WORKING TOGETHER: THE INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF A SPECIAL EDUCATION TEAM

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Abstract

This study explored the collaborative relationship between public school educators and parents/guardians of students with disabilities. Research indicates many Teams encounter issues around group dynamics when meeting to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for a student, including differing interpretations of laws, guidelines, and expectations within the special education process. These issues can be reduced through the use of effective collaboration, increased professional development for Team members, relationship building between families and educators, and a student-centered approach to the process. This multiple single-case study with three IEP Teams examined the experiences of an IEP Team as the members collaborated to create an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated, early childhood setting. Individual interviews with Team members, observations, and document review was used to gather data. After a thorough analysis of the data, two themes (misperception of collaboration and strategies for promoting effective collaboration) and six sub-themes (school-based Team members' collaboration, parents' role, impediments to collaboration, preparation, communication, and clarity of roles) emerged. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations for practice and future research were described, including: improving parent training, using parent-friendly language, holding multiple meetings, empowering Team members, clarity of roles, and repeating the study with IEP Teams for older students.

Keywords: special education, collaboration, conflict, Individualized Education Program (IEP), free and appropriate public education (FAPE)
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The function of special education is to provide students with disabilities the accommodations, modifications, and services necessary to ensure they have access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Within this process however, there are numerous opportunities for conflict and inadequacy as those responsible for creating the plan for a student with disabilities do not always bring the same goals, interpretations, and perceptions to the table (Simon, 2006). This study aimed to discern how a Team comprised of educators and parents/guardians created an Individualized Education Program (IEP) at a Team meeting; in particular, how goals and services were individualized according to the student’s needs, using a collective and collaborative process. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004) requires that IEP Teams write an IEP at the Team meeting for a student, yet often the bulk of the IEP is written before or after the meeting, and decisions are not always made based on the needs of the student, but rather other external factors such as funding, staffing, or parental pressures (Cheatham, Hart, Malian, & McDonald, 2012). As a result of this disparity between the requirements of IDEIA (2004) and the actual practice of writing an IEP, conflicts can arise.

Examining this issue, it was important to consider the reasons these conflicting truths need to be reconciled, as the purpose of educational research is not only to enlighten, but also to improve practice (Creswell, 2012; Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). The function of the IEP is to allow students with educational disabilities the chance to make effective progress in the general curriculum, whereas students without disabilities inherently have that opportunity. For a student with disabilities, the IEP is essential to providing equal access to the educational
opportunities to which all children are entitled in the United States. Ensuring that the IEP process is individualized and effective is a step toward securing the civil rights of these students (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Freedman, 2009).

On a broader scale, an educator’s purpose is to increase student achievement. When students with educational disabilities receive individualized goals, services, and other supports through an appropriately written IEP, it is likely that their achievement will increase. According to IDEIA (2004), the progress toward goals must be monitored frequently and those goals must be revised if the student is not making gains sufficient to meet them, so it stands to reason that well-written IEPs created using the prescribed Team process will support student learning more effectively.

Finally, research suggests that the special education process is riddled with legal conflicts between school districts and families over disagreements on what constitutes FAPE for a student (Cheatham et al., 2012; Crockett & Yell, 2008; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Fish, 2008; Freedman, 2009; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Mueller, 2009; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Are district staff excluding families’ input during Team meetings? Are families pushing agendas that do not align with the requirements of IDEIA (2004)? Scrutinizing the process by which a Team creates an IEP could perhaps uncover some of the underlying causes of these divergent perspectives.

While many studies describe the challenges schools and families face when working together cooperatively to write IEPs, very few examine how Teams manage the logistical process of individualizing writing an IEP. Specifically, there is a gap in the literature in regard to an examination of IEP Teams using data to inform decisions within the confines of the meeting, while calling upon all Team members for genuine input (Capizzi, 2008). Although IDEIA (2004) sets out the laws and regulations by which special educators must abide, there is very
little in the law or the literature to provide a roadmap for Teams to follow in order to effectively and proficiently adhere to those regulations.

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of an IEP Team as the members navigated the process of creating individualized accommodations, goals, services, and specially designed instruction for a student with disabilities. The IEP is the cornerstone of IDEIA (2004), and it must be more than a collection of words, but instead a living document that provides educators, parents, and students with guidance toward FAPE for students with disabilities.

Significance of the Problem

A study examining the experience of how a Team comprised of educators and parents/guardians collaborate to create IEPs for a student with disabilities was important for several reasons. IDEIA (2004) requires that Teams write an IEP at the Team meeting for a student yet there are many roadblocks that can occur within the process that challenge these Teams (Cheatham et al., 2012; Crockett & Yell, 2008; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Fish, 2008; Freedman, 2009; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Mueller, 2009; Reiman & Coppola, 2010; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Considering both the varied causes of conflict as well as effective strategies to work through those issues provided additions to the literature within the field and improvement of practice for students with disabilities and their Teams.

For a student with a disability who requires specially designed instruction to make effective progress in school, and for his or her family to support that student, the IEP process is a lifeline to obtaining FAPE. The IEP is a roadmap meant to be completely individualized for the student, specific to the needs identified after diagnostic assessments are completed (Reiman & Coppola, 2010). If that individualization does not occur or if there are conflicts among Team
members leading to legal proceedings around the IEP, the student is denied his or her civil rights and the opportunity to access FAPE. The family then potentially shifts its focus from bringing the important parental perspective to the IEP table to becoming a watchdog of the school, eviscerating any trust that may have existed (Freedman, 2009).

Issues around collaboration with families greatly affect a school district’s ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities. When Teams do not work effectively and efficiently to create IEPs for students, there are several consequences to a district. There are financial implications on many levels a district must address. First, there are costs associated with the time and resources spent preparing for and attending multiple meetings for a student. For example, if there is a dispute between parents and the district, which results in a rejected IEP, the Team holds a follow-up meeting or meetings to attempt to resolve the issue. These meetings generally occur during the school day, taking educators away from the students and sometimes require hiring substitute teachers to cover those classes. If the conflict is not able to be resolved internally, the dispute can be brought to a legal environment, such as the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA) in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013). These legal battles can cost a significant amount of money, as can settlements that result from the judicial findings. These costs affect not only the school, but also the community, as district budgets increase to support the special education-related legal issues that arise (Baker, Green, III, & Ramsey, 2012).

An additional implication for schools is the emotional impact that IEP conflicts can have on educators. When Team meetings result in conflict and discord between a family and a district, there can be frustration, anger, and other negative feelings that remain. The longer and more drawn out the conflict, the more stress Team members often experience. Yet educators
often continue working with the student and must find a way to communicate with the family about the day-to-day issues in school, despite the potentially bitter conflict that occurred at the Team meeting. These stressors can lead to teacher burn-out and challenges with teacher retention (Woolfolk Hoy, 2013).

Effective Team collaboration is also important to ensure that individuals with disabilities are provided with the education necessary to transition into post-high school life with as much independence as possible. The number of individuals with disabilities in the workforce continues to rise, and what type of education they receive can affect job performance and capability (Rock, 2011). If an IEP Team spends energy dealing with and responding to conflict, there is no guarantee that the Team will have the opportunity to ensure that the student receives the necessary transition services to support independence after high school (Landmark & Zhang, 2012; Powers et al., 2012).

The issues that arise when IEP Teams cannot effectively collaborate to create a plan that meets students’ educational needs have far-reaching implications. Students, families, districts, communities, and society are all negatively affected by these conflicts. Special education Teams across the United States experience these types of disputes; according to Zirkel and Scala (2010), thousands of special education hearings are held each year in the United States. These hearings consist of the school district and student's family presenting evidence and testimony to an Independent Hearing Officer, who renders a final decision regarding a student's programming. Hearings are expensive (Zirkel & Scala, 2010) and are not designed to repair the damage to the relationship between a district and family that typically occurs when conflicts are brought to hearing (Mueller & Carranza, 2011). Due to the challenges that come with due process hearings, it is critical that IEP Teams are supported to manage conflict effectively, which allows Teams to
create an individualized plan that provides each student with disabilities with FAPE (Reiman & Coppola, 2010).

**Positionality**

As part of the process of understanding how a team of educators and families create IEPs at Team meetings, I needed to consider my reasons for choosing the topic, which lead to examining my relationship to it and uncovering of any biases I may have had. Carlton Parsons (2008) defines positionality as, “a concept that acknowledges the complex and relational roles of race, class, gender, and other socially constructed identifiers in being” (p. 1129). I would further state that my journey to this topic relates to my identity as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and educator. Those highly personal components of myself provided strong motivation and interest for me to pursue this topic but also warranted avoiding the possibility of biased results. Machi and McEvoy (2009) write, “While your bias and opinion can never be completely removed, they must be controlled” (p. 19).

I was born the eighth of nine children to a teacher and a nurse on Long Island, New York. When my younger sister Ellie¹ was born in 1980 at 25 weeks gestation, weighing one-and-one-half pounds, neither she nor my mother were expected to survive. Fortunately, they both did, but Ellie is someone with autism and is hard of hearing. Memories of watching my parents leave special education meetings at her school devastated and beaten, believing that they had to fight the district in order for Ellie to have opportunities to interact with neurotypical peers continue to have an enormous impact on me, both personally and professionally.

Another example of how this topic affects me on a personal level involves the education of my 16-year-old stepson Robert, a highly gifted individual intellectually with an IQ of 132, who was evaluated to determine eligibility for special education services in grade eight, because

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¹ To protect the anonymity of all participants, pseudonyms have been assigned.
of an emotional impairment and a significant issue with executive function. During his initial evaluation meeting, the special education administrator (who had never met Robert) talked for approximately 90 percent of the meeting, the evaluation reports were not reviewed, and not only did the teachers not have an opportunity to speak, neither did his parents. The administrator spent the majority of the time discussing Robert’s grades (mostly Cs) and indicating that those grades were average and so he was doing just fine. Despite the rest of the Team’s disagreement with this administrator and documentation of years of severe incidents involving social/emotional issues, it took pages upon pages of paperwork and letters, an additional meeting, and the involvement of Massachusetts’ Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Program Quality Assurance department before he was placed on an IEP and began to receive services. This resolution did not occur until he had transitioned to grade nine and begun a new school year.

Both of the above examples from my life are signposts on my journey to this focal point. I became a special educator as a result of living with my sister and seeing my parents’ tenacious commitment to equality in her education. At substantial personal cost to themselves, they made sure that Ellie’s IEPs were written as a Team to ensure her FAPE. As a parent of two children with disabilities (my experiences with my six-year-old son’s IEP have been much more positive), I know just how emotionally taxing it was for them, and I struggle to maintain composure every time I walk in to a meeting for one of my children. As the Director of Special Education for a public school district, I try to bear in mind all of those feelings at every meeting I facilitate, in order to remember that we are all here to meet the needs of the student.

Putting all of those parts of myself together however, made this topic a highly personal one. The topic impacts my personal and professional lives, which by Briscoe’s (2005) logic
made me an ideal candidate to study the topic: “A researcher who is a member of the group is likely to perceive and represent the group in a way that constructs a social identity that protects and serves the interest of the group” (p. 28). I am both a parent and an educator who participates in IEP meetings, which certainly places me in that category.

As I considered the topic and my own biases around it more though, I was struck by Fennell and Arnot’s (2008) discussion of avoiding the egocentrism and individualism around the topic. Because it is so personal to me, the lens through which I view the topic is completely based in my own schema, which could have challenged my ability to let the research progress on its own. Fennell and Arnot (2008) assert that researchers need “to unpack not just the epistemologies that they have encountered but also to be prepared to be equally scrupulous in the manner in which they unpick their own learnings” (p. 533). It was essential, as I moved through this research that I remained open to ideas outside of what I had experienced, which was a challenge. Machi and McEvoy (2009) describe the personal “demons” researchers bring to their topic, but state, “Demons are unavoidable, but they must not control or influence the research” (p. 20).

When becoming entrenched in a topic about which I have not only such a personal connection, but also a great fund of professional knowledge, there was a risk of prejudging the outcome of the study. In other words, I was looking at how an IEP Team functions and a large part of my professional experience involves facilitating IEP meetings, which I believe I do well. Consequently, I had more than a hypothesis about the answer to my research question, I had preconceptions. Some of these preconceptions ended up being accurate, but they were troublesome to me as a scholar. Jupp and Slattery (2010) remind the reader of the importance of
perspective when defining truth. My preconceptions about what constitutes a successful IEP meeting could have potentially blinded me to other valid perspectives, if I was not careful.

In conclusion, although I fit into Briscoe’s (2005) definition of someone who is qualified to study the dynamics and functions of an IEP Team, due to my roles as a parent of children with disabilities and a special educator, my longstanding personal experiences with the IEP process as a daughter, sister, and mother along with my professional experiences as a teacher and administrator could have contributed to potential bias. In order to successfully manage the emotional components of this topic for myself, I was cautious to keep any conscious or unconscious agendas out of my work and just allowed it to play out as it did. Throughout the execution of this study, I kept a journal documenting my experiences in which any biases were acknowledged and removed from the study (Creswell, 2012).

Research Questions

**Central question.** What is the experience of an IEP Team as the members collaborate to develop an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated, early childhood environment?

**Sub-questions.** What experiences do participants relate as they reflect on the IEP process? What behaviors do participants believe promote effective collaboration? What challenges do participants believe exist that impede collectively creating IEPs? Are there differences in the perception of the process between school staff and parents?

**Rationale.** These questions were designed to help increase understanding of an IEP Team’s process, particularly considering collaboration among Team members. According to Creswell (2012), the purpose of qualitative research is to uncover the meaning of a phenomenon, for which the above questions were intended. By answering these questions, the expectation was
that I would have a deeper knowledge of a group's experiences, including the successes and challenges, from a variety of perspectives. Examining the different perspectives provided a thorough look at how the IEP process works as well as the successes and challenges within. Finally, this exploration allowed me to uncover strategies and techniques that support collective and collaborative educational planning for students within an integrated early childhood setting.

Theoretical Framework

The problem of practice was considered through the lens of sensemaking (Weick, 2011; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). This theory was selected due to its strong alignment with the problem of practice of the study. The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of three IEP Teams as the members navigated the process of creating an IEP for a student with disabilities. Because the IEP Team members included members with disparate roles and functions (e.g. parents, school administrators, teachers, related service providers), these members brought varied perspectives to the IEP process, while attempting to collectively make sense of the experience. The individual perceptions combining to create a group experience supported the use of sensemaking through which to consider the research questions.

Seminal Roots and Features

Sensemaking is considered an interdisciplinary research field, with scholars from the following fields studying the concept: human-computer interaction (Russell, Stefik, Pirolli & Card, 1993), information science (Dervin, 1983), and organizational studies (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995). Within the study of sensemaking, scholars strive to understand how, what, why, and to what end, individuals create understandings about an event. According to Louis (1980), sensemaking involves individuals making predictions about experiences, which then helps to
shape those experiences. In addition, when events do not occur in the predicted or expected way, individuals use sensemaking to understand the unexpected (Louis, 1980).

According to Weick (1995), sensemaking includes seven properties. It is grounded in identity construction, retrospection, enacting of sensible environments, social activity, ongoing processes, a focus on and extraction by cues, and is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995, pp. 17-60). Identity construction entails members' beliefs about who they are and what they bring to the table, which affects their interpretation of events. Retrospective time allows the members to engage in sensemaking, while the enacting of environments involves members creating a narrative that helps to make sense of the experience. Sensemaking is a social activity that combines individual perspectives and collective understandings and is an ongoing and evolving experience. The ongoing nature of sensemaking occurs by members focusing on and extracting cues from which to make and shape meaning. Finally, sensemaking relies on the stronger consideration of plausibility over accuracy; in other words, what makes sense is weighed heavily as sensemaking occurs (Weick, 1995). Both the individual and the collective make the final determination of plausibility and ultimately sense, although those decisions are not always overtly communicated, but rather gauged via non-verbal cues (Weick, 2010).

Application to IEP Team Collaboration

The research questions guiding this study include a central question and several sub-questions. The central question is: What is the experience of an IEP Team as the members collaborate to develop an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated early childhood environment? The sub-questions for this study include: (1) What experiences do participants relate as they reflect on the IEP process? (2) What behaviors do participants believe
promote effective collaboration? (3) What challenges do participants believe exist that impede collectively creating IEPs? and (4) Are there differences in the perception of the process between school staff and parents? These questions were designed to help increase understanding of an IEP Team’s process, particularly considering collaboration among Team members.

The problem of practice within focused on sensemaking in organizational studies, in particular the works of Karl Weick (1988, 1993, 1995, 2010, 2011) as well as Weick and his colleagues (2005). According to Weick (1995), an organizational setting is one in which members are working from individual perspectives, but the overall goals are intertwined. Members of a group have "shared understandings of their roles, expertise, and stature, but they also act as shifting coalitions of interest groups" (Weick, 1995, p. 3). An IEP Team falls into this category in that the roles of Team members vary, but there is a common understanding of the goal of the group, which is to create an IEP for a student with disabilities.

**Justification for Use**

Through the use of individual interviews, observations, and record review (e.g. student records, Team meeting notes, Team communications), I considered how members of three IEP Teams collaborated to create an IEP for a student with a disability. Working with individual Team members allowed me to determine the ways by which Team members made sense of the IEP process. Observations allowed me to make objective determinations of the Team process and a record review provided context and historical insight into the prior experiences of this Team. This approach to data collection through the lens of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) supported the understanding of the experiences of three IEP Teams as the members collaborated to develop an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated early childhood environment.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Within existing literature, there is much written about special education; its 40 year history has sparked research in countless directions. In order to better understand the problem of practice within this study, I examined topics in the following areas: group dynamics, to include collaboration, causes of conflict, and strategies to avoid or overcome conflict (Blau & Allbright, 2006; Cheatham et al., 2012; Christie & Yell, 2010; Crockett & Yell, 2008; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Fish, 2008; Freedman, 2009; Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2011; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Mueller, 2009; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011); using data, to include curriculum-based measurement, progress monitoring, psychoeducational assessments, and other assessments (Burke & Vannest, 2008; Fuchs, Deno, & Mirkin, 1984; Hessler & Konrad, 2008; Paulsen, 2005; Willis & Dumont, 2006); and specially designed instruction, to include its definition, how to individualize specially designed instruction, and evidence-based practices (Capizzi, 2008; Hessler & Conrad, 2008; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Finally, I considered the gaps in the literature, which informed the research questions.

Group Dynamics

According to IDEIA (2004) parents are required to play a significant role in the IEP process. Parents must be invited to all meetings in which their child’s special education program will be meaningfully discussed, and parents have an equal voice at the table when decisions are made (Christle & Yell, 2010). But research indicates that the relationships between schools and districts can be wrought with conflict when working together to develop an IEP for a student (Cheatham et al., 2012; Crockett & Yell, 2008; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Fish, 2008; Freedman, 2009; Goepel, 2009; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Mueller, 2009; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011), for
reasons such as differing opinions about FAPE, poor training for educators or a lack of education for parents, and financial issues.

**Collaboration.** IDEIA (2004) requires that the IEP process be a collaborative one between families and school-based staff. Research indicates a strong correlation between positive professional/parental partnerships and student achievement (Arnold, Zeljo, Doctoroff & Ortiz, 2008; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Murray & Curran, 2008; Powell, Son, File & San Juan, 2010). However, in order for this collaboration to be effective, both groups must demonstrate commitment to the process and must be clear and upfront about their goals and intentions (Murray & Curran, 2008).

Benefits of collaboration include the enhancement of supports for the student as well as helping to maintain an educational environment that is conducive to meet the student’s needs. By working together, Teams can determine a full picture of the student, offsetting the “split-personality” factor that so often is seen with students. Students often present one manner with their family and quite another at school, so effective collaboration allows all those who work with the student to know the multiple facets of the individual. Furthermore, when families and schools have a negative relationship, the negativity can affect the learning environment. The stress of conflict can cause school-based Team members to become preoccupied with the disagreement making it difficult to focus on teaching (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Powell et al., 2010; Rock & Bateman, 2009).

The purpose of collaboration among an IEP Team is to produce an IEP that allows the student to access FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Ideally, parents, the student (when of an appropriate age), teachers, and other educators determine the student’s areas of need and design a plan to meet those needs, which includes goals, accommodations, and services, and
is monitored regularly for efficacy. Although the above process is expected, it is not always the
reality (Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006).

**Causes of conflict.**

**Differing opinions on what constitutes FAPE.** The Education of All Handicapped
Children Act of 1975 defines a free and appropriate public education as,

(A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge,
(B) meet the standards of the State educational agency,
(C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary education in the State involved, and
(D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 1414(a)(5) of this title (U.S.C. § 1401, 1975).

In each reauthorization, (IDEA, 1997; IDEIA 2004), the federal definition of FAPE has not been altered or clarified. Examining the definition, it is understandable how misunderstandings arise among Team members when determining FAPE for a student. While the words free and public are clearly explained above, the law gives little guidance around the definition of “appropriate,” and it is this ambiguity that generates the majority of conflicts (Blau & Allbright, 2006; Simon, 2006). In fact, IDEA’s (2004) language on this issue is deliberately vague with the intention of giving educators, as experts, the leeway to make decisions about instruction. Despite this intention, in reality the ambiguity can cause significant conflict among Teams when differences of opinion arise (Rock & Bateman, 2009).

Because the law does not provide a clear definition of FAPE, schools and families have relied on the courts to interpret the law. Most famously tackling the question of FAPE was
Board of Education vs. Rowley (1982) in which the United States Supreme Court denied a family’s request for a sign language interpreter for their Deaf daughter under the FAPE requirement. The Court determined that while FAPE must be based on the specific needs of the student, rather on what the district currently has to offer, it constitutes a starting point from which students are entitled to begin, rather than specifying the level of the quality of education they receive. While this decision provided some clarity to the question of what is deemed appropriate, it continues to be challenged and still no consensus has been reached (Anthony, 1982; Crockett & Yell, 2008).

**Inadequate Team training for educators and parents.** When Teams meet for the purpose of writing an IEP for a student, IDEIA (2004) requires the following participants: parents, general educator (if the child participates or may participate in general education), special educator, a representative of the local educational agency (LEA) who can commit the resources of the district, anyone else with expertise related to the student’s educational program, and the student (whenever possible). These groups, while generally sharing a common goal of providing quality services for a student, bring very different perspectives to the table (Reiman & Coppola, 2010).

**Educators’ challenges.** Educators are trained to teach, and special educators and related service providers (e.g., occupational therapists, speech pathologists, etc.) are specialists, whose focus and training is specific to meet the needs of a highly specialized population. Within these professionals’ training, there is no standard class on mediating conflict and facilitating adult groups. However, these educators are asked to fill these roles, and the gaps in group dynamic knowledge can lead to missteps in meetings. Research indicates that multidisciplinary Teams that include supportive administrators provide the most beneficial opportunities for Team
dynamics (Cheatham et al., 2012; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). School administrators (e.g., special education directors, principals) generally have more experience and training in facilitating meetings and engaging adult participants, which is helpful, although there is evidence that even administrators do not always have the training necessary to best guide the IEP process (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

Repeated exposure to conflicts with parents and subsequent chronic stress can have a negative psychological effect on teachers and lead to teacher burnout (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2011; Maslach, 2003; Rock & Bateman, 2009; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) describe teacher burnout as, “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” (p. 1060). Emotional exhaustion can lead to reduced energy, chronic fatigue, and other physical ailments. Depersonalization involves the gradual disinterest in students and/or co-educators, while reduced personal accomplishment occurs when the educator no longer believes he or she is having a meaningful effect on students and is mostly impacted by negative relations with parents (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010).

Küçüksüleymanoğlu’s (2011) study also indicates that special educators, in particular, feel reduced idealism and hope about their profession. There are several factors which contribute to this phenomenon, including "low pay, poor training, crowded classrooms, discipline problems, lack of resources, lack of teaching and learning materials, lack of a well designed program, the mess of bureaucracy, bureaucratic society’s criticisms, social and political oppression on educational organizations, insufficiency of rewarding and lack of participation in decision making" (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2011). In addition, the unique challenges that students with disabilities sometimes present, including physical, cognitive, and behavioral challenges can
contribute to an increase in stress and a decrease in job satisfaction for special education professionals (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2011).

Parents’ challenges. The special education system is riddled with contradictions. It is meant to be collaborative, with parents’ input holding as much weight as that of district reports; however, all decisions must be made based on data and progress monitored using measurable outcomes (Fish, 2008; IDEIA, 2004). Meetings are required to be held at mutually convenient times for schools and parents, but are held at the school, which can be intimidating for parents, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds (Lo, 2012). The IEP process is also quite technical and procedural, with the eligibility process involving language and concepts that may not be inherently understood by parents. For example, a student might struggle in school, but does not qualify for special education service because the assessment results do not indicate an educational disability. But for the parents, the only thing that matters to them is that their child is struggling and needs help. Parental lack of understanding of IDEIA (2004) can lead to conflict within a Team (Valle, 2011).

Another issue related to parent involvement is the sporadic levels of involvement that exist within the special education process. Some parents are highly involved, while others do not attend their child’s annual Team meeting. At times, parents serve a passive role at Team meetings, with the educators providing the bulk of the input toward developing the IEP. While parents can enlighten the Team by providing information on the student’s personality and what unique traits the student possesses, many factors can contribute to parents’ limited participation in developing the IEP. These factors include parents’ limited confidence, time constraints, and a lack of IEP relevance in the home. Parents must feel empowered to contribute to the development of the IEP so that they will recognize the connection between the IEP goals and the
needs they identify in their child. Team meetings are likely to require a significant amount of time in order to ensure the above-listed components are in place for parents because without them, the process is likely to remain educator-centered (Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006).

**Financial considerations.** A requirement of IDEIA (2004) is that special education services are provided to the student at no cost to the parent. Depending on the needs of the student, these services can cost $150,000 per year or more, including transportation. However, IDEIA (2004), a federal mandate, is not fully funded through the federal government, which places the financial burden on the local community. Additionally, much of the funding provided, via grants, must be spent in particular ways, with districts possessing little control over those processes. In fact, at times, districts have a surplus of grant funds meant to serve students with disabilities because there are such specific contingencies attached to funding use that are not necessarily aligned with the actual needs of the district (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Baker et al., 2012; Christle & Yell, 2010).

One strategy that attempts to distribute funds in schools equitably is the weighted student formula (WSF), which allows for funds to be distributed to students based on student needs and provides significant flexibility at the school level for how those funds are spent. Weighted Student Formula allows money to be sent to those who need it most, such as students with disabilities. Those promoting WSF assert that school-based staff, such as building principals, have a better handle than non-educators on how to spend funds in order to produce the greatest effect on student achievement. To determine student need, WSF weights students in high-need groups, such as those with disabilities, stronger than those outside of that group, and funding is thereby increased to those schools with large high-need groups. This Student Based Funding (SBF) is meant to provide more transparency for how funds are spent and more valid equity in
how funding amounts are determined, using the WSF model. However, while these modified funding distribution models are a start toward supporting district costs, they are not widely implemented and when they are, they do not eliminate the financial burden that the education of a student with disabilities puts on a community (Chambers, Levin & Shambaugh, 2009).

Districts are required to implement all components of a signed IEP, despite the cost, so schools work to provide FAPE using the most cost-effective methods and placements available. Parents may enter a Team meeting with an expectation for a private school placement for their child, while the district may assert that an in-district placement could provide FAPE, at a lower cost. The result can be a meeting that produces no IEP, only conflict (Arfstrom, 2001; Freedman, 2009).

**Strategies for avoiding or overcoming conflict.** According to Mueller (2009), the number of special education cases that are resolved via due process hearings is increasing substantially and the cost of each hearing ranges from $50,000 to $100,000. Not only is the financial cost of due process resolution a significant hardship, but also the emotional cost to families and school-based staff is significant and damaging (Mueller, 2009; Rock & Bateman, 2009). One suggestion for reducing conflict by building relationships is to encourage families to be involved in as many aspects of the school as possible, in order to support parent engagement with the school. This increased engagement begins the process of connecting families to the school, which can support the building of necessary trust, which can translate to effective Teams.

Another strategy involves staff maintaining ongoing communication with families, so that the IEP meeting is not the only time the parties discuss the student. For example, educators can communicate to parents through notes and e-mails, and parents should feel comfortable coming in to school to visit the child’s program. Finally, when staff members participate in professional
development related to team building and collaboration, often Teams begin to work more effectively (Valle, 2011).

**Professional development.** Professional development in any specialized field involves learning experiences that promote professional growth. In education, the features of professional development that lead to optimal teacher learning should include the following: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation (Desimone, 2011). Content focus involves activities that look at how students learn specific content. As teachers learn, they should be active participants, looking at student work, observing their colleagues, or making presentations, as opposed to taking in information through lectures. Professional development should have a steady through-line to it; there should be consistency and alignment with the district’s mission and beliefs as well as other learning experiences the educator has attended, and these activities should be spread over time and include 20 hours or more of contact time. Professional development works best when groups of teachers from the same grade or school, or those who teach the same subject, work together, “to build an interactive learning community” (Desimone, 2011, p. 69).

There are many different types of professional development for teachers, and what is available or accessed can depend on the district, school, or even the teacher. Examples of variances in professional development options include: peer observation, peer development, mentoring, coaching, Expeditionary Learning, video-stimulated recall, Professional Learning Communities in-service trainings, and engaged autonomy (Blackman, 2010; Byrne, Brown, & Challen, 2010; Desimone, 2011; Gabriel, Day, & Allington, 2011; Grissom & Harrington, 2010; Kennedy, Deuel, Nelson, & Slavit, 2011; Klein & Riordan, 2011; Reitano & Sim, 2010). Each of these types of professional development will be further developed below, but it is important to
note that the list is not even close to exhaustive, yet those listed are vastly different from one another, and can produce dramatically different results.

Peer observation is generally pictured as one teacher observing another, watching a standard lesson in a classroom, although Byrne et al. (2010) write that in order for peer observation to be truly effective, it needs to evolve into peer development. Peer development involves active engagement in didactic theory and dialogue, along with critical reflection and collaboration with colleagues, all of which leads to long-term improvements in practices. Included in this peer development model is self-reflection, which enhances the individual’s professional development and furthers the group’s collective reflections and growth.

Mentorships are effective professional development tools for new educators because they increase confidence in professional proficiency, develop a sense of community, and assist with the conversion between theory and practice (Grissom & Harrington, 2010). These relationships provide novice teachers with a safe, knowledgeable, veteran staff member to whom they can go with any and all questions and concerns. The relationship is, by definition, non-evaluative and supportive, and when set up correctly, leads to self-reflection and teacher growth.

The use of coaching as a professional development tool benefits teachers both as coaches and those who receive the coaching. Training teachers to become coaches helps to encourage enhancement of leadership skills, but also, “those who believe that they can make a difference are more likely to see coaching as a tool that can help them expand and strengthen their teaching skills” (Blackman, 2010, p. 421). As they are discussing and explaining practices with their colleagues, they are refining their own instructional techniques, thereby improving what is happening in their own classrooms. Interpersonal cooperation is also enhanced when teachers work together as mentor and mentee.
Expeditionary Learning (EL) as a professional development tool involves the teachers assuming the role of the students in order to truly understand how instruction translates into classroom practice (Klein & Riordan, 2011). Also called experiential professional development, it requires that educators experience what the students experience, reflect on those experiences, and then change and improve their practice as a result. EL provides teachers with unique experiences, “creating curiosity or adaptive dissonance by offering challenging tasks that require development of skills, providing opportunities to demonstrate development of skills, providing opportunities to demonstrate progress and/or mastery of tasks, and applying learning to other situations” (Klein & Riordan, 2011, p. 38). In order to be a successful professional development tool, teachers must then be given ample opportunities and support to apply and generalize that knowledge into the classroom.

According to Reitano and Sim (2010), video-stimulated recall (VSR), is a term used to indicate audio- or videotaping skilled behavior. As a professional development tool, VSR is used when teachers record their instruction and watch the playback, reflecting on their practice and ultimately leading to professional growth. Using VSR allows teachers to collaborate and use explicit evidence to discuss instructional decisions as well as those related to classroom management. With the visual reminders, educators are cued into why a decision may have been made or an approach may have been chosen, while without the visual reminder, the educator may not remember. VSR “allows the teacher to ‘relive’ an episode of teaching by providing, in retrospect, an accurate verbalized account of his/her thought processes” (Reitano & Sim, 2010, p. 218).

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) support teachers, collectively using assessment data and student work to identify instructional strategies to meet students’ learning
needs (Thessin & Starr, 2011). The concept of collaboratively and communally making decisions about what constitutes good instruction and quality student work fosters relationships among colleagues that may not have existed without PLCs, particularly since teaching has historically been an isolated profession. Additionally, these groups harness the exponential wisdom of a group of educators, thereby increasing the likelihood of spreading that insight to others, which can positively impact student achievement (Kennedy et al., 2011).

Clarke and Hollingsworth (2002) demonstrated that overall, professional development programs consisting of one-off workshops that focus on a particular skill or concept do not produce meaningful change in teacher performance or student achievement. Instead, some of the professional development methods described above have a greater impact; those which are sustained and provide multiple opportunities for practice and reflection have greater power as a professional development tool. However, for some specific trainings, a one-day professional development class can be effective. For example, learning about the different community resources available to help students with transition planning does not require a sustained training process with embedded coaching, but instead can be accomplished in a three hour colloquium at which community resource agencies set up tables and information explaining the services they provide (Gabriel et al., 2011).

Engaged autonomy describes a teacher being given freedom to take risks and teach in whatever way seems appropriate, while still being provided with support from administration. Teachers are encouraged to try new techniques and share their successes and failures with colleagues. Administrators are considered instructional leaders who challenge and collaborate, but do not micromanage what happens in the classroom. The professional development comes from the lessons that emerge from the risks that are taking by trying new approaches and sharing
successes and failures with colleagues without the fear of punitive, job-performance repercussions (Gabriel et al., 2011).

Teachers’ perspective.

According to Smith, Petty, and Day (2008), teachers seek high quality professional development opportunities that relate specifically to their subject areas. When new teachers are asked why they leave the profession, many state the lack of support and ongoing training. Kaufman and Ring (2011) explain that many novice teachers leave the profession due to, “feeling unsupported, unprepared, and overwhelmed by student needs or job responsibilities, as well as feelings of disempowerment” (p. 53). Teachers also are hesitant to attend professional development that pulls them away from their students, which has led to an increase in the popularity of online professional development opportunities (Ellis & Kisling, 2009; Keown, 2009). Walk-throughs, or short classroom observations, can provide teachers with immediate, content-specific professional development and does not require that the teacher miss time with students. Receiving timely feedback from administrators that directly links to what is happening in the classroom provides teachers with support that can empower and lead to improvement in practice (Kaufman & Ring, 2011).

Using Data

To write an IEP, Teams must determine at what level the student currently functions. Educators assess students to determine current performance before adequately creating goals and objectives. Types of and approaches to assessment vary, as do the quality of the data that can be pulled from assessments (Willis & Dumont, 2006). Assessments should occur in all areas of suspected disability and should be conducted by qualified, trained professionals (Leung, Mak, Lau, Cheung & Lam, 2010).
Curriculum-based measurement. Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) compares a student’s performance to his or her peers’ on valid, authentic materials. Since it is so timely and individualized, it allows for specific and immediate feedback and remediation. Additionally, educators can use the peer-to-peer comparisons to draw conclusions determining if a child is successfully accessing grade-level material. These types of assessments let Teams quantify a student’s current instructional level when writing an IEP (Ardoin, Roof, Klubnick & Carfolite, 2008; Hessler & Konrad, 2008; Willis & Dumont, 2006).

One challenge with using CBM is that decision making is usually based on educator judgment. There is no psychometric or research-based evidence to support those decisions. Although instruction is based on empirically-validated methods, the results are not normed, causing varying interpretations of progress. Therefore, CBM should not definitively and exclusively be used to make high-stakes decisions such as the determination of eligibility for special education services (Ardoin, Christ, Morena, Cormier & Klingbeil, 2013).

Progress monitoring. Progress monitoring involves the collection of data over time for the purpose of searching for trends and patterns. This technique is also used to determine the usefulness of an instructional or behavioral approach and to check on the efficacy of a behavior plan. Educators use reference scales, charts, graphs, and other visual tools to gather and interpret data around a targeted skill or behavior (Burke & Vannest, 2008).

According to Fuchs et al. (1984), progress monitoring provides a highly effective tool for increasing student achievement. By checking for understanding at regular intervals and adjusting instruction based on the check-ins, teachers can tailor instruction to meet the individual needs of students. In addition, students are more aware of the goals around their learning and become more invested in the instruction as well. Although there are debates regarding the best
tools for progress monitoring, (Foegen, Jiban & Deno, 2007), evidence indicates that using the approach provides an increase in student achievement (Diercks-Gransee, Weissenburger, Johnson & Christensen, 2009; Espin, Shin & Busch, 2005; Fore III, Boon, Burke & Martin, 2009; Fuchs, Fuchs & Bishop, 1992; Knutson, Simmons, Good III, & McDonagh, 2004; Paulsen, 2005).

In order to make decisions about student progress using this method, formative assessment is used. Formative assessment involves the frequent evaluation of student progress, data-based problem solving and analysis to ensure systematic adjustment to instruction, and individualized, flexible instruction based on the analysis (Knutson et al., 2004). Additionally, student progress is measured against a goal line. The evaluator can either consider progress by aiming toward a specific goal or can analyze progress through examining trends. Both approaches consider the student’s progress over time. Although student performance can fluctuate, over time the rate and level of progress should be evident (Ardoin et al., 2013).

**Psychoeducational assessments.** Many students referred to determine eligibility for special education services are assessed using a multitude of psychoeducational assessments. These batteries generally include Intelligence Quotient (IQ) testing as well as educational achievement testing. One method of determining if a student has a specific learning disability (SLD) is by measuring the discrepancy between his or her IQ and achievement scores and looking for a statistically significant gap (Willis & Dumont, 2006).

Psychologists evaluate individuals, generally placing great weight on the IQ score. According to Floyd, Clark, and Shadish (2008), the IQ can predict academic achievement, employment eligibility and success, income potential, and social status. However, IQ alone is not sufficient to determine the existence of a disability or to plan for the specific needs of a
student adequately (Floyd et al., 2008; Mellard, Deschler & Barth, 2004). Instead, students must be evaluated in all areas of suspected disability and those assessments, along with input from the Team, determine eligibility and, if appropriate, manifest in an IEP (Capizzi, 2008).

**Other assessments.** Some of the other areas assessed that can be used to help determine a student’s eligibility for special education services are fine motor, gross motor, communication, social skills, vocational skills, behavior, health, executive function, and emotional regulation (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). Within these realms, evaluators use formal and informal assessments, along with observations, and student and/or parent report to help identify a student’s strengths and weaknesses and illuminate the existence of pathology (Merrell, 2010). According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2010), “Reliance on any single criterion for assessment or evaluation is not comprehensive, nor is a group assessment, such as universal screening or statewide academic assessment tests, sufficient for comprehensive assessment or evaluation” (p. 1), which supports a multi-disciplinary, multi-faceted approach to the diagnosis of educational disabilities.

**Specially Designed Instruction**

**What is specially designed instruction?** According to the Massachusetts Department of Education (2001), specially designed instruction is, “instruction for the student that is designed to meet the unique needs of that student. Such special design may require modifying content, methodology, delivery of instruction, or instructional format, or performance criteria” (p. 21). This component of eligibility for special education and ultimately, of the IEP, makes special education distinct from general education. It is the part of the instruction, materials, or expectations that is unique from what students without disabilities experience and require (Capizzi, 2008).
Specially designed instruction can be found throughout the IEP, from the description of how content, methodology, and/or performance criteria are modified, to the goals and benchmarks. The literature provides varied approaches to crafting specially designed instruction (Hessler & Conrad, 2008; Johns, Crowley & Guetzloe, 2002; Johnson & Lawson, 2006; Ketterlin-Geller, Alonzo, Braun-Monegan & Tindal, 2007; Rosas, Winterman, Kroeger & Jones, 2009), however, in order to ensure the plan is individualized, the Team must begin by examining the results of assessment data (Capizzi, 2008; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2010).

**How is instruction individualized for a student?** To individualize the components of the IEP for a student, the Team needs to begin by determining the student’s current performance level. Teams are expected to write challenging, measurable goals that the student is likely to achieve within the timeframe of the IEP (usually one calendar year). Without establishing a baseline, it is impossible to adequately determine the amount of expected progress for the student over the course of the IEP period. Evaluators assess students in all areas of suspected disability in order to gain information about current performance levels and from there, Teams can tailor specially designed instruction (Capizzi, 2008).

When instruction is individualized and content is modified to meet the needs of a student, that student is more likely to be engaged in the work and demonstrate mastery of the concepts and skills. At the same time, students present with fewer maladaptive behaviors in the classroom when materials are presented according to their individual needs, which allows the teacher to spend more time and energy on instruction. Curriculum modifications include either adapting materials or augmenting them to best meet the needs of a student. When materials are adapted, the content is not changed, but how students access and relate to it is. Augmentations expand the
general curriculum to provide a student with skills and knowledge he or she needs to access the general information being presented. Similarly to adaptations, augmentations do not change the content of the class (Lee, Palmer, Soukup & Wehmeyer, 2010).

Teams use a variety of techniques to create the IEP. Some Teams use the IEP as sort of meeting agenda, walking through each component of the document as a guide to cover all legal components of the meeting. Other groups may use a round robin approach, having all service providers speak about the student, providing updates or feedback on progress. Another strategy is looking at the student’s program from the perspective of his or her daily schedule. A benefit to this approach is the encouragement of a more multidisciplinary conversation; all Team members are encouraged to speak throughout the meeting, which can lead to a more collaborative and integrated IEP (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011).

**Evidence-based practices.** According to IDEIA (2004), all students receiving services through IEPs are entitled to receive research- or evidence-based instruction. The idea behind this requirement is that students are likely to perform at a higher level when provided with high quality instruction, and students with disabilities require the highest quality of instruction in order to compensate for learning deficits. The assumption is made that in order for instruction to be considered high quality and evidence-based, there must be several studies demonstrating its effectiveness, the research design and methodological rigor must meet a threshold of expectation, and the studies must document measured, meaningful effect on student achievement through the use of the instruction (Cook, Tankersley & Landrum, 2009; Kutash, Duchnowski & Lynn, 2009).

Students are likely to demonstrate significant progress when instruction is explicit and targeted to individual needs and learning styles. In fact, when evidence-based practices are used with fidelity, the students functioning at the lowest level tend to demonstrate the most gains
(Paulsen, 2005). In particular, instruction in small groups, using formative assessment, and using benchmarks to determine progress correlate strongly with an increase in student achievement (Knutson et al., 2004).

**Conclusion**

Considering the multitude of challenges and complexities Teams face when writing an IEP for a student, it is a wonder any IEPs are implemented at all. Conflicting agendas, ill-prepared meeting facilitators, and the enormous financial implications special education decisions can have on a district can create almost insurmountable obstacles for Teams. When Teams struggle to collaborate effectively, schools can become battlegrounds rather than environments that meet the needs of students (Freedman, 2009).

Literature indicates that for the special education process to be effective, Teams must run efficiently and collaboratively, with all members having a voice (Jones & Gansle, 2010). Districts must not only work with special educators and related service providers to train in effective meeting management, but with general educators and parents to increase their knowledge in all areas of the IEP as well (Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Mueller, 2009). The Team must use reliable data to make instructional decisions, which leads to the creation of specially designed instruction that is individualized in alignment with the student’s specific needs. It is in this area the literature is the least robust and more investigation is warranted. While there are studies describing types of assessment data used to develop the IEP (Johns et al., 2002; Mellard et al., 2004), there is limited research available that supports Teams in their efforts to use that information collectively at the meeting to create a plan based on valid data and unique to the student.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Question

Central question. What is the experience of an IEP Team as the members collaborate to develop an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated early childhood environment?

Sub-questions. What experiences do participants relate as they reflect on the IEP process? What behaviors do participants believe promote effective collaboration? What challenges do participants believe exist that impede collectively creating IEPs? Are there differences in the perception of the process between school staff and parents?

Paradigm

This study was conducted through the lens of constructivism-interpretivism, the aim of which is an understanding (Ponterotto, 2005). The consideration of truth, or reality, must begin with the realization that there are multiple versions, depending upon the background and perspective of the individual or group. In order to work through those layers of reality, the researcher generally uses a qualitative approach, engaging in conversations and observations, and becoming a co-participant in the research (Ponterotto, 2005). Due to the collaborative nature of the IEP process and the different versions of reality that can be brought to the table by various Team members (Cheatham, et al., 2012), in this case study, I sifted through those perceptions in order to obtain a rich understanding of the IEP process.

Researcher’s Role within the Paradigm

According to Ponterotto (2005), “Reality, according to the constructivist position, is subjective and influenced by the context of the situation, namely the individual’s experience and perceptions, the social environment, and the interaction between the individual and the
researcher” (p. 130). While conducting this study, I acted as a co-participant in the study, co-creating a reality with the participants. The interactions between participants and researcher created a new reality, which could not be created without both participant and researcher bringing their individual perspectives to the relationship (Ponterotto, 2005).

**Research Design**

This study employed qualitative methods to uncover the experience of three IEP Teams as the members collaborated to develop an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated early childhood environment. Through the examination of three cases at an integrated, public early childhood program, I sought to discover understandings about that experience and ultimately support assertions regarding the problem of practice. According to Creswell (2013), a qualitative approach is used when a topic must be explored and that exploration is necessary to fully understand the topic. Additionally, qualitative research allows the researcher to conduct an in-depth study, in order to make sense of a topic (Creswell, 2013).

**Research Tradition**

This study used a multiple, single-case design with three IEP Teams to understand the experiences of an IEP Team as they collaborated to create an IEP for a student. Three Teams within the same school were studied in order to enhance the level of depth that could be uncovered through data collection, and the Teams served as examples of a typical case (Creswell, 2013). This study used multiple sources of information (e.g. interviews, observations, document review) to uncover case themes (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009).

Case study is used when the researcher is examining real-world experiences and is not controlling the structure of those experiences. In addition, case studies serve to answer "how" or "why" questions (Yin, 2009). This approach was appropriate for my study because it allowed for
a thorough examination of the experiences of members of the IEP Team, which was then considered in relation to my observations of the Team meetings and historical document review. This level of depth in data collection and analysis supported a strong understanding of how the group experienced the IEP meeting, which then served the purpose of the study, which is to understand how collaboration occurs within the IEP Team.

Participants

This study examined the experiences of three IEP Teams as the members collaborated to create an IEP for a student with disabilities enrolled in a public, integrated early childhood program. In order to truly understand those experiences within each of three cases, participants included all of the members of the IEP Team for a particular student. These groups included special education/general education teachers (who, at times, served as the Team’s chairperson), the students’ parents (and/or other family members), a speech/language pathologist, an occupational therapist, a school psychologist, and the building principal (who also took the role of Team chairperson).

Protection of Human Subjects

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012), the researcher is responsible to ensure that participants are protected while participating in the study. This do-no-harm mentality includes the elimination of exploitation of subjects, not publishing information that would lead to the loss of a job or an arrest, and not revealing information that could be embarrassing to the participant. This study provided protection to all subjects in a variety of ways. Participants were all adults, able to make decisions for themselves. Additionally, all participants were asked to provide informed consent, the entire process of the study was submitted to Northeastern University’s
Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the study did not commence until IRB approval was received.

**Confidentiality.** All participants were assured that every effort was made to maintain confidentiality regarding their identity. Pseudonyms were created for all individual participants as well as the school district in which the study took place and any identifying information presented in the study was altered to protect anonymity. These pseudonyms were used within all notes and recording labels to maintain that level of confidentiality.

**Managing and verifying data.** All data were stored in either a locked file or within a password-protected computer, smart phone, or tablet. Once the study was complete, all data were destroyed. All participants had the opportunity to check and verify the data they provided, to ensure the validity of the data collection.

**Obtaining Informed Consent**

Each participant in this study was provided with information that ensured that they understood the type of research being conducted, along with any potential risks involved, as well as the assurance that participation was completely voluntary and could be stopped by the participant at any time (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix A) which indicated that they had a clear understanding of the purpose of the research, the procedures that would be followed, and the benefits (such as improved IEP Team processes within the district) that could result from the study. There were no anticipated risks to participants within this study; participants were simply asked to share their input regarding the IEP Team process. Throughout the research period participants were provided with the opportunity to ask questions at any time, clarify the goals of the study or statements made within, and/or withdraw from the study.
Obtaining IRB Approval

Before collecting data, I submitted a Doctoral Thesis Proposal (DTP) and an “Application for Approval for Use of Human Participation in Research” to Northeastern University’s IRB. Additionally, I submitted all additional documentation to IRB, including participant consent forms (Appendix A), interview questions (Appendix C), a letter of permission from the superintendent of schools (Appendix D), and other supporting materials. Please see Appendix B to review a copy of the IRB application.

Recruitment and Access

After my DTP was approved by Northeastern University’s IRB, I began to recruit Teams for the study. Because the research questions focus on the experiences of the IEP Team, recruitment was limited to Teams that included members who all agreed to participate. I had access to the gatekeeper of the district in which I conducted the study (Creswell, 2012), the superintendent of schools, as we have a preexisting, professional relationship due to shared memberships in area educational collaboratives. This past relationship with the superintendent of the district allowed access for the study to occur with limited hindrances.

I developed criteria that IEP Teams were required to meet in order to be part of the study (see Appendix E). Teams that met the criteria were invited to participate via telephone (see script in Appendix F), which clearly stated that participation was voluntary and would have no effect on the contents of the IEP itself. Additionally, the recruitment script included information regarding the protection of participants’ confidentiality, in particular that of the families.

Data Collection

Data were collected using observations, interviews, and document review. I began by observing an IEP meeting for each case that was chosen. After the IEP meeting, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured, individual interviews with each IEP Team member (Rubin & Rubin,
Full interview protocols can be found in Appendix C. Interviews took place in person at a time and location that was convenient for each interviewee and lasted between 30-60 minutes each. Participants were asked about their willingness to participate in follow-up interviews, if necessary, and if they were open to follow-up contact for clarification. Interviews were audio recorded on two devices (smart phone application and tablet) and then transcribed by me. Participants were asked to review the transcripts of their interviews. This process of member checking allowed for greater credibility in regard to the accounts of the data collected (Creswell, 2013). I examined and analyzed the IEP documents pertinent to the case. These documents included the student’s current and prior evaluative testing, current and past IEPs and supporting documents, parent correspondence with the school, progress notes, and any other relevant documents in the student’s special education file. This process was repeated for the subsequent two cases.

**Data Storage and Management**

All data were stored in either a locked file in my office or within a password-protected computer, tablet, or smart phone. In addition, copies of informed consent forms were kept in a secure, locked location, separate from all other data collected. Only I had access to the data, and all data will be destroyed within three years of the completion of this study. Each participant had the opportunity to check and verify the data they provided, to ensure the validity of the data collection. Additionally, only the Principal Investigator and I had access to the original files and notes collected.

**Data Analysis**

I used a variety of tools by which to analyze the data collected. Writing margin notes in field notes, summarizing those field notes, noting patterns and themes and creating
corresponding codes, and counting the frequency of codes (Huberman & Miles, 1994) all supported the synthesis of gathered information. Interview and observation data were filtered and analyzed using a computer program, MAXQDA (www.maxqda.com). Using this type of software allowed for quick sorting and categorizing of data, which supported data analysis (Creswell, 2013). The findings are presented using narrative and lists to provide an in-depth picture of the case (Creswell, 2013, p. 191).

Using interviews, observations, document review, and multiple sources of information allowed for a deep understanding of the experience studied (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). In addition, the data were examined and coded, using a two-cycle approach (Saldaña, 2013). The first round of analysis was completed using Initial Coding and In Vivo coding to break down the interview responses into separate categories. During the second cycle of coding, I used Axial Coding to "strategically reassemble data that were 'split' or 'fractured' during the initial coding process" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 218). The initial codes were analyzed, sorted, and regrouped into fewer, broader categories, which allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the problem of practice.

**Trustworthiness**

Within this study, I took several measures to ensure the trustworthiness and uphold the integrity of the project and its findings. Clarification of researcher bias, member checking, and the use of rich description supported the enhancement of trustworthiness, while examining threats to internal validity further ensured the study is trustworthy.

**Clarifying researcher bias.** My background as a Special Education Director and a parent of children receiving IEP services was provided from the outset of the study, to all involved. It was essential to find clarity regarding researcher bias and to clearly articulate those
discoveries to participants. In addition, I continuously bracketed my own opinions (Creswell, 2012) about the topic by keeping a journal in which these biases were acknowledged and removed from the study (Creswell, 2013).

**Member checks.** In this study, participants were asked to review the transcripts of interviews. This member checking allowed for greater credibility in regard to the accounts of the data collected (Creswell, 2013). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), this process of participant validation is essential to creating a quality study.

**Rich, thick description.** Rich, thick description occurs when the author provides a detailed account of the participants or the setting in the study (Creswell, 2013). This detail includes physical descriptions as well as descriptions of observed activities or movements, and provides the reader with the opportunity to judge whether or not the findings can be transferred due to common themes or ideas (Creswell, 2013). Within this study, I provided this level of detail in order to provide enhanced trustworthiness.

**Potential threats to internal validity.** Because this study occurred in a district in which I have some existing professional relationships, there was the possibility that my familiarity with the environment could affect the research process. In order to combat these risks, I worked closely with the participants and used the above tools (clarification of researcher bias, member checking, and rich, thick description). In addition, I did not have a preexisting relationship with any of the participants in the study, nor had I previously visited or had any encounters with the school in which the Team meetings occurred.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of three IEP Teams as the members collaborated to create an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated early
childhood setting. The aim of this study was to expand on existing literature around the topic of collaboration in special education and to uncover both successful and unsuccessful components of existing structure and practice. This study used the lens of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to consider how multiple and varied perspectives affected the ability of a group to work together and come to agreement on topics. A multiple, single-case design with three IEP Teams was used to consider the research questions. Using observations, interviews, and record review to gather data provided me with multiple sources of information through which to examine the problem of practice.

Chapter Four: Report of the Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of three IEP Teams as the members collaborated to create an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated early childhood program. The early childhood program is located in Longview, a small town in southeastern Massachusetts. Victory School houses preschool and kindergarten for the district. In order to consider the problem of practice, this chapter is divided into two main sections: (1) a summary of each meeting; and (2) a review of emergent themes, based on observations, document review, and interviews with Team members.

Team Meetings

Nathan². Nathan's IEP Team meeting was the first time this group had assembled. Nathan, a two-year-old child had been referred from Early Intervention for an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education in advance of his third birthday (the earliest age he could access school-based special education services). The Team consisted of the child's mother (Mrs. Newton), the building principal (Justine), a special education teacher (Nellie), and a speech

² Again, to protect the anonymity of all participants and locations, pseudonyms have been assigned.
The meeting lasted 30 minutes, during which the group reviewed two evaluation reports, determined eligibility for special education services, and reviewed a draft of an IEP, which had been prepared by Nellie.

The meeting took place in a classroom, with the group sitting around a child-sized rectangular table. The special education teacher, Nellie opened the meeting by giving Mrs. Newton an agenda (Appendix G) and asking her to list her concerns about Nathan; Mrs. Newton answered that she was unhappy that Nathan would throw anything he held in his hand. The principal, Justine, then interjected, asking if the meeting could pause so that the group could introduce themselves.

The group then shifted into a review of the evaluation reports, that were written based on formal testing conducted by Nellie and Carol. Mrs. Newton had received copies of the reports prior to the meeting. Nellie began by reviewing the academic testing, reading the report she wrote, aloud. She stated that Nathan was not able to match nor was he able to demonstrate comprehension of the concept "all". Nellie went on to state, "But he was a very nice little boy, and sat nicely". At this point, Justine interjected, "We should mention that he's not three until September, so there are things we wouldn't expect him to be able to do".

Carol then began reviewing her portion of the testing. She provided the group with information about Nathan's demeanor and behavior during the testing and then explained that she was unable to complete formal testing with him, as he did not respond to prompts from the testing instrument. She indicated that she informally observed him and found that he did not use any words during the evaluation and demonstrated limited babbling. Mrs. Newton interjected that his communication was the same at home. Carol went on to explain that Nathan seemed interested in some of the toys, but when he needed help manipulating a toy, he was unable to
communicate that. She stated that when he was presented with pictures and asked to point to the picture demonstrating the word, he did not point, but his eyes went to the pictures. Carol stated that it seemed Nathan understood that she wanted him to do something, but that he was not sure what it was. She recommended that the pediatrician check Nathan's hearing and stated that both his expressive and receptive language skills were below average, so she was recommending speech and language therapy. Carol then asked Mrs. Newton if she had any questions, and when she did not, she completed her portion of reporting. Carol's reporting lasted approximately 10 minutes.

Nellie then stated that the next portion of the meeting would be spent determining if Nathan was eligible for special education services. She asked if there were any questions and when no one replied, she began reading aloud the eligibility flowchart (Appendix H):

1. Does the student have one or more disability? Yes, developmental delay.
2. Would the student make effective progress without special education? No.
3. Is it due to the disability? Yes.
4. Does the student require specially designed instruction? Yes.
5. So the student is eligible for SPED, and this next question is for Mom.
6. Was the parent satisfied with the evaluation?

During the eligibility process, only Nellie spoke, until the final question, which asked if the parent was satisfied with the evaluation, to which Mrs. Newton responded, "Yes". Eligibility took approximately one minute to complete.

Nellie then guided the group's attention toward the draft of the IEP, explaining to Mrs. Newton that the IEP is similar to an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), which the family had used when Nathan received Early Intervention services (which cease when children turn three
years old). Nellie led the group through the draft of the IEP (please see Appendix I for a blank IEP template), while the rest of the Team followed along with their personal copies. Nellie stated that she would include the concerns Mrs. Newton mentioned at the beginning of the meeting in the Parent Concerns section and she read the Team vision statement, which was included on the draft. Nellie read the remainder of the draft aloud to the parents, with Carol interjecting to read the speech and language goal. Nellie asked Mrs. Newton if she had any questions three times during the times she was reading and Carol asked if there were any questions when she completed reviewing her goal. Mrs. Newton did not ask any questions during this portion of the meeting.

While the Team reviewed the IEP draft, no changes were made to the draft that was presented. Mrs. Newton asked one question throughout the review, regarding transportation. Other than that, she told the school staff that she had no questions. The Team spent 12 minutes reviewing the draft of the IEP. Once that review was completed, the draft became the proposed IEP. Mrs. Newton left the meeting with the proposed IEP, and the Team meeting ended.

**Christopher.** Christopher's meeting was also an initial evaluation for special education services. Christopher, a three-year-old boy, completed assessments in the following domains: academic/cognitive (completed by the special educator, Nellie), speech and language (completed by the speech pathologist, Carol), and fine motor (completed by an occupational therapist, whose attendance at the meeting was waived by the parents). In attendance was Anna, a new principal to the building and chairperson for the meeting, Carol, the speech pathologist who works exclusively with preschool students, Nellie, the special education teacher who completes all academic/cognitive testing for initial evaluations of preschool students (who served as unofficial chairperson during the previous school year), and Mr. and Mrs. Little, Christopher's parents.
Because the occupational therapist was unable to attend the meeting, Anna asked Mr. and Mrs. Little if they would sign a waiver for her attendance, to which they agreed. The Team sat around a rectangular table in Anna's office and the meeting lasted for 55 minutes, during which the evaluation reports were reviewed, eligibility was determined, and an IEP was drafted.

Anna opened the meeting with introductions, then asked Mr. and Mrs. Little to share their concerns regarding Christopher. Mr. Little stated:

We had concerns and brought to him to the pediatrician. And I'm not sure if it's because of his sister being older and that he has cousins right around his age for benchmarks, but it didn't seem like he could ask what he wanted and we couldn't understand him. . . he just can't formulate his thoughts and communicate with us.

Mrs. Little interjected, stating:

And I think because of that, we are seeing some behavioral things, and he's frustrated because no one understands him. He'll put his foot down and say no and the tantrum can last for an hour and a half. Like the other night we had pasta and he wanted mac and cheese. He tantrumed for an hour and a half and he can't do that in school; he can't tantrum.

Carol indicated that she had seen some of the same behaviors during the testing, but noted that Christopher had been very easy to redirect, when he was off task. Mr. Little added, "He always seems to find his way and he plays well with others. He tends to be the bite-ee, not the biter, so I don't know if that relates to this or how he behaves, but he's a good boy".

Anna then stated that Nellie and Carol would review the testing reports, which had been provided to Mr. and Mrs. Little two days earlier. Nellie explained that Christopher had been through speech and language and occupational therapy testing earlier in the day, so she was the
third evaluator to work with him. She then read directly from the report and finished her
comments with, "Cognitive naming, he was average and cognitive counting, he fell in the below
average range. He was definitely below average. Okay, do you have any questions for me"? Mrs. Little responded, "What does this mean for him and how do we work this out"? to which Anna replied, "That's a great question. Can we just tuck it to the side for now? We're gonna get
back to that".

Next, Carol reviewed the speech and language testing, stating that she had evaluated
Christopher first, so he had been more alert and attentive during her assessment. He scored in
the average range on each of the subtests given during the testing, although Carol noted that his
speech shifted from words to jargon as his sentences became longer. Mrs. Little agreed, stating,
"His brain goes faster than his mouth does. His mouth doesn't work as fast". Overall, Carol was
able to understand his speech and he was able to understand and respond to questions and
commands at a level expected of his age. Carol noted that she did continue to have some
concerns with Christopher's communication, but since his testing scores were all within the
average range, she would talk with the family about how to address those concerns outside of the
IEP process. She added that some of the challenges Christopher demonstrated with
communication were developmental and were appropriate for a three-year-old child. Anna asked
if Mr. and Mrs. Little had any questions for Carol and when they stated they did not, Anna
shifted the focus to the occupational therapist's report.

Anna read directly from the occupational therapist's report, stating, "I'm going to read her
words because she can say it better than I can". Christopher's scores were average in the fine
motor domain, so occupational therapy was not recommended. Anna read the recommendations
from the report (e.g. extra opportunities for coloring and drawing tasks, lots of physical activity
prior to seated work to help with sitting and attending to tasks) and asked Mr. and Mrs. Little if there were any questions about the occupational therapy report, stating she would do her best to answer them, however no one had questions. Anna then asked if Mr. and Mrs. Little were comfortable with the reports to which Mr. Little replied, "Yeah, I feel like it's all in the ballpark".

The Team shifted into the task of determining eligibility for special education. Anna stated:

So now, we need to go through the eligibility. The State puts this out; they're not my words. These are educational disabilities, they're not medical and some of these would not be remotely applicable to Christopher...that leads us to one category: developmental delay. Does his development have enough of a lag compared to his same age peers? As a Team we look at all the testing that was completed. With developmental delay, we look mostly at SPED testing. We did see a lag on one subtest, and this is a borderline case. Is it that he's just younger or is there a disability? We don't want -- we don't want parents to feel like your child has a problem, but as a school Team we would say that he is under developmental delay. But you are integral Team members so what do you think?

Mr. Little indicated his agreement regarding the determination of developmental delay, while Mrs. Little responded, "I definitely want to keep working with you so that when he's ready to start kindergarten, he's not below".

Anna continued through the Eligibility Flowchart (Appendix H), stating, "[For] effective progress we would look at testing because he's not in public school [Christopher attends daycare], so do the Team members think he's making effective progress"? After a period of silence lasting approximately five seconds, Anna continued, "I would say [no], due to that one area of delay," to which Carol and Nellie voiced their agreement. Anna then read the remainder
of the Eligibility Flowchart aloud, answering the questions on the flowchart as she read and pausing to gauge the assent of the group. When Christopher was found eligible for special education services, Anna drew the Team's attention to the IEP document, which she projected from her computer onto a screen.

Anna presented a draft of the IEP that was filled in, but throughout the review of the draft, she frequently solicited input from Mr. and Mrs. Little. For example, she stated, "Next is the vision. We've made a statement, but we certainly want your input on it. Mom and Dad, your thoughts on any changes that would make you feel most comfortable"? to which Mr. Little replied, "No, I think that's fine". Anna highlighted the one proposed goal on the IEP, stating, "Those are the things we're hoping to work on. Do those feel comfortable"? to which Mrs. Little replied, "Um, they're fine".

The Team reviewed the remainder of the IEP by Anna reading each section and other Team members viewing the projected document. When the group reached the Additional Information section on the final page of the IEP, Anna stated, "The Feds and the State tell us some things we need to speak about. One is if the disability makes them more vulnerable to teasing, harassment, or bullying. I always caution that it doesn't mean he is being bullied. The school Team - his social skills [do] not impact him, but do you have concerns along those lines"? Mr. Little responded, "No, he's a good boy -- what I said earlier about bites --" and Anna interjected, "That's what gave me pause". Mr. Little went on, "Yeah, it's more like two individuals, two boys, one toy and we worked through the issue. No issue with him being teased". Anna followed with, "If that changed at any time, we could come back together and put things into place to work on that". When the Team completed the review of the IEP draft, there were no changes made, so in the end, the original draft became the proposed IEP.
Anna then reviewed the next steps of the IEP process with Mr. and Mrs. Little:

This section here is where you decide if you accept or reject the IEP. And, if you're inclined to reject, I would ask that you give me a call and I think we could come together and solve the problem. So, I'll make it pretty, send it to [district administration], you should get in three to five days. And definitely give me a call if you have any questions. So that's it. Do you have any questions? I know it's a lot and it's your baby.

Mr. Little replied, asking what Christopher's schedule would be and Nellie responded, stating quickly, "I can speak to that. We come in, hang our backpacks, circle time, centers, snack, recess, and go home. Any questions about that"? Mr. and Mrs. Little discussed with each other how they would make the schedule work after which Anna officially ended the IEP meeting.

The Littles and Carol then reviewed the informal speech and language plan, which would allow Christopher to receive speech services through general education. That conversation ended and the group disbanded.

Ryan. Ryan is a five-year-old kindergarten student who has been receiving special education services since he first became eligible at three years old. He transitioned into special education services from Early Intervention, qualifying due to a developmental delay. This meeting was held as a reevaluation meeting at which the Team members reviewed formal and informal testing completed with Ryan and re-determined Ryan's eligibility for special education services. Team members included the building principal, Anna; Ryan's mother, Mrs. Flynn and his grandmother, Mrs. Bryant; the school psychologist, Beth; Ryan's general education kindergarten teacher, Trisha; his special education teacher, Liza; speech pathologist, Isabelle; and occupational therapist, Karen. The meeting lasted approximately one hour and five minutes, during which the Team reviewed the testing results for approximately 50 minutes, determined
eligibility for approximately five minutes, and looked at a draft of an IEP for approximately 10 minutes.

The meeting began with Team members introducing themselves and signing the attendance sheet that was passed around the table. This meeting took place in the principal's office, with most Team members sitting around a rectangular table and those members who could not fit around the table sitting off to the side. The testing reports were reviewed, with each Team member looking at individual paper copies of the reports, while the IEP draft was projected onto a screen for all Team members to view.

Once introductions were complete, Anna asked Mrs. Flynn to state her concerns for Ryan. Mrs. Flynn stated that Ryan was enjoying school and that she was primarily concerned with his speech. She explained that it is difficult for Ryan to be understood by anyone, and when he is not able to be understood, he becomes frustrated. She stated that she has seen improvements in other areas, noting that he now loved to color, a task that had been quite arduous for him in the past. When Mrs. Flynn finished speaking, Anna turned to Ryan's grandmother, Mrs. Bryant and asked her if she had any concerns. Mrs. Bryant reiterated the concerns she had for Ryan related to his articulation. Anna then repeated back the concerns she had heard from the family asking, "Does that about sum it up?" to which Mrs. Flynn and Mrs. Bryant stated that it did.

The conversation then moved to a verbal review of the written reports based on the formal assessments that had been completed. Trisha discussed Ryan's transition to kindergarten and the progress he had made during the year so far:

He is coming out of his shell. When we first got him he was really quiet, but now he'll ask for help...he can do it, but he wants it absolutely perfect...he's made some really good
friends, so much that we have to have them sit away from each other. [He has a] great sense of humor. I don't have trouble understanding him, but he doesn't tell me long stories. So far, he did well on the screening on the DIBELS [Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills -- an assessment measuring the acquisition of early literacy skills]; I don't have the scores in front of me, but I know he did well on the letter names and the sounds we've covered...To go with what you were saying with the language piece and I'm sure Isabelle will have more to say, there's so much vocab that goes into math so I can see how the language might be a barrier. But I always check in with him and usually give him an extra set of directions...I think he's off to a great start and I love having him in class.

When Trisha finished speaking, Anna asked Mrs. Flynn and Mrs. Bryant if there were any questions and when none were raised, the Team shifted its focus to the psychological testing completed by Beth.

Beth reviewed the results of cognitive testing she had completed with Ryan and indicated that at times, he had not seemed to give his best effort, so she thought that perhaps the scores were a low representation of his abilities. Overall, his scores indicated that he needs a great deal of time to complete tasks. In addition, Beth reviewed the behavioral assessment she had completed, indicating that Ryan's scores represented a happy, well-adjusted boy. Beth asked Mrs. Flynn if there were any questions about her testing and Mrs. Flynn stated that there were none. Anna asked Liza to then review the academic testing.

Liza explained that the scores she obtained for Ryan were also potentially lower than his actual knowledge, but this possible discrepancy was due to Ryan's trouble understanding the test directions. She stated, "Not being able to reword directions, that was difficult and he needed
Liza indicated that Ryan's academic achievement was where it was supposed to be for a child his age, but added, "If he knows what to do, he can do it", restating her concern regarding his ability to comprehend verbal directions. She explained that Ryan would need directions repeated in class, but he was currently completing grade-level work. Mrs. Flynn then asked, "Is he still going to have an IEP?" to which Anna interjected, "We'll get to that. We have to go through the reports before we can do eligibility. I don't want you to think I'm blowing you off. We're being crafty because we have to". Mrs. Flynn indicated that she understood and the meeting continued.

Isabelle then began reviewing the speech and language testing Ryan had completed, stating, "He has a lot of great skills; I can't believe how far he's come! He was using pictures when he first got here! There are some areas of weakness, but he's really developing". Ryan's testing indicated that his receptive language skills were somewhat delayed, with his ability to follow directions being most compromised, and his expressive language skills were significantly delayed. In addition, his articulation scores fell into the very low range, which accounted for his difficulty being understood. When Isabelle asked if there were any questions, Mrs. Flynn and Mrs. Bryant reiterated their concerns with Ryan's speech and unintelligibility, explaining how upset Ryan becomes when listeners do not understand his message. Isabelle stated, "I know he has the whole perfectionist thing...I don't usually recommend this, but you might just act like you understand him", adding that she would continue to work on the articulation with Ryan.

Anna then asked Karen to discuss the occupational therapy (OT) testing that had looked at Ryan's fine motor skills, his ability to integrate visual and motor information, and his approach
to processing sensory information. Karen stated that she had worked with Ryan since he was three years old and she was thrilled with the progress he had made over the two-and-a-half years she had known him. The assessment showed a deficit in visual motor integration (i.e., how Ryan used his eyes and his hands in conjunction, to complete a task such as cutting or writing letters), but his isolated fine motor skills were developing and there were no sensory integration concerns noted. She did recommend that Ryan continue to receive OT school-based services.

Anna then moved toward her computer and began projecting the Eligibility Flowchart (Appendix H) onto the screen for the group to consider. She indicated that Ryan had been initially found eligible under the category of developmental delay, but she was not sure if that continued to be an accurate description of his educational disability, stating, "Usually developmental delay is an overall one across the board". She asked Isabelle if she thought Ryan presented with a communication disability, to which Isabelle answered, "It's a communication disorder, but there's still delays in fine motor". Karen agreed, and Anna stated, "Communication as primary and we'll leave developmental delay, but specify that it's in the area of fine motor". Anna then read through the remaining questions on the flowchart, asking for and obtaining agreement from the group after each question. Ryan was found to remain eligible for special education.

Anna brought up the first page of the IEP and stated that she would add the concerns Mrs. Flynn and Mrs. Bryant had reported at the start of the meeting. After approximately five minutes of reviewing the draft, when the group was considering the vision statement on page one of the IEP, there was a knock on the door and the principal's secretary entered, stating that the participants of the next meeting were waiting in the hallway. Anna answered that this group was just finishing up and would be ready to adjourn in a few minutes.
Anna then read the draft of the IEP as it was presented on the screen, asking, "Any comments?" after each section. Isabelle asked to add an accommodation to one of the pages, and Karen asked to modify one of the benchmarks on the draft. In addition, Isabelle broached the idea of Ryan attending a summer program, but Anna indicated that the group could not make a determination of a need for summer programming at this time. Mrs. Flynn added, "He does great in the summer, so if we could add that now...". Anna stated that the teachers would have to take data regarding Ryan's performance around school vacations, to see if he demonstrated substantial regression without the services. The group would not be able to make that determination now. The remainder of the draft IEP was accepted by the group and consequently, became the proposed IEP. Within five minutes of the notice that another group was waiting to meet, Ryan's meeting ended and the Team disbanded.

The above section described, in detail, the three cases which were examined within this study. The summaries above were derived from my observations of each Team meeting, while document review provided me with an historical context for each case. For example, I reviewed at each student's prior special education record and Early Intervention documents. This document review supported my analysis of each case in that I was able to determine parents' prior history with special education. In addition, I was able to determine if any past conflict had occurred between the school and the family, although no prior conflicts were noted. The next section will describe the themes, which emerged from my analysis of my observation notes and interview transcripts, with data gathered through document review providing context for each case.
Emergent Themes

The analytical strategy employed to uncover themes from the data were described in great detail in Chapter Three. In brief, a multiple, single-case design was used to examine the experiences of an IEP Team as the members collaborated to write an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, early childhood setting. I observed three IEP meetings, taking detailed, verbatim notes during each. I reviewed student records, including evaluation reports, referral documents, IEPs, meeting summaries, and Early Intervention documents to obtain an historical context for each case. Finally, I interviewed Team members, asking each the same questions (please see Appendix C), using a semi-structured, open-ended approach.

Information gathered through data collection, including field notes, interview transcripts and IEP documents (e.g. evaluation reports, eligibility flowcharts, proposed IEPs) was compiled. I wrote margin notes in field notes and then summarized the ideas captured from my observations, noting patterns and themes, and created corresponding thematic codes. Interview transcripts were filtered and analyzed using MAXQDA (www.maxqda.com), which allowed for quick sorting and categorizing of information, allowing for themes to emerge (Creswell, 2013). These themes were compared with those developed through my field notes. I then used first- and second-cycle coding to break apart the interview data and then reconnected it into overarching themes, with sub-themes indentified (Saldaña, 2013). In the subsequent discussion of themes, a representative sample of quotes is used as evidence of consensus among participants and disagreements are highlighted.

The following themes and sub-themes are identified and discussed in the section below:

- Theme 1: Misperception of collaboration
  - Sub-theme 1: School-based Team members’ collaboration
Sub-theme 2: Parents' role

Sub-theme 3: Impediments to collaboration

Theme 2: Strategies for promoting effective collaboration

Sub-theme 1: Preparation

Sub-theme 2: Communication

Sub-theme 3: Clarity of roles

**Theme 1: Misperception of collaboration.** Each participant was told that the study's purpose was to examine collaboration among IEP Team members. However, interview data indicated that the working definition of collaboration was inconsistent among participants and none of the participants shared the definition of collaboration among IEP Team members as IDEIA (2004) defines it. When asked to describe the collaboration among the IEP Team for example, both school-based staff and parents' initial responses only considered how school-based staff collaborated. It was only after follow-up, probing questions were asked that participants considered collaboration that included the parents. In fact, each participant reported varied ideas regarding the role of the parents in the process, and even among parents, the perception was diverse. Taken together, the above examples are illustrative of the theme that emerged from the data regarding the extent to which participants’ perceptions of what was meant by collaboration varied somewhat.

**Sub-theme 1: School-based Team members' collaboration.** Each participant was asked to describe his or her thoughts on the collaboration among the IEP Team and to explain if he or she thought the meeting was collaborative. School-based staff and parents interviewed all provided initial answers to this question in regard to how school-based staff collaborated, not
considering the parents' collaboration until prompted to do so. After Nathan's meeting, Nellie discussed her thoughts on collaboration among the Team:

We talked a little bit, Carol and I, but I don't think that we really...It's toward the end of the year and at that point everybody is very busy with their own agendas, progress reports, report cards, and that kind of information. I don't think we really had a chance to really collaborate as much as, that would've benefitted me.

Carol's perspective was similar:

I know that I had tried that earlier in the week but the IEP wasn't done and I don't blame her because it's just been crazy. I don't think that there was a ton. We did collaborate. She did ask me a little about how many days a week I thought he needed.

Liza also explained the Team's collaboration in terms of the school staff:

We do talk off and on, as we have a chance to see each other, about how kids are starting to look as you test them, any surprises. We usually share individually with each other, as we might catch each other, "I'm really surprised about this. Did you have anything that is showing that same kind of thing?"

Anna explained the process the school staff had gone through prior to Christopher's meeting:

We didn't have a heck of a lot of time to come together in advance, but we had discussed the case, to some degree, at our case meeting. We meet every Friday as a preschool Team. We had gone over the case, to some extent, at that. I think we all felt that we were pretty much in agreement.

The educators discussed the challenges they had faced trying to get together prior to the Team meeting to discuss the case and their thoughts on eligibility. Karen described her thoughts on the quality of school-based staff collaboration when working on IEP development:
I think we have a ways to go with [collaboration]. I think we collaborate very well as a Team in terms of what we're all finding, but then we go forward and just write our own goals.... I think we could do a better job of collaborating on the goals themselves....I was just at a meeting that we were all talking about the same thing...but we ended up with an ELA goal, speech goal, and an OT goal, which we really could've done one goal.

Parent responses to the question regarding collaboration among the Team indicated similar perceptions. Mrs. Flynn stated, "I think they all work well together. They seem to be on the same page with what he needs," while Mrs. Little stated, "I think the part was that they were like, 'Okay, we're all a Team here,' but it wasn't like a clear definition of what role each of us were playing". Mrs. Newton indicated that while she was hoping for special education services for her child, it was the school-based staff who would make that determination. While the school-based staff and parents' perceptions similarly excluded parental input into the collaborative process, once asked about collaboration, which included parents, the opinions shifted.

As above, once participants were prompted to consider the collaboration that occurred during the Team meeting, which involved all Team members, including the parents, there continued to be varied thoughts on the process. Isabelle, for example, indicated that she believed the school-based Team members had provided the parent with a lot of useful information, which she believed was the purpose of the meeting, while Justine explained slightly different views:

And that's where I feel like it's our job to let them know they are a part of it. That we need their input. And that's why starting with parent concerns, let's make sure we address them by the end of the meeting, can help them feel like they're part of it.
Justine explained that the IEP process is not inherently conducive to parent participation, so, as a school leader, she felt it was important to begin meetings with parent concerns in order to "help them feel like they're part of it". Anna agreed, stating, "My hope is that I could help families understand that we want what's best for their children, within what we're able to offer". Despite consensus among school-based participants regarding including parents as collaborators, there was a lack of cohesion among participants' beliefs about the role of the parent as an IEP Team member, as presented below.

**Sub-theme 2: Parents' role.** Once participants were specifically asked about parent participation in the Team process, the responses were quite varied. Some parents did not want to play a large role in the determination of eligibility for special education nor did they desire to play an active role in crafting of the IEP document. Instead, they trusted the school-based staff to make the decisions. In addition, these parents were most concerned with services that would be offered. Mrs. Newton explained her expectations, "I hoped that he would qualify for services...I was praying," and continued, "I mean if I went in there and they just said, 'No' to everything then I wouldn't feel respected, but they didn't". Because the school-based staff recommended services, Mrs. Newton's goals for the meeting had been achieved. When asked if she wished she had been a part of writing the goals on the IEP, she emphatically stated that she did not and that she trusted the school to make those decisions.

Mrs. Flynn explained her thoughts on the purpose of the meeting noting, "To go over his testing they've been doing because it's been the two years since his testing. To see what goals were met," with her role being, "To, I guess, agree or disagree on their test results". Her perception of her role was as a sort of gatekeeper, agreeing or disagreeing with the school's proposal. She did not express an interest in helping to create what was being proposed. When
asked if she had wanted to provide more input into the writing of the IEP, she reported that she
did not, but rather wished the teachers had taken more time explaining the proposed goals, "I
think it could have been a little bit longer, explaining what they -- they didn't really go over their
goals. I thought that was odd...usually you go over the goals".

Mrs. Little's response was even more explicit in terms of her perceived role on the Team,
"I don't understand why we're Team members in the process. Like no, I'm a mom. That's my
kid". She explained that she was not an expert in the field of education and felt that she should
not be made to feel that she should have the answers of how to help her child, educationally. She
relied on the trained educators to tell her what Christopher needed and she would do what they
recommended: "I don't expect them to know exactly what's going to work to solve the issues that
Christopher has, but at least I need a plan laid out". She did believe that the school and family
shared the same intentions for the IEP however, stating, "In the end, I think we all have the same
goal. For that, I think it's a collaborative Team effort, because they want to see Christopher
succeed, I want to see Christopher succeed".

The perception of most school-based participants was that the IEP process was
collaborative with parents because each meeting began by asking parents to state their concerns
for their child. Carol, for example, explained her thoughts on how often parents were involved,
"More at the beginning, I guess, when we [review] the testing. We always talk to the parents and
get their input." Justine, agreeing with what Carol and others said, noted, "That's generally how
they've been running them here, it's parent concerns, and then get into the report, and then
eligibility". Carol went on to explain, "Sometimes in a meeting there will be a little back and
forth between, 'What do you feel like he needs or do you think this is...‘", but school-based
participants agreed that those conversations were generally related to the days of the week the child would attend school, not necessarily a substantive portion of the IEP.

While Liza agreed with the other school-based participants regarding the role of parents in IEP meetings, she also noted that while it is nice when parents participate in the meeting, it was not the only way parents received updates and information on the child's school functioning:

What's really important is what's going on in the classroom every day. It's not the only place where the parent finds out and participates in their child's education. They're coming into the classroom. They're getting report cards. They're coming to special events. They're participating in field trips.

Instead, she explained, the IEP process was not as important as what happens in the classroom and the parents' perceptions and trust:

We can spend lots of time on this paper, but when it comes really right down to it, it's the interactions we have with children, that are the most important. If the parent feels really happy that their child is in a great classroom with a great teacher, is happy coming to school every day, this is just icing on the cake, really. We in special ed can think it is the foundation, but I really think what goes on in the classroom every day is what is most important to children.

Anna, however, stated that she could relate to the feelings of the parents and wanted to do what she could to support the collaborative process:

A lot of time, I found myself sympathizing and empathizing with parents, who were really just looking out for the best interests of their children. Then, because I was already in public education, I thought maybe I could make a difference from that end of things,
and instead of being that adversarial person on the special education Team, I wanted to be the person that works with them.

During the Team meetings observed, Anna's actions demonstrated this desire; as the Team chairperson, she regularly checked in with the parents, asking for their feedback and checking for their comprehension.

In sum, among school-based participants, most agreed that parents had opportunities to participate through the Parent Concerns section of the IEP. That said, to the extent that parents perceived their roles with significant variance (e.g. parents who put complete trust in the school's recommendations as well as those acting as a consumer judging the district's proposal and deciding if it was good or bad), collaboration among all Team members was sometimes hindered as can be seen in the evidence presented below.

**Sub-theme 3: Impediments to collaboration.** While both school-based staff and parents indicated satisfaction with the outcome of the meetings, there were factors and events that hindered collaboration among the group. Individual parents reported unique goals and perceptions about the process; those reports were different from those of school-based staff and those of other parents included in this study. Some parents simply wanted to ensure services for their child, while others hoped for more enlightenment from the Team when going through the proposed IEP. This hindrance was examined in depth in sub-theme 2 above. In addition, there were concerns with the pace of the meeting, with some parents feeling that the meeting was rushed. Others felt the reporting of evaluation results were not explained in practical, parent-friendly language, and finally, some parents were thrown off by formality of evaluation process.

**Pace of the meeting.** Each of the Teams included in this study reviewed recently completed formal evaluations; two meetings were initial evaluations and one was a reevaluation.
All three meetings included reviewing formal testing, determining or re-determining eligibility for special education services, and reviewing a pre-completed draft of an IEP with the Team. The duration of the meetings ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and five minutes long. The majority of the meeting time was spent reviewing the reports (approximately 75-85 percent of the duration of the meetings), with the remainder of the time being spent determining eligibility and reviewing the draft IEP.

According to the meeting schedule at Victory School, meetings were generally scheduled on a particular day of the week, and were scheduled on the hour, which allotted one hour per meeting. The observed Team meetings included two to five evaluation reports and educators spent between three and fifteen minutes reviewing each report. The eligibility process involves the completion of the Eligibility Flowchart (Appendix H), which is comprised of five questions on which the Team must answer and agree. Finally, the IEP consists of eight pages, on which several sections are included on each page (please see Appendix I). Collaborating through all of those components in a 60 minute timeframe can be challenging, as was noted by most participants.

At the time Ryan's meeting was interrupted by the school secretary indicating that the participants of the next meeting were waiting, the Team was reviewing the bottom section of the first page of the IEP. The meeting adjourned five minutes later, which meant that the Team considered seven pages of the IEP document in five minutes. Mrs. Flynn commented on how the meeting ended, "I thought I was being rushed out of there because they had another meeting to attend. They should give themselves more time seeing it [sic] was a big meeting".
Mrs. Little also had concerns with the pace of the presentation of the reports and draft IEP, stating that while the educators went into great detail in their explanations, they did not spend time on the specifics of what was going to be done. She explained:

I think that if they would have been able to articulate more of exactly where we're at, and what this plan of action is going to be, then I think we would have been a little bit more comfortable with it.

Instead, she stated that the meeting seemed rushed and she wished she had had more time and opportunity to ask clarifying questions. Overall, the parent participants indicated that the meetings felt rushed and they wished there had been more time for explanations within the IEP development.

*Educator jargon.* While Mrs. Newton was comfortable playing a mostly-silent role in the IEP process, provided her child received special education services, Mrs. Little reported some concerns with how the information was presented. Mrs. Little's concerns with the pace of the meeting were compounded by her belief that the reports and IEP did not provide her with sufficient concrete information regarding her child's functioning and educational needs. She stated:

This is when I wanted them to go to a little bit more detail, and explain to me exactly when they say that he scores below average on cognitive matching, explain that to me. What exactly does that mean? What areas does he not meet? I'm not a special ed person, and I'm not a therapist. I have no idea what the heck you're talking about, so it's like, "Okay, you need to explain this to me".
Mrs. Little had no experience with education or child development prior to becoming a mother, and she indicated that she needed the school-based staff to remember that when presenting information about her son.

Mrs. Flynn agreed with Mrs. Little when she reflected on her early experiences with special education. Ryan had been receiving special education services for more than two years, and his older brother also received services through an IEP, so Mrs. Flynn had experience with the process, prior to this reevaluation meeting. She stated that her prior experience had helped her to understand the language used by the school-based staff, but she remembered the first time she attended an IEP meeting, the language was quite overwhelming. She credited her years of experience as a mother attending IEPs for her comfort with the language used in the IEP meeting. All parent participants indicated that they were not able to independently understand the testing jargon and needed the school-based staff to better explain the results.

*Formality of the IEP process.* The structure of Team meetings often aligns with the structure of the IEP itself; Teams discuss parent concerns and then continue through the IEP document to consider progress and areas of need. When the meeting is held as an initial evaluation or reevaluation, the Team must also review the results of formal and informal testing which occurred in order to make a determination of eligibility for special education services. Because the process is so prescribed by both federal law (IDEIA, 2004) and state regulations (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001), it can be perceived as being quite formal.

Parents who have no prior experience with special education may not be expecting the level of formality, as Mrs. Little explained, "I definitely think it was too formal of a setting. They were all set about getting the formalities done, get the paperwork done, and it didn't feel like ... you could start asking questions like that". She was not prepared for the structure of the
meeting, but instead was expecting that the group would informally talk about Christopher and then decide what he needed. Instead, she explained her perspective on the structure of the meeting:

I feel that going into it, I...was just ...a concerned mom, who wants to help her kid in any way that she can. I felt like they took that...That their expectations of me, because this whole big meeting and Team member thing, was like odd to me.

Mrs. Little was expecting to be told what the educational issues were with her son and how the school was planning to fix them. She stated that the formality of the process made it challenging to really understand what the educators were recommending.

Mrs. Newton did not engage in the formality of the process, but instead took a more passive role in the structure of the meeting; her focus was completely on obtaining services for Nathan. Once the Team considered services for Nathan, she indicated her hopes that he would be able to attend the preschool and that he would receive transportation from the school in order to do so. Those requests were her only participation in the meeting and the remainder of the meeting she did not verbally participate. She indicated that she did not necessarily want to engage in the formal IEP process; she was more interested in the final outcome of the eligibility determination.

Mrs. Flynn had previously experienced the IEP process due to her older son's special needs and indicated that she currently had a solid understanding of special education. However, she explained that at Ryan's initial evaluation meeting, before he turned three, the speech therapist from Early Intervention attended the meeting with her and explained the meeting process and report language for her. She explained how she felt about Ryan's initial meeting and why having a professional help break down the experience was so helpful: "Because [they used]
big words and she could break it down for me. Him being so young and needing an IEP, I wasn't familiar with it". The parent participants either indicated frustration with the formality of the process or disengaged from the process. The next theme that emerged, which is presented below, addresses how collaboration could be enhanced and improved among IEP Teams.

**Theme 2: Strategies for promoting effective collaboration.** Several ideas that support effective collaboration were uncovered throughout the study. These notions were revealed through analysis of meeting observations and interview transcripts. Strategies can be broken into three sub-themes: preparation, communication, and clarity of roles. These sub-themes are examined in greater depth in the following sections.

**Sub-theme 1: Preparation.** All of the meetings observed included three components: the review of formal testing, determination of eligibility for special education services, and review of a draft IEP. Meetings for Nathan and Christopher were initial evaluations, and consequently were the parents' first experiences with the special education process. Ryan had been receiving IEP services for more than two years, so Mrs. Flynn had some experience with special education prior to this meeting, however this meeting was Ryan's first reevaluation for special education services.

Each of the parents indicated that while the school-based staff was professional and receptive to any questions, the meetings seemed somewhat rushed. The information presented was helpful, but it was a relatively new experience for parents, so they did not feel there was sufficient time to process the information and meaningfully participate in creating the IEP. Although evaluation reports were sent home prior to the Team meeting, most parents indicated that having some conversations with evaluators prior to the Team meeting would have been helpful. Mrs. Flynn stated, "I would recommend, you know, if they're going to have...some
communication before testing is even done". Carol stated that she believed Mrs. Newton would have benefitted from more preparation related to the information included in the reports: "I don't think mom fully understood what was going on. It's brand new to her and I don't think she even knew what to ask or what to give". Mrs. Little concurred, indicating that it would have been helpful to know what the Team meeting would entail, prior to the meeting, so that she could have been more prepared to participate: "A phone call with an explanation of what this is all about, would have been beneficial".

**Sub-theme 2: Communication.** The way in which information was shared during the meetings had an effect on participants' perceptions of collaboration among the Team. Mrs. Little explained:

This is when I wanted them to go to a little bit more detail, and explain to me exactly...What exactly does that mean? What areas does he not meet?...Also, the explanation of what his test results actually mean, to a non-therapy person, who does not -- has not been to school for this stuff.

Mrs. Flynn agreed, stating, "Instead of using all these big words...they're going to do this, this, this, this, this, this many times a week...instead of just saying, 'Okay, he's going to have OT' and not tell me what they're going to do with him". Parents indicated a desire for school-based staff to "cut to the chase" in terms of their child's needs and the services being recommended.

Carol noted that she decides how much information to present at meetings, based on her assessment of the family's reception of the information:

[I] try to get a feel for the parents. I mean, you can tell from that first in the beginning whether this is just brand new or they're already crying at the beginning of the meeting, or how much do you want to give them. They all have read the entire report already so
nothing I'm saying is brand new. If they seem really eager, I'll go through it a lot, and if they just seem to be totally overwhelmed I do an overview and see if they have any questions.

Karen agreed and expressed similar thoughts regarding how to present her evaluation findings and updates:

I try to keep it condensed, so the meetings don't go too long...I try to talk about strengths and then the areas of struggle in the three years I try to talk about that as terms of standardized testing and then also in terms of what I'm seeing during my treatments.

Then I gauge by the parents, if they're wanting a lot more information, questions, then I'll offer that. If not, I won't go into it too much.

Nellie's perspective, however, was that her role was to summarize her report for the families at the Team meeting; she did not indicate that there were ways that she would alter her presentation of her findings.

Anna recognized some of the concerns families might have with the way information is communicated during Team meetings. She stated:

I think we can make that a little bit more concise. A little bit less reading directly results off of reports. That's a tendency of service providers and liaisons...let's just say, these were the strengths, these were the weaknesses, this is my area of concern.

Justine articulated similar ideas about how to best provide testing results to families:

I try to share more so the parents can understand where we're coming from in terms of student learning, and when the teachers present, [they say] here's how they did on the test. But then take it the next step further, so this is what it would look like in the
classroom, this is what it means, this is what that means, and make that link for them, and not just they can match or they can't do it.

She expanded on this idea:

I kind of see it facilitating and anticipating what the questions are or what questions parents have that they don't even know they have as they start to go through the process. My goal is to always make the parents feel comfortable and understand, as much as possible what we're saying to them.

Both principals indicated a desire to support staff in a communicative shift, with the expectation that streamlining the presentation of reports and tailoring it to practical examples for families would allow families to be better informed.

**Sub-theme 3: Clarity of roles.** Special education regulations require each Team to include a chairperson who can make final decisions and can commit the financial resources of the district (IDEIA, 2004). While a school administrator or teacher can fill this role, in the cases I observed as a researcher, it was, at times, unclear to me who was serving in this capacity, and this lack of clarity was noted by many of the participants as well. As principal, Justine was considered the de facto chairperson, and she self-reported fulfilling this role in later discussion. However, her perception of what a chairperson's role was differed from that of the other Team members with whom she worked. Justine stated:

My role was supposed to be Team chairperson. Instead of me running the meeting, like in other places the Team chair will take over everything, I look at myself as more a facilitator, so if there is a question or challenge that comes up, that the staff doesn't feel comfortable answering because they're not in the position to commit district resources, then I look at that as more of my role.
Other Team members, however, had different thoughts on the roles of members.

According to Carol and Nellie, Nellie served as the meeting chairperson for Nathan's meeting. Carol stated, "The teacher is usually chairing the meeting. We don't really have a chairperson here, so the teacher usually runs it," while Nellie commented, "Basically, I felt like I was the chairperson, because I was running the meeting". Although Justine attended Nathan's Team meeting, her role as principal often kept her away from IEP meetings, leaving the special education teacher to fill the role.

When asked about the chairperson's responsibility to make decisions that commit the resources of the district, Carol indicated that there had been some challenges, "We've run into several sticky situations. The teacher can only go so far. It's not their job. It's not their fault. They don't have the authority to sometimes make the call". Nellie agreed, stating, "I wouldn't be able to [commit the resources of the district]. I've done it before though, because we've had meetings where she wasn't able to attend". Justine acknowledged that her dual role as building principal and Team chairperson precluded her from always attending Team meetings, "Because of my role as principal, I sometimes get taken out of the meetings or I'm getting in late to a meeting".

As noted above, Justine left Victory School at the end of the 2013-2014 school year, during which time Anna was hired as the new principal. After Anna had taken over as principal, I returned to observe the remaining IEP meetings for this study and noticed that the roles changed and shifted back toward the principal as chairperson and teachers serving in other capacities. This observation was supported by interviews with teachers. For example, Liza reported, "She has taken over a huge part of what was angst for all of us in that she's an administrator who makes the decision...we have someone who is extremely knowledgeable about
what is best practice now". Nellie reported feeling a great deal of relief at Christopher's meeting, which was the first one she had attended after Anna had become the principal:

It felt great. Not to feel that, okay, I'm presenting my report, and all of a sudden I'm going to have to switch hats and do the chairperson part, give all that information out. Something that I don't think I was really qualified to do... My role at the meeting was to just summarize my report and to present that, and be the special ed liaison and not the chairperson.

Anna's perception of her role in the IEP Team was as a chairperson who made sure all of the procedural components of the IEP process were completed and aligned with state and federal regulations. She stated:

In taking on the role, I wanted to take the lead with the whole special ed. component of the job here. It's my plan to be part of all the IEP Team meetings, with the exception of any that I can't make it, due to alternate meetings or whatever. I'm doing soup to nuts, from the referrals coming in to scheduling.

Anna reported that her approach was quite hands-on, taking responsibility for the compliance of the required referral and IEP paperwork as well as for running the meetings and committing district resources.

To recap, in the above section, I reviewed themes and sub-themes that emerged from data analysis of my observations and interview transcripts. Information gleaned from my review of any related IEP documents was used only to provide a context for each case, and as such is not included. Primary themes presented above comprised, *misperception of collaboration* and *strategies for promoting effective collaboration*) and sub-themes included *school-based Team*
members' collaboration, parents' role, impediments to collaboration, preparation, communication, and clarity of roles, each of which was included in thick description.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, the three cases included in this study have been portrayed in great detail. First, each meeting was described, according to the review of IEP documentation and my observations; descriptions comprised information regarding each of the meetings' participants, backgrounds of the students for whom meetings were being held, and each Team's meeting process. Next, emergent themes were articulated. Finally, themes were presented through illustrative quotes representative of consensus among participants; disagreements were highlighted. The document review provided a context for the background of each case.

The next chapter includes a discussion of these findings. A summary of the problem of practice and review of the results are included, along with implications of those results. Results are discussed through the lens of sensemaking, the theoretical framework through which this study was examined; results are then considered in relation to existing literature on this topic. Finally, limitations of the study are addressed, and implications for current research and recommendations for future research are presented.

**Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings**

Chapter Five examines the implications of the results outlined in the previous chapter. As detailed previously, this study examined the collaborative process of creating an IEP for a student with disabilities in an early childhood setting. The examination comprised observing three special education Teams, examining supporting documents in the form of student records, and interviews of IEP Team members. A summary of the problem of practice and a summary review of the results are first presented, followed by the results of the study interpreted through
the lens of sensemaking theory. This chapter then draws from the literature used to guide this study to further make meaning of the results. Finally, the limitations of the study are presented, along with implications and recommendations for current practice and research.

**Summary of Problem**

Since the United States Congress passed Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975, students with disabilities have been provided with legal safeguards to ensure they have access to a free and appropriate public education. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) created a system by which schools and families work together to create a plan that provides goals and services aimed at allowing students with disabilities to make effective progress. Because those two groups bring varied perspectives and levels of understanding to the Team meeting, there are numerous opportunities for conflict and inadequacy, which can hinder collaboration (Simon, 2006).

This study aimed to determine how a Team comprised of educators and families created an IEP at a Team meeting using a collective and collaborative process. The research question driving this study was: What is the experience of an IEP Team as the members collaborate to develop an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, integrated, early childhood environment? Four sub-questions followed the research question: What experiences do participants relate as they reflect on the IEP process? What behaviors do participants believe promote effective collaboration? What challenges do participants believe exist that impede collectively creating IEPs? Are there differences in the perception of the process between school staff and parents?

Qualitative data were collected through observations of Team meetings, interviews with IEP Team members, and analysis of student records, including evaluation reports, referral
documents, IEPs, meeting summaries, and Early Intervention documents. Analysis of observations and participant interviews revealed two overarching themes: *misperception of collaboration* and *strategies for promoting effective collaboration*, which were uncovered when considering each of the research questions and sub-questions. Further analysis revealed multiple sub-themes, which are presented below: *school-based Team members' collaboration, parents' role, impediments to collaboration, preparation, communication, and clarity of roles*. Themes are organized by research questions and presented in the context of brief summaries of results.

**Summary of Research Results**

**Sub-question one.** *What experiences do participants relate as they reflect on the IEP process?* As noted above, data analysis revealed themes of *school-based Team members' collaboration, parents' role, preparation, communication, and clarity of roles*.

Findings indicate that while parents and school-based staff described some similar experiences, for the most part, the groups experienced the IEP process differently. The idea of collaboration, for example, was misperceived as only relevant to school-based staff collaborating. In other words, no participants considered the parents' role in collaboration without explicitly being asked. Upon being asked, parents expressed varied thoughts on their role in the collaboration process, with some articulating a desire to be part of the process and others stating that they felt uncomfortable being asked to participate in that way. Another difference was seen in the extent to which school-based staff reported that parents were satisfied with proposed services, which they interpreted to mean that parents understood and were a part of the process. The parents, however, reported that because the process was formal and quick, it was difficult to fully engage in the experience. Finally, school-based staff expressed concern with clarity of roles at Team meetings, in particular with the role of the chairperson, as it was
revealed that it was sometimes unclear who was serving in this capacity. As building leadership changed, however, participants agreed that these roles were more clearly defined and teachers indicated relief that an administrator had taken over the chairperson duties. This clarity was evident to me as well. Indeed, there was a noted difference in my observations of Nathan’s meeting, which occurred prior to Anna actively taking the role of chairperson, versus Christopher’s and Ryan’s meetings, which occurred afterwards. I noticed that during the second two meetings, each school-based participant seemed much more sure of their roles.

**Sub-questions two and three.** What behaviors do participants believe promote effective collaboration? and What challenges do participants believe exist that impede collectively creating IEPs? As presented above, data analysis revealed themes of preparation, communication, and clarity of roles.

Evidence from observations and interviews presented in Chapter Four indicate that families benefit from having more preparation prior to the Team meeting, both in terms of the process of special education itself as well as the information that is included in the evaluation reports. In particular, parents need clarity on what to expect in an IEP meeting, including the outline and explanation of the process (e.g. eligibility, IEP development, placement), the components of the IEP documents itself, and their expected role in the meeting.

Although parents receive written evaluation reports two days prior to the Team meeting, as discovered in my review of the documents, the reports themselves contain a great deal of educational jargon. Most parents interviewed indicated that the reports would be more useful to them if they were written in common, familiar language. In addition, the school-based Team members present their reports at the Team meeting, but in doing so, many of them read verbatim from the written report. Results indicate that collaboration is enhanced when all Team members
understand the language being used to discuss the student's needs. As such, it seems clear that more parent-friendly language and real-world examples would support parent collaboration.

Finally, during the interviews, the school-based staff indicated concern regarding their roles in IEP Teams. In the meetings I observed, sometimes the special education teacher was considered to be the chairperson, while in others, the principal served in that role. Teacher participants stated that there had been confusion regarding chairperson duties, but with Anna's arrival at Victory School, those roles were more clearly defined. Teaching staff also reported feeling more comfortable having an administrator serve in the role of chairperson due to teachers' inability to commit financial resources of the district. However, when there was confusion regarding who was serving as chair, as was the case during Nathan's meeting, each participant reported working in solitude, with no one really directing the group. This confusion was evident in my observations as well. Once those roles were overtly defined, as was the case for Christopher's and Ryan's meetings, the school-based staff reported that the group was better able to collaborate.

Sub-question four. *Are there differences in the perception of the process between school staff and parents?* Data analysis revealed the following themes: *school-based Team members' collaboration* and *parents' role.*

As seen in Chapter Four, interviews with both parents and school-based Team members considered collaboration in terms of how school-based staff worked together in the meeting. Analysis of interview data revealed that there were some misperceptions regarding what was meant by collaboration however, or rather, who participants' perceived collaboration was meant to include. When prompted to consider the parents' participation, for example, school-based staff indicated that they felt parents had collaborated with the group, in particular when they
were asked to provide their concerns for their child. In contrast however, parents reported that the process itself was overwhelming and its formality made it difficult for them to fully collaborate. Based on my observations, the rigorous agenda and quick pace of the meeting caused parents to view themselves more as receptors of information and educational options, than co-creators of a plan for their child. In addition, some parents reported that they believed their role should be more passive, as they did not feel they had the expertise to determine the learning needs of their child and create a plan. In essence, all participants viewed parents as the consumers of whatever plan was put forth. In other words, based on interviews with parents and my observations of the Team meetings, it seemed that parents were simply tasked with accepting or rejecting the school's proposal. The various ways in which each Team member made sense of the process will be examined in more detail in the following section.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework**

This study used the theoretical framework of sensemaking (Weick, 2011; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), as a lens through which to consider the experiences of an IEP Team as members collaborated to create an IEP for a student with disabilities. Special education Teams comprised parents, teachers, school administrators, and related service providers, each of whom bring varied perspectives to the Team meeting. Examining Team members’ experiences through the lens of sensemaking allowed for individual views to be considered and helped me to gain insights into how each of the different perspectives came together to create a final, unified outcome in the IEP.

As explained in Chapter Two, sensemaking includes seven properties: identity construction, retrospection, enacting of sensible environments, social activity, ongoing processes, a focus on and extraction by cues, and is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick,
1995, pp. 17-60). Those properties will be examined in relation to this study's findings in the sections below.

**Identity construction.** Identity construction consists of a member's beliefs about who they are and what they bring to the table, which in turn, affects their interpretation of events (Weick, 1995). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking requires a sensemaker; in other words, each individual makes sense of a situation after first considering his or her own identity and beliefs.

Along those lines, it was apparent that this study's participants' identity construction shaped their responses to the experiences of the IEP meeting. In other words, evidence presented demonstrated that parents had varying levels of prior experience with IEP meetings. As reported by them and observed by me, the extent of their experience seemed to affect their response to and perception of the meeting. Recall for example, Christopher's meeting was Mrs. Little's first experience with special education and she expressed discomfort with the expectation that she would play a role in determining his educational needs. On the other hand, Mrs. Flynn had prior experience in special education and while she trusted the school to provide what Ryan needed, she was much more comfortable also providing her ideas. These examples demonstrate how the amount of experience parents had with special education helped to shape their identity construction, which in turn, affected how they made sense of their role in the IEP meeting.

In addition, it was demonstrated through interviews and observations that parents had different ideas about their identity in relation to making educational decisions for their children. Some reported that they simply considered their identity to be akin to a customer consuming a service, while others said they considered themselves underprepared to be full participants and hoped for more enlightenment from those educators who have a deeper understanding of child
development. These roles were evident based on my observations of parent participation in each Team meeting as well; Mrs. Newton clearly desired to be a recipient of information and not an active contributor, and was particularly concerned with obtaining services for Nathan, while Mrs. Little appeared less familiar with the process and asked many questions of the school-based staff with the apparent goal being to better understand the educational needs of Christopher.

Similarly, evidence showed that school-based staff’s beliefs about their identity also affected their perception of the IEP Team process. Teachers who were asked to serve as chairpersons noted that this identity struggle, or lack of understanding regarding expected roles in the meeting, resulted in feelings of inadequacy and frustration. It was clear through my observation of the meeting in which a teacher served as the chairperson, that the teacher was not comfortable in this role, nor was the teacher able to skillfully run an IEP meeting. This meeting was quite brief and there was very little back and forth among participants, rather the school-based staff reported information and read the proposed IEP aloud. Administrators who identified their role as facilitator, rather than a leader of the group, listed feelings of frustration as well, when teachers were unable to meet the leadership roles expected by the administrator. Findings made it clear that the IEP Team members (parents and school-based staff) need to communicate how individual roles are defined among the Team in order to ensure that all Team members are clear on their expected role. This type of communication regarding expectations around roles would ensure that all Team members are working with the same understandings about the roles each member is expected to fulfill.

Retrospection. Sensemaking involves making sense of what has already occurred; with retrospective sensemaking, individuals take action and then make sense of those actions (Weick, 1995; Weick, 2011). For those participants with prior IEP Team meeting experience, some of
that retrospection included comparisons with other Team meetings that had occurred. For families for whom this was an initial evaluation, there were no other IEP meetings with which to compare, but instead, experiences with Early Intervention were used in retrospection. Those with frequent IEP Team meeting experiences however, reported using that retrospection with the Team meeting, connecting their experiences meeting about other children to the current experience, which enhanced their ability to participate. Those without earlier IEP Team meeting familiarity indicated greater confusion with the experience, upon reflection. These reports aligned with my observations, which demonstrated that participants with greater IEP experience had a deeper understanding of the process, while new Team members, in particular, parents for whom this meeting was their first special education experience, had very little to which to compare the experience. As a result, for novice participants, there were fewer opportunities to use retrospection to make sense of the IEP meeting, which resulted in less engagement with the IEP process.

Enacting of sensible environments. As the aforementioned suggests, sensemaking involves making sense of actions a process within which individuals examine plausible options for reality (Weick, 1995). However, participants' individual perspectives ensure that individuals will create varied plausible options for reality, which lead to differences in how the Team meetings were experienced. Of the participants' narratives in this study, one plausible option was created by Anna, based on her interview comments. In this plausible option, Team members were all working on the same ideas and notions, with the same level of understanding. In contrast, a plausible option created by Mrs. Little was reported regarding the same Team meeting as evidenced in her interview comments. This plausible option was generated as follows: by
seeking parental input, the school staff were asking parents to serve in a capacity for which they were not prepared.

Another example of contrasting plausible options involves the dissimilar realities created by school-based Team members regarding the role of the chairperson. During Nathan's meeting, Justine considered herself the chairperson, but viewed that role as one of a facilitator, rather than a direct leader. Both Carol and Nellie however, considered Nellie to be the chairperson, but neither thought Nellie should have served in that role. These simultaneous, contradictory ideas are the result of differences in the sensemaking process. As a result of these varied perspectives, it was clear that there was a lack of cohesion regarding the roles of Team members, which hindered genuine collaboration. Because Team members were not coming from the same perspectives in terms of the assignment of roles within the Team, individuals were observed to be more tentative and unsure in their collaboration.

**Social activity.** At its core, sensemaking is both an individual and social process. Humans make sense of their experiences individually, based on their own schema and history, but check for understanding and validation of that sense through connection with others (Weick, 1995). When engaged in a highly structured and prescribed situation such as an IEP meeting, individuals will initially use social sensemaking to collaborate and create the common outcome of an IEP. However, when that social experience no longer makes sense to the individual, he or she will revert back to individual sensemaking techniques. Parent participants noted this shift when the formality of the IEP process was unexpected and overwhelming.

Mrs. Little, for example, reported that she felt like the school-based staff was having one conversation while she was trying to have another. She stated that she expected to talk with teachers to hear what her son needed to progress to where he should be academically. Mrs. Little
later reported however that she did not feel those evaluation reports adequately explained the actual issues Christopher was facing. Similarly, I observed the evaluators as they spoke about the results of the testing, using technical language, which seemed to me to be confusing to Mrs. Little. As a result, Mrs. Little appeared to revert to individual sensemaking, as evidenced by her reporting feeling disconnected from the school-based Team members during the review of Christopher's evaluations. This disconnection, in turn, cut off all collaboration, based on Mrs. Little's interview comments, in which she indicated that feeling overwhelmed and confused by the evaluation reports and uninvolved in the drafting of the IEP document. This example was indicative of the breakdown that occurred during each of the observed meetings regarding how participants perceived the experience.

**Ongoing processes.** While sensemaking is an ongoing process that neither begins nor ends, Weick (1995) describes "shock" circumstances which jar individuals' perceptions of a situation. When something jolts someone out of the automatic, ongoing sensemaking, the new sensemaking that occurs comes from a more emotional place (Weick, 1995). This experience was evident when parents realized the Team meeting was not going to be the informal conversation they expected as well as when teachers realized they were expected to chair a meeting with the principal in attendance.

Nellie stated that she did not know that Justine would be attending Nathan's meeting and she was not expecting to chair the meeting with her supervisor in attendance. Much of the rest of Nathan's meeting was spent with her feeling stressed regarding this unexpected change. It was clear during my observation of Nathan's meeting that Nellie was not comfortable in her role. In other words, I observed that she presented information by reading quickly and directly from her report with no elaboration and she moved the group more quickly through this IEP document.
than through any of the other meetings observed, both of which suggested that she was very nervous and uncomfortable. As a result of the "shock" of the unexpected components of Nathan's meeting, Nellie was unable to effectively lead or even participate in the collaboration of crafting the IEP, instead, just reading the draft to the group.

**Cues.** Individuals rely on surrounding and familiar cues to make sense of a situation. These cues allow individuals to gauge the social sensemaking with the individual and support ongoing, fluid sensemaking (Weick, 1995). School-based Team members reported using cues to determine how much or how little to elaborate on an evaluation report, while parents reported using cues to decide that asking clarifying questions would not be appropriate within the context of the IEP meeting. Whether or not the perceptions leading to these cues being read was accurate, they were an essential part of creating Team members' understanding of the IEP Team meeting.

Given the school-based Team members' assertions that parents were full and active participants, it is clear that these Team members did not realize the cues they were giving that were being read by families. In other words, all of the school-based participants asserted that they wished for and personally promoted genuine collaboration among all Team members, yet parent participants did not always report that they could participate in a way that would be most useful. Instead, I observed that school-based staff members were providing participatory cues to parents from their own perspectives as individuals familiar with the rules and regulations regarding IEPs (e.g. reading from evaluation reports, using educator jargon), as opposed to providing cues that would have elicited parents' participation from whatever level of experience and comfort the parents had (e.g. clarifying evaluation results using real-world experiences).
Plausibility. According to Weick (1995), people make sense on the basis of plausibility, not accuracy. Individuals perceive the most logical, likely scenario and make sense of what is in front of them, on the basis of their perceptions, whether accurate according to that which is intended by others, or not. In this study, the parents reportedly perceived it was the school's role to provide information about their child's needs and it was their role to accept or reject the school's proposal. Despite IDEIA (2004) requiring families and schools to create the IEP together, based on interview responses, the sense parents made of the IEP process placed them in receptive positions.

In addition, the school-based staff reported their perceptions of parents' comprehension, which then dictated how much detail staff used in their explanations of evaluation reports. Again, their perceptions were based on plausibility, but were not necessarily accurate regarding the actual circumstances. For example, parents reported feeling overwhelmed with the jargon of the evaluation reports, so the educators were accurately perceiving that there was a disconnect between their presentation and parents' comprehension. However, I observed these educators shortening their presentation, while using educator jargon throughout. So parents’ feelings of overwhelm might have been avoided had educators’ used laymens’ terms to describe children’s educational needs. Understandably, as a result, most parents reported that they were hoping for more details about their child's educational needs, but wanted to hear about those needs in language that made sense to them. In that way, educators should consider the plausibility of parents' comprehension of their child's needs from the perspective of the parents to ensure that the adjustments in presentation actually met the needs of the parents. In other words, educators should put themselves in the mindset of parents before making adjustments to their presentation to ensure that those adjustments are actually beneficial to parents.
Summary of findings in relation to sensemaking. In the above section, the theoretical framework of sensemaking (Weick, 2011; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005) was used to consider the results of this study. Each of the seven components of sensemaking was reviewed: identity construction, retrospection, sensible environments, social activity, ongoing processes, cues, and plausibility (Weick, 1995, pp. 17-60). Results of this study were filtered through these components and conclusions have been drawn.

First, the ways in which Team members perceived their roles in the group had a significant effect on the success of the Team's collaboration. Parents who considered their role to be that of a receiver of information regarding their child reported being confused when the school-based staff asked for meaningful, substantive input into the academic portions of the IEP. In addition, teachers, who were serving as chairpersons, reported that they did not wish to serve in that capacity and this disconnect was evident through my observations as well. Second, the cues participants read to make sense of the IEP meeting were not necessarily the cues other participants were trying to provide. In other words, parents reported that they were not necessarily comfortable stopping the meeting to ask clarifying questions, while school-based staff reported that parents had many opportunities for meaningful participation. Finally, while using plausibility to make sense of the IEP meeting, participants may have misinterpreted the dynamic of the members, as was evidenced by teachers recognizing parents' disassociation from listening to evaluation results and shortening their evaluation presentation, when parents actually were looking for results to clarified in laymen terms. The next section will review the literature examined in Chapter Two and will consider the results of this study in that context.
Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature Review

This section examines the results of the study in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Specifically, this section addresses the results of the study in relation to collaboration and conflict within the realm of special education. Within the consideration of conflict, particular focus is placed on the following sub-topics: inadequate training in meeting facilitation, financial challenges, IEP process, and varying levels of parent involvement.

Collaboration. While IDEIA (2004) requires the IEP process be a collaborative one, the findings of this study indicate that a clear definition of collaboration is lacking among IEP Teams. Similarly, literature reviewed in preparation for this study (Arnold, et al., 2008; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Murray & Curran, 2008; Powell, et al., 2010) indicates a strong connection between parent and school partnerships and student achievement. In other words, the authors above report that students do better in school (academically, socially, and emotionally) when their parents are engaged in the life of their school. But although Murray and Curran (2008) articulate the need for clear goals and expectations among the groups, in the remaining literature reviewed, there is very little information available to prescribe exactly how effective collaboration should occur among the members of an IEP Team.

In line with the dearth of available information in the literature regarding the definition of collaboration, it make sense that study participants would have reported such varied definitions of collaboration and held varied perceptions regarding the level of collaboration among the IEP Team members. While the Team members were observed to be polite and professional with each other, the structure of the meetings did not allow for clear goals and expectations among members, based on my observations. In other words, the meetings were observed to be agenda- and procedure-driven, with a focus on completing the required components of the IEP.
interviews, parent participants expressed confusion regarding their role in the meeting and there was confusion reported by school-based staff as well. My observations and participant reports aligned with Murray and Curran's (2008) assertion that those expectations should be articulated to all group members. In addition, the agenda- and procedure-driven process of the IEP hinders genuine collaboration.

After studying IEP Teams, Stroggilos and Xanthacou (2006) determined that the nature of the IEP itself impedes genuine collaboration. Because the IEP is such a prescribed document and regulatory boards evaluate a district's compliance with the procedural components of the IEP (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001), it is difficult to elicit genuine collaboration at a Team meeting. Stroggilos and Xanthacou's (2006) findings were corroborated by the findings of this study. In interviews, all participants indicated a desire to truly and meaningfully collaborate, but the constraints of time, required documents and forms, and ambiguity of Team member roles were named as impediments to collaboration.

In interviews, both Justine and Anna indicated a disconnect between how they wished they could facilitate meetings and the way meetings were actually run. They both described ways in which they would improve the likelihood of whole-Team collaboration; Justine articulated a desire to restructure the process using the type of student-strength centered meeting recommended by Diliberto and Brewer (2012), while Anna expressed a wish that the meetings could be split into a review of the evaluations and then the drafting of the IEP. However, both Justine and Anna reported that the large number of meetings needing to be held each year, and the resources that are used for each meeting, including having teachers out of the classroom to attend, along with the strong focus on procedural compliance within the special education system, made it difficult to shift practice from the existing model. A review of Victory School's
IEP calendar revealed up to six Team meetings per week, which supports the validity of both principals' concerns with improving the collaborative experience.

In addition, the results of this study support the existing literature, which promotes multidisciplinary Teams that include supportive administrators, in order to provide the most beneficial opportunities for Team dynamics (Cheatham et al., 2012; Lytle & Bordin, 2001; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). All of the non-administrative school staff interviewed expressed strong gratitude at the more involved leadership role Anna played at meetings. When teachers were acting as chairpersons, school-based staff reported that there was a feeling that the meetings were unpredictable and therefore not collaborative. However, with a clear leader in place, the teachers and therapists indicated a highly improved process through which all Team members could fill appropriate roles. Based on my observations, the meetings observed in which the principal served as chairperson resulted in clearer roles for school-based staff members.

In the above section, the literature reviewed for this study on the topic of collaboration was reviewed and was used as a lens through which to consider the results of this study. Three ideas emerged from analysis. First, it is evident, based on the results of this study, that there is not a clear definition of what collaboration should look like among IEP Teams. This finding is consistent with the literature reviewed for this study (e.g. Arnold, et al., 2008; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Murray & Curran, 2008; Powell, et al., 2010) in which there was no consensus around the definition of collaboration within special education Teams. Next, as Stroggilos and Xanthacou (2006) assert, the prescribed nature of the IEP process required by IDEIA (2004) can hinder the collaborative process for IEP Teams. School-based participants reported that they felt constrained by the procedural requirements of IEP development and wished for more flexibility to work with the Team. Similarly, parent participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the
formal process of the IEP meeting, which restricted their ability to meaningfully participate. Finally, despite both Justine's and Anna's wish to modify the IEP process to better address the needs of the student, it was evident through participant interviews and my observations that Anna's stronger leadership of IEP Teams supported clarity of school-based roles within the IEP Team, which allowed for greater collaboration among Team members. This finding aligned with Lytle and Bordin's (2001) claim that an effective Team must include a strong administrator who is able to lead the group effectively and make final decisions on behalf of the school. When teachers were not responsible for IEP compliance and leading the group through the eligibility process, their presentations were more thorough and they could better explain the results of their testing. The next section considers the literature related to conflict in the context of the results of this study.

**Conflict.** The results of this study supported and added to much of the literature regarding conflicts among IEP Team members; participants reported concerns related to inadequate training in meeting facilitation, financial challenges related to the high costs of special education services, technical and procedural hindrances with the IEP process, and varying levels of parent involvement (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Bays & Crockett, 2007; Christle & Yell, 2010; Freedman, 2009; Lo, 2012; Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2011; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Stroggilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Valle, 2011). This study also found that concerns with the clarity of roles within the Team also can lead to conflict, which goes beyond the experiences included in the existing topical literature and enhances the understanding of hindrances to collaboration.

**Inadequate training in meeting facilitation.** Teachers, who had been asked to serve as chairpersons prior to the 2014-2015 school year, reported a strong discomfort with serving in this role, as well as that of an examiner and instructor. For example, Nellie reported feeling
frustrated and underprepared to serve in the chairperson role and indicated that it had been thrust on her due to a low number of students in her classroom. She indicated that she gave her best effort, but she felt it was quite challenging to wear both teacher and chairperson hats. She also reported worrying about how she would handle potential conflict with parents, when she was not able to commit the financial resources of the district. Liza corroborated this discomfort, indicating her wish to simply teach. According to Cheatham et al. (2012), it is essential that a chairperson be comfortable facilitating the meeting.

Upon Anna's arrival as principal of Victory School, she reported that she took over as chairperson and this role was communicated to all Team members. It was evident that she met Cheatham et al.'s (2012) criteria for comfort with meeting facilitation, based on her immediate entry into that position upon taking over as principal. In addition, she demonstrated comfort leading the group in the meetings I observed. While she did express concern with some of the components of the IEP process, she clearly was at ease leading the IEP Team members, walking the group through the pieces of the IEP. The next section considers the way financial considerations can lead to conflict among IEP Team members.

**Financial challenges.** Freedman (2009) describes the enormous cost of special education services, which must be provided at no cost to the families of children with disabilities. According to IDEIA (2004), these costs are not meant to be considered by the Team when making decisions about the IEP and placement, but it is difficult for school-based staff to remove those concerns from their minds when preparing an IEP. To illustrate this concern, Nellie described an example from Nathan's meeting when the Team was discussing the portion of the IEP related to the student's need for specialized transportation based on his disability. She explained that she brushed past that portion of the IEP, in the hopes that Nathan's parents would
be able to provide transportation, but she was relieved when another Team member revisited the question and offered transportation to the family. She was torn between wanting to help the family get Nathan to school, but not wanting to commit district resources to avoid conflict with her supervisors.

This example is indicative of the struggles school-based staff often face when collaborating with families to develop an IEP, as described by Chambers et al. (2009). Chambers et al. (2009) explain that there is a financial bottom line which schools must consider in terms of the yearly budget. At the same time, IDEIA (2004) requires schools to provide students with disabilities with FAPE, irrespective of the cost. School-based staff indicated that this imbalance often created conflict for them, as they struggled to find an appropriate balance. The next section considers the connection between the IEP process and conflict among IEP Teams.

**IEP process.** The IDEIA (2004) is a federal law and is written in legal language, yet it is the document that educators and parents must follow in order to ensure that FAPE is provided to eligible students. The process outlined within IDEIA (2004) is complex and specific and can work against true Team collaboration (Aron & Loprest, 2012; Valle, 2011). This struggle between the following the IEP process for procedural compliance and running a Team meeting that promotes genuine collaboration was evident in the results of this study. Each parent participant reported feeling confused by the technical language of the IEP meeting. In addition, Mrs. Little stated that she wished the educators would have spent more time explaining the specifics of the needs of her child, rather than pushing through the procedural agenda. Mrs. Newton reported that she only focused on the services portion of the meeting, and felt disconnected from the remainder of it. In addition, the school-based staff expressed frustration
with the procedural requirements of the process. Both teachers and administrators expressed a
desire to spend more time talking about the whole child with the Team, but all feel pressured to
meet the legal requirements laid out within IDEIA (2004).

It is clear from the responses of participants that there is a disconnect between the IEP
process outlined by federal law (IDEIA, 2004) and the desires of both parent and school-based
participants to speak more informally about the student and his or her needs. This challenge is
supported by Valle (2011) who writes that instead of expecting parents to fit into the existing,
broken system prescribed by IDEIA (2004), Teams should consider how the group can capitalize
on the essential knowledge of the student brought by the parents, through individualized means.
In other words, instead of running a meeting focused on IEP compliance, a Team would be better
served to take the time to consider the unique perspectives of the student's parents.

Varying levels of parent involvement. The level of parental involvement in the IEP
process varies based on many factors, including parental confidence, prior experience with
special education, the quality of prior relationships with school-based Team members, and
desires of parents (Lo, 2012; Stroglilos & Xanthacou, 2006; Valle, 2011). These factors were
evident within the results of this study as well. For example, Mrs. Little stated strongly that she
did not believe that she should be creating the goals and services with the school-based Team
members. She hoped to come to the meeting, informally hear from the evaluators about
Christopher's strengths and weaknesses, and then receive specific information on what exactly
needed to be done in order to help him. She was not interested in adding substantive information
to the content of the IEP, as she believed the school-based staff were the experts and she was
coming to them for help. Similarly, Mrs. Newton stated that she was happy that the evaluators
were going to provide Nathan with services, but she did not wish to participate in creating a plan
for how those services would be provided. She spoke of the school-based staff with deference and counted on the school-based staff to know what type of instruction he would require. In contrast, Mrs. Little had prior experience with special education and with some of the Ryan’s Team members as well, which she stated helped her to feel comfortable with participating in the meeting. However, her strong relationship with the school-based staff increased her trust in their recommendations, so she did not feel that she needed to provide much input into the IEP document, and that lack of verbal participation was evident during my observation of the meeting.

Based on the experiences shared by parent participants, it would seem that school-based staff would benefit from having a frank discussion with parents regarding the process of the meeting and ascertaining the parents’ expectations regarding their participation. Although all parent participants indicated satisfaction with the outcome of the IEP meeting, all also indicated some confusion regarding their expected role in the process. Clarifying parents’ wishes regarding participation in an open way would enhance the collaborative process for the entire IEP Team.

In the section above, I revisited the literature considered for this study on the topic of conflict and addressed the results of the study in relation to this research. Within the topic of conflict, four important ideas were brought forth. First, it is important that the Team member serving as the chairperson for the meeting be comfortable with the role. In addition, chairpersons should be trained in both the IEP process and laws as well as leading adult groups (Kiel & Watson, 2009). Second, there is a clear conflict for school-based staff regarding the high costs of special education services versus the district’s overall budget. While all school-based participants indicated a strong desire to provide students with everything necessary to
make effective progress in school, there was also a fear of spending too much of the district's money by proposing a costly option for a student. Third, the IEP process mandated by IDEIA (2004) is not conducive to genuine collaboration between school-based staff and families. Although schools create compliant IEPs by following this process (Christle & Yell, 2010), parent participants reported that the formality of this experience hinders their ability to collaborate. Finally, parent participants reported that they were unclear on their expected role in the IEP process and were uncomfortable being asked to provide their input into the academic components of the IEP. The next section summarizes the findings in relation to the literature review.

**Summary of findings in relation to literature review.** The results of this study were considered in relation to the literature reviewed in depth in Chapter Two. In particular, the areas of collaboration and conflict were revisited. While considering this study's results in relation to research on collaboration, the following three ideas emerged: (1) there is not a clear definition of what collaboration should look like among IEP Teams, (2) the prescribed nature of the IEP process required by IDEIA (2004) can hinder the collaborative process for IEP Teams, and (3) an effective Team must include a strong administrator who is able to lead the group effectively and make final decisions on behalf of the school. Considering the study's results through the literature reviewed on the topic of conflict surfaced the following four ideas: (1) it is important that the Team member serving as the chairperson for the meeting be comfortable with the role, (2) there is a clear conflict for school-based staff regarding the high costs of special education services versus the district's overall budget, (2) the IEP process mandated by IDEIA (2004) is not conducive to genuine collaboration between school-based staff and families, and (4) parent participants reported that they were unclear on their expected role in the IEP process and were
uncomfortable being asked to provide their input into the academic components of the IEP. The next section will consider the limitations of this study.

**Study Limitations**

Within this study, the following limitations were identified:

- The study was conducted in one school within one school district.
- Several participants were members of multiple Teams studied, which limited the reach of the study.
- Participants were chosen based on availability and willingness of the Team, so are not necessarily representative of all IEP Teams.
- All of the IEP Teams included in this study were working with young children (ages three-five), which limits the scope of the representation of special education students, as special education services are available for eligible individuals ages three-22.
- Educators were asked to share personal thoughts and feelings regarding their roles and the roles of supervisors and colleagues. While participants were assured of the confidentiality safeguards within the study and provided much candor in interviews, the information gathered was based on participant self-report and could have been colored, due to concerns about the effect of criticism of the existing system on their professional status.

**Recommendations for Practice and Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experience of an IEP Team as the members navigated the process of creating individualized accommodations, goals, services, and specially designed instruction for a student with disabilities. Upon reflection of the results of this
study, it is clear that IEP Team members are asked to do a great deal in order to create a plan for a student, and both school-based staff and families want to work collaboratively to serve the best interests of the student. Findings of this study support consideration of the following recommendations for practice, as well as recommendations for further study.

**Parent training.** The results of this study support a need for better and more appropriate parent training throughout the special education process. Parent participants reported being confused by the IEP process and their role within. Stroggilos and Xanthacou (2006) report that without training for parents, the IEP process remains centered on the educators, as opposed to the student and family. Therefore, it is recommended that schools create a system by which parents come to school to sign consent forms for special education testing and are provided with information and resources in person, prior to the formal process beginning. In addition, parents of children with disabilities could be trained to provide this type of support to other parents. This parent-to-parent support would allow families to receive training from the start of the eligibility process and would empower families to meaningfully participate in the IEP process for their child (Fish, 2008; Murray & Curran, 2008).

**Parent-friendly language.** The process of evaluating a student to determine eligibility for special education services includes educators conducting formal and informal assessments to gather information on the student's functioning. These assessments are typically standardized and evaluators must comply with the protocols outlined within (Cook et al., 2009; Floyd et al., 2008). However, the formal nature of this process often translates to educators using formal language, both in written and verbal reports, to families. The results of this study indicate that when educators use formal jargon in meetings, parents do not feel they are able to meaningfully participate in the process. Instead, parents spend time trying to decipher the unfamiliar reports
and an opportunity for collaboration is missed. As a result, it is recommended that school-based Team members explain the formal reports using parent-friendly language and concrete, explicit examples.

**Multiple meetings.** The special education system, outlined in IDEIA (2004) is both exhaustive and exhausting (Freedman, 2009). According to IDEIA (2004), special education Teams are asked to review and consider multiple evaluation reports, parental input, and other factors (e.g. medical history). Teams are then expected to synthesize that information into a decision-making process using the Eligibility Flowchart (Appendix H). If the child is determined to be eligible for special education services, the Team must then create an IEP that is reasonably expected to provide the student with access to grade-level curriculum and to allow the student to make meaningful progress toward goals. Finally, the Team must consider the least restrictive placement in which the IEP can be implemented. All of these activities are expected to occur within a single meeting and families are supposed to receive the proposed IEP before leaving the meeting (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). If districts do not comply with these procedural regulations, families can bring litigation forth with the claim that the student's civil rights were violated under IDEIA (2004). This study's results indicate that the strict spotlight on compliance promoted by IDEIA (2004) causes the school-based Team members to focus on getting through the requirements, which can lead to a cursory level of collaboration.

It is recommended that Team meetings be split into more than one meeting. These could include an evaluation meeting, at which Teams review the evaluation results and spend time providing real-world examples of the student's strengths and weaknesses. Next, a second meeting could be held to determine eligibility, giving the Team adequate time to consider the
eligibility questions and develop a learning profile for the student. Last, a third meeting would allow the Team to go through the IEP together and consider each component in depth. By splitting the process into multiple meetings, all Team members can take time to process information presented, ask questions, and work through misunderstandings and/or disagreements. While it would involve a greater commitment of time and resources from Team members, it is clear that without this in-depth approach, genuine and meaningful collaboration among Team members which supports the creation of a fuller and more robust IEP cannot exist (Capizzi, 2008).

**Empower all school-based Team members.** During interviews, several educators discussed the fear they experienced regarding committing financial resources of the district at an IEP meeting. To illustrate this point, there were reports by school-based participants of services considered privately by a Team member, which were not addressed at the Team meeting, due to concerns around the high cost of some services. While some of this apprehension was due to confusion around the role of the chairperson (the Team member who has the authority to commit the financial resources of the district), some of it was also due to the self-perception of Team members about what they believed their role should be.

It is recommended that the district provide training to school-based Team members in order to support expanding educators’ comfort with genuine collaboration. According to Goepel (2009), collaboration requires trust among all collaborators that ideas can be generated and discussed and even rejected, without a fear of emotional repercussion. While there must be a financial gatekeeper within a district, the fear around financial implications of recommendations can stifle true communication and collaboration. By training staff in how to effectively
contribute and receive ideas, it is likely that Teams will be able to create richer, more appropriate IEPs.

**Clarity of roles.** At the same time, there must be a clear sense of who is the chairperson at each meeting and who makes the final decision regarding the proposed IEP, and this person must be identified at the start of each meeting. When Teams collaborate and consider many perspectives and ideas, there can be conflict and if negotiation does not lead to compromise, the district must go ahead with proposing an IEP for the family to consider (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2001). When all Team members know who makes the final determination of when negotiation ends, a solid structure is created around the meeting and this clarity allows all Team members to participate freely.

**Repeat with middle and high school Teams.** It is recommended that this study be repeated with Teams creating IEPs for older students. The dynamics of the group are likely to vary with older students, as the needs of these individuals are different from those of preschoolers or kindergarteners. In addition, students are invited to attend their own IEP meeting after they are 14 years old, and more research is needed to determine the dynamics of an IEP Team when the student is in attendance. Finally, as students age, often the achievement gap widens from their typical peers, due to the educational disability. When there is a large discrepancy between the achievement of grade-level peers and a student with disabilities, the stakes can seem higher to IEP Teams to close that gap as quickly as possible.

**Summary of recommendations for practice and future research.** In the above sections, recommendations were made based on the results of this study. The following recommendations were made: (1) provide training for parents, (2) use parent-friendly language at meetings, (3) hold multiple meetings, (4) empower all school-based Team members, (5) ensure
The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of IEP Teams as the members collaborated to create an IEP for a student with disabilities in a public, early childhood setting. A multiple, single-case study design was used to consider the experiences and to examine the level of collaboration among Team members. Team meeting observations, document review, and semi-structured interviews with Team members were used to gather data regarding the experience of creating an IEP. Data were examined and coded, using a two-cycle approach (Saldaña, 2013), including Initial Coding and In Vivo coding. During the second cycle of coding, Axial Coding was used to restructure the initial codes.

Results of this study indicate that the level of collaboration among IEP members really depends on one’s perception of collaboration. In other words, participants reported different ideas about what constituted collaboration, with all participants focusing on how school-based Team members worked together; none of the participants initially considered collaboration to include the parents. When prompted to include parents when considering Team collaboration, most school-based staff indicated that parents had been provided with ample opportunities to provide input, as each meeting began by asking parents to list their concerns for their child. In addition, during each meeting, parents were asked periodically if sections of the IEP made sense to them and if they had any questions. However, when parents were asked to consider their role in collaboration, there were differing opinions about the experience.

Parents reported feeling overwhelmed by the formal structure of the eligibility process and IEP meeting. While reports were reviewed with the Team, the language used to describe the
needs of the students was technical not familiar to non-educators and as a result, parents felt a lack of clarity and specificity regarding their child's strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the proposed IEP was reviewed quickly and also included a great deal of technical language, which was not clear to parents. During the meeting, parents were often asked if they had any questions, however, the findings indicate that either parents did not feel comfortable slowing down the pace of the meeting to obtain clarity or they did not believe they needed to understand the technical parts of the process. More training for parents is necessary in order to provide them with the background knowledge necessary to fully understand the special education process. Also, splitting the eligibility consideration from the process of writing the IEP would provide families with time to consider the evaluation results and bring questions, ideas, and concerns to the table which can be included in the IEP document.

School-based Team members reported concern with clarity of roles; specifically, at times, it was not clear who was meant to serve as chairperson of the meeting. For example, at one point, the special education teacher was serving as a chairperson as well as an evaluator and service provider. During this meeting, the principal considered her role as a facilitator and mentor for teachers to lead Team meetings. A change in leadership within the building lead to a different approach regarding chairing meetings; the new principal took this role on and teachers' and therapists' roles shifted back to more passive ones. While there are certainly many viable approaches to IEP Team leadership (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Bryan & Henry, 2012; Capizzi, 2008; Diliberto & Brewer, 2012; Lytle & Bordin, 2001), the findings of this study indicate that there must be clarity among the Team regarding roles and expectations. This clarity allows all Team members to understand their role and be open to dialogue and discourse among the Team,
which, in turn, promotes the creation of an IEP which provides the student with a free and appropriate public education.

**Personal Reflection**

My history with special education began when I was a young child, through watching my younger sister's educational experiences unfold, five years behind my own. As a young adult, I would not have imagined that I would become a special educator, as my observations of my parents' experience with the process were quite negative. However, as I began moving toward a career in education, I continued to lean toward working with children with disabilities. As I gained my own experiences as a professional in the field of special education (as a paraprofessional, teacher, chairperson, coordinator, then director), I realized that the system may be set up in such a way that conflicts ensue, but it is not a foregone conclusion that IEP Teams cannot work collaboratively to meet the needs of a child.

The findings of this study support my earlier belief that the system of special education under IDEIA (2004) is so procedurally dense that it can impede genuine collaboration from occurring for a variety of reasons. It is my belief, supported by Freedman (2009), that these legal requirements, and the fear of subsequent legal ramifications if they are not explicitly met, can cause a sort of paralysis to school-based staff. In other words, school staff are so afraid that forgetting to complete a required form will mean the district is sued (and staff members will be disciplined), that the focus of the meeting becomes dotting i's and crossing t's, instead of collaborating with the Team to substantively plan for the student's special education needs.

At the same time, there are ways in which IEP Teams can increase opportunities for genuine Team collaboration. The findings of this study illustrate how schools can support collaboration. But outside of those formal findings, I found that the staff members who seemed
most confident and humble with their knowledge demonstrated the most openness to considering all viewpoints. In other words, staff who did not appear to be afraid of getting caught in an error were the most effective at keeping the Team conversation focused on student needs and accessible to families (i.e. using a conversational tone, not worrying about proving their professional worth through the use of formal and legal language).

Finally, as a mother of children who receive special education services, the experience of conducting this study has helped me to delineate my role as I participate in Team meetings as a parent and not a professional. Considering the essential input provided by parents to an IEP Team, at Team meetings for my children, I have begun to try to bracket my professional biases and opinions, in order to ensure that I am meeting the obligation of the parent role to promote true collaboration. This task is not easy, but as a result of completing this study, I recognize that I best serve the educational needs of my children by participating in IEP meetings as a parent.
References


Briscoe, F. M. (2005). A question of representation in educational discourse: Multiplicities and
intersections of identities and positionalities. *Educational Studies, 38*(1), 23-41.


Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five*


and learning (Advances in research on teaching) (Vol. 18, pp. 255-270). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.


Appendix A

IEP Meeting Observation/Interview Consent Forms

Northeastern University, Department of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Karen Harbeck (Principal Investigator), Hope Hanscom (Student Researcher)

Title of Project: Working Together: The Individual and Collective Experiences of Special Education Teams

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of IEP Teams as the members navigate the process of creating individualized accommodations, goals, services, and specially designed instruction for a student with disabilities.

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

The study will begin with an observation of an IEP meeting, which will take place at ___________. If you decide to allow the Student Researcher (Hope Hanscom) to observe the IEP meeting, we will ask you participate in an interview (conducted by Hope Hanscom) about your experiences as a member of an IEP Team at a later date.

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 the experiences of IEP Teams and ways in which groups such as yours successfully navigate the process.

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 only use pseudonyms, and will not identify you or any other participant as being part 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.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Hope Hanscom (Tel: 508-681-8181, Email: hanscom.h@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Karen Harbeck (Northeastern University, Boston, MA, Email: k.harbeck@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, 960 Renaissance Park,
I agree to allow Hope Hanscom to observe the IEP meeting for my child. I understand that this observation will be used as data in the study, *Working Together: The Individual and Collective Experiences of Special Education Teams*. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

___________________________________________________  
Participant Signature                  Date  

___________________________________________________  
Student Researcher Signature         Date
**Interview Consent Form**

**Northeastern University, Department of Education**
**Name of Investigator(s):** Dr. Karen Harbeck (Principal Investigator), Hope Hanscom (Student Researcher)

**Title of Project:** Working Together: The Individual and Collective Experiences of Special Education Teams

**Request to Participate in Research**
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of an IEP Team as the members navigate the process of creating individualized accommodations, goals, services, and specially designed instruction for a student with disabilities.

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

The study will take place at ______________ and will take about ___________. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you participate in an interview (conducted by Hope Hanscom) about your experiences as a member of an IEP Team. In addition, Hope Hanscom will observe the IEP Team meeting.

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 the experiences of IEP Teams and ways in which groups such as yours successfully navigate the process.

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 only use pseudonyms, and will not identify you or any other participant as being part 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.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Hope Hanscom (Tel: 508-681-8181, Email: hanscom.h@husky.neu.edu), the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Karen Harbeck (Northeastern University, Boston, MA, Email: k.harbeck@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, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
You may keep a copy of this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Hope Hanscom

I agree to participate in the study, Working Together: The Individual and Collective Experiences of Special Education Teams. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

_____________________________________________________________________
Participant Signature
Date

_____________________________________________________________________
Student Researcher Signature
Date
Appendix B
Application for IRB Approval

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL FOR USE OF HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Before completing this application, please read the Application Instructions and Policies and Procedures for Human Research Protections to understand the responsibilities for which you are accountable as an investigator in conducting research with human participants. The document, Application Instructions, provides additional assistance in preparing this submission. Incomplete applications will be returned to the investigator. You may complete this application online and save it as a Word document.

If this research is related to a grant, contract proposal or dissertation, a copy of the full grant/contract proposal/dissertation must accompany this application.

Please carefully edit and proof read before submitting the application. Applications that are not filled out completely and/or have any missing or incorrect information will be returned to the Principal Investigator.

REQUIRED TRAINING FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Under the direction of the Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Northeastern University is now requiring completion of the NIH Office of Extramural Research training for all human subject research, regardless of whether or not investigators have received funding to support their project.

The online course titled "Protecting Human Research Participants" can be accessed at the following url: http://phrp.nihtraining.com/users/login.php. This requirement will be effective as of November 15, 2008 for all new protocols.

Principal Investigators, student researchers and key personnel (participants who contribute substantively to the scientific development or execution of a project) must include a copy of their certificate of completion for this web-based tutorial with the protocol submission.

Certificate(s) Attached
Certificate(s) submitted previously – on file with the NU’s Office of Human Subject Research Protection
A. Investigator Information

Principal Investigator (PI cannot be a student) ___ Dr. Karen Harbeck ________

Investigator is: NU Faculty ___x___ NU Staff___ Other ______________________

College _____ Northeastern University College of Professional Studies

Department __________ Education (Ed.D. Doctorate Program) ____________________

Address __________ 55 Glen St. Malden, MA 02148 __________

Telephone ___ 781-321-3569 Email ______ k.harbeck@neu.edu________

Is this student research? YES _X_ NO ___ If yes, please provide the following information:
Student Name _____ Hope Hanscom ________ Undergrad ___ MA/MS ___ PhD _x_ (Ed.D.)

Mailing Address 44 Horseshoe Bend Way Mashpee, MA 02649

Anticipated graduation date: June 2015

Telephone 508-681-8181 Primary Email __hanscom.h@husky.neu.edu__

Cell phone 774-319-9503 Secondary Email hopepulick@yahoo.com
B. Protocol Information

Title: Working Together: The Individual and Collective Experiences of Special Education Teams

Projected # subjects __12-40__

Approx. begin date of project June 1, 2014       Approx. end date November 30, 2014

It is the policy of Northeastern University that no activity involving human subjects be undertaken until those activities have been reviewed and approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

- Anticipated funding source for project (or none) _______NONE_________

Has/will this proposal been/be submitted through:

- NU’s Office of Research Administration and Finance (RAF) _____no____
- Provost ______no____
- Corp & Foundations ______no____

C.

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<th>Will Participants Be:</th>
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<td>Northeastern University Students?</td>
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<td>Institutionalized persons?</td>
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<td>Investigational drug/device?</td>
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<td>Audiotapes/videotapes?</td>
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x
D. What are the goals of this research? Please state your research question(s) and related hypotheses.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of three IEP Teams as the members navigate the process of creating individualized accommodations, goals, services, and specially designed instruction for students with disabilities.

The following question guides the direction of this study:

**Central question.** What is the experience of three IEP Teams as the members collaborate to develop an IEP for students with disabilities in a public, integrated early childhood environment?

**Sub-questions.**
- What experiences do participants relate as they reflect on the IEP process?
- What behaviors do participants believe promote effective collaboration?
- What challenges do participants believe exist that impede collectively creating IEPs?
- Are there differences in the perception of the process between school staff and parents?

There is no hypothesis for this case study.

START HERE E. Provide a brief summary of the purpose of the research in non-technical language.

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of three Individualized Education Program (IEP) Teams as the members navigate the process of creating individualized accommodations, goals, services, and specially designed instruction for students with disabilities in an integrated early childhood program. The IEP is the cornerstone of federal laws
supporting the education of individuals with disabilities, and it must be more than a collection of words, but instead a living document that provides educators, parents, and students with guidance toward a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities.

The function of the IEP is to allow students with educational disabilities the chance to make effective progress in the general curriculum, whereas students without disabilities inherently have that opportunity. For a student with disabilities, the IEP is essential to providing equal access to the educational opportunities to which all children are entitled in the United States. Ensuring that the IEP process is individualized and effective is a step toward securing the civil rights of these students.

**F. Identify study personnel on this project. Include name, credentials, role, and organization affiliation.**

*Principal Investigator - Karen Harbeck Ph.D.; Northeastern University faculty located in Northeastern University College of Continuing Studies*

*Student Researcher - Hope Hanscom, MS, CAGS, Director of Special Education for the West Bridgewater Public Schools and doctoral (Ed.D.) student in Northeastern University College of Continuing Studies*

*Professional Transcriptionist – To be confirmed. Each time interview transcription is mentioned in the study, the possibility of utilizing a professional transcriptionist is also mentioned. If used, the professional transcriptionist will be asked to sign a “Transcriber Confidentiality Statement in a Research Study” Form (Appendix A).*

**G. Identify other organizations or institutions that are involved. Attach current Institutional Review Board (IRB) approvals or letters of permission as necessary.**

The XX Public Schools in XX, MA will be the site for this study. A letter of support and permission from the Superintendent of the XX Public Schools is found in Appendix B.

**H. Recruitment Procedures**

| Describe the participants you intend to recruit. Provide all inclusion and exclusion criteria. Include age range, number of subjects, gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, literacy level and health (as applicable) and reasons for exempting any groups. |

---
Describe how/when/by whom inclusion/exclusion criteria will be determined.

Participants must speak English proficiently and be members of one of three IEP Teams chosen for early childhood students with disabilities. Members must include the parent(s)/guardian(s) of each student. School personnel must include (although individuals may play multiple roles) a special education teacher, a general education teacher, and a Team chairperson, and may include other related service providers including, but not limited to: speech/language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, behavioral consultant, and any other relevant specialists who are members of the Team. Ages of participants will range from 18-75 and the number of participants will depend on the makeup of the IEP Teams (but will range from 12-40). Gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, and health will not be used as criteria for selection. Literacy level will not be controlled for parent participants, however, all school-based participants must hold Massachusetts certification in their given roles.

Describe the procedures that you will use to recruit these participants. Be specific. How will potential subjects be identified? Who will ask for participation? If you intend to recruit using letters, posters, fliers, ads, website, email etc., copies must be included as attachments for stamped approval. Include scripts for intended telephone recruitment.

The IEP Teams will be recruited with the help of the principal of the school in which the study will occur. The student investigator will work with the principal, using the participant criteria to note which existing IEP Teams meet the criteria set out in the study. Of those IEP Teams which meet all criteria, the student investigator will contact Team members via telephone, using the script provided in Appendix C, to determine interest in study participation and will follow up with a written request and consent forms (Appendix D - IEP Meeting Consent Form and Appendix E - Interview Consent Form). If more than one Team meets the criteria and all members are willing to participate, the Team meeting on the earliest date will be chosen.

What remuneration, if any, is offered?

No remuneration will be offered.
I. Consent Process

Describe the process of obtaining informed consent*. Be specific. How will the project and the participants’ role be presented to potential participants? By whom? When? Where? Having the participant read and sign a consent statement is done only after the researcher provides a detailed oral explanation and answers all questions. Please attach a copy of informed consent statements that you intend to use, if applicable.

If your study population includes non-English speaking people, translations of consent information are necessary. Describe how information will be translated and by whom. You may wait until the consent is approved in English before having it translated.

Only English-speaking individuals will be interviewed.

As stated in section H (Recruitment Procedures), the student researcher will give a detailed oral explanation of the scope of the project and the role of the participant during the intake call.

Participants will receive the unsigned consent form prior to the interview. At the start of the interview, the form will be reviewed and the student researcher will answer any questions the participant may have. The participant will then be asked to verbally consent on the recording.

If your population includes children, prisoners, people with limited mental capacity, language barriers, problems with reading or understanding, or other issues that may make them vulnerable or limit their ability to understand and provide consent, describe special procedures that you will institute to obtain consent appropriately. If participants are potentially decisionally impaired, how will you determine competency?

N/A

*If incomplete disclosure during the initial consent process is essential to carrying out the proposed research, please provide a detailed description of the debriefing process. Be
specific. When will full disclosure of the research goals be presented to subjects (e.g., immediately after the subject has completed the research task(s) or held off until the completion of the study’s data collection)? By whom? Please attach a copy of the written debriefing statement that will be given to subjects.

N/A

J. Study Procedures

Provide a detailed description of all activities the participant will be asked to do and what will be done to the participants. Include the location, number of sessions, time for each session, and total time period anticipated for each participant, including long term follow up.

Qualitative data will be collected through observations (IEP Team meetings held at the school) and interviews conducted by the Student Researcher either in person (at a location convenient to the interviewees) or over the phone. In addition, the Student Researcher will examine all documents related to the student's school record and IEP, which may include, but are not limited to: Early Intervention reports, referral documents, evaluation reports, medical reports, parent concerns, and the finalized IEP.

Interviews will focus on the participant’s experiences with the IEP process and will last approximately 60 minutes.

The transcript from the interview will be emailed to a secure email address provided by the participant within one month after the interview. The participant will then have one week to review the information and provide any feedback in regard to the validity, or make requests for alterations.

Who will conduct the experimental procedures, questionnaires, etc? Where will this be done? *Attach copies of all questionnaires, interview questions, tests, survey instruments,*
The interviews will be conducted by the Student Researcher (Hope Hanscom) either in person or over the phone. When interviews occur over the phone, the Student Researcher will conduct all interviews in the secure settings of either her work or home office, and the participant will be asked to also be in a location where privacy and concentration can be maintained. All in-person interviews would also be conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality and the ability for both the researcher and interview to concentrate on the interview.

The script for the interviews (which include the interview questions) is attached (see Interview Protocol Form, Appendix F).

**K. Risks**

Identify possible risks to the participant as a result of the research. Consider possible psychological harm, loss of confidentiality, financial, social, or legal damages as well as physical risks. What is the seriousness of these risks and what is the likelihood that they may occur?

Appropriate measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality (see Section L: Confidentiality). As some participants will be discussing personal details about their life, there is the slight chance of potential (non-physical) discomfort, but the risk of this is minimal.

Describe in detail the safeguards that will be implemented to minimize risks. What follow-up procedures are in place if harm occurs? What special precautions will be instituted for vulnerable populations?

Participants will be informed that if they feel uncomfortable replying to any of the questions that are asked, they are free to decline from answering. They will be also told both verbally and in the Consent Forms (Appendix D and Appendix E) that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time.
Every effort possible will be made to protect participant confidentiality, and no other risks (financial, social, physical, etc.) seem likely based on participation in this study.

**L. Confidentiality**

Describe *in detail* the procedures that will be used to maintain anonymity or confidentiality during collection and entry of data. Who will have access to data? How will the data be used, now and in the future?

Any information that is obtained in connections with this study and that can be identified with an individual will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with the participant’s expressed request/permission or as required by law. No names will be associated with any interview information; any information that could be used to identify a participant will be altered to protect their confidentiality; the recording of the interview will not be labeled with the participant’s name, but rather a pseudonym; should a professional transcriptionist be used, a Transcriber Confidentiality Statement (Appendix A) will be used; all data files will be encrypted and password protected, and only the Principal Investigator (Dr. Karen Harbeck) and Student Researcher on this project (Hope Hanscom) will have access to the files.

The data will be used for the Student Researcher’s doctoral thesis project, and potentially for future journal articles, books, presentations, or research. Even in these potential instances, confidentiality will be kept for all participants.

Information regarding confidentiality will be shared with all participants prior to the interview process, both in the Consent Form and verbally.

How and where will data be stored? When will data, including audiotapes and videotapes, be destroyed? If data is to be retained, explain why. Will identifiers or links to identification be destroyed? When? Signed consent documents must be retained for 3 years following the end of the study. Where and how will they be maintained?

Each interview will be audio-recorded by an electronic application called “Smart Voice Recorder” on the Student Researcher’s Smartphone, as well as on an application called “Super Note” on the Student Researcher’s iPad, to ensure the audio is captured. These electronic
applications have an extensive or no limit to audio-length, and electronic recordings can be transferred to a computer as mp4 or .wav files.

The electronic recordings of the interviews and all other electronic documents will be downloaded and then saved to the Student Researcher’s personal USB flash drive, personal external hard drive, and personal (online) cloud storage account. All files will be encrypted and password-protected.

Interviews will be transcribed by one of two methods:

1) Directly by the student researcher, with the assistance of the computer software program “Dragon Naturally Speaking,” or

2) By a professional transcriptionist who will be required to sign a “Transcriber Confidentiality Statement in a Research Study” (Appendix A).

Transcripts will be saved in the same secure manner as the electronic recordings. The only other person who would have access to original files and actual names would be the Principal Investigator (Dr. Harbeck), should there be a need.

Any written documents will be kept in the locked desk drawer at the home of the Student Researcher (44 Horseshoe Bend Way Mashpee, MA 02649) during the period when the investigation is taking place. After the thesis project is complete, any hard-copy materials containing confidential interviewee information will be destroyed, and any electronic documents saved on the cloud will be deleted. All remaining electronic data stored on the student researcher’s USB flash drive and personal external hard drive will remain untouched, and kept in a locked drawer in the home of the Student Researcher. These remaining data and documents will be destroyed 3 years following the completion of the study.

M. If your research is HIPAA-protected, please complete the following;

Individual Access to PHI

Describe the procedure that will be used for allowing individuals to access their PHI or, alternatively, advising them that they must wait until the end of the study to review their PHI.
N/A

**N. Benefits**

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<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant:</td>
<td>No immediate benefits to participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society: Potential benefits to society include a better understanding of the experience of an IEP Team and transferable strategies that can be used by other groups working collectively.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Researcher: Successful completion of this study will allow the Student Researcher to complete the Ed.D. (Doctor of Education) program at Northeastern University.</td>
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**O. Attachments**

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<td>Copy of fliers, ads, posters, emails, web pages, letters for recruitment *</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>ApxC</td>
<td>Scripts of intended telephone conversations*</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Copies of IRB approvals or letters of permission from other sites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ApxD</td>
<td>Informed Consent or Informed Consent and Health Information Use and Disclosure Authorization*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Debriefing Statement*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ApxE</td>
<td>Copies of all instruments, surveys, focus group or interview questions, tests, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(faxed)</td>
<td>Signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form**(required)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ApxF</td>
<td>NIH Human Subject Training Certificate(s) <em>(required if not already on file at HSRP)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ApxA</td>
<td>Transcriber Confidentiality Statement in a Research Study</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Approved forms must be stamped by the IRB before use)*
P. Health Care Provision During Study

Please check the applicable line:

___x___ I have read the description of HIPAA “health care” within Section 3.0 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. I am not a HIPAA-covered health care provider and no health care will be provided in connection with this study.

______ I am a HIPAA-covered health care provider or I will provide health care in connection with this study as described in Section 3.0 of the Policies & Procedures for Human Research Protection. This health care is described above under “Study Procedures,” and the Informed Consent and Health Information Use and Disclosure Authorization form will be used with all prospective study participants.

If you have any questions about whether you are a HIPAA-covered health care provider, please contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection at n.regina@neu.edu or (617) 373-4588.

Please return the completed application to:  Nan C. Regina, Director

Human Subject Research Protection

960 Renaissance Park

Northeastern University

Boston, MA 02115-5000

Tel: 617.373.7570; Fax: 617.373.4595

n.regina@neu.edu

The application and accompanying materials may be sent as email attachments or in hard copy. A signed Assurance of Principal Investigator Form may be sent via fax or in hard copy.
Appendix C

Interview Protocol Form

Interview Protocol

Institution: Northeastern University; 360 Huntington Avenue; Boston, Massachusetts 02115

Interviewee:

Interviewer: Hope Hanscom

Date:

Location of Interview:

************************

Interview

Part 1: Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who is a member of an IEP Team for a student with disabilities in an integrated early childhood program.

This research project focuses on the experience of IEP Teams as the members collaborate to create an IEP for students with disabilities in an integrated early childhood program. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into how IEP Teams collaborate and manage the process of creating an IEP.

Hopefully this study will allow us to better understand how IEP Teams collaborate and other Teams can benefit from this understanding.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to record our conversation today. I will also be taking written notes during the interview. Only I and possibly a professional transcriptionist will be privy to the audio files. If a transcriptionist is used, that person will have signed a confidentiality statement, and will also only be provided with the recording labeled by pseudonym, meaning they will never even know your name, to maintain confidentiality. The audio files will be destroyed within two weeks after they are transcribed. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only pseudonyms will be used when quoting from the transcripts. Only your pseudonym will be attached to the transcript.
I would like to begin recording this session now, is that all right with you? OK, the audio recording has begun.

To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, participants have to read and verbally agree to the Consent Form that I sent you. I’d like to go over this form with you now. The Consent Form for this study, titled ‘Working Together: The Individual and Collective Experiences of Special Education Teams,’ states that all participants must be at least 18 years old. You are being asked to participate in an interview focused on your experiences as an IEP Team member. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study, and there are also no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. 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 only use pseudonyms, and will not identify you or any other participant as being part 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. If you have any questions about this study, contact information for me as well as the Principal Investigator is listed, and contact information is also listed for the Director of Human Subject Research Protection at Northeastern University should you have any other questions about your rights in this research (and you can call that person confidentially, if you wish).

Do you have any additional questions or concerns about the interview process or this form? Do you give your verbal consent? Great, thank you.

We have planned for this interview to last approximately 60 minutes. I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

**Part 2: Interview Introduction**

As I’ve mentioned, the intent of this study is to gain better understanding into the experiences of IEP Teams as the members collaborate to write an IEP for students with disabilities in an integrated early childhood program. The approach to this qualitative study will be to first explore a participant’s background and experiences prior to the IEP meeting and next to examine the participant’s current experience with this IEP Team.

During today’s interview, I will ask you focused questions about your history and experiences with special education, as well as questions directly related to the IEP meeting.

Are you ready to begin?

**Part 3: Questioning**

**Biographical Background**
I’d like to start by asking you some basic questions in regard to your biographical background. This part should only take between 5-10 minutes.

1. Please share with me your background and how you came to be a member of this IEP Team.
2. Please share information about your experience with special education prior to being a member of this IEP Team.

Questions related to this specific Team meeting

1. Please share with me your thoughts on this IEP meeting. Was it a typical meeting or unique in some way?

2. What do you believe was the purpose of this meeting? Do you believe the meeting served that purpose? Why or why not?

3. What do you believe was your role in this meeting? Do you believe you were able to successfully fill that role? Why or why not?

4. Please share with me your thoughts on the collaboration among this Team. Do you believe this meeting was a collaborative one? If so, why? If not, why not?

5. Is there anything about this meeting that you would have changed (added/deleted/modified)?

6. Is there anything else you want to share about your experiences with this IEP Team?

Part 4: Wrap-up

Thank you, that concludes the interview questions for this interview.

If I come across a need to ask any follow-up questions, which would most likely only be the case if I felt clarification was needed in regards to one of your responses, would it be all right for me to contact you? Would you prefer I contact you via e-mail or telephone?

Some time over the next month, I will email you word-for-word transcripts and my initial interpretations of both interviews. If you choose, you can review the information, and you will have one week to provide me with any feedback, alterations, or corrections. Can you please confirm the e-mail address you would like for me to e-mail the transcripts to?

And once this thesis study is complete, which will most likely be 3-6 months from now, would you like to receive an electronic copy of the document?

Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for your participation in this study!
Appendix D

District Letter of Support

May 7, 2014

Institutional Review Board
Northeastern University
960 Renaissance Park
Boston, MA 02115-5000

To Whom It May Concern:

Hope Hanscom and I have discussed her research project, "Working Together: The Individual and Collective Experiences of a Special Education Team." I understand that this project will involve staff members and families from the Public Schools. Hope may have access to the personnel involved as well as access to the school facilities and the files she needs for the purpose of data collection.

I support Hope as she pursues this project as part of her doctoral dissertation in Educational Leadership. I anticipate that her research will add to our knowledge of special education and how best to support students with disabilities, their families, and special education professionals in the Public Schools.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Superintendent of Schools

The public school system is committed to ensuring that all of its programs and facilities are accessible to all members of the public. We do not discriminate on the basis of age, color, disability, national origin, race, religion, sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. The contents of Public Schools publications are available upon request in language other than English.
Appendix E

Criteria for Choosing a Team

Participants must be members of one of three IEP Teams chosen for early childhood students with disabilities. Members must include the parent(s)/guardian(s) of each student. School personnel must include (although individuals may play multiple roles) a special education teacher, a general education teacher, and a Team chairperson, and may include other related service providers including, but not limited to: speech/language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, behavioral consultant, and any other relevant specialists who are members of the Team. Ages of participants will range from 18-75 and the number of participants will depend on the makeup of the IEP Teams (but will range from 12-40). Gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, and health will not be used as criteria for selection. Literacy level will not be controlled for parent participants, however, all school-based participants must hold Massachusetts certification in their given roles.
Appendix F

Recruitment Script

HH: Hello, my name is Hope Hanscom and I am a graduate student at Northeastern University. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a study which is looking at the experiences of IEP Teams as the members collaborate to write an IEP for students with disabilities in an integrated early childhood program. You are a member of a Team that has been identified as meeting the criteria laid out in the study. I'd like to talk to you about your willingness to participate in this study. Please understand that your participation is entirely voluntary.
Appendix G

Meeting Agenda

TEAM MEETING AGENDA

Meeting Type: Initial

1. Opening: Greetings
   Attendance Sheet, Introductions

2. Purpose for Meeting:
   Our purpose today is to
   a) Share the results of assessments in the various disciplines
   b) AND AS A TEAM, determine eligibility for special education based on 3 factors:
      • The presence of a disability
      • Whether the identified disability (if there is one) prevents the student from making
effective progress
      • Whether the student requires specifically designed instruction or related services in
order to access the curriculum

✓ Should the student be found eligible...the TEAM will identify appropriate special education
services and write an IEP to address the student’s needs.

3. Sharing of Assessments/Questions

4. Eligibility Determination

5. Next Steps:
   ➢ If Eligible:
     • Parent Concerns/Vision Statement
     • Individual Goals/Objectives
     • Service Delivery
   ➢ If not Eligible:
     Options for other services

6. Meeting Summary Form

7. Adjourn
Appendix H

Eligibility Flowchart

Special Education Eligibility/Initial and Reevaluation Determination

A. Proceed through the flowchart until an eligibility determination is reached.

1. Does the student have one or more of the following types of disability?
   - Autism
   - Developmental delay
   - Intellectual
   - Sensory/Hearing, Vision, Deaf-Blind
   - Neurological
   - Emotional
   - Communication
   - Physical
   - Specific Learning
   - Health

   yes

2. a) Is the student making effective progress in school? (For reevaluations: Would the student continue to make progress in school without the provided special education services?)

   yes
   no

2. b) Is the lack of progress a result of the student’s disability?

   yes
   no

2. c) Does the student require specially designed instruction in order to make effective progress in school or does the student require related services in order to access the general curriculum?

   yes
   no

B. Answer this question for all students.

- Is parent satisfied with school evaluation?
  - Continue forward as previously discussed.
  - Discuss Extended Evaluation and rights to an Independent Educational Evaluation.

- Student is not eligible for Special Education but may be eligible for other services in other programs.

KEY EVALUATION FINDINGS AND/OR NEXT STEPS:
Appendix I

IEP Template

School District Name: 
School District Address: 
School District Contact: 

Student: X student
Grade: ___ DOB: ___ LASID#: ___ ASID#: ___

To:

Subject: The school district proposes the following:
☐ An Evaluation
☐ An IEP
☐ An Amendment
☐ A Placement
☐ Other:

Notice Date:

The school district has recently discussed this student and, with your input, has developed a proposal. We have described our actions and our reasons for these actions in this memo.

As you know, special education regulations provide protection to you and your child. You will find specific information about your legal rights in the Parent's Notice of Procedural Safeguards, including sources that you may contact for help in understanding your rights. This notice is enclosed for initial evaluations. You should have received your Parent's Notice of Procedural Safeguards if you will be attending an IEP/Amendment or Placement meeting during the school year. We will also disseminate the notice at your request and upon disciplinary removal to an interim alternative education setting. You should carefully review this brochure and the enclosed material before making any decisions.

The school district staff is available to speak to you or meet with you about your rights and the school district's proposal. We strongly encourage you to call us if you have any questions. Please contact us through the district contact person listed below. Thank you.

An Evaluation Consent Form, an IEP or an IEP Amendment must be signed and returned, as we are required by law to have a signed copy on file regardless of your decision. Please return a copy as soon as possible but no later than the date listed below, Thank you.

Document Return Date: Not Applicable
District Contact Person: 
Contact Information:

Enclosures:
☐ Parent's Notice of Procedural Safeguards
☐ Other:
Directions to School Staff:

This notice must be sent to parents in their native language or other mode of communication used by the parent. School districts must ensure that parents understand the content of this notice. (Federal Regulation §300.503)

Describe one or more of the following actions: Initial Evaluation, Reevaluation, Emergency Evaluation, Extended Evaluation Period, IEP, IEP Amendment, Placement (include the specific placement location and transportation requirements, if any), Graduation or any other proposal used to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, educational placement or the provision of special education services by answering the following questions:

1. What action is the school district proposing to take?
2. Why is the school district proposing to act?
3. What rejected options were considered and why was each option rejected?
4. What evaluation procedure, test, record or report was used as a basis for the proposed action?
5. What other factors were relevant to the school district’s decision.
6. What next steps, if any, are recommended?

Narrative Description of School District Proposal

Enclosures:

☐ Parent's Notice of Procedural Safeguards
☐ Other:

Massachusetts DESE/Notice of Proposed School District Action N 1
# Administrative Data Sheet

## Student Information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full Name:</th>
<th></th>
<th>LASID#:</th>
<th></th>
<th>SASID#:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birth Date:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Age (as of Meeting):</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Language:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Language of Instruction:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Telephone:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If 18 or older:</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acting on Own Behalf</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of Shared / Delegated / Appointed Person:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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## Parent/Guardian Information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Relationship to Student:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address:</td>
<td>Legal Guardian:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Telephone:</td>
<td>Work Phone:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell Phone:</td>
<td>Primary Language:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>email Address:</td>
<td>Secondary Language:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Parent/Guardian Information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Relationship to Student:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address:</td>
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<td>Cell Phone:</td>
<td>Primary Language:</td>
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<td>email Address:</td>
<td>Secondary Language:</td>
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## Meeting Information:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date of Meeting:</th>
<th>Eligibility Determination:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type of Meeting:</td>
<td>Placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Scheduled Annual Review Meeting:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Next Scheduled Three Year Reevaluation Meeting:</td>
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</table>

## Assigned School Information: (Complete after a placement has been made.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Name:</th>
<th>Telephone:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address:</td>
<td>Fax:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Person:</td>
<td>Telephone:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost-Shared Placement:</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, specify agency:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After a meeting, attach to an IEP, an IEP Amendment or Extended Evaluation Form.
Parent and/or Student Concerns
What concern(s) does the parent and/or student want to see addressed to enhance the student's education?

Student Strengths and Key Evaluation Results Summary
What are student's educational strengths, interest areas, significant personal attributes and personal accomplishments?
What is the student's type of disability(ies), general education performance including MCAS/district test results, achievement towards goals and lack of expected progress, if any?

Vision Statement
What is the vision for this student?
Consider the next 1 to 5 year period when developing this statement. Beginning no later than age 14, the statement should be based on the student's preferences and interests, and should include desired outcomes in adult living, post-secondary and working environments.
Individualized Education Program

Student: X student

Present Levels of Educational Performance
A: General Curriculum

Check all that apply.

☐ English Language Arts
Consider the language, composition, literature (including reading) and media strands.

☐ History and Social Sciences
Consider the history, geography, economic and civics and government strands.

☐ Science and Technology
Consider the inquiry, domains of science, technology and science, technology and human affairs strand.

☐ Mathematics
Consider the number sense, patterns, relations and functions, geometry and measurement and statistics and probability strands.

☐ Other Curriculum Area
Specify:

How does the disability(ies) affect progress in the curriculum area(s)?

What type(s) of accommodation, if any, is necessary for the student to make effective progress?

What type(s) of specially designed instruction, if any, is necessary for the student to make effective progress?

Check the necessary instructional modification(s) and describe how such modification(s) will be made.

☐ Content:

☐ Methodology/Delivery of Instruction:

☐ Performance Criteria:
Individualized Education Program

Student:  
Grade:  
DOB:  
LASID#:  

Present Levels of Educational Performance

B: Other Educational Needs

Check all that apply.

- Adapted physical education
- Braille needs (blind/visually impaired)
- Extra curricular activities
- Social/emotional needs
- Other:  

General Considerations

- Assistive tech devices/services
- Communication (all students)
- Language needs (LEP students)
- Travel training

Behavior

Communication (deaf/hard of hearing students)

Nonacademic activities

Skill development related to vocational preparation or experience

Age-Specific Considerations

- For children ages 3 to 5 - participation in appropriate activities
- For students ages 14+ (or younger if appropriate) - student’s course of study
- For students ages 16 (or younger if appropriate) to 22 - transition to post-school activities including community experiences, employment objectives, other post-school adult living objectives and, if appropriate, daily living skills.

How does the disability(ies) affect progress in the indicated area(s) of other educational needs?

What type(s) of accommodation, if any, is necessary for the student to make effective progress?

What type(s) of specially designed instruction, if any, is necessary for the student to make effective progress?

Check the necessary instructional modification(s) and describe how such modification(s) will be made.

- Content:

- Methodology/Delivery of Instruction:

- Performance Criteria:
Individualized Education Program

Student: X student
Grade: __
DOB: ___
LASID#: __________ SASID#: __________

Current Performance Levels/Measurable Annual Goals

Goal #: Specific Goal Focus:

Measurable Annual Goal: What challenging, yet attainable, goal can we expect the student to meet by the end of this IEP period?

How will we know that the student has reached this goal?

Benchmark/Objectives: What will the student need to do to complete this goal?

Progress Reports are required to be sent to parents at least as often as parents are informed of their nondisabled children's progress. Each progress report must describe the student's progress toward meeting each annual goal.
Service Delivery

What are the total service delivery needs of this student?

Include services, related services, program modifications and supports (including positive behavioral supports, school personnel and/or parent training/supports). Services should assist the student in reaching IEP goals, to be involved and progress in the general curriculum, to participate in extracurricular/nonacademic activities and to allow the student to participate with nondisabled students while working towards IEP goals.

School District Cycle: ☒ 5 day cycle ☐ 6 day cycle ☐ 10 day cycle ☐ Other:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus on Goal #</th>
<th>Type of Service</th>
<th>Type of Personnel</th>
<th>Frequency and Duration/Per Cycle</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>End Date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Consultation (Indirect Services to School Personnel and Parents)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Special Education and Related Services in General Education Classroom (Direct Service)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Special Education and Related Services in Other Settings (Direct Service)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Nonparticipation Justification

Is the student removed from the general education classroom at any time? (Refer to IEP § Service Delivery, Section C.)

☐ No    ☐ Yes        If yes, why is removal considered critical to the student's program?

IDEA 2004 Regulation 20 U.S.C. § 1412 (a) (5)(B) "...removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily." (Emphasis added.)

Schedule Modification

SHORTER: Does this student require a shorter school day or shorter school year?

☐ No    ☐ Yes -- shorter day    ☐ Yes -- shorter year    If yes, answer the questions below.

LONGER: Does this student require a longer school day or longer school year to prevent substantial loss of previously learned skills and/or substantial difficulty in relearning skills?

☐ No    ☐ Yes -- longer day    ☐ Yes -- longer year    If yes, answer the questions below.

How will the student’s schedule be modified? Why is this schedule modification being recommended? If a longer day or year is recommended, how will the school district coordinate services across program components?

Transportation Services

Does the student require transportation as a result of the disability(ies)?

☐ No    Regular transportation will be provided in the same manner as it would be provided for students without disabilities.

☐ Yes    Special transportation will be provided in the following manner:

☐ on a regular transportation vehicle with the following modifications and/or specialized equipment and precautions:

☐ on a special transportation vehicle with the following modifications and/or specialized equipment and precautions:

After the Team makes a transportation decision and after a placement decision has been made, a parent may choose to provide transportation and may be eligible for reimbursement under certain circumstances. Any parent who plans to transport their child to school should notify the school district contact person.
### Individualized Education Program

**Student:**

**Grade:**

**DOB:**

**LASSID:**

**SASID:**

### State or District-Wide Assessment

Identify state or district-wide assessments planned during this IEP period:

Fill out the table below. Consider any state or district-wide assessment to be administered during the time span covered by this IEP. For each content area, identify the student’s assessment participation status by putting an "X" in the corresponding box for column 1, 2, 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENT AREAS</th>
<th>COLUMN 1</th>
<th>COLUMN 2</th>
<th>COLUMN 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and Social Sciences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science and Technology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Assessment participation: Student participates in on-demand testing under routine conditions in this content area.
2. Assessment participation: Student participates in on-demand testing with accommodations conditions in this content area. (See 3 below)
3. Assessment participation: Student participates in alternate assessment in this content area. (See 3 below)

1. For each content area identified by an "X" in column 2 above: note in space below, the content area and describe the accommodations necessary for participation in the on-demand testing. Any accommodations used for assessment purposes should be closely modeled on the accommodations that are provided to the student as part of his/her instructional program.

2. For each content area identified by an "X" in column 3 above: note in space below, the content area, why the on-demand assessment is not appropriate and how that content area will be alternately assessed. Make sure to include the learning standards that will be addressed in each content area, the recommended assessment method(s) and the recommended evaluation and reporting method(s) for the student's performance on the alternative assessment.
Individualized Education Program

Student: X student
Grade: __
DOB: __
LASID#: __

Additional Information

☐ Include the following transition information: the anticipated graduation date; a statement of interagency responsibilities or needed linkages; the discussion of transfer of rights at least one year before age of majority; and a recommendation for Chapter 688 Referral.

☐ Document efforts to obtain participation if a parent and/or student did not attend meeting or provide input.

☐ Record other relevant IEP information not previously stated.

Response Section

School Assurance

I certify that the goals in this IEP are those recommended by the Team and that the indicated services will be provided.

Signature and Role of LEA Representative

Date

School Principal

Date

Parent Options/Responses

It is important that the district knows your decision as soon as possible. Please indicate your response by checking at least one (1) box and resuming a signed copy to the district. Thank you.

☐ I accept the IEP as developed.

☐ I reject the IEP as developed.

☐ I reject the following portions of the IEP with the understanding that any portion(s) that I do not reject will be considered accepted and implemented immediately. Rejected portions are as follows:

☐ I request a meeting to discuss the rejected IEP or rejected portion(s).

Signature of Parent, Guardian, Educational Surrogate Parent, Student 18 and Over*

Date

*Required signature once a student reaches 18 unless there is a court appointed guardian.

Parent Comment: I would like to make the following comment(s) but realize any comment(s) made that suggest changes to the proposed IEP will not be implemented unless the IEP is amended.
Special Education Placement Consent Form - PL1: 3-5 year olds

IEP Dates ___ to ___

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Team Recommended Special Educational Placements</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Team identified that the majority of the IEP services will be provided in a program in the home for a child who is 3 to 5 years of age.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Team identified that the majority of the IEP services will be provided in a clinician's office for a child who is 3 to 5 years of age.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Team identified that some or all IEP services will be provided in the inclusive early childhood program the child is already attending.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Team identified that the child should attend an inclusive early childhood program in order to receive some or all IEP services.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Team identified that the child should receive IEP services in a program serving only young children with disabilities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Team identified that the child should attend a special education program in a residential school that only serves children with disabilities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location(s) for Service Provision and Dates:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Placement Consent

Parent Options / Responses

It is important that the district knows your decision as soon as possible. Please indicate your response by checking at least one (1) box and returning a signed copy to the district along with your response to the IEP. Thank you.

- I consent to the placement.
- I refuse the placement.
- I request a meeting to discuss the refused placement.

Signature of Parent, Guardian, Educational Surrogate Parent

Date

Other Authority Required Placements

Note: These non-educational placements are not determined by the Team and therefore service delivery may be limited and consent is not required.

- The placement has been made by a state agency to an institutionalized setting for non-educational reasons.
- The Department of Mental Health has placed the child in a hospital psychiatric unit or residential treatment program.
- The Department of Public Health has placed the child in the Massachusetts Hospital School.
- A medical doctor has determined that the student must be served in a home setting.
- Home-based Program
- A medical doctor has determined that the student must be served in a hospital setting.
- Hospital-based Program