school
- Some college
- AA degree
- BA/BS
- MA
- PhD
- Prefer not to answer
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)

-) Within which income bracket did your 2022-2023 household income fall (approximately)?

- \$0-22,000
- \$22,001-89,000
- \$89,001-190,000
- \$190,001-360,000
- \$360,001+
- Prefer not to answer

-) What is your current age?

- 18-25
- 26-43
- 44-51
- 52-59
- 60-67
- 68-75
- 75+
- Prefer not to answer

-) What type of program **is your child currently participating in**? Select all that apply:

- Resource classroom
- Inclusive/Integrated classroom
- Mainstream (all general education classes)
- Co-taught classroom
- Self-contained classroom
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- Medically fragile
- Life skills
- Specialized Academic Instruction
- Academic Support (in gen ed classroom)
- Special day classroom
- None of these

-) Which of the following school-based special education services **is your child currently receiving**? Select all that apply:

- Special Education/Specialized Academic Instruction
- Speech Language Therapy
- Adapted Physical Education
- Social Work
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- Occupational Therapy
- Orthopedic/Mobility
- Nursing
- Physical Therapy
- Counseling/Psychological
- None of these

### **Start of Block 2: Engaging with IEP Teams**

-) Which statement best describes your experiences overall engaging with your child’s **current IEP team** (i.e., teacher(s) and service provider(s))?

- Always positive
- Sometimes positive
- Neither positive nor negative
- Sometimes negative
- Always negative

-) Please rank from 1 (most supportive) to 6 (least supportive) the supports that have helped you engage with your child's **current IEP team** when discussing the services your child is receiving:

- \_\_ Language (i.e., translation or interpretation services, clearly written without too much jargon)
- \_\_ Communication (i.e., consistent communication from teachers or service providers)
- \_\_ Collaboration (i.e., working together, sharing updates, sharing resources)
- \_\_ Educational (i.e., training and workshops specific to understanding the IEP process, speakers and presentations for families)
- \_\_ Relational (i.e., opportunities to meet with other families receiving services)

-) Please select things your child's **current IEP team** has done to make sure you feel engaged in the services your child is receiving. Select all that apply:

- Consistent opportunities to share priorities, concerns, and goals, and to ask questions
- Timely responses from teachers and service providers to requests or questions
- Teachers or service providers consistently providing progress updates
- Opportunities to engage with administrators when a request/concern has not been addressed
- Providing training, workshops, or support groups for families
- Strengths-based approach to describing your child (i.e., their skills, strengths, needs, etc.)
- Consistently offering a translation of documents and interpretation at meetings
- Various types of communication (i.e., email, phone calls, in-person, via Zoom)
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of these

-) **In general**, in what ways has your child's **current IEP team** made you feel like an equal partner in your child's education? Select all that apply:

- Shared drafts of your child's IEP before an upcoming meeting
- Initiating conversations to check in with you about your priorities, concerns, and goals for your child (i.e., in person, through email, over the phone)
- Replies to emails in a timely manner
- Communicating with other service providers about your child's services
- A willingness to listen to and respond to feedback you provide
- Addressing concerns you have shared with them in a timely manner
- Inviting additional team members to attend IEP meetings per your request
- Using clear language that is free of jargon in meetings
- Attempts by teachers and service providers to build a partnership with you

- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of these

If “Attempts by teachers and service providers to build a partnership with you” was selected as part of your answer for the previous question, what did that look like? Select all that apply:

- Having informal conversations (i.e., talking about weekend activities, stories about your child, checking to see how other family members are doing)
- Sharing recommendations for activities (i.e., books to read, meals to make, places to visit) that you can do with your child and family
- Exchanging phone numbers to text or talk provide updates about your child at school and/or for you to provide updates about your child at home
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of the above

-) What has your child’s **current IEP team** done to make sure you can fully engage **in IEP meetings** during which there are conversations about the services they receive? Select all that apply:

- Provide you with a draft agenda before the meeting
- Provide you with a draft of all documents related to a meeting ahead of time
- Ask you about your current concerns before the meeting
- Tell you which team members are going to be present at the meeting and what their role is
- Give you opportunities to share without interruption during the meeting
- Offer meeting times based on your availability
- Support your family’s needs during meeting (i.e., childcare)
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of the above

### **Start of Block 3: Communication with Your Child’s IEP Team**

-) How have your child’s **current teachers or service providers** communicated with you/your family regarding your child’s services? Select all that apply:

- Email       Phone       Text       In person       None of the above
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)

-) What is (are) your preferred type(s) of communication? Select all that apply:

- Email       Phone       Text       In person
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)

-) Has your child’s **current IEP team** accommodated your communication preferences?

- Yes       No

#### **Start of Block 4: Collaboration with Your Child's IEP Team**

-) Which activities do you find to be collaborative related to the services your child is currently receiving?

- Writing IEP goals with your input and in alignment with your priorities for your child
- Discussing your child's services
- Sharing ideas, concerns, and needs about your child's IEP progress
- Reviewing the activities/assignments you and your child can work on together
- Accessing educational resources (i.e., textbooks, technology, school supplies) necessary for you to support your child's education
- Open two-way communication with your child's teacher about what is being worked on at home and what is being worked on at school (i.e., progress throughout the school year)
- Working with your child's teacher on supporting your child with developing a new skill (i.e. toilet training)
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of the above

-) Which of the following activities do you find to be collaborative outside of the services your child is currently receiving?

- Volunteering for school events
- Chaperoning field trips
- Working in the classroom
- Attending PTA meetings
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of the above

-) Other than you, which of your child's **current IEP team members** have been the most collaborative?

- Teachers
- Service providers (i.e., SLP, OT, PT, APE, Social Worker)
- School Psychologist
- Administrators
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of the above

-) When collaborating with your child's **current IEP team**, did it feel like your voice (i.e., experiences, opinions, needs) was heard?  Yes  No

#### **Start of Block 5: Engaging through Partnerships**

-) Would you say you have had the opportunity to develop a partnership with at least one of your child's **current teachers or service providers**?  Yes  No

-) Which of the following are important to you when working to develop a partnership with a teacher or service provider working with your child? Select all that apply:

- Trust (i.e., understanding you and your child's unique needs and addressing them with you)
- Child is happy to work with them
- How they speak about your child
- How they share information (i.e., strengths-based; sharing goals, strategies, etc.)
- How do they talk about challenges working with your child
- How do they conduct IEP meetings, assessments, sharing reports and progress updates
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of the above

-) Would you say you have had the opportunity to develop relationships with other parents/caregivers within your child's school community?  Yes  No

-) How did you develop relationships with other parents or caregivers? Select all that apply:

- Through PTA meetings
- While volunteering in the classroom
- At school
- Outside school: (Please specify where outside of school in the box provided.)
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)
- None of the above

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your responses will support other families engage with their child's teachers and service providers.

-) Are you interested in being entered into a weekly lottery to receive a \$100 gift card?

- Yes  No

-) If "Yes" is selected: Please enter your first and last name into the first box provided and your email address into the second box provided. (Your name and email address will be saved separately from your survey answers.)

Check this box if you are interested in participating in a follow-up interview and receiving a \$50 gift card as compensation for your time.

-) What language are you most comfortable speaking during the interview?

- English  Spanish  Mandarin
- Vietnamese  Somali  Arabic
- Other: (Please specify in the box provided.)



## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (PHASE TWO)

|              |              |                                    |
|--------------|--------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Date:</b> | <b>Time:</b> | <b>Interviewer: Mischa McManus</b> |
|--------------|--------------|------------------------------------|

Hi. My name is Mischa. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

I would like to learn more about your experiences engaging with your child's current IEP team.

I expect this interview to take 30 minutes, depending on the length of your answers.

If our interview is cut off, may I have a phone number to call you back to continue the interview? Number provided:

### **Consent** (5 minutes)

I emailed you the consent form before this interview. Did you receive the consent form?

No       Yes

Were you able to read it before our meeting?

No (Read through the form.)       Yes (Paraphrase)

Do you have any questions regarding the consent?  No       Yes

Are you consenting to participate in this study?       No (End interview)  Yes

### **Consent to Record** (5 minutes)

Our conversations will be recorded to ensure that I accurately capture your comments and experiences. I won't share this recording with anyone who isn't part of the research team.

Do I have your consent to record this interview?  No       Yes

Before I start the recording, I will remove your name from your Zoom box and change it to your Participant ID to ensure there is no identifying information associated with the recording.

Do I have your consent to do that?  No       Yes

*Start digital recording now.*

Do I have your consent to participate in this study?

Do I have your permission to record this interview? (You can turn your video off during the recording if that makes you more comfortable.)  No  Yes

### **I. The Importance of Relationships**

Diverse respondents ranked Relational support - opportunities to meet with other families receiving services - as the least helpful when engaging with their child's current IEP team.

Why do you think this type of support was consistently ranked lowest by respondents?

Would you say that school-based relationships are as important as the relationships you have outside of your child's school when it comes to making you feel supported as a member of your child's current IEP team?

### **II. The Role of Collaboration**

Diverse respondents consistently ranked Collaboration low in comparison to other types of support for engaging with their child's current IEP team.

What types of collaboration have been helpful when engaging with your child's current IEP team?

What type of collaboration do you wish to have with your child's current IEP team?

### **III. The Opportunity to Speak in Meetings**

Diverse respondents report having fewer opportunities to share without interruption during IEP meetings with their child's current IEP team.

Has this been your experience? Tell me more about that.

Please describe how your child's current IEP team provides you with opportunities to share (i.e., before, during, and after IEP meetings).

What could your child's current IEP team do to give you more opportunities to share feedback, ideas, and concerns about your child's current services?

### **IV. The Truth Behind Positive Experiences**

Diverse respondents consistently selected "Always positive" and "Mostly positive" to describe their overall experiences engaging with their child's current IEP team.

Has this been your experience? Tell me more about that.

What has your child's current IEP team done that has led to a positive experience with them? A negative experience?

What would you like your child's current IEP team to do differently to ensure more consistent positive experiences?

## **V. The Need to Find a Communication Match**

Diverse respondents do not feel their child's current IEP team accommodates their communication preferences.

Has this been your experience? Tell me more about that.

Could you share an example of a communication exchange with a member of your child's current IEP team that felt supportive or helpful (e.g., via email, phone, text message, or in person)?

## **VI. The Importance of Community**

The majority of diverse respondents indicated that they do not have a member of their community on their child's current IEP team.

What does community mean to you when working with your child's current IEP team?

How do you feel (or would you feel) about having someone on your child's IEP team who shares your ethnicity?

## **VII. Conclusion**

I appreciate your participation in this study. I just have one more question.

What are three things your child's current IEP team could do to make you feel like the next IEP meeting was a success?

Thank you for your time. I'd like to offer you a \$50 gift card as compensation.

Is the email we used to communicate with you so far an appropriate place to send the gift card?

Yes  No: Alternative email \_\_\_\_\_

**END RECORDING**