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An examination of low-income minority parents' and guardians' experiences with the special education process using a strengths-based perspective

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ABSTRACT

AN EXAMINATION OF LOW-INCOME MINORITY PARENTS' AND GUARDIANS' EXPERIENCES WITH THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS USING A STRENGTHS-BASED PERSPECTIVE

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The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of low-income, minority parents and guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process using a strengths-based perspective. Minority students are currently overrepresented in the field of special education; thus, this study sought to uncover possible reasons for that occurrence.

This study was conducted in a school district in a suburban city outside of Chicago, Illinois. Four participants, three mothers and one grandmother who was legal guardian of her grandchild, were observed in one special education meeting each, participated in two one-on-one interviews, and took part in a focus group discussion. The data were member checked, transcribed, and coded. Themes were concluded from the data.

The findings of this study illustrated the need for a reexamination of the special education process. It was determined that parents/guardians should feel empowered and be provided with supports from school personnel. Parents/guardians should also be clearly informed of their legal rights so they can best help their child(ren) grow.

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AN EXAMINATION OF LOW-INCOME MINORITY PARENTS' AND GUARDIANS'
EXPERIENCES WITH THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS USING
A STRENGTHS-BASED PERSPECTIVE

BY

CARLA BRAUN
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Doctoral Director:
Elizabeth A. Wilkins

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Finally, I am deeply grateful for my husband, J.R. He has been incredibly supportive, understanding, and encouraging. I am thankful for all of the conversations in which he encouraged me to persevere and continue to dream. He has been my light throughout this journey.

DEDICATION

To J.R., Rey, and my family

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF APPENDICES	ii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Conceptual Framework	4
Problem and Purpose Statements	5
Research Questions	6
Significance of the Study	7
Methodology	7
Definition of Terms	8
Organization	9
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	10
Problem: Disproportionate Representation	12
Special Education Process	13
Conceptual Framework: Strengths-Based Perspective	15
Deficit Model in Special Education	15
Strengths-Based Perspective: What Is It?	17
Guiding Principles of the Strengths-Based Perspective	18
Every Individual, Group, Family, and Community Has Strengths	18

Chapter	Page
Trauma and Abuse, Illness, and Struggle May Be Injurious, But They May Also Be Sources of Challenge and Opportunity	19
Assume That You Do Not Know the Upper Limits of the Capacity to Grow and Change; Take Individual, Group, and Community Aspirations Seriously.....	19
Every Environment Is Full of Resources	20
Caring, Caretaking, and Context	20
Current Special Education Model	21
Educators and Parents/Guardians	21
Communication Barriers with School Officials.....	23
Readability of Special Education Documents	23
Professional Language	25
Parents’/Guardians’ Legal Rights	27
Parents’/Guardians’ Stages of Understanding.....	28
Parents’/Guardians’ Support Systems	30
Low-Income, Minority Parents/Guardians Benefit from Parent/Guardian Social Networks	32
Conclusion	33
3. METHODOLOGY	35
Research Questions.....	35
Research Design.....	35
Site	37
Participants.....	37
Data Collection	40

Chapter	Page
Direct Observations	41
Interviews.....	42
Focus Group.....	43
Phases in Conducting the Study.....	44
Data Analysis	46
Transcription Process.....	46
Initial and Focused Coding	46
Data Verification.....	47
Member Checking	47
Triangulation	47
Potential Risks	48
Limitations	48
Delimitations.....	49
Conclusion	50
4. FINDINGS	51
Participants.....	51
Research Question 1	52
Written Communication.....	53
Subtheme 1: Professional Communication	54
Subtheme 2: Unprofessional Communication.....	55
Oral Communication.....	56
Subtheme 1: Updates on Behavioral and Academic Progress.....	57

Chapter	vii Page
Subtheme 2: Communication Barriers	59
Summary of Research Question 1	60
Research Question 2	61
Novice Stage	62
Advanced Beginner Stage	63
Proficient Stage	65
Summary of Research Question 2	68
Research Question 3	68
School Supports	68
Theme 1 School Supports: Teachers (General Education Teachers, Speech Teachers, and Special Education Teachers)	69
General education teachers	69
Speech teachers	70
Special education teachers	72
Theme 2 School Supports: Formal and Informal Documents	73
Theme 3 School Supports: Becoming Aware of Resources	74
Family and Community-based Supports	77
Theme 1 Family and Community-based Supports: Family Support	77
Theme 2 Family and Community-based Supports: Medical Doctors	80
Theme 3 Family and Community-based Supports: Independent Research about the Special Education Process	82
Theme 4 Family and Community-based Supports: Peer Groups	83
Summary of Research Question 3	84

Chapter	viii Page
5. DISCUSSION.....	85
Context.....	85
Significant Outcomes.....	86
Discussion	87
Research Question 1	88
Research Question 2	89
Research Question 3	91
School Supports.....	91
Family and Community-based Supports	92
Limitations	93
Implications of this Study	94
Recommendations for the Field.....	98
Adopt a Strengths-Based Perspective	98
Create a Welcoming Atmosphere	99
Educate Parents/Guardians	101
Collaborate.....	102
Establish a Parent/Guardian Social Network.....	104
Recommendations for Future Research	105
Parents/Guardians and the Procedural Safeguards	105
Impact of Strengths-Based Perspectives in the Field of Special Education	106
Mixed-Methods Research Design.....	106
Longitudinal Study.....	107

Chapter	ix Page
Educators' Perspectives	108
Student Grade Levels	108
Closing Statements.....	108
REFERENCES	110
APPENDICES	118

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Stages of Parents'/Guardians' Understanding of Their Legal Rights in the Special Education Process; Adapted from Benner's (1984) Stages of Clinical Competence	29
2. Alignment of Research Questions with Data Collection Strategies	40
3. Phases of the Study	45
4. Demographic Information of Participants Who Have Children in the Special Education Process	52
5. Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1	53
6. Themes and Number of Comments from RQ3: School Supports.....	69
7. Themes and Number of Comments from RQ3: Family and Community-based Supports	77

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix	Page
A. INFORMATIONAL LETTER	118
B. PHONE CALL PROTOCOL	120
C. INFORMED CONSENT FORM	122
D. OBSERVATION PROTOCOL	125
E. COMPARISON OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS.....	127
F. FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL.....	129
G. CROSSWALK BETWEEN RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS	133
H. SPECIFIC COMMENTS MADE BY PARTICIPANTS REGARDING RQ3: SCHOOL AND FAMILY AND COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORTS.....	135

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Jacob is an African-American, first grade student in a low-income school in the suburbs of Chicago. Jacob's teacher, Mrs. Henry, noticed that throughout the first trimester, Jacob had difficulty paying attention to her instruction and was extremely fidgety. Jacob also exhibited aggressive behavior towards other students in the form of pushing and yelling when he did not get his way. Jacob's teacher noted that he was not progressing as she had hoped academically. He was reading two levels below the target for that point in the school year. Mrs. Henry was concerned about Jacob's behavior and academic progress, so she contacted Jacob's mother, Sam, to discuss her concerns and steps that could be taken. The news of Jacob's behavior and academic progress came as a shock to Sam. She thought he was performing well in school. Mrs. Henry and Sam determined that it was necessary to provide Jacob with an intensive reading intervention and a personalized behavior plan.

A few weeks after the implementation of both the reading intervention and behavior plan, Mrs. Henry did not think Jacob had made adequate progress. She thus began Step 1 of the special education process, which included the completion of necessary paperwork and notifying Jacob's mother. The school psychologist made a phone call to Sam about the decision, and a formal letter was sent home inviting her to the first meeting to discuss Jacob's progress in school and possible need for special education services.

The meeting was scheduled, and Mrs. Henry met with the building principal, classroom teacher, special education teacher, school psychologist, social worker, and speech therapist in a school conference room. The educational professionals introduced themselves and welcomed Sam. The classroom teacher then began the meeting by briefly summarizing Jacob's strengths. The remainder of the meeting was used to identify areas in need of improvement and challenges, with the ultimate goal of forming a plan of action.

Since the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975) was enacted, parental involvement has been a requirement in the decision-making process for students with special needs. Moreover, parent involvement has remained a requirement through each reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990, 1997, 2004). However, while policymakers continue to recognize the importance of parental involvement, the majority of the supports put into place for parents/guardians require them to engage in self-education, whether through online informational resources or online/in-person social networks. These networks may or may not include special education professionals, such as teachers, doctors, and lawyers (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Additionally, the use of professional language when communicating with parents/guardians of students with special needs can place a barrier between parents/guardians and the school, which can potentially impede parental/guardian involvement (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008; Lo, 2009; Salas, 2004; Tellier-Robinson, 1999).

Although educational professionals in Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings often begin by identifying a child's strengths, the remainder of the meetings are devoted to identifying areas in need of improvement (Armstrong, 2012). If educational professionals wish to increase parental/guardian involvement, it is important for them to focus more on each child's

individual strengths (Saleebey, 2009). In other words, they must adopt a strengths-based perspective. A strengths-based perspective, informed by the concepts of liberation and empowerment, could potentially strengthen relationships between parents/guardians and educators (Saleebey). The present study sought to determine whether adopting a strengths-based perspective in the field of special education could be liberating and empowering to parents/guardians who have children with special needs.

The special education experience in many schools is similar to the story of Jacob and Sam. It is not atypical for parents/guardians of children who are in the early stages of the special education process to have some levels of “emotional distress,” including feelings of “denial, shock, and anger” (Haley, Hammond, Ingalls, & Marín, 2013, p. 240). Parents/guardians sometimes have difficulty understanding why their child has been identified as having special needs.

IDEA (2004) describes a ten-step process for identifying and testing a child who may require special education services; if the child qualifies to receive special education services after testing, an IEP is written for him or her:

Step 1. Child is identified.

Step 2. Child is evaluated.

Step 3. Eligibility is decided.

Step 4. Child is found eligible for services.

Step 5. IEP meeting is scheduled.

Step 6. IEP meeting is held and the IEP is written.

Step 7. Services are provided.

Step 8. Progress is measured and reported to parents.

Step 9. IEP is reviewed.

Step 10. Child is reevaluated.

Historically, minority and low-income children have been disproportionately represented in special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006), with disproportionate representation in this context defined as “the extent to which a membership in a given group affects the probability of being placed in a specific special education category” (Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Singh, 1999, p. 198). Therefore, it is the intent of the researcher to focus on the experiences of low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process, as identified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2011) defined minority populations as individuals who are of Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, American Indian, or Alaska Native race or ethnicity. According to the Illinois School Report Card (2014), low-income individuals are those who are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch/public aid or are in substitute care, which could include children in foster care. For the purposes of this study, if a child is considered low income, it is assumed that the parent(s) or guardian(s) with whom the child resides are low income as well.

Conceptual Framework

Within the context of social work practice, Saleebey (2009) defined the *deficit model* as the belief that individuals “become clients because they have deficits, problems, pathologies, and diseases; that they are, in some essential way, flawed or weak” (p. 3). The field of social work has traditionally relied on labeling individuals (i.e., schizophrenic, dyslexic, autistic). These labels have the power to dictate a person’s existence; the discourse regarding an individual who

has been defined as having a disability often becomes dominated by language reflecting his/her deficits (Saleebey, 2009). The same can be said for the field of special education: it is commonly viewed that an individual qualifies to receive special education services because he or she has deficits (Armstrong, 2012).

The framework for this study, in contrast, is grounded in a strengths-based perspective, which emphasizes an individual's strengths rather than his or her deficits (Saleebey, 2009). Using a strengths-based perspective encourages professionals to shift from acting as disseminators of knowledge toward a collaborative relationship with students, parents, and guardians. A more detailed description of the strengths-based perspective is provided in Chapter 2.

Problem and Purpose Statements

Parental/guardian involvement in the decision-making process for students with special needs is mandated by law and has been since the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (1975) was instituted. However, few supports have been put in place to help parents/guardians learn about special education law and the special education process (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). As a result, parents/guardians may have difficulty with special education decision-making processes, understanding the terminology used in special education meetings and documents, or navigating the available supports for special education (Fish, 2006; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004).

The special education process poses particular challenges for low-income, minority parents/guardians (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2004). The majority of studies regarding parent/guardians experiences with and opinions of the special education process have focused on

specific racial subgroups of parents and their perceptions of special education as a whole (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Fish, 2006; Fish, 2008). However, these studies are becoming dated. It is critical to continue to study the perspectives of parents/guardians in the special education process because they have the power to influence their child's educational experiences within it: parents/guardians are first notified that their child may have a learning disability or special need, and then have the right to move forward or to stop the special education process altogether.

Additionally, while extensive research on the utilization of a strengths-based perspective has been conducted in the field of social work, relatively little has been conducted regarding the use of strengths-based perspectives in special education (Saleebey, 2009). Furthermore, special education has traditionally operated according to a deficit model. Indeed, children qualify to receive special education services by displaying a deficit or deficits (Harry & Klinger, 2007). Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of low-income, minority parents and guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process using a strengths-based perspective.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1. How do low-income, minority parents/guardians describe communication with school officials during the special education process?
2. To what extent do low-income, minority parents/guardians know about their legal rights when it comes to their involvement with the special education process?

3. How do low-income, minority parents/guardians identify school and family and community-based support systems and utilize them in the special education process?

Significance of the Study

The results of this study will add to the current literature available regarding low-income, minority parents'/guardians' perceptions of the special education process. The results may also better prepare educators and other educational professionals to assist low-income, minority parents/guardians with navigating the special education process. Parents/guardians of children who are identified as possibly needing special education services could also benefit from these findings by providing them with information on the special education process and their rights, equipping them to make well-informed decisions regarding their child's education. Finally, by adopting a strengths-based perspective, this study outlines a model for collaborative relationships between educational professional, parents/guardians, and students, one which emphasizes strengths rather than deficits.

Methodology

The current research was conducted as a qualitative case study in Thorn Grove School District (pseudonym). Thorn Grove, located in the south suburbs of Chicago, is known to have a large low-income and minority population. Four low-income, minority parents/guardians of children in the special education process were chosen for this study. The researcher combined three data collection strategies -- direct observation, interviews, and focus group -- to gather narrative data regarding parents'/guardians' experiences with and opinions of the special education process. The data gathered from the observations informed the questions asked in the

interviews. The data were then coded using initial and focused coding. To ensure the data were credible and consistent, the researcher utilized member checking and triangulation.

Definition of Terms

Individualized Education Program (IEP): According to the Illinois State Board of Education

(ISBE, 2009), an IEP is

a written statement of the educational program designed to meet the student's needs and is developed by a team. The IEP includes a detailed description of what will be done to give the student the extra help needed. The IEP will change based on the student's needs—it is like a road map showing where the student is and where he or she is going. (p. 34)

Parental Involvement: Parental involvement can take on many forms, such as parenting skills, communication, volunteering, learning at home, school decision making, and collaboration with community agencies (Epstein & Salinas, 2004). For the purposes of this study, parental involvement will be defined as parents' and guardians' participation in any and all facets of their child's education, including, but not limited to, attending school meetings and events, volunteering for extracurricular activities, helping their child(ren) with homework, and reaching out to educators regarding grades, behavior, etc.

Primary-Aged Children: According to the U.S. Department of Education International Affairs Office (2008), primary grades range from first grade to fourth through seventh grade, depending on the location of the school district and individual policies. The school district chosen for this study considers primary-aged children to be students in grades kindergarten through third.

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, primary-aged children will be from those grades only.

Special Education Process: IDEA (2004) has a ten-step process in place that educators and/or parents/guardians should follow when they feel a child might have a disability. A more in-depth explanation is provided in Chapter 2.

Organization

This study is organized into five chapters. This first chapter establishes the significance of the study, including the problem, purpose statement, and research questions that guided it. A brief overview of the conceptual framework is also provided.

The second chapter contains a review of relevant literature. The key topics covered in Chapter 2 include:

1. Disproportionate representation of minority students in special education
2. Special education process
3. Conceptual framework: a strengths-based perspective
4. Communication barriers parents face
5. Impact of parent social networks

The third chapter outlines the methods used to conduct this study. The fourth chapter presents the findings from the data collected. Finally, the fifth chapter provides a discussion of the findings, recommendations for the field, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to the signing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1975), schools could make special education decisions without parental/guardian consent. The current law states that no action regarding a child's individual special education program (IEP) can be made without parental consent. Since the inception of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), and through each reauthorization of IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004), parental involvement in the decision-making process for students with special needs has been a requirement. IDEA (2004) stated that schools must "take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP (Individualized Education Program) team meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate" (Section 300.322.a). Additionally, parents have procedural safeguards through IDEA (2004) to protect their rights throughout the process. According to IDEA, parents/guardians must be informed of their rights at every Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting.

Despite these protections, parents/guardians struggle with both participating in and understanding the special education process. One impediment to participation is communication barriers between school officials and parents/guardians, such as the use of professional language, or jargon, in special education meetings and documents (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Lo, 2008; Lo, 2009; Mandic, Rudd, Hehir, & Acevedo-Garcia, 2012; Nagro & Stein, 2015; Pizur-Barnekow, Patrick, Rhyner, Cashin, & Rentmeester, 2011; Salas, 2004;

Tellier-Robinson, 1999).

Additionally, students identified as culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) are more likely to be placed in special education. At the end of the twentieth century, low-income African American students were 2.3 times more likely to be identified as having mental retardation than any other subgroup of students (IDEA, 1997). Ten years after regulations were put into place to lower the number of minority students placed in special education, the US Department of Education (2007) stated that African American students were 2.86 times more likely to receive services for mental retardation and 2.28 times more likely to receive services for emotional disturbance than all other racial/ethnic groups combined.

This research suggests that the regulations put into place to lower the number of minority students in special education were unsuccessful. Thankfully, studies have shown that parent/guardian social networks can provide parents/guardians with support in navigating the special education process and in combatting barriers, such as communication issues with school staff (Mueller, Milian, & Lopez, 2010; Munn-Joseph, & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Murray, Ackerman-Spain, Williams, & Ryley, 2011).

This literature review explores five major areas: (a) the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, (b) the special education process, as identified by IDEA, (c) communication challenges that parents/guardians experience with school officials while navigating the special education process, (d) parents'/guardians' legal rights, roles, and responsibilities throughout the special education process, and (e) the impact parent/guardian social networks can have on parents/guardians with children in the special education process.

A strengths-based perspective frames this research. Traditionally, the field of special education has been criticized for utilizing a deficit perspective, which focuses on a child's

deficits to create a plan to improve a child's academic performance (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). However, a strengths-based perspective focuses on an individual's strengths, rather than his or her deficits (Saleebey, 2009). Utilizing a strengths-based perspective in the field of special education could potentially lower the number of minority students placed in special education and also strengthen parent/guardian-school relationships.

Problem: Disproportionate Representation

For over 30 years, research has shown that minority students have been overrepresented in the special education field (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). Disproportionate representation in special education has traditionally been defined as the proportion of minority of students enrolled in special education being more than the proportion of minority students in the school population (MacMillan & Reschly, 1998). IDEA (2004) acknowledged that disproportionate representation of minority students continues to be a problem in the U.S., with a higher percentage of minority students enrolled in special education than the total percentage of minority children enrolled in school. Even after the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, African American students continued to be disproportionately represented in special education: African American students made up 16% of all students in elementary and secondary schools throughout the United States and 21% of all students enrolled in special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). Additionally, Coulter (1996) found a disproportionate underrepresentation of African American students in the gifted and talented branches of special education.

Minority students are also more likely to be diagnosed with "socially-determined disabilities," such as specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and speech and language impairments, than "traditional biologically-determined disabilities," such as blindness

and deafness (Coulter, 1996, p. 18). Donovan and Cross (2002) posited that one possible reason for the overrepresentation of African American students in special education could be cultural differences in behavior between predominantly Caucasian, middle-class educators and African American families.

According to IDEA (2004), each state education agency (SEA) is required to determine if there is a disproportionate representation of minority students enrolled in special education within a school district. The SEA must then notify the local school district and provide these students with additional support. Overrepresentation could indicate discrimination; therefore, the special education process should be further investigated.

Special Education Process

There are ten steps in the special education process, as identified by IDEA (2004). In the first step, the child is identified as possibly needing special education and related services. A child can either be identified through *Child Find* activities, as mandated by law, or through a request from a school professional or parent. *Child Find* is a component of IDEA (2004) that aims to identify students with disabilities as early as possible so that all students with disabilities can be provided with a “free and appropriate public education” (n.p.). In accordance with federal law, all states must develop a system for identifying students with possible disabilities.

In the second step, the child is evaluated in all areas that are related to the child’s possible disability. The results from the evaluation are used to determine his or her eligibility for special education services. Eligibility is determined in the third step, in which parents/guardians and educational professionals examine the results of the evaluation together and determine if, according to IDEA (2004), the child has a disability.

In the fourth step, the child is found eligible for services. If a parent/guardian does not agree with the decision, it can be challenged. Otherwise, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be written within 30 days. Scheduling an IEP meeting constitutes the fifth step, in which parents/guardians must be notified of the time, place, location, and participants of the meeting. Parents/guardians must also be notified of their rights (e.g., to bring additional participants to the meeting). In the sixth step, the IEP meeting is held and an IEP is written by a team of parents/guardians and educators. If the parents/guardians do not agree with the team's determination, they have the right to request a due process hearing.

After the IEP is written, the seventh step, in which services are provided, begins. School officials must ensure that the IEP is followed according to the plan, including accommodations and supports for the child. The parents/guardians, as well as teachers who work with the child, each receive a copy of the child's IEP. In the eighth step, progress is measured and reported to parents/guardians throughout the school year, at least as often as is done for students in general education, to determine if their child is making enough progress to meet his or her goals as stated in the IEP.

In the ninth step, the IEP is reviewed, which must be done at least once a school year. Parents/guardians must be invited to the IEP meeting, and they have the right to make suggestions for their child's IEP. If there are any disagreements, the team will try to come to a consensus by the end of the meeting. However, if they are unable to come to a consensus, parents/guardians have "several options, including additional testing, an independent evaluation, or asking for mediation, or a due process hearing. They may also file a complaint with the state education agency" (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2014, para. 22).

In the tenth and final step, the child is reevaluated. Every child in the special education system is reevaluated at least once every three years to determine whether he or she continues to qualify to receive special education services. Children can be reevaluated more often if it is requested by their parent(s)/guardian(s) or it is deemed appropriate by school officials.

Conceptual Framework: Strengths-Based Perspective

The special education process, as identified by IDEA (2004), has primarily focused on identifying a child's disability to provide him or her with proper instruction. However, placing the primary focus on identifying a child's disability, rather than his or her individual strengths, indicates the use of a deficit model. This study, in contrast, utilizes a strengths-based perspective.

This section will describe the current special education process, including the data gathering and evaluation tools that schools use to identify a child that may need special education services, and demonstrate how these procedures reflect a deficit perspective. It will also include 1) how the deficit model is currently being utilized in the special education process by examining the communication between parents/guardians and educational professionals, 2) define a strengths-based perspective, and 3) explore the impact that this perspective can potentially have on all stakeholders in special education.

Deficit Model in Special Education

The special education process focuses primarily on identifying a child's deficits and emphasizes what is wrong with him or her, rather than identifying strengths. Harry and Klinger (2007) stated that "[t]he main criterion or eligibility for special education services . . . has been

proof of intrinsic deficit” (p. 16). Compounding matters, *Child Find* makes looking for disabilities in their students mandatory for educators (IDEA, 2004).

If an educational professional or parent/guardian identifies a student as possibly needing special education services, many of the data used for an initial evaluation are subjective. Some of the most common types of data educators use to identify students with disabilities are observations, classroom grades, localized assessment scores, and standardized test scores. Observations, classroom grades, and localized assessment scores are often performed or assessed by a single individual (i.e., teacher, social worker, or psychologist), and thus may be subject to that individual’s subjective feelings toward the child.

Although it is standard practice for educators to identify a child’s strengths at the onset of each special education meeting, the remainder of each meeting is often devoted to identifying a child’s weaknesses. Describing the field of social work, which often overlaps in practice with special education, Ronnau and Poertner (1993) stated that “[m]ost workers are well intentioned and many assessment forms include a token space for recording strengths, but such efforts are usually minimal when compared to the time and energy used to identify problems and deficits” (para. 2).

According to IDEA (2004), it is required by law that parents/guardians are to be involved in the special education process in its entirety. Much of parents’/guardians’ involvement is through special education meetings. In their study of parents’ perspectives of the special education process, Lake and Billingsley (2000) reported that parents felt that the schools their children attended primarily focused on what was wrong with their child, rather than what was right. The parents in the study also emphasized the importance of schools recognizing their child’s individual strengths.

Strengths-Based Perspective: What Is It?

A strengths-based perspective places the focus on an individual's strengths rather than his or her deficits (Saleebey, 2009). Using a strengths-based perspective encourages professionals to shift from believing that they are disseminators of knowledge toward a collaborative relationship between professionals and clients (in this case, parents/guardians) that builds on individuals' strengths.

There are two main ideas that shape a strengths-based perspective: liberation and empowerment. Liberation is gaining the ability to make choices, rather than being constrained by the parameters of one's social situation, giving a person the power to achieve success. Additionally, liberation is the gaining freedom from thoughts and preconceived notions and recognizing that those things do not bind an individual. In this case, liberation can be gained through the development of knowledge, skills, and ability. It is the responsibility of leaders and policymakers, social workers, and educational professionals to guide individuals to recognize their abilities and power. According to Saleebey (2009), the central idea of liberation is hope. Arousing the feeling that things are possible, in spite of adversity, cultivates hope. The struggle to survive and to gain success cannot begin without hope that one's situation can change through one's actions and choices.

Empowerment occurs when people gain the ability to provide for themselves using the knowledge, tools, and resources they possess (Saleebey, 2009). In this context, empowerment is when an individual gains the confidence and authority to advocate and use their voice for themselves and their loved ones. Empowerment benefits people who are marginalized due to race, class, gender, sexuality, or other demographic factors. Oppressed individuals may respond

“to oppressive conditions through acts of constructive resistance, including mobilizing effective social change movements to overcome social problems such as poverty, family violence, racism, and homophobia” (Anderson, Cowger, & Snively, 2009, p. 193).

Guiding Principles of the Strengths-Based Perspective

Saleebey (2009) identified six guiding principles of the strengths-based perspective:

1. Every individual, group, family, and community have strengths.
2. Trauma, abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity.
3. Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change and take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously.
4. We best serve clients by collaborating with them.
5. Every environment is full of resources.
6. Caring, caretaking, and context. (pp. 15-19)

Every Individual, Group, Family, and Community Has Strengths

All individuals have strengths no matter their backgrounds. Accordingly, a strengths-based perspective focuses on recognizing and cultivating an individual’s strengths, rather than on fixing him or her. Unfortunately, as Chapin (1995) asserted, once the special education process begins, so does “the labeling process and a societal predisposition to create a social construction of reality to fit the needs of the people in power may transform people into problems” (p. 506). When individuals are labeled as having a disability, society labels them as *weak* or *different* and tries to fix them, as though they were problems to be solved (Sullivan, 1992). For example, in special education meetings, an IEP is created by identifying a child’s weaknesses and creating a plan to improve those weaknesses. It is not uncommon for educational professionals to create

IEPs without taking the child's strengths into account at all, so that they lose the opportunity to utilize and foster the skills and strengths that individuals with disabilities possess.

Trauma and Abuse, Illness, and Struggle May Be Injurious, But They May Also Be Sources of Challenge and Opportunity

According to Saleebey (2009), children should be viewed as individuals who, through their trials and tribulations, have acquired a set of skills and attributes. Even individuals who struggle in certain areas of life are still full of resources. A strengths-based perspective encourages hope, rather than focusing solely on struggles (Resiliency Initiatives, 2011). Although low-income, minority parents/guardians of children in special education have undoubtedly faced some trials and tribulations, they and their children have strengths. Unfortunately, special education meetings are generally devoted to discussing the child and his/her deficits with limited discussion about the strengths that the parents/guardians or students possess.

Assume That You Do Not Know the Upper Limits of the Capacity to Grow and Change; Take Individual, Group, and Community Aspirations Seriously

Saleebey (2009) found that professionals sometimes think that, once an individual is given a diagnosis, that individual can only progress so much. For example, it is not atypical for teachers and parents/guardians to assume that, once a child is diagnosed with a learning disability, the child will always have difficulties in school. However, as Chapin (1995) stated, all people, no matter their backgrounds, are capable of growth and change and that it is critical to focus on the power that every individual possesses.

We Best Serve Clients by Collaborating with Them

It is necessary for professionals to shift from working on an individual to fix their problems toward working with an individual to help him or her recognize his or her strengths and build on them. Saleebey (2009) suggested that it is important for professionals who work with clients to enlighten “schools, agencies, employers, local governments, churches, and businesses” of their clients’ strengths (p. 17).

Every Environment Is Full of Resources

Just as all individuals possess strengths, all environments contain resources. Saleebey (2009) suggested that resources can include people, institutions, and businesses as well as the knowledge, physical resources, time, and space(s) they possess. However, those resources are underutilized in the special education process in general and by service agencies in particular. Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific (2015) stated that when educational professionals reach out to communities and parents/guardians to identify their strengths and resources, it strengthens relationships between and among these groups. Parents/guardians can then be active collaborators in the education of their children.

Caring, Caretaking, and Context

Caring and caretaking are critical in the field of social work, and the same can be said of special education (Saleebey, 2009). Parents/guardians and students in special education must be provided with support in providing care for each other and school administrators and educators should provide care to parents/guardians and students.

Leung, Cheung, and Stevenson (1994) stated that a critical piece of the strengths-based approach is being culturally sensitive and appreciating the differences of individuals from all backgrounds. Smith (2006) asserted that when professionals identify clients' strengths and capabilities, it enriches them with confidence. Low-income, minority parents/guardians of children who are in special education should leave special education meetings feeling empowered.

Current Special Education Model

Educators and Parents/Guardians

Parental/guardian involvement has been a critical piece of special education policy since the inception of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). Parents are required by law to be involved in the special education process through its entirety, as mandated by IDEA (2004). However, special education research has shown that parents/guardians have at times felt frustrated in special education meetings because the focus of the meeting has been on their child's deficits (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Shifting from a deficit perspective toward a strengths-based perspective could positively impact educators, parents/guardians, and students during the special education process.

Within the context of psychological care, Smith (2006) stressed that it is critical to focus each session on identifying clients' strengths, so those strengths can be used throughout the counseling process. For instance, therapists using a strength-based model try to discover what the outstanding qualities of their clients are, how and with whom their clients build successful alliances, what special skills or characteristics distinguish their clients, how their clients have

successfully adapted to change, what resources support their clients, and how their clients interact or connect with their surrounding environments. Therapists might explore clients' personal strengths in cognitive, affective, physical, and cultural domains (e.g., one's cultural identity may contribute to group pride and belonging and a positive sense of self).

Although, Smith (2006) devised these principles and practices for use in counseling practice, they could be applied to special education meetings involving parents/guardians as well. Parents/guardians may not recognize their own strengths, and educational professionals do not always acknowledge them. Focusing on strengths may help professionals build empowering relationships with clients, thus facilitating positive change.

Weishaar (2010) suggested some ways to utilize a strengths-based perspective in the special education process. All educational professionals should avoid using negative language, such as "dysfunctional," "emotionally disturbed," or "learning disabled," and adopt positive language that emphasizes students' strengths (p. 208). The strengths-based perspective is not, however, saying that the needs of students will not be addressed. Educational professionals should be honest about students, but must always frame areas in need of improvement positively. For example, if a child displays behavior that is not conducive to the classroom environment, instead of stating that the child is *violent*, the specific behavior the school professional observes should be described.

Unfortunately, there is a stigma attached to special education, and parents/guardians and educators alike often have preconceived notions about children who have special needs. Campbell, Milbourne, and Silverman (2001) found that when educators got to know students with special needs through the creation of a portfolio, they more easily recognized each child's

unique strengths and talents. Communication between home and school can potentially be strengthened when educators understand each child as an individual who possesses strengths.

Additionally, Leung et al. (1994) discussed the importance of cultural sensitivity when working with individuals of all cultural backgrounds. That is, a strengths-based approach could improve the special education process by motivating educational professionals to focus on the strengths of every individual, no matter their background or identity. As Ronnau and Poertner (1993) maintained, culture and ethnicity are an important piece of a person's self-image. Finding out about a person's cultural background is critical.

Communication Barriers with School Officials

Parents/guardians who have children in special education often struggle when it comes to communication with the school (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Lo, 2008; Lo, 2009; Salas, 2004; Tellier-Robinson, 1999). Both the readability of special education documents and the professional language that educational professionals use can be a challenge to parents/guardians.

Readability of Special Education Documents

With the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), procedural safeguards were put into place to inform parents/guardians of their rights throughout the special education process. Included in the procedural safeguards is the requirement that schools provide parents/guardians with a copy of the "Procedural Safeguard Notice" at least once a year, which informs parents/guardians of their rights as available under IDEA. Additionally, state law requires that the "Procedural Safeguard Notice" be "written in a language understandable to the general public; and provided in the native language of the parent or in another mode of communication that's used by the parent,

unless it is clearly not feasible to do so” (§300.503[c]). If the parent’s/guardian’s language is not a written language, the notice must be orally translated, and educators must take steps to ensure that the parent/guardian understands the content. These procedural safeguards were created to ensure that parents/guardians have access to all of the necessary information that pertains to their rights throughout the special education process.

However, parents/guardians continue to have difficulty reading special education documents (FitzGerald & Watkins, 2006). Research has consistently demonstrated that special education documents are written above the reading level of their intended audience (Mandic et al., 2012; Nagro & Stein, 2015; Pizur-Barnekow et al., 2011). Nagro and Stein (2015) reviewed research regarding the suggested readability of these documents, and found that researchers recommended they be written at reading levels ranging from fifth to ninth grade. Mandic et al. (2012) analyzed the readability levels of the procedural safeguard documents for each state in the United States, and concluded that the majority of the procedural safeguard documents were written at a college reading level, which they determined was too high. Pizur-Barnekow et al. (2011) studied early intervention program documents from nine agencies in a Midwestern American county and found that the reading levels of the early intervention documents were higher than a fifth-grade reading level. Nagro and Stein (2015) examined the readability levels of 461 special education documents and found that the average reading level in relation to grade of all of 461 special education documents was 10.8.

Research has shown that parents/guardian of children in special education generally read at below average levels (Kutner et al., 2007; Mandic et al., 2012). Kutner et al. (2007) studied the literacy levels of adults throughout the United States and found that as household income increased, so did literacy levels; therefore, individuals who fell under the low-income category

had the lowest literacy abilities. Taken together, these findings indicate that current special education documents that are meant to help parents/guardians understand and navigate the special education process are at reading levels that are too high.

It is necessary for documents to be at a reading level that is appropriate for parents/guardians who have children in the special education system so they are informed of their rights and responsibilities (Pizur-Barnekow et al., 2011). Pizur-Barnekow et al. (2011) reported that special education documents that are difficult for parents/guardians to understand could lead to a decrease in empowerment, as it could compromise the parental rights provided by IDEA (2004).

Professional Language

The procedural safeguards that were put into place by IDEA (2004) required that educators make special education documents understandable for parents/guardians. The safeguards also indicated that parents have the right to participate in the entire special education process, and that they must give their consent before schools take action regarding their child, including initial evaluation, re-evaluation, and providing special education services for the first time. While the procedural safeguards were designed with positive goals in mind, parents/guardians sometimes have difficulty when it comes to participating in the special education process due to the professional language that is used during special education meetings and in special education documents (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999).

For years, research has reported that the professional language used in special education meetings is often difficult for parents/guardians to understand. Kalyanpur and Rao (1989) found that African American, low-income mothers felt unheard during IEP meetings because of the gap

between the professional language the school personnel used and their own informal language.

Fish (2006) studied seven middle-class families from one family support group in Texas who had children with autism and reported that all of the participants in the study had negative overall experiences with IEP meetings, in part due to their unfamiliarity with the special education process and the technical language used. Similarly, Childre and Chambers (2005) interviewed six families who had children in the special education system regarding their perceptions of IEP meetings, and found that the parents felt alienated due to the technical language that was used by the educational professionals during the meetings.

CLD parents/guardians often have a particularly difficult time understanding the professional language that is used in special education meetings (Lo, 2008; Lo, 2009). Lo (2008), who observed and interviewed CLD parents who had emigrated from China; Salas (2004), who interviewed Mexican-American mothers with low socioeconomic status; and Cho and Gannotti (2005), who interviewed Korean-American mothers of children with developmental disabilities regarding their experiences with special education, all reported that the participants in their studies had difficulty understanding the issues discussed during special education meetings due to linguistic and cultural barriers. Lo (2008) reported that the technical terms in special education documents did not always easily translate to parents' home languages. Cho and Gannotti (2005) also reported that their participants had difficulty advocating for their children because they could not understand the technical terms the professionals used.

In another study regarding the experiences of Chinese families in the special education system, Lo (2009) reported that although the school district provided a mother with a translator during special education meetings and translated all special education documents, the translators did not speak her native language (Mandarin) as fluently as needed. Additionally, while her

son's IEP documents were translated, they were often difficult to understand because they were translated word for word, and some of the terminology used was difficult for the mother to interpret. Lo (2008) also reported that one of the parents in another study had difficulty reading the special education documents, although the documents were translated in her native language, because the parent was illiterate. The parent reported that she had had to trust what was written in the documents and sign them so her child could receive special education services.

Lo (2008) further found that the interaction between the educational professionals and parents/guardians during special education meetings was limited. Lo interviewed and observed five Chinese parents of children who received special education services who stated that they were often confused during special education meetings because of their unfamiliarity with the professional language used. Additionally, the educational professionals gave an abundance of information to parents before allowing the translators to translate, which suggests that some of the information may have been lost.

Parents'/Guardians' Legal Rights

The goal of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is to make parents/guardians equal partners with educational professionals when it comes to making decisions for children who have disabilities. Procedural safeguards provide parents/guardians with rights and protections. According to the Center for Parent Information and Resources (2016), some of the most important procedural safeguards of which parents/guardians must be notified include:

- The right of parents to receive a complete explanation of all the procedural safeguards available under IDEA and the procedures in the state for presenting complaints

- Confidentiality and the right of parents to inspect and review the educational records of their child
- The right of parents to participate in meetings related to the identification, evaluation, and placement of their child, and the provision of FAPE (a free appropriate public education) to their child
- The right of parents to obtain an independent educational evaluation (IEE) of their child
- The right of parents to receive “prior written notice” on matters relating to the identification, evaluation, or placement of their child, and the provision of FAPE to their child
- The right of parents to give or deny their consent before the school may take certain action with respect to their child
- The right of parents to disagree with decisions made by the school system on those issues
- The right of parents and schools to use IDEA’s mechanisms for resolving disputes, including the right to appeal determinations (para. 3)

Parents’/Guardians’ Stages of Understanding

Although it is mandated that parents/guardians receive a copy of the procedural safeguards, they may still have some difficulty understanding the special education process and their rights. To date, no metrics exist to determine parents’/guardians’ knowledge of their legal rights. Therefore, the researcher created Table 1: Stages of Parents’/Guardians’ Understanding of Their Legal Rights in the Special Education Process. Benner’s (1984) model was created to place nurses on a continuum to determine their different stages of growth. Benner determined that nurses grow over time when exposed to strong educational and on-the-job experiences. The researcher, in the present study, adapted Benner’s (1984) Stages of Clinical Competence to place parents/guardians on a continuum and to determine the learning experiences they had with the special education process.

Table 1

Stages of Parents'/Guardians' Understanding of Their Legal Rights in the Special Education Process (Adapted from Benner's (1984) Stages of Clinical Competence)

Stage 1: Novice

- No experience with the special education process
- Relies solely on school personnel (teachers, administrators, social workers, psychologists, etc.) for information regarding his/her legal rights in the special education process

Stage 2: Advanced Beginner

- Has prior experience with the special education process
- Knowledge of his/her legal rights is developing through experience and research conducted on own
- Still relies to some degree on school personnel for information regarding his/her legal rights in the special education process

Stage 3: Competent

- Has at least two years of experience with the special education process
- Is confident in knowledge of his/her legal rights in the special education process
- Feels confident in advocating for his/her child's educational needs

Stage 4: Proficient

- Has three to five years of experience with the special education process
- Is confident in knowledge of his/her legal rights in the special education process
- Regularly advocates for his/her child's educational needs
- Is an active member of his/her child's special education team (participates, provides recommendations, openly expresses opinion, etc.)

Stage 5: Expert

- Exhibits all characteristics from the "proficient" stage
- Has a deep understanding of his/her rights in the special education process
- Is confident enough in his/her legal rights in the special education process that he/she could teach others about them

This table was adapted from Benner's (1984) Stages of Clinical Competence, which are widely used in the field of nursing to determine nurses' levels of expertise, identifying areas in

which a nurse can grow. These stages can accordingly be adapted to determine parents'/guardians' levels of understanding of the special education process, with an eye to ultimately helping them to obtain greater knowledge and understanding.

Parents'/Guardians' Support Systems

Support systems can be a useful tool in providing parents/guardians with the support they need to navigate the special education system (Mueller et al. 2010; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Murray et al., 2011). However, while it has been reported that children's after-school activities are an avenue for parents to form connections with other parents (Horvat et al., 2003), children who come from middle-class families participate in more organized activities than children who come from low-income and working-class families (Bennett, Lutz, & Jayaram, 2012; Horvat et al.). Low-income, minority parents/guardians often have difficulty accessing educational resources and, by extension, forming educational support systems (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003).

Additionally, low-income and minority parents/guardians are less likely to form relationships with professionals (e.g., teachers, psychologists, lawyers, and doctors) (Horvat et al., 2003). This could be because low-income, minority parents/guardians sometimes hold contrasting cultural morals and beliefs than the primarily middle-class, White educational professionals with whom they work throughout the special education process (Boyd & Correa, 2005). Horvat et al. (2003) found that when middle-class parents/guardians had issues or questions relating to special education, they consulted their social groups consisting of other parents/guardians or professionals, whereas low-income and working-class parents/guardians mostly consulted members of their families. When African American children go through the

special education process, their parents/guardians often turn to the church or family members for support, rather than utilizing institutional or professional supports (Rogers-Dulan & Blacher, 1995).

Additionally, low-income and minority parents/guardians are not as trusting of educational professionals as middle-class or Caucasian parents (Lareau, 1987). African American parents/guardians in particular are often skeptical of racism that is inherently present in the educational system (Harry, Klinger & Hart, 2005). Lynch and Stein (1987) studied Hispanic, African-American, and Caucasian families, and concluded that the teachers in the study most often contacted Hispanic and Caucasian parents in regard to a child's academic progress but most often contacted African American parents due to behavior. This could indicate cultural differences between teachers and African American parents/guardians and could fuel the parents'/guardians' distrust for educational professionals.

Despite potential hindrances to participating in them, parent/guardian social networks have been found to connect low-income, minority parents with special education resources, including knowledge of the special education system and access to other adults who are also navigating it (Mueller et al., 2010; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Murray et al., 2011). Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) studied how social networks impacted three African American, low-income families who had children in the special education system, and found that "families do not function in isolation" (p. 391). The families in the study benefitted from the support and information they received from social and institutional networks.

Low-Income, Minority Parents/Guardians Benefit from Parent/Guardian Social Networks

Parent/guardian social networks can be a support to low-income, minority parents/guardians by providing them with access to special education information and other parents/guardians who are in similar circumstances (Mueller, et al., 2010). For instance, Mueller et al. (2010) studied eight Latina mothers with children receiving special education services who were a part of a Spanish-language support group. The participants reported that belonging to the support group was both “a source of information” and felt “like a family,” providing members with “emotional support” (Mueller et al., 2010, p. 116). Before becoming a part of the support group, the participants felt alienated when it came to their children’s education; throughout their time in the support group, they created an emotional support system for each other all while learning about their rights and how to navigate the process.

Trust between parents/guardians and educational professionals in the special education process is critical. Lake and Billingsley (2000) interviewed 22 parents, 16 school officials, and six mediators regarding their experiences with parent-school conflict in the special education system, and all groups of participants indicated that conflicts in special education could largely be avoided if everyone was more knowledgeable. Angell, Stoner, and Sheldon (2009) found that parents/guardians were more likely to trust educators who cared about their children, communicated with them frequently and honestly, and were knowledgeable about their children and their children’s disabilities. Social networks are an avenue that can provide knowledge to parents/guardians, school officials, and mediators.

Partnerships for Autism through Collaborative Community Choice and Empowerment (Project PACE), which was designed to provide educators and parents/guardians with

information regarding autism spectrum disorder but could potentially be applied to special education as a whole, stresses the importance of equal partnerships in which both parents/guardians and educators embark on a journey of knowledge together. Murray et al. (2011) studied 27 participants (12 parents and 15 educators) throughout the implementation of Project PACE, and found that participation in Project PACE increased parents' and educators' knowledge of autism spectrum disorder through mutual sharing of stories and information. Because the parents and educators worked together, they were able to view issues from one another's perspectives (Murray et al.).

Conclusion

A strengths-based serves as the framework for this study. Sabalauskas, Ortolani, and McCall (2014) found that adopting a strengths-based perspective creates a “common understanding and shared language” between staff members and clients and also provides the “opportunity to move from deficit-focused and/or judgmental language in describing clients and client challenges to language that reflects hope” (p. 130). Adopting a strengths-based perspective in the field of special education could potentially strengthen relationships between parents/guardians and educational professionals, thereby lowering the number of low-income, minority students who are identified as possibly needing special education services. Additionally, Saleebey (2009) identified the six guiding principles of the strengths-based perspective:

1. All individuals have strengths.
2. Challenges could be sources of opportunity.
3. There is always room for growth and change.
4. Collaboration is essential.
5. Every environment has resources.

6. Individuals must be provided with support and care.

This literature review explained the steps of the special education process, as detailed in IDEA (2004), highlighting the still present disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. Additionally, although parental involvement is required by law (IDEA, 2004), some parents/guardians have difficulty communicating with educational professionals. This could be due to the readability of special education documents (Mandic et al., 2012; Nagro & Stein, 2015; Pizur-Barnekow et al., 2011) or the professional language that is used during special education meetings (Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Fish, 2006; Salas, 2004). Social networks could be beneficial in providing parents/guardians with necessary special education information and support (Mueller et al., 2010; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Murray et al., 2011).

In the present study, the experiences of low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process were investigated to gain a better understanding of parents'/guardians' roles and level of involvement in the special education process. The research was conducted to help educational professionals better understand low-income, minority parents/guardians and how they advocate for and support their children with special needs.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process, as identified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This chapter includes information regarding the study's research questions, research design, the participants, data collection strategies, data analysis, and limitations of the study.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1. How do low-income minority parents/guardians describe communication with school officials during the special education process?
2. To what extent do low-income minority parents/guardians know about their legal rights when it comes to their involvement with the special education process?
3. How do low-income minority parents/guardians identify school and family and community-based support systems and utilize them in the special education process?

Research Design

Nagy Hesse-Biber (2010) emphasized the importance of letting the research problem and questions guide the study. As the purpose of this study was to collect an in-depth explanation of

low-income, minority parents' and guardians' experiences with the special education process, a qualitative design was employed. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research is used to reveal meaning and interpret the experiences of individuals. Qualitative research can account for and record, as Mertens (2015) concisely stated, the uniqueness of individuals' "beliefs, values, intentions, and meanings" (p. 238).

Qualitative methodologies provide an avenue for voices to be heard, and are thus particularly important when studying minority populations. Qualitative research can help to represent complex phenomena within ethnicities and cultures (Leong, 2012; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 2005), and can, according to Mertens (2015), help researchers focus "on how people of color transcend structural barriers and create successful moments for themselves and others" (p. 244).

The present work implemented a case study design, which, as defined by Yin (2009), is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 18). Yin recommended employing a case study when "(a) 'how' or 'why' questions are being posed, (b) the investigator has little control over events, and (c) the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context" (p. 2). The goal of a case study is to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences in practice. Similarly, Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2007) suggested that case studies can provide detailed narrative descriptions of real-life events. Case studies are conducted to better understand organizational and social phenomena, and allow researchers to focus on contemporary real-life events (Yin, 2009).

For this study, a single-case design was utilized. Creswell (2007) recommended that a single instrumental case study be used when the researcher chooses a specific issue or concern to

be studied and when a bounded case is used. In the present study, the bounded case was low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process in a south suburb of Chicago.

Site

Thorn Grove School District (pseudonym) is a large district, encompassing nine schools and over 3,000 students, in a high poverty area in the south suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. According to the Illinois Report Card (2014), 95% of the students were considered low income; 59% of the students were Hispanic, 35% Black, and 4% White; and 14% of the students received special education services and had an IEP. This district was chosen because of its high poverty rate, minority student population, and number of students in special education.

Participants

The researcher studied the perceptions of low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process. The criteria to be selected as a participant were as follows:

1. The parent/guardian must have a child who is in the special education process, as defined by IDEA.
2. The parent/guardian must have a child who is in a primary grade (kindergarten through third grade).
3. The parent/guardian must belong to a racial or ethnic minority group. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), racial or ethnic minority groups include individuals

who identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian American, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

4. The parents'/guardians' child must qualify for free and reduced cost lunch.

The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning the study. After IRB approval, the researcher met with the assistant superintendent of special education in Thorn Grove School District, provided her with information about the study, and answered her questions.

The researcher then met with all kindergarten through third grade teachers during their first district-wide Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting of the 2016-2017 school year and provided them with a general overview of the study, including its purpose and the participant criteria. Before the meeting's conclusion, the researcher distributed brief informational letters to be sent home with all primary-aged students whose parents/guardians met the study criteria (see Appendix A). Because no outside persons can receive information or names of students who receive special education services, the teachers handed out the letters privately, without sharing any names or contact information with the researcher.

The letter included a brief description of the study and its purpose, participant criteria, and the researcher's contact information. The parents/guardians who met the study criteria and were interested in participating were asked to return the bottom portion of the letter, along with their contact information, to their child's school. The researcher then called all parents/guardians who completed and returned the bottom portion of the letter to verify if they met the study criteria, and further explained the study, including their time and effort commitment (Appendix B).

Prior to conducting the study, the researcher determined that if the number of participants was in excess of four to five, additional participants would be balanced by gender and ethnicity, allowing the researcher to gather rich information regarding different genders and ethnicities. The researcher also intended to place potential participants who were not initially chosen for the study on an alternate list in the event that a participant dropped out of the study.

Four participants who met the criteria volunteered to be a part of the study. All four participants fully completed the study's criteria; therefore, the alternate list was not necessary. This circumstance is supported by Yin (2009) and Creswell (2007) who suggested that no more than four or five cases should be included per case study. The final participants (n=4) were asked to complete an informed consent form (see Appendix C). The informed consent form included an explanation of the study and any potential risks, discomforts, or benefits of participating in it. The informed consent form also required the participants to consent to be audio recorded and quoted through the use of a pseudonym.

Additionally, each participant was given a \$100 Visa gift card for participating. The compensation information is included in the Information Letter that was given to the parents/guardians (Appendix A). If a participant had not fully completed the study, he or she would have been compensated accordingly.

The compensation was prorated as follows: participants needed to complete all four requirements (i.e., two interviews, one observation, and a focus group meeting) to receive the full \$100 Visa gift card; if a participant did not complete all four requirements, he or she would receive \$25 per each requirement completed. For example, if a participant only participated in the observation, he or she would receive a \$25 Visa gift card. If a participant participated in two

interviews and one observation, he or she would receive a \$75 Visa gift card. All participants (n=4) in this study completed all four requirements and each received a \$100 Visa gift card.

Data Collection

Three data collection strategies were utilized to answer the present study's research questions: direct observation, interviews, and a focus group (see Table 2).

Table 2

Alignment of Research Questions with Data Collection Strategies

	Direct Observations	Interviews	Focus Group
Research Question #1: How do low-income minority parents/guardians describe communication with school officials during the special education process?	X	X	X
Research Question #2: To what extent do low-income, minority parents/guardians know about their legal rights when it comes to their involvement in the special education process?	X	X	X
Research Question #3: How do low-income, minority parents/guardians identify school and family and community-based support systems and utilize them in the special education process?		X	X

Direct Observations

Direct observations were used to collect data regarding the participants' knowledge of their legal rights as parents/guardians. Direct observations "cover events in real time" and "cover content of 'case'" (Yin, 2009, p. 102). Yin recommended carrying out direct observations in an environment familiar to participants, in which nothing is altered. The researcher observed both verbal and non-verbal communication that parents/guardians utilized during special education meetings. Data collected during the observations were used to help finalize the interview questions (Merriam, 2009).

As noted by Yin (2009), it is best to observe participants in a natural setting, which, for the purposes of this study, was in each school's designated meeting room. The researcher in this study was a complete observer in a natural setting, and thus observed and did not participate in any of the discussions (Mertens, 2015). This allowed the researcher to gain an authentic picture of the experiences of parents/guardians in an IEP meeting.

The participants in the meetings were parents/guardians and school personnel, including regular education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, school psychologists, social workers, and all other individuals who had experience working with the child. The researcher observed the physical setting as well as conversations and nonverbal communication between school personnel and parents/guardians, with particular attention to participants' knowledge of their legal rights.

To facilitate observations, the researcher used an observation form (see Appendix D). To ensure validity for this observational instrument, the form was field-tested in two special education meetings and then reviewed by two special education teachers in Thorn Grove School

District prior to the study. The special education teachers provided the researcher with feedback on the form, having been invited to pay particular attention to the data collected and whether it assisted in answering the study's research questions. The special education teachers approved the form, deeming no additional modifications necessary.

Interviews

The researcher conducted focused interviews with each of the participants, as well as a combined interview approach, to collect in-depth narrative data (Patton, 2002). An informal conversational interview was used with an interview guide approach as the two together provided flexibility, allowing time for the participants to feel comfortable, and helped the researcher maintain a focused, specific, and systematic line of questioning.

Seidman (2013) suggested a three-interview series consisting of three 90-minute interviews per participant. However, the researcher modified this process and conducted two interviews per participant (one longer interview and a follow-up interview) due to the time constraints of the parents/guardians.

Seidman (2013) also recommended focusing on the participants' life histories and their experiences with a given topic. Accordingly, the parents/guardians were asked questions about the special education process, their communication with school officials, and their understanding of their legal rights. They were also asked to identify supports, both in and outside of the school, that they found helpful in navigating the special education system.

The first interview was approximately one hour. For two of the participants, the interview took place in a meeting room at the school that their children attended. For the other two participants, the interviews took place in their homes. The children were allowed to be present.

This first interview allowed the researcher to gain information about the participants' daily routines; their feelings when they first learned that their children might qualify for special education services; and their experiences with school personnel, special education meetings, and the overall special education process. Questions focused on such topics as the parents'/guardians' upbringings, beliefs, personal experiences with schooling, life goals, and key people who have been helpful to them.

Follow-up interviews lasting approximately 30 minutes were conducted with each participant approximately one week after the initial interviews, allowing time for reflection on their first interview and their experiences with the special education process (Seidman, 2013). The follow-up interviews took place in a meeting room at the school which the child attended at a time that was convenient for the participants; follow-up interviews were conducted in the other two participants' homes. Children were again allowed to be present. Participants were asked to discuss how special education fit into their needs and what special education meant to them and their children. A comparison of interview protocols and research questions can be found in Appendix E.

Focus Group

In addition to establishing a relationship with the participants to ensure they felt comfortable, the researcher used a focus group as the final means of data collection. Mertens (2015) characterized a focus group as an opportunity to interview a group of individuals, encouraging discussion across the group and highlighting differing opinions in a productive and positive way (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Focus groups can allow participants to express their

experiences without feeling judged, and can be particularly helpful in eliciting opinions from individuals who might hold back in one-on-one interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

The protocol used for the focus group discussion can be found in Appendix F. The focus group protocol was first field-tested with a panel of three teachers in Thorn Grove School District, two primary education teachers and one special education teacher. A comparison of the focus group protocol and the research questions can be found in Appendix G. The focus group provided the participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences with each other. It also allowed them to share information about resources that have been helpful to them in navigating the special education process.

The focus group took place after school in the conference room at the Thorn Grove School District's Central Office. The conference room was spacious, aesthetically pleasing, and comfortable, which encouraged discussion. The focus group discussion lasted approximately one hour. Children were allowed to be present, and tablets containing educational games were provided for them.

An assistant moderator was present to help conduct the focus group. The assistant moderator assisted in setting up the room, including monitoring and recording equipment, distributing materials and refreshments, welcoming participants, and taking notes. The assistant moderator did not participate in the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

Phases in Conducting the Study

The phases used to carry out the study are described in Table 3.

Table 3
Phases of the Study

Phases	Purpose/Objective
Phase 1	The researcher contacted the assistant superintendent of special education at Thorn Grove School District for permission to conduct the study.
Phase 2	<p>Once permission was granted, the researcher met with all kindergarten through third grade teachers in the school district during their first Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting of the 2016-2017 school year.</p> <p>The researcher provided the teachers with an informational letter to send home with all primary-aged students in the district whose parents/guardians met the qualifications of the study, inviting them to participate. The informational letters were sent home twice.</p>
Phase 3	Parents/guardians who were interested in participating returned the bottom portion of the letter to their child's school, along with contact information.
Phase 4	The researcher called all parents/guardians who returned the bottom portion of the letter to determine if they were eligible to participate and to further explain the study, including their time and effort commitment.
Phase 5	<p>Prior to conducting the study, the researcher determined that if the number of participants was in excess of four to five, additional participants would be balanced by gender and ethnicity. The researcher also intended to place potential participants who were not initially chosen for the study on an alternate list in the event that a participant dropped out of the study.</p> <p>However, only four participants who met the qualifications volunteered for this study. Therefore, all four of those participants were chosen.</p>
Phase 6	The final participants were asked to complete an Informed Consent Form.
Phase 7	All participants were observed in special education meetings. Each meeting lasted approximately one hour.
Phase 8	Each of the participants participated in two one-on-one interviews. The first interview lasted approximately one hour. The follow-up interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.
Phase 9	The participants participated in a focus group discussion, which lasted approximately one hour.

Data Analysis

Four data analysis techniques were utilized in this study: transcription, initial and focused coding, member checking, and triangulation. Initial and focused coding were used to code data from the focus group and interviews. Member checking was used after each interview to ensure that the data collected were accurate. Finally, the data from the observations, interviews, and focus groups were triangulated to make sure they were consistent.

Transcription Process

After the focused interviews and focus group interviews, the researcher transcribed the data collected. The focused interviews and focus group interviews were recorded on an iPhone using the Voice Record application, which allowed the researcher to slow down the speed of the recordings when playing back the interviews to allow for easier transcription. As Merriam (2009) recommended, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim (Merriam, 2009).

Initial and Focused Coding

The researcher first engaged in initial coding, or open coding (Merriam, 2009), which included the coding of “individual words, lines, segments, and incidents” (Mertens, 2015, p. 440). Any words that were related to the research questions were recorded in the margins of the transcriptions. This facilitated deep reflection of the data’s “contents and nuances” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100).

In the focused coding phase, the researcher developed specific codes or themes and compared those codes “across other participants’ data to assess comparability and

transferability” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 217). The researcher looked for emerging themes across data that related to the research questions regarding parents’/guardians’ experiences with the special education process, including potential supports as well as challenges faced.

Data Verification

Two strategies were used to ensure the data collected were accurate, reliable, and valid: member checking and triangulation.

Member Checking

Member checking was utilized to increase the accuracy of the interviews. Member checking is defined as “taking data and interpretations back to the participants in the study so that they can confirm the credibility of the information and the narrative account” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). The member checks were both informal and formal (Mertens, 2015). After each interview, the researcher summarized what the participant said, and the participant then made sure the summary was accurate. The same procedures were used for the focus group. No changes were requested by any of the participants.

Triangulation

Triangulation is defined as “checking information that has been collected from different sources or methods for consistency of evidence across sources of data” (Mertens, 2015, p. 271). The researcher checked information that had been collected from a variety of data collection strategies: direct observations, interviews, and a focus group. This ensured the data collected

were consistent. Triangulating the data helped strengthen this study by increasing reliability and validity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Potential Risks

The potential for risk in this study was minimal, and the researcher took the following steps to further reduce any possible risks:

1. To ensure confidentiality of information for students in special education, the researcher asked individual teachers to distribute an informational letter to the children whose parents/guardians met the study's qualification criteria.
2. The researcher reported all data using a pseudonym for the school district and pseudonyms for all participants.
3. The researcher created a warm and comfortable environment during the interviews. The participants were given a document for support services available through Northern Illinois University (NIU) in the event that experienced any negative emotions or thoughts during the interview.
4. The researcher discouraged participants from sharing information discussed in the focus group with anyone outside the group.

Limitations

Although the participants in this study were chosen because they were considered low-income, minority parents/guardians with a child or children in the special education process, they all also resided in the same geographic area. Therefore, the results of this study are not

transferable because “within-group variation” and “the influence of particular contexts” was not a focus of the study (Mertens, 2015, p. 432).

Another potential limitation of the study included the ethnicity and social class of the researcher. While the researcher took all necessary precautions to ensure the participants felt comfortable and unthreatened, the researcher is Caucasian and middle class, which could have affected the responses of the participants due to cultural and social class differences.

Delimitations

This study was limited to one school district in the south suburbs of Chicago. Only low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process were considered for this study. Parents/guardians of primary-aged children were selected because many children are first identified as possibly needing special education services in the primary grades due to the *Child Find* component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The researcher chose to only study parents/guardians who had primary aged children in hopes that the parents/guardians would provide a more recent perspective of their experiences with the special education process. Children are generally identified as needing special education services when they are younger; therefore, the researcher made the assumption that parents/guardians who had children in the primary grades were newer to the special education process. Therefore, parents/guardians of children who were in fourth grade or above were not included in this study. Four participants were chosen in total.

Conclusion

The participants of this study were four low-income, minority parents/guardians who had children in the special education process. This study was conducted using a qualitative case study; direct observations, interviews, and a focus group were the data collection strategies utilized, which allowed the researcher to gain insight into the parents'/guardians' experiences. The data were carefully analyzed using three techniques: initial and focused coding, member checking, and triangulation. Limitations of this study included transferability and cultural and social class differences between the participants and the researcher. The following chapter provides the findings of the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter is comprised of an overview of the study participants and a summary of the data collected and coded. The themes that arose from the data are presented as they relate to the research questions of this study:

1. How do low-income minority parents/guardians describe communication with school officials during the special education process?
2. To what extent do low-income, minority parents/guardians know about their legal rights when it comes to the special education process?
3. How do low-income, minority parents/guardians identify school and family and community-based support systems and utilize them in the special education process?

The data represent responses collected from the parents/guardians during interviews and a focus group meeting as well as observations of special education meetings. The findings are organized by themes and subthemes as they relate to each research question.

Participants

The researcher studied four low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children who were in the special education process. Table 4 includes demographic information about the participants. To maintain their confidentiality, the names used to identify participants are pseudonyms.

Table 4

Demographic Information of Participants Who Have Children in the Special Education Process

Participant Name	Gender	Age Range	Child's Grade Level	Relation to Child
Cassie	Female	Under 30	Third Grade	Mother
Jamie	Female	31-40	Third Grade	Mother
Jenna	Female	Under 30	Kindergarten	Mother
Stephanie	Female	Over 50	Kindergarten	Grandmother (Legal Guardian)

Table 3 shows that there is a wide age range of participants in this study: under 30 years old to over 50 years old. Additionally, at the time of data collection, the participants each had more than one child. Cassie and Jamie both had two children: each had one child in third grade and one infant less than a year old. Jenna had two children, one child in kindergarten and another child who was two years old. Stephanie had four older children who ranged from 18 to 33 years old. One of her children went through the special education process when he was in grade school. She also had five grandchildren and was the legal guardian of one in special education.

Research Question 1

How do low-income minority parents/guardians describe communication with school officials during the special education process?

Data for Research Question 1 were obtained from one-on-one interviews, follow-up interviews, and a focus group meeting. Communication with school officials occurred in two ways: in writing (emails, informal notes, and printed documents) and orally (in person and over the phone). The themes and subthemes that emerged from the data are found in Table 5.

Table 5

Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1

Theme	Subtheme
Written Communication	Professional Communication
	Unprofessional Communication
Oral Communication	Updates of Behavioral and Academic Progress
	Communication Barriers

For the purposes of this study, professional communication was defined, according to Eisenberg's (1989) suggestion, as direct, correct, true, and easily understood by its intended audience. When discussing sensitive matters, up-to-date data should be used to guide conversations. Professional communication is also timely, with responses issued within 24 hours of receipt of the initial correspondence. Unprofessional communication is defined as writing or speaking that is inaccurate, incomplete, and not easily understood by its intended audience; unprofessional communication leaves its intended audience confused.

Written Communication

The parents/guardians in this study mentioned that they have both received and initiated written communication with school officials during the special education process, such as classroom teachers, speech teachers, and special education teachers. Forms of written communication received from school officials included formal documents to notify parents/guardians of special education meetings, informal emails, and informal notes. Written communication initiated by the parents/guardians in this study included informal notes only.

Two subthemes emerged from the data: 1) professional communication and 2) unprofessional communication.

Subtheme 1: Professional Communication

Two out of the four parents/guardians, Jamie and Jenna, felt as though the school officials had been professional in their written communication. For example, Jamie felt like her child's current school was professional and responded to her informal notes in a timely manner. She stated, "Now [my child's school], they're really good at if you call or if you send a little note in her folder or whatever. They will call you" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). Jenna, whose child attended the same school, similarly communicated with her child's teacher through informal, handwritten notes frequently. Jamie and Jenna both interpreted a timely response from their children's school as professional. They also appreciated the ease of communicating with their children's school through informal, handwritten notes.

When it came to informing parents/guardians about special education meeting dates and times, all four participants in this study felt as though their children's schools were professional in their written communication. All of the participants received notifications regarding upcoming meetings through formal letters mailed to their homes and formal, sealed letters sent home with their children. The formal letters were written on district letterhead and used simple language to inform parents/guardians of when and where the meetings would take place. When discussing the formal notices she had received about the time and date of her grandchild's special education meetings, Stephanie stated, "They informed me at that point that they would be contacting me either by mail or sending a letter home by [her grandchild]. I haven't had any problem [receiving formal meeting notifications]" (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). The other participants

expressed similar opinions: they all felt that the formal notices were professional in tone and provided them with the necessary information they needed regarding meetings.

Subtheme 2: Unprofessional Communication

While the participants felt that the formal written communication from school officials was professional, two participants, Cassie and Stephanie, discussed experiences with unprofessional communication. Cassie reflected on the instance in which her son's school made the decision to change his placement from a general education classroom to a self-contained classroom. When Cassie found out that the change had been made, she was upset. She approached the school, and the response she received was, "I thought we sent a note" (Interview 1, November 25, 2016). Cassie said that she did not receive a note. She felt that the school officials were unprofessional because they should have been more formal in the notification they provided her, mailing her, at the very least, a formal notice to her house and requesting a meeting. During the focus group, she commented, "I thought we was supposed to come to a table and talk about it, sign it, and agree to it before you do something. You can't just put a child in a class without a parent's permission" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). Cassie was adamantly opposed to her child being placed in a self-contained classroom. Several times throughout the one-on-one interview, follow-up interview, and the focus group, Cassie stated that she felt her child would be better served in a general education classroom.

Stephanie shared an experience with school officials in which she felt they had acted unprofessionally. Stephanie's child received a handwritten note from her child's kindergarten teacher that recommended her child receive speech therapy:

Three days into . . . kindergarten class, [my child's] teacher sends me a note and says, 'You know what? I want [my child] in therapy. [My child] needs to be in therapy, in speech therapy.' And first I got offended. Then I said, 'You know what? No, before I respond to her, let me listen to [my child]. Let me really, really listen.' And then that's when I started paying attention to the little things [my child] does. [My child] has a lisp because [my child's] tongue is longer than most kids, and so then I start really paying attention. So then . . . I'm just saying . . . don't take it personal before you . . . lash out at some of the points. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

Stephanie's immediate response when her child's teacher first mentioned that her child should receive speech therapy was to perceive the communication as unprofessional. Stephanie felt offended and thought the teacher's approach was too informal given the seriousness of the request. However, she came to the realization that her child's teacher was right in her recommendation.

Stephanie told the other participants in the focus group meeting that it was natural to take offense to some of the things that educational professionals have to say about their children, and that it might feel unprofessional at times, but, before retaliating, it was best to calm down, listen, and observe their children through a new lens. She said, "Sometimes you have to stop and just pay attention because as a parent . . . you don't notice those things that an outside person might notice" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). Stephanie urged the other participants to attend special education meetings with an open mind.

Oral Communication

In this study, the parents/guardians reported communicating orally with school officials during the special education process. Forms of oral communication included in-person communication and communication over the phone. The oral communication also ranged from formal (e.g., while scheduling or during special education meetings) to informal (e.g., to address

everyday issues regarding the participants' children). Two subthemes emerged from the data: 1) updates on behavioral and academic progress and 2) taking offense.

Subtheme 1: Updates on Behavioral and Academic Progress

School officials contacted the parents/guardians in this study in person and over the phone to provide them with updates regarding their children's behavioral and academic progress. Two of the participants, Jenna and Jamie, saw the updates on behavioral and academic progress as positive, whereas another participant, Cassie, perceived those updates differently.

Jenna and Jamie enjoyed receiving updates regarding their children's behavioral and academic progress, even though the updates were both positive and negative. Jenna shared that she spoke with her child's teacher at dismissal almost every day; she said that the teacher, "lets me know when [my child is] bad and acting up or something good. So every day when I pick [my child] up from school she tells me" (Interview 1, October 5, 2016). Jamie, too, spoke to the classroom teacher about her child's academic progress regularly: "[my child's] teacher is really good. From meeting with her, talking with her, and then what [my child] says, it's easy to fill in the blanks [to know that she is a good teacher]" (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).

Jenna and Jamie said that they enjoyed meeting with the educational professionals in special education meetings. Jenna stated, "What I like about special education is I come back a couple months later for an IEP meeting, and they'll let me know what [my child] has improved on, what [my child's] working on, and what [my child] needs extra help in" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). Jenna added that she enjoyed being involved in her child's education. She wanted to know her child's areas in need of improvement, so she could ensure that her child would excel in both academic performance and behavior. Jenna and Jamie both

commented on how proud they were of their children's academic growth and that they appreciated the frequent and ongoing communication they shared with school officials.

Although Jenna and Jamie had positive experiences regarding the updates they received from their children's school, Cassie did not enjoy the updates her child's school gave her. The updates she received only reported her child's negative behaviors:

But sometimes they wanna keep [calling] and they wanna keep not listening to me. "Don't call me, don't care. I told y'all what to do. You're not listening." You have to treat [my child] like a regular kid because that's what I've been doing since I found out that day. I still treat [my child] like . . . a regular kid. [My child] still gets punishment. [My child] has chores. When [my child is] wrong, [my child is] wrong. And that's the biggest problem with these schools where they want to baby them. If you treat them disabled, they're gonna be disabled. Don't do mine like that because mine is not disabled. Mine could get up. [My child] could literally cook . . ., microwave style. [My child] can dress, all that stuff . . . So I'm like, "No, my child can do this . . ." [My child is] very independent for [my child's] age and . . . disability. [My child is] very independent. I got a lot of doctors' compliments like, "For your age group, we never met a mother who does what you do." (Interview 1, November 25, 2016)

Cassie said that her child's school called her almost daily to provide her with behavioral updates, but that the school never called her to report any positive information.

She felt as though her child's poor behavior in school was related to the way the teachers treated her child. She was proud of her child's independence and wished the teachers would recognize that. Because she was familiar with her child's learning styles, she offered the school suggestions, and felt offended that the school did not listen to her. After so many poor reports from the school and feeling as though her child's school did not take her recommendations seriously, Cassie felt tired of receiving phone calls from them.

Subtheme 2: Communication Barriers

Throughout the data collection process, three out of the four parents/guardians (Stephanie, Cassie, and Jamie) recalled taking offense to statements made by school officials regarding their children. For example, Stephanie stated, “I’ve been in meetings where, you know, they’re sitting here, and they have already summed you up before you’ve come into this meeting” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). Stephanie was offended because she felt that the educators in the special education meetings she attended had preconceived notions about her and her children. Stephanie’s response to those educators in the special education meetings was, “It’s not for me. It’s not for you.” Stephanie felt as though the special education meetings were not held for the educators present nor for herself, but for her child and her child’s education. Stephanie explained that everyone should come together to “find out what’s best for my children, what’s wrong with them, and how can we go forward” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).

Like Stephanie, Cassie declared that she often felt offended during special education meetings. Cassie, whose child had been receiving special education services for approximately four years, had experiences with special education programs at several different schools. She spent a lot of time with her child, researching her child’s disability and overseeing her child’s medical care. Cassie mentioned that she felt her age impacted educational professionals’ opinions of her: “And they think I don’t know nothing. And I’m like, ‘Just because I’m young don’t mean I don’t know nothing.’ Because I’m the type of person, I do my research before I come to the table” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016). Cassie felt offended because she worked hard to learn about her child’s disability, and did not like that the school officials seemingly made judgments about her before getting to know her.

During the focus group meeting, Stephanie commented on the experiences she had with several different schools. Her children had received special education services when they were in school, and now her grandchild was receiving special education services as well. She stated that while she was happy with her grandchild's current school, she had encountered other schools that did not give her the same feeling:

For me, I've had a lot of experience with it. Just, I'm more confident and I know what questions I want to ask and what's really bothering me. At some point, you'll see, a few years down the line, where it's like, okay—you'll start taking these mental notes and know exactly. You know what I'm saying? What to say and who to ask because luckily this team that I've approached here are very professional. If you've ever been in a room with some that aren't professional, you're gonna appreciate what's professional now because you have some educators that, shall I say, they're not all professional. And some of it is personal. And you'll say things and you'll have to be able to learn what to . . . [not take as an] attack and what to take as an attack. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

During the focus group meeting, some of the words the other participants used to describe their feelings during special education meetings included attacked, scared, and nervous. Stephanie responded to the other participants and said that she became better at gauging when she should listen and when she should speak up with experience. She also stated that the topics that are discussed in special education meetings are personal by nature. She told them that it was natural to take offense to the comments made by educational professionals, but she also gave the educational professionals the benefit of the doubt, considering that they might mean well.

Summary of Research Question 1

Educational professionals and parents/guardians communicated in two ways: in writing and orally. Written communication occurred through emails, informal notes, and printed

documents. Two subthemes emerged from the data regarding written communication: 1) professional communication and 2) unprofessional communication.

Two out of the four participants perceived that educational professionals had been professional in their communication with them via informal emails and notes, and the other two participants perceived that educational professionals had been unprofessional via these means. However, all four participants felt as though educational professionals had been professional when communicating through formal documents to notify them of future special education meetings.

Oral communication occurred in person and over the phone. Two subthemes emerged from the data: 1) updates on academic and behavioral progress and 2) taking offense. One participant, Cassie, did not enjoy the frequent negative updates she received from her child's school. Two of the participants, Jenna and Jamie, enjoyed the positive and negative updates they received regarding their children's academic and behavioral progress. Additionally, three out of the four participants recalled instances when they took offense to something that school officials communicated to them regarding their children.

Research Question 2

To what extent do low-income, minority parents/guardians know about their legal rights when it comes to the special education process?

Data for Research Question 2 were obtained from observations, one-on-one interviews, follow-up interviews, and a focus group meeting. Because the participants in this study had varying levels of knowledge regarding their legal rights, the researcher adapted a competence model from Benner (1984) to determine the participants' levels of understanding (see Table 1). Jenna was in the Novice Stage; Jamie and Cassie were categorized under the Advanced Beginner

Stage; and Stephanie, with her knowledge and experience, can be considered Proficient. While the researcher did not observe Stephanie prior to her proficiency, it is assumed that she had progressed through the other stages (Novice, Advanced Beginner, and Competent).

Novice Stage

At the time of the data collection process, Jenna's child was in kindergarten. Her child had been receiving special education services for a little less than one year. At the time of the one-on-one interview, Jenna had attended a total of two IEP meetings. Because Jenna was mostly a listener during special education meetings, had no prior experience with the special education process, and relied on school personnel to provide her with information regarding her legal rights as a parent/guardian, Jenna was in the Novice Stage.

The researcher observed Jenna in an IEP meeting. It was noted that Jenna did very little talking. While the meeting was in session, she only spoke when she was directly asked questions. However, she did engage in a brief conversation regarding her child's personal interests with the general education teacher after the meeting concluded (e.g., her child's favorite food and games). At the conclusion of the special education meeting, the researcher noted that Jenna received a copy of the *Procedural Safeguards*, which listed her rights as a parent. Jenna later stated in the focus group meeting that she did not read those *Procedural Safeguards*.

Additionally, during the first interview, Jenna was asked what she knew about her legal rights, and she responded, "[I know] a lot because I've been through everything, been to all those meetings and then talking to [my child's] teacher all the time" (Interview 1, October 5, 2016). When asked to further elaborate on what she knew, she could not indicate any specific rights she held as a parent/guardian.

It is worth mentioning that Jenna was nervous during the initial one-on-one interview because it was the first time she had met the researcher. She displayed some visible signs of being uncomfortable (e.g., hand fidgeting and many short, one word replies). During the follow-up interview, she opened up more and stated that she felt more comfortable. When asked the same question regarding how much she knew about her legal rights, she stated, “I think they’ll let me know at the meeting” (Interview 2, November 2, 2016). Jenna explained that she was unsure of her rights, but she felt that the educational professionals would inform her of them the next time they met.

Advanced Beginner Stage

Both Jamie and Cassie had children who were in third grade. Both of their children had been receiving special education services since kindergarten (i.e., for more than three years at the time of data collection). The participants had each attended at least one Individual Education Program (IEP) per school year since their children were in kindergarten.

During the observation, the researcher noticed that while Jamie and Cassie only spoke when they were directly asked questions during the special education meetings, they were both more outspoken than Jenna had been. At different points in Jamie’s and Cassie’s meetings, they asked for clarification regarding the services their children received. For example, Jamie and Cassie each requested clarification as to the number of minutes per day that their children met with their special education teachers.

Both Jamie and Cassie seemed to understand that they had a voice in their children’s education, which is their legal right as parents/guardians. Referring to the most recent special education meeting that she attended, Jamie said of the educational professionals,

They gave me a feeling that I have more of a voice in it. I mean, they didn't say it, but yeah, this is the first meeting I've been to that they made me feel like more involved than before, you know? Like talking about what [my child] does in school. We'll compare notes as far as, you know, what [my child is] doing in school, what [my child is] doing at home, and then what [my child's] homeroom teacher sees. (Interview 1, October 6, 2016)

Although Jamie's child was in third grade and had been receiving special education services since kindergarten at the time of the one-on-one interview, it was not until that special education meeting, when her child was in third grade, that she felt as though she had more of a voice in her child's education.

However, Jamie still did not feel completely confident in the knowledge she possessed regarding her legal rights as a parent/guardian. While the researcher and Jamie were on the phone discussing a time to meet for the first interview, Jamie talked about the *Procedural Safeguards* she received and how she did not read them because she was given too many papers. During the one-on-one interview, she stated, "as far as my consent and what, I don't know. I really don't know my rights. I should sit down and read this [*Procedural Safeguards*]" (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).

Cassie seemed to understand that it was her right to advocate for her child in the special education process. She reported contacting her child's schools to express any concerns she had regarding her child's education. However, she was also skeptical of the special education process and was not fully knowledgeable of what her child's school could and could not do legally. Cassie stated that she was still learning when it came to her legal rights regarding the special education process.

When Cassie lived in a different state, her child was in a general education classroom and only worked with a special education teacher, speech teacher, and occupational therapist for part of the day. When her family moved to her current location, her child began school in a general

education classroom and again received special education services for part of the day. However, one day, the school made the decision to place her child in a self-contained classroom without speaking to her. She expressed her displeasure during the focus group:

They didn't talk to me. They didn't ask me, no nothing. And it's like, at the beginning, before we moved back this way, I was hesitant about it. The school said, "I thought we sent a note." "No, you didn't send no note home to me to let me know nothing." And, like I said, I experienced it when they did that to my [child], and they didn't let me know. They didn't talk to me. I didn't sign no paper, no nothing for you to put my child in this class. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

During the one-on-one interview, Cassie also discussed her mistrust of the special education process: "they don't listen. No, like I said, they be slipping stuff right past me" (Interview 1, November 25, 2016). While Cassie did discuss her concerns with the school, she was unaware that her child's IEP was a legally binding document that her child's school could not make any changes to. She was unaware that the school could not legally change her child's placement without consulting her first.

Jamie and Cassie both had prior experience with the special education process, and their knowledge of their legal rights was developing. They relied on school personnel to provide them with some information regarding their legal rights in the special education process. Because of this, they can both be placed in the Advanced Beginner Stage.

Proficient Stage

Stephanie had more than three nonconsecutive years of prior experience with the special education process at the time of the study. She was both guardian of her grandchild, who was in kindergarten and receiving special education services, and her now adult children had gone through the special education process when they were younger.

Because of her experience, Stephanie felt relatively confident in her knowledge of her rights:

With myself, a couple of my children have been in it and a couple of my grandchildren as well. After the first experience with the first one, you know, that was kind of, you know, that's where I learned a lot. And knowing what some of my rights was and resources. And I've also witnessed from watching my own children deal with certain things and my grandchildren, how some of the resources have changed as well. (Interview 1, November 18, 2016)

Stephanie also stated, "I do on some level, for the most part, have an idea of what my rights are. I've always received these notices [*Procedural Safeguards*]. I've always gotten everything I needed to work with" (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). During the observation, the researcher noted that Stephanie seemed very confident in the special education meeting. She spoke throughout the meeting and advocated for her grandchild. She made sure that the educators in the room knew her grandchild's interests, strengths, and areas in needs of improvement.

Stephanie was also adamant that all parents/guardians should read the *Procedural Safeguards* and learn about their legal rights to best help their children in school. During the focus group meeting, Stephanie encouraged the other participants to learn about their rights:

And I'll tell you, it pays to read it, simply because, honestly, probably the rights haven't changed that much. You need to know your rights because, again, with my oldest, and back then they made it look like, you know. You know back then it was always the mother's fault, and I didn't take it personally because I know I did my best. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

Stephanie likewise encouraged vigilance. She recalled an experience when her oldest child was in school, in which the school officials met with her child and, according to Stephanie's recollection, began "drilling" her child to say something negative (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). She asserted, "You just have to really be perceptive of who it is

asking these questions and what their motives are of asking it. You doing it out of love. Someone else is doing it for a paycheck sometimes” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).

Stephanie described instances in the past when schools did not follow-through with her children’s IEPs. Because she knew her rights, she was able to advocate for her children to ensure that they received the best educations possible. For example, when one of her children was in eighth grade, Stephanie noticed that her child was not improving academically and socially, which troubled her. She said, “In fact, my oldest [child], [who is] almost 30, . . . eighth grade year [was] actually homeschooled . . . [My child] was having some issues academically and getting along, so I brought [my child] home” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). Stephanie homeschooled her child for a few months according to curricula that she received from her aunt, a public-school teacher. After her child had made advances academically and socially, she put her child back in public school to complete eighth grade and, later, high school.

Stephanie reported that she was overall pleased with the level of knowledge, care, and respect that her grandchild had received. She also shared that she frequently monitored her grandchild’s progress in school: “I pay close attention to what I’m hearing, so I can see what [my grandchild] is responding to at school” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). She knew that if she was not pleased with her grandchild’s progress, she could contact the school and she not afraid to do so.

Stephanie could be placed in the Proficient stage because she had prior experience with the special education process, openly advocated for her grandchild during special education meetings, and was adamant about the importance of other parents/guardians knowing their legal rights so they could best help their children, grandchildren, or wards with their education.

Summary of Research Question 2

The participants in this study were in different places in the *Stages of Parents'/Guardians' Understanding of their Legal Rights in the Special Education Process*. Jenna was in the Novice stage because she had very little experience with the special education process and relied heavily on school personnel to provide her with information regarding her legal rights. Jamie and Cassie were in the Advanced Beginner stage because they had both had a few years of experience with the special education process and, while, they still relied on school personnel to provide them with information, had basic knowledge of their legal rights. Stephanie was in the Proficient stage because she had more than three nonconsecutive years of experience with the special education process, was knowledgeable of her legal rights, and advocated for her grandchild during special education meetings.

Research Question 3

How do low-income, minority parents/guardians identify school and family and community-based support systems and utilize them in the special education process?

Data for Research Question 3 were obtained from one-on-one interviews, follow-up interviews, observations, and a focus group meeting. Three themes emerged regarding school supports: 1) educators, 2) formal and informal documents, and 3) becoming aware of resources. Four additional themes emerged regarding family and community-based supports: 1) family support, 2) medical doctors, 3) independent research, and 4) peer groups.

School Supports

Table 6 identifies each of the three themes, including the number of comments per theme.

Table 6

Themes and Number of Comments from RQ3: School Supports

Theme	Total Number of Comments from All Participants
Teachers	17
Formal and Informal Documents	8
Becoming Aware of Resources	7

Theme 1 School Supports: Teachers (General Education Teachers, Speech Teachers, and Special Education Teachers)

The participants identified educators as a form of school support 17 times throughout the interviews and focus group meeting. *Teacher* in this context referred to general education teachers, speech teachers, and special education teachers. *Speech teacher* in this context referred to state-licensed speech language pathologists. In the school setting, speech language pathologists are most commonly known as “speech teachers” by teachers, parents, and students. Speech teachers work with students who have communication disorders. Interestingly, the participants in this study did not mention their children’s special education teachers at any time during the data collection process. It was also observed during the special education meetings that the general classroom teachers and speech teachers spent the most time discussing the academic progress of each individual child with the child’s parent/guardian.

General education teachers. During the focus group meeting, Stephanie described the quality of general education teachers and the support they provide to parents and students. Stephanie explained that she had experienced general education teachers who were supportive of

her children during the special education process by making accommodations and caring about their academic performance.

However, Stephanie had also experienced general education teachers who were not as supportive, mostly in low-income schools:

If your school district is a cheaper school district, not paying their teachers, they're not gonna keep good teachers. Now, I won't say there aren't any good teachers there, but they may not keep a good teacher because she feels threatened. She feels scared, and she's not being paid enough to pay her bills, so she's gonna go over [to a better paying school district], just like anybody else. You gonna go where you can use your skills. You'll see a big difference in what your kid receives and what your kid does not receive. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

All of the parents/guardians in the focus group agreed with Stephanie regarding the relationship between school funding and the quality of support offered by general education teachers in the special education process. Elaborating further, Cassie compared her experiences with general education teachers in well-funded schools to those in schools receiving less than adequate funding:

They [well-funded schools] literally cared [about her child's education]. They literally let you know before they do it [made decisions regarding her child's education]. "This is what we gonna do, Ms. Holmes. Is you okay with this? You need to come in and sign this paper before we make the decision." But they [poor schools] don't care. They just go and just do it, and they just call it a day. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

Cassie liked that the general education teachers in well-funded schools focused on her child's academic performance and contacted her before making any decisions regarding her child's schooling. She was not pleased that the general education teachers in a school with lower funding made decisions about her child's education without contacting her first.

Speech teachers. Three participants in this study mentioned speech teachers during the data collection process. Each noted that they had seen improvements in their children's speech and felt happy about the services provided by their speech teachers. Jenna stated, "I'm happy

[my child is] improving with . . . speech. [My child has] improved a lot. Like when [my child] was one and two, three, [my child] hardly said anything, and now I hear [my child] say all these words that I never knew [my child] could say” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).

Stephanie and Jamie remarked that they appreciated their children’s speech teachers as well. Stephanie said of her grandchild’s speech teacher: “I’m glad that it seems like she [speech teacher] is looking at every area that can strengthen [my grandchild]” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). Jamie especially liked the system her child’s speech teacher used: “She had a really good system going there where she would do the syllables on her arm” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016). Jamie enjoyed that she could use the syllable strategy with her child at home.

The researcher asked Jenna if there was anyone at her child’s school who was helpful to her during the special education process, and she replied, “No, besides the speech teacher when she sees me for the IEP meeting. She lets me know everything with [my child] and what she’s going to work on with [my child] and what [my child] has improved [on], but that’s about it” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016). When questioned further regarding her relationship with her child’s speech teacher, Jenna mentioned in both her first interview and in her follow-up interview that she waits to be contacted by the teacher, usually through formal meetings (e.g., parent/teacher conferences and IEP meetings), to learn about her child’s academic progress. She reported that she very seldom contacted her child’s speech teacher for support: “I talk when there’s something wrong” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).

However, Jenna stated that she valued the support she received from her child’s speech teacher during those meetings:

What I like about special education is I come back a couple months later for an IEP meeting, and the speech teacher will let me know what [my child] has improved on, what [my child is] working on, and what [my child] needs extra help in. So then I know more,

you know, because they don't tell me things every day, what [my child] needs. (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).

One participant, Jamie, was unaware of what the speech services her child received entailed. During the one-on-one interview, Jamie asked her child, "how often do you go to speech?" The child replied that instruction in speech took place a few times per week, and did not elaborate on the number of times per week or the length of each session. Jamie did not appear concerned about the frequency of communication with her child's speech teacher, which could indicate that she, like Jenna, primarily spoke to her child's speech teacher only when contacted first.

Special education teachers. According to each student's IEP, the special education teachers must meet with the student more frequently than any other teacher, aside from the general education teacher. Yet the participants' children's special education teachers were not mentioned once in the interviews or the focus group meeting.

Three of the participants in the study (Jamie, Jenna, and Stephanie) had children who spent the majority of their school days in a general education classroom. Those three children were taken out of their general education classrooms for a set amount of time each day to meet with a special education teacher. One of the children was also taken out of their general education classroom once a week to meet with an occupational therapist.

Cassie's child was in a self-contained classroom at the time of the interviews and focus group meeting; however, her child spent kindergarten through second grade in a general education classroom. Cassie spoke of her child's previous general education classroom teachers, but did not mention any of her child's special education teachers.

Theme 2 School Supports: Formal and Informal Documents

All of the participants agreed that there seemed to be no shortage of documents when it came to the special education process. They stated that they were notified of their child's first special education meeting was through a formal letter sent home from school with their child or through the U.S. mail.

Additionally, at the end of every special education meeting observed by the researcher, a packet of papers was given to the participants. The formal documents in those packets included goals for the child and the *Procedural Safeguards*. According to Jenna,

Usually in the pamphlet that they send me home, it says everything that they've talked about and what [my child is] working with, and so I get to keep it. I get to relook at it if I didn't hear everything or if they were talking too fast or something, and if I have a question, I can always go back to them and ask them about it. (Interview 1, October 5, 2016)

During the focus group meeting, however, two of the four participants (Jenna and Jamie) mentioned that although they received these formal documents at the end of meetings, they did not read them. In response, Stephanie stated, "I'll tell you, it pays to read it" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). She urged the other participants to read the formal documents, no matter how long they were, because ones like *Procedural Safeguards* outlined the rights they had as parents/guardians of children who were in the special education process. She felt that it was important for parents/guardians to know all the details of their child's education and stay informed.

However, Stephanie was also wary of accepting everything the educators said. As she explained,

It's the educators that are telling you about [your children], and just because they are saying it doesn't make it right. You know, you got some unprofessional educators, and

they have been misleading, and then, you know what, if you already got a lot going on with you and you're having a hard time dealing with it, they gonna have you walking out of a meeting feeling like it's your fault. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

Stephanie wanted the other participants to be careful about trusting educators in special education meetings.

Regarding informal documents, Jenna and Jamie stated that they received handwritten notes from their children's general education teachers. They generally perceived these informal communications as a form of support. As Jamie described it, she and her child's general education teacher communicated "just through little notes back and forth" (Interview 1, October 6, 2016). The content of these notes included meeting reminders and quick updates on her child's academic progress. Jamie appreciated this kind of informal communication because she wanted to know how her child was performing in school.

Stephanie was not as pleased with this mode of informal communication initially. She mentioned that she was first notified that her oldest child may require speech therapy or special education services during the first week of kindergarten through an informal letter from the teacher. She stated that she was immediately defensive: "You know, but in my eyes, [my child's] vocabulary was fine, so when [my child] went to kindergarten, in the first week, the teacher sent me a letter and my first response was to be defensive" (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). Ultimately, however, Stephanie felt thankful for the teacher's recommendation. She stated that instruction in speech "made a huge difference for [her child]."

Theme 3 School Supports: Becoming Aware of Resources

One prominent theme that surfaced during the focus group meeting was the need for parents/guardians to be aware of the resources and supports available to them. Stephanie stated,

“The problem I have with special education, not that it’s with special education, is that you don’t know that those resources are there” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). Cassie added, “As a parent, you so busy. You gonna spend two years trying to help your child, not knowing there’s resources there” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).

Three out of the four participants were entirely or relatively new to the special education process, and were unaware of the special education services that the schools could provide their children who were struggling with speech and/or academics. The parents/guardians in this study learned more about special education services that the schools offered once their children began the special education process. Cassie described her experiences cogently when she reflected on the first special education meeting she attended for her child and the knowledge she has gained throughout the special education process:

I was so lost, but I had a lot of learning to do. I was so lost like to the point where I had to start doing my own research, and then I was coming in with like a list of questions. I learned a lot from school to school and stuff. (Interview 1, November 25, 2016)

Stephanie, unlike Cassie, had prior experience with the special education system. She had four children, ranging in age from 18 to 33, and five grandchildren. At the time of data collection, she had custody of one of her grandchildren, who was in kindergarten and received special education services. Like her grandchild, a few of her children had gone through the special education process, so she was aware of the resources and supports that were available.

Stephanie told the story of when she was new to the special education process:

My first child that was in special education is my 30 years old. And what generally happens with a kid, even if they have a little bit of a learning disorder, it goes unnoticed, and no one does anything about it. They will cover it up with a behavioral problem. And then, it becomes a different kind of problem, and it’s not being addressed, and then they want to put them in a different kind of school or class. When in actuality that problem should have been addressed sooner. I love some of the resources that are in school, but a parent that

does not have any idea that that resource is there, there needs to be a way of letting them know (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

She elaborated:

When [my child] got to alternative school, some of their educational programs were awesome, but when they were trying to reach a child, by the time they were in that much turmoil and trouble, it didn't do any good. It should have been implemented long before it got to that. So that's my problem with some of the problems in education. It needs to be known that these resources are here. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

Because of her previous experiences, Stephanie knew right away that there were resources in schools to help her grandchild, so she requested them. She recognized that her grandchild had trouble with speech and struggled academically. She requested that her grandchild be tested because she wanted her grandchild to receive both speech and academic special education services.

She commented that there are many parents/guardians out there who are completely unaware of the resources available to them to help their children: "These resources are here. Because until you had a problem, you probably wouldn't know those resources are there. They don't advertise these resources. They don't" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). The other participants in this study agreed with her.

While discussing available school supports in the focus group meeting, Stephanie had many things to add to the conversation from her own personal experience. Jenna, Jamie, and Cassie mostly listened and agreed with her. They were eager to learn from her and directed questions toward her regarding available supports. Jamie remarked that it was nice to hear from Stephanie because she had experienced so much.

Family and Community-based Supports

Table 7 identifies each theme related to family and community-based supports and the number of comments made per theme. Specific comments can be found in Appendix H.

Table 7

Themes and Number of Comments from RQ3: Family and Community-based Supports

Theme	Total Number of Comments from All Participants
Family Support	20
Medical Doctors	9
Independent Research about the Special Education Process	4
Peer Groups	4

Theme 1 Family and Community-based Supports: Family Support

Family support was the most frequently discussed, and perceived as the most valuable, support by all four participants. Jamie had a motto that she lived by, and it captured the feelings of all of the participants in this study: “Family is everything” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).

Although the participants mentioned many family members who were helpful to them during the special education process, the participants reported that their mothers were the most influential. When the participants were asked about what or who had been helpful to them during the special education process, the first answer all four participants gave was their mothers. Cassie stated, “So my mom was the number one supporter through the whole process and everything,

and she kinda coached me on everything and stuff” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016). Jenna expressed a similar sentiment:

So if I ever have any problem, I go to her with anything. She helps me all the time, so if I have a problem I go to her and then she says, “You know what. You need to go talk to them” or, “You need to do this,” because she’s been around longer than me, so she knows the rules. She knows more than I know. (Interview 1: October 5, 2016)

Fourteen out of the 20 comments (70%) regarding family support were made about the participants’ mothers.

Out of the four participants, three of them had mothers who had passed away within the past few years; however, their influence was lasting and significant. Jamie explained that she learned so much from her mother about parenting and how to support her child through the special education process. “She parented so well. It’s like she knew everything. If I’m half the mother she was, I’ll be happy with it” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016). Stephanie discussed the impact her mom had on her, especially when it came to promoting education: “My mom passed three years ago, and I took care of her until she passed. My mom was one of those, you know, promoting education. Same thing I do. It’s a family thing. You know, that’s my family, period” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). Cassie talked about how much she missed her mom and her support:

Well, there was my mother. But she just passed like three months ago, so that was like my only support. And it’s like, as of now, I don’t have one. She was always there for me to talk to her. And then she gave me advice because, like I said with my twin cousins, when they was in special education, she was the one who was taking care of them, taking them to therapy and all that. So basically, she knows what I’m going through. But she was there to like guide me through certain things, give me advice. If she sees something. I don’t see and she’ll bring it to my attention like, “Have you ever noticed this?” and stuff. But I was always calling to talk to her. (Interview 1, November 25, 2016)

The four participants leaned on their mothers, mostly for a listening ear but also to provide them with advice regarding their children and the special education process.

Mothers were not the only familial supports that the participants discussed. Stephanie and Jamie talked about how much their entire families helped with supporting them in raising their children. Stephanie spoke of her “close-knit” family and how every person in the immediate family made sure her grandchild was well taken care of. She explained that when it came to her grandchild’s education, her family supported her in many ways, not just with the special education process:

My immediate family in the household, my two [children in general education], and of course [my son, the father of my grandchild in special education] is there as well, so we all make sure [my grandchild in special education is] eating and getting everything [my grandchild] needs in the home. And I’ve got one [child in general education] that’s normally picking [my grandchild in special education] up. My youngest [child] drops [my grandchild in special education] off on [the] way to school, so [my grandchild in special education is] very close-knit with [the extended family] and the immediate household right there so everybody interacts with him and [my grandchild is] a very loved kid. (Interview 1, November 18, 2016)

She discussed her entire extended family as well: “My whole family is like that, be it aunts, cousins, and we’re all very close-knit people. When one is in trouble, we all look out” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).

Jamie held the same beliefs regarding the importance of having her entire family help to raise the child. She added that her fiancé was also supportive, due to his personal experiences with the special education system: “He was dyslexic, and he had problems learning. I don’t know exactly what they were, but [my child] runs into a lot of the same problems” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016). All four participants agreed that raising a child was a team effort amongst family members.

Additionally, Stephanie had several family members who were educators, including classroom teachers, classroom assistants, and one school dean: “As far as support, I have many educators in my family as well” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). She also discussed her own

experience with homeschooling her oldest child when her child was having difficulty in school.

As a homeschooling mother, she was able to utilize her aunt's experience as a teacher to provide her child with grade-level curricular opportunities.

Family was by far the most valuable resource for all four of the participants in this study. They utilized family members to both listen to them and to provide them with advice regarding their child's experiences with the special education process. As Stephanie stated, "When I'm looking for resources, you know, if I do have questions, I do have people [meaning family]" (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).

Theme 2 Family and Community-based Supports: Medical Doctors

Although not as prominent a theme as family, medical doctors and other medical professionals were brought up in discussion nine times. Jenna's mother recommended that Jenna take her child to the doctor when she started noticing her child was not talking as much as an infant should be by the age of one:

She told me that I should ask the doctor to see what he thinks, and the doctor said [my child] needs speech, and [my child] needs the help now before it's too late, before [my child] goes to pre-K and then . . . can't talk to anybody. And they're not going to want to play with [my child]. (Interview 2, November 2, 2016)

During the focus group meeting, Jenna also mentioned, "I thought [my child] was just, like, a late talker, but [my child] needed the help" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). She said that the doctor was helpful in referring her to a speech teacher. When her child began preschool, Jenna was able to discontinue speech therapy with the outside provider and utilize the speech teacher in her child's public school free of charge.

Additionally, Jamie and her child worked with a therapist on a weekly basis. She was assigned a therapist through the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS). To begin, the therapist worked with Jamie and her child separately for approximately one year. At the time Jamie was interviewed, she and her child were no longer receiving therapy individually, but were working together in family therapy. She stated that she had learned so much from the therapist in terms of supporting her child and learning about the special education process.

Unfortunately, at the time of the interview, the therapist only had a short time left to provide therapy with the family. Jamie stated, “Me and [the therapist] both got the relationship. Really, it does suck because she is cool. She is really cool” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016). Jamie talked about the small gifts her and the therapist exchanged throughout their time together in therapy as well as the positive impact the therapist had on her family, helping it come together as a cohesive unit. She was upset that her therapist was no longer going to work with her family because she had learned so much from her.

Cassie was not as positive regarding the support she received from her new medical doctor. She moved from a different state and took her child to a doctor in her new neighborhood. At that point, her child had already been diagnosed with Asperger’s and had been receiving special education services in school for a few years. Cassie stated, “When you go to new doctors, you gotta explain it to them what’s going on. So, he’ll write it in your old records. He just looked at him and was like, ‘Ain’t nothing wrong with [my child]’” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016). She explained that her mother had recently passed at that time, and she was new to a town with no one else she could go to for support. Accordingly, she had been looking forward to establishing a positive relationship with a doctor. At the time of the interview, Cassie was still on the search for a good doctor she could trust.

Theme 3 Family and Community-based Supports: Independent Research about the Special Education Process

Because the parents and guardians in this study were unaware of some of the resources available to them and their children in the special education process, it was necessary for some of them to conduct independent research. During the interviews and focus group meeting, the participants mentioned conducting their own research to help them understand the special education process (n=4 participant comments).

When asked about family and community-based supports that had been helpful to the participants during the special education process, many of them brought up the research that they had conducted independently. Cassie primarily went to her mother for help when it came to her child, but, once her mother passed away, independent research was all she had left. She concluded, “I just kinda had my own research after my mom passed away” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016). She conducted research via the Internet and by watching movies, both documentaries and dramas. She determined that the best way to learn about her child was to just watch and “learn [her child’s] ways.”

Two of the other participants, Jenna and Stephanie, said that they used similar methods. Stephanie stated, “I find answers in whatever resources I use, be it by mail, be it by who I’ve contacted, etc. I always kind of keep a record of that. I kind of reflect back to that” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016). Jenna, however, said that she did not do her own independent research by reading. She received most of her support through speaking with individuals.

Theme 4 Family and Community-based Supports: Peer Groups

While none of the participants in this study had attended any organized peer group meetings or parenting classes, they stated during the focus group meeting that peer groups and parenting classes would be helpful in learning about the special education process (n=4 participant comments).

Stephanie stated,

I think, too, groups like this would help. I think it would help when parents talk because your experience might help the person and vice versa because, as you can see, we all come from different walks of life, different experiences, different levels, and different places. And that alone can help somebody else. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

Cassie added that people around her recommended that she should seek out a parenting class to provide her with support. She said, however, that she had had difficulty finding a parenting class near the places that she has resided:

It's like I could never find one because, like you say, I do want to go to other people. Like, if I have a question, like, give me advice on it. I know how to handle certain things and stuff like that but because, like I said, I'm young, so I'll be wanting other people advices because they help me out and stuff. I be looking for those type of groups and stuff. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

All four participants agreed that if parenting classes or peer groups were available nearby, they would take advantage of them. Jamie stated that when her mother was alive, she had talked about how parent groups were helpful. Jenna added, "You learn a lot [from other moms]" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016). All of the participants remarked that they were deeply invested in their children's educations and wanted to help them in any way possible. They agreed that parenting groups would help provide them with the knowledge necessary to best support their children in the special education process. The challenges of finding such a group, however, were evident in their responses.

Summary of Research Question 3

In summary, all participants revealed that they had utilized both school and family and community-based support systems in the special education process. They turned to family members first when in need of support, and their mothers were their number one supporters. The participants also utilized other forms of support, including formal and informal documents, educational professionals, independent research about the special education process, and medical professionals.

The participants agreed that there needed to be more advertisement of resources available in schools because most were not privy to those resources prior to their children being identified as needing special education services. Some of the participants indicated that they were still learning about them. Additionally, the participants all agreed that peer group meetings and parenting classes would be helpful in supporting parents/guardians with children in the special education process.

Chapter 5 explores the themes described in this chapter, connecting them to the study's conceptual framework as well as existing research. Additionally, implications of this study for future research recommendations will be discussed.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the experiences of low-income, minority parents/guardians of primary-aged children in the special education process as well as the results of the present study. This chapter also connects the findings of this study to its conceptual framework, providing recommendations for the field of special education and for future research.

Context

Low-income and minority children are overrepresented in the field of special education (Coutinho & Oswald, 2006). Upon further investigation, researchers have identified possible reasons for this. Both teacher observation and standardized tests are used to determine whether a child qualifies to receive special education services. However, teachers and test creators are primarily White and middle class, which may influence their views of students' intelligence. White-Eurocentric knowledge and types of intelligence have traditionally been privileged in American schools as well as on standardized tests (Viruru, 2006). Further, standardized tests, including intelligence quotient (IQ) tests, have been heavily criticized for racial and cultural bias (Green & Griffore, 1980; Marbley, Bonner, & Berg, 2008; Viruru, 2006).

These conventional methods do not always acknowledge that intelligence is shaped by an individual's culture and experiences (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Individuals regarded as intelligent have historically been portrayed as ones who do well in school and on standardized

tests. When students do not perform well in these areas, they are considered “uneducable” (Boozer, 1978, p. 415). Some teachers thus struggle to see a student’s individual strengths if those strengths differ from what they typically prioritize.

In contrast, a strengths-based perspective is heavily rooted in the ideas of liberation and empowerment. For teachers to empower parents/guardians to make decisions regarding their children’s education, they must become culturally relevant themselves. Establishing trusting relationships is a key component of the strengths-based perspective, and it is the job of school officials to take the first steps in doing so. One way to begin establishing a positive relationship is to determine and build upon the strengths of the children and their parents/guardians.

Significant Outcomes

The findings of the present study contribute to research on low-income, minority parents’/guardians’ experiences with the special education process. The bulk of existing studies, which are becoming dated, used a wide lens to focus on racial subgroups (Childre & Chambers, 2005; Cho & Gannotti, 2005; Fish, 2006; Fish, 2008). In contrast, this study specifically focused on low-income, minority parents’/guardians’ experiences with the special education process, as identified by IDEA (2004).

The current research showcases the need for the adoption of a strengths-based perspective in the field of special education. Research on strengths-based perspectives is fairly new in the field of special education. The findings from this research are in agreement with Harry and Klinger’s (2006) claim that children’s deficits determine their eligibility to receive special education services. The participants in this study would have preferred more positive interactions

with school officials, ones that focused on what is right with their children rather than what is wrong.

The present study also examined parents'/guardians' stages of understanding of their legal rights, as defined by IDEA (2004), in the special education process, a subject which has been neglected by existing research. The results of this study suggested that as parents'/guardians' levels of understanding increased, so did their ability to advocate for their children (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006).

Finally, the findings from the present study support Horvat et al.'s (2003) finding that when low-income parents need help with the special education process, they mostly consult family members. The participants in this study were quick to identify their families as their number one supports throughout the special education process. They identified other supports as well, including general education teachers and conducting their own research. However, none of those supports compared to the helpfulness of their families. This finding emphasizes the need for schools to build upon parents'/guardians' strengths, allowing school officials to develop positive relationships and, by extension, establish or add to parents/guardian social networks.

Discussion

This section discusses the results of this study and connects them to past research regarding parents'/guardians' experiences with the special education process as well as commentary on a strengths-based perspective. The discussion section is organized by research questions.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 investigated the communication that low-income, minority parents/guardians had with school officials during the special education process. The present study indicated that educators contacted parents/guardians through both formal and informal written and oral communication.

Cherng (2016) found that teachers contacted parents/guardians of African American and Latino students regarding negative classroom behavior more frequently than parents/guardians of their Caucasian peers, and that that immigrant parents and parents of color were less likely to be contacted by educators to report accomplishments of their children. One out of the four children who were a part of the present study was Hispanic, one was biracial, and two, including Cassie's child, were African American. Cassie reported that her child's teacher frequently contacted her regarding her child's negative behavior, and that she was not contacted regarding anything positive her child had done at school, behaviorally or academically. While Stephanie did not mention any negative contact from teachers regarding her African American grandchild's behavior, she did discuss the frequent negative contact she had regarding her older child's behavior in the past. She, too, did not enjoy that kind of contact from her child's teachers.

The participants in the present study were more accepting of negative updates regarding their children's behavioral and academic progress from teachers when they were combined with positive updates. These findings support the Harvard Family Research Project's (2010) suggestion that it is best to first begin with something positive when meeting with parents/guardians. These findings affirm the importance of utilizing a strengths-based perspective during the special education process, as it emphasizes that every individual has strengths and that those strengths should be capitalized upon (Saleebey, 2009).

It was also found in the present study that when educators provided the participants with feedback that did not emphasize their children's strengths, the participants had the tendency to find the communication offensive. Similarly, Lake and Billingsley (2000) found that parents/guardians of children in special education wanted educators to focus more on what is right with their children, rather than what is wrong. The special education process is a sensitive time for parents/guardians; therefore, information about their children should be presented to them in a sensitive manner. Pruitt, Wandry, and Hollums (1998) also found that parents wanted to feel respected, supported, and valued by educators. The parents/guardians in the present study agreed with this sentiment.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 explored low-income, minority parents'/guardians' knowledge of their legal rights in the special education process. Stages of Parents'/Guardians' Understanding of their Legal Rights in the Special Education Process was used to determine where the parents/guardians fell on the continuum, and the results suggested that the participants in the present study were in different stages when it came to understanding their legal rights: two of them were in Stage 1, Novice; one was in Stage 2, Advanced Beginner; and one was in Stage 4, Proficient. None of the participants in the study were in Stage 3, Competent, or Stage 5, Expert.

The results also suggested that the more experience a parent/guardian had with the special education process, the higher their stage of understanding and, subsequently, the more likely they were to experience feelings of liberation and empowerment. Subsequently, the more knowledgeable the parent/guardian was regarding her legal rights, the better she was able to advocate for her child. These findings align with Hess, Molina, and Kozleski's (2006) research,

which suggested that parents/guardians, with time, grow in their understanding and ability to advocate for their children.

However, Hess et al. (2006) also found that, even with experience and knowledge, parents/guardians still had a sense that their “power” in the special education process was “fragile” (p. 153). This was not found in the present study. Although only one participant was in the Proficient stage (Stephanie), she felt confident in her knowledge of her legal rights, and felt that she had the power to make her voice heard and advocate for her grandchild.

It was also observed that three out of the four parents did not speak during the special education meetings unless they were directly asked questions. This could be an indication that they did not feel that they were members of a collaborative team. One of the guiding principles of a strengths-based perspective is that participants are best served when they are partners in collaboration (Saleebey, 2009). Childre and Chambers (2005) found that parents/guardians felt alienated in special education meetings because of the educational jargon that was used by the educators. The terminology used in special education meetings is not generally used in everyday life, which could make it difficult for parents/guardians to feel included. Fish (2006) studied middle-class families and came to the same conclusion, suggesting that social class and race have little bearing on parents’/guardians’ understanding of special education terminology.

Another notable finding was that three out of four parents in the present study admitted that they did not read the *Procedural Safeguards*, a document given out at special education meetings that lists their legal rights as parents/guardians. Some of the participants stated that they should read them; however, none of the participants gave a reason as to why they did not read them. One possible explanation is readability, as special education documents are generally written above the reading level of parents/guardians (Mandic, et al., 2012; Nagro & Stein, 2015;

Pizur-Barnekow et al., 2011). Other possible reasons could be lack of time, forgetfulness, and not deeming the documents important. Further research is necessary to examine whether parents/guardians in the special education process do or do not read the formal documents given to them, and to determine why.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 examined school and family and community-based supports that low-income, minority parents/guardians utilized during the special education process. This section is organized in two parts: school supports and family and community-based supports.

School Supports

The primary form of school support that the participants in the present study deemed helpful was speaking with their children's general education teachers. Three out of the four participants' children spent most of the school day in a general education setting with a general education teacher. A notable finding was that participants did not mention their children's special education teachers during the entire data collection process. This data point is interesting because, of all educational professionals, special education teachers spent the second largest amount of time with the participants' children, coming in behind general education classroom teachers.

Because special education teachers were not mentioned throughout the data collection process, it can be inferred that the participants did not consider their children's general education teachers and the special education teachers a team, supporting the finding that special education teachers tend to be isolated from the rest of the school community (Orr, 2009). It could also be

inferred that collaboration between special education teachers and parents was nonexistent. It is recommended that special educators collaborate with general education teachers, parents/guardians, administrators, and the special education team (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014). Killion (2015) found that high levels of teacher collaboration positively impacted student achievement.

However, while many school districts strive for inclusivity, some, such as Thorn Grove School District, practice exclusivity (Ashton, 2014). Instead of placing students who receive special education services in the general education classroom and utilizing co-teaching techniques, students are removed from the classroom and provided with lessons in isolation for a designated amount of time each school day.

Family and Community-based Supports

Horvat et al. (2003) found that low-income parents/guardians mainly consulted family members when they needed advice regarding the special education process. The results of this research supported these findings, as participants reported that they predominantly went to their family members, particularly their mothers, when in need of advice. In fact, the impact that the participants' mothers had on their lives and parenting styles was the most discussed topic in the present study. While some of the participants shared childcare responsibilities with significant others or family members, all were the primary caretakers for their children. In turn, all of them went to their mothers, who had previously been their primary caretakers, for advice and guidance when it came to their children's educations. As Saleebey (2009) noted, a strengths-based perspective acknowledges that "every environment is full of resources," which can include family members (p. 18).

Horvat et al. (2003) found that, in contrast to low-income parents/guardians, middle-class parents/guardians went to professionals (lawyers, doctors, educators) as well as other parents in their social circles when they needed advice regarding the special education process. Two of the participants in the present study spoke of soliciting advice from their children's doctors, although one of the participants did so only after her mother's prompting.

Additionally, the participants reported that none of them was part of an organized peer group or parenting class, although all thought that such a class would help support them in the special education process. According to existing research, social networks can help support low-income, minority parents/guardians (Mueller et al., 2010; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Murray et al., 2011), suggesting that it may be helpful for low-income, minority parents/guardians to incorporate social learning networks into their existing support systems, which generally consist of family members (Horvat et al., 2003),

Another family and community-based support that some of the participants found helpful was conducting independent research. Many of the participants in this study used the Internet to further learn about the special education process, adding additional evidence to support Knapp et al.'s (2011) finding that the majority of parents/guardians of children with special healthcare needs used the Internet for research. One of the participants in the present study reported using movies, both documentaries and dramas, to learn about her child's special needs as well.

Limitations

Limitations that may have affected the transferability of the findings from the present study include the small sample size and lack of geographical diversity among the participants. The researcher intended to select four to five initial participants with two to three alternates. If

additional participants volunteered, the researcher would have matched them in terms of gender and ethnicity to the initial participants. However, only four participants volunteered.

Additionally, all of the participants were from the same relatively small geographic area, the south suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. For its findings to be transferable, this study would have to be repeated with a larger number of participants, varying in gender, ethnicity, and location.

Another potential limitation of the present study is that the researcher is both middle class and Caucasian, while all of the participants self-identified as low income and of minority ethnicities. While the researcher tried to make all participants feel comfortable, social class and ethnicity could have impacted the responses they provided.

Implications of this Study

The current special education process requires teachers to determine children's deficits for them to qualify for special education services. It is recommended that the special education process be restructured to reflect a strengths-based perspective. The six guiding principles of a strengths-based perspective, as identified by Saleebey (2009), can serve as a guide for this restructuring.

1. Every individual, group, family, and community have strengths.

Instead of focusing solely on a child's deficits in education, teachers should first seek to find out a child's strengths. *Child Find* legally requires that school personnel identify children who may qualify to receive special services. The law was put into place so that children who have special needs could receive services as early as possible. However, the needs and

intelligence of students who are neither White nor of European descent are not always fully understood by predominantly White, middle-class school personnel.

Therefore, I recommend that school personnel become more culturally knowledgeable and consider the strengths of all groups and individuals before concluding that a child may have special needs. Along similar lines, IQ tests and standardized tests given to determine if a child has special needs should also be reexamined to determine whether those tests are racially and culturally biased.

This study revealed many strengths the parents/guardians possessed. For example, every parent/guardian in this study was invested and involved in their children's education. Stephanie ensured that all of her children and grandchildren received the best education possible by promoting strong values in her home and by communicating with teachers. Cassie reached out to her mother for advice regarding her son's education, and Jenna and Jamie communicated with teachers through handwritten notes. Additionally, every participant in this study had strong relationships with their families. The strengths of these women are valid and could be built upon to invoke positive changes in their children's educations.

2. Trauma, abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity.

School personnel should take the opportunity in IEP meetings to get to know parents/guardians, build upon their experiences, and empower them to help their children grow. However, while IEP meetings should ideally be an empowering experience, some of the participants in this study felt as though they were "judged" by school personnel. Every participant in this study faced challenges, which included trauma and even death, yet, fortunately, every participant persevered.

For example, Jamie's family faced some hardships, and the Department of Children and Family Services got involved. Jamie welcomed them into her home, built relationships with the family therapist who was assigned to her family, and continually worked to strengthen her family life. Cassie faced many setbacks regarding her son's placement in education and treatment from the school; however, she never gave up hope and continued to learn how to navigate the special education process.

3. Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change and take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously.

It is common for parents and guardians to feel defeated when learning that their child may have special needs. School personnel should take the opportunity, especially during IEP meetings, to instill or foster hope in parents/guardians. The special education process should be transformed into an empowering process, one where the capacity to grow and change seems limitless.

Regardless of any setbacks the parents in this study faced, they continued to look forward and persevere. While some of the participants in this study felt as though they were "judged" during special education meetings, those parents never mentioned giving up. They continued to grow and strive to improve the education of their children.

4. We best serve clients by collaborating with them.

The special education process should be collaborative. Special education law expects that parents/guardians are involved during the special education process; however, parents/guardians do not always feel like that is the case. It is not uncommon for parents and guardians to feel like they have no power or are outnumbered during IEP meetings. The special education process should help parents/guardians feel like they are part of the team, and that their involvement go beyond signing papers and being present at meetings.

One of the many strengths that resonated with me during the data collection process was the relationships that these parents/guardians developed with others. While most of the relationships were with family members, the women in this study also reached out to teachers to discuss their children's progress in school. Educators should further develop that strength of developing relationships to ensure collaboration in the education of children.

5. Every environment is full of resources.

All environments, regardless of the socioeconomic status of those who occupy them, have rich resources. It is the job of an educational institution to empower parents/guardians and to help them take advantage of the resources within their community. Relying solely on the parents/guardians to do this independently is often ineffective and has potential negative ethical implications. Accordingly, school personnel should help parents/guardians to identify the resources within their community. The most used resource that the parents/guardians in this study utilized was their relationships with others. There are many resources in every community, and they oftentimes go underutilized.

6. Caring, caretaking, and context. (pp. 15-19)

It is critical for school personnel to assist parents/guardians in the special education process. Parents/guardians are experts on their children, and school personnel are experts in education and educating children who have special needs. Their strengths should be combined to provide the best education possible.

The parents/guardians in this study deeply cared about and for their children. While, at times, some of the parents/guardians felt resistance from school officials, they never lost hope. The parents/guardians continued to care and provide for their children to give them the best lives possible.

Recommendations for the Field

Although there were only four participants in the present study, trends emerged in the data that suggest practices educators can implement to improve the special education process and, as a consequence, improve the experiences of parents/guardians who navigate it, particularly those who can be considered low income or of minority ethnicity.

Adopt a Strengths-Based Perspective

The participants in the present study expressed discontent with some of the communication they had with educational professionals. At times, some of the participants felt offended or attacked during special education meetings, due to the personal nature of the topics discussed and/or the negative approach that educational professionals adopted. One participant, Stephanie, recommended that when the other participants felt offended during special education meetings, they should think before reacting. She felt that educational professionals generally had parents'/guardians' best interests in mind. While it is most likely true that the educational professionals in the special education meetings did mean well, they still have a responsibility to adjust their behavior. This could be done by adopting a strengths-based perspective, not only during special education meetings but in all areas of education.

Lopez and Louis (2009) found that when educators focused on students' strengths rather than their deficits, their students felt more empowered and were more likely to realize their potential. With an eye to putting this perspective into practice, Jones-Smith (2011) provided some suggestions for teachers, counselors, and parents/guardians to follow when utilizing a strengths-based approach:

1. Educators should make communication with parents/guardians and children/wards positive.
2. Replace any negative thoughts or biases with positive ones.
3. Guide children to recognize their strengths and evaluate their effectiveness in completing tasks.

Roebuck (2007) also recommended that professionals who work with children provide them with feedback that acknowledges their progress.

As change like this will require some training, individualization is key when adopting a strengths-based perspective. Children's educations should be individualized to best fit their needs (Powell & Batsche, 1997). Educational professionals should use language and practices, both in instruction and in communication with parents/guardians that acknowledge that all students are individuals that have different strengths and needs.

Ideally, the use of a positive, strengths-based perspective will influence the way parents/guardians interact with their children at home. Additionally, a strengths-based perspective can be utilized at a schoolwide level by taking advantage of professional development opportunities and using frequent surveys to assess and improve its implementation. Thus, all stakeholders in the special education system, including school personnel, parents/guardians, and students, can benefit from the adoption of a strengths-based perspective.

Create a Welcoming Atmosphere

Some of the parents/guardians in the present study expressed dissatisfaction with the way school personnel conducted special education meetings. Stephanie and Cassie felt as though school personnel drew premature conclusions about them and their parenting before getting to

know them. They commented on their discomfort during special education meetings, feeling that they were being judged. Like the participants in Pruitt et al.'s (1998) research, Stephanie and Cassie wanted to feel respected, supported, and valued by school personnel; unfortunately, they did not always feel that way.

In addition to adopting a strengths-based perspective, educators should consider the following suggestions when attempting to cultivate a positive and welcoming atmosphere in special education meetings and in the classroom. Epstein et al. (2002) proposed that educators should shift perspective and view the individuals in their classrooms not as students, which are merely part of the school, but as children, which are part of the community. Additionally, parents/guardians will appreciate that educators view their children as community members and that they get to know them on an individual level. Webber and Wilson (2012) found that “parents want teachers who observe their children carefully, develop strong learning relationships, and communicate meaningfully” (p. 35).

Similarly addressing the need for educators to foster positive relationships and communication but focusing specifically on parents/guardians, Peter (2009) suggested that educators should greet parents/guardians warmly; engage in informal conversation, speaking in clear language and avoiding the use of jargon, to help parents/guardians get acclimated; and, above all, listen to what parents/guardians have to say. Peter (2009) also recommended that educators should help keep parents/guardians informed by discussing the importance of involvement with them, determining if parents/guardians need transportation or childcare services, and allowing parents/guardians time to review documents and ask questions.

Educational professionals should also ensure that the general population can understand special

education documents. Pizur-Barnekow et al. (2011) reported that difficult-to-understand documents could lead to a decrease in parent/guardian empowerment.

To institute these changes, educators would need to be trained. Professional development opportunities that focus on interacting with parents/guardians and creating a positive environment for parents/guardians should be provided to educators. As involvement is a goal of IDEA (2004), educational professionals must work to create a welcoming atmosphere for parents/guardians. Parents/guardians must feel respected, valued, and supported by educators.

Educate Parents/Guardians

The parents/guardians in the present study were all in differing stages of their understanding, as determined by the *Stages of Parents'/Guardians' Understanding of their Legal Rights in the Special Education Process*. While some parents/guardians were further along than others, none was in the Expert category. This suggests that schools could benefit from providing additional education to parents/guardians regarding their legal rights and how to best navigate the special education process. This will also help ensure that parents/guardians feel empowered (Saleebey, 2009).

One way to educate parents/guardians is through the use of technology. School districts can, for example, create a website for parents/guardians of children in special education that includes easy to understand and access information on navigating the special education process. The website could also include videos about special education and links to easy-to-read guides (e.g., parent/guardian guides on the Illinois State Board of Education website and *Special Education: A Basic Guide for Parents* by National Association of School Psychologists) or other informative websites (e.g., Center for Parent Information and Resources, National Center for

Learning Disabilities, and the U.S. Department of Education). If information is organized in one location, parents/guardians can easily research the special education process from the comfort of their own homes or using their mobile devices. It is important to note that some parents/guardians may not have access to technology devices or the Internet; therefore, schools should make technology readily available that parents/guardians can utilize. Additionally, any special education information that is available online should also be available in hard copy form for parents/guardians who prefer to receive information in that way.

Schools can also host informational sessions for parents/guardians to learn about the special education process. Sessions can be formal, centered around a specific topic, or informal, including time for questions and answers. Padgett (2006) suggested that when scheduling such sessions, schools should address any barriers that could prevent parents/guardians from attending. This might include scheduling sessions at varying times to accommodate parents'/guardians' schedules or providing childcare, translators, etc.

As with any educational program, it is critical to evaluate the effectiveness of the informational sessions. Parents/guardians should complete surveys to rate the effectiveness of the informational sessions and to help educational professionals make decisions regarding topics to address. Teaching parents/guardians how to best navigate the special education process has the potential to empower them and to help them advocate for what is best for their children.

Collaborate

Since 1975, when IDEA mandated that children with special needs were to be educated in least restrictive environments (LREs), inclusion of students with special needs in general education settings has increased. Further, collaboration among teachers and support staff has

been found to be highly effective in serving students with special needs (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006). While both general education teachers and special education teachers are experienced regarding instructional methods, they are educated in different fields: general education teachers have experience with grade-level content, while special education teachers have experience with adapting curricula and instruction to meet the needs of students with special needs (Ripley, 1997). Therefore, collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers is both useful and necessary.

Unfortunately, not all general education teachers and special education teachers are highly collaborative. Because the parents/guardians in the present study did not mention special education teachers once throughout the special education process, it can be inferred that the special education teachers and general education teachers in Thorn Grove School District did not work collaboratively.

There are a variety of means by which school districts can foster collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers. Ripley (1997) proposed that the number one thing that schools should do to encourage collaboration is to provide general education teachers and special education teachers with time to work together. Other ways to encourage collaboration among teachers is to develop shared goals, arrange professional development opportunities that educate teachers on how to best collaborate, and establish a professional learning community (PLC).

PLCs are beneficial because they encourage teachers to collaborate around the common focus of learning for all (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). General education teachers and special education teachers could work together in a PLC to individualize instruction to meet the needs of their students. For example, at the elementary level, special education teachers and

general education teachers could work together and use data to create differentiated learning opportunities for students with special needs. By collaborating, special education teachers and general education teachers could positively impact the educational experiences of all children.

Establish a Parent/Guardian Social Network

In accordance with the recommendations of a strengths-based perspective, the parents/guardians in the present study all reported strong relationships with their families and friends. Such relationships could serve as a foundation for parent/guardian social networks, which could allow parents/guardians with children with special needs to collaborate and learn from each other. Having other adults to talk to, who are in similar situations, can also provide parents/guardians with emotional support (Mueller et al., 2010).

When parents/guardians are involved in school activities, they tend to develop their own peer social networks. One way for schools to encourage parental/guardian interaction is to provide parents/guardians with varied opportunities to get together. Activities could include PTO or PTA meetings, educational sessions, and informal night-out activities.

Additionally, the US Department of Education (2007) suggested that schools create parent centers. Parent centers can provide a place for parents/guardians to meet and feature a list of local classes focused on educational topics, parent/guardian meeting dates, important information regarding the school, flyers on all topics related to education, and contact information for other parents/guardians. Parent centers look different at all schools: some are informal, located in a corner of a school's main office, while some are formal, having their own designated room in the school. A parent/guardian or group of parents/guardians who have

children in the school generally run the parent center; however, a staff member of the school can run a parent center too.

Parent/guardian social networks have been proven to help support low-income, minority parents/guardians by providing them access to their peers and providing them with educational resources regarding the special education process (Mueller et al., 2010). The parents/guardians in the present study expressed contentment with their participation in the focus group meeting because they were able to discuss their experiences with other parents/guardians. They also stated that they would like to be a part of a parent/guardian social network.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is necessary to provide a more in-depth description of parents'/guardians' experiences with the special education process. Recommendations for future research are described in this section.

Parents/Guardians and the Procedural Safeguards

The majority of the parents/guardians in this research did not read *the Procedural Safeguards*, which listed parents'/guardians' rights and protections under special education law. According to IDEA (2004), parents/guardians are required to be a part of the special education decision-making team for their children. Therefore, it is important for them to know their rights and protections. It can only be inferred why the participants in the present study did not read the *Procedural Safeguards*. Future research is needed to determine why parents/guardians might not read them. Such findings could aid policymakers in educating parents/guardians of their rights and protections.

Impact of Strengths-Based Perspectives in the Field of Special Education

A strengths-based perspective focuses on building on an individual's strengths, rather than on their deficits (Saleebey, 2009). Although there has been a push toward utilizing a strengths-based perspective in the field of social work, special education has traditionally operated under a deficit model (Harry & Klinger, 2007). Further, while research has been conducted regarding the benefits of a strengths-based perspective in social work practice (Macias, Farley, Jackson, & Kinney, 1997; Modrcin, Rapp, & Poertner, 1988), there is little research on strengths-based perspectives in education. Therefore, future research regarding the impact of adopting a strengths-based perspective in special education should be conducted.

Mixed-Methods Research Design

The present study was carried out using a qualitative case study design, allowing the researcher to interview parents/guardians and gain an understanding of their experiences with the special education process. However, a mixed-methods research design would add robustness to the research. This study could be replicated with the addition of a quantitative component.

This could include asking parents/guardians to complete a questionnaire containing questions pertaining to their experiences with the special education process. Questionnaires can reach a larger number of participants and can be completed in the comfort of participants' homes, offering them a safe cognitive space to process the information. This might allow

participants to be more open and honest than they otherwise would be in the presence of an unfamiliar researcher.

Regarding the design of the questionnaire itself, a Likert scale could be used to determine parents'/guardians' understanding of their legal rights and level of satisfaction with their communication with school officials. Demographic data could also be obtained from the questionnaire, which could be helpful in providing researchers with detailed descriptions of participants.

Quantitative data could allow researchers to draw conclusions and make comparisons across studies. Interview questions for the qualitative portion of the study could also be created using the data collected from the questionnaire, which would allow the researchers to gain an even deeper knowledge of parents/guardians and their experiences with the special education process.

Longitudinal Study

The current study could be conducted as a longitudinal design to determine whether parents/guardians develop a deeper understanding of the special education process the longer they are in it. A longitudinal study over the course of three years could be used to determine how parents/guardians move through stages of understanding. Participants could be interviewed two times per school year, once at the beginning and once at the conclusion. The data could be compared from year to year. Data collected from the longitudinal study could be used to help educators streamline the learning process for parents/guardians, so they can better understand the special education process at an earlier time.

Educators' Perspectives

The present study focused solely on gaining an understanding of parents'/guardians' experiences with the special education process. Research focused on the perspectives of educators, specifically general education and special education teachers, regarding the special education process could complement these findings. Educators could provide insight into their special education training, collaboration practices, and their perspectives regarding communication with parents/guardians.

Student Grade Levels

The present study focused on participants with children in kindergarten through third grade to assess the experiences of parents/guardians in the earlier stages of the special education process. Future research could be conducted with parents/guardians of children in the special education process across all grade levels. Parents'/guardians' experiences could then be compared to determine how their experiences and perspectives developed over time.

Closing Statements

Special education law mandates that parents/guardians be a part of the special education process in its entirety, from identifying a child's possible disability to helping write a child's IEP. Therefore, parents/guardians need to be supported by educational professionals, clearly informed of their legal rights, and provided with opportunities to develop relationships with both educators and other parents/guardians to help them on their journey through the special education process.

This can best be done by adopting a strengths-based perspective in special education meetings and instruction. Through these efforts, parents/guardians can feel more empowered, and their empowerment will ultimately lead to them being greater advocates for their children.

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APPENDIX A
INFORMATIONAL LETTER

Greetings Parents/Guardians:

I am currently a first grade teacher at [REDACTED]. As one of the academic requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Curriculum and Inquiry through the College of Education at Northern Illinois University, I need to conduct research for my dissertation.

I invite YOU to participate in my study. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of low-income, minority parents of primary aged children who are in the special education process. By participating in this study you could help other parents to make better-informed decisions regarding their child's education.

- Do you have a child/ward who receives special education services?
- Is your child/ward in kindergarten, first, second, or third grade?
- Do you belong to a racial or ethnic minority group?
- Does your child/ward qualify for free and reduced cost lunch?

If so, please consider participating in this study. Your experiences with the special education process are of immense worth. **You are important!**

If you meet the qualifications of this study, are interested in participating, and would like more information, please return the bottom portion of this letter to school with your child. I will contact you to further discuss your participation in this study.

I look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

Carla Braun
 Doctoral Candidate
 Northern Illinois University
 [REDACTED]

Dr. Elizabeth Wilkins
 Dissertation Chair
 Northern Illinois University
 [REDACTED]

Hello, Carla! I am interested in learning more. Here is my contact information:

Name: _____

Phone Number: _____

Email Address: _____

APPENDIX B
PHONE CALL PROTOCOL

Hello. My name is Carla Braun, and I am calling in response to your interest in being involved in my study. First, I would like to thank you for your interest in this study. It is very important to me, and your experiences with the special education process are of immense worth.

The purpose of this phone call is to determine if you meet the qualifications for this study, to provide some clarity, and to answer any questions that you may have.

I first have a few simple questions:

- *Do you have a child/ward who receives special education services?*
- *Is your child/ward in kindergarten, first, second, or third grade?*
- *Do you belong to a racial or ethnic minority group?*
- *Does your child/ward qualify for free and reduced cost lunch?*

If the answers are yes to all of those questions:

You meet the qualifications for this study! By participating in this study, you can contribute to the field of special education. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be interviewed twice, once for approximately 60 minutes, and once for approximately 30 minutes at times that are convenient for you. You will also attend one focus group meeting with other parents that will last approximately one hour. Additionally, I will observe one special education meeting regarding your child. By participating in this study, you will be adding to the body of literature available regarding low-income, minority parents and the special education process. You could also inform future parents and guardians of children who are in the special education process of ways to better understand and navigate through the special education process. Your knowledge of the special education process is important!

I do hope that you decide to participate in this study. It is people like you that help to advance education and make life better for our children. I would love to learn from you.

Do you have any questions about this study?

Is this study still of interest to you?

Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. I will send you a copy of the consent form. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns. Thank you again!

If the individual does not meet the requirements:

Unfortunately, you do not meet the requirements for this study because _____ . I appreciate your willingness to participate. It is people like you that help to advance education and make life better for our children. If by chance you are needed for this study, can I have your permission to contact you?

Again, thank you for your time!

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Low-Income, Minority Parents' Experiences with the Special Education Process
Consent Form**

I agree to participate in the research project titled *Low-Income, Minority Parents' Experiences with the Special Education Process* being conducted by Carla Braun, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of low-income, minority parents and guardians of primary aged children who are in the special education process.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: be interviewed two times, once for 60 minutes and once for 30 minutes, over the course of one semester, attend one focus group meeting that will last approximately one hour, and be observed during one special education meeting, which will last approximately sixty minutes. The interviews will take place in a meeting room at the school in which the children attend at a time that is mutually convenient for the participants and the researcher. The focus group will take place after school in the conference room at the Thorn Grove School District's Central Office when the participants are available

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Carla Braun at (815) 999-2542 and Dr. Elizabeth Wilkins at (815) 753- 8458. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include adding to the body of literature available regarding low-income, minority parents/ guardians and their perceptions of the special education process. The results from this study could also inform future parents and guardians of children who are in the special education process of ways to better understand and navigate through the special education process.

I have been informed that potential risks and/or discomforts I could experience during this study include providing information to the researcher regarding personal experiences and perceptions of the special education process. I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential by keeping all electronic data on a computer that is password protected. The researcher will keep all data that are a hard copy in a locked cabinet. Also, the researcher will report all data using a pseudonym for the school district and pseudonyms for all participants; however, I also understand that, when participating in a focus group, confidentiality among the members of the group cannot be guaranteed.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

_____ Signature of Subject Date

I consent to be audio recorded during interviews.

_____ Signature of Subject Date

I consent to be audio recording during the focus group.

_____ Signature of Subject Date

APPENDIX D
OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Field Observation Tool		
Observer Descriptions of the Setting, People, and Activities (Merriam, 2009)	Data from Scripted Notes	Inferences Regarding Observation (Merriam, 2009)
<p>Physical Setting:</p> <p>Participants:</p> <p>Meeting Agenda (introductions, child's present performance, parent concerns, teacher concerns, assessment reports, goals for the child, etc.):</p>	<p>Verbal Communication with School Officials:</p> <p>Non-Verbal Communication of Parents/Guardians:</p> <p>Parent/Guardian's Knowledge of Legal Rights</p>	

Note. Adapted from *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* by Merriam, 2009, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

APPENDIX E

COMPARISON OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Questions	Interview Protocol Questions: Initial Interview	Interview Protocol Questions: Follow-Up Interview
<p>* How do low-income minority parents/guardians describe the communication with school officials during the first six steps of the special education process?</p> <p>* What do low-income, minority parents/guardians know about their legal rights when it comes to their involvement during the first six steps of the special education process?</p> <p>* What school- and family and community-based supports do low-income, minority parents/guardians identify as helping them understand the first six steps of the special education process?</p>	<p>* Please tell me the details of what happened when you first learned that your child might require special education services.</p> <p>* Tell me what your first special education meeting was like.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -How were you first notified of the meeting? -Who was present at the meeting? -What happened in the meeting? -How did you feel before, during, and after the meeting? <p>- What is one positive experience you have had with the school?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What is one negative experience you have had with the school? <p>*How much did you know about special education at that time compared to now?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Tell me about your legal rights as a parent. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your rights? <p>*Are there any key people in your life who you look up to? How have those people helped you? How have they helped you with your child?</p> <p>*Recall any life-changing experiences you've had that have helped to shape you into the person you are today.</p> <p>*Who has helped you with your child and his/her education? Please give me an example of something he/she has done that has been helpful.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Who has been helpful to you during the special education process? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me how they have been helpful. •Have you found anything else to be helpful to your understanding of the special education process (both through the school and not)? If so, who and/or what? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Given what you have said about your communication with school officials during the special education process in the past, and after you have reflected on it, has it changed? If so, how? •What is your current relationship with the school officials you have worked with during the special education process? • Given what you have said about your life before you had a child and given what you have said about your life now with a child in special education, how do you understand special education in your life? • After reflecting on the school and family and community-based supports that have helped you better understand the special education process, have your feelings changed? If so, how?

Note: Adapted from the *Protocols for professional learning* by Easton, 2009, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the *Qualitative research and evaluations methods* (3rd ed.) by Patton, 2002, Sage, and *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (4th ed.) by Seidman, 2013, Teachers College Press.

APPENDIX F
FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Welcome/Introductions

Thank you so much for participating in this focus group. I am very excited to learn from you all.

Moderator: My name is Carla Braun. I am a doctoral candidate at Northern Illinois University. As a part of my requirements through NIU, I must conduct research. This focus group is an important component of my data collection.

Assistant Moderator: The assistant moderator will introduce himself/herself.

Basic Details

This focus group meeting will last approximately one hour.

The Purpose Behind This Focus Group/Overview

I am conducting this focus group in order to better understand your experiences with the special education process. I also hope the information provided by you will help other parents to make better-informed decisions regarding their child's education.

Ground Rules

1. It is important for the participants to do the talking. Your experience and the information you provide today is paramount. I may call on you if you have not participated in a while.
2. Please be honest.
3. There are no right or wrong answers. Every participant's experiences and opinions are extremely important. Feel free to agree or disagree.
4. Confidentiality. This is a safe room. What is said in this room will only be heard by the participants and the researcher. Please feel comfortable sharing if and when sensitive issues arise.
5. As stated in the consent form, this focus group will be audiotaped. Pseudonyms will be used in the report. You will not be identified in any way.

Focus Group Interview Protocol

Focus Group Question # and Purpose	Focus Group Protocol & Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Questions
1: Opening/Intro relationship- building; gain a focused history of participant in light of research focus; establish remaining interview schedule; gain details for rich, thick description	<p><u>Introductory Protocol</u> (Krueger & Casey, 2014)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - remind participants that per the signed consent form, the focus group will be audiotaped - remind participants that only I will have access to the focus group recordings and that these recordings will eventually be destroyed after they have been transcribed - remind participants that all information gathered for the study will be confidential and not to talk about what is shared outside the group after the focus group comes to a close. - remind participants that the focus group will meet one time and last for 60 minutes <p><u>Warm-up questions</u> (Merriam, 2009)</p>

	<p>1 - Describe your educational history. 2 – What is your current occupation? 3 – How many children do you have, and how old are they? <u>Detail/Experience questions</u> (Merriam, 2009) 4 – How long has your child been receiving special education services? 5 – What is something you like about the special education system? 6 – What is something you dislike about the special education system?</p>
<p>2: Key topic; gain further details of experience for rich, thick description</p>	<p><u>Detail/Experience questions</u> (Krueger & Casey, 2014) 1 – Think back to the first time you attended a special education meeting for your child.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel? • What were you thinking? • Tell me about what happened in that meeting. <p>2 – When you are in a special education meeting, how do you feel about how the school professionals (teachers, principals, speech teachers, psychologists, social workers, etc.) communicate with you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please give an example of how the school professionals communicate with you. • Do you feel well informed when you leave special education meetings? <p>3 – How well do you know your legal rights when it comes to special education?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Please share what you know about your legal rights with us. <p>4 – What supports have helped you to navigate the special education process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me some of your personal strengths that help you when it comes to your child’s education. <p>5 – Do you have any support systems that help you? 6 – As a parent with a child in special education, can you explain any challenges that you have faced?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have you faced any challenges with the special education system?
<p>3: Conclusion and ending questions: reflection and overall experience</p>	<p><u>Detail/Experience questions</u> (Merriam, 2009) 1 - Currently, how do you feel about your decision to place your child in special education? (Reflection) 2 - How has your understanding of special education changed since your child qualified to receive special education services? (Reflection) 3 - Suppose you had one minute to talk to a parent who has a child who has just been identified as possibly needing special education services, what would you say to that person? (All things considered question) 4 - Of all the things we discussed today, what to you is the most important? (All things considered question) 5 - Is there anything else you would like to share that I haven’t asked? (Final question)</p>

	6 - <i>Thank the participants for their time and efforts as a part of the research study.</i>
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Note: Adapted from the *Protocols for professional learning* by Easton, 2009, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and Kreuger and Casey, 2009, *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (4th ed.).

APPENDIX G

CROSSWALK BETWEEN RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Research Questions

* How do low-income minority parents/guardians describe the communication with school officials during the first six steps of the special education process?

* What do low-income, minority parents/guardians know about their legal rights when it comes to their involvement during the first six steps of the special education process?

* What school- and family and community-based supports do low-income, minority parents/guardians identify as helping them understand the first six steps of the special education process?

Focus Group Questions

*Think back to the first time you attended a special education meeting for your child.

-How did you feel?

-What were you thinking?

-Tell me about what happened in that meeting.

*When you are in a special education meeting, how do you feel about how the school professionals (teachers, principals, speech teachers, psychologists, social workers, etc.) communicate with you?

-Please give an example of how the school professionals communicate with you.

-Do you feel well informed when you leave special education meetings?

*Were there any words or phrases that school officials used during the special education process that you did not understand?

-If so, what were they?

-How did that impact your understanding of the special education process?

*How well do you know your legal rights when it comes to special education?

-Please share what you know about your legal rights with us.

*How has your understanding of special education changed since your child qualified to receive special education services?

*Have you sought out any legal advice about the special education process you are going through?

*What school supports have helped you to navigate the special education process?

*What family and community-based supports have helped you to navigate the special education process?

APPENDIX H

SPECIFIC COMMENTS MADE BY PARTICIPANTS REGARDING RQ3:
SCHOOL AND FAMILY AND COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORTS

Theme: SCHOOL SUPPORTS	Total Number of Comments from All Participants
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Educators

17

- 1) “I’m happy [my child is] improving with . . . speech. [My child has] improved a lot. Like when [my child] was one and two, three, [my child] hardly said anything, and now I hear [my child] say all these words that I never knew [my child] could say” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).
- 2) “No, besides the speech teacher when she sees me for the IEP meeting. She lets me know everything with [my child] and what she’s going to work on with [my child] and what [my child] has improved [on], but that’s about it” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).
- 3) “I talk when there’s something wrong” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).
- 4) What I like about special education is I come back a couple months later for an IEP meeting, and the speech teacher will let me know what [my child] has improved on, what [my child is] working on, and what [my child] needs extra help in. So then I know more, you know, because they don’t tell me things every day, what [my child] needs. (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).
- 5) “Yeah, she [classroom teacher] seems like she’s got it together. She’s been doing it for like 20 years” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 6) “She had a really good system going there where she would do the syllables on her arm” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 7) “So her teacher is the one that really knows because she spends the most time with her out of everybody” (Interview 2, November 16, 2016).
- 8) “I really like her teacher. She said that she’ll teach this way [conceptually], but she’ll always go back to the original way [procedurally]” (Interview 2, November 16, 2016).
- 9) “I’m glad that it seems like she [speech teacher] is looking at every area that can strengthen [my grandchild]” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).
- 10) “They call me [classroom teachers] every little thing that he does. I’m like ‘do you have any other parent like this?’” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).
- 11) “They [teachers] don’t tell me things he needs every day” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 12) “They’re really good at if you call or if you send a little note in her folder or whatever. They will call you” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).

- 13) “The educators are telling you about them [legal rights]. Just because they’re saying it, doesn’t make it right” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 14) “I emailed that teacher the same night, and she emailed me back that same night and told me to come into school in the morning” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 15) “The teachers are asking me to cut his hair because of these students. ‘No. Why do I need to cut my son’s hair for?’ They keep calling him a little girl” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 16) If your school district is a cheaper school district, not paying their teachers, they’re not gonna keep good teachers. Now, I won’t say there aren’t any good teachers there, but they may not keep a good teacher because she feels threatened. She feels scared, and she’s not being paid enough to pay her bills, so she’s gonna go over [to a better paying school district], just like anybody else. You gonna go where you can use your skills. You’ll see a big difference in what your kid receives and what your kid does not receive. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)
- 17) They [well-funded schools] literally cared [about her child’s education]. They literally let you know before they do it [made decisions regarding her child’s education]. “This is what we gonna do, Ms. Holmes. Is you okay with this? You need to come in and sign this paper before we make the decision.” But they [poor schools] don’t care. They just go and just do it, and they just call it a day. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)

Formal and Informal Documents

8

- 1) Usually in the pamphlet that they send me home, it says everything that they’ve talked about and what [my child is] working with, and so I get to keep it. I get to relook at it if I didn’t hear everything or if they were talking too fast or something, and if I have a question, I can always go back to them and ask them about it. (Interview 1, October 5, 2016)
- 2) “just through little notes back and forth” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 3) “Papers send home usually through her notebook or her folder when I sign off on her daily folder. I’d usually get a phone call” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 4) “You know, but in my eyes, [my child’s] vocabulary was fine, so when [my child] went to kindergarten, in the first week, the teacher sent me a letter and my first response was to be defensive” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).
- 5) “They informed at that point that they were contacting me

either by mail or sending a letter home by [grandson].

Generally, I would get a phone call” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).

- 6) “They said they’ll call me or send a notice. I hope I’m responding in a timely fashion for them. In fact, I have a letter that I need to give them” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).
- 7) “I’ll tell you, it pays to read it” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 8) It’s the educators that are telling you about [your children], and just because they are saying it doesn’t make it right. You know, you got some unprofessional educators, and they have been misleading, and then, you know what, if you already got a lot going on with you and you’re having a hard time dealing with it, they gonna have you walking out of a meeting feeling like it’s your fault. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)
Becoming Aware of Resources
- 1) I was so lost, but I had a lot of learning to do. I was so lost like to the point where I had to start doing my own research, and then I was coming in with like a list of questions. I learned a lot from school to school and stuff. (Interview 1, November 25, 2016)
- 2) “The problem I have with special education, not that it’s with special education, is that you don’t know that those resources are there” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 3) “As a parent, you so busy. You gonna spend two years trying to help your child, not knowing there’s resources there” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 4) My first child that was in special education is my 30 year old. And what generally happens with a kid, even if they have a little bit of a learning disorder, it goes unnoticed, and no one does anything about it. They will cover it up with a behavioral problem. And then, it becomes a different kind of problem, and it’s not being addressed, and then they want to put them in a different kind of school or class. When in actuality, that problem should have been addressed sooner. I love some of the resources that are in school, but a parent that does not have any idea that that resource is there, there needs to be a way of letting them know (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)
- 5) When [my child] got to alternative school, some of their educational programs were awesome, but when they were trying to reach a child, by the time they were in that much turmoil and trouble, it didn’t do any good. It should have been implemented long before it got to that. So that’s my problem with some of the problems in education. It needs to be known that these resources are here. (Focus Group Meeting, December

- 9, 2016)
- 6) “These resources are here. Because until you had a problem, you probably wouldn’t know those resources are there. They don’t advertise these resources. They don’t” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
 - 7) It can be bad [special education] because when they get accustomed to it [help from teachers], and then by the time they get to the high school level [not much help]. That’s my problem with special education. They do still have programs, but we don’t know about them. I feel like they are thrown to the wolves after [k-8 grade]” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).

Theme: FAMILY AND COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORTS	Total Number of Comments from All Participants
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Family Support

20

- 1) So if I ever have any problem, I go to her [mom] with anything. She helps me all the time, so if I have a problem I go to her and then she says, “You know what. You need to go talk to them” or, “You need to do this,” because she’s been around longer than me, so she knows the rules. She knows more than I know. (Interview 1: October 5, 2016).
- 2) “So if I ever have any problem, I go to her [mom] with anything” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).
- 3) “It’s good that I have somebody [mom] to talk to about anything” (Interview 1, October 5, 2016).
- 4) “She [mom] parented so well. It’s like she knew everything. If I’m half the mother she was, I’ll be happy with it” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 5) “He [her fiancé] was dyslexic, and he had problems learning. I don’t know exactly what they were, but she runs into a lot of the same problems. It’s no secret that I have zero patience at homework. I’m like seriously working on it myself” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 6) My mom completely changed me, 100%. I started drinking after she died, but then I got pregnant with her [daughter]. From that point on, I’ve been trying. She [her mom] parented so well. It’s like she knew everything” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 7) “Family is everything” (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 8) “My mom is still close to me, and she always tries to help me when I need the help or I have questions” (Interview 2, November 2,

- 2016).
- 9) “My mom passed three years ago, and I took care of her until she passed. My mom was one of those, you know, promoting education. Same thing I do. It’s a family thing. You know, that’s my family, period” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016)
 - 10) My immediate family in the household, my two [children in general education], and of course [the father of my child in special education] is there as well, so we all make sure [my child in special education is] eating and getting everything [my child] needs in the home. And I’ve got one [child in general education] that’s normally picking [my child in special education] up. My youngest [child] drops [my child in special education] off on [the] way to school, so [my child in special education is] very close-knit with [the extended family] and the immediate household right there so everybody interacts with him and [my child is] a very loved kid. (Interview 1, November 18, 2016)
 - 11) “My whole family is like that, be it aunts, cousins, and we’re all very close-knit people. When one is in trouble, we all look out” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).
 - 12) “As far as support, I have many educators in my family as well” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).
 - 13) I have several family members that are in education. I have an aunt that’s a teacher. I have a cousin that teaches over at [high school] now... I went to my aunt, and I got a list of information that I needed to get to him” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).
 - 14) “So my mom was the number one supporter through the whole process and everything, and she kinda coached me on everything and stuff” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016)
 - 15) Well, there was my mother. But she just passed like three months ago, so that was like my only support. And it’s like, as of now, I don’t have one. She was always there for me to talk to her. And then she gave me advice because, like I said with my twin cousins, when they was in special education, she was the one who was taking care of them, taking them to therapy and all that. So basically, she knows what I’m going through. But she was there to like guide me through certain things, give me advice. If she sees something. I don’t see and she’ll bring it to my attention like, “Have you ever noticed this?” and stuff. But I was always calling to talk to her. (Interview 1, November 25, 2016)
 - 16) She [mom] was always there for me to talk with her, and then she gave me advice when they were in school. She was the one who was taking care of them, taking them to therapy, and all that. So basically, she knew what I was going through” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).
 - 17) “She [mom] was there to like guide me through certain things, give

- me advice. If she sees something I don't see, and she brings it to my attention" (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).
- 18) She [her mom] was just there." (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).
- 19) "My mom because when I first had [my son] we stayed at her house. Like, we used to live there and pay rent and everything. Now we have our own place, but when he was one, she had told me that 'He's not talking. He's not saying much'" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 20) "My mom told me, 'You know what? You're going to love your child. I don't care how bad your kid is, how ugly your kid is, you're gonna love your own kid. You raise your kids like you want the world for them. You also teach your kid that nobody's gonna treat them like you do. You have to teach your kid how to survive without you because you can't be with your kid all the time'" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).

Medical Doctors

9

- 1) "Me and [the therapist] both got the relationship. Really, it does suck because she is cool. She is really cool" (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 2) "I asked if they had any help for...well, I didn't call it speech therapy. Any kind of help for speech because she said her [letter] r like she's from Boston" (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 3) "I'm learning patience as I'm going along with the therapist. I'm learning. I learned so much [on how to help her daughter]" (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 4) "I have a counselor through DCFS. She comes every week. She's doing therapy with me and [daughter]. She has helped so much" (Interview 1, October 6, 2016).
- 5) She told me that I should ask the doctor to see what he thinks, and the doctor said [my child] needs speech, and [my child] needs the help now before it's too late, before [my child] goes to pre-K and then . . . can't talk to anybody. And they're not going to want to play with [my child]. (Interview 2, November 2, 2016).
- 6) "That's the stuff I was worried about with her being a preemie. She wasn't even a week old. I was asking the doctor if she was gonna have problems later on in life" (Interview 2, November 16, 2016).
- 7) "When you go to new doctors, you gotta explain it to them what's going on. So, he'll write it in your old records. He just looked at him and was like, 'Ain't nothing wrong with [my child]'" (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).
- 8) "I thought [my child] was just, like, a late talker, but [my child] needed the help" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 9) "Ask what the pediatrician thinks. So the pediatrician said that he needed speech help" (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).

Independent Research about the Special Education Process 4

- 1) “I find answers in whatever resources I use, be it by mail, be it by who I’ve contacted, etc. I always kind of keep a record of that. I kind of reflect back to that” (Interview 1, November 18, 2016).
- 2) “I just kinda had my own research after my mom passed away” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).
- 3) “I just do different research. I watch different movies” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).
- 4) “I was getting books, reading on the internet every day because I’m the type of person likes to do my own research” (Interview 1, November 25, 2016).

Peer Groups 4

- 1) I think, too, groups like this would help. I think it would help when parents talk because your experience might help the person and vice versa because, as you can see, we all come from different walks of life, different experiences, different levels, and different places. And that alone can help somebody else. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)
- 2) It’s like I could never find one because, like you say, I do want to go to other people. Like, if I have a question, like, give me advice on it. I know how to handle certain things and stuff like that but because, like I said, I’m young, so I’ll be wanting other people advices because they help me out and stuff. I be looking for those type of groups and stuff. (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016)
- 3) “You learn a lot [from other moms]” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).
- 4) [talking about what she wants for help] “Parenting classes. Parenting classes” (Focus Group Meeting, December 9, 2016).