A SHARED MEANING OF FAPE: RECONCILING PARENT AND SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSPECTIVES TOWARD POLICY IMPROVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles students with a disability to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The FAPE entitlement is broadly defined in IDEA and the word ‘appropriate’ in the acronym is not defined in the law. Any existing standards, understandings, and meanings of FAPE are defined primarily by litigation and judicial decisions. The research literature specifically around a meaning of ‘appropriate’ and a shared meaning of FAPE is non-existent. The lack of a shared meaning of FAPE throughout the special education system creates the opportunity for poor student programming and the potential to instigate conflict. This study uses a constructivist grounded theory approach to answer research questions about: The foundational components of FAPE that contribute to positive educational outcomes for students with disabilities enrolled in public schools; the relationship of the individualized education program to the basic components of FAPE as it relates to appropriateness and its positive impact on student educational outcomes; and, the points of convergence and divergence between parents and school district personnel around the meaning of ‘appropriate.’ The study proposes that the place to find any existing shared meaning of FAPE, and build on that shared meaning, is in the dynamic between parents and school district personnel currently involved with the public school special education system on a day to day basis. With data collected through mixed methods, semi-structured interviews and survey, the research compares parent and school district personnel perspectives on FAPE and concludes that a foundation exists for the construction in context of a shared meaning of FAPE. Points of convergence around a shared meaning of FAPE include student success, individualization, placement, and engagement with general education and non-disabled peers. The study includes recommendations for policy improvements intended to directly impact FAPE for students with disabilities.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background

Public schools in the United States provide all eligible students with a disability special education programs and services consistent with the mandate of the federal entitlement in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). The federal entitlement to special education is the result of over 40 years of policy implementation, research, advocacy, and litigation on the part of parents, educators, legislators, and adjudicators. Utilizing a unique bundle of procedural and substantive requirements, IDEA provides a foundation of policies, practices, and procedures that ensure the right of a student with a disability to an equitable education in every public school and classroom alongside the student’s nondisabled peers. The unique bundle of requirements, included within the original 1975 federal special education law, continues to exist and persist as originally conceived. The most basic of those original requirements include: free eligibility evaluation (Child Find); maximization of education with nondisabled peers, known as Least Restrictive Environment (LRE); an individualized education program (IEP); and, a free appropriate public education (FAPE). The last requirement, FAPE, is the foundation of the federal special education entitlement. It is an applied policy, substantive in nature but dependent in practice on a litany of procedures found in IDEA that prominently include LRE and the IEP.

The year 1975 is often identified as the birthdate of the concept of FAPE. This is not an entirely accurate history of FAPE. The idea of providing an appropriate public education for individuals with disabilities needed its own foundation before it could be imagined as a national policy. In 1971 the State of Pennsylvania enacted a right to education law for all its students
because of the work of the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) focused on closing state-run institutions and keeping individuals with disabilities in their home communities. The federal Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was built on this foundation. However, the original Pennsylvania law did not use the term FAPE. The state law used the more generic ‘free public education’ term. The practice in Pennsylvania, and many other parts of the United States at the time, was to deny access to the public schools by individuals with disabilities. The original goal of PARC and federal legislation was access. It was not until the EAHCA was enacted in 1975 that the word ‘appropriate’ would be included as an entitlement embedded in a free public education. For many decades, the entire focus of special education was access. Despite state efforts and the federal law, school districts persisted in developing separate facilities and separate programs for students with disabilities. It is impossible to pinpoint a date when efforts at access began to dwindle, however as general education evolved and placed a new emphasis on improved student outcomes and performance, special education picked up the gauntlet and began to demand and advocate for more than simple access. With the reauthorization of the EAHCA in 1990 and its renaming to IDEA in the same year, special education policy took on more of the characteristics found in federal general education policy. These characteristics included increased regulation and oversight in the form of state agency monitoring, school district accountability for student academic progress, and an emphasis on state-wide and district-wide assessment as a measure of student academic achievement and improvement.

As the educational landscape began to shift toward a new paradigm of achievement, assessment, and data-driven decision making, the concept of FAPE continued to be defined primarily through the courts and administrative hearings. The seminal decision on the meaning
of FAPE continues to be *Board of Education v. Rowley* (1982). In this United States Supreme Court decision, the Justices articulated their agreement with IDEA in stating that the IEP contains the basis of the FAPE standard for each student. Beyond the fact that the plain dictionary meaning of ‘standard’ precludes a definition that is mercurial and changes from situation to situation and student to student, the *Rowley* decision established the concept that the contents of the paper document upon which the IEP is written equates to FAPE. This reflects the procedural definition used in IDEA. However, this is inconsistent with what the Court then proceeded to describe as a continuum of appropriateness from adequate to above-and-beyond. The Court walked a thin line between the substantive and procedural nature of FAPE. By doing so, it skirted the issue of creating a solid meaning and understanding of what appropriateness in educational programming ought to be for any student with a disability.

At issue with the concept of FAPE, for the purpose of this research and toward improved student outcomes, is the understanding and meaning of the ‘A’ in its acronym. Decades of IDEA implementation provide little clarification of exactly what an ‘appropriate’ education is for a student with a disability. Additionally, the diversity of disability that the population of students represents creates ambiguity and inexactness around the word ‘appropriate.’ Each student is unique, and each disability varies in type, intensity, and in its impact on education. Which brings into focus another issue that blurs and confounds the understanding of FAPE, which is its relationship with the IEP. The IDEA itself provides minimal language for defining appropriate education. Where it does define FAPE, the federal law, and its implementing regulations at 34 C.F.R. § 300.17, uses broad and general language identifying FAPE as special education and related services provided to a student consistent with an IEP. This definition is, in part, responsible for the creation of the common understanding of appropriate education, i.e. FAPE is
everything contained within the four corners of the piece of paper on which an IEP is written. This is the extent of the federal policy language about the meaning of FAPE. Plenty of words have been written over the years about the provision of FAPE and many of those words perpetuate the lack of clarity and understanding around its meaning and ultimately its implementation as a foundational special education policy. The result is a policy which is unevenly applied, instigates conflict between parents and school districts, and has the potential to impose a direct negative effect on educational outcomes and diminish success for students with disabilities.

**Significance of the Study**

School district personnel and parents come to the table to identify programs and services for students with disabilities with little or no common ground on which to establish ‘appropriate’ programming. Additionally, with no common understanding or policy guidance about the practical ‘appropriateness’ of a student’s public education, special education due process systems (mandated and defined by IDEA) continue to see consistent numbers of administrative law hearings and state complaints about failures to provide FAPE (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2015). The applied policy problem at issue is the unnecessary stress and conflict experienced by the stakeholders and the special education system about FAPE that present because of the inability to find little, if any, common ground about what constitutes FAPE for a student. This gap in understanding and shared meaning further creates an inability to resolve these problems related to FAPE and causes the same detrimental effects experienced when determining student level education programming – weak and inadequate solutions that prevent positive student outcomes and diminish the educational benefit provided to students with disabilities. Of equal import, the parent and school district relationship, which is critical to school success (Goodall, 2014;
LaRocque, et al., 2011), is potentially negatively affected. These issues of adequate student programming and procedural stress and conflict provide the broadest categories that encompass the existing literature about FAPE. No research exists with a specific focus on the foundational meaning of FAPE appropriateness and the intersection of that meaning from the perspectives of parents and school district personnel.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this applied policy research is to identify the fundamental meaning and components of FAPE, specifically the word ‘appropriate,’ as perceived by stakeholders who are current, active participants in the special education system mandated by IDEA. The research explores the perceptions and understanding of the two key stakeholders in the special education process: parents and school district personnel. This study is an initial attempt to construct shared meaning for the purpose of improving the public school special education system in the United States through behavior and policy change.

**Research Goal and Questions**

The primary research goal of this policy study is to build the foundation of a basic shared meaning of FAPE, specifically the word ‘appropriate,’ for parents and school district personnel responsible for the development and implementation of special education programming for students with disabilities. The primary research question is: “What are the foundational components of FAPE that contribute, in a practical manner, to positive educational outcomes for students with disabilities enrolled in public schools in the United States?” This policy study also looks at two secondary research questions. Because FAPE is a substantive entitlement informed by procedural requirements, one of those secondary questions is: “What is the relationship of the IEP to the basic components of FAPE as it relates to appropriateness and its positive impact on
student educational outcomes?” The third research question is specific to the concept of shared meaning and the primary research goal: “Where are the points of intersectionality and divergence between parents and school district personnel around the meaning of ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE acronym?”

**Theoretical Framework Overview**

Research about FAPE includes the procedural dynamics that occur between the ‘appropriate’ education of students with disabilities, the IEP, and student placement or LRE. These procedural dynamics are rooted in a federal special education policy based on a team structure that requires interaction between parents and school district personnel. For the current research, this embedded concept of team necessitates a theoretical framework that includes how groups (teams) construct shared meaning, share power, and navigate a system. This study uses the work of Bjørn & Ngwenyama (2009) about the development of shared meaning between individuals and the work of Scheepers, et al. (2013) and Watson & Foster-Fishman (2013) in the evolution of shared power to comparatively analyze and interpret data. Fundamental systems theory from Donella Meadows (2008) is also used to analyze the impact of the data on policy solutions. The three theoretical lenses collectively create an analytic approach that seeks to uncover egalitarian and aggregate policy solutions from the perspective of two stakeholders, parents and school district personnel. These stakeholders enter the special education process from unique and different places in the life of a student with a disability. A student-centered approach to problem-solving is necessary to deal with the problems that surround getting to common ground around the concept of appropriate educational programming for students with disabilities. The siloed and disparate approaches that look at the problem from one perspective at a time do not produce these student-centered results. This theoretical framework, used in the
context of grounded theory as a methodology, is a good fit for a problem that must navigate policy procedures and human relationships.

**Definition of Terms**

*Free appropriate public education*: An entitlement and mandate in the IDEA federal special education law. The term is commonly, almost exclusively, referred to by its acronym of FAPE (read as a word and pronounced \fāp\). The federal definition of FAPE is found in the IDEA implementing regulations at 34 C.F.R. § 300.17:

*Free appropriate public education* or FAPE means special education and related services that—
(a) Are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge;
(b) Meet the standards of the SEA, including the requirements of this part;
(c) Include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and
(d) Are provided in conformity with an individualized education program (IEP) that meets the requirements of §§ 300.320 through 300.324.
(Authority: 20 U.S.C. 1401(9))

FAPE is understood across the special education field to be the foundation of a student’s special education programs and services and therefore effects, and is effected by, nearly every other procedural and substantive requirement in the law. The word ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE acronym is not defined in federal law.

*General education*: The term ‘general education’ is used as a counterpoint to ‘special education.’ Depending on the educational system, and often the geographic location, general education is synonymous with such terms as ‘regular’ education or mainstream education. This is a nebulous term that is primarily a function of time, not place or activity. Its use is primarily tied to a federal policy effort to distinguish between time spent receiving special education services and time spent receiving other education services not defined as special education.
**Individualized education program:** An entitlement and procedural mandate in the IDEA federal special education law. The term is commonly referred to by its acronym, IEP. The IEP is a document whose content is proscribed in the IDEA implementing regulations at 34 C.F. R. § 300.320. The document itself requires seven basic statements and descriptions, of varying complexity, that collectively present a course of action that will be followed for one school year to deliver special education programs and services to a student (see Figure 1.1.). Two additional basic statements and descriptions are required for postsecondary and age of majority students. The IEP must be developed by a team that includes parents and school district personnel and must be reviewed and updated on an annual basis for as long as a student is eligible for special education programs and services.

**Figure 1.1. The Basic IEP Procedural Requirements**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance</th>
<th>Measureable Annual Goals</th>
<th>Method To Measure Progress Toward Meeting Annual Goals</th>
<th>Special Education and Related Services; Supplementary Aids and Services; Modifications and Supports for Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extent To Which The Student Will Not Participate With Nondisabled Students</td>
<td>Accommodations Necessary To Measure Academic Achievement and Functional Performance on State and Districtwide Assessments</td>
<td>Projected Date for Beginning of Services and Anticipated Frequency, Location, and Duration of Services and Accommodations</td>
<td>For Students Transitioning To Postsecondary: Transition Goals and Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For Students Who Attain The Age of Majority: Transfer of Rights Statement</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Least restrictive environment:** An entitlement and procedural mandate in the IDEA federal special education law (see Figure 1.2.). Least restrictive environment, or LRE, is often used synonymously with the term ‘placement.’ LRE, however, is not synonymous with a student’s placement. LRE is a consideration that must be undertaken during the development of a student’s program and in assessing the appropriateness of a program, not defining that appropriateness.
Both terms, LRE and placement, are used separately in IDEA. LRE is presented in the federal IDEA regulations as a set of requirements at 34 C.F.R. § 300.114. The essence of LRE is the level of interaction with, and the amount of time spent with, non-disabled students by a student with a disability. The continuum runs from a general education classroom to hospitalization.

**Figure 1.2. The LRE Continuum**

Assumptions

- Parents and school district personnel both encounter positive and negative special education experiences in the public-school environment.
- Parents and school district personnel represent the continuum of disability, age, and grade level in their special education experience.
- Parents and school district personnel strive for the best possible educational outcome for students with disabilities within the public-school environment.
- Parents and school district personnel engage with each other and students along a continuum from negligible interaction to fully engaged.
Organization of the Research

The purpose of this research is to identify the fundamental components of FAPE to build shared meaning. Specifically, the research seeks to identify a shared meaning around the word ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE acronym. Chapter 1 provides an overview of FAPE as a foundational entitlement and articulates the significance of the research as a potential mitigating factor in the implementation of special education policy. The chapter also summarizes the purpose and theoretical framework of the study. The research questions are presented in detail and definitions for four special education terms are provided (FAPE, general education, IEP, and LRE).

Chapter 2 presents a review of the existing literature about FAPE in the context of special education policy. The literature review exposes the gap in the research around the meaning of FAPE and the interplay between appropriate education and the IEP. The chapter presents a review of the literature used to build the conceptual and theoretical framework applied to analysis and interpretation of the research data.

Chapter 3 describes the overall research design of the study and the methodology used to collect and analyze data. The methodology includes specifics about the Michigan system of delivery for special education programs and services as the sampling environment.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the data collection and analysis along with a discussion of the findings. The focus of the results and data collection is the quantitative data collected through the survey instrument. Within the survey instrument, the specific open-ended question about the meaning of ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE mandate provides the deeper focus for the data analysis.
Chapter 5 presents the conclusions of the applied policy research in the context of the research questions, purpose, significance, and theoretical framework. Included in this chapter are recommendations for future research and policy improvement.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

Existing FAPE literature, taken as a narrow category unto itself, produces a limited, albeit robust, body of work about special education legal issues of litigation and court decisions. The body of work increases when the literature expands to include special education issues, both procedural and substantive, of the IEP, parental engagement, and parent and school district interactions as they relate to FAPE. Consequently, the role of the IEP, parents, and school district personnel in the provision of FAPE is a focus of this literature review. An additional and expanded categorization of FAPE literature attempts to identify the parameters, components, criteria, and standards applicable to ‘appropriate’ education programming for students with disabilities. Regardless of the focus, whether it is law, process, or meaning, the literature about FAPE consistently reveals a knowledge gap, i.e. there is no clear, precise, or shared meaning of FAPE within the K-12 public school special education system, environment, and community in the United States.

A Review of the FAPE Literature

A review of the literature about FAPE consistently reaffirms the long-standing and continuing lack of clarity and understanding across the nation about the meaning of FAPE. Much of the literature about special education and the provision of FAPE is about the courts and adjudication. This body of work relies heavily on literature review and some limited secondary data review (usually in the form of federal or state data collected on adjudication and complaints). FAPE is the fodder of due process challenges from the simplest, most informal state complaint in an administrative law setting up to and including the United States Supreme Court.
Along this legal continuum, the interpretations of FAPE as a whole concept consistently differ and provide different meanings of appropriateness and standards upon which to determine if a student is provided FAPE (Brizuela, 2011; Bucaria, 2007; Zirkel, 2013a). An example of the vague and broad meaning and standard applied to FAPE is the Supreme Court decision in the *Board of Education v. Rowley* (1982). The Court, which consistently struggles with the “unique statutory scheme” of IDEA (*Schaffer v. Weast*, 2005), established a standard for evaluating FAPE by way of an automotive analogy in *Rowley*. The Court stated that FAPE is on a continuum from a “Chevy” to a “Cadillac” and that a public school is under no obligation to provide a student with a disability a “Cadillac” education, but would do perfectly well to provide a “Chevy” education. A court decision could not be less helpful or better situated to instigate conflict between parents and school districts (Colker, 2013; Kaufman & Blewett, 2012). The analogous language involving automobiles represents more than the opportunity for conflict.

Bridging the literature between law, process, and meaning, Teal (2013) conducted research on the lack of clarity and definition of FAPE with a review of hundreds of U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals cases and concluded that there is no conclusory understanding or decision-making process about FAPE. In the final analysis, the most that Teal could do is identify some helpful procedures for school district compliance. The federal law provided the initial vague concept of FAPE, and the courts have perpetuated that trend. A result of this failure is the inability to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. If failure seems a harsh term, there is literature that attempts to bring some meaning to the term ‘appropriate’ if not to the FAPE mandate as a whole. Bates (1994) uses *Rowley* to describe the distinction between the procedural and substantive requirements of IDEA that impact FAPE. The procedural requirements for meeting the FAPE mandate are historically embodied in the content and
procedures used to create a student’s individualized program. The substantive requirements include the more holistic IDEA requirements that ensure student achievement. This distinction is helpful as it puts some space between FAPE and the IEP. The description of FAPE in the federal law creates an intimate relationship between the IEP and ‘appropriate’ programming that perpetuates the lack of understanding as the two terms often become synonymous. The separation, as identified by Bates, is a small, but bright, ray of hope that FAPE can be defined separately, even if not exclusively, from the IEP. Significantly, the distinction is captured in the literature about special education process and standards, not the law.

The inexact language of special education law creates a void in the policy that places FAPE standard-setting on a continuum from difficult to impossible. The most prolific researcher about the need to raise the FAPE standard is Dr. Perry Zirkel at Lehigh University. Zirkel, a Ph.D. in Educational Administration and a lawyer, researches and writes often about FAPE and the decades-long stall in efforts to move beyond the old Chevy and Cadillac standard proffered in the 1980s (Zirkel, 2008; 2013a; 2013b). Even when the research presents a positive picture of the courts and their relationship to special education, FAPE is inevitably identified as a policy exception that remains neglected when it comes to providing a clear understanding of appropriate educational programming and services (Heise, 2002). DeBerry (2003) affirms this neglect of FAPE specifically at the state regulatory level of policymaking. Similar to all of the FAPE literature dealing with special education services and policy, DeBerry uses some literature review infused heavily with opinion to decry the lack of FAPE clarity.

The literature presents a theme of failure regarding FAPE policy itself. This failure to clarify the meaning of FAPE or to construct a shared, agreed-upon understanding affects the substantive efforts of special education stakeholders to improve the standards upon which
appropriateness are measured. Other researchers support Zirkel’s assessment that raising the FAPE standard is necessary to the improvement of outcomes for students with disabilities in both the special education and general education environment (Beatty, 2013; Huefner, 2008; Johnson, 2003). The literature presents the failure but proposes no effective, sustainable solution for all stakeholders. It was necessary to look elsewhere for literature that might identify areas of help and hope that would inform research intended to begin the effort to construct that which is missing: a meaningful definition of FAPE for parents and school districts.

The evolution of the literature review appeared, at times, to drift away from FAPE and even from IDEA and special education. The collection of literature that was discovered to have FAPE embedded in its content was research focused on the parent role in the special education process and system. This literature used interviews and surveys to collect data from parents and school district personnel regarding their roles and relationships, in contrast with the FAPE literature centered on the law and process that utilized literature reviews. The overwhelming conclusion from this literature is that parents, especially, lack the information necessary to understand FAPE and effectively and meaningfully participate in the development and provision of appropriate programming for their student (Chopp, 2012; Griffin, 2014). This lack of understanding leaves parents at a disadvantage in the special education process as a whole and perpetuates the lack of shared meaning and shared decision-making in response to the FAPE mandate (DeBerry, 2003). The information and understanding inequity between parents and school districts as the primary actors in the special education system and the provision of FAPE is apparent in the literature (Daniel, 2000). A solution to the problem presented is to construct a basic, consistent, shared meaning and understanding of FAPE. The solution requires research
that constructs that meaning and identifies the dynamics present between the adults who must implement the policy based on that meaning.

**A Review of the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework Literature**

Constructing a shared meaning for the word ‘appropriate’ in the special education FAPE mandate requires the use of multiple concepts and theories. The current literature that discusses FAPE suggests that the meaning of the term holistically and the word ‘appropriate’ in particular includes concepts beyond the procedural requirements found in special education law (Edghill, 2014). These concepts beyond the procedural requirements include regulatory substantive requirements and the group dynamics that are a consequence of IDEA processes and procedures. The substantive policy is more about the purpose of appropriateness than the processes of checking off activities and procedures required in the law. Substantive concepts involve the place appropriate special education programming holds in the broader educational system. The relational and group dynamics result from IDEA policies, practices and procedures built on a team model. The meaning of FAPE encompasses concepts and theories that build upon and reflect off each other in a way that creates this holistic or prismatic sense of understanding. This prism is inclusive of the procedural and substantive requirements of law and the relational and group dynamics that exist between all the actors who contribute to the development and implementation of a student’s special education program. To build a clear and consistent meaning and understanding of ‘appropriate’ and FAPE the prism of research needs intersecting sides that reflect concepts of systems theory, shared meaning theory, and concepts of shared power from group dynamic theories.

Special education programs and services are provided to students through systems of delivery. As such, an appropriate program must be defined within a systems context. A
fundamental component of a system is the feedback loop (Meadows, 2008). Within all feedback loops is the opportunity to identify points of intervention where the system is working and where it is not working. Systems theory provides an opportunity to look at the meaning of appropriate education from an interventionist perspective. The goal is to provide effective education for students with disabilities and use that effective education to define the system. As Meadows contends in her systems primer (a restatement of Forrester’s basic ideas), two of the most effective leverage points in a system are the collective concepts of shared understanding and flexibility among actors within the system. Continuous feedback and the ability to adapt to unique student needs is an important consideration within a special education delivery system and must be built on a foundation of shared meaning. Unique to special education is the need to create feedback balance between parents and school district personnel. Historically, the balance has been heavily weighted toward the school district. As Meadows proposes, without balance a system will fail and with it the object of the system; in this case, students with disabilities.

Identifying the components of FAPE and the meaning of appropriate requires the integration of input from the two major actors responsible for a student’s special education programming – parents and school district personnel. Fitting neatly into the universal systems theory are the conceptual frameworks and theories of shared meaning and language. Making sense out of different perspectives, conflicting goals, and disparate experience and knowledge levels requires the application of those pieces of language and shared meaning theory that brings parents and school districts to a middle ground that focuses on student need (Kasper, et al., 2012; Nicklin, 2012). The shared meaning framework of Bjørn & Ngwenyama (2009) provides a useful model for special education based on their experimental work with virtual teams in the business environment. The model is based on the need to ensure frequent and transparent
communication that accommodates different language bases. The model accounts for differences in depth of knowledge that team members bring to a given task. The work of Bjørn & Ngwenyama is built on a foundation of three perspectives, or analytical levels, and provides context for building shared meaning and remedies when communication and collaboration breaks down between those three perspectives (see Figure 2.1.). This theoretical model of shared meaning and effective communication translates efficiently and cleanly to the special education policy procedures required of parents and school district personnel as a team to develop and implement appropriate special education programming for a student within the public-school system. The model is applicable at multiple levels in the special education process. It applies as easily and cleanly to the whole special education system as it does to the IEP process specifically. A simple translation of Bjørn’s & Ngwenyama’s lifeworld, work practice, and organization levels to parent, district, and student is just one example of this theoretical transferability. In fact, at the core of this study of FAPE is Bjørn’s & Ngwenyama’s lifeworld level which accounts for similarities and differences in knowledge, assumptions, and language that are taken for granted in a shared meaning space.

Figure 2.1. Three Analytical Levels of The Organizational Context Providing The Basis for Shared Meaning Developed by Bjørn & Ngwenyama.
The provision of FAPE, so closely tied to the IEP in the special education process, is built on a procedurally mandated team model and involves multiple players with different knowledge and language bases. The shared meaning framework of Bjørn & Ngwenyama reflects the basic language theory of Fillmore (2014) that emphasizes the construction of words and language as a frame that provides for flexibility in depth and understanding of an individual word (appropriate) or phrase (FAPE). These language-based concepts and theories are transparent in their applicability to the construction of meaning. Less transparent, but just as necessary, are concepts and theories that construct the environment within which these decisions about appropriate education are made on behalf of a student.

The fundamentals of group and power theory deal with status and influence. The development of a student’s individualized and appropriate special education program is awash in the dynamics of power and status that exist between parents and school district personnel. The development of a shared meaning for FAPE is subject to the same group and power dynamics. The literature of Scheepers, et al. (2013) and Watson & Foster-Fishman. (2013), respectively, takes an experimental and case study approach to research that identifies the attainment (or loss) of power or status in group decision-making situations. Both researchers emphasize the importance of equity and authenticity in the group decision-making process. Watson & Foster-Fishman promote the use of the Exchange Boundary Framework as an effective method to promote greater involvement of group members who are disadvantaged regarding information and resources as they relate to the decision-making at hand. Similarly, Scheepers, et al. discuss shifts in group and individual status and power based on expanding and declining knowledge as it effects both the dynamics of the group and the actual decisions made by the group. These theories reflect the historical dynamics of the team concept as it has existed in IDEA and as it has
been embedded in the FAPE concept for over 40 years. The power share and the information and resources owned by parents and school districts has changed over the years. This change has brought the dynamic between these two stakeholders to the same essence as the research conducted by Scheepers, et al. and Watson & Foster-Fishman – voice. Status, information, resources, and shifting power dynamics all collect at that place where the voice of the parent and school district personnel seek equity and converge within the special education team process.

The team decision-making environment built into the special education process mandated by IDEA needs a lens of group power and status theory to ensure that conclusions are balanced and inclusive. Supporting this theoretical framework is the work of Thye, et al. (2006) which adds depth and nuance to the group and power theories in their review of literature about Network Exchange Theory and Status Characteristics to identify a concept where the other two theories overlap. The effect of these two combined theories models the complexities of shared decision-making in the context of the goal of determining appropriate programming for students with disabilities. The construction of a shared meaning of FAPE is an exercise in the shifting dynamics between parent and district with the student at the center.

Conclusion

This literature review presents a picture of a public-school K-12 special education system that lacks clarity and shared meaning for one of the basic components of that system. That basic system component is an ‘appropriate’ free public education. Collectively, the literature indicates that no current consistent meaning and understanding of FAPE exists to provide feedback to the system, and to the individual student for continuous improvement in educational outcomes. A review of literature from a variety of sources across the disciplines of law, disability, and education reveals a definite knowledge and information gap that impacts the provision of
appropriate education for students with disabilities. The literature review affirms the significance and purpose of the research. The need to expand the content of the review, to include other aspects of special education such as the IEP and parent and school district relationships, reveals the need to include these issues intentionally in the FAPE research focus and data collection methods. The entire conceptual and theoretical framework was developed on a literature trail that leads to concepts and theories about the shared meaning of FAPE within the procedural and compliance structure of IDEA. Utilizing this literature-based lens, the research provides a foundation for both policy change and behavior change affecting students, parents, and school districts. The ultimate policy change goal is to construct a shared meaning of ‘appropriate’ and to update and improve the IDEA policy definition of FAPE. The desired behavior change, on behalf of students with disabilities, is an improved cooperative effort and focus on student educational outcomes among adults as they develop appropriate education programs that reflect an equitable opportunity for success both within and without the education environment.
Chapter 3
Methodology

Introduction

The choice of research design and methodology was meant to transform the concept of FAPE from its current vague abstract state to something solid and practical. Haas and Springer (1998), referencing the work of Carley and MacRae and Wilde, identify applied policy research as analysis for policy with a goal to produce actionable research. The meaning of ‘appropriate’ cannot continue to languish as an elusive idea defined by an eclectic and inexact collection of legal decisions, misunderstandings, and myth. Maintaining the status quo perpetuates two unacceptable conditions: it works against the continuous improvement of the education of students with disabilities by perpetuating and reinforcing a moving target of ‘appropriate’ education; and, makes it impossible to improve or raise the standard of FAPE because there is no sense of where appropriateness begins or ends in the current special education system. The research design and methodology decisions were driven by the attempt to create actionable research to stabilize that moving target and change the status quo by providing a foundation of basic meaning.

Within the holistic approach created from the three applied policy research questions about the foundational components of FAPE, the interplay between FAPE and the IEP, and the parent and school district dynamic concerning appropriateness, is a point of reconciliation. That center, that core point of reconciliation, is all about the meaning of the word ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE entitlement. To reach that point, the data collection and analysis methods were selected to satisfy these explicit measures:

- Identification of the foundational components of FAPE
• Construction of shared language about the meaning of FAPE
• Understanding the meaning and decision-making process of FAPE
• Identifying and understanding the roles of students, adults, and the system within the context of FAPE

Research Design

This exploratory applied policy research used a grounded theory method to identify the foundational components of a shared meaning of FAPE between parents and school district personnel. Grounded theory, as identified by Charmaz, is inductive, iterative, and exploratory as it constructs theory from the collected data (2014). The gap among special education stakeholders in the understanding and meaning of FAPE holistically, and the term ‘appropriate’ specifically, makes this research method the best design approach. Grounded theory allowed for the repeated review and categorizing of the raw data through axial, open, and selective coding.

A mixed methods approach was used to collect data. The goal of building a shared meaning between parents and school district personnel required a method that gave voice to both populations and resulted in comparative data. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews and quantitative data was collected through a survey instrument. The quantitative survey instrument was developed with Northeastern University’s Qualtrics system.

The scope of the research, the data collection, was restricted to the State of Michigan. The decision to use the State of Michigan for the data sampling was based on my Michigan experience and location as the researcher. I have worked as a teacher for students in the general education and special education populations in Michigan public schools and state agencies. In addition, I have worked at the regulatory level within state agencies, including experience with state complaints. This experience provided me with an intimate understanding of how the system
works and of the concerns and knowledge level surrounding FAPE of both parents and school district personnel. Beyond my own experience, the State of Michigan has a unique system and statewide structure for the delivery of special education programs and services.

The Michigan special education system, by state law and administrative rule, uses an Intermediate School District (ISD) model to develop and implement plans statewide for the delivery of special education to students with disabilities in the public-school system (M.C.L. 380.1701 et seq.; M.A.R.S.E. Rule 340.1831-1839.). Michigan’s 906 local school districts are geographically and politically tied to a specific ISD. The ISDs generally break down into county boundaries. This is particularly true in the southern half of the state, where the densest areas of population are found. As shown in Figure 3.1., the population becomes less dense toward the

**Figure 3.1. Michigan’s 56 Intermediate School Districts and Statewide Population Density**
northern and Upper Peninsula regions of the state, where the ISDs are often collections of multiple counties. This structure provided the opportunity to communicate with and collect data through 56, rather than 906, educational entities and the parents associated with those entities.

Additionally, the ISDs break down into four regions across the state. These regions also, generally, follow the population density of the state. The regions were not created by law, but are the result of administrative self-organization by the ISDs over many decades in an effort to create efficacy and efficiency (shared resources and responsibilities) within the special education system in Michigan. Parents in Michigan strongly identify with an ISD as the provider of special education programs and services, the source of fiscal and other special education resources, and the source of regulatory and policy oversight for the local districts.

To provide an answer to the research questions and goal of identifying the foundational components of ‘appropriate’ to build a shared meaning, the research was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved the collection of qualitative data to inform the development and deployment of the second phase of data collection. The second phase involved the collection of quantitative data using a survey.

The First Phase

Population and Sampling. The intent of the first phase of the data collection was to inform the development of the subsequent survey instrument deployed in the second phase of data collection. The first phase filled the purpose of providing credibility to the overall research goal and to mitigate any of my own preconceived bias. Any bias I may have brought to the research would naturally take the form of presumption and undue influence as a result of my own experience in special education. Taking this extra step to collect data from across the State of Michigan helped to remove that bias from the final survey content. A survey developed from the
sole context of my own perceptions about FAPE would not have reflected the lived experience of parents and school district personnel as they implement the policy of appropriateness.

It was necessary to identify a population sample for this first phase of data collection that would meet several criteria. First, the population needed to represent the two primary stakeholders at the focus of this applied policy research: parents and school district personnel. Second, the preferred population needed to be sophisticated consumers of special education services. Sophisticated was translated to mean individuals who had at least two years of experience with special education programs in Michigan in the K-12 public school system. Additionally, the desired population needed to be currently involved in the system. Third, the preferred population, though small in overall size, should represent the overall diverse character of the state. Seidman (2013) identifies the ability of a wide range of readers to identify with a piece of research as important in identifying a broad, yet representative, sampling.

To select a sample of interviewees to meet these criteria, the ISD structure and the state system of special education service delivery as mandated in State rules were employed. The school district personnel contacted as potential interviewees were the directors of special education at an ISD representing one of the four special education administrative regions in the state (see Figure 3.2.). Potential parent interviewees were identified through public websites maintained by the Parent Advisory Committees, also mandated in State rules, at each ISD in the state. All interviewees were initially contacted by email. Follow-up to establish interview details were also communicated through email. No criteria were established to ensure any other demographic for parents beyond representation of the four special education regions. Anecdotally, as a result of self-disclosure during the interviews, the four parent interviewees represented elementary, middle school, and high school experience in special education.
Figure 3.2. Michigan’s Special Education Administrative Regions

**Data Collection.** Semi-structured, purposeful interviews were conducted with the sample of parents ($N=4$) and school district personnel ($N=4$) from across the state. One parent and one school district special education administrator from each administrative region were interviewed. The interview guide presented broad questions about FAPE and the IEP (see Appendix B). Two of the school district personnel interviews were conducted in-person and all other interviews were conducted over the phone. The interviews took place over the late fall through winter season. The time frame for all eight interviews was more protracted than originally planned given the nature of school calendars. There may be no good season to plan for interviews of school district personnel and parents with children attending school, however, it was particularly challenging and time-consuming over a season that included multiple holidays and lengthy school breaks. Nonetheless, all of the interviewees were accommodating and eager to talk about their experiences with the special education system. The interview guide was explicitly followed with each interviewee.
The interview guide was deliberately developed from a broad perspective. The intention of this design was to give the research subjects the opportunity to share story about their understanding of special education and FAPE. The interview guide did not ask a specific question about the word ‘appropriate’ by design. The purpose of the interviews was to help build a survey instrument. The interview guide was intended to encourage each interviewee to follow their own experience and thoughts about the FAPE concept as a whole and not grope for a forced definition. A further intention was to elicit, without undue influence, all of the core and nuanced ideas held by the interviewee about what constitutes FAPE for a student.

**Data Analysis.** The interviews were analyzed using exploratory coding methods. The purpose of coding was to identify salient and critical elements of FAPE for the development of a survey instrument. Because of the purpose and the unique dual nature of FAPE as a procedural and abstract concept, it was necessary to create a unique overall method of coding. All eight interview transcripts were initially coded using an elemental descriptive method that focused on terms related to FAPE (see Appendix C).

A second cycle of coding employed a descriptive review of the interview transcripts to identify the context of the codes. These codes looked at ‘how’ the interviewees were talking about the components of FAPE. For example, interviewees made a distinction between rating and ranking FAPE requirements. These context codes were used to inform the type of survey questions used in the subsequent survey instrument in addition to the content of the survey.

**The Second Phase**

Using the data collected during the first phase of semi-structured interviews, a survey instrument was developed for distribution across the State of Michigan. The number of survey questions was deliberately kept to a minimum to encourage participation.
survey was to collect data from parents and school district personnel about the foundational components of FAPE for comparison and development of shared meaning.

**Population and Sampling.** The sample for the survey instrument included parents, caregivers, school personnel, and service providers in the Michigan K-12 public-school system. No specific criteria regarding role or length of contact time with the special education system was required to participate in the survey. The survey instrument was distributed through the existing Michigan ISD structure. The unsigned consent was needed for respondents to access the URL for the online survey. The consent was forwarded to individuals or groups of individuals by the ISD special education administrator. Five direct requests for the survey URL were received from parents and school district personnel. The consent was also forwarded to all eight interviewees from phase one of the data collection.

The survey was deployed and accessed through the Northeastern University Qualtrics system and was available from March 20, 2017 through April 17, 2017. A total of 302 respondents completed the survey; 51 parents ($N=51$) and 251 school district personnel ($N=251$). Survey respondents were asked to identify themselves by three criteria: role as parent or school district personnel; age and grade level involvement in special education; and, the Michigan county in which they live. The identification of the respondent’s role as parent or school district personnel was a required and critical question given the purpose of the research to find shared meaning as a function of these two distinct roles. The age and grade level involvement question was not significant to the sample. It was an effort to identify the population and sample as broad in its experience and interactions with students of all grades and ages. The identification of the respondent’s Michigan county was also an effort to identify the sample as being from the State of Michigan and to look at statewide distribution of the respondents by role (see Figure 3.3.).
**Data Collection.** An e-mail communication was sent through the ISD system for distribution to Parent Advisory Committees and local school districts. All 56 special education directors in Michigan were initially contacted. Several follow-up communications were sent to Parent Advisory Committees in the less densely populated areas in the state. As data collection progressed, the disparity between parent and school district personnel widened. Because of this widening disparity, and to increase parent participation, the consent was also distributed to a statewide parent advocacy organization. The disparity persisted throughout the data collection and the school district respondents roughly outnumbered the parent respondents by five to one. As indicated in Figure 3.3., even with the gap in numbers the two groups were distributed throughout the lower peninsula and had some representation from the upper peninsula.

The survey instrument (see Appendix D) consisted of a total of eight items; seven closed questions and one open-ended question. The open-ended question was the key question in the data collection and to this study. This item asked the respondent to provide a direct answer to the
primary research question by asking the question, “When thinking about the concept of Free Appropriate Public Education, how would you define ‘appropriate’?” The seven closed questions were a combination of ratings, rankings, and multiple choice. The interview data used to develop the survey indicated the need for the use of rankings for three of the items. It is important to note that the use of ranking, as opposed to rating, empowers the respondent to give voice to prioritization and the complexity of the FAPE meaning. A simple rating drives the respondent to look at one idea or component at a time, with no need to consider any other component. The interviewees used language that indicated a preference for multiple components of FAPE all being important as a collective whole. This approach was given voice through the use of rankings and asking the respondent to look at multiple factors in relation to each other.

**Data Analysis.** The survey data was analyzed using comparative descriptive analysis and a grounded theory approach to coding. The comparative analysis was applied to the seven closed questions and the coding was used to analyze the open-ended question. Straightforward descriptive analysis was applied to the rating and multiple-choice questions. Unique to the ranking questions was the use of a sequential logit model for analysis. In this model, as an item is ranked high it is removed from the list of choices (see Figure 3.4.). This forces the analysis to eliminate ‘ties’ when different items are highly ranked or prioritized across a set of multiple choices.

**Figure 3.4. The Sequential Logit Model**

Given five separate factors to rank, A – B – C – D – E, the choices reduce after each ranking:

- If D is ranked highest from A, B, C, D, and E.
- Then B is ranked highest from A, B, C, and E.
- Then A is ranked highest from A, C, and E.
- Then C is ranked highest from C and E.
The coding for the open-ended question about the meaning of ‘appropriate’ used the three traditional grounded theory approaches of axial, open, and selective coding. The responses to the meaning of ‘appropriate’ were reviewed from a word-by-word perspective and then progressed through organization as categories, subcategories, and themes.

**Limitations**

The data collection for this applied policy research was limited to the State of Michigan. The focus was on the policy itself through the perspectives of parents and school district personnel. Personal and demographic data collected from survey respondents was limited to broad characteristics for the purpose of identifying the final scope and distribution of the data collection instruments. No personal or demographic data was collected from interviewees. Additional data collection limitations included a focus on K-12 public schools and the discrepancy between the number of parent and school district personnel survey responses (see Figure 3.3.). This discrepancy was true for the overall numbers (Parent Responses, N=51 and School District Personnel Responses, N=251) and was particularly apparent in the Upper Peninsula and along the Lake Michigan coast.

**Ethical Considerations**

Data for this study were exclusively stored on an external hard drive. The hard drive was kept in a locked stationary desk. All interviews from the moment of transcription were redacted of any references to school building or school district names. Interviewees were identified by an assigned code and no names were ever used in relation to the coded data. Once transcribed, recorded interviews were destroyed. All interview participants were given consent forms and were contacted after they consented to participate in the study. At first contact with the
interviewees the purpose and intent of the study was explained and interviewees were given the opportunity to decline to participate and to stop the interview at any moment.

Access to the survey instrument was limited to individuals who received the electronic consent form. The survey collected limited demographic data and no personally identifiable information beyond the county of residence. All other data used in this study were publicly sourced.
Chapter 4

Results and Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this applied policy research was to identify the foundational components of FAPE and its relationship to the IEP from the perspective of parents and school district personnel. To look at a realistic, expanded meaning of FAPE beyond the federal policy and existing legal decisions, the research attempted to engage individuals who currently experience the special education system in public schools. The lived experience of special education was realized through a research design built on grounded theory and the use of both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Data was collected through an online survey that was informed and developed from interviews conducted with individuals who represented parents and school district personnel in the State of Michigan.

The guiding intent in collecting and analyzing the data about the meaning of FAPE from the frontline user level of understanding was to compare parent and school district perspectives. The single piece of required survey data on the respondents was their role as either a parent or school district personnel. All the survey responses were disaggregated by these two criteria defined by role in the special education system.

The online survey was the instrument used to collect the core data that would answer the essence of the primary and secondary research questions for this study:

- What are the foundational components of FAPE?
- What is the relationship of FAPE to the IEP?
- Where do parent and school district ideas about the meaning of FAPE intersect and diverge?
At the core of the survey instrument was an open-ended question that asked respondents to define the word ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE acronym. Among the eight survey questions, this question carries most of the weight in answering the primary research question of constructing a shared meaning of FAPE. The remaining seven survey questions were closed questions utilizing multiple choice, rankings, and ratings.

The Close-Ended Questions

Placement and Engagement. During the semi-structured interviews conducted to inform the survey development, both parents and school district personnel brought forward concerns and issues that were ultimately translated into survey items. These items fell into the broad themes of student need, adult need, and system need. The subcategories that emerged from the interviews were: the IEP, post-school outcomes, in-school outcomes, parent involvement, and compliance and entitlement issues. These subcategories are represented by the refined codes identified in the final interview codebook (see Appendix C).

The interview guide asked the four parents and four special education administrators to respond to questions about FAPE and the IEP. However, all eight interviewees included the issues of placement and the least restrictive environment (LRE) in their responses. Therefore, placement was included in the survey. It must be noted that the term ‘placement’ is often used as a synonym for LRE with a slight twist in its meaning. The term LRE reflects the presence of non-disabled students in the learning environment, whereas placement is often inclusive of the LRE meaning as well as the character of the environment. For example, the character of the environment was referred to during the interviews using words such as “calm and quiet,” “supportive,” “helpful,” and “not working.” In response to the multiple-choice survey question about whether student placement was less important, more important, or just as important as the
IEP, the responses indicate a difference in the ‘more important’ choice (see Figure 4.1.). Just over 35 percent of the parent respondents considered the placement decision more important than the IEP. This is consistent with the four parent interviewees who, in telling their stories, emphasized the place where the IEP was implemented as well as the character of the place (e.g. supportive, calm, quiet, nurturing) and the people who were implementing the student’s program.

**Figure 4.1. Parent and District Responses Comparing the Placement Decision to the IEP**

All eight interviewees used the word “engagement” in responding to the meaning of FAPE. Engagement is, like placement, inclusive of the LRE concept. Engagement is exposure to different individuals, academic content, and settings such as classroom and community. It was during the interview dialogue around student engagement that the need for a survey tool that would rank, as opposed to rate, criteria became obvious. Both school district personnel and parent interviewees consistently communicated that criteria used to define the meaning of FAPE must not be exclusively prioritized, but ranked against the other criteria. This is the essence of the difference between rating and ranking. Ratings compare individual items or criteria against a scale, separately and individually. Rankings compare items directly to each other. The school district personnel noted that the need to speak in terms of a system where concepts and criteria
interact with each other is paramount in special education. This criteria interaction indicates a need for ranking over rating. Parents also referred to the fact that “it’s all important; it just depends on the moment.” Parent and school district personnel survey responses agreed that engagement with non-disabled peers ranked as the highest need regarding students with disabilities (see Tables 4.1. and 4.2. and Figure 4.2.). The two roles also agreed in the position of engagement with the community outside of the school district. This was of particular concern during the interviews in the most rural parts of the state where the districts rely heavily on community relationships and resources and students are less likely to relocate post-school.

Because of the disparity between the number of parent respondents and school district personnel survey responses agreed that engagement with non-disabled peers ranked as the highest need regarding students with disabilities (see Tables 4.1. and 4.2. and Figure 4.2.). The two roles also agreed in the position of engagement with the community outside of the school district. This was of particular concern during the interviews in the most rural parts of the state where the districts rely heavily on community relationships and resources and students are less likely to relocate post-school.

**Table 4.1. Parent Ranking of Student Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>General Education Teachers</th>
<th>Non-disabled Peers</th>
<th>The Same Curriculum Used By Non-disabled Peers</th>
<th>The Community Outside Of The School District</th>
<th>Students With The Same Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank 1 (Highest)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2. School District Ranking of Student Engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>General Education Teachers</th>
<th>Non-disabled Peers</th>
<th>The Same Curriculum Used By Non-disabled Peers</th>
<th>The Community Outside Of The School District</th>
<th>Students With The Same Disability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank 1 (Highest)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 2</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 3</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank 5</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.2. Comparison Chart of Student Engagement Rankings
respondents, the rankings were analyzed with simple comparative descriptive statistics. The numbers highlighted for each rank represent a simple high number of raw number responses. Given this approach to the analysis, the only certain statement is, from the perspective of both parents and school district personnel, that engagement with non-disabled peers is important for students with disabilities and of high importance to the meaning of FAPE.

The use of the Sequential Logit Model (see Figure 3.4., page 38) to analyze the ranking responses produces a clean linear path. However, as Table 4.1. indicates, the act of ranking is not always a clean and clear activity. The activity of ranking items is a cognitively demanding task for any survey respondent (Moors, Vriens, Gelissen, & Vermunt, 2016). The parent perspective on ranking the engagement criteria indicates that there is also complexity involved in the FAPE decision making process that adds another level of difficulty to the ranking. If the Sequential Logit Model was not used, the open boxes around items in the ‘Rank 3’ and ‘Rank 5’ rows in Table 4.1. indicate that the ranking would have resulted in the same item receiving two different ranks. This would result in a domino effect that would skew and limit the intermediate rankings and the analysis. It is important to note that the same situation did not present itself in Table 4.2. Because ranking is an equally demanding task for both parent and school district respondents, another cause for this difference is indicated. One difference between the two tables is the role of the respondent, parent and school district personnel, and the number of respondents. It is pure speculation to comment on why there is a difference between the two tables without applying more sophisticated statistical analysis specific to ranked items. It could be an indication of the perspective: school district personnel having a highly defined institutional and legal paradigm within which they operate; and, parents having a greater stake in the life-long outcomes for the student and a much broader knowledge base regarding the student.
The IEP. The semi-structured interviews that informed the survey instrument included direct questions about the IEP and its relationship to FAPE. A consistent response from the interviewees, both parents and school district personnel, were the clear and specific compliance requirements and legal entitlement provided by the IEP. The IEP process in practice is subject to negotiation and contention itself and influences FAPE because of the relationship established in the federal special education policy. Therefore, it was critical to include questions about the IEP in the FAPE survey.

The interviewees told story as they informed the survey. The stories they told included a fluid relationship between the development, final content, and implementation of the IEP as it related to appropriate programming. As with the issues of placement and engagement, parents and school district personnel stated that the process as a whole was important. Parents indicated the need to be involved in the development of the IEP. They also shared that “districts need to do what they say they will do” in the document – an implementation issue. School district personnel spoke about the special education system and how a “perfect IEP means nothing if it’s not properly implemented.” As the interviewees shared their understanding of FAPE in relationship to the IEP they shared that the “IEP is what is required,” but it is not entirely sufficient to the task of building an effective and appropriate program for a student with a disability. This is represented in Figure 4.3. comparing parent and district responses to the question, “Does the IEP contain everything necessary to provide a student with FAPE?” The differences are more striking than the differences regarding the relationship of the placement decision to the IEP. The school district personnel appear to have more confidence in the linear relationship between the IEP and FAPE, although it must be noted that less than half of the district respondents believe the IEP equates to FAPE. In comparison, only 15.69 percent of parents responded that everything needed
to provide FAPE is contained in the IEP. Over half of the parents responded that ‘It Depends.’ During the interviews, parents spoke to their role in the process (IEP and FAPE) and school district personnel as factors that influence ‘It Depends.’ Parents shared stories about needing to seek out different school staff or asserting themselves with decision-makers to arrive at an appropriate program for their student. In an interesting contrast between the interviewees and the survey respondents, all four special education administrators stated during the interviews that they did not believe that FAPE was exclusively the IEP, despite the federal definition. However, the 251 district personnel survey respondents were not as unequivocal.

**Figure 4.3. Parent and District Responses About IEP Content Containing Everything Necessary to Provide FAPE**

![Pie charts showing parent and district responses about IEP content containing everything necessary to provide FAPE.]

The content and process of the IEP are as long-standing as the concept of FAPE. The IEP has undergone some revision and changes over the 42-year history of IDEA, but essentially has remained the same for decades (see Figure 1.1., page 15). The IEP often takes pre-eminence over all other federal requirements including the special education entitlement holistically. The historical reality is that FAPE and appropriateness subsume the content and process-driven IEP. If the IEP and its process requirements did not exist, FAPE would still be required. During the
interviews, the school district administrators and parents took the IEP as a given, a compliance and legal requirement with three distinct phases.

The process prescribed by federal special education policy is that the IEP is developed, then written, and finally implemented. The survey responses from the parents and school district personnel reflect identical rankings in answering the question, “Please rank order the following IEP phases, with the most important being (1), the next (2), and then (3).” Table 4.3 and Table 4.4. reflect an exact ‘tie’ that would occur if the Sequential Logit Model were not used to analyze the rankings. The equivalency between the two roles is visually apparent in Figure 4.4.

**Table 4.3. Parent Ranking of The IEP Phases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank 1 (Highest)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Content of the IEP</th>
<th>Implementation of the IEP</th>
<th>Developing the IEP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Table 4.4. District Ranking of The IEP Phases**

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<tr>
<th>Rank 1 (Highest)</th>
<th>Rank 2</th>
<th>Rank 3</th>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>133</td>
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<tr>
<td>170</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>92</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Content of the IEP</th>
<th>Implementation of the IEP</th>
<th>Developing the IEP</th>
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</table>
The consistency between parent and school district rankings of the importance of implementation over development and content, or procedure over substance, is inconsistent with the multiple-choice results shown in Figure 4.3. The gap between ranking the final content and development of the IEP for both roles when neither group strongly believes the IEP contains everything necessary for FAPE creates some dissonance. It may be as simple as the fact that, being unsure of the appropriateness of the IEP content on a consistent basis, the low ranking reflects a lack of trust in the IEP itself. Another explanation for this dissonance could be the result of the broad nature of the question indicating yet another instance of no shared meaning. Alternatively, the terms ‘development’ and ‘final content’ may have been interpreted from a strict legally-compliant perspective. This would be consistent with the necessity of all parties to the special education process needing to reconcile not only shared meaning, but the mix of substantive and procedural components in a single system.
**FAPE Decision-Making.** The survey instrument included three close-ended questions that directly referred to the purpose of FAPE and its decision-making process. These three questions were of different types: a rating, a ranking, and a multiple-choice. The multiple-choice question was a broad question about appropriateness as it intersects with meaning. Webster’s defines the noun ‘meaning’ and the adverb ‘meant’ in terms of purpose, intent, and significance. All eight interviewees talked about these three characteristics of shared meaning in terms of student success and happiness. The issue of student happiness and success informs the substantive nature of FAPE. All the interviewees emphasized the need to understand special education from a perspective beyond procedures, forms, and compliance. The multiple-choice survey question about the purpose of FAPE went to the farthest extreme from procedure and asked respondents to complete the statement, “A free appropriate public education should lead to student…” by choosing between happiness or success (see Figure 4.5.).

**Figure 4.5. Parent and District Responses About Happiness vs. Success**

![Pie charts showing parent and district responses about happiness vs. success](image)
The comparison between parents and school district personnel indicates that both roles value success over happiness to a high degree. The district response is consistent with the nature of the institution and the importance of student success within the structure and purpose of the public school and federal special education policy. Parents valued happiness slightly higher than district personnel, but still put more emphasis on success. The parent response could be yet another indicator of a lifelong perspective on, and greater depth of responsibility for, the student.

Using a rating survey question, parents and school district personnel were asked to rate the importance of six different components considered when making decisions about FAPE for individual students. Four of the six considerations were identified during the interviews (individual student data, continuing parent input, regular updates on student progress, and student input) and two were included from the federal IDEA policy (teacher input and scientific research). The results of this rating question indicate only one common component of shared meaning in the FAPE decision-making process. Both parents and school district personnel ranked 'scientific research' as the least important component overall and with the same caveat. Both roles equivocated in their ratings of scientific research. Looking at only the 'very important' rating, both roles are in contrast with the federal policy that includes a mandate to use peer-reviewed scientific research when making student programming decisions. As a federal policy component this requirement represents the part of FAPE and student programming that addresses the quality of the methods and interventions used in special education. However, as the descending ratings of scientific research indicate, both parents and school district personnel seem to be aware of the procedural, policy, and practice requirements of scientific research as the rating numbers do not cleanly decline as with the other five components.
As indicated in Tables 4.5. and 4.6., the survey respondents reflect their traditional roles in the special education process through the data. Parents highly rate parent input and regular progress updates, while school district personnel rate student data and teacher input highest.

**Table 4.5. Parent Rating of FAPE Decision-Making Components**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important are each of the following when making decisions about an appropriate education for a student with a disability?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
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<tr>
<td>Important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Important</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Student Data</th>
<th>Continuing Parent Input</th>
<th>Scientific Research</th>
<th>Teacher Input</th>
<th>Regular Updates On Student Progress</th>
<th>Student Input</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Table 4.6. District Rating of FAPE Decision-Making Components**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How important are each of the following when making decisions about an appropriate education for a student with a disability?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
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<tr>
<td>Important</td>
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<tr>
<th>Individual Student Data</th>
<th>Continuing Parent Input</th>
<th>Scientific Research</th>
<th>Teacher Input</th>
<th>Regular Updates On Student Progress</th>
<th>Student Input</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
The clustering of numbers at the ‘very important’ and ‘important’ ratings may indicate two difficulties with the rating type of survey question used to collect the data. First is the preference of the interviewees to express FAPE needs as all being equally important. Second is a resistance to prioritize the items and begs the use of a ranking method. The final closed question about appropriateness was presented as a ranking question.

The eight interviews that informed the development of the survey all included comments, discussion, and stories about the purpose of appropriate student programming. The three primary student goals that emerged from the interviews are consistent with special education policy and general education policy at all governmental levels. The purpose of education, and special education, being to prepare students for: employment; post-secondary education or training; and, living as an independent adult. These three choices were included in the survey along with the ‘other’ option. The option to include their own component for ranking was prompted by the story-telling used by interviewees to talk about FAPE. It was an effort within a close-ended question to give some voice to the respondents about the purpose of FAPE.

Tables 4.7. and 4.8. present data from a question that asked the survey respondents to prioritize employment, independent living skills, and post-secondary education or training as purpose in relationship to appropriate student programming. The rankings are ‘messy’ and may indicate the difficulty in ranking outcomes that all seem to be important to the development of a successful life for a student with a disability. The highest raw numbers appear in the lowest ranking and for the ‘other’ category for both parents and school district personnel. The ‘other’ component presented some data difficulties. For example, only 15 parent respondents included their own language for this choice. Similarly, only 55 district respondents included their own language. The choice of ‘other’ did not require input from the respondent. The question may
have provided cleaner data if input was required. For example, a few individuals chose ‘other’ and then stated that all three purposes were of equal priority. This type of response is indicative of the difficulties inherent in the ranking of similarly perceived components.

Table 4.7. Parent Ranking of The Purpose of FAPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank order in response to the following: The purpose of a free appropriate public education is to help a student obtain…</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank 1 (Highest)</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td>18</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rank 4</td>
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<td>3</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.8. District Ranking of The Purpose of FAPE

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<tr>
<th>Rank order in response to the following: The purpose of a free appropriate public education is to help a student obtain…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rank 1 (Highest)</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rank 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>108</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rank 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83</td>
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<td>Rank 4</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment</th>
<th>Independent Living Skills</th>
<th>Post-Secondary Education or Training</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td>141</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>108</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The raw numbers in the parent rankings indicate no clear prioritization of the three articulated purposes. Applying the Sequential Logit Model, parents indicate independent living skills (18), post-secondary training or education (19), and employment (16), respectively, as their priorities of the purpose of FAPE. The numbers are close and both tie and move down between rankings. The district rankings indicate a cleaner choice between the purposes, but rank employment above post-secondary education or training. This may be an indication of Michigan education and special education policy that puts an emphasis on employment across the state’s education and disability communities. As with the parent responses, the highest raw number from the districts appears under ‘other’ and is ranked lowest.

A visual comparison of the parent and school district responses regarding the purpose of FAPE is presented in Figure 4.6. The preference of respondents for the ‘other’ category is apparent in the bar chart. The language shared under ‘other,’ in response to ranking the purpose
of FAPE, was diverse between the two roles of parent and school district personnel. The district respondents emphasized the goals and outcomes of educational institutions. For example, respondents identified the purpose of FAPE as: “Success in the appropriate learning environment,” “A high school diploma,” “Mastery of content,” and “Literacy and social skills.” The district personnel also used terms associated with special education policy from its inception, such as potential and meeting the student’s individual needs. In contrast, the language used under ‘other’ by the parent respondents emphasized life success and human skills. Parents identified the purpose of FAPE, among others, as: “How to interact with non-disabled peers,” “Acceptance in [the] community,” “Self-sufficiency,” “Knowledge/skills necessary to [the] extent possible to live a self-determined life,” and “Success by their own measure.” The comments about FAPE purpose and community provided by both roles reflect this difference. District respondents used more abstract and community-centered words and phrases such as ‘access,’ ‘involvement,’ and ‘interaction’ with the community while parent language was much more student- and individual-centered (‘acceptance,’ ‘productive member,’ and ‘socialization’). One phrase appeared under ‘other’ for both groups. That phrase was ‘self-advocacy.’ Both parent and district respondents in their own language added self-advocacy as a purpose of FAPE.

Data from the close-ended questions in the form of multiple-choice, ratings, and rankings is limited to simple descriptive comparisons of answers that allowed limited opportunity for individual voice. The value is in the identification of the touch points where parents and school district personnel seem to hold similar beliefs in a shared meaning of FAPE. The question that allowed for the voice of the two groups to emerge and that provided the opportunity to expand the shared meaning of FAPE was in the single open-ended question posed in the survey.
The Open-Ended Question

The foundation of this applied policy research is the meaning of the word ‘appropriate’ in the federal special education FAPE entitlement. The survey instrument used to collect data for this research included an open-ended question that was all-encompassing in relation to the research goals, questions, and measures. Survey respondents were asked, “When thinking about the concept of Free Appropriate Public Education, how would you define ‘appropriate’?” Understanding how the two primary stakeholders involved with FAPE on a day to day basis define ‘appropriate’ is the literature and research gap the current study attempts to fill. While the close-ended questions inform the research measures individually and help construct meaning, the results and findings from this open-ended question are the essence of the research.

In describing the use of grounded theory to analyze data, Charmaz (2014) states that the inductive method is used to analyze actions and processes rather than themes and structures. Therefore, there was no search for emerging themes as the data from the open-ended question was analyzed. The results of the analysis reflect the researcher’s interactions with the data and iterative reviews of the data from a variety of perspectives and depths. Because of this unique nature of grounded theory, the coding for the question about the meaning of ‘appropriate’ took a different form in contrast to traditional qualitative data coding. The initial coding of responses to the question was conducted separately for the parents and the school district personnel. The coding was simple and identified word and phrase occurrence within each of the two groups (see Appendix E). The coding for the two groups was then compared.

The shared meaning of FAPE pursued by this research begins with the recognition of basic actions, activities, and processes engaged in by parents and school district personnel currently involved in K-12 special education in the public-school system. Initial coding produced
points of convergence between parents and districts as shown in Figure 4.4. A total of 302 individuals responded to the survey, 51 parents and 251 school district personnel. Of the 51 parent respondents, 45 filled in an answer to the definition of ‘appropriate’ question producing a response rate to the question of 88 percent. Of the 251 school district personnel respondents, 216 answered the question resulting in a response rate of 86 percent. The parent and school district respondents shared some basic understanding and concepts associated with the word ‘appropriate’ in defining FAPE.

**Points of convergence.** The concepts that were common throughout the responses from parents and districts include: individualization; placement; general education; peers – disabled and non-disabled peers; success; and, expectations.

*Individualization.* Of the 45 parent respondents, 37 specifically mentioned the need for individualization when thinking about FAPE. Among the district respondents, 102 referred to individualization. References to the need for special education programming to be individualized is not surprising. It is part of the existing federal policy and is a requirement articulated throughout IDEA. It should be noted, however, that 82 percent of the responding parents specifically used words such as “tailored to the student’s needs,” “the individual student,” and “individual child’s needs” while less than half, 47 percent, of the district respondents used similar or exact language.

*Placement.* Placement was another concept used by both groups of respondents; by 29 percent of the parents and 13 percent of the district personnel. Parents used the word ‘placement’ specifically and terms such as ‘inclusive,’ ‘mainstreaming,’ and ‘best environment,’ in describing the relationship between FAPE and placement. District personnel exclusively used the terms ‘placement’ and ‘LRE’ to reference the general concept of where a student receives special
education programs and services. Placement and LRE are both part of the federal IDEA policy. Michigan policy also includes placement requirements in state law and policy with an emphasis on the integration of students with disabilities into general education.

**General education.** General education as a concept was used to define ‘appropriate’ by both groups. General education included references to the curriculum, school district personnel (e.g. general education teachers), the environment (general education classroom), and general education activities. Fifteen parents, 33 percent, identified general education considerations as a component of appropriateness. Twenty-two school district personnel, ten percent, included general education in their definition, with nearly half of those 22 respondents (ten) specifically mentioning general education curriculum. The concept of general education overlaps placement as a component of FAPE. Placement is defined federally as the amount of time a student spends apart from and with non-disabled peers. The percentages between the two concepts for both groups are close but not exactly the same.

**Peers.** Both parents and school district personnel referred to peers, both disabled and non-disabled, as important in defining ‘appropriate.’ References to peers was primarily about exposure to and engagement with non-disabled peers for both groups. This reflects two activities and processes that parents and school district personnel engage with on a daily basis: IEP and placement procedural requirements and federal and state data reporting requirements. Eight parents referenced peers with phrases such as, “learn, grow and interact with peers” and “participating in the socialization of peers…skills can come from being around peers.” School district personnel (ten) included references to “build[ing] peer relationships” and “be with their typical peers as much as possible” in their responses. The peer component in defining appropriate is an additional concept that overlaps placement and general curriculum. As with the
relationship between placement, LRE, and general curriculum, the essence of the policy concept is exposure to what one respondent referred to in quotes as “normal.”

**Success.** The word ‘success’ was used by parents and school district personnel to define FAPE. The term was used in both a narrow and broad context; to reference success in the classroom and toward IEP goals and post-secondary and life-long success. Parent respondents made 11 literal references to success and 35 school district personnel made literal references. However, the number of references to success increase when it is looked at through the lens of terms such as ‘achievement,’ ‘progress,’ ‘accomplishment,’ and ‘meet goals.’ These terms were used by both groups of respondents. Both groups also used existing policy terms such as ‘educational benefit’ and ‘maximum potential’ to describe student success as a component of appropriateness. Success was described in terms of a goal to reach and an expectation as part of the existing mandate.

**Expectations.** The idea of student expectations builds upon the concept of success. Respondents from the two groups, parents and school district personnel, used the term ‘expectations’ from different perspectives. The two perspectives reflect *Webster’s* broad general definition of success: to obtain a desired outcome or end. Expectations build on this nebulous definition that begs the question, “Is there agreement about the desired outcome?” The different perspectives of the two groups indicate that there is not agreement about the desired outcome or end. The three parents who referenced expectations did so in the context of student outcomes. The three phrases used were: “high expectations,” “expectations are higher,” and “setting high expectations.” One school district respondent referred to student expectations in terms of individual abilities, data, and research. The remaining four school district respondents used terms such as “reasonable,” “unreasonable,” “grade level,” and “as allowed by his or her disability” to
describe the relationship between ‘appropriate’ and expectations. The concept of expectations provides insight into the deeper perspective on the differences between the two groups in response to defining FAPE.

Two measures identified in this research are understanding the meaning and decision-making process of FAPE and identifying and understanding the roles of students, adults, and the system within the context of FAPE. To understand and identify FAPE process and roles requires interaction with the data at a level beyond the identification of specific language and components. The data needs to be reviewed for overall impression, tone, and purpose as a driver of activity and process. A review of the data from this perspective necessarily requires a review of what is not found in the responses of the two groups and the researcher’s impression of the responses taken as a whole.

**Points of divergence.** The two groups represented in the survey, parents and school district personnel, express some components necessary for shared meaning, for example individualization and placement. However, *how* they talk about all of the common components differs in tone between the groups. The parent responses take a long-term approach to defining ‘appropriate’ and use personal language. For example, one parent respondent used the term “pushing him to succeed” to define appropriate. Another parent used the phrase “care about the students” and yet another “meet the student’s and family’s realistic goals.” This is practical language that works both inside and outside of the school environment. Parents also referenced programming that was “developmentally appropriate.”

The 45 parent responses were diverse in content and length. The overall tone of the parent responses was all-inclusive as it referenced access, parent awareness of services, quality of teachers, and maximization of time in general education and with non-disabled peers. It was
overall a hopeful and ‘humane’ tone. Several exemplary parent responses reflect this long-term understanding of the meaning and its all-inclusiveness:

“A placement that exposes the child to the general curriculum and non-disabled peers, while providing a high-quality education that meets them at their level to create successful outcomes. (Meaningful employment, independence, and a high quality of life).”

“As long as the student is receiving ‘some’ educational benefit from being in a gen ed classroom, no matter how much the work is modified, it is appropriate. The expectations are higher and skills to interact in a non-disabled world are learned.”

“What is appropriate for the child! That the program is designed to meet the individual child’s needs not so the child fits the program. Appropriate means ‘normal’ to me. What are other kids without disabilities doing? Then children with disabilities should be doing the same thing too to the best of their ability. They should be encouraged to participate in what everyone else is doing.”

This is colloquial language that indicates a level of understanding of the student and the FAPE process that is both personal and sophisticated. This contrasts with the tone of the school district respondents.

The school district respondents were greater in number than the parent respondents (216 to 45 respectively). Despite the large number of responses, the school district personnel reflected diversity. There were no ‘postcard’ types of answers. Within this diversity, however, there was a common tone that can be described as institutional and compliant. School district responses were generally not all-inclusive. The responses used language found in federal policy such as, “Meeting the specific needs of the student so they can progress in the gen ed curriculum” and
“appropriate to what the students need[s] are and how to meet those needs in the LRE.” This is the broad and general language found in the federal law. In addition, school district personnel responses included references to information and activities exclusive to a school district generally, such as data collection and scientific research. The district responses also included references to the IEP and the IEP team process. Typical of the tone are the following responses:

“Provision of services and supports that enable the student to obtain maximum benefit from the educational experiences.”

“Appropriate would be the education that best meets the needs of the students in the least restrictive setting.”

“Appropriate would mean services that allow a student to access curriculum and programming like that of any other student. Appropriate are means to help level the playing field so they are considered as equal as possible to that of the average student progressing in a similar manner.”

“I would define appropriate as providing education services that will allow the student to maximize his/her potential and gain skills that will lead to becoming a contributing member of their community.”

These responses lack the long-term, person-centered language of the parent respondents. The language is not negative or inaccurate in its purpose, but it reads as more institutional and confined to the activities of the district.

Overall, the responses between the parents and the school district personnel share ideas about components and concepts that define ‘appropriate,’ but differ in their tone and scope. This may reflect the differences in the accountability relationship between parent and student and district and student. It most certainly reflects the accountability relationship between the district
and the policy regulators at the state and federal level. It is notable that IDEA is not mentioned in any response. One parent respondent wrote that the definition of appropriate was, “To meet the goals of the student which match the overall educational goals and priorities set forth by our American education system.” As a counterpoint, a school district personnel response stated that the definition was, “Subjective and a reason for lawsuits.” Shared meaning of FAPE between the two groups must be reconciled at all levels and from all perspectives to improve the special education system and student programming.
Chapter 5
Conclusions and Recommendations

_The Pool of Shared Meaning is the birthplace of synergy._
Kerry Patterson
Crucial Conversations – Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High

Introduction

Special education policy in the K-12 public school system is bound by the nation’s democratic and legislative structures of entitle, mandate, and appropriate. The delivery of special education services in the public schools is a policy system on a continuum from the federal level to the street level bureaucrat. As applied policy research, the current study begins at the federal end of the continuum with an examination of the existing policy and literature and moves to the opposite end where parents and school districts interact with each other and students with disabilities daily.

What makes this system and this applied policy unique in its implementation is its overlap and necessary integration with the most human, non-political, and non-democratic structure in the culture – families and their children. In this research, specifically, students with disabilities who receive their education in our public schools. This unique juxtaposition of the dynamics of special education policy and families of students with disabilities is at the core and essence of the research. This focus sets up a natural comparison and dichotomy between school district personnel and parents. Specific to special education, this applied policy research attempts to fill a gap in the special education literature and the implementation of special education policy regarding the mandate of FAPE provided by IDEA.

The three research questions pursued by this study collectively address the lack of understanding and shared meaning around the FAPE concept. The research focused on the
meaning of the word ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE acronym. It is this word that has never been adequately defined for parents and school districts within the special education system itself. The primary research question was: “What are the foundational components of FAPE that contribute, in a practical manner, to positive educational outcomes for students with disabilities enrolled in public schools in the United States?” This study attempted to answer this question by collecting data from parents and school district personnel that would identify these components. The basic components included concepts of purpose (e.g., employment, happiness, preparation for post-secondary training), tasks associated with decision-making (e.g., student engagement, parent input), and stakeholder understanding of how FAPE interacts with other IDEA mandates (e.g., IEP requirements, LRE). Two secondary research questions added depth to the primary question. The secondary research questions were: “What is the relationship of the IEP to the basic components of FAPE as it relates to appropriateness and its positive impact on student educational outcomes?”; and, “Where are the points of intersectionality and divergence between parents and school district personnel around the meaning of ‘appropriate’ in the FAPE acronym?” As the research progressed, the word ‘convergence’ supplanted the word ‘intersectionality’ because it better conveyed the movement of one role toward the other as the special education system is implemented.

The research measures went to the depth of the meaning of ‘appropriate’ and are firmly embedded in the research questions. The measures in relation to the research focus targeted data collection necessary for identification, understanding, and construction. The constructivist research design kept the data disaggregated and sorted into the two primary stakeholder roles of parent and school district in the special education system for the purpose of comparison. The intent at every phase of the research was to examine the perspectives of these two groups
separately and then, in the spirit of synergy, bring them together to construct a shared meaning of FAPE appropriateness.

**Conclusions from Results and Findings**

This research was about words. The public school special education system is about words. The system is designed and meant to promote discussion, communication, collaboration, and the production of written material. It is a complex system of many parts that works toward the synergy used in the quote from Patterson that opens this chapter, i.e. synergy is born out of shared meaning. Synergy is a state of being in which the singular whole is greater than the collective parts that define the whole. In this study, the synergistic state of being is the student-centered result of the FAPE process. It is this result, the student programming, that must be appropriate to be effective for the student. Because this is a system of words, language and communication are at the core of the theoretical framework developed to analyze the research. Because reconciliation of perspectives about shared meaning (synergy) is a goal, group power dynamics are necessarily included in the framework. Finally, those parts of classic systems theory that deal with resiliency and information flow are included.

Literature about FAPE and shared meaning in the context of the dynamic between parent and school district does not exist. The body of literature about the meaning of FAPE is limited to research about the legal and judicial interpretation of the term and the policy. Some FAPE research looks at the roles and relationships of parents and districts as they navigate FAPE, but stops short of looking at the concept itself as reconciled from the two stakeholder perspectives. Therefore, it was necessary to look outside of education research to find theory that would help to interpret the results and findings of this research in the context of shared meaning, group and power dynamics, and systems. The shared meaning theory piece used in the framework was
found in corporate information systems research and the group and power dynamic theories were found in community and social psychology research. The systems theory used is classic and derives from the seminal primer on systems thinking from Donella Meadows (2008). These theories center around words, communication, and information central to a complex understanding and construction of a shared meaning of FAPE.

The research data from the current study show that there are salient components of FAPE identified by both parents and school district personnel to build the foundation of a shared meaning of appropriate. These common concepts answer the research question, “What are the foundational components of FAPE that contribute, in a practical manner, to positive educational outcomes for students with disabilities enrolled in public schools in the United States?” The basic and broad FAPE building blocks necessary for a shared meaning context are:

- Student Success
- Individualization
- Placement
- Engagement

These components are part of what Bjørn & Ngwenyama (2008) identify as shared meaning context and the common language parents and school district personnel use to make sense out of each other’s actions. It was not surprising that these concepts would be identified in the structured interviews and in the survey responses defining ‘appropriate.’ These are words found in federal IDEA policy and in Michigan special education law and policy. Moreover, these components are accessible to both parents and school district personnel. As foundational pieces, perceived as broad in scope and taken at their face meaning, these four concepts are understood similarly by parents and school district personnel. What was surprising in the data was how the
perception of these foundational items between the two roles diverged as the items were dealt with in finer and finer detail. Bjørn & Ngwenyama would identify this movement from broad concepts to finer detail as analytical levels in three separate contexts – lifeworld, organization, and work practice (see Figure 2.1., page 25).

Parents and school district personnel agree that student success is a purpose (perhaps the dominant purpose) of FAPE. This was evident in the data to the point that both roles chose success over happiness as the desirable student outcome. Individualization was another dominant data point generally expressed by parent and district respondents. Engagement with general curriculum and non-disabled students as well as attention to the consideration of placement were all shared in the data collection as broad foundational concepts. These are taken-for-granted concepts in the special education system. The data show that these items are brought to the tasks of developing and implementing FAPE for a student with a disability as common knowledge and assumptions. This is Bjørn’s & Ngwenyama’s lifeworld analytical level needed for teams coming from diverse places and positions to develop shared meaning. Parents and school district personnel certainly come to the table to develop appropriate educational programming for a student with these common goals and this common language. The shared background knowledge and assumptions about student success were certainly expected to appear in the data. So, too, the concepts of individualization and placement as both are found in current special education policy. Placement and engagement (i.e. exposure to and interaction with general education curriculum and non-disabled peers) was foreshadowed during the interviews that informed the survey and may also reflect the emphasis placed by Michigan law and practice on the status of a student with a disability as a general education student first. The identification of these foundational components of FAPE answer the broadest research question. Identifying points of
convergence and divergence around the meaning of ‘appropriate’ requires a deeper look at these basic components.

The collection of close-ended survey questions produced their own level of synergy about the meaning of ‘appropriate’ as it relates to an overall shared meaning of FAPE. The responses to questions about purpose of FAPE and activities and entities involved in the FAPE decision-making process move the data analysis into Bjørn’s & Ngwenyama’s intermediary analytical level of shared meaning development, i.e. the organization level of policy, norms, and procedures. While parents and school districts identified success as a foundational component of FAPE, their perception of and perspective on what constitutes success diverges as one moves deeper into the data to reveal more detail and nuance. The language changed from broad sweeping words to more specific language that was more policy-, practice-, and student-centered. It was not surprising that both parents and school district personnel want students with disabilities to succeed and want to ensure that success. This was an assumption identified as a basis for the current study. It was, however, surprising and concerning that the scope of success was far more limited in the responses from school district personnel in comparison to responses from parents. The data indicate a limit to appropriate programming contained within the institutional structure and purpose of the public-school system that is owned and acted upon by school district personnel. In response to the survey question defining the word ‘appropriate’ as this school district response exemplifies the limits and tone of the language:

“I would define appropriate as providing an atmosphere in which a student is able to maximize his or her potential, along with modifications to the curriculum so that he/she can move forward, but from the place where they currently have a mastered or at least a solid understanding of the skills needed before expectations of ‘grade level’ are applied.
This involves providing instruction and ancillary services in the least restrictive environment, but with the necessary supports in place for success.”

This is success exclusively confined to a set of parameters contained in and owned by the school district. The respondent defines appropriate around curriculum, mastery of academic skill, grade level, instruction and related services (the broad federal policy definition of FAPE), and LRE. It is organizational policy language that translates into the actions of the school district personnel. This example includes a classic policy ‘but’ that moves some responsibility of success away from the district and toward the student with the phrase “…but from the place where they [the students] currently have…” The school district words contrast with the language used in these two exemplary responses from parents about success and FAPE:

“A FAPE is one designed for the individual student with teachers who care about the students, have an understanding of students who are different and want to help students succeed.”

“The equal opportunity to reach their individual maximum potential and have that potential supported for their lifetime. Not warehoused, but to have friends, privacy and safe personal living space. If we create the expectation to be independent then we must follow through the transition with lifetime support.”

The parent language is expansive and is not confined to a specific structure or institution. This language describes FAPE as a process that must include life beyond education while it is delivered within education was expressed in the survey responses and during the interviews that informed the survey. The parent language brought to the discussion and decision-making of appropriate education for a student with a disability is clearly a point of divergence in the development of shared meaning. Parents and school district personnel bring different
perspectives to the FAPE team process mandated by IDEA and, consistent with Bjørn’s & Ngwenyama’s model, is at risk of leading to communication breakdowns. The consequences include a breakdown of the FAPE process because parents and districts operate from different organizational norms and perspectives. The breakdown of the process increases the potential for inappropriate educational programming because it can create schisms in the final product and contribute to lack of fidelity during implementation of the program. An example of a schism in the programming is when an important element, such as an annual goal, is compromised to a point of ineffectualness when parents and school districts reach an impasse during efforts to define the goal. Failure to implement with fidelity can result when programming expectations are not aligned and therefore not appropriately advocated for or defended by either role. The same model indicates that a breakdown at the organizational analytical level in the development of a shared meaning context will directly affect the third analytical level – professional specific norms and work language. This level in the construction of shared meaning is the place where current special education policy mandates that parents and school districts work together as a team to ensure FAPE through the development of a student’s individualized program. It is the place where the IEP currently has overwhelming dominion over FAPE policy, procedure, and practice.

Trust is a word that was not articulated by either parents or school district personnel during the quantitative data collection phase of this applied policy research. It was, however, a recurring issue voiced during parent and school district interviews. During the semi-structured interviews, parents shared stories that included the necessity to document every aspect of a student’s educational program, required or not required by law, to keep the school district accountable for implementation of the program. The data in response to the close-ended question
about whether the content of the IEP contains everything necessary for FAPE further reflects this tenuous nature of trust in the IEP document itself and consequently in the FAPE process. School district personnel implied a lack of trust in their response to the same close-ended question. During the interviews, the special education administrators stated that the IEP and the process used for its development is not adequate to ensure appropriate educational programming. This was an unexpected point of convergence about the shared meaning of FAPE. The IEP and its attendant team process has long been identified as synonymous with FAPE. If the document itself is procedurally inadequate or the process and procedures used to develop the document failed to meet IDEA policy standards, then a program was not considered appropriate – even if the program was appropriate from the perspective of the parents and school district developers. The common lack of trust in the IEP as adequate to define appropriateness conflicts with the ranking of the IEP phases as they relate to FAPE.

Implementation of the IEP was ranked highest by both roles. The comparison within the question about the IEP phases shows an identical response from parents and school district personnel, including an indicator of difficulty between ranking final content and development. The inconsistency is between the two IEP-specific questions. Both roles consider implementation the most important activity related to the IEP and yet neither group indicates strong trust in the actual content of the document to provide FAPE. Parsing out the complex nuances of the perceived relationship between the IEP and appropriateness requires further research. Parents and school district personnel may have more in common at the lifeworld and organizational analytical levels in the context of shared meaning than either role realizes within the existing FAPE process. For the current study, it is sufficient to conclude that parents and districts have more agreement about this fundamental process relationship than was previously realized. It is an
indicator of the need to keep the two concepts separate and distinct in their purpose and usefulness in the special education system.

At Bjørn’s & Ngwenyama’s professional specific norms and work language level of shared meaning development the data for the current study also becomes detailed and specific in both language and activity related to appropriate educational programming. It is a point in this applied policy research where the dynamics of power share and the relationship between parent and district emerge as factors that influence the construction of shared meaning. The process that results in the development of the IEP is a language-dominated process. Parents and districts meet to discuss, share, inform, and negotiate around the specific FAPE purpose and content items presented in the current study’s data results. Issues of engagement, purpose, decision-making, expectations, and placement inform appropriateness. An initial review of the results shows points of convergence and divergence between the two groups. For example, both roles agree that the placement decision is just as important or more important than the IEP in the special education system. Predictably, there is some distance between the ‘highly important’ ratings of parent input (parents 86% and district 62%) and teacher input (parents 65% and district 78%) for both groups in relation to FAPE decision-making. These data points, these choices, are indicators of preference and have value from that perspective. They inform the work practice of the parent and district stakeholders in the special education system. Additionally, just as the collective nature of the language found in the open-ended question indicates an overall approach to understanding appropriateness, these data points indicate an overall power dynamic between parent and district that impacts both group’s perspective of FAPE.

The relationship between parent and district within the special education system is unique in its pronounced imbalance. To understand FAPE, research must go beyond specific activities
and tasks to analyze the inequitable distribution of power between parents and school district personnel. The work of Bjørn & Ngwenyama as part of the theoretical framework for this research is valued for the depth of useful research and insight it provides specific to understanding the construction of shared meaning. The work of these two information and communication system researchers provided a multi-level analytical structure to make sense out of the data collected for the current study and to answer the three research questions posed by the current study. Bjørn & Ngwenyama take their research one step further and discuss the difficulties inherent in communicating, sharing information, and decision-making between “heterogeneous worlds.” They describe the difficulties that team members from different world, organizational, work, and social contexts experience in collaborative work and team decision-making as a result of trust issues and lack of knowledge about invisible and unspoken rules known only to each separate team member or team subgroup. In the current study, parents and school district personnel approach the work of FAPE and the task of providing appropriate and effective educational programming for students with disabilities from different worlds. To understand how parents and school district personnel navigate shared meaning from the perspective of the balance of power and its impact on the shared meaning of appropriate, the theoretical framework turns to social and organizational psychology research and systems theory.

Scheepers, et al. (2013) and Watson & Foster-Fishman (2013) provide theories and research that essentially answer all three research questions through the lens of the power dynamics that exist when parents and school district personnel work within the current special education delivery system. Scheepers, et al. help to explain power in a group context and Watson’s & Foster-Fishman’s work apply their own Exchange Boundary Framework to understand the power dynamics within collaborative decision-making settings. Touching briefly,
again, on the theory of Bjørn & Ngwenyama, the physical location of management in relation to FAPE affects negotiated shared meaning. As it is currently written and has existed for over 40 years in IDEA, the ‘management’ of special education is located solidly with the public-school system and, by extension, with each public-school district in every state in the United States. This is where the understood and misunderstood balance of power begins and must be recognized in any attempt to construct a shared meaning of FAPE. As the data for the current studied was analyzed, a division clearly emerged between parents and school district personnel. Both roles did agree on some finer data points. Similar concerns and emphasis on specific priorities and tasks became apparent when comparing both groups. These convergences provide a positive and hopeful opportunity to begin the construction of a shared meaning of appropriate. However, it is undeniable that parents and districts are like two worlds that clash together with a student at the center who is protected by a handful of concepts related to purpose and structure (success, individualization, placement) but at the mercy of two groups irreconciled to their imbalance of power, accountability, and responsibility.

Power is defined by Watson & Foster-Fishman (2013) as “a relational, context-dependent construct that connotes the ability and opportunity to fulfill or obstruct personal, relational, or collective needs.” In the effort to create appropriate educational programming, parents and school district personnel live out this definition on a regular basis; in some cases, on a daily basis. Watson & Foster-Fishman built their theory, the Exchange Boundary Framework, on social exchange theory which states that power develops as individuals, groups, and institutions exchange resources to satisfy their own needs. The Exchange Boundary Framework takes social exchange theory and integrates it with social boundary theory which further identifies power as control over the socially constructed norms, structures, discourse, knowledge or ‘social
boundaries’ that legitimizes an individual’s, group’s, or institution’s resources. The Exchange Boundary Theory fits neatly into the construct of the analytical levels identified by Bjørn & Ngwenyama and, in fact, uses exactly the same language (norms, structures, and knowledge) to describe those levels. It is undeniable that, in the dynamic between parents and school district personnel, the resources that directly affect FAPE and define appropriateness are owned by the school district. IDEA attempts to bring parents into the FAPE process by defining the sister process – the IEP – with a team model and then broadly defining FAPE as inclusive of the IEP. Unfortunately, as indicated by the data collected for the current study, this circular logic paired with the team model fails and parent and school district personnel are left to negotiate a system with no shared meaning of appropriate and a myth of shared power.

Parent responses to the survey convey the need to include process and system structures as part of the shared meaning of FAPE. From the parent perspective, the meaning of ‘appropriate’ includes a prioritization of continuing parent input, an all-inclusive purpose (from employment to self-advocacy skills), and engagement with the non-disabled world. Parents identify individualization and fidelity to individual student plans as paramount. Additionally, parents take a long view of the consequence of appropriate programming and emphasize the need to prepare a student in the education system to live in the broader community. This is a world view and perspective parents bring to the process of student educational programming along with the expectation that school district personnel share that understanding. The data from school district personnel, however, is not fully in line with the parent perspective. School district personnel bring their own perspective that is strongly, but not exclusively, influenced by institutional, regulatory, and compliance requirements. School district responses to the survey identify data, a purpose that trends toward the attainment of independent living skills, and
engagement with non-disabled peers as priorities. The districts must, by mandates in federal policy, include some consideration of post-secondary success for students with disabilities, but focus most of their attention on success within the boundaries of a student’s years of attendance in the public school. The federal policy attempts to create a model wherein these differing perspectives may reconcile themselves through a process that focuses on the student. The model fails because the power between the two perspectives is not equitable. The ‘management’ of special education programming, and therefore the resources and the power, are controlled by the school district. Parents, as indicated by interview comments and in response to the definition of appropriate survey question, desire equitable power in the FAPE process. The fact is that parents must rely on the special education programs and services owned exclusively by the public-school district. With no resources to legitimize, the power shifts to the school district and the relationship between parent and district becomes something other than a team. It is not an environment conducive to the construction of shared meaning. Scheepers, et al. (2013) contribute research to the theoretical framework that supports the negative consequences an imbalance of power imposes on group decision-making. The research conducted by Scheepers, et al. concluded that not only does the perceived power status of a group impact whether the group makes decisions that maintain the status quo or promotes improvements, but that power dynamics within separate groups further affect decision-making. The cogent point of the research as it informs the current study is further support of the existing imbalance and power inequity between parents and school districts.

Scheepers, et al. observed power in a group context. As part of their research, they identified a more complex structure that identified an expanded balance of power within specifically identified groups. In the system of special education this is primarily played out
amongst school district personnel. The team mandated by federal policy requires a specific group of school district staff be on a student’s programming team (e.g., general education teacher, special education teacher, service providers, district administrator). The dynamics of the power share within the group has an impact on FAPE decision-making. Parents, in contrast, often engage with the programming team alone (by federal policy, they may also expand their role on the team by including and inviting others, such as experts in a specific disability, an advocate, and service providers). Scheepers, et al. contend that as both sides of the team (or group) work toward appropriate programming, the action that is actually taken and the decisions actually made will be influenced by how powerful each group perceives itself to be and also by the levels of power held by individuals in each group. Both Scheepers, et al. and the systems theory of Meadows (2008) imply consequences of continuing power imbalance as inaction and inadequate decision-making. The Meadows theories on systems brings the impact of power on the shared meaning of FAPE full circle.

Parents and school district personnel both indicated in their responses to the survey and in the semi-structured interviews that appropriate must be defined in the context of the entire public education system. The identification of placement in the general education environment, with access to the general education curriculum, maximizing time with non-disabled peers, and maximizing exposure to the broader community both within and outside the school environment as priorities is the call to include a systems approach in a shared meaning of FAPE. Meadows identifies basic systems principles that provide a structure for the shared meaning construct, Exchange Boundary Framework, and power in group context theories as they relate to FAPE and appropriateness. All of these theories, systems principles included, rely on information and the communication of that information. Systems thinking and theory includes basic principles of
feedback flows, dynamic equilibrium, self-organization, and resiliency. A detailed summary these principles is beyond the scope of the current research. The specific principles posited by Meadows that reflect the systems characteristics found within the data of the current study and that enhance the current study’s theoretical framework include: system interconnections operate through the flow of information; a system’s function or purpose is often the most crucial determinant of the system’s behavior; and, systems evolve from the bottom up. The latter principle, that systems evolve from the ground up, gives hope to policy improvement. Parents and school district personnel may experience imbalances of power, conflicting perspectives, and divergent priorities as they engage with the special education system. The data collected by this applied policy research indicates that these differences are real and part of the special education lived experience in our public-school system. However, parents and districts also agree on other priorities both procedural and simple, and substantive and critical. What systems theory and thinking bring to the development of a shared meaning of FAPE and appropriate is that systems, like good policy, do evolve from the ground up and systems are manageable for both productivity and resiliency. Parents and school district personnel are the policy influencers on the ground and have the power, separately and collectively, to influence and change FAPE policy.

**Recommendations**

Systems theory teaches that there are no separate systems. The world is on a continuum and all systems are connected and interrelated. The delivery of special education programs and services is an educational system devoted to the service and promotion of students with disabilities and their families as part of a greater educational system. The parent and school district personnel in the State of Michigan who provided data through interviews and surveys for this research understand and acknowledge the status of special education as a system. The
research participants identified students with disabilities as just students first and squarely placed special education in the context of a support system within a broader general education system. The separate approach at the federal policy level is not consistent with this system thinking. As federal education laws are changing, it is recommended that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (federal general education policy) be literally merged with IDEA. Meadows, in her basic principles of systems states that “A system is more than the sum of its parts.” It is time for federal special education policy administrators and federal legislators to create a national education policy synergy. Integration of general and special education federal policy does not have to mean the loss of any entitlement or protections under existing law. The benefits of including general education personnel more fully and more intimately in the process of defining and implementing FAPE for all students, not just students with disabilities, has the potential to create greater educational efficiencies and effectiveness.

Inherent in the theoretical framework identified in this research is the importance of human discourse, communication, and ongoing interaction for the purpose of improvement. The team model in IDEA has failed. Parents are placed in a position of powerlessness because they do not control resources and have no influence on the school district system that is fully accountable to the policy creators, i.e. the federal and state special education regulators. A different model must be developed to replace the IEP team model. A suggested shift is to develop an individualized program from the perspective of contributors rather than team members. For example, change the IDEA language from requiring a list of mandated team members by role to language that mandates ‘equitable input’ from specific contributors, inclusive of parents, necessary school personnel, and outside experts. The power balance between parent and school district must be addressed. The procedural requirements in IDEA
around the literal team meetings does not work in our changing culture. The work calendar and work schedule followed by the educational community continues to defy logic. The difficulties involved in the logistics and planning to simply communicate about appropriate programming supplants the actual communication. Inordinate amounts of time and resource are devoted to planning and coordinating the meetings alone. The procedure swallows the substance and the victim of the weak programming is the student.

The data collected for this applied policy research presents salient components of FAPE identified by both parents and school district personnel. These salient points are the building blocks of the foundation for a shared meaning of ‘appropriate’ in the public school special education system. These components include:

- Student Success
- Individualization
- Placement
- Engagement with General Education and Non-Disabled Peers

These basic FAPE components were present in both the interview and survey methods of data collection. It may seem an exercise in stating the obvious that these four concepts must build the foundation of a shared meaning of FAPE. Except for ‘student success’ and ‘engagement,’ these terms all currently appear in IDEA but not necessarily in the context of appropriateness or FAPE. Emphasizing the importance of these items to a shared meaning of FAPE, individuals on the ground every day, working within the special education system to develop and implement programs and services for students with disabilities focused on these components as necessary to the delivery of an appropriate program. A policy improvement in this regard would be to excise the IEP from FAPE as a federal definition. Both parents and school district personnel expressed a
lack of complete trust in the ability of an IEP to define appropriate. The IEP needs to be redefined as part of appropriate, not the beginning and end of FAPE. Concomitantly, placement needs to be elevated in federal and state policy to a critical component. Currently, placement is not included in the IEP requirements. The placement decision needs to be balanced with the attention and time given over to the development of the IEP document. Discussions about the literal placement and the nature of the student’s environment in both the special education placement and in general education need to be specifically required in the regulatory scheme.

The development and implementation of special education policy is subject to the larger education policy debate in the United States about who owns the responsibility. The most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, in 2016, began a push toward return of education policy decisions to the state and local level. The same did not happen for IDEA, which was last reauthorized in 2004. A reasonable recommendation for improving an understanding of FAPE and developing a shared meaning around appropriate programming for students with disabilities is to encourage local districts to engage in discourse with all stakeholders, including disability stakeholders, about shared meaning in context. The research used for the theoretical framework in the current study emphasizes the need for face-to-face engagement and discussion as the optimal method to construct shared meaning. The options are available within a variety of models: communities of practice, focus groups, advisory panels, and similar structures. The form is discretionary and is subordinate to the function and the purpose of constructing meaningful local context that fills the knowledge gap around FAPE.

The research presented here was intended to be an initial foray into the issue of shared meaning of FAPE and appropriate within the special education system. The research gap from the perspective of shared meaning is profound. FAPE and appropriateness have long been and
continue to be defined litigiously and judicially. Further research is necessary to refine the components that constitute FAPE. It would be useful to have similar research from states beyond Michigan. It would also be useful to develop data collection methods that free respondents from the constraints of the current federal policy. Michigan has a history of special education policy that predates the federal legislation. It is certain that research participants brought a perspective to the data influenced by that long history and sophisticated policies developed over that long history.

Special education, like all systems, is more than the sum of its parts. As a part of that system, the construction of a shared meaning of FAPE does not stand alone in the effort to improve public education for students with disabilities. A reconciliation of parent perspectives and school district perspectives is needed across the continuum of public education. Students with disabilities, their parents and families, and educators and professionals involved in the disability community understand the value of shared meaning. It is understood that meaning begins in words, ends in action, and in-between is lived.
References


Education. *Journal of the National Association of Administrative Law Judiciary*, 28(2), 397-420.

Appendix A

IRB Material

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action

Date: October 19, 2016
IRB #: CPS16-08-23

Principal Investigator(s): Gail Matthews-DeNatale
Sheryl Diamond

Department: Doctor of Law & Policy
College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project: Free Appropriate Public Education: Identifying the Basic Components

Participating Sites: Permission letters forthcoming

Informed Consent: Two (2) unsigned consents—one for parents, one for administration

As per CFR 45 46.117(c)(2) signed consent is being waived as the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required.

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

Approval Expiration Date: OCTOBER 18, 2017

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
ATTACHMENT A

Interview Recruitment Letter for School District Personnel

Dear Director/Supervisor ____________: 

My name is Sheryl Diamond and I am a Doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am conducting research in the State of Michigan about the meaning of a free appropriate public education as it is mandated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The purpose of my study is to identify the basic components of a free appropriate public education and construct a consistent and meaningful definition for all stakeholders in the special education system.

I am recruiting school district personnel to participate in a one-hour interview in an effort to collect data regarding free appropriate public education who meet the following criteria:

- A minimum of 2 years of experience working in special education
- Working in kindergarten through 12th grade
- English speakers
- Teachers working in either general education or special education
- Administrators at the local or intermediate district level

There are no other prerequisites for participation in the interview. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

I hope that either you will agree to participate in my study or you will recommend another individual to participate in my study. If you are able to participate in the interview or if you have a name to recommend, please e-mail me at: ________

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you. If you have any questions, please contact me at the email above or at ________.

Thank you.

Sheryl Diamond

IRB# CPS16-08-23
Approved: 10/19/16
Expiration Date: 10/18/17
ATTACHMENT B

Parent Interview Recruitment Letter/email

Dear ___________:  
My name is Sheryl Diamond and I am a Doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am conducting research in the State of Michigan about the meaning of a free appropriate public education as it is mandated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. I have received permission from ____ to contact you regarding this study.

The purpose of my study is to identify the basic components of a free appropriate public education and construct a consistent and meaningful definition for all stakeholders in the special education system.

I am recruiting parents to participate in a quick one-hour interview to collect data. I believe your knowledge and experience in special education is valuable to my research.

I would like to spend some time with you to hear about your experience with special education and free appropriate public education within the school system. I want to learn what you as a parent believe should be included in an improved definition of free appropriate public education for students with disabilities in our public education system.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not contact me to volunteer, you will not be contacted regarding this study again.

I hope you will agree to participate in my study. Please e-mail me if you are able to participate in the interview at: ______.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you soon. If you have any questions, please contact me at the email above or at ______.

Thank you.
Sheryl Diamond

IRB# CPS16-08-23
Approved: 10/19/16
Expiration Date: 10/18/17
ATTACHMENT C
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Law and Policy Program
Name of Investigator: Principal Investigator, Gail Matthews-DeNatale, and Student Researcher, Sheryl Diamond
Title of Project: Free Appropriate Public Education: Identifying The Basic Components

Request to Participate in Research

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to identify the basic components of a free appropriate public education and use the identified components to construct a clear and practical definition. The definition will be constructed in language that is shared and understood by both parents of students with disabilities and all school district staff.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place at a public location, date, and time mutually agreed upon and will take about 50 to 60 minutes. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you discussion your understanding and ideas about special education and a free appropriate public education. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about special education programming and the provision of a free appropriate public education.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being of this project.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Sheryl Diamond, the person mainly responsible for the research, at _____ or _______. You can also contact Dr. Gail Matthews-DeNatale at g.matthews-denatale@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself. Thank you.

Sheryl Diamond
ATTACHMENT D

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Law and Policy Program
Name of Investigator: Principal Investigator, Gail Matthews-DeNatale, and Student Researcher, Sheryl Diamond
Title of Project: Free Appropriate Public Education: Identifying The Basic Components

Request to Participate in Research

We would like to invite you to participate in a web-based online survey. The survey is part of a research study whose purpose is to identify the basic components of a free appropriate public education and use the identified components to construct a clear and practical definition. The definition will be constructed in language that is shared and understood by both parents of students with disabilities and all school district staff. This survey should take about 20 minutes to complete.

We are asking you to participate in this study because you are currently involved with the special education system at a K-12 Michigan public school. You must be at least 18 years old to take this survey.

The decision to participate in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the web-based online survey, you can stop at any time.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomfort to you for taking part in this study.

Your part in this study is anonymous to the researcher(s). However, because of the nature of web based surveys, it is possible that respondents could be identified by the IP address or other electronic record associated with the response. Neither the researcher nor anyone involved with this survey will be capturing those data. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being affiliated with this project.

If you have any questions regarding electronic privacy, please feel free to contact Mark Nardone, NU’s Director of Information Security via phone at 617-373-7901, or via email at privacy@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Sheryl Diamond, the person mainly responsible for the research, at _____ or _____. You can also contact Dr. Gail Matthews-DeNatale at g.matthews-denatale@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

By clicking on the survey link below you are indicating that you consent to participate in this study. Please print out a copy of this consent form for your records.

http://_______

Thank you for your time.
Sheryl Diamond

IRB# CPS16-08-23
Approved: 10/19/16
Expiration Date: 10/18/17
### Interview Guide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Question</strong></th>
<th><strong>Explicit Measure Reasoning for Question</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me what you know about a free appropriate public education.</td>
<td>These questions are meant to learn about the individual’s understanding of the basic construct of FAPE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Explain or describe for me what is a free appropriate public education.</td>
<td>Establishes baseline understanding of FAPE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Explain what a free appropriate public education means to you and your child (you) and a child with a disability in your school district.</td>
<td>Collect information about the concept of FAPE in relation to the individual child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell me about your experience with FAPE and the Individualized Education Program process.</td>
<td>These questions are meant to learn about the individual’s meaning and understanding of FAPE in the context of the basic special education process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe for me your experience (participation) in the development of your student’s (a student’s) individualized programming.</td>
<td>Establishes baseline understanding of individualized and appropriate programming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Describe or explain to me your understanding of how FAPE impacts your student’s (a student’s) individualized programming.</td>
<td>Collect information about the interaction between FAPE and programming; all components of programming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C

### Interview Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Direct or indirect references to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Needs</strong></td>
<td>• Any type of paperwork (mandated or otherwise) related to special education programming for a student with a disability (includes the IEP, progress reporting, Notice, etc.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adult Needs</strong></td>
<td>• Feedback, input, voice, and reports, both formal (required) and informal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>System Needs</strong></td>
<td>• Awareness efforts and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong></td>
<td>Direct or indirect references to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Needs</strong></td>
<td>• General education curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum</strong></td>
<td>• Special education curriculum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>System Needs</strong></td>
<td>• Content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data</strong></td>
<td>Descriptions or references to student data, either individual or aggregate from a school district, intermediate district, state, regional, or national level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Descriptions or references to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Needs</strong></td>
<td>• Interaction with groups or individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement</strong></td>
<td>• Exposure to content and methods.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Education</strong></td>
<td>References to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Needs</strong></td>
<td>• General education classrooms, teachers, systems of delivery, curriculum, programs, and extra-curricular activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>General Education</strong></td>
<td>References to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>System Needs</strong></td>
<td>References to the delivery of special education programs and services to students with disabilities. Includes programming, paperwork, and procedures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation</strong></td>
<td>Direct or indirect references to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Needs</strong></td>
<td>• Student needs – inclusive of services, programs, and supports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementation</strong></td>
<td>• Unique needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individualization</strong></td>
<td>Direct references (allowing for flexible, non-legal language) to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Needs</strong></td>
<td>• Parts of the individual programming for a student with a disability as listed at 34 CFR § 300.320.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individualized</strong></td>
<td>Direct references (allowing for flexible, non-legal language) to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Program</strong></td>
<td>• Parts of the individual programming for a student with a disability as listed at 34 CFR § 300.320.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individualized</strong></td>
<td>Direct references (allowing for flexible, non-legal language) to:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Program</strong></td>
<td>• Parts of the individual programming for a student with a disability as listed at 34 CFR § 300.320.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Needs</strong></td>
<td><strong>Adult Needs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The IEP process inclusive of meetings and development of the written document.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Personal Experience</strong></th>
<th><strong>Adult Needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>System Needs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptions or references to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Characteristics of individual or group relational dynamics (positive and negative).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Placement</strong></th>
<th><strong>Student Needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>Adult Needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>System Needs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptions or references to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where students with disabilities receive both special education and related services and/or access to general education curriculum.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Procedures</strong></th>
<th><strong>Student Needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>Adult Needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>System Needs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct references to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Any of the procedural safeguards, general procedures, and program procedures defined at 34 CFR §§ 300.320 to 300.344 and 300.503.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Student Outcomes</strong></th>
<th><strong>Student Needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>Adult Needs</strong></th>
<th><strong>System Needs</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct or indirect references to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student success.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Expectations.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Goals.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</table>
Appendix D

FAPE Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

The purpose of this survey is to collect basic information about the meaning of a Fee Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. The data gathered through this survey will be used to help develop a shared meaning of FAPE in an effort to strengthen and improve communication between school districts and parents.

For Parents: Please think about your child's current school district and current special education services. If you have more than one child currently receiving services, please focus on only one child per survey.

For School District Personnel (including Service Providers): Please think about FAPE in relationship to your district's special education system.

Let's begin with a little information about you...

Q.1 I am a (select one):
   Parent (1)
   School District Personnel (including Service Provider) (2)

Q.2 I have been involved with special education at the following grade level (choose all that apply):
   Preschool (1)
   Elementary (2)
   Middle School (3)
   High School (4)
   Post-Secondary (to age 26) (5)

Q.3 I live in the following Michigan County:
   Alcona (1)    Dickinson (22)    Lake (43)    Oceana (64)
   Alger (2)     Eaton (23)       Lapeer (44)   Ogemaw (65)
   Allegan (3)   Emmet (24)      Leelanau (45)  Ontonagon (66)
   Alpena (4)    Genesee (25)    Lenawee (46)   Osceola (67)
   Antrim (5)    Gladwin (26)    Livingston (47)  Oscoda (68)
   Arenac (6)    Gogebic (27)    Luce (48)    Otsego (69)
   Baraga (7)    Grand Traverse (28)    Mackinac (49)  Ottawa (70)
   Barry (8)     Gratiot (29)    Macomb (50)    Presque Isle (71)
   Bay (9)       Hillsdale (30)    Manistee (51)  Roscommon (72)
   Benzie (10)   Houghton (31)    Marquette (52)  Saginaw (73)
   Berrien (11)  Huron (32)      Mason (53)    Sanilac (74)
   Branch (12)   Ingham (33)     Mecosta (54)   Schoolcraft (75)
   Calhoun (13)  Ionia (34)      Menominee (55)  Shiawassee (76)
   Cass (14)     Iosco (35)      Midland (56)    St. Clair (77)
   Charlevoix (15)    Iron (36)    Missaukee (57)  St. Joseph (78)
   Cheboygan (16)    Isabella (37)  Monroe (58)    Tuscola (79)
   Chippewa (17)    Jackson (38)    Montcalm (59)  Van Buren (80)
   Clare (18)     Kalamazoo (39)   Montmorency (60)  Washtenaw (81)
   Clinton (19)   Kalkaska (40)    Muskegon (61)   Wayne (82)
   Crawford (20)   Keweenaw (41)  Newaygo (62)    Wexford (83)
   Delta (21)     Kent (42)        Oakland (63)
Now, let's get your input on the meaning of Free Appropriate Public Education...

Q.4 How important are each of the following when making decisions about an appropriate education for a student with a disability?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not Important (1)</th>
<th>Moderately Important (2)</th>
<th>Important (3)</th>
<th>Very Important (4)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Student Data (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Continuing Parent Input (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific Research (3)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Input (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular Updates On Student Progress (5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Input (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q.5 Compared to the IEP, the placement decision is (select one):
Less Important (1)
Just As Important (2)
More Important (3)

Q.6 Does the IEP contain everything necessary to provide a student with FAPE?
Yes (1)
No (2)
It Depends (3)

Q.7 Please rank order the following IEP phases, with the most important being (1), the next (2), and then (3):
______ Final Content Of The IEP (1)
______ Implementation Of The IEP (2)
______ Developing The IEP (3)

Q.8 A free appropriate public education should lead to student (select one):
Happiness (1)
Success (2)

Q.9 Please rank the following in order of importance, with the most important being (1) and the least important being (5).
It is important for a student with a disability to engage with:
______ General Education Teachers (1)
Q.10 Please rank the following in order of importance, with the most important being (1) and the least important being (4). You may choose to leave 'Other' empty.
The purpose of a free appropriate public education is to help a student obtain:

- Non-disabled Peers (2)
- The Same Curriculum Used By Non-disabled Peers (3)
- The Community Outside Of The School District (4)
- Students With The Same Disability (5)

Q.11 When thinking about the concept of Free Appropriate Public Education, how would you define "appropriate"?
## Appendix E

### Survey Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Exemplary Language</th>
<th>District Exemplary Language</th>
<th>Shared Meaning Component/Concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Placement</td>
<td>• LRE</td>
<td>Placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Gen ed classroom</td>
<td>• Placement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Regular education</td>
<td>• Educational setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Their local school</td>
<td>• Setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inclusive classrooms</td>
<td>• Type of learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mainstreaming</td>
<td>• environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Where</td>
<td>• Classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The best environment</td>
<td>• General education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Most restrictive</td>
<td>• setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-contained classroom</td>
<td>• Environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Where</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Where the student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>should be placed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• At their level</td>
<td>• Needs of the student</td>
<td>Individualized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• At their pace</td>
<td>• Individual needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tailored</td>
<td>• At the student’s level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individualized</td>
<td>• Tailored</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Needs of the student</td>
<td>• Unique needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Individual child’s needs</td>
<td>• At their level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Specific to the student</td>
<td>• Individualized</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• At whatever level they</td>
<td>• Individually designed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>are</td>
<td>• An individual plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Needs of each unique</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Fitted to that student’s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>strengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General curriculum</td>
<td>General Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For the general population</td>
<td>(Includes Curriculum, Classroom,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Normal”</td>
<td>District Staff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standard curriculum</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Education of the student’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>peers</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• General curriculum</td>
<td>General education curriculum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Same disability</td>
<td>Same curriculum and core</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>standards</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>General classroom</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>General education content</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>General education model</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Same disability</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer level</td>
<td>Center-based programs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn, grow, and interact with peers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-disabled peers</th>
<th>Non-disabled peers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged to participate in what everyone else is doing</td>
<td>Same opportunities as general ed students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Succeed</td>
<td>Progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Taking the student from where they are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At their level</th>
<th>Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maximum potential</td>
<td>Relevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum ability</td>
<td>Maximum potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taking the student from where they are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expectations</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>