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CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS
OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING DURING
INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION
PLAN MEETINGS

by

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Dedication

To the Lord of the worlds, Allah

Then my mother, Sabiha Ali Akbar.

Dreams, Prayers, Blessings.

Acknowledgments

In The Name of Allah “And if you would count the blessings of Allah, you would not be able to enumerate them, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.” (Quran, 16:18).

My first and continuous gratitude is to Allah; I am grateful for His countless blessings; one of which is this study and degree.

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I send special thanks and warm wishes to the mothers who allowed me into their world and shared their experiences, taking care to benefit not only their children but all children and families with special needs. Their generosity and selflessness transcend themselves to benefit the special education community at large, thank you.

My deepest gratitude goes to my mother Sabiha Akbar, my father Nour Beydoun, my husband Reda Jafar, and my children, Ghazi, Omar, Abdulaziz, and Yousuf for their unwavering support throughout this journey.

ABSTRACT

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The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires local education agencies to include parents as equal team members in cultivating their child's Individual Education Plan (IEP). Despite the law, studies have shown that parents experience barriers to being included in the decision-making for their child in IEP meetings. Barriers, such as a lack of information, understanding the law, and feeling of unequal status or power compared to school district team members, have been noted by previous research. This study explored the perceptions, feelings, and understanding of the IEP development process experienced by parents from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed to understand the parents' lived experience of participating in decision-making during the IEP meeting. A purposive sample of three Arabic CLD parents from a city in southeast Texas were recruited, by the

researcher, to reflect on their experience and respond to the in-depth semi-structured interview questions. Analysis of the participants' reflections on their lived experiences revealed several personal experiential themes (PETs), which made up the final three Group Experiential Themes (GETs): aiming for knowledge; pursuing progress; and seeking success. The findings of this study suggest that IEP meetings with CLD parents are focused on compliance with the law rather than providing CLD parents the opportunity to participate effectively in decision-making during the IEP meeting.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

According to the US Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics (2021), the number of students receiving special education services nationwide increased by around 14% from the academic school years 2000-2001 to 2020-2021. Furthermore, the State of Texas saw a 23% increase during the same period (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). With such increases, public schools struggle to meet legislative demands requiring each student to be served effectively through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to receive equitable and accessible education (Boroson, 2017). Moreover, the increasing number of students with special needs from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds in the US presents educators and practitioners with several opportunities and challenges (Barrio et al., 2017). Defined in many ways, the term CLD usually describes students and families from the following groups: African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, students who speak English as a second language, and students who have undocumented or immigrant status (Griffin, 2011).

The pivotal importance of parental involvement in the special education programs of their child is emphasized in the U.S. special education policy (Freeman & Kirksey, 2022). One of the fundamental requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) is that parents should be equal participants engaging fully alongside the district school personnel in developing their child's IEP (Yell et al., 2015). IDEA mandates rights and safeguards for parents, incorporating the right to (a) participate in meetings, (b) review school records, (c) obtain an independent evaluation, (d) deny consent or disagree with decisions, and (f) resolve disputes using

mediation or due process (IDEA, 2004). This priority on parent participation reflects the IDEA accountability system, which obliges states to report annually the percentages of parents who disclose schools that facilitated their involvement (Office of Special Education Programs, 2013).

An individualized education program (IEP) is a specially designed plan that addresses and meets students' and families' unique needs (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2018). The IEP is the keystone of the IDEA designed to develop and formalize a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students receiving special education services (Bateman, 2011). The stipulation of a FAPE was the focal point of the law, and a student's IEP was the medium by which the content of FAPE is formulated and delivered (Yell et al., 2020). Under IDEA, all students who qualify for special education services must have an IEP, a special education document revised annually by schools and parents (Burke & Goldman, 2018).

IEP documents outline a child's educational plan, defining eligibility for special education and related services, and outlining the skills the child will learn and how they will be taught (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). The IEP contains information unique to student needs, educational goals, evaluation criteria, objectives, and other services the student will receive (Singh & Keese, 2020). The goal of the IEP is to meet students' needs by delivering appropriate support (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). However, there is only one component of the IEP process, the IEP meeting is an intended time for the IEP team to work collaboratively to develop the IEP document (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023).

IEP meetings are an opportune time for the team members to review and/or make recommendations concerning a student's annual progress toward achieving designated goals (Lukas & Steely, 2018). The members of the IEP team include parents, special

education teachers, general education teachers, campus administrators, assessment personnel, speech-language pathologists, related services personnel (i.e., physical therapist and occupational therapist), and any other individuals who interact, work, and service the student (Ramirez, 2022). During an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting, key decisions regarding a student's special education services and support are made, including classroom placement and goals for the coming year (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023).

Parents adopt many roles in the IEP meeting such as participating in the creation of their child's Present Level of Performance (PLOP), advocating on behalf of their child, and contributing to the development of the IEP goals (Lukas & Steely, 2018). Similarly, parents perform a vital role during the IEP development process, such as participating in educational decision-making (Love et al., 2017; Ruiz et al., 2019; Zagona et al., 2019). While school professionals bring educational and curricular expertise to the meeting, parents contribute their unique perspectives to the development of the IEP as experts on their child's needs (Kervick, 2017).

Participation in the educational decision-making process is considered the most distinguishing element of parental involvement among CLD parents of children with special needs (Ruiz et al., 2019). Parental participation in decisions for their children with special needs increases school personnel's compliance with the special education process (Ruiz et al., 2019). Moreover, parent input during decision-making is fundamental for applying effective, equitable instruction and services for all children (Elbaum et al., 2016). Although parents are considered the primary advocates for their children, they still face challenges in ensuring their children participate in an inclusive education setting (Lalvani & Hale, 2015).

Research Problem

In the United States, the pivotal importance of parental involvement in the special education program of their child is highlighted in the U.S. special education policy (Freeman & Kirksey, 2022). However, engaging parents as participants can be a challenging goal (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). Although the law assumes an equal partnership in the decision-making process, the power is primarily concentrated in the hands of school professionals (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). The goal of the IEP development process is to utilize the expert knowledge of parents and school personnel to build a supportive and uniquely designed educational environment for the student (Singh & Keese, 2020). However, Singh & Keese, (2020) found that the IEPs are often ineffective due to a lack of effective partnerships between school personnel and parents. Although parents are an essential part of the IEP team, many meet hurdles that de-center their knowledge of the process and participation in their children's meetings (Pushor, 2012).

In examining parents' input in IEP documents, Kurth et al. (2019), discovered that the document either contained a small section for parental input or limited it to an attendance checklist. Additionally, parental input did not translate into IEP goals, supports, or services. Similarly, a qualitative study by Zagona, Miller, Kurth, and Love (2019) examined parents' perspectives on special education experiences with attention to decisions and found that parents experienced mixed implementations to agreed decisions from the school personnel. For example, parents faced challenges getting diagnostic services for their children, inclusive placement, and other special education services.

Likewise, Jung (2011) explains how CLD families are more likely to meet systematic, bureaucratic, and communication barriers before becoming a meaningful part of their child's educational process. For example, some CLD parents are unfamiliar with

the process of discussing their children's education with school professionals, as they believe that school professionals' suggestions are final and inevitable decisions from the start of the IEP process, even when parents' opinions are diametrically opposed to those of the school professionals (Jung, 2011). Therefore, CLD parents may not argue or oppose school professionals because of their innate respect for authority (Jung, 2011).

Parents from CLD backgrounds may be passive in their participation in the IEP process for several reasons, including language barriers, poor interpretation, lack of respect from school personnel, and mistrust of the education system (Burke et al., 2020; Wolfe & Durán, 2013). Additionally, in some instances, CLD parents are viewed by school personnel as being peripheral to the education decision-making process and, in some cases, as "obstacles or adversaries" (Stoner et al., 2005, p. 39). Using semi-structured interviews of CLD parents Mbeseha (2013) found that parents indicate that their lack of involvement is affected by the special educators' practices that coerce them to concede to pre-made decisions during the IEP meeting instead of encouraging parental input (Mbeseha, 2013). To build a solid foundation of collaboration, it is recommended that the education community regularly examine all stakeholders' perceptions so that efforts span the distance toward effective teaming (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

Effective IEP development requires an equal partnership between parents and school officials (Singh & Keese, 2020). However, parent participation in IEP teams alongside school professionals is sometimes hampered by the school's actions (Kurth et al., 2020). Similarly, during the IEP meeting, several obstacles can impede the collaborative development of the IEP for example, some parents are unable to attend the IEP meeting because of logistical barriers, such as transportation, child care, and/or incompatible work schedules (Cavendish & Connor, 2018), or cultural barriers, such as a lack of cultural responsiveness, inadequate information in the parents' language, and the

marginalization of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) families by school professionals (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014; Wolfe & Duran, 2016). Regardless of the parent's level of involvement, team members are advised to establish a welcoming environment for parents to trust that the information they provide will be valued and incorporated into any improvements or needs and that team members genuinely care about them and their children (Schoeller & Emanuel, 2003).

Although there is research documenting the unintended adverse outcomes that CLD parents experience during IEP team meetings (Burke & Goldman, 2018; Kurth et al., 2019; Mueller & Vick, 2019), there is still a gap in understanding the lived experience and sense-making when participating in decision-making from the perspective of the CLD parent. There is a need for a systematic understanding of CLD parents' experience in decision-making with their children's special education teachers and other members during IEP team meetings. More specifically, to facilitate their participation effectively in the IEP meeting, it is necessary to explore CLD parents' experiences, of their involvement in decision-making in the IEP meeting, through an interpretative phenomenological (IPA) lens. This will provide an understanding of the lived experience of the CLD parents on a deeper level, by analyzing their reflections and sense-making.

Significance of Study

The importance of carefully and thoroughly evaluating students, determining eligibility, creating IEPs, and deciding the proper program placement cannot be underestimated (Richman, 2015). Appropriately constructed IEPs are central to ensuring that special education services are effective and comply with federal and state law (Richman, 2015). Bateman (2014) highlights the importance of constructing IEPs that match students' evolving needs for instruction and intervention to be implemented effectively. IEP teams must carefully construct IEPs that match students' evolving

individual needs and abilities. Similarly, the interventions, accommodations, and modifications described in each IEP must be implemented with fidelity (Bateman, 2014). Collaboration among the different stakeholders, including teachers, students, families, school personnel, and administrators, can be used to transform schools and community agencies effectively and create opportunities for individuals with and without disabilities to experience better outcomes (Solone et al., 2020).

Annual IEP meetings are essential for parents of children with disabilities to plan their children's education and coordinate special education services (Montoya et al. 2022). CLD Parents who participate in the IEP can advocate for their children (Dodge, 2018). School professionals can receive different understandings of a student's physical, psychological, cognitive, academic, social, and cultural needs from the parents (The Legal Framework, 2018). Parents provide important information about their children that transcends what is obtained through a formal or informal evaluation (Lo, 2013). Additionally, parents can provide information that the committee cannot obtain solely through the teacher's comments about the children's classroom behaviors, peer interactions, and academic achievements (Cadieux et al., 2020).

Successful IEP development involves an equal partnership between parents and school officials because IDEA classifies parents as first members when defining the intended team for IEP development (Singh & Keese, 2020). Indeed, several studies highlighted the importance of every IEP team member prioritizing by collaborating and involving CLD parents to develop their children's educational program (Correia et al., 2021; Fallah, 2018; Mueller & Vick, 2019; Solone et al., 2019). Bateman, (2011) emphasizes Parental participation as it is central in all decisions regarding the child's program and placement, abridging full and equal parental participation, affects the student's right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) (Bateman, 2011).

Similarly, without family engagement in special education, CLD students with special needs can be susceptible to lower quality and more isolated education programs and faulty diagnostic processes (Harry, 2008). Although today's public schools continue to grow more diverse, most preservice teachers, for example, are still from White, middle-class backgrounds; this issue can develop a cultural disconnection as teachers may hold deficit views and lower expectations for CLD students (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011). Yell et al., (2015) emphasized the importance of school personnel, particularly teachers, developing skills to build positive relationships with parents, given the connection between parent involvement and successful student outcomes.

It is essential to recognize the collaborative, active, equitable, and meaningful participation of parents of children with special needs in their children's education (Solone et al., 2020). Positive outcomes for CLD students are possible when schools and families engage in culturally responsive collaborative partnerships (Harry, 2008). As Fults and Harry (2012) explained, "In a multicultural world, it is not possible to be family-centered without being culturally responsive" (p. 28). Similarly, Sanderson and Goldman (2023) affirmed the benefits of schools collaborating with parents in attaining parents' satisfaction, and students' needs are addressed, leading to the positive outcomes desired by all involved.

A recent systematic literature review examined studies implementing interventions to increase CLD parent participation in the IEP process from 1975 to 2020 and found that only one of the 10 studies included in the review identified CLD parent participants with accuracy. There is a gap in the literature concerning culturally appropriate services and support for CLD families in the IEP meetings. There is a need for more research to better comprehend the needs of CLD families and their perspectives on the IEP meetings to inform school personnel's best practices in the future. This

information will allow the educational team essential data to provide the support that is more culturally appropriate to increase parental participation in the IEP process.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study is to examine culturally and linguistically diverse parents' perceptions of their involvement in decision-making during their child's IEP. The exploratory research questions emphasize the understanding and experiences of Arabic CLD parents participating in decision-making during the IEP of their child per the theoretical foundation for the proposed qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study. The research question is:

What are the perceptions of Arab CLD parents when reflecting on their involvement in decision-making for their child when attending IEP meetings?

Definitions of Key Terms

Barriers: are encounters or difficulties hindering parents' ability to access education services that are appropriate as well as assistance for their child in the special education program (Steeley & Lukacs, 2015).

CLD Families: Defined in many ways, the term CLD usually describes students and families from the following groups: African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, students who speak English as a second language, and students who have undocumented or immigrant status (Griffin, 2011).

Collaboration: Collaboration refers to people working together toward common goals and entails individuals with disabilities themselves, professionals, family members, community members, and friends coming together to work toward and achieve a shared

vision. Individuals on collaborative teams have varied life perspectives and experiences and can add a great deal to the collaborative planning process (Solone et al., 2020)

IDEA: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that makes available free appropriate public education (FAPE) to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children (US DOE, 2021)

Individualized Education Plan: A written statement for each child with a disability that includes present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, measurable annual goals and aims, measures, services, supplementary aids, modifications, and accommodations (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2017).

IEP team: A group of individuals who come together to write and implement a student's IEP, which includes a parent or guardian, one general education teacher, one special education teacher, a school district representative, a school psychologist, the child, a translator if needed, and parent advocate ((Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2017).

Parent: A parent is a natural, adoptive, or foster parent of a child; a guardian; an individual acting in the place of a natural or adoptive parent with whom the child lives, or an individual who is legally responsible for the child's welfare (IDEA, 2004).

Parent participation: is a meaningful two-way communication between family members and school representatives about academics and activities. This communication can be in person, verbal, or written (NCLB, 2002; Johnson & Hull, 2014).

Parent Involvement: includes the subsequent actions of school-related and special education process participation: (a) presence at school-related decision-making procedures regularly; (b) initiating interaction with teachers and additional school staff;

(c) school-related meeting engagement and discussions; and (d) sessions of planning (Murray et al., 2014).

Special education: Specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and other settings (Dorfman, 2012).

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Despite the integral nature of the school–parent relationship, the role of parents is often limited to that of an informant (Snyder, 2014). Policymakers involved in drafting IDEA recognized this fact. They included parental involvement as one of the main aspects. However, the legislative efforts over the past 40 years have not increased the desired level of parent involvement (Sudit, 2018). When parents are not participating fully in their children's educational decisions, the legal rights afforded to them are not being exercised, and chances for optimizing student outcomes are limited (Dodge, 2018). Furthermore, the research available is limited in scope as it does not address how all stakeholders can work together to improve outcomes, specifically with the voices of parents (Gunter, 2019). Therefore, culturally, and linguistically diverse (CLD) students with special needs may have limited abilities to access the same or similar opportunities compared to their peers without disabilities who are often White (Gunter, 2019).

This chapter is organized as follows. First, there is a review of public policy of the IEP approach for special education students to situate the proposed study in its education policy context. Next, the academic literature on the vital social phenomena for the proposed study is reviewed, specifically the literature on CLD families, the IEP process, and barriers to efficient and effective collaboration in decision-making during the IEP process for CLD parents. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical framework presentation which informs the analysis of the proposed study. Per the focus of this study, on Arabic CLD parents' perceptions, the theoretical framework adopted was Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Background

In the contemporary United States, special education services are organized around legal mandates and the professional mission to provide services to all (Kibria & Becerra, 2020). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) encourages home, school, and community partnerships to improve academic achievement. Districts that seek federal funding must provide outreach to all parents within the district, making meaningful efforts to attract those with the most significant barriers to engagement (Whitford & Addis, 2017). More than 7.2 million students in the United States receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004; US Department of Education, 2022).

Title I federal funding, under ESSA, is heavily linked to "parent and family engagement." ESSA (2015) provides funding to support technical assistance and training to implement and enhance "family engagement policies, programs, and activities that lead to improvements in student development and academic achievement" (p. 581). Although not all caregivers must participate in partnerships, districts must provide outreach to all caregivers within a district, making much-needed efforts to attract those with the most significant barriers to meaningful engagement (i.e., economically disadvantaged families, CLD families, families with members who have disabilities, and families with limited English and literacy proficiency) (ESSA, 2015).

In addition to ESSA, there are mandatory regulations within special education law that outline caregiver involvement (Whitford & Addis, 2017). According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parents have several rights and safeguards for their children with disabilities (Burke et al., 2018). IDEA requires parents' inclusion in their student's education by an explicit obligation to be on their student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team as full and equal participants (Yell et al.,

2013). Districts that have not appropriately included parents are violating IDEA (e.g., *Doug C. v. Hawaii Department of Education*, 2013). This violation can have financial consequences for the districts if parents are awarded monetary damages, for lawyers and specialist fees, compensatory services, and other corrective actions. Although IDEA does not require parent engagement beyond the IEP process, including parents throughout the school year, as opposed to only the months, weeks, days, or even hours just before an IEP meeting, may help build relationships long before the IEP is due (Whitford & Addis, 2017).

The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) in 1975 and, more recently, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (PL 101-476) in 1990 both recognized parental involvement and family professional collaboration as indispensable to developing Individualized Education Plan (Cho & Brenner, 2003). Amendments to the IDEA in 1997 (Public Law 105-17, 1997) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act in 2004 (Public Law 108-446) further improved parents' roles and increased their opportunities for participating in their children's education as a member of the IEP team (Jung, 2011). The IDEA mandates parent participation as a procedural requirement, stating that parents should be involved in the special education process from referral to IEP development and implementation with full and equal participation (Yell et al., 2020). However, multiple obstacles prevent parents of students with disabilities from being equal members of the IEP team, including a lack of communication strategies from the IEP team and parents experiencing a feeling of power imbalance (Marx et al., 2014).

A fundamental provision of the amendments to IDEA requires school professionals to involve parents of students with disabilities in the educational decision-making process to incorporate parents' knowledge of their children in the planning and

design of their children's educational services (Kalyanpar et al., 2000). Under these amendments, parents have become equal partners with school professionals when deciding educational issues on behalf of their children. Since those legislative changes, a mounting body of literature has emphasized the positive impact of parents' involvement on children's success in school and proposed diverse strategies to promote and facilitate collaboration between families and educational professionals (Jung, 2011).

A recent study by Gershwin et al., (2022) explored factors that led to parents' satisfaction with the IEP process. The researchers employed a qualitative approach by interviewing 43 parents of students with special needs to explore their experiences. Findings revealed that parental satisfaction is significantly connected with practices that followed IDEA legal requirements such as: (a) conveying a strengths-based perspective about the student, (b) utilizing meeting strategies, (c) working together as a team, (d) bringing outside support to the meeting, (e) learning about the IEP process ahead of time, and (f) having a supportive educator available to advocate for the student.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families

Drawing on observational data and 30 in-depth interviews, Kibria and Becerra (2020), found that families saw the special education system as competitive, individualized, and organized by constituents of interest and power between themselves and schools. Defined in several ways, the term CLD usually describes students from the following groups: African Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, students who speak English as a second language, and students who have undocumented or immigrant status (Griffin, 2011). Despite widespread awareness of the importance of CLD family engagement in special education, the lack of culturally responsive collaborative partnerships with CLD families has persisted as a problem (Rossetti et al., 2017).

The cultural values and beliefs of CLD parents can differ widely from the values and beliefs typically held by schools, leading to misunderstandings, mistrust, and tense relationships between parents and teachers (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). Over the past several decades, researchers have documented the need for educators to facilitate relevant curricular access for all diverse learners, with and without disabilities, highlighting the significance of meeting federal mandates by incorporating cultural and linguistic strengths and qualities into teaching and learning (Hoover et al., 2019).

Scholars believe parental involvement is constructive for student development and academic achievement; however, assessing the importance of parental involvement is full of complexity since it can be influenced by race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, cultural beliefs, and level of acculturation (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). Additionally, cultivating, increasing, and then maintaining successes in home and school partnerships requires much more than getting parents involved; it requires active engagement with the school community (Whitford & Addis, 2017). Hanson and Lynch (2013) clarified, "Parents can actively participate in all aspects of the evaluation, placement, and education process, and they have the right to challenge or appeal any decision related to the identification, evaluation, and placement of their child." (p.111). Unfortunately, there are substantial disparities in parent involvement in special education per racial and linguistic backgrounds (Burke et al., 2021).

Researchers have identified the dimensions of collaborative partnerships (Rossetti et al., 2017). After decades of studying the school and family dynamics in special education, Ferguson et al. (2013) developed a strengths-based collaboration framework, suggesting "that we first seriously listen to families' accounts of their own experiences with both schools and disability" (p. 767). The most extensive study on parent-school collaboration to date by Rossetti et al., (2017) described six components of collaborative

partnerships: (a) communication, (b) commitment, (c) equality, (d) professional competence, (e) mutual trust, and (f) mutual respect. These components of collaborative partnerships apply to all families, but the strategies focus on developing collaborative partnerships with CLD families.

Additionally, Rossetti et al., (2020) conducted four focus group interviews with Chinese, Vietnamese, and Haitian parents to examine their participation and language access in their children's IEP meetings. Findings revealed that the families' limited access to information hampered meaningful engagement. However, all the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Haitian immigrant parents in this study explicitly indicated that they wanted to engage meaningfully in their children's education through improving collaboration with school personnel to develop their children's IEPs. To engage meaningfully, the parents first needed to learn about special education policy and practice from the experienced parents in their support groups as there is a dearth of other meaningful resources. Moreover, despite actively trying to participate in the IEP meetings, parents encountered two types of barriers, some within the meetings and others between the meetings. Barriers between the meetings included a lack of accountability, little communication, and infrequent attempts to strengthen relationships with families.

A study by Burke et al. (2021) compared the special education experiences of the Spanish and English-speaking parents of children with special needs regarding decision-making. Six focus groups in two states participated in a piloted protocol with six open-ended questions in their native language. The researchers found three significant issues in the study. First, barriers such as empowerment and lack of teacher knowledge in communicating with families were heightened for Spanish-speaking families. Although English-speaking participants reported some disempowerment and lack of teacher knowledge, Spanish-speaking participants reported these issues more frequently. In

addition, while both Spanish-speaking and English-speaking participants expressed concerns about communication between parents and school, Spanish-speaking families experienced specific barriers to communication, such as a lack of translators and racism when interacting with school personnel. Finally, both English- and Spanish-speaking parents shared negative experiences that they encountered with the school. Regardless of the native language, parents in both groups desired improved collaboration and increased services for their children (Burke et al., 2021).

The Individual Education Plan

A special education student's instructional blueprint is reflected in the IEP, which guides special and general educators when teaching necessary skills for special needs children by providing appropriate goals to foster meaningful experiences (Hoover et al., 2019). Indeed, the IEP is intended to encourage communication between parents and school representatives about services and support offered to children with special needs (Slade et al., 2018). The members of the IEP team include parents, special education teachers, general education teachers, campus administrators, assessment personnel, speech-language pathologists, related services personnel (i.e., physical therapist and occupational therapist), and any other individuals who interact, work, and service the student (Ramirez, 2022).

Appropriately constructed IEPs are central to ensuring that special education services are effective and are essential to district compliance with federal and State law (Richman, 2015). Moreover, strategies to incorporate parents in the IEP goal planning, including empowering them to participate effectively in the process and ensuring effective cross-cultural communications, are part of the recommendations for best practices to serve the needs of children with disabilities (Trahan et al., 2018).

A recent study conducted by Sanderson and Goldman (2023), explored parents' satisfaction with the IEP document itself. The researchers analyzed 1,183 responses from a national survey to determine which factors promote greater parental satisfaction with the IEP document. Analysis of the survey indicated that around 40.5% of the parents were dissatisfied with their child's IEP. One of the important factors that promoted greater parent satisfaction was a stronger family-school partnership outside the IEP meeting. Additionally, features relating to the IEP meeting, such as employing a strengths-based model of the child, were among the strongest predictors of parent satisfaction. The researchers recommended additional research to evaluate how family-school partnerships and other aspects of the IEP meeting predict parental and student satisfaction with the IEP with a focus on CLD families.

Slade et al., (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine parents' satisfaction with the IEPs of their children with Autism by looking at four aspects such as content, services offered, level of agreement between IEP content and actual services provided, and effectiveness of the IEP team members. Parents of children with ASD, in the Boston, Massachusetts area, filled out an IEP satisfaction survey and some of them participated in a semi-structured interview. The researchers found that within each of the four domains, over half of the parents were generally satisfied, while over 61% were dissatisfied with one or more domains. Around 46% of parents were dissatisfied with content, 47% with services offered, and over 40% perceived their IEP teams as ineffective.

A study by Hoover et al. (2019) conducted in two school districts examined a sampling of IEPs for English language learners (ELLs) receiving special education for cultural/linguistic responsive features to inform instruction. Findings from the pilot study showed that the IEPs contained little to no reference to ELLs' diverse linguistic and

cultural qualities to meet legislative mandates and/or to guide the delivery of appropriate special education (Hoover et al., 2019). When the student is an English learner with a learning disability, legislative mandates require that school districts acknowledge the learner's language needs as they pertain to the IEP and inform parents how the language instruction method meets the IEP objectives (Hoover et al., 2019).

Despite theoretical validation and legal mandates in special education for parent participation, studies have indicated that CLD parents' roles in the IEP process still need to be more noticeable and influential. CLD parents find it more challenging to access the information, help, and resources they need and to navigate the special education system (Lim-Mullins & Cheatham, 2021).

Collaboration between CLD parents and IEP team members

Collaboration requires parity among team members. Each person's contribution must be viewed as equally valued, and each person must be given equal power in the decision-making process (Solone et al., 2020). Collaboration is based upon a commitment that all participants are necessary, listened to, and respected (Friend & Cook, 2013). Collaboration is based on establishing mutual goals among team members. For example, IEP team members must agree that the education of the student in focus is the central purpose of the meeting. In addition, the outcome for all team members should be to develop an appropriate educational program for that student, with significant input, insight, and wisdom from all team members (Solone et al., 2020).

Parent involvement in the educational process is a crucial component of a student's academic success (Erdener & Knoepfel, 2018; Meehan & Meehan, 2018). Parent involvement is required by special education law (IDEA, 2004), as it positively impacts students with special needs, by providing better continuity in interventions, improved generalization and maintenance of treatment gains, more effective strategies for

solving problems, and preferable academic performance (Burke & Goldman, 2017; Kasper, 2019). Parents of children with special needs and school professionals collaborate at many levels during the IEP meeting process. When these groups fail to connect, a lack of collaboration may impact parent participation (Jones et al., 2020). The IEP meeting mandates parental involvement in the development, review, and revision of the IEP (Sanderson, 2023).

Brown (2022) conducted a study to explore parents' perspectives of the IEP team members' behaviors that influence the level of collaboration with CLD parents. The study examined the perspectives of 17 parents from four regions in the United States through semi-structured interviews. The researcher reported that collaboration and trust were dominant themes, and both were factors in parents' views of the overall success or failure of the IEP meeting. Parents described feelings of increased collaboration when they believed the school had their child's best interest in mind because they trusted the IEP team and its process. On the contrary, parents who questioned whether the school was acting in their child's best interest described limited to no trust in the school and described the process as not collaborative or even "adversarial" (Brown, 2022). Families of students with disabilities who have stronger partnerships with IEP team members report more satisfaction with services, improved communication, trusting, respectful relationships with instructors, and a reduced need to advocate (Burke & Hodapp, 2016).

Barriers to CLD parent participation in the IEP process

The literature has indicated that compared to European American families, CLD families commonly exhibit lower levels of participation in and lack of knowledge about the special education process (Chang et al, 2022; Goldman & Burke, 2019; Montoya et al, 2022). Studies have identified a myriad of cultural and economic reasons that have contributed to families' low participation, including communication and language

barriers, cultural differences in help-seeking behaviors, history of poor relationships with schools, and beliefs about disability (e.g., Burke et al., 2020; Rossetti & Burke, 2019). Moreover, the lack of culturally responsive collaboration partnerships is usually an attribute of ethnocentric beliefs about CLD families (Wolfe & Durian, 2013). Additionally, factors contributing to parents' anxiety during their child's IEP meeting include lengthy procedures and unfamiliar special education terminology (Marx et al., 2014).

Research shows that there are many structural barriers to CLD parental involvement, such as childcare, work responsibilities, lack of appropriately translated documents, lack of resources, unwelcoming school environment, and subtractive schooling practices, which can better explain CLD parental involvement patterns (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). Parents with fewer resources and less time to dedicate to activities outside the home or their employment will undoubtedly have difficulty participating in school activities. Teachers who lack time and training in collaborating with caregivers can seem uncaring or unwilling to involve parents in their student's education (Hornby, 2011). Furthermore, the cultural and linguistic differences between caregivers and school personnel can lead to miscommunication and differing attitudes regarding acceptable involvement (Hornby, 2011). Lawless (2019) conducted a qualitative multi-case study to examine the benefits of conducting a pre-IEP meeting with CLD parents tailored to their cultural needs. The study explored CLD parents' perceptions as well as teachers' perceptions and found that conducting a pre-IEP meeting helped foster a more positive perception of the IEP by CLD parents. Additionally, it also supported CLD parents' positive perceptions of teachers.

Moreover, Jung (2011) explained that many studies have sought to examine critical factors that may hinder efficient parental participation in the educational process.

Key elements that adversely impact CLD parents include the family's acculturation level, limited English proficiency, differences in values and attitudes toward disability, communication style different from mainstream families, and a lack of knowledge about the IEP process and the school infrastructure (Chun, 2001; Harry, 1992). Additionally, the notion of parent participation may be foreign or even intimidating to some CLD parents participating in the special education system (Chang et al., 2022). A qualitative study by Montoya et al. (2022) examined the experiences of Latinx immigrant parents of children with special needs to understand their perspectives on the IEP. Using a general inductive approach and constant comparative analysis, the researchers analyzed data from semi-structured interviews. The researchers found that CLD parents faced challenges that were categorized under seven themes (a) parents' insecurity of knowledge, (b) difficult terminology, (c) confusion with the IEP process, (d) discrimination or misconceptions, (e) language barriers, (f) need of parent advocacy, and (g) staff lack of knowledge (Montoya et al., 2022).

For some families from CLD backgrounds, making decisions based on individual choice may not be readily understood as a parental right within their child's educational process because they tend to perceive such individual rights as inseparable from the group or social obligations (Jung, 2011). Also, some CLD parents tend not to argue or contradict school professionals because of their innate respect for authority. In the decision-making process for special education, limited English proficiency may not present a direct obstacle, but it often creates a significant disadvantage for parents of children with special needs while communicating with school personnel (Jung, 2011).

Collaboration depends on shared responsibility for participation and decision-making (Solone et al., 2020). Collaborators must assume the responsibility of actively engaging in decision-making processes and ensure all stakeholders do so (Solone et al.,

2020). Effective collaboration embraces the unique perspectives of all team members and requires a sense of trust and shared responsibility (Friend & Cook, 2013). Parents are fundamental team members and must be respected and encouraged to actively engage in all decision-making (Solone et al., 2020).

Knowledge of the IEP

Parents of children with special needs are required to attend IEP meetings annually to participate in their children's education and coordinate special education services (Montoya et al., 2022). Parents play many roles in an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting such as participating as a team member in creating the narrative on their child's Present Level of Performance (PLOP), advocating for their child, and contributing to the development of IEP goals for their child (Lukacs & Steeley, 2018). Parents have extensive rights, though they might only sometimes know this and may participate at varying levels of involvement, for example, parents have the right to disagree with an IEP if the team members need to consider their input, and they do not have to sign an IEP with which they are not in agreement (Lukacs & Steeley, 2018, IDEA, 2004).

Special education forms and documents are full of information that is challenging for parents to read and understand. A typical special education referral, evaluation, and determination of eligibility for a specific learning disability may easily contain more than 50 pages of printed material required by law to be provided to parents (Perry, 2020). Special education documents are very extensive and legalistic, and Perry (2020) found that this process impedes parent engagement. Similarly, McGinley (2019) advised that the laws applicable to individuals with special needs can be challenging to navigate and comprehend. Interdisciplinary teams and parents need to be knowledgeable about students' entitlements (McGinley, 2019).

Language differences can impact the readability of education documents and school correspondence, which can be challenging for CLD parents, especially those who are not fluent in English (Gonzales & Gabel, 2017). This results in communication barriers, feelings of isolation from the special education system, and often discrimination at the hands of school professionals (Jung, 2011). Parents report that IEP documents are hard to understand (Perry, 2020), additionally, some parents may have reading difficulties (Snowling et al., 2007), and such factors can contribute to parent dissatisfaction, confusion, and mistrust of school personnel. Perry (2020) revealed that a group of parents reported that IEP documents were hard to understand but offered recommendations to make the materials more parent-friendly, more qualitative, and less quantitative.

A study conducted by Burke et al. (2018) explored the benefits of providing CLD parents, specifically, Latinos, with an advocacy training program called the Latino Parent Leadership Support Project (LPLSP), a 36-hour advocacy training for Latino families of children with ASD. A total of 22 Latino parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) participated in the study. The participants read and responded to a proxy IEP transcript designed to gauge participation and advocacy in the IEP meetings, once before the training and another after it. The researchers found that parents demonstrated significant increases in the number of words used, turns taken, and appropriate advocacy comments after participating in the advocacy training. Although the parents participated more and advocated better for their children, their comments were informal and less assertive, which Burke et al. (2018) asserted, may be due to cultural differences.

Edwards (2022) conducted a study using the Family Expert Survey to explore CLD parents' perceptions of and satisfaction with the IEP procedures. In this study, 69 CLD parents answered the survey in full. Nearly 72% of the respondents indicated that they wanted to be given more information during the IEP meeting. The results showed

that CLD parents experience more barriers when engaging in IEP meetings such as lack of childcare, amount of information covered during the IEP, previous negative experiences with the IEP, and language barriers (Edwards, 2022).

Educators' power over IEP decisions

Due to the predictable agenda and format of special education committee meetings, there is a risk that school staff will merely go through the motions and focus more on the progression of meeting objectives than on the comfort and understanding of the parents (Siddiqua & Janus, 2016). When parents and students are at odds with a school district's decisions, working through differences collaboratively can result in mutually agreed-upon IEP decisions (Solone et al., 2020). Several studies found that much of the content of the IEP is decided by the school team members before the meeting, leaving CLD parents to perceive that their role is to agree and sign the document (Cavendish & Connor, 2018; Fish, 2006; Kurth et al., 2019; Lo, 2008).

The pivotal research work of Fish (2008) proposed that IEP school team members primarily control decision-making during early childhood and throughout the school years leaving parents with a limited voice in their child's education. To exacerbate the situation, parents are sometimes reluctant to consider changes to services proposed by school personnel (Elbaum et al., 2016). Consequently, school professionals sometimes misinterpret parents' passive attitudes in the IEP process as a lack of interest, a sign of low self-esteem, or on the other hand, school personnel may believe that parents are satisfied with the decisions made for their child (Jung, 2011).

A study by Sullivan (2015) found that parents perceive that they are not an integral part of the IEP process, particularly in decision-making about their child's education. More than half of the 34 parents reported that they did not have enough time to read over reports beforehand and that the IEP team did not listen or respond to their

input. Contrary to some other studies, Sullivan (2015) indicated that this result crossed all socioeconomic lines, although the sample size in this study was small. The results of this study indicated that parents continue to struggle to participate meaningfully in the decision-making responsibility as a member of the IEP team.

Similarly, Zagona et al., (2019) found that parents experienced mixed implementations to agreed decisions from the school personnel. For example, parents faced challenges getting diagnostic services for their children, inclusive placement, and other special education services. Additionally, parents felt that reaching an agreement on decisions set by the school team was a “full-time job.” One of the issues that parents advocated for is placement; for example, many parents asked for an inclusive placement for their child. Placement decisions are made by the team (IDEA, 2004), and the team needs to participate in systematic considerations of the support needed to ensure each special needs student’s success in the least restrictive environment (Zagona et al., 2019). Subsequently, IEP committee decisions are frequently seen as one-sided because decisions are primarily made by schools rather than collective decisions made with all concerned—including families (Hancock et al., 2017). Counts et al. (2018) discerned that school personnel must make a conscious effort to communicate with parents and build opportunities for active engagement; they can work together in the decision-making process of the IEP, which is in the child's best interest.

In their study, Love et al. (2017) interviewed 19 parents of children with special needs to explore how the parents were included or excluded from educational decision-making regarding placement and services during the IEP meeting. Results revealed that schools often excluded parents from decision-making by conducting pre-IEP staff meetings and using school policies, unofficial institutionalized processes, and school hierarchies. Parents felt that schools did not collaborate with them; for example, parents

were excluded by the school team from initial placement decisions and did not have any opinion in placement changes. However, parents could have some input in decision-making through positive relationships with the teachers.

Language and communication in the IEP

Communication is a key factor in building effective collaborative relationships between parents and school professionals (Schreiner, 2021). Communication is mediated by cultural norms, values, beliefs, and ways of doing things within a particular linguistic and cultural context to share, convey, construct, and interact (Ried et al., 2016).

Differences in the method, purpose, and content of communication exist in the way that parents communicate with teachers and other school personnel (Azad & Mandell, 2016; Hourri et al., 2019; Schreiner, 2021). Previous communicative experiences, both positive and negative, are likely to impact subsequent communication by enhancing or inhibiting the likelihood of a parent's willingness to engage with school professionals (Schreiner, 2021).

Special education research has stated difficulties related to intercultural communication when CLD families and school professionals interact (Lim & Cheatham, 2021). A critical cultural challenge for CLD parents is language, demonstrated as a limited English language proficiency and lesser familiarity with the established communication cues of body language and tonal inflection within the institutional cultures of the United States (Kibria & Becerra, 2020). School systems are legally obliged to provide language interpreters and translation to CLD parents; unfortunately, these accommodations are not often timely or effective, thus compromising the strength of CLD parental advocacy (Rossetti & Burke, 2018; Rossetti et al., 2017; Wolfe & Durian, 2013).

A recent study by Montoya et al. (2022) explored the perceptions of Latinx immigrant parents of children with special needs regarding their children's IEP. Findings revealed that parents faced several obstacles such as: (a) parents' insecurity of knowledge, (b) difficult terminology, (c) confusion with the IEP process, (d) discrimination or misconceptions, (e) language barriers, (f) need for parent advocacy, and (g) staff lack of knowledge. Under language barriers, Montoya et al. (2022) explained that parents spoke about the complex vocabulary school professionals adopt at the IEP meetings, leaving parents struggling to understand even if translators were provided. Similarly, some parents expressed being uncomfortable speaking to school professionals at the IEP meeting because English is not their first language, so they opted to stay silent instead of actively participating in the process.

While there is recognition that there are culturally specific ways of interacting and communicating as far as understanding the relationships between culture and communication, the application of stereotypes can lead to miscommunication in intercultural contexts (Ried et al., 2016). Similarly, Bowe et al. (2014) argue that recognizing differences and similarities between people and cultures is crucial in understanding the complexities involved in intercultural communication. Therefore, just as it is essential to acknowledge the cultural influences in communication, it is equally important to challenge the taken-for-granted stereotypes and normative "truths" that serve to impede communication (Ried et al., 2016).

Lo (2008, 2009) conducted studies exploring professional collaboration with CLD Chinese parents in the IEP meeting. Lo found several challenges and impediments to assigning interpreter services for the parents: a) IEP team members do not allow adequate time for interpreters to translate between speakers, speak without pausing for interpreters to translate, and believe that translations would not extend the meeting time; b) the use of

school employees as interpreters who are not familiar with special education terms, and may lack training in professional translating services; c) interpreters may limit translations due to perceived time constraints, translating what they believed to be necessary, or just the general idea; d) the use of interpreters who lack understanding about CLD parents' cultural beliefs and practices.

Diversity across the categories of special education impacts the unique needs and parents' perceptions of communicative support from school (Schreiner, 2021). A study conducted by Woods et al. (2018) examined variables associated with the communication and perceptions of school stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administrators. In general, parents who received the most home-school communication were more satisfied with their experiences. Additionally, parents of children with the most impairments in the school setting were likely to communicate frequently, despite experiencing high levels of communication frustration. This was particularly true for students with significant emotional and behavioral issues.

A study by Kibria and Becerra (2020) analyzed observational data and 30 in-depth interviews to examine the experiences of CLD parents negotiating public special education services for their children with severe intellectual disabilities. The study found that when CLD parents advocate for their children, they face challenges such as language and cultural denigration, having to work harder to access services, and experiencing fear of resistance and retribution. There is evidence that measures to improve communication with the parents of children with disabilities are a requirement to facilitate genuine collaboration and effective problem-solving (Collier et al., 2015). Parent engagement is likely to be reciprocated by school professionals when proactive, positive communication and dedicated efforts to involve families are actively used (Carlson et al., 2020).

CLD parental input in the IEP

Improving the education of their disabled children requires parents to be actively involved and advocate for their children's needs (Montoya et al., 2022). A literature review conducted by Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) on IEP found that although parents frequently attended the meetings, they often needed to be provided an opportunity to contribute significantly to the content of the meeting. Similarly, Jones and Gansle (2010) found that there were few requests for input from the parents by the IEP school team members. Likewise, Jung (2011) noted that parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are not typically actively involved in the various components of IEPs, such as evaluation, developing IEP goals, and arranging intervention services related to their child's disability, regardless of their attendance in the IEP. Similarly, when parents push to include their input during times of conflict, for example, they may find themselves even further isolated from their child's team and in an adversarial position (Stoner et al., 2005).

Furthermore, Tucker and Schwartz (2013) conducted a mixed methods study to explore barriers that hinder the equal participation of parents of children with autism disorder in the IEP. The study found that parents did not receive opportunities to provide input, encountered challenges communicating with the IEP team, and adopted a negative view of school team members. As a result of their research, Tucker and Schwartz (2013) concluded that IEP teams must not employ practices that denigrate the CLD parents' abilities to be equal members of the team in decision-making; these practices can be, for example, presenting a finished draft of the IEP; This makes the parent unprepared to participate fully, and leads them to feel undervalued. Additionally, it is essential to provide access to all documents to be discussed in the meeting, for parents will not be

able to participate fully as equal members of the IEP if they do not receive relevant information as other team members (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

Using content analysis, a study on parental input by Kurth et al. (2019) analyzed 88 IEP documents of students with special needs. The aim was to investigate parents' team membership, concerns parents raised during the IEP meeting, and evidence that parents' concerns and priorities reflected in the IEP goals, aids, and services. Regarding the parental section on the IEP documents, the researchers found that some documents had an exceedingly small section for parents to fill in while others limited parent input to an attendance checklist. The researchers also found that despite parent identification concerns for, and strengths of their children, their input did not translate into actual IEP goals, support, and services. In fact, “about one-third of parent-identified concerns and priorities had no corresponding goals and services. Other times, the goals and services directly contradicted parent statements” (p. 495).

Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Systems Theory (EST) depicts a convergence of biological, psychological, and social sciences (Crawford, 2020). By studying the ecology of human development, social sciences attempt to clarify and understand how individuals interact with interrelated systems within their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1983a).

Bronfenbrenner (1994) aimed to create a theory of human development that would consider all systems that have an impact on how an individual lives, regardless of how remote those influences may be. Ecological Systems theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979), describes human development through the prism of the environmental connections and the direct influence they have on psychological development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory comprises multiple environmental systems (microsystem,

mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) that provide the context in which child development occurs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

This study considered two levels of the model, the microsystem, and the mesosystem. The microsystem includes the relevance of immediate settings on the developing child, such as their school and home environments. The mesosystem focuses on the influence of the interactions among these immediate settings, considering communication and school supports available that facilitate healthy family-school relationships. The current study explored the lived experience and sense-making of the CLD parents in the mesosystem realm of the child's environment to understand the interactions between CLD parents and their children's IEP team. The findings from the current study may contribute to the existing literature by providing insight into CLD parents' level of satisfaction and the types of school-provided support available to facilitate CLD parents' participation in decision-making in the IEP meeting of their child.

Through the ecological systems theory model, Bronfenbrenner noted that optimal development occurs when effective connections and continuities among these effective systems are created (Kim & Sheridan, 2015). By this, the current study intended to examine how CLD parents perceive their sense-making of advocacy through participating in decision-making during the IEP meeting. If CLD parents are advocating effectively in the IEP meeting, this process would facilitate an optimal home and school collaboration that allows optimal growth for the child with special needs. For CLD parents facing challenges in participating in decision-making, it is critical to consider the effect of weak family-school partnerships on the child's mesosystem because it can negatively impact the child's microsystem (Amant et al., 2018). Additionally, information about family-school interactions will increase our understanding of disparities, service access, and reception to services for the CLD parents' community. The different levels of the model

from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems were considered to help define and discuss the significance of family-school partnerships for effective IEP planning.

Summary

A review of past and current literature documents the ongoing challenges the CLD parents face with the IEP process despite the important work done by policy and educational team members to improve the quality of services offered to special needs students and their caregivers. CLD parents continue to encounter difficulties in effectively participating in the IEP due to a lack of relevant knowledge about their rights, the special education system, and the IEP process. Moreover, CLD parents experience a power imbalance with the IEP team members when they attend the meeting with predetermined goals and services which impedes collaboration. Finally, language barriers and ineffective communication practices inhibit the CLD parents' participation in decision-making leading to a significant lack of input during the IEP meeting. There is a need to understand CLD parents' experiences during the IEP meeting on a deeper level by encouraging them to analyze their experiences through reflection. The next chapter presents the methodology adopted to achieve in-depth knowledge of CLD parents' experiences.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study adopted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach developed by Smith et al. (2009) to examine how culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents make sense of their involvement in decision-making during the individual education plan (IEP) meeting. Parental involvement is a key component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), especially when developing students' IEPs (IDEA, 2004). Yell et al. (2013) highlighted the importance of every member of the public schools' IEP team placing a high priority on involving CLD students' parents in a collaborative effort to develop suitable educational programs and determine appropriate placements. Indeed, Bateman (2014) explained that parental involvement is central in all decisions regarding the child's program and placement, so, when full and equal parental participation is abridged or denied, a denial of a student's right to free appropriate public education (FAPE) will presumably be found.

The study employed Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) as a theoretical framework to understand the importance of connections between parents and school professionals concerning the child's development. This chapter presents an overview of the research problem, research purpose and questions, research design, researcher role, participant selection, data collection procedures, data analysis, validity, reliability, privacy and ethical considerations, and research design limitations.

Overview of the Problem

Over forty years have passed since the original IDEA legislation; still, parents report that school IEP teams primarily drive decisions at the IEP meetings (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). IDEA requires caregivers' inclusion in their student's education by the explicit obligation to be on their student's IEP team as full and equal participants (Yell et

al., 2013). Parent participation is manifested by the IDEA accountability system, which obliges states to report the percentage of positive feedback from parents about school efforts in facilitating their involvement (Office of Special Education Programs, 2013). Parents' input is especially important during the IEP concerning decision-making aspects, including assessment, present level, goals, services, and placement (Kurth et al., 2019). However, CLD parents indicate that their lack of involvement is a result of the special educators' practices that coerce them to concede to pre-made decisions during the IEP meeting instead of encouraging parental input and participation (Mbesha, 2013).

Participation in the educational decision-making process is by far the most distinctive component of parental involvement among parents of children with disabilities (Ruiz, et al, 2019). Parent participation is an important determinant in increasing the effectiveness of children's special education programs and services (Chang et al., 2022). Active participation in the IEP process includes making decisions regarding their children's educational assessment, planning, and intervention services (Division of Early Childhood, 2014). Parents' participation in educational decisions about their children with disabilities, is often viewed as advocating for the child (Ruiz, et.al, 2019). CLD parents provide valuable input and advocate for their children's best interests, and their involvement in the educational process increases the accountability of the IEP team (Chang et al., 2022).

Parents are regarded as an important part of the IEP team in accomplishing successful outcomes for their children that manifest in positive cognitive development, academic achievement, and behaviors (Webster et al., 2017). Despite literature acknowledging the importance of parents' role, research shows that there is insufficient active participation of CLD parents in the IEP (Wade, 2006) and that the IEPs often fail to include parent concerns and priorities (Webster et al., 2017). Additionally, many

families, particularly those from CLD backgrounds, are unfamiliar with the IEP process and their rights under IDEA, leading to negative experiences with schools (Burke et al., 2020; Lo, 2012). Current studies note an absence of school acceptance of parental input by not asking for it and being unresponsive to it (Elbaum et al., 2016).

One recent study involving Chinese, Vietnamese, and Haitian immigrant families found that limited access to special education information and the lack of educator accountability contributed to families' lack of meaningful engagement and active participation (Rossetti et al., 2020). These barriers prevented CLD families from becoming active participants in their children's IEPs and highlighted the need for more support for parents to become equal partners in the IEP process (Chang et al. 2022).

Effective collaboration and partnerships between schools and families are needed to foster a positive change in CLD parents' participation in their children's academic success (Rossetti et al., 2020). Communication, competence, commitment, advocacy, respect, equality, and trust have been determined as seven key principles for positive collaborative family-professional partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015). The attention to the emotional aspects (e.g., empathy, compassion, and dignity) of how families and professionals interact can significantly impact the quality of these relationships (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015).

The notion of parent advocacy may be unfamiliar or even intimidating to some families entering the special education system, specifically those from CLD backgrounds (Chang et al., 2022). The research identified multiple cultural and economic reasons that contributed to CLD parents' low participation, including communication and language barriers, cultural differences in help-seeking behaviors, history of poor relationships with schools, and beliefs about disability (e.g., Burke et al., 2020; Rossetti & Burke, 2019). Family-centered practices allow for a deeper understanding of families' views on

disability and individualized programming and help avoid cultural stereotypes (Dunst et al., 2007; Rivera et al., 2022).

Research Purpose and Questions

Current research reveals gaps in the literature and a lack of culturally sensitive approaches to parent engagement before and during IEP meetings (Barrio et al., 2017). This interpretative phenomenological qualitative (IPA) study aimed to examine Arab culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents' lived experiences and how they make sense of their involvement in decision-making during the individual education plan (IEP) meeting. The aim was to gather Arab CLD parents' perceptions and sense-making about the experience (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Grounded in principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA is used by researchers to explore individuals' meaning-making related to specific significant experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Good IPA research questions focus on a particular contextualized experience, and they are usually open and exploratory (Smith et al., 2009). The exploratory research question is intended to draw out the essences and meanings of Arab CLD parents' experiences participating in decision-making during the IEP of their child per the theoretical foundation for the proposed qualitative IPA study. The research question is:

What are the perceptions of Arab CLD parents when reflecting on their involvement in decision-making for their child in IEP meetings?

Research Design

Qualitative research is an approach to examining and understanding the meaning individuals ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The essence of qualitative research is to make sense of and identify patterns among data to develop a meaningful picture without undermining its richness and dimensionality (Leung, 2015). Qualitative research seeks to understand and explore rather than to

explain and manipulate variables. It is contextualized and interpretive, emphasizing the process or patterns of development rather than the product or outcome of the research (Nassaji, 2020). Therefore, qualitative studies allow the researcher to turn an assumption into a question that investigates a social or human problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, human emotions and perspectives are essential and inevitable (Leung, 2015).

This qualitative study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design to explore the lived experiences of Arab CLD parents. IPA is a qualitative research approach (Tuffour, 2017). As such, IPA provides researchers with the opportunity to perceive the innermost deliberation of the ‘lived experiences’ of research participants (Alase, 2017). IPA focuses on the detailed examination of human lived experience expressed in its terms rather than according to a predefined category system (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is created on the assumption that when a momentous experience occurs in a human’s life, this leads to a natural opportunity for reflection and is often steeped in emotions (Smith et al., 2009).

Three major philosophical underpinnings influenced the development of the IPA method of qualitative inquiry: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith & Nizza, 2022). According to Smith and Nizza (2022), phenomenology is “the philosophical approach to the study of human experience” (p.7). The concept of phenomenology stemmed from the work of Husserl (1859-1938) who theorized that “experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Husserl sought to understand how the experience of a given phenomenon could be understood accurately enough to discover its essential qualities (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Phenomenology “explicitly focuses on the essence of the lived experience, grounded in a shared human condition.” (Billups, 2021). This helps the researcher to have a deeper understanding of the lived experience because the essence uncovered makes “an attempt to represent their emotional, psychological, and transformative journeys.” (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological studies continue to examine the lived experiences of individuals to understand how to provide proper therapeutic support, amend the curriculum, or better prepare for the future (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The philosophy of hermeneutics, which is the theory of interpretation, also underpins IPA. Heidegger (1889-1976), a student of Husserl, inherited the commitment to close examination of experience in its own terms but with the consideration that the meaning of experience is not always self-evidently visible and that to reach meaning involves digging deeper beyond the surface level (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Heidegger added more insight by emphasizing that the phenomenologist's role is to facilitate the release of information that would otherwise be concealed beneath the surface (Smith et al., 2009). Specifically, in IPA, researchers become involved in a double hermeneutic process whereby the participant is attempting to make sense of their experience while the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense-making (Smith & Osborne, 2003, p. 51). The dynamism of interpretation and reflection resonates very well with the hermeneutic circle model which represents the dynamic relationship between the ‘part’ and the ‘whole’ at several levels for a holistic analytical interpretation (Tuffour, 2017). In IPA, the ‘part’ corresponds to the experience of the participant, and the ‘whole’ is related to the knowledge and experience of the researcher (Smith et al., 2009).

The third major theoretical perspective influencing IPA is idiography, which is defined as a focus on the particular (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Incorporating idiography

allows the design to not only adopt a rich and descriptive understanding of the phenomena through the words of the participants but also recognize that individual cases are fundamental to the researcher's understanding (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Smith et al. (2009) explained that researchers who use IPA are "committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context" (p. 29). IPA employs the idiographic method as it analyzes experiences case by case before possibly making connections between the cases (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The researcher of an IPA study, according to Smith et al., (2009), intends to leverage the participants' moment of reflection and emotion to gather rich data on the significant life experience from the perspective of the individual experiencing this event. Similarly, Smith and Nizza (2022) explain that IPA researchers aim for insight into what it is like to experience a certain phenomenon from the point of view of those who encounter it to elicit elaborate descriptions, aiming to capture the emotions surrounding the experience, how people understand it and make sense of it. In particular, the goal of IPA is to get as close as possible to the lived experience of participants to examine it in detail (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Moreover, IPA as a qualitative method is made of both convergent and divergent themes, which serve to illustrate the impacts of the phenomenon (Pringle et al., 2011). Therefore, the IPA approach helps the researcher to go deep into the pathos-laden experiences of a participant, i.e., CLD parents, while also maintaining their true and unique representation.

In this study, analysis directly related to CLD parents' sense-making of their lived experience. Specifically, this study examined Arab CLD parents' perceptions of their experiences during the IEP meeting, particularly participating in decision-making.

Researcher Role

In qualitative research, the researcher reflects on how their role and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold the potential to influence their interpretations, such as the themes they introduce and the meaning they ascribe to the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher comes from a very diverse cultural and linguistic background with multiple ethnicities, specifically, Lebanese, Pakistani, and Saudi Arabian. Growing up I experienced both sides of being a native and a foreigner.

My education included a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Linguistics which ignited my interest in the unique ways people use language to communicate revealing the value of linguistics and communication. After receiving the Bachelor of Arts degree, I participated in a two-year training program at a center for special needs children and became a certified special needs teacher. Additionally, I earned a master's degree in teaching English as a second language (TESOL) from a university in the United States. This degree fueled my academic passion for our English language learners and best practices in learning language and overcoming barriers in communication. Currently, I am pursuing my doctoral degree in Educational Leadership with a specialization in special populations as it enhances my prior and current educational interests and builds on academic and professional experiences.

On the professional side, I worked as a preschool teacher for children with special education needs and wrote IEPs. I also gained unique experience collaborating with parents in the early intervention department for children with special needs. Additionally, I taught English language for upper elementary grades at a private school for several years. As a parent when I came to the USA, I experienced the educational system through my children as they entered the public schools as ESL students. I also have a son who required special needs services in the form of a 504 plan, which gave me a unique insight

into the Arabic CLD parents' experiences as my native language is Arabic. These experiences helped me attain valuable knowledge through being a teacher, a student, and a parent within the realm of ESL and the special needs community.

As a qualitative researcher using the IPA approach, my goal was to examine the lived experiences of CLD parents by conducting interviews to gain insight into their perceptions of participating in decision-making for their children with special needs during the IEP meeting. I worked on building trust with the CLD parents by volunteering at the non-profit organization from which they were recruited. Building trust is important to make the parent feel at ease sharing their deepest thoughts and sense-making of their experiences. I crafted a welcoming environment in which CLD parents were able to share their 'lived experience' stories without worries of distortions (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, my responsibility was to ensure that I noticed the "underlying dynamics of the experience" of my participants (Moustakas, 1994).

IPA being inductive, in nature, allows flexibility and prevents the researchers from designing questions that may potentially create causality or predictions (Ukeye, 2021). Given that IPA interprets the participants' responses, the researcher needs to engage in a 'double hermeneutic' process, whereby the participant is trying to make sense of their experience while, at the same time, the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant's sense-making (Smith & Osbourne, 2003, p.5 1). This is an integral part of the IPA process because the researcher is an outsider who may not be familiar with all the participants' preconceptions, therefore as an IPA researcher, I practiced reflexivity (Smith et al., 2009). The best way to engage in reflective practice was for me to 'bracket' my previous assumptions and remain open to the phenomenon as it unfolds.

Participant Selection

IPA research aims to illuminate individual participants' lived experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Studies conducted with the IPA methodology typically rely on a small, purposively selected sample of participants who have a close and thorough understanding of the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). In IPA, sampling must be selected purposively since the aim is to offer the research project insight into a particular experience (Smith et al. 2009).

IPA focuses on small and homogeneous samples; the research question being addressed must be meaningful to participants who are purposively selected because they have experienced the phenomena (Smith et al. 2009). In IPA, 'homogeneity' refers to a possible shared perspective of the phenomenon of interest (Larkin et al, 2019). The number of participants in IPA studies is small (typically less than 10) to enable a detailed micro-level analysis of the participants' accounts (Smith et al., 2009). Each participant offers a rich reflective account of their experience and represents their perspectives (Smith et al., 2009). Notions of generalizability are a contradiction in IPA because participants are recruited for their individual experiences and perspectives, rather than to represent perceptions of a wider population (Smith et al., 2009).

Since the group of participants is small and specific, recruitment usually happens through referral by gatekeepers, by other participants such as snowballing, or by the researcher's contacts (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Sample studies in IPA depend on the complexity of the topic and context, so anywhere between three to ten is a good number of participants to aim for (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Smith et al. (2009) emphasized that "IPA studies are conducted on relatively small sample sizes, and the aim is to find a reasonably homogeneous sample, so that, within the sample, we can examine convergence and divergence in some detail" (p. 3). This study aimed to use a small

sample size of around three to five participants which was in keeping with IPA as the emphasis on idiographic analysis was maintained.

Participants were purposively selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) all parents must be Arab immigrants who have a special needs child attending public school; (b) all parents must have attended more than one IEP meeting. The researcher contacted several gatekeepers of two non-profit organizations that serve the special needs community, one based in Texas and the other serving nationwide. The researcher also reached out to CLD parents through a local special needs Sunday school program at the local Islamic Center and the researcher's social contacts. The snowballing technique was used to recruit as many participants as possible to choose CLD parents that would best fit the study. The researcher gained access to potential participants through word of mouth followed by direct messaging through emails, phone calls, text messages, and social media messaging such as WhatsApp to connect with participants and confirm their approval. The researcher described the study to the CLD parents and obtained their consent to participate (see Appendix B).

Data Collection Procedures

The qualitative research process consists of emerging questions and procedures, the data is usually collected in the participant's preferred setting, data analysis inductively builds from specific to general themes, and the researcher constructs interpretations of the meaning of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Before beginning the data collection, the researcher obtained approval from the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) at the University of Houston-Clear Lake (UHCL).

When choosing a data collection method, IPA is considerably suited to invite participants to offer rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, data was collected through one-to-one, semi-structured, in-depth

interviews. Interviews for this study explored the perceptions of CLD parents on their involvement in decision-making during the individual education plan (IEP) meeting (see Appendix A).

In qualitative research, the questions become expansive and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation, typically formed in discussions or interactions with other people. The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interview guides in IPA are a collection of simple, straightforward, open-ended questions specifically designed to lead participants toward responses that indirectly help the researcher answer the study's questions (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The researcher developed open-ended interview questions to guide the interview with participants. The interview questions were formed using the literature review on the research topic and other relevant interview protocols previously done. The open-ended questions were designed to explore the perceptions of CLD parents and were worded in a way that is free of professional jargon to facilitate the understanding of what is asked. The piloted interview questions were assessed on a CLD parent, who was not a participant in the study, to make sure that the questions were relevant and easy to understand.

Smith and Osborn (2007) describe the semi-structured interview as “the exemplary method for IPA” (p. 57). The semi-structured interview allows some flexibility to follow up on what is being said to gain a more in-depth understanding of the experience while also providing the structure to ensure that the interviewer covers all the planned questions. The researcher conducted a semi-structured interview using an interview guide that included questions alternating between descriptive and narrative and those that were more analytical and reflective (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Questions in a

semi-structured interview for IPA are “prepared so that they are open and expansive; the participant should be encouraged to talk at length” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 59).

The interviews were conducted through the Zoom platform based on the participants’ preferences. The researcher conducted the interview in Arabic, to allow the parents to speak freely about their experiences. One parent chose to answer the questions in both Arabic and English language. The time spent was around an hour to an hour and a half, depending on the participants’ needs. The researcher recorded the interview to transcribe and wrote down any relevant notes.

Since the researcher is bilingual in both English and Arabic with expertise in academic language as well as the different conversational dialects of Arabic, the researcher chose to translate the interviews and transcribe them in both Arabic and English. As the researcher experienced firsthand the participants’ accounts of their experiences, this led to a more realistic and appropriate choice of translation output. The researcher also acknowledged the importance of attending to verbal and non-verbal communication output from the Arab CLD parents, in providing relevant and more authentic translation to the participants’ answers.

Data Analysis

A hallmark of fine qualitative research is the record of the diversity of perspectives on the topic (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher utilized the process of bracketing to eliminate the researcher’s prejudgments and beliefs on the topic of this research study. Creswell (2013) describes bracketing as a critical component of a qualitative study in which the researchers strive to set aside their knowledge, judgments, and assumptions from findings in the data collection and analysis of the research study. IPA researcher’s commitment to interpretation and idiographic depths demands engagement in a careful analytic reading of the participant quotes (Nizza et al., 2021).

Good IPA analysis is interpretative rather than descriptive, it also captures similarities and differences among participants, giving attention to convergence and divergence (Smith, 2011).

IPA has two primary aims (a) to explore in detail how the participant makes sense of life experience, and (b) to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the account to understand the experience (Smith et al., 2009). Data analysis for this study was completed using the steps of analysis in IPA described by Smith and Nizza (2022). The first step was reading the transcripts more than once while listening to the audio data to better understand the participant's feelings and answers. While reading the interview transcript, the researcher made exploratory notes categorizing them into descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual (Smith et al., 2009).

The second step consisted of formulating Personal Experiential Statements (PETs) (see Appendix C) by capturing in a succinct form what the researcher learned about the meaning of the experience to the participant. Each PET was a summary of prominent ideas in the notes which are dense and rich pointing to both the important psychological process and the context of the process being conjured by the participant's response (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In the third step, the researcher worked on finding connections and clustering the formulated PETs. This stage aimed to review and refine experiential statements by grouping similar ones, extracting, synthesizing, and identifying a common structure (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In step four, the researcher compiled identified clusters into a table of PETs, labeling each cluster with the relevant theme (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

The final stage was to find Group Experiential Statements (GETs) (see Appendix D) by performing a cross-analysis to identify whether there were any common patterns and idiosyncratic differences within the similarities, in addition to noticing how one case

may shed light on another (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The outcome was a table of GETs that provided the basis for writing up the analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). To achieve that, the researcher performed a cross-analysis by conducting a first pass review of each participant table. Then, the researcher worked on identifying group experiential themes from a combination of rigorous screening across tables of personal experiential themes searching for links (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The final output was a table (see Appendix C) portraying a sequence of group experiential themes with keywords from participants to denote the evidence supporting the final analysis (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Attention to researcher reflexivity is important during all stages of the analysis process (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Smith et al., 2009).

Validation

Validity is broadly defined as the state of being well-grounded or justifiable, relevant, meaningful, logical, confirming accepted principles, or the quality of being sound, just, and well-founded (Merriam-Webster, 2016). Validity in qualitative research is manifested through the elaboration on the appropriateness of the tools, processes, and data (Leung, 2015). Similarly, qualitative validity means that the researcher verifies the accuracy of the findings through adopting relevant procedures (Gibbs, 2007). Qualitative investigators ideally consider validity issues throughout the process of inquiry, particularly in the planning and analytic phases (Whittemore et al., 2001).

As per Whittemore et al. (2001) guidelines for demonstrating validity, the researcher employed several techniques to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the study. From the design consideration, the researcher adhered closely to the sampling protocols followed by IPA design such as making sure that the sample is homogenous and small enough to render the depth needed in the analysis. From the beginning, the researcher ensured that the selection process of participants was done with the utmost

‘carefulness’ and integrity so that the research participants and sites were selected for the right reasons and based on the ‘lived experiences’ that the participants purported to have experienced (Alase, 2017).

The researcher also made sure by using idiographic accounts to give voice to the participants in sharing their lived experiences and listening to their interpretations and sense-making of the phenomenon. As an approach that is ‘participant oriented,’ IPA allows the participants to express themselves and their ‘lived experience’ stories the way they see fit without any distortion and/or prosecution (Alase, 2017)

As for data generation, the researcher used techniques such as explaining in detail data collection decisions pertaining to the IPA design. In IPA, the interview protocols allow participants to articulate rich and dense data that mirrors the lived experience and their interpretations at a deeper level. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) assert that “IPA shares the view that human beings are sense-making creatures, and therefore the accounts which participants provide will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experience” (p. 4).

To ensure study credibility, the researcher employed member-checking by sharing the PETs with the participants to ensure the accuracy and validity of the analysis and allow the participants to make changes as they saw fit. Maxwell (2013) noted that member checking, is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed. (pp. 126–127)

At the presentation level, the researcher also included excerpts of the rich descriptions provided by participants in chapter four of this study’s findings. In adopting

such techniques, the researcher aims to determine the validity ideals of this study, employ the optimal methodological techniques, and critically present the data accurately.

Reliability

Reliability is based on consistency and caution when applying research practices, which are reflected in the transparency of research practices, analysis, and conclusions, reflected in an open account that keeps an eye on the limitations and biases of the research findings (Davies & Dodd, 2002). Qualitative reliability denotes that the researcher's approach is consistent across other researchers (Gibbs, 2007). Yin (2009) proposed that researchers set up a detailed methodology protocol; and database so others can follow the procedures. The following processes established by Gibbs (2018) were utilized to ensure reliability: transcripts were reviewed multiple times to confirm no errors occurred during transcription; data were repeatedly compared to codes and code definitions to ascertain deviation in code definition did not occur.

Privacy and Ethical Considerations

Ethics are considered a priority due to the involvement of people's personal lives and experiences as a part of the study and research process (Peters, 2021). Tracy (2010) emphasizes the significance of ethical research when she states that "ethics are not just a means, but rather constitute a universal end goal of qualitative quality" (p. 846). For this study, I reached out to the parents and obtained their approval verbally as well as got them to sign a consent form (Appendix B). The parents were informed about their guaranteed rights to know why this research is being conducted, what educational results might come of this study, and how safe their classified information will be kept, as well as their right to ask questions at any time, and withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. The parents were assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality; also, pseudonyms were used to identify locations and other individuals as needed. Completed

interview responses, notes, and other related materials will be kept in a locked file cabinet for five years after the research is completed.

Research Design Limitations

This study had a few limitations. First, the sample size was small, which limited the generalizability of the findings. The experiences of the Arab CLD parents may not represent those of other groups. The idiographic focus of an IPA study also ensured that the findings show a detailed understanding of how individual participants understand or perceive an event. Due to the individualistic nature of this, the discoveries may not be equivalent to the experiences of other people experiencing this same event (Peters, 2021). Although the findings may not represent all CLD parents attending IEP meetings, the data will hopefully be able to assist others working with similar populations.

Summary

In summary, this study employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore in-depth Arab CLD parents' sense-making of their experience with the IEP meeting. IPA design sheds light on the innermost deliberation of the “lived experience” by focusing on the detailed idiographic details of the experience. Consequently, the study aimed to understand the Arab CLD parents’ views on their involvement in decision-making during the IEP meeting.

CHAPTER IV:

FINDINGS

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to examine Arab CLD parents' lived experiences and how they made sense of their involvement in decision-making during the individual education plan (IEP) meeting. Annual IEP meetings are essential for parents of children with disabilities to plan their children's education and coordinate special education services (Montoya et al., 2022). Parents provide valuable information about their children that transcends what is obtained through a formal or informal evaluation (Lo, 2013). Participation in the educational decision-making process is considered one of the most distinguishing elements of parental involvement among CLD parents of children with special needs (Ruiz et al., 2019). Moreover, parent input during decision-making is fundamental for applying effective, equitable instruction and services for all children (Elbaum et al., 2016). Successful IEP development involves an equal partnership between parents and school officials because IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) classifies parents as first members when defining the intended team for IEP development (Singh & Keese, 2020).

The study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of Arab CLD perceptions of their involvement in decision-making by analyzing their lived experiences through idiographic accounts and reflections. The research question was:

What are the perceptions of Arab CLD parents when reflecting on their involvement in decision-making for their child in IEP meetings?

Parent Participant Demographics

Three Arabic-speaking CLD parents were selected to participate in the study. The parents all lived within the city where the study took place. However, the participating parents' children attended different school districts in the Southeast Texas area. All the parents participating in the interviews had a college degree. All the participants immigrated to the United States from Iraq and spoke Arabic as their native language.

The following names are pseudonyms given to each participant to protect their identity and respect their privacy. The participants and their children were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and respect their privacy.

Parent Participants

Parent Sama

Sama is a medical doctor who immigrated from Iraq. She is a mother of two children, Sultan aged seven, and Salmin aged four. Sama shared her heartfelt journey of discovery and adaptation as a mother to her son, Sultan, who is seven years old. When Sultan was born, he appeared to be developing typically. However, around the age of three years, she noticed delays - no language, no eye contact, and difficulty following instructions, so she went to a developmental pediatrician where she received the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. Sama, a new mother in a foreign country, felt lost, sought advice from others, and embarked on a journey of pursuing knowledge and advocacy for her child.

Sama's experience with the IEP meetings displays the indispensability of significant knowledge. Sama's experience started with the IEP when her husband attended one by himself before the school year started. Absence of knowledge about the IEP led her to underestimate its value, she disclosed, "The first ARD meeting my husband attended, I did not attend, I mean, I mean, I did not know that it is very

important at all.... this was before the school” But after her son started attending school that same year, she asked for another meeting,

After he went to the school, I went, I wanted to see, I started messaging the teacher, what is happening? I told her I wanted an ARD meeting another time, I wanted to attend, I want, I mean I told her I was confused; I do not know what you are doing.

Sama’s lack of knowledge affected the type and level of participation during the IEP meeting,

So, we did the meeting, and we told her ok and followed through the plan, you know it is all (we do), we sign, we sign promptly, we do not know, we said okay yes, the plan is okay, and we sign promptly.

Sama elaborates on the importance of providing sufficient and suitable information in a timely manner, to promote better participation for the parents during the IEP meeting, “They must give me the goals, and objectives before the (IEP) meeting, this is what will be discussed in the meeting, to give me what we will discuss in the meeting, and do you agree on these? Do you have additional things that you want to add more?”

Sama talks about the importance of providing essential information before the meeting, which Sama did not get, “Before (the IEP meeting), no, they do not give us anything, but during the meeting, they start explaining what his level is now...” She explains the importance of sharing knowledge before the meeting, “to give me what we will discuss in the meeting...Prepare me.”

An essential feature of Sama’s experience with the IEP meeting is the need for effective communication practices to achieve better outcomes, “I would love more explanation, meaning, they explain for me more about the plan.” She elaborated on the needed strategies of explanation, “That they explain a bit more slowly, not to be fast and

you sign this.” Similarly, Sama described that the communication should be ongoing “This plan to be comprehensive between me and you, I mean to be done through dialogue front and back.” She mentioned the school’s ineffective communication methods by not providing sufficient explanation, “They explain in a few words.” Alternatively, not answering her concerns, “I mean, no one gave me an answer, No one guided me where to go.” This affected her level of input, “I feel it is very little,” and the type of input to be limited, “I mean sometimes I talk to them if I have a question or something like that, but you cannot say that I am the main, that I am the one who is always, so it is little, little.”

Sama pointed out the importance of collaboration with the school to help her son. She described her feelings about collaboration, “I love to be a part, an indivisible part, they ok, they work at school, I want that I also work at home...” She elaborates on how she sees collaboration, “I and they (the IEP team) be with me always... we want to do this thing, you at home this is your role.” Sama values collaborating closely with the teacher, “she started to work with him, and you know me, I am always with her, always anything happens.” Sama places enormous importance on school-home collaboration, “I love that everything they do, I do at home, ... even if it is academic.” Sama perceives that collaboration leads to effective IEPs. “I want a plan that covers everything, all the things, the weakness that he has, and this plan to be comprehensive between me and you.”

Advocating for her son, Sama discloses pursuing knowledge and attempting to advocate, “I try with everything to provide for him anything that I learned... I demand from them.” She expressed her dismay at the school’s lack of response, “I try, I mean I try with them, but I feel they do not, they do not want, I do not know whether they are the ones who make the rule, or they do not care.” Sama’s advocacy is limited to asking questions or correcting any misconceptions “Sometimes I talk to them if I have a question... I would only interfere to correct and afterward to consent.” Sama describes

asking for more services, “There are some things like, for example, speech also, I feel I need more and this occupational therapy that is not available at all.” She expresses her frustration at the lack of resources, “But I do not think they have all the facilities...” Ultimately, Sama wishes for a more active role in the IEP meetings and decision-making process, “In the meeting, I aspire to have more role in devising the plans (IEP).”

Parent Manar

Manar is a mother of two; her eldest is Muhannad, who is 11 years old, and Leen, five years old. Muhannad currently attends grade five in an elementary public school in the southwest region of Texas. Manar talked about the journey of parenting her child, Muhannad, who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of two. Since then, Manar mentioned embarking on a mission to find appropriate schooling and services for her child, moving from state to state.

Manar’s experience with attending IEPs is abundant; she describes it as “A lot, a lot, he started to go to school, I think, he was four, he started going to preschool, kindergarten, and elementary, and all those years, I must attend the IEPs. I attended more than once.” Manar explained that the IEP meeting experience varied from year to year. Her journey in advocacy started to gain momentum as her child grew older and needed more services,

The first few years, because he was little, we followed the school's program, and there were no problems. However, as he got older, the services started to change, and we started to ask for more things from the school. So, I would say we started to ask for more than one meeting a year, sometimes twice a year we would do.

Manar highlighted her recent experience attending IEP meetings after they moved to the current region. She expressed her perception, “For example, last year in April, we

had difficulties with the program because it was our first year moving to this region, and we struggled because we asked for services for him, and they gave us different services.” She went on to explain her tireless efforts advocating for her child, “That year we had maybe four meetings, and we asked for services.” Manar describes that it was not easy to advocate for the services, “last year we had to fight with them to get the right thing.”

Manar describes the value of being an advocate and participating in decision-making in the IEP meeting by disclosing that:

Yes, a part, yes a part, it is a must, a must to be a part, I mean even if they on the opposite regard you as a weak and small part, but we have to try to impose ourselves and be a big part, and an effective part because we want to deliver the voice on behalf of our son, I have to be an effective part.

She goes on to highlight the importance of the parents’ role in getting their child’s rights and needs.

My role is not only a mother, and there is no way for me to express his thoughts, although he is not non-verbal. He can speak, and he can read, but he cannot speak in his case. So, first things first, we are his mother and father but at the same time we try to be his voice so he can get whatever he needs from society.

The desire for progress is what ignites Manar’s attempts to participate in decision-making during the IEP meeting; for example, when advocating for services, “The mom, when she sees there are services that can help him (son), he can change for the better, but when the services are not enough, no, you (mom) feel there is no progress, there is no progress, little and weak.” Similarly, concerns of regression or negative outcomes are other reasons Manar identifies for example when advocating for the appropriate placement for her child based on prior negative experience of an improper placement,

“Yes, but he did it in the past and did not get much progress from it, so he declined.”

Manar elaborates more on this issue:

We know for sure from our experience, since he was in a similar class before, his state was not good at all, and I can say he had psychological distress because he used to cry every day for a year whenever he entered a school because of this (type) of class (life skills) when he was younger. So, we do not want to give him the same experience.

Manar described the input level during the IEP meeting as sufficient, “Usually, it is enough; we usually ask all the questions that we want and not only sign.” She elaborates on her experience when participating in the IEP goals during the meeting,

We give our opinions (on the goals) in the meeting; for example, last year, some of the goals we agreed to, and other goals maybe (not), because we are his family, we see him more and know him more in certain aspects. Some things they (school) know more about, like educational things, and other things like behavior, we (parents) can see that he overcame that stage. So, we can give them comments and add to these goals, and usually, if we want to add some goals, they add them.

The need to achieve progress for her son is also evident in her perception of the quality of the goals determined by the IEP team members, “The goals are a bit weak, need to be stronger, and there need to be more additions to them.”

Manar’s perception of the IEP meeting is highlighted in her choice of words such as struggle, fight, war, battle, to defend, and victory. The choice of words mirrors the conflicting nature of the experience for her. For example, in one statement, she disclosed, “We know we are going, and there will be a war, a battle.” When advocating for services and placement, she discusses how “we had to fight with them to get the right thing.” This

affects Manar's choice of words that portray the feelings the IEP meeting experience brings, and she chooses words such as hard, worry, anger, uncomfortable, triumph, and relief, which are strong emotions that characterize the emotional turmoil she goes through,

Before the meeting, a little bit of worry, not fear, but uh worry during the meeting, in case it was like last year's experience because we did not, we did not get what we had in our minds for him, it...the feeling was anger during the meeting it was anger, plus anger, it was anger and uncomfortable feeling.

Professionalism is a value that Manar emphasizes as an important characteristic of an exemplary IEP meeting experience, "We (parents) try to be professional with them not because of my son but because that is the appropriate way. However, the relationship with them is no, not good, I mean." She and Muhannad's father employed several strategies to ensure they were properly pursuing advocacy for Muhannad, "sure we can try our best to get our rights in the right way of course we will not go above his level we just want what is right for him." The concept of "the right way" is manifested in their actions when conflict occurs during the IEP meeting. The parents started to do their research to learn about their rights, "My husband started looking at the district's website digging deeper into some of the laws," what services are offered by the district, "There are services, but they do not want to give.", and how to prepare for the IEP meeting,

I mean, before we attend any IEP meeting, we know what questions we have, and we have his records that we read and scrutinize to determine what are the points that need additions, need to be discussed, and there are things we do not sign on. I read and make a comprehensive picture of what we would see and what we would encounter (in the meeting).

Subsequently, Manar describes the unprofessionalism of the school by highlighting several actions, such as putting parents in a de-facto situation during the IEP meetings, “For example, the principal of this school, the teachers, and the principal of the other school tried to push their agenda without taking any opinions or anything.” Additionally, trying to enforce their decisions, “As you know, they tried to follow his old IEP and add their recommendations that they enforce.”

Manar talked about the school’s representatives not preparing them sufficiently before the meeting.

They did not provide us with sufficient information, they did not provide us with enough information even though I do not remember what they gave us; I do remember that before each meeting, they would give us a document that told us our rights, but I do not remember that when we came, they gave us any documents or things like it.

Manar also mentioned that they were not provided with sufficient explanations. “Even when they explained the programs that there is a (certain) class, I can say they did not provide enough information.” Keeping information away from parents “So, there are many rights they do not discuss, but we must find it out. There are a lot of things they always mess up. Honestly, we can say there is confusion and a lack of organization. They have a weakness.” This led the parents to research and conclude that “there are services, but they do not want to give ... There is lying and deception.”

Manar emphasized the importance of constant communication between school and parents. She explained, "Communication is important all year, not only at the time of the IEP meeting." Moreover, it should be “all the time, all the time.” To achieve that, she asked for a daily communication folder to be sent home. Manar disclosed that “They do not communicate with me before the meeting. Usually, in the IEP meeting, they put a

plan for the goals.” She connected communication to collaboration by wishing that “they be collaborative, that there is communication between them and the families.” The lack of effective communication practices negatively affected the collaboration between the school and parents. Manar acknowledged,

No, no, there is no collaboration. We work by ourselves, and they work by themselves. This is one of the very weak things in the IEP meeting, if you are not forming one team, it is called one team, but we were on our own last year and this year, so I would say two teams.

Manar’s perception of the IEP meeting experience transcends her and the school to represent that of other families and society. Her perception of school transcends to that of society at large: “So first things first, we are his mother and father, but at the same time, we try to be his voice so he can get whatever he needs from society.” She acknowledges that she represents not only herself or her child: “I try from all my heart to find for my son and send a message so to defend all the kids and all the moms who have kids with autism.” Similarly, she stated that “to get the services they deserve, all kids need it. I am not asking for something more, so we can try to defend our kids and everyone's kids, too.”

Parent Zaina

Zaina provides valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of a parent navigating the process of the meetings for her child, Ameer. Zaina, a medical doctor, immigrated from Iraq several years ago to the United States of America. Her son Ameer, nine years old, is the youngest child and was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at the age of three. Zaina acknowledges the importance of attending IEP meetings for her son, Ameer, “it is a plan for my son’s education for the whole following year.” Her

dedication to attending and participating in the meeting shows this importance, “I never miss an IEP.”

Zaina’s overall perception of IEP meetings are experiences full of stress and anxiety, “Oh! IEP is like, how do I say it? Headache, headache. The preparation for the IEP meeting, and the preparation for what you will do and what you will say about your son.” There is a sense of pressure and tension associated with the IEP meetings, as they determine the goals and services for Ameer,

Tension, you feel stress. You go to the meeting with all the stress. like how will the meeting go? And ... go in and prepare, to have to pay attention to every word saying, they are gonna say there, every word you have to think about, you have to hear them well, you don’t miss anything. You’re already in stress. Tomorrow, we have IEP! (Zaina places her hands over her head). Oh, tomorrow we have IEP! like an exam, it’s like you’re going to an exam.

In reflecting on the underlying cause of stress, Zaina explains, “Because this goal, my son’s goal, will be with him for the upcoming year.” The idea of new beginnings ignites the seeds of hope, so the feeling of stress turns into excitement, “Sometimes, I feel like excited, like he’s going to, gonna have, this is a new year, let me see what he did, let me see what achievement, what he will do, so it’s like mixed feelings.”

Zaina perceives her role as an advocate for her son. She says, “Oh, this is a huge role, I think it's the most important role the parents play in their child's education,” She makes a connection between advocating and motherhood, “As a mother! As a mother, you must focus on it (the IEP plan) and discuss it with them (the school) so they can follow on with the plan.” She explains the motivation behind it, “because if you don’t, I hate to say it if you don’t fight for their education and achievement, they will fall

behind.” She also provides other reasons, “I mean, sometimes the school has another opinion, sometimes they fall behind, they have lots of students, and they don’t do what you (mom) want.” Zaina emphasized the need to be courteous to the IEP team when participating in decision-making in the IEP meeting, and she describes her conduct, “I try to be nice with them and to work... cooperate with them, and to work the best for my son, and you don’t want to fight, you want to do it in a nice way.”

Zaina describes facing struggles as she needs to stay consistently vigilant and constantly check whether the school is committing to agreed-upon goals and services. She discloses her frustration at not getting the services promised, “Like the simplest thing I requested is that my son go to normal, typical classrooms at least gradually, starting 30 minutes and then 1 hour. They never follow it. They don’t send him.” The school is not implementing IEP goals consistently, “There were some struggles with them in his IEP and what I want, and we will sit and put the goals and everything, and then I discover that not everything is followed that we, as we discussed.” The school would not respond to her requests promptly, “I have to keep on asking, I have to keep following on it, so it was like a little bit of a struggle.” Similarly, she recounts the importance of getting the goals right during the IEP meeting; otherwise, changing anything afterward needs a lot of effort and patience, “It’s true they say anytime you want to change, but there is lots of going back and forth and back and forth ..., lots of going back and forth if you want to change anything.”

Zaina’s experience with communication takes on multiple facets as she participates in advocating for her child, Ameer. Zaina often finds the language and content of IEP documents to be complex and challenging to comprehend, leading to the need for clarification and explanation.

The IEP document is so difficult to understand. I know a lot of moms who go to educational advocacy to help them to go through it. I try my best to, I read it, the document, to be honest, it's a lot, and not all the time I will read. I will read the stuff that I really want him, want to, want him to work I feel like he's weak in it.

She experiences challenges in understanding the terminology and method of reporting employed in the IEP document, "this is a mystery, this is like a graph, and he achieves in 9 out of 10 trials to, what do you mean by nine out of ten trials, what is his achievement?"

Zaina connects collaboration to effective communication practices. She emphasizes the importance of keeping her informed about her child, "This is also something, like, I tell them all the time, that if he had any behavior let me know because we work on it with his therapist, or, with, at home." However, to her dismay, she experienced a lack of communication and collaboration several times; for instance, she goes on to explain, "I never get from them anything about his behavior." Zaina is not discouraged; on the contrary, she takes the initiative and reaches out to the team during the IEP meeting to explain complex concepts, "sometimes during the meeting, the IEP meeting, I ask them to explain it to me. I ask them, oh, this, I read this, but really, I don't understand, what do you mean by this?" Yet, Zaina feels that the teams' explanations are not really for her to understand as much as they are for her to agree and sign.

They will explain to you, no their way is not to ask you (mom's opinion), they will explain it (goals), they will give you, ok, do you think it's okay, are you agree mom with that, not like asking you, it's like asking for your permission because at the end, you're gonna sign the paper.

So, Zaina's perception of the IEP team is that "they are nice," but ultimately, she feels that "the IEP is not about what you think about your child and what's your expectations; no, it's about them."

Zaina places a high value on knowledge, starting with herself, she talks about her experience attending a training program about leadership, "I recently attended a leadership education program...that was also an eye-opening, and I understand lots of stuff." The training empowered her to advocate better for her son, Ameer, "So, in the last two IEPs, I was able to talk to them, and ask them a lot of questions, and settle my Amir, IEP goals, my Amir goals with them." Knowledge also gave her the ability to evaluate the goals and services provided by the IEP team, "she (teacher) set up a high academic goal, and I told her to decrease it a little, it will be too much on him, my son will not be able to achieve it. Let my son follow his level." Zaina describes feeling empowered to use her right to withhold signing until she gets the services she asked for, "If I do not agree, I discuss with them. If I do not agree and I want to change, I don't sign the paper until they change it." Knowledge about her rights and services grants Zaina the courage to stand up for her son, Ameer, "The speech therapy, they weren't providing it correctly, and I said no, he said, they said he meets his goals he talks, but... Ameer has a stutter. So, he always needs speech therapy." She asked for retesting for the speech, "The IQ and the speech test I want you to redo it. So, I didn't sign the paper until they did the test." This allowed Zaina to get speech services and ask for more sessions. "I placed in it (in the IEP meeting) a request for more, for our speech therapy, because I told them his speech needs work. He (the therapist) agreed that he is qualified for speech therapy according to the speech test."

On one hand, Zaina chooses words such as blind, mystery, discover, stress, headache, and suffer to mirror the challenges she faces with the IEP experience; on the

other hand, she uses words such as excitement, relief, happy, and eye-opening to portray the positive instances that were a result from gaining knowledge, adopting effective advocacy, employing resilience and seeing her child progress and being happy. She uses the word “ask” a lot, which accounts for her interest in knowledge. Zaina uses “know” several times to link knowledge as a by-product of an internal source that is based on being experienced, whether as a mother, as a school, or as a teacher.

Group Experiential Themes

Aiming for knowledge

Knowledge of IEP

The lack of special education knowledge among parents, the power imbalance between them and the school, and the procedural barriers often make it difficult for them to advocate for their children (Burke & Goldman, 2017; Spies & Cheatham, 2018). This lack of knowledge and skills results in a lack of ability to negotiate and challenge decisions and can prevent caregivers from advocating for their child's educational needs. Furthermore, the power imbalance between the caregiver and the school can prevent them from participating or even being heard. This is evident in Sama's experience attending the IEP meeting; she sits there listening most of the time,

“So, we did the meeting, and we told her ok and followed through the plan, you know it is all (we do), we sign, we sign promptly, we don't know, we said okay yes, the plan is okay, and we sign promptly.” (Sama)

Likewise, Zaina describes that in the first few meetings, she would sit, listen, and sign without participating much, “To be honest, the first few IEPs I will go and sit, and they will say we will do this, this, and I will just agree on it” (Zaina).

Basing knowledge of IEP on personal experiences

The parents shared their knowledge of the IEP meeting based on their experiences. Manar and Zaina attended several meetings while Sama only attended a few. The amount of experience is reflected in their ideas about the IEP meetings and their importance. Zaina's definition of the IEP reflects the importance she gives it by using the word "whole."

"It's a plan for my son's education for the whole following year." (Zaina)

"I never miss an IEP." (Zaina)

While Manar displays the importance not only by the number of IEP meetings she attended but also by using the word "must"

"A lot, a lot, he started to go to school, I think, he was four, he started going to preschool, kindergarten, and elementary, and all those years, I must attend the IEPs. I attended more than once (a year)." (Manar)

On the other hand, Sama did not know the importance of the meeting, so she did not attend that first one, but after that, she made sure to attend all subsequent ones.

"The first ARD meeting my husband attended, I didn't attend. I mean, I mean, I did not know that it was very important at all." (Sama)

Information and preparation before the IEP meeting.

The parents expressed the need for information about the IEP before the meeting to be better prepared to participate in and follow the discussion. Sama holds the school accountable for providing relevant information, while Zaina explained that the plan was already decided without any prior feedback from her.

"Supposedly, they must give me his goals, and objectives before the meeting, to give me what we will discuss in the meeting...Prepare me." (Sama)

“No, they don’t ask you, they are setting the goals and they decided, and if you don’t want to if you just say okay, okay, okay, that’s it, they already decided.”

(Zaina)

On the contrary, Manar takes the matter into her own hands and starts preparing ahead of the meeting by researching and closely examining relevant documents.

“I mean before we attend any IEP meeting, we know what questions we have, and we have his records that we read and scrutinized to determine what are the points that need additions, need to be discussed, and there are things we do not sign on it. I read and make a comprehensive picture of what we will see and what we will encounter (in the meeting).” (Manar)

Knowledge as guidance

Parents view knowledge as a tool of guidance on their path of helping their children with special needs. As a new mother, Sama highlighted her frustration at unknown and unanswered inquiries.

“I mean, no one gave me an answer. No one guided me where to go.” (Sama)

Manar began searching for answers to guide her on finding out the information needed to resolve conflict in the right way.

“My husband started looking at the district’s website and digging deeper into some of the laws.” (Manar)

Zaina participated in an educational leadership training program to learn more about special education and become a better advocate for her son.

“I recently attended a leadership education (LEND) program... so that was also eye-opening and I understand lots of stuff. So, in the last two IEPs, I was able to talk to them, and ask them a lot of questions, and settle my Ameer, IEP goals, my Ameer goals with them.” (Zaina)

Pursuing Progress

Mothers as advocates

Parents must play an active role in the decision-making process of their child with a disability to formulate effective interventions related to the child's disability (Berkant et al., 2019). Although parents are considered the primary advocates for their children, they still face challenges in ensuring their children participate in an inclusive education setting (Lalvani & Hale, 2015). All mothers interviewed expressed the importance of advocating for their children and trying their best to be their children's voice. Zaina emphasized the importance of the role of a mother, describing it as a huge role.

“Oh, this is a huge role. I think it's the most important role the parents play in their child's education.” (Zaina)

“As a mother, as a mother, you must focus on it (the IEP plan) and discuss it with them (the school) so they can follow on with the plan.” (Zaina)

Manar uses advocacy as a tool to represent her child's voice, so he can access the education and services that he needs.

“So, first things first, we are his mother and father but at the same time we try to be his voice so he can get whatever he needs from society.” (Manar)

Sama described her dedication to advocating for her child to the maximum of her capabilities.

“I try, I mean I try with them... I mean, I try with anything to provide for him anything that I learned, ... So, I try anything they can provide for him, I demand from them.” (Sama)

Motivation for advocacy: Progress

The parents in this study expressed, directly and indirectly, the driving force behind advocating for their children. Zaina admits to the reason by reflecting on why she feels stressed,

“Because if you don’t, I hate to say it, if you don’t fight for their education and achievement, they will fall behind.” (Zaina)

Manar explains her reason from a different angle, one that is evaluating the services provided through outcomes, and progress,

“The mom when she sees there are services that can help him (son), he can change for the better, but when the services are not enough, no, you (mom) feel there is no progress, there is no progress, little and weak.” (Manar)

As for Sama, she started to advocate for her son when she felt that the services provided for him were not enough to result in progress,

“My son, of course, needs more, more speech therapy. Even my son, he, ok, says a sentence; I mean, now he talks if I ask him, for example. But until now, his pronunciation has a lot of defects.” (Sama)

Advocacy during the IEP

Advocacy during the IEP meeting is tied to knowledge and experience; the more knowledgeable and experienced the parents are, the more empowered they become to take the initiative and advocate for their child. Sama was a new mom, and her son was her firstborn. She did not attend many IEP meetings and lacks knowledge about it, so, in her case, she does not advocate during the meeting; most of her advocacy occurs outside it.

“We were with her (teacher), and another ARD meeting happened this year. It was either in the third or fourth month, so I went by myself, and also, I signed it myself and saw, and I said okay and followed on with her.” (Sama)

In Zaina's case, becoming more knowledgeable, attending multiple IEP meetings, and needing to keep an eye on the child's goals and services led her to pursue advocacy during the meeting,

“So, in the last two IEPs, I was able to talk to them, and ask them many questions, and settle my Ameer, IEP goals, my Ameer goals with them.” (Zaina)

“She (teacher) set up a high academic goal, and I told her to decrease it a little, it will be too much on him. My son will not be able to achieve it. Let my son follow his level.” (Zaina)

Manar felt the need to advocate during the IEP meeting when she moved from another state, and the quality of goals, placement, and services was not the right fit for her son,

“Then they presented us with a program that we (Parents) know will not benefit him, and he will not gain any benefit from it, and he will not achieve any progress...Last year, we had to continue fighting with them. I mean, we have to, so we win things for him that are correct because they gave him services, but they did not follow them; they changed the plan, and after following his old IEP, they changed the services. However, we had to bring an advocate and deal with them through law.” (Manar)

Advocacy challenges for parents

Parents experience several challenges when advocating for their children. Challenges include lack of cooperation, refusal to provide what they ask for, and lack of consistency in following agreed-upon items in the IEP meeting. This reflects the ongoing

struggle, stress, and worry the parents go through while navigating their child's special education services. Manar and Zaina reveal their frustration at the school's actions,

“We struggled because we asked for services for him, and they gave us different services.” (Manar)

“There were some struggles with them in his IEP and what I want, and we will sit and put the goals and everything, and then I discover that not everything is followed that we, as we discussed.” (Zaina)

To Manar's dismay, she had to turn to the law to get her son the appropriate services,

“Last year, we had to fight with them to get the right thing.” (Manar)

Another challenge facing parents is having to be persistent to get what they are advocating for,

“I have to keep on asking, I have to keep following on it, so it was like a little bit struggle.” (Zaina)

“It is true they say anytime you want to change, but there is lots of going back and forth and back and forth..., lots of going back and forth if you want to change anything.” (Zaina)

As for Sama, she felt sad that the things she advocated for were either not offered enough or are unavailable.

“There are some things like, for example, speech also, I feel I need more, and this occupational therapy, which is not available at all.” (Sama)

Advocacy for better goals, placement, and programs

The parents' goal of seeing their children progress obligated them to ask for appropriate goal planning and the provision of more services. Manar felt that the goals needed to be revised.

“The goals are a bit weak, need to be stronger, and there need to be more additions to them.” (Manar)

While Zaina felt that the goal was not appropriate.

“She (teacher) set up a high academic goal, and I told her to decrease it a little. It will be too much on him. My son will not be able to achieve it. Let my son follow his level.” (Zaina)

As for Sama, there is a need for more goals,

“I felt that we can do more, not only the goals that they have set. They are ok, but he needs more. Um, I did not know that I can ask more if there are more things.”

(Sama)

All the parents advocated for their children to be placed in the least restrictive environment. They all asked for their children to be allowed to attend general education classes.

“This thing we have asked for before a long time ago, to let our son be with the typical kids, even if it is for one hour in the day or even when they are playing in the backyard at school, that he be with normal children.” (Sama)

“Like the simplest thing I requested is that my son go to normal, typical classrooms at least gradually, starting 30 minutes and then 1 hour. They never follow it. They do not send him.” (Zaina)

Manar advocated for her child to stay in his current placement and not be moved to a life-skills class. She knows from previous experience that a life-skills class is an unsuitable choice,

“We know for sure from our experience, since he was in a similar class before, his state was not good at all, and I can say he had psychological distress because he

used to cry every day for a year whenever he entered a school because of this (type) of class (life skills) when he was younger.” (Manar)

Manar highlights the importance of following the law and designating the proper placement for her child.

“It is very important, and the placement, and following the correct rules. It affects him when they send him (son) to the wrong placement. It will set him back as he grows, whereas the other placement is the correct one for him. It will change his life profoundly for him and his family and everything, and everything will be affected by it.” (Manar)

Advocacy for one is for all

Gaining knowledge and experience broadens the horizons of humans and changes their perspectives to grow from themselves to everyone. Zaina and Manar pointed out that their advocacy transcends them to all the families with special needs children.

“I said it has to be in a way that the moms can understand.” (Zaina)

“I try from all my heart to find for my son and send a message so to defend all the kids and all the moms who have kids with autism.” (Manar)

“To get the services they deserve, all kids need it. I am not asking for something more so we can try to defend our kids and everyone's kids too.” (Manar)

Seeking Success

Effective communication and collaboration

Communication is an important factor in building effective collaborative relationships between parents and school professionals (Schreiner, 2021). Parents shared their perceptions of communication practices, barriers, and hopes. Manar points out the importance of having ongoing communication between the school and parents.

“Communication is important all the year, not only at the time of the IEP meeting.” (Manar)

Sama and Zaina expressed a desire for clearer and more detailed explanations during IEP meetings.

“That they explain a bit more slowly, not to be fast and you sign this... I mean I want more explanation, meaning they explain to me more about the plan...”

(Sama)

“The IEP document is so difficult to understand. I know a lot of moms who go to educational advocacy to help them to go through it. I try my best to, I read it, the document, to be honest, it’s a lot, and not all the time I will read, I will read the stuff that I really want him, want to, want him to work I feel like he’s weak in it.”

(Zaina)

“Sometimes, during the meeting, the IEP meeting, I ask them to explain it to me. I ask them, oh, this, I read this, but really, I do not understand, what do you mean by this?” (Zaina)

Manar complains about the school failing to communicate to the parents about rights and services,

“So, there are many rights they do not talk about, but we must find it out. There is a lot, a lot of, one of the things, they always mess up honestly, we can say there is confusion, lack of organization, they have a weakness.” (Manar)

Parental input

Parental input varies from one mother to another. Sama’s input is minor due to her limited knowledge and experience in the IEP meeting. Sama’s input is only offered when she feels that she needs to ask a question or clarify something about her son,

“I mean, sometimes I talk to them if I have a question or something like that, but you cannot say that I am the main, that I am the one who is always, so it is little, little.” (Sama)

Contrary to Sama, Manar feels that she provides a sufficient amount of input, and elaborates on the kind of input she provides,

“Usually, it is enough, we usually ask all the questions that we want and not only sign.” (Manar)

“We give our opinions (on the goals) in the meeting...we can give them comments and add to these goals, and usually, if we want to add some goals, they add them.” (Manar)

Lack of effective explanations

Parents in this study solicited explanations for different concepts related to the IEP. However, they disclosed their views on the ineffectiveness of the explanations offered, to provide appropriate information, convince about decisions, or promote parents' decision-making,

“They explain in a few words.” (Sama)

“I mean, no one gave me an answer, No one guided me where to go.” (Sama)

Manar expressed her dismay at the lack of sufficient information about programs,

“Even when they explained the programs that there is a (certain) class, I can say they did not provide enough information.” (Manar)

As for Zaina, her perception of the style of explanations given by the IEP team is that it is done to coerce her to agree and sign on a decision pre-made,

“They will explain to you, no their way is not to ask you (mom’s opinion), they will explain it (goals), they will give you, ok, do you think it’s okay, are you agree

mom with that? not like asking you, it's like asking for your permission because at the end you're gonna sign the paper." (Zaina)

Lack of collaboration in goal-setting

All parents wanted more collaborative decision-making on goals. Sama, Manar, and Zaina denied that the school solicited their opinions about goals,

"No, they do not ask you. They are setting the goals, and they decided, and if you do not want to, if you just say okay, okay, okay, that is it, they already decided."

(Sama)

"They do not communicate with me before the meeting. Usually in the IEP meeting, they put a plan for the goals." (Manar)

Collaboration with the IEP team.

Parents place much value on collaboration to achieve successful IEP plans and meetings. Sama describes it,

"I want a plan that covers everything, all the things, the weakness that he has and this plan to be comprehensive between me and you." (Sama)

Zaina describes her attitude in building collaboration with the IEP team,

"I try to be nice with them, and to work cooperate with them, and to work the best for my son, and you don't want to fight, you want to do it in a nice way." (Zaina)

Likewise, Manar emphasizes the importance of adopting a professional attitude.

"We (parents) try to be professional with them not because of my son but because that is the appropriate way. But the relationship with them is no, not good, I mean." (Manar)

Nevertheless, she elaborates with annoyance at the lack of collaboration from the school.

“No, no, there isn’t collaboration. We work by ourselves, and they work by themselves. This is one of the very weak things in the IEP meeting, if you are not forming one team, it is called one team, but we were on our own last year and this year, so I would say two teams.” (Manar)

School-Home Collaboration.

The parents insisted on the significance of collaboration outside the IEP meeting. They pursue building a connection between the home and the school. Parents want to help their children in every way possible, and they believe that it is vital to implement the IEP plan at home,

“I love to be a part, an indivisible part, they ok, they work at school, I want that I also work at home...” (Sama)

"Me and they will be with me always... we want to do this thing, you at home, this is your role." (Sama)

“I love that everything they do, I do at home, so he, even if it was academic.”
(Sama)

“This is also something, like, I tell them all the time, that if he had any behavior let me know because we work on it with his therapist, or, with, at home.” (Zaina)

Summary

Overall, the findings from this study revealed the experiences of Arab CLD parents when trying to participate in decision-making for their children during the IEP meeting. The interview encouraged the parents to reflect deeply on their experience and analyze their feelings, advocacy, and the challenges they encountered during the IEP. Idiographic accounts and analysis opened a window into each Arab CLD parent’s experiences, depicting their unique stories and uncovering their advocacy styles, worries, and aspirations. The final group experiential themes (GETs) illustrate the general themes

that pertained to all the Arab CLD parents while at the same time illustrating the convergence and divergence characteristics of each parent. All findings in this study revolve around the concept of “progress” as the driving force for Arab CLD parents to pursue knowledge, collaboration, and success for their children.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

As part of the public school system, special education provides specialized instruction and services to students with special needs (IDEA, 2004). An individualized education program (IEP) is a specially designed plan that addresses and meets the students' and families' unique needs (Gargiulo & Bouck, 2018). Participation in educational decision-making during the IEP is one of the most distinctive components of parental involvement among parents of children with special needs (Ruiz et al., 2019). Parents, guardians, and other family members are invited to special education as primary advocates for children with disabilities (Goldman & Burke, 2019). This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study examines culturally and linguistically diverse parents' perceptions of their involvement in decision-making during their child's IEP.

This study employed an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach because its primary two aims are a) to explore in detail how the participant makes sense of life experience, (b) to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the account to understand the experience (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, analysis directly relates to CLD parents' sense-making of their lived experience. Specifically, this study examined three Arab CLD parents' perceptions of their experiences during the IEP meeting, notably participating in decision-making. The study used a small sample size of three participants adhering to IPA as the emphasis on idiographic analysis is maintained and allowing for an in-depth analysis of the Arab CLD parents' interpretations of their perceptions.

The study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of three Arab CLD perceptions of their participation in decision-making by analyzing their lived experiences and idiographic accounts and reflections. The research question was:

What are the perceptions of Arab CLD parents when reflecting on their involvement in decision-making for their child in IEP meetings?

In this study, three Arabic-speaking CLD mothers from Iraq participated in a semi-structured interview. The idiographic accounts of the mothers revealed several personal experiential themes (PETs) that highlighted their interpretations of their experiences when trying to advocate and participate in their child's IEP meeting. The PETs of each participant were used to construct the group experiential themes (GETs), by identifying areas of convergence and divergence within the themes of the lived experience, an essential IPA strategy (Chatfield, 2022). The findings of this study suggest that IEP meetings with CLD parents are focused on compliance with the law rather than providing CLD parents the opportunity to participate effectively in decision-making.

Empirical Findings

Aiming for Knowledge

An overarching group experiential theme evident in the reflections and experiences of all parents is the value and aspiration to acquire knowledge. Although the parents are highly educated, their first few IEP experiences mirror the effects of lack of knowledge of the IEP on their participation level in the meeting. Parents do not feel prepared to participate as equal team members and lack the confidence to advocate for their children during the meeting. Participants related how they used to sit and listen to the IEP team members read the document, provide their agreement, and sign. However, as the participants attended more IEP meetings, they started to learn more about the IEP, and they felt the need to acquire the appropriate knowledge to participate effectively during the meeting.

The parents differed in pursuing the knowledge necessary to participate effectively in the IEP meeting. Sama asked other parents about her concerns and felt the

school was responsible for providing her with the relevant information before the IEP meeting to better prepare her for it. Zaina attended an educational training program that benefitted her immensely, as it helped her learn about her rights and gain successful advocacy strategies to use for her son better during the meeting. As for Manar, her husband read all the information, through the district and school's website, to educate themselves, acquiring a plethora of information that the school needed to provide.

A fundamental provision of the amendments to IDEA requires school professionals to involve parents of students with disabilities in the educational decision-making process to incorporate parents' knowledge of their children in the planning and design of their children's educational services (Kalyanpar et al., 2000). Parents of children with special needs are required to attend IEP meetings annually to participate in their children's education and coordinate special education services (Montoya et al., 2022). Parents have extensive rights, though they might only sometimes know this and may participate at varying levels of involvement; for example, parents have the right to disagree with an IEP if the team members need to consider their input, and they do not have to sign an IEP with which they are not in agreement (Lukacs & Steeley, 2018, IDEA, 2004). Interestingly, Sama did not know that she could hold off signing if she disagreed with the IEP team on any part of the IEP document, so she just used to sign at the end, although she was not happy with some of the goals, services, and placement. Zaina and Manar knew that they could hold off signing and used this right to advocate for the child and make sure that they and the school reached an agreement that benefits their child.

Special education documents are very extensive and legalistic, and Perry (2020) found that this process impedes parent engagement. Similarly, McGinley (2019) advised that laws applicable to individuals with special needs can be challenging to navigate and

comprehend. Interdisciplinary teams and parents need to be knowledgeable about students' entitlements (McGinley, 2019). Manar talked about the need for the IEP team members, particularly leaders, to provide parents with proper explanations about the services and rights that the district offers parents and children with special needs.

Pursuing Progress

All parents in this study expressed the importance of advocating for their children and trying their best to be their children's voice. Zaina and Manar showed improved capabilities in advocating for their children; they were more experienced and knowledgeable. Zaina's take on the importance of advocating for her child is to ensure that the school follows what she discussed with the IEP team during the meeting and agrees on. For Manar, advocacy represents her child's voice to receive the appropriate education and services for him; for Sama, her advocacy attempts are pursued outside the IEP meeting setting for several reasons, such as lack of knowledge and the IEP team members talking very fast.

All parents in this study share the same driving force for parental advocacy, which is that their children achieve progress. Zaina reflects how, although she did not understand much in the first few meetings, she did not feel the need to advocate during the meeting because her child was showing progress. Once her child started falling behind, she felt the need to stand up for him and started learning and advocating for him. Manar had experienced IEP meetings in different states before moving to the current state and experienced positive IEP meetings where her son was getting all the services from professionals. She described how all the IEP team members who worked with her son were highly certified; this was reflected in the quality of the IEP meeting. Since Manar moved, her experience with the IEP meeting has not been favorable due to the lack of professional conduct from the IEP team members, which negatively affected her son's

progress; this made her learn more about her rights and use a professional lawyer to get the appropriate services for her son. As for Sama, she felt the need to advocate when her son started showing no progress in speech skills and fine motor skills.

Advocacy during the IEP meeting is tied to knowledge and experience; the more knowledgeable and experienced the parents are, the more empowered they become to take the initiative and advocate for their child. She did not attend many IEP meetings and needs to learn about them, so in her case, she did not advocate during the meeting; most of her advocacy occurred outside of it. Manar, with the help of knowledge from the district and the lawyer, advocates for her child during the IEP meeting to get the proper placement and services for her child. For Manar, advocacy for her child transcends him and her from including all parents and children in the special needs community. The same can also be seen with Zaina, who advocates for her son to get adequate services and appropriate placement; she often refers to other moms whenever she speaks about her experience. As parents become better at advocating, they start helping other parents, and the focus of advocacy shifts from self to everyone.

All parents in this study experienced multiple challenges when advocating for their children. Challenges include lack of cooperation, refusal to provide requested services, and lack of consistency in implementing agreed-upon services after the IEP meeting. This results in the ongoing struggle, frustration, stress, and worries the parents go through as they navigate special education services for their child. Each parent dealt with different kinds of challenges. Manar struggled with advocacy because instead of giving her the services she requested, the school would give another. Manar also expressed her frustration and anger at the conduct of the school with her, and she disclosed how the school pushed its agenda, putting her in a de facto situation. Manar's perception of the school's conduct is that they are unprofessional. As for Sama, she also

considered the school an expert, but this perception changed when she tried more than once to advocate for her son to get services, but the school would either brush it off or not provide her with answers. Sama also expressed her dismay at the lack of important services for her child, such as occupational therapy. Finally, Zaina's challenges differed in that she felt that after advocating for her child, the school did not necessarily implement what they agreed on, providing insufficient excuses.

Arabic CLD parents place a high value on education and progress, and this shows in what they choose to advocate for. All parents in this study advocated either having more robust goals, more additions to the goals, or changes in the goals, aiming for their child to progress and overcome challenges. All the parents, Sama, Manar, and Zaina, wanted their children to be included with the general education students as much time as possible. Manar related the negative impact her child attending life skills class had on him and the family. Zaina and Sama described their frustration at the school for not allowing their children to participate with the general education students.

Improving the education of their disabled children requires parents to be actively involved and advocate for their children's needs (Montoya et al., 2022). A literature review conducted by Blackwell and Rossetti (2014) on IEP found that although parents frequently attended the meetings, they often needed to be provided an opportunity to contribute significantly to the content of the meeting. Additionally, Tucker and Schwartz (2013) found that parents did not receive opportunities to provide input, encountered challenges communicating with the IEP team, and adopted a negative view of school team members. As a result of their research, Tucker, and Schwartz (2013) concluded that IEP teams must not employ practices that denigrate the CLD parents' abilities to be equal members of the team in decision-making; these practices can be, for example, presenting a finished draft of the IEP. This makes the parent unprepared to participate fully and

leads them to feel undervalued (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). All the parents in this study disclosed that they received no information about the items for discussion in the IEP meeting, such as goals, services, and placements. All the parents expressed that they want the IEP team members to send them the document ahead of the meeting to prepare better them to participate in the meeting.

The team should make placement decisions (IDEA, 2004), and the team needs to participate in systematic considerations of the support needed to ensure each special needs student's success in the least restrictive environment (Zagona et al., 2019). Subsequently, IEP committee decisions are frequently seen as one-sided because decisions are made by schools rather than collective decisions made with all concerned—including families (Hancock et al., 2017). All the parents in this study were unsatisfied with the placement of their children. They advocated for their children to participate with their general education peers in the Least restrictive environment (LRE) setting.

Seeking Success

Communication and collaboration are intertwined themes that all parents perceive as necessary for success. For communication to be effective, it must have two characteristics: clarity and consistency. All the parents shared how the IEP discussion during the meeting was sometimes unclear because the team members talked too fast or there was unfamiliar educational jargon. An example of educational jargon is the method the teachers use to measure the success of the goals in the IEP; Zaina found it challenging to understand it on her own, so she asked the teacher during the IEP meeting. All parents expressed that for communication to be effective, it must be consistent and ongoing before and after the IEP meeting. Communication should not only be about the child's progress but also about the parents' rights. It is essential to provide parents with the tools

and information through different modes of communication, inside and outside of the IEP meeting.

It is vital to provide adequate explanations when communicating with parents. In Sama's experience, the explanations were either not provided or given in a few words. Manar exclaimed how even when the school explained something, they did not provide enough information. As for Zaina, she felt that the school provided explanations of the goals to get her agreement rather than make sure she understood them.

Parents place a great deal of value on collaboration to achieve successful IEP plans and meetings. In the IEP meeting, all parents wanted more collaborative decision-making on goals, and they exclaimed their dismay at finding that all goals were written before the meeting without consulting or sharing the goals with them. All the parents aim to collaborate with the school outside the IEP meeting by asking for regular correspondence with the teacher on their child's progress and for homework to be sent.

The data highlights the importance of effective communication and collaboration in special education. The findings suggest potential areas for improvement, such as enhancing the clarity of communication, providing support for parents in understanding complex documents, and fostering a more collaborative approach to goal-setting within the IEP process. Addressing these issues may contribute to more meaningful and inclusive collaboration between parents and school professionals.

Communication is essential in building effective collaborative relationships between parents and school professionals (Schreiner, 2021). Frequent communication between schools and parents establishes relationships that convey a sense of trust and increase the likelihood that parents will participate in school activities (Francis et al., 2016). A recent study by Montoya et al. (2022) found that parents faced several obstacles, such as (a) their insecurity of knowledge, (b) complex terminology, (c)

confusion with the IEP process, (d) discrimination or misconceptions, (e) language barriers, (f) need for parent advocacy, and (g) staff lack of knowledge. Under language barriers, Montoya et al. (2022) explained that parents spoke about the complex vocabulary school professionals adopt at IEP meetings, leaving parents struggling to understand even if translators were provided. All the parents expressed the need for more explanation and transparency. Sama discussed the need for IEP team members to speak more slowly during the meeting and to provide clear explanations for her requests. Zaina talked about the need for the IEP team members not to assume that parents know everything in the IEP document, and they should provide explanations to parents, especially regarding educational jargon.

Collaboration requires parity among team members. Each person's contribution must be viewed as equally valued, and each person must be given equal power in the decision-making process (Solone et al., 2020). Collaboration is based upon a commitment that all participants are necessary, listened to, and respected (Friend & Cook, 2013). Families of students with disabilities who have more robust partnerships with IEP team members report more satisfaction with services, improved communication, trusting, respectful relationships with instructors, and a reduced need to advocate (Burke & Hodapp, 2016). All the parents in this study discussed their positive experiences at prior schools, where the teacher was knowledgeable and professional in her conduct; this translated into better relationships and outcomes of progress for the child.

Theoretical Literature Discussion

This study employed a theoretical framework to deepen the understanding of parents participating in decision-making for their children at the IEP meeting. Ecological Systems Theory (EST), Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes human development through the prism of environmental connections and their direct influence on psychological

development. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory comprises multiple environmental systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem) that provide the context for child development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Through the ecological systems theory model, Bronfenbrenner noted that optimal development occurs when effective connections and continuities among these effective systems are created (Kim & Sheridan, 2015).

This theory was the foundation for understanding CLD parents' lived experiences advocating for their children at the IEP meeting. For CLD parents facing challenges in participating in decision-making, it is critical to consider the effect of weak family-school partnerships on the child's mesosystem because it can negatively impact the child's microsystem (Amant et al., 2018). Additionally, information about family-school interactions will increase our understanding of disparities, service access, and reception to services for the CLD parent community.

At the microsystem level, one of the motivations for parents to advocate for their child was evident when the child started to fall behind or did not show any progress. This issue made the parents in this study pursue knowledge to equip themselves better and become influential voices and advocates for their children.

At the mesosystem level, the parents' relationship with the IEP team members affected their advocacy for their child. Prior positive experiences were marked by IEP team members being professional in their conduct and expertise; this allowed the parents to trust the school and not feel the need to advocate much as they saw their child's progress. On the other hand, in this study, Arab CLD parents' relationship with IEP team members was marked with distrust when they saw their children regressing instead of progressing. This made the parents feel the need to advocate for their children and try their best to get their children's proper goals, services, and placement.

Implications

The prevailing theme was the significance of expanding parents' understanding of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) procedure. This approach involves training sessions to enhance parents' understanding of Individualized Education Program (IEP) concepts. This study suggests that it is important for parents to receive training on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This recommendation is backed by section §300.34(c)(8) of the IDEA:

(i) Parent counseling and training refers to providing support and guidance to parents to enhance their comprehension of their children's requirements.

(ii) Equipping parents with knowledge regarding child development.

(iii) Assisting parents in acquiring the essential skills required that will allow them to support the implementation of their child's IEP (Lightner, 2020)

Students benefit, and challenges are minimized when school personnel and administrators provide IEP training to parents. As stated by IDEA (2004), it is the responsibility of IEP team members to offer suitable training when necessary; however, parents are often unaware that they can demand training as part of their child's special education eligibility (Goldman, 2020).

Professionals can translate findings from this study into practical communication guidelines for IEP team members working with CLD parents. For example, given that the parents in this study noted the importance of clear, ongoing, and consistent communication inside and outside the IEP meeting, the IEP team members must devise strategies and adopt protocols that ensure CLD parents receive relevant information about their child.

In tying the implications to the EST theory employed in this study, at the microsystem level, parents must continue to learn and advocate for their children to

improve their quality of life and achieve progress for their children. Parents can find allies through networking; they can build a parent-teacher association (PTA) for the special needs community in their schools.

In the mesosystem circle, professionals must consider CLD parents as equal partners in the IEP team. The CLD parents' concerns, demands, and priorities should be included in the IEP discussion and documented throughout the IEP document (Kurth et al., 2019). Parent input can be devised strategically to solicit input throughout the IEP by encouraging them to answer questions, provide feedback, or check for understanding. Additionally, providing pre-IEP and post-IEP meetings helps address CLD parents' needs better.

On the exosystem level, the government must disseminate more information to school officials to streamline the interpretation of policies and education laws about families and students receiving special education. The policies must be written clearly and avoid ambiguity to assist both schools in carrying them out effectively, so parents understand them. When governments promote family-school collaborations, developing resources and enhanced support structures is essential to ensure successful outcomes.

On the chronosystem level, the government must conduct training and assessments for schools to monitor the proper implantation of the policies and laws. Additionally, schools must monitor their success and failures over time by doing regular assessments. Schools must evaluate their strategies and implementations of the IDEA, particularly those that increase effective parent participation in the IEP with more care for CLD parents and children with special needs.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study seeks to enhance educational practice and CLD parents' experience in participating in decision-making for their child during the IEP meeting. It is of vital

importance that schools implement strategies that give CLD constructive opportunities to engage in decision-making during IEP meetings. Future research can investigate best practices from the CLD parent's point of view to facilitate their participation in decision-making during IEP meetings. The study included Arabic-speaking Iraqi mothers of children with autism in elementary public schools, and future studies could include Arabic-speaking mothers and fathers from different Arab countries to have a more universal understanding. This study was conducted using IPA methodology to gain a deeper understanding of the CLD parents' experiences, and future studies can be done using advanced IPA designs such as focus groups, longitudinal design, or larger groups of participants.

Summary

Given the increasing number of Arabic-speaking CLD parents attending IEP meetings, it is crucial to understand this population better. By recognizing the barriers facing Arabic-speaking CLD parents and their children, along with their strengths, professionals can better target their services and work towards improved long-term outcomes for these children and their families.

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APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about your child.
3. Tell me about your last IEP meeting.
4. What does parental involvement mean to you?
5. Who attends your child's IEP? Who are the team members?
6. What are your perceptions about your relationship with the members of the IEP team?
7. How do you perceive the language used in the written document of the IEP?
8. How do you perceive the language used in the IEP meeting?
9. What are your thoughts on your involvement in your child's current IEP?
10. What are your thoughts about your child's placement?
11. What does advocacy mean to you?
12. Tell me about your level of input on your child in the IEP.
13. Tell me about the type of input you provide for your child in the IEP.
14. How do the IEP team members receive your input?
15. Describe your level of participation in decision-making during the IEP meeting.
16. Describe your feelings as an advocate for your child in the IEP meeting.
17. What do you want most for your child to get from the IEP?
18. What advice would you give school professionals who work with CLD parents through IEP meetings?
19. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience with the IEP process?

APPENDIX B:
INFORMED CONSENT

CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE PARENTS'
PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING DURING
INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETING

By SUHA BEYDOUN

You are invited to be in a research study exploring culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) parents' perceptions of their involvement in decision-making during the individual education plan meeting (IEP) of their child. You were selected as a participant because you come from a culturally and linguistically diverse background and have an IEP for your child. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be on the study. This study is being conducted by Suha Beydoun, a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of Houston Clearlake. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis study will be first to contribute to the existing gap in research on the phenomenon. Furthermore, this study will look at the lived experiences of CLD parents and their sense-making of attending the IEP meeting about their involvement in decision-making for their child. If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in a personal semi-structured interview. Interviews will be audio-taped for accuracy or conducted and recorded through the Zoom platform. The location and time of the interview will be determined based on your convenience. Since your time is valuable, an estimated time for each interview will be approximately 45 minutes. Risks related to this study are very minimal and are no more than participants would encounter in everyday life. A risk may include emotional distress as you are asked to share experiences that may provoke an emotional response or memory. In the situation that you experience significant distress or discomfort while in the study, you may choose

to stop participating at any time. The benefits of participation include an overall benefit to the field of special education, particularly improving knowledge of the lived experiences of parents participating in decision-making in the IEP meeting, and how to meet the needs of parents and children. While your participation may have a potential benefit to society, you may not receive a direct benefit from participating in this study. This study is completely voluntary and there will be no monetary compensation provided. The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Ethical considerations will be addressed to ensure the safety and confidentiality of people and documents. Pseudonyms will be used for all names and locations to protect each participant's identity. Security of data transcripts will be ensured by locking up all paper documents. Also, electronic documents will be backed up electronically and protected with a password. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships. You may withdraw from the study by contacting Suha Beydoun by email or by informing the researcher before, during, or shortly after the interview has concluded. If you do choose to withdraw, all data and documents you provided will be deleted and not used in this study.

The researcher conducting this study is Suha Beydoun. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 571-335-5220 or email: beydouns6776@uhcl.edu. Dr. Judith Marquez is the faculty advisor overseeing this study. You may contact Dr. Marquez by email: marquez@uhcl.edu. You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

___I have read and understood the above information.

___I have asked questions and have received answers.

___I consent to participate in the study.

___I understand that interviews will be audio recorded.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C:

PERSONAL EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (PET)

Table of Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) for Sama

A. VALUE OF KNOWLEDGE

Sama desires more information and preparation before the IEP meeting.

“Before (the IEP meeting), no, they don’t give us anything, but during the meeting, they start explaining what his level is now...”

Lack of knowledge about the IEP affected the level of active participation.

“You know it is all (we do), we sign, we sign promptly, we do not know, we said okay yes, the plan is ok, and we sign promptly.”

The importance of providing the IEP plan for parental review and preparation in advance.

“Supposedly, they must give me his goals and objectives before the meeting, to give me what we will discuss in the meeting...Prepare me.”

A desire for more information during the IEP meeting.

“I would love more explanation, meaning, they explain for me more about the plan.”

A desire for more transparent and more detailed explanations during IEP meetings.

“You know it is all we sign. We sign promptly. We do not know. We said okay, yes, the plan is okay, and we sign promptly.”

Knowledge as guidance

“Do you have occupational therapy? They do not have occupational therapy; they do not have a feeding program. I honestly do not know where to take him, I mean what is his problem until now?”

B. VALUE OF COMMUNICATION

A desire for more transparent and clear communication about the IEP and goals.

“They must give me his goals, and objectives before the (IEP) meeting, this is what we will discuss in the meeting, to give me what we will discuss in the meeting, and do you agree on these? Do you have additional things that you want to add more?”

A desire for ongoing communication.

“Back and forth.”

Parental input

"I feel it's very little."

Challenges in communication.

“That they explain a bit more slowly, not to be fast and you sign this... I mean I want more explanation, meaning they explain to me more about the plan...”

Type of parental input

“I mean sometimes I talk to them if I have a question or something like that, but you cannot say that I am the main, that I'm the one who is always, so it is little, little.”

Lack of effective explanation from the school on different issues.

“They explain in a few words.”

“I mean, no one gave me an answer, No one guided me where to go.”

C. VALUE OF COLLABORATION

Sama wishes for more collaboration in goal setting.

“I want a plan that covers everything, all the things, the weakness that he has and this plan to be comprehensive between me and you.”

Wishes for more collaboration in goal setting.

Sama has no say on predetermined goals during the meeting.

“In changing the goals, no... They put what they can provide, the district if the district does not provide this and does not accept, they do not put it.”

Collaboration with the teacher.

“She started to work with him, and you know me I am always with her, always anything happens.”

School-Home collaboration.

“I love that everything they do, I do at home, so he, even if it was academic.”

Collaboration by being a part of the team.

“I love to be a part, an indivisible part, they ok, they work at school, I want that I also work at home...”

"I and they be with me always... we want to do this thing, you at home this is your role."

D. VALUE OF ADVOCACY

Holds team accountable in soliciting her participation.

“Do you agree on these? Do you have additional things that you want to add more?”

Sama is her son’s advocate.

“I try with everything to provide for him anything that I learned.... I demand from them.”

Sama attempts to advocate for her son’s needs.

“I try, I mean I try with them, but I feel they do not, they do not want, I do not know whether they are the ones who make the rule, or they do not care.”

Sama actively corrects any misconceptions about her son during the IEP meeting.

“I would only interfere to correct and afterward to consent.”

Sama expresses frustration and dissatisfaction at the lack of resources and support.

“But I do not think they have all the facilities...”

Sama wishes for a more active role in the IEP meetings and decision-making process.

“In the meeting, I aspire to have more role in devising the plans (IEP)”

Advocating for more services, speech, occupational, etc.

“There are some things like, for example, speech also, I feel I need more and this occupational therapy that is not available at all, feeding program, I mean this thing.”

APPENDIX D:

GROUP EXPERIENTIAL THEMES (GET)

A. AIMING FOR KNOWLEDGE

(BECOMING INFORMED, LEARNING, EXPERIENCE)

Knowledge from experience

“A lot, a lot, he started to go to school, I think, he was four, he started going to preschool, kindergarten, and elementary, and all those years, I must attend the IEPs. I attended more than once (a year).” (Manar)

“it’s a plan for my son’s education for the whole following year.” (Zaina)

“I never miss an IEP.” (Zaina)

Information and preparation before the IEP meeting.

“Supposedly, they must give me his goals, and objectives before the meeting, to give me what we will discuss in the meeting...Prepare me.” (Sama)

“I mean before we attend any IEP meeting, we know what questions do we have, and we have his records that we read and scrutinized to determine what are the points that need additions, that needs to be discussed, and there are things we do not sign on it. I read and make a comprehensive picture of what we will see and what we will encounter (in the meeting).” (Manar)

“No, they don’t ask you, they are setting the goals and they decided and if you don’t want to if you just say okay, okay, okay, that’s it, they already decided.” (Zaina)

Lack of knowledge about the IEP affects the level of active participation.

“So, we did the meeting, and we told her ok and followed through the plan, you know it is all (we do), we sign, we sign promptly, we don’t know, we said okay yes, the plan is okay and we sign promptly.” (Sama)

A desire for more information during the IEP meeting.

“I would love more explanation, meaning, they explain for me more about the plan.” (Sama)

Knowledge as guidance

“My husband started looking at the district’s website and digging deeper into some of the laws.” (Manar)

“I mean, no one gave me an answer, No one guided me where to go.” (Sama)

B. PURSUING PROGRESS

(ADVOCACY FOR SERVICES, PLACEMENT AND GOALS)

Moms as advocates.

“Oh, this is a huge role, I think it's the most important role the parents play in their child's education,” (Zaina)

“As a mother! As a mother, you must focus on it (the IEP plan) and discuss it with them (the school) so they can follow on with the plan.” (Zaina)

“I try with everything to provide for him anything that I learned.... I demand from them.” (Sama)

“So, first things first, we are his mother and father but at the same time we try to be his voice so he can get whatever he needs from society.” (Manar)

“The first few years, because he was little, we followed the school's program, and there were no problems. But as he got older the services started to change and we started to ask for more things from the school. So, I would say we started to ask for more than one meeting a year, sometimes twice a year we would do.” (Manar)

Achieving progress is the motivation for advocacy.

The mom when she sees there are services that can help him (son), he can change for the better, but when the services are not enough, no, you (mom) feel there is no progress, there is no progress, little and weak.” (Manar)

“Because if you don’t, I hate to say it if you don’t fight for their education and achievement they will fall behind.” (Zaina)

Advocating during the IEP.

“You know it is all we sign we sign promptly, we don’t know, we said okay yes, the plan is okay and we sign promptly.” (Sama)

“So, in the last two IEPs, I was able to talk to them, and ask them a lot of questions, and settle my Ameer, IEP goals, my Amir goals with them.” (Zaina)

Sama actively corrects any misconceptions about her son during the IEP.

“I would only interfere to correct and afterward to consent.” (Sama)

“She (teacher) set up a high academic goal and I told her to decrease it a little, it will be too much on him, my son will not be able to achieve it. Let my son follow his level.” (Zaina)

Advocacy presents challenges for parents.

“We struggled because we asked for services for him, and they gave us different services.” (Manar)

“Last year we had to fight with them to get the right thing.” (Manar)

“There were some struggles with them in his IEP and what I want, and we will sit and put the goals and everything and then I discover that not everything is followed that we, as we discussed.” (Zaina)

Advocacy frustration and dissatisfaction at the lack of resources and support.

“But I do not think, they have all the facilities...” (Sama)

“I have to keep on asking, I have to keep following on it, so it was like a little bit struggle.” (Zaina)

“It’s true they say anytime you want to change, but there is lots of going back and forth and back and forth..., lots of going back and forth if you want to change anything.” (Zaina)

Advocating for an active role in the IEP meetings and decision-making process.

“In the meeting, I aspire to have more role in devising the plans (IEP)” (Sama)

Advocating for better goals

“The goals are a bit weak, need to be stronger, and there need to be more additions to them.” (Manar)

Advocating for more services speech, occupational, etc.

“There are some things like for example speech also, I feel I need more and this occupational therapy that is not available at all, feeding program, I mean this thing.” (Sama)

Advocacy for one is for all.

“I try from all my heart to, to find for my son and send a message so to defend all the kids and all the moms who have kids with autism.” (Manar)

“To get the services they deserve all kids need it. I am not asking for something more so we can try to defend our kids and everyone's kids too.” (Manar)

“It will change his life profoundly for him and his family and everything, and everything will be affected by them.” (Manar)

C. SEEKING SUCCESS

(EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION)

A desire for clearer and more detailed explanations during IEP meetings.

“That they explain a bit more slowly, not to be fast and you sign this... I mean I want more explanation, meaning they explain to me more about the plan...”

(Sama)

“The IEP document is so difficult to understand. I know a lot of moms who go to educational advocacy to help them to go through it. I try my best to, I read it, the document, to be honest, it's a lot, and not all the time I will read, I will read the stuff that I really want him, want to, want him to work I feel like he's weak in it.” (Zaina)

“Sometimes, during the meeting, the IEP meeting, I ask them to explain it to me. I ask them, oh, this, I read this, but really, I don't understand, what do you mean by this?” (Zaina)

A desire for effective communication.

“Communication is important all the year, not only at the time of the IEP meeting.” (Manar)

“All the time, all the time.” (Manar)

“So, there are a lot of rights they do not talk about, but we must find it out. There is a lot, a lot of, one of the things, they always mess up honestly, we can say there is confusion, lack of organization, they have a weakness.” (Manar)

Parental input

"I feel it's very little." (Sama)

“Usually, it is enough, we usually ask all the questions that we want and not only sign.” (Manar)

Type of parental input

“I mean sometimes I talk to them if I have a question or something like that, but you cannot say that I am the main, that I'm the one who is always, so it is little, little.” (Sama)

“We give our opinions (on the goals) in the meeting...we can give them comments and add to these goals, and usually, if we want to add some goals, they add them.” (Manar)

A need for effective explanations from the school on different issues.

“They explain in a few words.” (Sama)

“I mean, no one gave me an answer, No one guided me where to go.” (Sama)

“Even when they explained the programs that there is a (certain) class, I can say they did not provide enough information.” (Manar)

“They will explain to you, no their way is not to ask you (mom's opinion), they will explain it (goals), they will give you, ok, do you think it's okay, are you agree mom with that, not like asking you, it's like asking for your permission because at the end you're gonna sign the paper.” (Zaina)

Wishes for more collaboration in goal setting.

“This plan to be comprehensive between me and you, I mean to be done through dialogue front and back.” (Sama)

“No, they don't ask you, they are setting the goals and they decided and if you don't want to if you just say okay, okay, okay, that's it, they already decided.” (Sama)

“We give our opinions (on the goals) in the meeting, for example, last year, some of the goals we agreed to, other goals maybe because we are his family we see him more and know him more in certain aspects, something they (school) know more like educational things, other things like behavior we (parents) can see that he overcame that stage.” (Manar)

“They do not communicate with me before the meeting. Usually in the IEP meeting, they put a plan for the goals.” (Manar)

“In changing the goals, no... They put what they can provide, the district if the district does not provide this and does not accept, they do not put it.” (Sama)

Collaboration with the teacher.

“She started to work with him, and you know me I am always with her, always anything happens.” (Sama)

Collaboration with the IEP team.

“I want a plan that covers everything, all the things, the weakness that he has and this plan to be comprehensive between me and you.” (Sama)

“No, no, there is no collaboration. We work by ourselves, and they work by themselves. This is one of the very weak things in the IEP meeting, if you are not forming one team, it is called one team, but we were on our own last year and this year, so I would say two teams.” (Manar)

“I try to be nice with them, and to work cooperate with them, and to work the best for my son, and you don't want to fight, you want to do it in a nice way.” (Zaina)

Collaboration affects the parent-school relationship.

“We (parents) try to be professional with them not because of my son but because that is the appropriate way. But the relationship with them is no, not good I mean.” (Manar)

School-Home collaboration.

“I love to be a part, an indivisible part, they ok, they work at school, I want that I also work at home...” (Sama)

"I and they be with me always... we want to do this thing, you at home this is your role." (Sama)

"I love that everything they do, I do at home, so he, even if it was academic."
(Sama)

"This is also something, like, I tell them all the time, that if he had any behavior let me know, because we work on it with his therapist, or, with, at home."

(Zaina)