ABSTRACT

Title of Capstone:	STRENGTHENING THE CONDITIONS FOR PARTNERSHIP: A MULTI-COMPONENT MODEL FOR IMPROVING THE IEP PROCESS
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This Capstone analyzes parents' experiences with the individualized education program (IEP) process and identifies research-backed strategies to strengthen family–school partnerships. Through a PRISMA-aligned review of empirical studies and national reports from 2010 to 2025, three key questions are addressed: how parents participate in IEP decisions, which relational and organizational factors influence collaboration, and which school practices improve partnership quality and student outcomes. These guiding questions structure the review and set the stage for subsequent sections. Findings indicate that while parents are identified as partners, their impact is often limited by clinical perspectives on disability, ambiguous procedures, professional authority, inconsistent implementation, and the emotional labor required to secure services. Collaboration is fostered in contexts with relational trust, transparent communication, inclusive environments, and reliable follow-through. Building on these findings, the Capstone transitions to propose a partnership-centered IEP improvement model and toolkit. These components are

intended to promote meaningful family engagement, support collaborative decision making, and improve educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities by enabling systematic, equity-focused redesign of IEP structures and practices.

Keywords: individualized education program (IEP) process, parent–school collaboration, special education equity, parental engagement, relational trust, systemic barriers, improvement model, PRISMA review

STRENGTHENING THE CONDITIONS FOR PARTNERSHIP: A MULTI-COMPONENT MODEL FOR IMPROVING THE IEP PROCESS

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Special Education Leadership
2026

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Dedication

To my parents, whose unwavering love, encouragement, and belief in me have shaped the courage and resilience required for this journey. You raised ten children with faith, quiet service, and a steady willingness to meet the challenges that came with supporting children with disabilities, embodying the values and constancy that ground this work.

To my brothers, whose lives have shaped my earliest understanding of disability: to Jeff, who is blind and arrived in the world just nine months before me, offering a front-row view long before I had language for what I was witnessing, and to Tim, whose learning disability and presence in our family continue to inform my sense of purpose.

To my nieces and nephews, whose journeys through special education echo the very patterns examined in this Capstone. You are the reason this work exists.

Acknowledgments

This work was made possible through the guidance, generosity, and steady support of many people who shaped this journey in meaningful ways.

I extend my appreciation to my faculty and committee members for their expertise and for the structure and oversight they provided throughout this process. I am grateful for the time and attention they contributed to the review of my work and for their role in guiding this Capstone to completion.

I am grateful as well for colleagues who offered genuine encouragement during the most demanding stages of this journey. Daisy, Cindy, Judy, Kaye, Jed, Shalyn, Josh, and others created moments of connection and support that helped me continue forward with clarity and resolve.

My work with children and parents over the years has been one of the greatest privileges of my professional life. Their courage, persistence, and honesty have shaped my understanding of partnership and remain at the heart of my commitment to improving the IEP process. Their stories continue to guide my sense of purpose.

I am also deeply grateful for friends who have walked with me through this season. Joni, Tracey, Buffy, Cobie, Berit, Richard, Stacy, Kathleen, Cindy, and Greg and Lori Mellies have offered encouragement, steadiness, and genuine care. Alongside them are those who have supported me spiritually, individuals who know me to the core and whose prayers, presence, and insight have strengthened me in ways that words cannot fully express.

There are also loved ones whose lives have ended but whose influence continues to be felt. Tim, Anthony, Christine, Janet, Patricia, Lori, Kimberly, Mary, Glen, Bryant, and Marilyn remain sources of quiet strength through the example they set and the love they offered.

To my parents, thank you for modeling faith, perseverance, and quiet service in ways that have shaped every part of who I am. Your example has grounded this work, and your encouragement has carried me through each step of this journey.

To my sister Rebecca, “Becca”, thank you for your unwavering support and for sharing your computer expertise whenever I needed it. Your willingness to help, often at a moment’s notice, made an immeasurable difference.

To my family, thank you for the constancy, humor, and grounding presence that carried me through this season. Your willingness to celebrate small wins, hold space for difficult days, and remind me of what matters most made this journey possible.

I also express my gratitude to my Heavenly Father and to His Son, Jesus Christ. Their guidance, mercy, and sustaining strength have carried me through every part of this experience. Life itself is a privilege, and I am grateful for the opportunity to learn, grow, and serve through this work.

Although these acknowledgments cannot capture the full measure of my gratitude, they reflect the deep appreciation I feel for all who have influenced my life and supported this journey.

I am deeply grateful.

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List of Abbreviations

ADA	Americans with Disabilities Act
CADRE	Center for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education
CEC	Council for Exceptional Children
CSE	Committee on Special Education
DBIR	Design-Based Implementation Research
EAHCA	Education for All Handicapped Children Act
EBSCO	Elton Bryson Stephens Company
ED	Education
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
FAPE	Free Appropriate Public Education
FERPA	Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act
FIEP	Facilitated Individualized Education Program
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IEP	Individualized Education Program
K–12	Kindergarten to 12th grade
LEA	Local Education Agency
LRE	Least Restrictive Environment
MTSS	Multi-Tiered System of Supports
PD	Professional development
PiS	Partners in School
PLC	Professional learning community
Pub. L. No. 94–142	Public Law Number 94–142

PDSA	Plan–Do–Study–Act
PRISMA	Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
PTC	Parent–Teacher Conferences
REDCap	Research Electronic Data Capture
RTI	Response to Intervention
RQ	Research Question
SEL	Social Emotional Learning
SPED	Special Education
TA	Theory of Action
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
WorldCat UMD	University of Maryland (UMD) Libraries

Section 1: Identifying the Problem

History of the Problem

Public schools are responsible for creating learning environments where every child can access meaningful instruction and support. For students with disabilities, this responsibility is carried out through the individualized education program (IEP), a process first established in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which guaranteed students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate public education and affirmed parents as essential participants in educational decision-making (Pub. L. No. 94-142, 1975). Subsequent reauthorizations, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), strengthened this commitment by continuing to position parents as equal partners in planning their child's education. Schools are therefore expected to create conditions that allow parents to participate fully in decisions about services, supports, and goals.

In practice, however, parents' experiences with the IEP process vary considerably. Some describe positive, collaborative relationships, while others report confusion, limited voice, or difficulty understanding how decisions are made (Elbaum et al., 2016; Love et al., 2017; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). These differences often stem from inconsistent communication, varied meeting practices, and uneven educator preparation for working with parents—conditions that shape whether parents experience the IEP process as collaborative or marginalizing (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023; Mueller & Vick, 2019). As a result, many parents struggle to navigate a process that is central to their child's educational experience. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing IEP processes that are collaborative, transparent, and responsive to parent needs.

Why This Matters for Schools and Parents

The IEP meeting is the primary space where parents and educators come together to make decisions about services, supports, and goals. When communication is unclear or the process feels rushed or procedural, parents may leave meetings feeling uncertain about next steps or unsure how to advocate for their child (Sanderson, 2023; Zagona et al., 2019). Educators, in turn, must balance instructional demands with compliance requirements, documentation pressures, and the relational work of engaging families (Burke & Hodapp, 2016). High rates of special educator turnover further strain this capacity, disrupting continuity, limiting relationship-building, and contributing to the inconsistency many parents experience in the IEP process (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020). These intersecting pressures create conditions that limit parents' opportunities to participate as equal partners and shape the range of decisions they feel empowered to make.

Research consistently shows that strong parent–school partnerships contribute to better communication, clearer expectations, and more effective decision making (Azad et al., 2024; Francis et al., 2016a; Francis et al., 2016b). Yet, persistent systemic conditions such as inconsistent meeting structures, uneven educator preparation, and relational dynamics shaped by power imbalances continue to limit parents' participation. Taken together, these patterns help explain why many parents struggle to participate as equal partners despite IDEA's longstanding intent to position them as central contributors to their child's educational planning.

Statement of the Problem of Practice

Although IDEA establishes parents as equal partners in the IEP process, many continue to struggle to participate meaningfully in IEP meetings. Parents frequently encounter unclear communication, inconsistent meeting practices, and limited opportunities to contribute to

decisions about their child (Elbaum et al., 2016; Love et al., 2017). Recent studies show these issues remain widespread: meeting transparency and relational quality strongly influence parents' sense of inclusion (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023; Sanderson, 2023), while structural routines such as predetermined decisions or prewritten goals continue to limit parents' influence (Batz & Blanchard, 2025; Sanderson, 2023). Inconsistent implementation of agreed-upon services further forces parents into monitoring roles that echo longstanding concerns about systemic power imbalances (Zagona et al., 2019). As a result, many parents leave the IEP process feeling confused, unheard, or unsupported (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).

These challenges do not reflect a lack of commitment from educators but instead arise from systemic conditions that make collaboration difficult. Limited preparation for parental engagement in both pre-service teacher education and ongoing in-service professional development (Mueller & Vick, 2019), combined with the complex procedural requirements of the IEP process (Burke & Hodapp, 2016), cultural and linguistic mismatches between parents and schools (Murry & Wiley, 2017), and inconsistent implementation of services (Zagona et al., 2019), create conditions in which parents struggle to understand the process or confidently advocate for their child. Together, these factors undermine IDEA's collaborative intent and produce barriers that prevent parents from participating as informed, empowered partners.

In response to these challenges, this Capstone examines how parents experience the IEP process and identifies practices that support clearer communication, stronger relationships, and more meaningful participation. The goal is to synthesize research on parent experiences and develop a partnership-centered IEP meeting format that strengthens parent–school collaboration and helps parents feel informed, included, and supported.

Contemporary Context: Why a Systematic Review Is Needed

Schools operate within increasingly complex instructional, legal, and accountability environments that shape how the IEP process unfolds. Educators must navigate evolving federal and state requirements, heightened documentation demands, and expectations for data-driven decision making, all while supporting diverse learners and building relationships with parents. At the same time, parents encounter a system that can feel technical, opaque, or difficult to navigate, particularly when communication is inconsistent or when meeting structures limit opportunities for meaningful participation (Elbaum et al., 2016; Sanderson, 2023). These conditions contribute to wide variation in how the IEP process is experienced across schools, districts, and communities.

Although decades of research have examined family–school partnerships in special education, recent studies continue to document persistent gaps between the collaborative intent of IDEA and parents' lived experiences. Parents frequently describe feeling marginalized, rushed, or excluded from decision-making processes (Sanderson, 2023; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014), while educators report challenges related to meeting structure, communication demands, and preparation for engaging families (Burke & Hodapp, 2016; Mueller & Vick, 2019). Additional systemic pressures, such as high special educator turnover and inconsistent service implementation, further complicate efforts to build stable, trusting partnerships (Council for Exceptional Children, 2020; Zagona et al., 2019). As a result, the quality of the IEP experience remains uneven, despite longstanding legal expectations for collaboration.

A systematic review is needed to bring coherence to this dispersed body of research and to identify the relational, structural, and procedural factors that most strongly shape parent participation in IEP meetings. Synthesizing findings across studies provides a clearer

understanding of the patterns that consistently influence parents' experiences and highlights the conditions that support or hinder meaningful collaboration. In a context where parents continue to report uneven experiences and educators face increasing demands, a systematic review offers a timely and necessary foundation for improving the IEP process and strengthening family–school partnerships.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to systematically examine how parents experience the individualized education program (IEP) process and to identify the relational, structural, and procedural factors that shape their opportunities for meaningful participation. Although federal law positions parents as equal partners in educational decision-making, research continues to document persistent challenges related to communication, meeting structure, educator preparation, and systemic constraints that influence how parents engage in IEP meetings (Elbaum et al., 2016; Mueller & Vick, 2019; Sanderson, 2023). These challenges contribute to uneven experiences across schools and districts, leaving many parents unsure of their role or how to advocate for their child (Love et al., 2017; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).

Because this research spans multiple disciplines and varies in methodological focus, a systematic review is needed to synthesize what is known about the conditions that support or hinder parent participation. This review focuses specifically on parent experiences, as parents are the legally designated partners in IEP decision-making; studies that focus solely on student perspectives fall outside the scope of this analysis due to distinct developmental, legal, and methodological considerations.

Guided by this focus, the following research questions frame the study:

RQ1. What patterns characterize parental experiences in special education decision making within the IEP process?

RQ2. What relational and systemic factors within the IEP process support or hinder effective collaboration between parents and schools?

RQ3. What strategies can schools implement within the IEP process to strengthen partnerships and improve outcomes for students with disabilities?

Methodological Framework

This Capstone synthesizes existing research on parents' experiences with the IEP process and uses these findings to develop a partnership-centered IEP meeting format intended to strengthen parent–school collaboration. The project uses a systematic review of empirical studies and national reports on parent experiences with the IEP process and parent–school collaboration. Searches were conducted in ERIC, EBSCO education collections, WorldCat UMD, and Google Scholar. The findings inform the design of a meeting format that translates research-aligned principles into concrete practices parents and educators can use before, during, and after IEP meetings.

Databases Searched

A systematic search identified empirical studies, national reports, and scholarly analyses relevant to parental experiences in special education decision making. ERIC provided access to peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, technical reports, and practitioner resources. EBSCO's education and social science databases offered additional peer-reviewed journals and interdisciplinary research. WorldCat UMD supported access to books, dissertations, conference proceedings, and foundational texts related to special education policy and family engagement. Google Scholar captured recent publications, cross-disciplinary studies, and grey literature and

supported citation chaining (for example, Irwin et al., 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2024). Together, these databases provided comprehensive coverage of research published from 2010 to 2025.

Although the systematic search was intentionally bounded to this range, several foundational or seminal works published prior to 2010 were incorporated for theoretical framing. These earlier sources were not included in the PRISMA-screened dataset but were used to clarify key constructs and situate the empirical findings within a broader conceptual lineage.

PRISMA-Aligned Search Strategy

This review followed PRISMA-aligned procedures to ensure a transparent and replicable search process. Search terms were developed from key concepts in the literature on parental experiences, family–school partnerships, and special education decision making, and Boolean operators were used to refine results across databases. Terms were adapted for each database to capture studies focused on communication, collaboration, trust, and parent participation, consistent with the review's focus on how parents experience the IEP process.

Although this Capstone does not meet all requirements of a full systematic review, such as multiple reviewers, preregistered protocols, or formal risk-of-bias assessments, PRISMA principles were applied to strengthen rigor and transparency. A detailed PRISMA flow diagram is provided in *Appendix D*.

Study Selection and Screening Results

Studies were included if they examined parental experiences, perceptions, or participation in special education and focused specifically on the IEP process, including collaboration, communication, meeting quality, or decision making. To ensure relevance and methodological rigor, only empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods) published in

peer-reviewed journals or reputable national reports, written in English, situated in K–12 special education contexts in the United States, and published between 2010 and 2025 were eligible for inclusion.

Studies were excluded if they did not align with the purpose of understanding parent experiences within the IEP process. Excluded studies were those focused exclusively on teachers, administrators, service providers, or students without collecting parent-reported data; those situated in early intervention, postsecondary, or adult disability services; and those conducted in clinical, medical, or community-based settings rather than K–12 schools. Conceptual or commentary-only pieces, legal or policy analyses without empirical data on parent experiences, and instrument-development or psychometric validation studies were also excluded, as were studies examining special education processes outside the IEP, such as disability identification, Response to Intervention (RTI), Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS), or general service delivery not tied to IEP meetings.

The combined searches yielded 312 records. After removing 74 duplicates, 238 were screened at the title and abstract level, resulting in the exclusion of 167. Seventy-one full-text articles were reviewed, and 50 were excluded based on the criteria above, leaving 21 studies in the final dataset: 18 empirical studies and 3 national reports.

National reports, policy documents, and federal data were treated as contextual sources rather than empirical evidence because they do not contain parent-level empirical data. These materials were used to situate the empirical findings within broader national patterns in dispute-resolution trends, special education demographics, and IDEA implementation, but they were not included in the analytic synthesis. The empirical findings identified through this PRISMA-aligned process are presented in Section 2.

Section 2: Comprehensive Research Review

Overview of the Review

Section 2 synthesizes the empirical literature identified through the PRISMA-aligned search procedures described in Section 1. The review is guided by three research questions examining how parents experience the IEP process, the relational and systemic factors that shape their opportunities for meaningful participation, and the strategies schools can implement to strengthen collaboration. The empirical studies that form the core of this review are analyzed in relation to these questions, while contextual sources are referenced as needed to situate the findings within broader national policy and demographic trends.

Across the literature, parents' experiences with the IEP process are shaped by a complex interplay of relational, procedural, and systemic conditions. Parents describe navigating conceptual differences with educators, communication practices that vary widely in clarity and transparency, and meeting structures that often limit their ability to contribute meaningfully to decisions about their child's education. These experiences are further influenced by systemic pressures, such as staffing instability, inconsistent service implementation, and uneven preparation for family engagement, all of which affect the relational climate in which IEP decisions are made.

The sections that follow synthesize these findings in relation to each research question, offering a comprehensive understanding of how parents experience the IEP process and identifying the conditions that most strongly shape meaningful collaboration between families and schools. A methodological critique matrix was also developed to assess the design features, sampling strategies, analytic approaches, and limitations of each included study; this matrix is

provided in Appendix B. A summary of the included studies and their key findings is presented in the Literature Review Article Results table in Appendix A.

Research Question 1: Patterns Characterizing Parental Experiences in Special Education Decision Making

The first research question examines the patterns that characterize how parents experience decision making within the IEP process. Across the empirical literature, parents describe navigating systems shaped by conceptual misalignment, emotional labor, structural exclusion, and the need to adopt adaptive strategies to secure appropriate services for their children. These studies illuminate the everyday realities of IEP participation, revealing how communication practices, meeting routines, and relational dynamics influence whether parents feel included, respected, and able to contribute meaningfully to decisions about their child's education.

Conceptual Frameworks and Interpretive Differences

Lalvani (2015) provides a foundational lens for understanding how conceptual differences shape parents' experiences in the IEP process. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry grounded in critical disability studies, Lalvani examined how 32 parents and 30 teachers conceptualized disability and interpreted the experiences of families raising children with disabilities. Participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling across New Jersey and represented diverse cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews lasting one to three hours allowed participants to narrate their experiences in depth.

Data were analyzed using an inductive, multi-stage process that included holistic transcript review, initial coding, thematic clustering, and cross-group comparison. Two central

themes emerged. First, parents and teachers held divergent meanings of disability. Teachers often drew on medicalized, deficit-oriented perspectives that framed disability as an inherent characteristic of the child, often using diagnostic labels to justify segregated placements or specialized programs. Parents, in contrast, emphasized contextual and sociocultural interpretations, describing disability as shaped by stigma, expectations, and environmental barriers. They viewed labels as socially consequential markers that could limit opportunities or distort how their child was perceived.

Second, parents and teachers expressed conflicting beliefs about family life. Teachers often drew on deficit-based assumptions that portrayed families as burdened or grieving. Parents offered counter-narratives that emphasized ordinary, joyful family life and attributed stress not to their child's disability but to systemic barriers and the need for ongoing advocacy.

These findings illustrate how conceptual frameworks shape the emotional and relational climate of IEP participation. When educators rely on deficit-based or medicalized assumptions, they may adopt paternalistic attitudes that undermine equal-status collaboration. Parents' sociocultural interpretations position them as experts on their children's lived experiences and as active agents navigating systemic inequities. Lalvani argued that addressing these disparities requires shifts in teacher preparation toward frameworks that recognize the role of context, stigma, and systemic barriers in shaping disability and family experiences.

Experiences of Inclusion and Exclusion in Decision Making

To further examine how these dynamics are experienced in day-to-day decision-making, Love et al. (2017) examined how parents experience inclusion and exclusion in special education decision-making, particularly during IEP development. The study included 19 parents and guardians of 18 children and youth with disabilities between the ages of 2 and 20. Most

participants were mothers of children with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or learning disabilities. Parents were recruited across two Midwestern states using purposeful and snowball sampling through parent support groups and word-of-mouth referrals. Data were collected through small focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews, allowing the researchers to capture both shared patterns and individualized accounts of parents' interactions with school personnel.

Data were analyzed using a general inductive approach that involved iterative coding, constant comparison, and thematic synthesis. Five interrelated themes illustrated how parents were included or excluded from decision-making and how these experiences shaped their subsequent choices about placement and services.

First, parents described exclusion from educational decision-making. Parents described exclusion as woven into school routines and power structures. Parents reported that key decisions about placement, services, and supports were made during pre-IEP staff meetings they did not attend. These decisions were then presented as finalized, limiting opportunities for authentic dialogue or shared problem-solving.

Second, parents engaged in independent efforts to shape their children's services. To compensate for exclusion, parents developed strategies outside formal IEP structures. Some cultivated relationships with individual teachers who were more receptive to collaboration than the broader system. Others paid for private professionals to train school staff, interpret data, or help them navigate procedural barriers. These strategies reflect parents' determination to secure appropriate services while also revealing inequities based on financial and social resources.

Third, parents experienced discrepancies between their beliefs about inclusion and the placement options available to them. Parents expressed strong commitments to inclusive

education but often chose more restrictive settings because they were presented as the only way to access necessary supports. This tension highlighted the gap between parents' values and the structural constraints of local service delivery.

Fourth, parents' decisions were reactive responses to systemic constraints. Parents described moving to new districts, transferring schools, or paying for private therapy when their child's needs were not met. These decisions were driven not by preference but by the need to compensate for inadequate or inconsistent school-based supports.

Fifth, parents assumed expanded roles to direct their children's education. When school supports were insufficient, parents took on responsibilities typically assigned to educators. They adapted lessons, provided direct instruction, coordinated services, and, in some cases, homeschooled their children. These role shifts were described as exhausting and emotionally demanding.

Viewed together, these themes reveal how parents navigate a system that simultaneously mandates their participation and limits their influence. Exclusion is embedded not only in interpersonal interactions but also in routines, hierarchies, and resource structures that shape both the process and outcomes of educational decision-making. Even when parents are included, their decisions are shaped by a complex interplay of values, resource availability, school-level constraints, and the need to compensate for systemic shortcomings.

Implementation Realities and Ongoing Advocacy

While Love et al. (2017) highlight how exclusion can be embedded in decision-making processes, other studies show that these patterns extend into the IEP implementation phase. Zagona et al. (2019) conducted an exploratory qualitative study examining how parents of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities experienced the implementation of IEP

services. The sample included 19 caregivers (17 biological mothers, 1 foster mother, and 1 biological father) representing 18 children aged 2 to 20. Most children had intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, or learning disabilities. Parents were recruited across two Midwestern states through purposeful sampling via parent support groups, disability advocacy organizations, and snowball referrals. Although the sample was predominantly White, participants varied in socioeconomic background and had extensive experience navigating special education systems.

Data were collected through small focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews conducted in person or by phone. A “tree-and-branch” protocol guided the conversations, with open-ended questions organized around the child’s background, parents’ experiences with special education, placement decision-making, and involvement in outside activities. All interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

The researchers used a rigorous, multi-stage inductive thematic analysis. Initial coding was conducted on a subset of transcripts to develop preliminary categories, followed by refinement into a formal codebook with definitions and illustrative examples. The first author coded all transcripts using qualitative analysis software, while the second author independently coded approximately 45% of the dataset to ensure reliability. Final themes were developed through team discussion and consensus.

Three major themes emerged. First, parents described pervasive inconsistencies in the implementation of IEP services, including missed sessions, unqualified personnel, and failure to use assistive communication devices or behavioral supports. Parents frequently discovered that teachers had not read the IEP or that services documented in the plan were not occurring in practice. These implementation lapses were not isolated incidents but reflected systemic patterns

attributed to inadequate training, high staff turnover, fiscal constraints, and deficit-oriented professional philosophies.

Second, parents reported limited transparency and communication about service delivery. Many learned about missed services only after extended delays or through informal channels. This lack of communication undermined trust and made it difficult for parents to assess whether their child's needs were being met.

Third, parents described engaging in ongoing advocacy to secure appropriate services, including escalating concerns to administrators, filing complaints, documenting unmet services, and providing supplemental instruction at home. These advocacy efforts were described as emotionally exhausting and time-consuming, particularly for parents with fewer financial or social resources. Many expressed frustration that they felt responsible for monitoring the system to ensure basic compliance with legally mandated supports.

Viewed through a systems lens, the findings illustrate how exclusion extends beyond decision-making spaces into the day-to-day enactment of services. Even when parents are formally included in IEP planning, their influence is constrained by the degree to which schools follow through on agreed-upon supports. Implementation failures shift responsibility onto parents, requiring them to compensate for systemic shortcomings and undermining the collaborative intent of the IEP process. Zagona et al. (2019) argued that improving the IEP process requires more than procedural compliance. It demands attention to the organizational conditions that support or undermine implementation. Their findings call for enhanced professional training, stronger accountability structures, and more transparent communication practices to ensure that IEPs function as meaningful tools rather than symbolic documents.

While Zagona et al. (2019) highlight how inconsistencies in service delivery undermine parents' trust and require ongoing advocacy, other research shows that these systemic breakdowns also shape the emotional and relational climate of IEP meetings themselves.

Emotional Climate and Power Imbalances in IEP Meetings

Where Zagona et al. (2019) highlight inconsistencies in service delivery, additional research shows how these systemic breakdowns shape the emotional and relational climate of IEP participation. Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) conducted a descriptive qualitative study to examine how parents experience the IEP process and the extent to which those experiences align with the collaborative intent of federal special education policy. Motivated by the limitations of satisfaction surveys that obscure the reasons behind parental discontent, the authors sought to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of parents navigating the IEP system. Drawing on their experiences as a K–12 practitioner (Zeitlin) and a university-based educator (Curcic), they approached the study with a commitment to centering parent perspectives and understanding the relational dynamics that shape IEP participation.

The sample included 20 parents of students with disabilities recruited through flyers distributed in a suburban Midwestern school district. Purposeful sampling ensured that participants had at least two years of experience with special education services and had attended an IEP meeting within the past year. The sample reflected a range of ages, incomes, and years of experience, though it was limited in ethnic diversity. Data were collected through one-on-one, open-ended interviews lasting 45 minutes to two hours, all of which were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using the constant-comparative method.

The findings revealed a profound disconnect between the collaborative ideals of the IEP process and the experiences parents described. Parents consistently characterized IEP meetings

as stressful, intimidating, and emotionally taxing rather than as opportunities for shared decision-making. Many recounted feeling invisible or marginalized, describing moments in which they were positioned as peripheral to the conversation. One parent likened the meeting to being “a little gazelle… shot at one-by-one” by a large team of professionals, capturing the vulnerability and powerlessness that permeated many accounts.

Parents also described a pronounced power imbalance that shaped their interactions with school personnel. Rather than experiencing the IEP as collaborative, they often perceived an adversarial “us versus them” dynamic that required them to adopt combative advocacy roles to secure necessary services. The IEP document itself was frequently experienced as alienating—lengthy, technical, and difficult to use as a practical tool. Parents noted that its emphasis on quantitative goals contributed to a sense that their child was being reduced to measurable deficits rather than understood through their strengths, interests, and humanity.

Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) concluded that parents experienced the IEP process as ritualistic and compliance-driven, with structural and relational dynamics that limited their influence and obscured their voices. Parents called for more consistent and transparent communication, opportunities for informal problem-solving conversations, and recognition of their expertise as essential to the process. They also advocated for a simplified, parent-friendly IEP document that incorporates narrative summaries rather than legalistic language. These recommendations reflect a desire for a more humane, relationally grounded approach to special education planning—one that honors parents’ knowledge, reduces adversarial dynamics, and restores the IEP to its intended purpose as a tool for meaningful educational support. In this way, Zeitlin and Curcic’s (2014) findings complement those of Zagona et al. (2019) by illustrating how the emotional climate of meetings reinforces the structural barriers parents encounter.

Taken together, the studies by Lalvani (2015), Love et al. (2017), Zagona et al. (2019), and Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) illuminate the foundational mechanisms that shape parents' experiences with the IEP process. Although each study focuses on a different aspect of decision-making, they collectively reveal a coherent pattern in how parents interpret, navigate, and respond to the structures and routines of special education. These shared patterns provide a conceptual foundation for understanding the broader dynamics of RQ1 and set the stage for a cross-study synthesis of the interpretive and relational conditions that contour parental participation.

Cross-Study Synthesis: Patterns Across RQ1

Across these foundational studies, a consistent pattern emerges that clarifies the interpretive and relational conditions shaping parents' experiences in the IEP process. Lalvani (2015) shows how parents draw on sociocultural, contextual, and identity-based understandings of their child, while educators frequently rely on medicalized or deficit-oriented frameworks shaped by professional training. Similar dynamics are documented in research showing how deficit assumptions and institutional norms can marginalize parents' knowledge, particularly when parents' cultural or experiential perspectives diverge from school-based expectations (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). These interpretive mismatches contribute to misunderstandings, strained communication, and feelings of exclusion during IEP meetings.

Taken together, this body of work illustrates that deeply rooted interpretive frameworks, not individual intentions, shape the quality of parent–school interactions and help explain why many parents experience the IEP process as misaligned with their lived realities. Viewed through a broader lens, these findings show that the challenges parents encounter stem not only from procedural complexity but from deeper interpretive misalignments between parents and

educators. When schools rely on deficit-oriented or medicalized views of disability, as documented by Lalvani (2015) and Zeitlin and Curcic (2014), parents' sociocultural knowledge and lived expertise are often minimized or misunderstood. These dynamics shape how communication unfolds, determine which perspectives are considered credible, and influence how decisions are framed during IEP meetings. As a result, parents may feel unheard, marginalized, or positioned as outsiders in a process that legally defines them as equal partners.

Collectively, this cluster of research reinforces the Problem of Practice identified in this Capstone: parents struggle to participate meaningfully in the IEP process when the relational and interpretive conditions of partnership are misaligned with their experiences, values, and understandings of their child. Strengthening parent–school collaboration, therefore, requires not only clearer communication and more consistent meeting practices, but also attention to the underlying beliefs and assumptions that shape how educators and parents make sense of disability and partnership. Building on these foundational dynamics, subsequent research examines how these same conditions manifest across different parent groups and contexts.

Persistent Power Imbalances and Emotional Burdens in the IEP Process

Building on the focus of parent expertise and the emotional labor required to participate meaningfully in IEP decision-making, Batz and Blanchard (2025) examined how parents who also work as educators navigate the IEP process for their own children. The study focused on 25 mother-educator professionals with extensive knowledge of special education law, instructional practices, and school systems whose children received services under IDEA Parts B or C. Participants were recruited through professional networks, educator associations, and parent advocacy groups, and took part in semi-structured interviews exploring their experiences with IEP meetings, service implementation, and interactions with school personnel. Using a hybrid

deductive–inductive coding process, the authors analyzed how these dual-role parents interpreted their credibility, advocacy roles, and emotional labor within IEP teams.

Across interviews, participants described a complex interplay between expertise and vulnerability. Their professional knowledge enabled them to interpret jargon, anticipate school responses, and advocate strategically, yet this same expertise often triggered defensiveness among school personnel who perceived them as threatening or manipulative. Staff willingness and capacity varied widely; while positive experiences were rare, they were deeply impactful when they occurred. More commonly, participants encountered resistance, deficit-based assumptions, and inconsistent service implementation, even when they presented clear documentation or referenced legal requirements.

These patterns revealed that deficit-oriented assumptions and longstanding power asymmetries within the special education system persisted even among highly knowledgeable parents. Many mother-educators described being overruled or dismissed during meetings, and some pursued due process to secure services. These experiences prompted significant self-reflection. Advocating for their own children reshaped their professional practice, deepened their empathy for families, and motivated many to engage in broader systems-change efforts. The emotional landscape they described was marked by frustration, vigilance, and the need to continually negotiate credibility and relational risk within IEP teams.

Taken together, the findings illustrate that professional expertise does not insulate parents from the structural and relational barriers that shape the IEP process. Instead, the experiences of mother-educators reinforce a broader pattern across the RQ1 literature: parents' participation is constrained not by their knowledge or preparation but by systemic norms that shape credibility, influence, and emotional labor. Even those with maximal institutional familiarity encounter the

same patterns of dismissal, resistance, and structural exclusion documented among less-resourced families, underscoring that these challenges are embedded in the system rather than attributable to parental deficits.

Building on the patterns identified by Batz and Blanchard (2025), Miller, Love, Kurth, and Zagona (2019) deepen this line of inquiry by examining how parents interpret their interactions with school personnel and how these interpretations shape the roles they adopt in special education decision-making.

Identities Adopted While Navigating Educational Decision-Making and Partnerships with Schools

Miller, Love, Kurth, and Zagona (2019) examined how parents of children with developmental disabilities interpret their interactions with school personnel and how these interpretations shape the roles they adopt in special education decision-making. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with 17 parents, primarily mothers of children ages 6 to 20 with autism or intellectual disability, the authors sought to illuminate the emotional and relational dynamics that influence how parents navigate family–school partnerships. Participants were recruited through disability organizations and parent networks, and the study was grounded in a constructivist orientation informed by the researchers' personal connections to disability. This orientation shaped their interest in understanding the nuanced, often contradictory identities parents enact within systems that purport to value collaboration.

Across the dataset, parents described shifting among a spectrum of six fluid and overlapping identities as they engaged with school personnel: victim, advocate, perseverer, educator, broker or negotiator, and surrenderer. These identities were not fixed categories but dynamic responses to the conditions parents encountered. The victim identity emerged when

parents experienced intimidation, exclusion, or procedural violations, such as the unexpected presence of attorneys at IEP meetings. The advocate identity reflected parents' efforts to fight for their child's rights, often extending their advocacy to support other families. The perseverer identity captured parents' resilience as they studied laws, attended workshops, and developed strategies to navigate the system. The educator identity reflected the instructional roles parents assumed as they taught their children, supported other parents, and at times guided school personnel. The broker or negotiator identity illustrated how parents strategically built relationships, volunteered in classrooms, or used informal exchanges to secure services. Finally, the surrenderer identity emerged when parents, exhausted by repeated conflict or systemic resistance, yielded to school decisions or accepted more restrictive placements to access the supports they needed.

These identity shifts revealed an emotionally charged landscape in which parents continually recalibrated their advocacy in response to the conditions they encountered within school systems. Rather than functioning as equal partners, parents often found themselves navigating power imbalances, inconsistent service delivery, and deficit-oriented assumptions that shaped their sense of agency. The fluidity of these identities underscored the complexity of family–school partnerships and challenged simplistic portrayals of parents as either cooperative or adversarial. Instead, parents' roles were shaped by the relational and structural dynamics of the IEP process, dynamics that could either support or undermine collaborative decision-making.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that the burden of navigating the special education system weighs heavily on parents, who must continually adapt their identities to secure appropriate services for their children. Miller et al. argued that these identity shifts reflect systemic shortcomings rather than parental deficiencies. They called for policy and practice

reforms that reduce the need for adversarial advocacy and support more equitable, reciprocal partnerships, including stronger communication structures, parent training, and a support-based model that addresses emotional, informational, and material needs. Their identity framework offers a powerful conceptual tool for understanding how parents experience and respond to the structural and relational pressures embedded in the IEP process, reinforcing the broader RQ1 pattern that parents' participation is shaped not by their knowledge or preparation but by the conditions schools create.

Parent Experiences During IEP Meetings and Advice for Navigating the IEP Process

While Miller et al. (2019) illuminate how parents adapt their identities in response to systemic conditions, Sanderson (2023) demonstrates that these relational and emotional patterns are not isolated but widespread across a national sample of parents. Sanderson conducted one of the largest qualitative studies of parental experiences with the IEP process, drawing on open-ended responses from 803 parents and guardians of school-aged children with current IEPs. Participants were recruited through national disability organizations, parent support groups, University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, and thousands of agencies listed in the Wrightslaw Yellow Pages. Although the sample skewed heavily toward White, highly educated mothers, it provided a rare national portrait of the emotional, relational, and procedural dynamics that shape parents' engagement.

Data were collected through a web-based survey administered via REDCap between September 2017 and January 2018. While the full survey included numerous closed-ended items, Sanderson's qualitative analysis focused on two open-ended questions placed at the end: one inviting parents to describe their overall IEP meeting experiences and another asking what advice they would offer to other families. Of the 803 respondents, 628 answered the experience

question, and 770 answered the advice question. Responses were analyzed using a constant-comparative approach conducted by a three-member coding team comprising a special education faculty member and two trained graduate assistants, who engaged in open, axial, and selective coding. The team met weekly over two months to refine themes and achieved high interrater reliability (97.5% for the experiences question and 91.0% for the advice question).

Across the dataset, parents overwhelmingly described IEP meetings as tense, conflict-laden, and marked by significant power imbalances. Many described entering meetings with a sense of dread, anticipating predetermined decisions, resistance from school personnel, or conflict that required them to adopt defensive postures. Parents frequently reported that their expertise regarding their child was dismissed or overshadowed by professional authority, reinforcing a dynamic in which they were positioned as outsiders rather than equal partners. These patterns appeared consistently across the national sample, suggesting that the structural and relational challenges documented in smaller qualitative studies are widespread features of the IEP system.

Despite the prevalence of negative experiences, a subset of parents described positive interactions, typically when meetings were student-centered, strengths-based, and characterized by transparent communication. These parents emphasized feeling valued as equal members of the IEP team and noted that their child's presence often shifted the tone toward more personalized and collaborative planning. The contrast between these experiences underscored the central role of meeting quality, relational trust, and team dynamics in shaping parental perceptions of the IEP process.

A distinctive contribution of Sanderson's study was the analysis of parent-to-parent advice. Parents consistently encouraged others to prepare extensively by studying special

education law, requesting draft documents in advance, gathering documentation, and entering meetings with a clear advocacy strategy. Many recommended bringing external support, such as advocates or attorneys, to counteract perceived power imbalances. Others emphasized the importance of maintaining professionalism, building relationships with school staff, and documenting all communication. Still others advised parents to brace for negative experiences, manage expectations, and consider alternative options such as private services or homeschooling when districts were unresponsive. These recommendations reflected a collective recognition that, although the IEP process is legally framed as collaborative, parents often feel compelled to adopt defensive or adversarial stances to ensure their child's needs are met.

Taken together, Sanderson's findings reveal that parental dissatisfaction is not an anomaly but a patterned response to the emotional and relational conditions embedded in the IEP process. Meeting characteristics such as data transparency, individualized planning, student participation, and strengths-based framing emerged as among the strongest predictors of positive experiences. Sanderson argued that improving the IEP process requires a shift away from compliance-driven, deficit-oriented practices toward relationally grounded, student-centered approaches that honor parents' expertise and foster genuine partnership. Building on Sanderson's national-level evidence of emotional strain and structural imbalance, Miller et al. (2019) further illuminate how these conditions shape the identities parents adopt as they navigate the IEP process.

Systemic Conditions Shape and Constrain Parents' Participation

Elbaum, Blatz, and Rodriguez (2016) examined how parents' everyday experiences with school personnel shape their evaluations of parent involvement, as measured by Indicator 8, a federal accountability metric that assesses the extent to which schools facilitate meaningful participation. Using a mixed-methods design, the authors linked parents' narrative accounts of

collaboration to their ratings on the state's Indicator 8 survey. The quantitative component drew on responses from thousands of parents across Florida, while the qualitative component analyzed written comments from a purposive subsample of parents who provided detailed descriptions of their IEP experiences. This design allowed the researchers to explore not only how parents rated their involvement but also why they evaluated schools the way they did.

Across the dataset, parents' perceptions of collaboration were strongly associated with their Indicator 8 ratings. Parents who described respectful communication, transparency, and genuine opportunities to contribute tended to rate their schools highly. These parents emphasized feeling heard, receiving clear explanations of decisions, and engaging in shared problem-solving with school personnel. In contrast, parents who reported predetermined decisions, deficit-focused language, or limited opportunities to ask questions consistently provided lower ratings. Many described feeling dismissed or marginalized, noting that their participation felt procedural rather than meaningful. These patterns held across disability categories, demographic groups, and school contexts, suggesting that relational and communicative dynamics are central to how parents evaluate their involvement.

The qualitative comments provided insight into the specific experiences that shaped parents' evaluations. Parents who felt that school personnel listened to their concerns and engaged with them as partners described the IEP process as collaborative and supportive. Conversely, parents who encountered resistance, unclear explanations, or a lack of transparency reported frustration and distrust. Several noted that decisions appeared predetermined before the meeting began, echoing themes identified in studies such as Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) and Sanderson (2023). These parents emphasized that the tone and structure of the meeting

influenced not only their satisfaction but also their confidence in the school's commitment to their child.

Taken together, the findings demonstrated that Indicator 8 ratings reflect more than compliance with procedural requirements. They capture parents' lived experiences of partnership and the relational climate of the IEP process. Elbaum and colleagues argued that improving parent involvement requires attention to the communicative and relational dimensions of IEP meetings, not simply adherence to timelines or documentation standards. Their work showed that parents' evaluations of schools are shaped by the quality of interactions they experience, reinforcing the broader RQ1 pattern that parents' participation is deeply influenced by the emotional and relational conditions schools create.

Research Question 2: Relational and Systemic Factors That Support or Hinder Collaboration in the IEP Process

Research Question 2 examines the relational and systemic conditions within schools that shape whether collaboration between parents and educators is possible, supported, or systematically constrained. Whereas RQ1 illuminated how parents experience the IEP process, often navigating emotional strain, structural exclusion, and entrenched power asymmetries, RQ2 shifts the analytic lens to the organizational routines, cultural norms, and communicative practices that produce those experiences. This body of research moves beyond documenting parents' perceptions to interrogating the school-level conditions that contour the choices families can make, the roles they are permitted to play, and the degree to which partnership can be enacted in practice. In doing so, RQ2 explores how collaboration emerges or breaks down through the everyday interactions, beliefs, and structures that define the IEP process.

Emotional and Structural Barriers That Undermine Collaboration

The first set of studies examines the cultural and organizational foundations that enable authentic collaboration. Whereas RQ1 studies highlight the emotional and structural barriers that undermine collaboration, Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross (2016a) examine the conditions under which parents experience partnership as authentic, trusting, and reciprocal. By focusing on schools recognized for exemplary inclusive practices, the authors illuminate what collaboration looks like when inclusive values are deeply embedded in school culture.

Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross (2016a) conducted a qualitative study using focus groups with 58 parents across six K–8 schools intentionally selected for their strong reputations in inclusive education. This purposive sampling strategy allowed the researchers to explore relational and organizational conditions in contexts where collaboration was already functioning at a high level. Data were collected through structured focus groups and analyzed using thematic analysis, with the research team attending closely to parents' descriptions of trust, communication, and school culture.

The findings revealed that a robust schoolwide culture of inclusion served as the foundation for trust. Parents described these schools as places where all students belonged, where differences were normalized, and where inclusion was woven into daily routines rather than treated as an initiative. Administrative leadership played a central role: principals who modeled accessibility, hired competent staff, and communicated consistently were viewed as catalysts for strong family–professional partnerships. Their leadership shaped not only the school's climate but also the relational norms that guided interactions between educators and parents.

Parents also identified specific educator attributes that facilitated trust, including mutual respect, consistent and transparent communication, and demonstrable professional competence. Teachers who listened carefully, followed through on commitments, and approached parents as knowledgeable partners were viewed as essential to sustaining collaborative relationships. These attributes aligned with broader frameworks of relational trust, suggesting that trust is built through repeated interactions in which educators demonstrate reliability, integrity, and care.

Opportunities for meaningful family involvement further strengthened partnerships. Parents valued being invited into decision-making spaces, serving on committees, volunteering in classrooms, and participating in schoolwide events. These opportunities signaled that parents were not peripheral stakeholders but integral members of the school community. Importantly, parents noted that involvement was not limited to formal structures; informal interactions, such as casual conversations with teachers or spontaneous invitations to observe classroom activities, also contributed to a sense of partnership.

Finally, parents emphasized that positive outcomes for all students reinforced their trust in the school. They observed that inclusive practices benefited not only children with disabilities but also their peers, fostering empathy, social competence, and academic growth. Seeing these outcomes firsthand strengthened parents' confidence in the school's approach and deepened their commitment to collaborative relationships. Together, these experiences created an emotionally affirming landscape in which parents felt welcomed, respected, and genuinely connected to the school community.

Francis et al. (2016a) demonstrate that trusting partnerships emerge not from isolated strategies but from a coherent constellation of cultural, relational, and organizational conditions. Their findings offer a vision of what collaboration can look like when inclusive values are fully

realized, providing a conceptual anchor for understanding the relational and systemic factors that support effective decision-making in RQ2. While communication quality is foundational, it does not operate in isolation; cultural responsiveness and educator beliefs further shape whether parents experience the IEP process as inclusive or marginalizing.

Communication Practices and Educator Beliefs Shape Parents' Day-to-Day Experiences

While Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross (2016a) highlight the cultural and organizational conditions that enable strong partnerships, Francis, Blue-Banning, Haines, Turnbull, & Gross (2016b) extend this work by examining how communication practices and educator beliefs shape parents' day-to-day experiences of collaboration. Their study focuses on the micro-practices of interaction: how educators talk with parents, frame student needs, and position parents within decision-making processes. By analyzing these relational dynamics, the authors illuminate how collaboration is either strengthened or undermined through the everyday discourse of IEP teams.

Francis et al. (2016b) conducted a qualitative study involving interviews and focus groups with parents and educators across multiple school sites. The researchers sought to understand how communication patterns, relational trust, and cultural responsiveness influenced parents' sense of partnership. Their analysis centered on how educators conveyed respect, acknowledged parent expertise, and engaged in shared problem-solving, as well as on the subtle discursive moves that signaled exclusion or deficit-based assumptions.

Francis et al. (2016b) findings revealed that communication quality was a primary determinant of whether parents experienced the IEP process as collaborative or marginalizing. Parents described feeling valued when educators listened actively, explained decisions clearly, and invited them into discussions as knowledgeable contributors. These communicative practices

fostered relational trust and reinforced parents' sense of belonging within the school community. Conversely, communication that was rushed, overly technical, or dismissive signaled that parents' perspectives were peripheral. Parents reported that such interactions often left them feeling confused, excluded, or positioned as adversaries rather than partners.

Educator beliefs played a similarly influential role. When teachers and administrators approached parents with strengths-based, culturally responsive mindsets, parents experienced interactions as respectful and reciprocal. Educators who recognized the cultural and experiential knowledge parents brought to the table were better able to build trust and engage in meaningful collaboration. In contrast, deficit-oriented beliefs, such as assumptions about parental capacity, cultural background, or advocacy style, undermined trust and contributed to strained relationships. These beliefs often manifested subtly through tone, body language, or the framing of student needs, yet they had significant implications for how parents interpreted their role within the IEP process.

Francis et al. (2016b) also highlighted the importance of shared problem-solving. Parents described feeling most supported when educators approached challenges collaboratively, offered multiple options, acknowledged uncertainty, and worked together to identify solutions. This contrasted sharply with experiences in which decisions were presented as predetermined or non-negotiable, reinforcing power imbalances and limiting parents' influence.

Francis et al. (2016b) concluded that effective collaboration is built through consistent, relationally grounded communication practices that honor parent expertise and foster mutual trust. Their findings underscore that even in schools with strong inclusive cultures, collaboration can falter when communication is inconsistent or when educators' beliefs are misaligned with family values. Together with Francis et al. (2016a), this study demonstrates that collaboration is

not a single event but an ongoing relational process shaped by everyday interactions within IEP teams.

How Parents and Teachers Conceptualize 'Ideal' Parent–School Interactions

While Francis et al. (2016b) and Francis et al. (2016a) illuminate the conditions that support strong partnerships, Azad, Kim, Marcus, Sheridan, and Mandell (2018) examine how parents and teachers conceptualize 'ideal' parent–school interactions, offering insight into the relational conditions stakeholders believe are necessary for meaningful collaboration. The authors conducted interviews with 39 parents and 18 teachers in a large, racially and economically diverse urban district, using thematic analysis to identify shared aspirations and persistent tensions in family–school interactions. By focusing on participants' descriptions of what strong partnerships could look like, the study highlights the relational dynamics that parents and educators hope to achieve when structural and interpersonal barriers are minimized.

Four themes emerged from Azad et al. (2018) that illuminate both shared goals and persistent tensions. First, parents and teachers agreed that communication is foundational, yet they emphasized different aspects. Parents prioritized the content of communication, seeking detailed, specific information about their child's progress, daily experiences, and the adults who interacted with them. Teachers, by contrast, emphasized the mechanism of communication, expressing a preference for timely responses, face-to-face conversations, and consistent use of communication tools. This divergence reflects a broader pattern in the literature: parents seek transparency and insight into their child's school life, while teachers seek manageable, predictable communication routines.

Second, both groups expressed ambivalence about involvement, shaped by assumptions about the other's burdens. Parents hesitated to request more communication or opportunities to

participate because they perceived teachers as overwhelmed by large caseloads and limited support. Teachers, in turn, hesitated to ask parents for greater involvement because they recognized the complex life circumstances many parents faced, including poverty, demanding work schedules, and caregiving responsibilities. These mutual assumptions, rooted in empathy but resulting in silence, contributed to missed opportunities for partnership.

Third, the theme of expertise revealed a reciprocal sense of being undervalued. Parents wanted teachers to acknowledge their deep knowledge of their child's history, strengths, and needs, while teachers wanted parents to reinforce evidence-based practices at home. When either group perceived the other as dismissive or unresponsive, interactions became strained. This tension reflects a broader systemic challenge: the IEP process often positions professional expertise as primary, even though parents hold critical contextual knowledge essential to effective decision-making.

Finally, both parents and teachers articulated a desire for an active partnership characterized by reciprocal conversations, shared problem-solving, and opportunities for parents to observe or participate in classroom activities. Teachers valued parental presence but emphasized that presence alone was insufficient; they sought parents who would engage in dialogue, ask questions, and collaborate on strategies. Parents similarly wanted more authentic opportunities to understand and contribute to their child's educational experience.

In sum, Azad et al. (2018) found that parents and teachers share a common vision of partnership grounded in mutual respect, transparency, and shared responsibility, yet their interactions are constrained by misaligned expectations, unspoken assumptions, and structural barriers. The authors argue that improving family–school partnerships requires explicit role clarification, structured opportunities for expectation-sharing, and intentional efforts to recognize

and validate each party's expertise. By articulating what "ideal" interactions could look like, the study highlights the gap between stakeholders' relational aspirations and the practical supports needed to realize them.

Feasibility and Early Outcomes of Integrating a Structured Communication Training Program

These relational aspirations raise a practical question: how can schools operationalize the communication practices that stakeholders identify as essential? Azad, Taormina, Herrera, & Zhang (2024) take up this challenge. The vision of partnership articulated by parents and teachers in Azad et al. (2018) underscores that strong relationships depend not only on shared intentions but on concrete communication practices that support transparency, reciprocity, and mutual respect. Yet the study also makes clear that these practices rarely emerge organically; they require explicit structures that help parents and educators navigate differing priorities, assumptions, and areas of expertise. Azad et al. (2024) directly examined structured communication training embedded within a parent–teacher consultation model, offering empirical insight into how targeted skill-building interventions can operationalize the very partnership qualities stakeholders identified as ideal.

Azad, Taormina, Herrera, and Zhang (2024) investigated the feasibility and early outcomes of integrating a structured communication training program, School Talk, into the Partners in School (PiS) consultation model, a framework designed to align evidence-based practices across home and school for young children with autism spectrum disorder. Recognizing that effective parent–teacher communication is foundational to consistent implementation of interventions, the authors sought to determine whether adding a communication-focused training

component could strengthen the relational and instructional coherence between parents and educators.

Azad et al. (2024) involved 21 parent–teacher dyads from seven school districts, each supporting a preschool or early elementary child with autism. Participants completed the School Talk training, engaged in a structured consultation to identify a shared target concern, and implemented a coordinated intervention plan across home and school for three weeks. Using pre- and post-consultation surveys, the authors assessed the feasibility, acceptability, and usability of the training, as well as changes in communication quality, communication skills, problematic interactions, and child outcomes.

In Azad et al. (2024) parents and teachers rated the School Talk training as highly feasible and acceptable, indicating that the content was relevant, manageable, and appropriate for their roles. Teachers reported significant gains across all communication measures, including higher communication quality, increased use of communication skills, and fewer problematic interactions. Parents also reported improved communication quality, though reliability limitations temper the strength of this finding. Importantly, both parents and teachers noted a significant reduction in the frequency of the child's target concern, suggesting that enhanced communication may support more consistent implementation of intervention strategies across settings. Together, these improvements created an emotionally reassuring landscape in which parents and teachers experienced greater confidence, reduced tension, and a clearer sense of shared purpose in supporting the child.

Azad et al. (2024) demonstrate that communication is not merely a relational nicety but a skill that can be explicitly taught, practiced, and strengthened through structured intervention. Their findings extend the broader RQ2 literature by showing that when parents and teachers

receive targeted support in communicating, rather than simply being expected to collaborate, partnerships become more effective and child outcomes may improve.

Complexities of Multidisciplinary IEP Teams: Parent Perspectives

Azad et al. (2024) demonstrate that communication can be explicitly taught, practiced, and strengthened through structured intervention, yet their model focuses on dyadic parent–teacher exchanges. The IEP process, however, unfolds within multidisciplinary teams whose dynamics are considerably more complex. To understand how communication and collaboration function within these multi-party contexts, Kervick (2017) examines how parents navigate the interpersonal, procedural, and power-laden terrain of team-based decision-making.

Kervick (2017) examined how parents of children with disabilities understand, acquire, and mobilize their expertise as they navigate special education systems and work to foster collaborative relationships with school teams. Through in-depth interviews with twelve parents, the study explored how parents develop knowledge about their child's disability, how they negotiate the procedural and interpersonal complexities of special education, and the strategies they employ to secure meaningful participation in team-based decision-making. By centering parents' voices and experiences, the study illuminates the active, intentional, and often sophisticated work parents undertake to construct equitable partnerships within systems that frequently privilege professional authority.

Parents described themselves as multifaceted experts who hold deep, longitudinal knowledge of their children's strengths, needs, histories, and communication patterns. They viewed this expertise as essential to effective educational planning, yet often found that their insights required validation from external professionals before being taken seriously by school teams. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in the literature: although policy mandates parent

participation, parents frequently encounter structures and norms that position professional expertise as primary, requiring parents to continually assert and defend their knowledge to be recognized as legitimate contributors.

Kervick (2017) also revealed the deliberate strategies parents use to foster collaboration and secure a meaningful voice in team processes. Parents described initiating meetings, establishing consistent communication routines, and using multiple channels such as email, journals, and informal conversations to maintain information flow between home and school. They also discussed the strategic use of emotion, both as a tool for advocacy and as a form of relational work. Some parents intentionally shared personal stories to humanize their child and evoke empathy, while others practiced emotional restraint to avoid being dismissed as overly reactive or "difficult." These strategies underscore the emotional labor inherent in parent participation and highlight the extent to which parents must manage both content and tone to be heard within professionalized spaces. Together, these strategies reveal an emotionally demanding landscape in which parents navigate vigilance, self-restraint, and the continual need to assert their expertise in order to participate meaningfully in team-based decisions.

A central contribution of Kervick (2017) is its illumination of the power dynamics embedded in special education collaboration. Parents consistently described the need to "construct a seat at the table," emphasizing that collaboration does not occur automatically but must be actively cultivated through persistence, preparation, and strategic communication. Their narratives reveal that parents are not passive recipients of professional decisions but active agents who work to shape team processes, advocate for their children, and build relationships that support shared problem-solving.

Viewed within the broader RQ2 literature, Kervick's (2017) findings highlight that effective collaboration depends not only on professional behaviors but also on the recognition and integration of parent expertise. The study demonstrates that parents bring essential knowledge, emotional insight, and strategic capacity to the collaborative process, yet their contributions are often constrained by structural inequities and professional norms. By documenting the strategies parents use to navigate these dynamics, Kervick (2017) offers a nuanced understanding of the relational and organizational conditions necessary for equitable partnership and underscores the need for professionals to reorient their practices to honor parents as full and knowledgeable members of the team.

Complexities of Multidisciplinary IEP Teams: System-level Perspectives

Kervick's (2017) findings highlight the emotional and strategic labor parents undertake during IEP participation, but they also point to broader systemic conditions that shape whether collaboration is possible. Burke and Hodapp (2016) extend this systems-level perspective by examining the correlates and conditions of parental advocacy on a national scale, revealing how dissatisfaction, weak partnerships, and inequitable school practices often push parents toward more intensive and at times adversarial forms of engagement.

To investigate these dynamics, Burke and Hodapp (2016) conducted a national, web-based mixed-methods survey that remained active from December 2010 to June 2011. The 163-item questionnaire combined established scales with newly developed items and underwent expert review, pilot testing, and IRB approval prior to distribution. Recruitment occurred through extensive outreach to disability agencies, parent organizations, and Parent Training and Information Centers, supplemented by a broad directory search and snowball sampling. Most participants completed the survey electronically through a secure REDCap platform, although

paper versions were available upon request. A total of 1,087 parents from 47 states and Washington, DC participated. Quantitative items assessed advocacy behaviors and related factors, while qualitative data were collected through an open-ended prompt. For the qualitative analysis, the authors used maximum variation sampling to examine responses from parents in the top and bottom deciles of advocacy intensity. This design allowed the researchers to identify correlates of advocacy and explore how parents' experiences differed based on their level of engagement.

Across the dataset, Burke and Hodapp (2016) revealed a consistent pattern: high levels of parental advocacy were strongly associated with negative school experiences, poor family–school partnerships, and dissatisfaction with services. Parents who frequently advocated described encountering refusals of evaluations or services, inadequate professional training, opaque or disingenuous communication, and, in some cases, harmful or unsafe practices. These parents often reported adversarial relationships with schools, characterized by mistrust, conflict, and the need to invoke procedural safeguards such as mediation or due process. Advocacy, in this context, emerged not as a voluntary or proactive choice but as a necessary response to systemic barriers and unmet needs.

In contrast, parents who reported low levels of advocacy described more positive and collaborative relationships with their schools. They expressed satisfaction with services, highlighted caring and responsive educators, and characterized communication as open and consistent. These parents viewed their schools as partners and perceived the system as generally supportive of their child's needs. Notably, even within this group, some parents reported concerns or negative experiences, suggesting that low advocacy does not always reflect positive conditions but may also reflect limited capacity, resources, or knowledge to engage in advocacy.

These divergent experiences reveal an emotionally charged landscape in which parents navigate frustration, vigilance, and the persistent need to assert their child's rights amid school-created barriers.

The study's mixed-methods design allowed Burke and Hodapp (2016) to illuminate not only the correlates of advocacy but also the lived experiences that drive it. Their findings challenge deficit-based narratives that portray highly active parents as demanding or adversarial. Instead, the authors argue that frequent advocacy is often a rational response to systemic failures, inequitable treatment, or the absence of meaningful partnership. Advocacy emerges as a symptom of structural breakdown rather than a cause of conflict. Their work underscores that advocacy is deeply intertwined with trust, communication, and the quality of family–school partnerships: when schools provide transparent communication, responsive services, and collaborative relationships, parents are less likely to engage in high-intensity advocacy; when they encounter barriers or dismissive treatment, advocacy becomes a necessary tool to secure appropriate services and protect their child's rights.

These systems-level patterns become especially visible within the emotional and procedural terrain of IEP meetings. Connor and Cavendish (2018) extend this perspective by examining how these structural conditions manifest during IEP interactions, highlighting the emotional burdens, participation barriers, and power asymmetries parents encounter in these high-stakes settings.

How Structural Conditions Manifest

Unlike the preceding empirical studies, Connor and Cavendish (2018) conducted a commentary-based synthesis of research published in a special issue of Learning Disability Quarterly. Building on the systems-level patterns identified in RQ2, they examine how structural

conditions manifest within the emotional, relational, and procedural dynamics of IEP meetings. Drawing on qualitative interviews, narrative accounts, survey-based studies, and mixed-methods research included in the special issue, they illustrate how entrenched power asymmetries shape parents' emotional experiences, limit authentic participation, and constrain collaborative decision-making. Their synthesis underscores that despite decades of policy emphasizing partnership, parents (particularly mothers) continue to encounter inequities that undermine their ability to participate as full members of the IEP team.

Across the three contributions included in the special issue (Valle, 2018; Haley, Allsopp, and Hoppey, 2018; and Scanlon, Saenz, and Kelly, 2018), Connor and Cavendish (2018) identify a shared set of themes that illuminate how structural conditions shape parents' experiences in IEP meetings. Valle's (2018) conceptual analysis highlights the emotional vulnerability and identity-based tensions parents navigate. Haley et al.'s (2018) qualitative study documents the procedural and communicative barriers that limit authentic participation. Scanlon et al.'s (2018) mixed-methods research demonstrates how alternative dispute-resolution structures, such as SpedEx, can redistribute power and foster more collaborative engagement. By synthesizing these complementary perspectives, Connor and Cavendish (2018) show that the emotional strain, participation barriers, and power asymmetries parents encounter are not isolated incidents but systemic patterns embedded in the design and culture of IEP processes.

Parents across these contributions described IEP meetings not as collaborative problem-solving spaces but as high-stakes encounters in which both their child and their parenting were implicitly evaluated. Much of the most emotionally intense material comes from Valle's (2018) conceptual analysis, which includes parent narratives marked by guilt, shame, fear, and anticipatory dread. Valle's (2018) work features, for example, the account of a mother

who was unable to get out of bed for days following a distressing meeting, illustrating how the procedural formality and professional dominance embedded in IEP structures can transform routine meetings into emotionally charged events that undermine trust and partnership.

Connor and Cavendish (2018) also synthesize findings related to participation barriers. Haley, Allsopp, and Hoppey (2018) documented the overuse of technical jargon, the prioritization of procedural compliance over meaningful dialogue, and communication practices in which professionals "told" rather than listened. Student-focused findings from Scanlon, Saenz, and Kelly (2018) revealed similar patterns; young people often felt peripheral to the process, describing IEP meetings as "not really about me." Across these studies, a consistent pattern emerges: institutional norms and communication practices can silence the very voices that policy frameworks claim to center.

To contextualize these relational dynamics, Connor and Cavendish (2018) draw on findings from Haley, Allsopp, and Hoppey (2018), who examined the broader organizational pressures shaping special education practice. In secondary schools, high-stakes accountability structures and exam-driven cultures narrowed the space for individualized support and collaborative problem solving. Teachers described feeling constrained by performance demands, with some concluding that certain students were "set to fail" within a one-size-fits-all system. This broader context helps explain why IEP meetings often reproduce power asymmetries rather than disrupt them.

Although the special issue primarily documents relational and structural barriers, only one study, Scanlon, Saenz, and Kelly (2018), offers a concrete alternative model. Connor and Cavendish (2018) therefore highlight SpedEx as the primary example of how structural redesign can foster more equitable and collaborative IEP processes. Building on Scanlon et al.'s (2018)

analysis, they use SpedEx as a cautiously optimistic counterpoint to the more distressing narratives of parent–school conflict found elsewhere in the special issue. Scanlon et al. (2018) reported that approximately 90 percent of participating parents and schools were satisfied with the SpedEx process, noting that parents viewed the neutral consultants as both sources of information and advocates for children. Connor and Cavendish (2018) emphasize that these outcomes reflect more than procedural efficiency; they signal a shift from parents reacting to school-driven decisions to participating as proactive partners. They also highlight evidence that parents experienced increased confidence, knowledge, and comfort following participation in SpedEx, with many moving from feeling "not confident" to "very confident." For Connor and Cavendish, these findings demonstrate that when schools adopt structures that prioritize transparency, shared decision-making, and relational trust, the emotional and procedural burdens documented across other studies can be meaningfully reduced. By situating this model alongside the patterns identified across the special issue, they argue that meaningful change requires not only strengthened interpersonal practices but also systemic shifts in how schools conceptualize and enact collaboration.

Connor and Cavendish's (2018) synthesis concludes with practice recommendations to address power imbalances and strengthen authentic partnerships. They emphasize cultural humility, relationally attuned professional dispositions, and intentional efforts to support both parents and students, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, by recognizing and valuing their cultural and experiential knowledge.

Within the broader RQ2 literature, Connor and Cavendish's (2018) synthesis demonstrates how deeply relational and systemic inequities are embedded in the IEP process. Their analysis reveals that the emotional strain, procedural dominance, and power asymmetries

parents experience are not isolated incidents but predictable outcomes of institutional norms that privilege professional authority and procedural compliance over authentic partnership. Even when parents arrive prepared, knowledgeable, and committed to collaboration, the structural design of IEP meetings often limits their influence and constrains opportunities for shared decision-making. By highlighting both the emotional consequences of these dynamics and the structural alternatives that can disrupt them, Connor and Cavendish (2018) reinforce a central insight of RQ2: collaboration is not simply a matter of interpersonal goodwill but a function of the organizational conditions schools create.

Native American Perspective

While Connor and Cavendish (2018) focus on how institutional norms shape parents' participation within IEP meetings, Murry and Wiley (2017) extend this analysis by examining how cultural, historical, and community-level dynamics shape Native parents' experiences with special education. Murry and Wiley (2017) deepen this structural critique by investigating how Native American parents navigate the cultural, historical, and community-level dynamics that shape their participation in special education. Conducted in partnership with the National Indian Parent Information Center (NIPIC), the study used a sequential mixed-methods design consisting of three linked studies that identified, validated, and prioritized the barriers and supports Native parents' view as most influential in their participation. The authors moved from broad identification of concerns to empirical confirmation and, ultimately, to the development of actionable priorities for Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs).

Study 1 used an open-ended survey distributed through NIPIC networks to elicit Native parents' descriptions of the challenges they encountered when attempting to engage with schools and service systems. Parents identified a wide range of barriers, including limited personal

resources, community norms discouraging help-seeking, stigma surrounding disability, inadequate teacher training, and insufficient school-level supports. These responses served as the foundation for the subsequent phases.

Study 2 transformed the themes from Study 1 into a structured survey distributed to a broader sample of Native parents. Participants rated the extent to which each barrier affected their ability to participate in special education. This phase provided quantitative validation of the initial themes and clarified which barriers were most commonly experienced. Stigma emerged as the most frequently endorsed barrier, followed by insufficient personal resources and a lack of culturally responsive school practices.

Study 3 engaged NIPIC board members, Native parents, and community leaders in a structured prioritization process. Using the validated themes from Study 2, board members ranked both the most urgent barriers and the most appropriate solutions for PTIs to address. This final phase identified insufficient personal resources as the highest-priority barrier and the creation of culturally grounded “safe spaces” for Native parents as the most impactful and feasible solution.

Across the three studies, Murry and Wiley identified five primary barriers to involvement: insufficient personal resources, counterproductive community norms, stigma surrounding disability, lack of teacher training, and inadequate school-level supports. Parents described challenges such as limited finances, transportation difficulties, and competing caregiving responsibilities that made participation difficult. They also highlighted community norms that discouraged help-seeking or framed disability as shameful, contributing to isolation and reluctance to engage with schools. Stigma, validated as the most pervasive barrier,

underscored the emotional and cultural weight parents carry as they navigate systems that have historically failed to honor Indigenous ways of knowing and supporting children.

Parents also identified school-based barriers, including educators' limited training in disability and Native culture, inconsistent communication, and a lack of culturally responsive supports. These findings align with broader research documenting how schools often approach Native parents through deficit-based assumptions, procedural compliance, or culturally incongruent practices that undermine trust and partnership. Murry and Wiley's data show that when schools lack cultural competence or fail to create welcoming environments, Native parents experience the special education process as alienating, inaccessible, and misaligned with their values and lived realities.

Alongside these barriers, the study identified parent-generated solutions that reflect both cultural priorities and practical needs. Parents emphasized the importance of creating safe spaces, physical or virtual environments where Native parents can gather, share experiences, and receive support without judgment. These spaces were viewed as essential for reducing stigma, building community, and fostering collective empowerment. Parents also called for more parent-friendly services, including accessible information, culturally grounded training, and opportunities to learn from other parents. They highlighted the need for improved teacher training, particularly in disability awareness and Native cultural contexts, and advocated for stronger accountability systems to ensure schools deliver promised services.

A key contribution of the study is its translation of these findings into actionable priorities for PTIs. When NIPIC board members ranked the validated themes, they identified insufficient personal resources as the most urgent barrier and the creation of safe spaces as the most appropriate and impactful solution. This prioritization underscores the centrality of

community-based, culturally grounded support structures in promoting family engagement and reflects an Indigenous research paradigm that values relationality, collective care, and self-determination.

Viewed within the broader RQ2 literature, Murry and Wiley (2017) demonstrate that Native parents' participation in special education is shaped not only by individual motivation or knowledge but by systemic inequities, historical trauma, and community-level dynamics that influence how parents experience disability and schooling. Their findings highlight the need for culturally responsive, community-driven approaches to partnership, approaches that honor Indigenous awareness, address resource inequities, and create relational spaces where parents feel safe, respected, and empowered.

By grounding their analysis in the voices of Native parents and translating those insights into concrete organizational guidance, Murry and Wiley (2017) offer a critical corrective to mainstream special education research. Their work shows that equitable collaboration requires more than improved communication or procedural compliance; it demands structural change, cultural humility, and sustained investment in community-centered supports that reflect the lived realities of Indigenous parents. This culturally and structurally grounded analysis leads directly into the next set of studies, which shift the focus from the broader conditions shaping family participation to the moment-to-moment interactions through which collaboration is enacted within IEP meetings.

Interactional Analyses of IEP Meetings: Communication, Participation, and the Production of Power

Across multiple studies, researchers have examined how the interactional dynamics of IEP meetings shape parents' opportunities to participate and influence decisions. Zeitlin and

Curcic (2014) analyze how specific communicative practices and meeting structures affect whether parents feel heard, understood, and recognized as knowledgeable contributors, as well as the conditions that limit their influence. Sanderson (2023) conducts detailed case studies of individual IEP meetings, documenting how team talk, meeting routines, and interactional patterns either open space for parent input or constrain it. Love et al. (2017) extend this interactional lens by analyzing IEP meeting transcripts to investigate how parents' contributions are acknowledged, recorded, and incorporated into team decision-making, with particular attention to whether parent input is taken up substantively or remains at the level of meeting notes. Complementing these studies, Zagona et al. (2017) examine variation in school-level practices by analyzing how different IEP teams invite, respond to, and follow through on parent input, highlighting the procedural and communicative factors that shape parents' perceptions of partnership across settings.

Interactional Synthesis: Patterns Across Interactional Studies

Across these studies, several consistent patterns emerge regarding how communication practices shape parents' experiences of collaboration. Zeitlin and Curcic (2014) find that parents perceive collaboration positively when they feel heard, understood, and treated as knowledgeable contributors. Meetings characterized by jargon-heavy explanations, tightly controlled agendas, or limited opportunities for parent input are experienced as disempowering. Sanderson (2023) similarly identifies interactional supports such as welcoming relational cues, shared clarity about meeting purpose, and staff flexibility that facilitate parent participation, while also documenting barriers, including rigid procedural scripts and pre-written goals, that restrict parents' ability to influence decisions. Love et al. (2017) show that parents' contributions are often acknowledged verbally but not incorporated into the substantive content of the IEP, with input frequently

relegated to meeting notes rather than shaping decisions. Zagona et al. (2017) highlight how differences in school-level practices, particularly in how teams invite input, follow through on agreed services, and communicate about decisions, shape parents' perceptions of partnership and trust. Taken together, these findings illustrate how specific communicative practices can encourage or limit parent influence, shaping whether IEP meetings feel collaborative or exclusionary.

Cross-Study Synthesis: Patterns Across RQ2

Across this body of work, including Burke and Hodapp (2016), Connor and Cavendish (2018), Murry and Wiley (2017), and the interactional studies by Love et al. (2017), Zagona et al. (2017), Zeitlin and Curcic (2014), and Sanderson (2023), a coherent picture of collaboration in special education emerges. Collaboration is strengthened when relational and structural conditions work in tandem: when communication is clear, reciprocal, and transparent; when parent input is visibly taken up in decisions; when educators recognize and value parent expertise; when interactions are emotionally respectful; when engagement is culturally responsive; when meeting routines are flexible and transparent; when school climates are supportive; and when parents have accessible avenues for resolving disagreements. Collaboration falters when these conditions break down, when professional authority dominates, proceduralism overshadows dialogue, stigma or deficit assumptions shape interactions, or resource inequities limit parents' ability to participate. Under such conditions, parents may feel compelled to advocate intensely or, conversely, withdraw from engagement altogether. These studies collectively show that meaningful collaboration depends not only on parent motivation but also on the communicative and structural environments that schools create.

While the studies in RQ2 illuminate the cultural, relational, and structural conditions that shape parents' participation in the IEP process, they also reveal a persistent gap between the collaborative ideals of special education and the realities parents encounter in practice. These systemic patterns raise a critical next question: if collaboration depends on the conditions in which IEP teams operate, what strategies can schools implement to actively reshape those conditions and strengthen family–school partnerships? RQ3 addresses this question by examining evidence-based practices that offer concrete, actionable pathways to improve the IEP process.

Research Question 3: Strategies Schools Can Implement to Strengthen Partnerships and Improve Outcomes in the IEP Process

Building on the systemic patterns identified in RQ2, Research Question 3 examines the concrete practices, routines, and interventions that can strengthen family–school collaboration within the IEP process. Whereas RQ2 illuminated the cultural, relational, and structural conditions that shape parents' opportunities to participate, RQ3 turns to the practical strategies that can actively reshape those conditions. This body of research moves from diagnosing the problem to identifying actionable solutions, focusing on evidence-based approaches that help teams communicate more effectively, share decision making more authentically, and build the relational trust necessary for meaningful partnership. In doing so, RQ3 explores how schools can move beyond compliance-driven procedures toward partnership-centered practices that honor parent expertise and support student-centered planning.

Across this body of work, three interconnected domains of strategy emerge, each addressing a different dimension of the cultural, relational, and structural conditions identified in RQ2. The first involves restructuring IEP meetings to redistribute power and prevent conflict.

The second involves embedding structured communication routines and communication training into the IEP cycle. The third involves building system-level capacity for trust-based, culturally responsive partnership. Together, these strategies aim to create an emotional landscape in which parents feel respected, informed, and genuinely included, countering the fear, marginalization, and vigilance documented in RQ1 and addressing the systemic conditions identified in RQ2.

Structured Meeting Formats to Redistribute Power

Mueller and Vick (2019) examined facilitated IEP meetings as a proactive strategy to reduce conflict and strengthen equitable participation. Through qualitative interviews with parents, educators, and facilitators across multiple districts, the study showed that neutral facilitation reshapes meeting dynamics by clarifying roles, balancing participation, and maintaining a student-centered focus. Participants contrasted traditional IEP meetings, often disorganized, adversarial, and dominated by school personnel, with facilitated meetings that were structured, collaborative, and emotionally safer. Facilitators helped ensure balanced turn-taking, maintain focus on student needs, and de-escalate emerging tensions. These procedural supports countered the patterns of marginalization and emotional burden documented in RQ1, demonstrating that the design of meetings itself is a powerful lever for partnership. The authors recommend adopting facilitated IEPs more broadly as a dispute-prevention practice that redistributes power, improves communication, and supports more collaborative decision making. By shifting the IEP from a compliance-driven event to a facilitated problem-solving process, schools can create conditions that support parent participation, reduce conflict, and improve the quality of decisions made on behalf of students.

Structured Communication Routines and Communication Training

Azad et al. (2018) investigate the communication routines that parents and educators identify as essential for effective collaboration throughout the IEP cycle. Using focus groups with parents and teachers, the study examines the specific communication practices that foster clarity, shared understanding, and relational trust.

Participants emphasized the need for explicit communication plans that clarify expectations for frequency, mode, and content of updates, dedicated time during IEP meetings to discuss roles, expertise, and shared goals, and co-developed expectations for how parents and educators will collaborate across the year. Parents described how inconsistent or reactive communication created uncertainty and eroded trust, whereas predictable, transparent routines reduced anxiety and strengthened the partnership.

Azad et al. (2018) show that schools can strengthen collaboration by embedding structured communication routines into the IEP process. These routines promote transparency, reciprocal dialogue, and shared goal setting, directly addressing the mismatched assumptions and communication breakdowns identified in earlier research.

A Structured Communication-Training Intervention

Azad, Taormina, Herrera, and Zhang (2024) extend this work by evaluating School Talk, a structured communication-training intervention designed to improve parent–teacher communication within the Partners in School model. Using a randomized controlled design, the study examines whether brief, targeted communication training paired with a consultation session and a co-developed intervention plan improves communication quality and reduces child-related concerns.

Findings show that both parents and teachers reported clearer, more respectful, and more productive communication following the intervention. The structured training helped participants articulate their concerns, negotiate roles, and engage in collaborative problem-solving with greater confidence. The intervention also reduced misunderstandings and improved consistency across home and school, demonstrating that communication is not merely a relational aspiration but a teachable competency.

Azad et al. (2024) provide actionable evidence that schools can embed communication skill building into their IEP processes to strengthen collaboration, reduce tension, and create an emotionally reassuring environment for parents. These communication-focused strategies lay the groundwork for a third domain of improvement, which centers on practices that strengthen trust, relational connection, and the broader cultural conditions that support authentic partnership.

Building Trust and Relational Capacity

Within the domain of trust-building and relational capacity, Hamm and Mousseau (2023) examine how parents' perceptions of professionals' communication skills shape their trust in the IEP partnership. While Azad et al. (2024) demonstrate that structured communication training can strengthen parent–teacher collaboration by equipping both parties with concrete skills for more effective exchanges, their findings also highlight a broader insight: communication alone is insufficient if parents and educators do not experience interactions as respectful, responsive, and trustworthy. Hamm and Mousseau (2023) extend this line of inquiry by examining how parents' perceptions of professionals' communication skills shape their trust in the IEP partnership.

Drawing on survey data from 165 parents of children receiving IEP services across the United States, the authors investigated whether parents' perceptions of professionals' conversational skills predicted their trust, and whether other contextual factors, such as

communication modality or pandemic-related disruptions, contributed to this relationship. Using validated measures of communication competence and parent trust, the study found a moderately strong, positive correlation between parents' ratings of professionals' communication skills and their level of trust in those professionals. Hierarchical regression analyses further revealed that, after controlling for demographic variables, COVID-19 impacts, and communication methods, only two factors significantly predicted parent trust: the professional's communication competence and the use of in-person communication.

These findings underscore that trust is not merely a function of structural conditions or family characteristics but is deeply shaped by the interpersonal behaviors professionals demonstrate during interactions with parents. Parents who perceived professionals as skilled communicators, those who listened actively, responded clearly, conveyed respect, and engaged in meaningful dialogue, reported substantially higher levels of trust. Conversely, parents who perceived professionals as poor communicators reported lower trust regardless of other contextual factors.

Interpreted within the broader RQ3 literature, Hamm and Mousseau's (2023) findings demonstrate that communication competence is not an ancillary interpersonal skill but a core professional capacity that can be intentionally strengthened to build trust and prevent conflict within IEP partnerships. Their work provides empirical support for treating communication skills as essential professional competencies in special education. The authors argue that preservice preparation and ongoing professional development must explicitly address communication behaviors, such as active listening, clarity, responsiveness, and relational attunement, to strengthen family–school partnerships and reduce the likelihood of conflict escalation.

By quantifying the predictive power of communication competence, Hamm and Mousseau (2023) provide a critical piece of evidence for RQ3. Trust emerges not as an abstract construct but as a relational outcome shaped by specific, observable professional behaviors. Their findings underscore the need for systems-level investment in communication training and support, aligning with broader calls for more relationally grounded approaches to parent–school collaboration.

Trust-Building in Inclusive School Cultures

Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross (2016a) offer a complementary perspective on strategies that strengthen family–school partnerships by examining how inclusive school cultures institutionalize trust-building practices. Their work demonstrates that collaboration is not sustained by isolated techniques but by coherent, schoolwide routines that embed relational care, transparency, and shared responsibility into everyday practice. Drawing on focus groups with parents from schools known for strong, inclusive values, the authors identify the cultural and organizational features that create environments where parents feel welcome, respected, and meaningfully involved.

Parents described these schools as places where inclusion was not an initiative but a lived norm. Differences were embraced, expectations for all students were high, and belonging was cultivated through daily interactions rather than occasional events. Administrative leadership played a central role in shaping these conditions. Principals who were visible, communicative, and committed to inclusive values set expectations for staff behavior, hired educators who demonstrated relational competence, and modeled the dispositions necessary for authentic partnership. Their leadership created a climate in which parents felt psychologically safe and confident that their perspectives would be taken seriously.

Educator practices reinforced this sense of trust. Parents emphasized the importance of teachers who communicated clearly, listened attentively, followed through on commitments, and approached parents as knowledgeable partners. These behaviors aligned with broader frameworks of relational trust, which emphasize reliability, integrity, and care as essential components of effective collaboration. Parents also valued opportunities for meaningful involvement, both formal and informal. Participation in committees, classroom volunteering, and engagement in schoolwide activities signified that parents were integral members of the community. Informal interactions, such as brief conversations at drop-off or spontaneous invitations to observe classroom activities, further strengthened the relational connection.

Parents consistently linked these relational and cultural conditions to positive student outcomes. They observed that inclusive practices benefited not only children with disabilities but also their peers, fostering empathy, social competence, and academic growth. Seeing these outcomes reinforced their trust in the school's approach and deepened their commitment to collaborative relationships. The combination of inclusive culture, relationally attuned educators, and supportive leadership created an emotionally affirming environment in which parents felt valued and empowered.

Within the broader RQ3 literature, Francis et al. (2016a) illustrate that trust building is not a discrete strategy but a systemic practice that must be embedded across school structures. Their findings show that schools can strengthen partnerships by cultivating inclusive cultures, establishing predictable, transparent routines, and ensuring educators have the relational skills for authentic collaboration. These insights reinforce the idea that improving the IEP process requires more than procedural adjustments. It requires sustained attention to the cultural and relational foundations that enable collaboration.

System-Level Structures That Sustain Trust-Based Partnerships

Fulton, Terol, Hardy, and Burke (2025) examine how system-level improvement structures can support sustainable, trust-based family–school partnerships by aligning meeting design, communication routines, and culturally responsive practices. Using a mixed-methods improvement science design, the authors partnered with multiple school teams to implement and refine a suite of IEP-focused improvement strategies over the course of a year. Their work brings a systems perspective to RQ3 by showing how coordinated, multi-component approaches can reshape the conditions under which collaboration occurs.

The improvement initiative incorporated several interconnected practices. Teams implemented facilitated IEP meeting structures that supported equitable participation and reduced the dominance of professional voices. Educators engaged in communication training modules designed to strengthen clarity, responsiveness, and relational attunement. Schools adopted culturally responsive engagement practices that acknowledged parents' cultural knowledge and community contexts. They also used aligned tools and protocols to support consistent implementation across classrooms and grade levels. These practices were tested and refined through iterative plan–do–study–act cycles, with teams drawing on both quantitative indicators, such as trust, communication quality, and perceived voice, as well as qualitative feedback from parents and educators.

Findings showed that system-level coherence, rather than any single strategy, was the strongest predictor of improvement. Schools that aligned meeting structures, communication routines, and cultural practices experienced measurable increases in parent trust, clarity of communication, and perceived partnership. In contrast, schools that implemented strategies in a fragmented or inconsistent manner saw limited gains, even when individual practices were well

designed. Fulton and colleagues demonstrate that improving the IEP process requires a multi-component, system-level approach that integrates relational, structural, and cultural practices. Their findings reinforce that effective IEP processes depend not only on individual educator behaviors but also on organizational systems that support consistency, transparency, and relational safety.

When implemented together, these system-level strategies foster an emotionally coherent environment in which parents experience stability, respect, and genuine partnership across the IEP process. The study illustrates that system-level coherence is essential for sustaining the relational and structural improvements identified across RQ3 and provides a model for how schools can build the organizational capacity necessary for long-term change.

Cross-Study Synthesis: Patterns Across RQ3

Viewed collectively, the RQ3 studies demonstrate that strengthening family–school partnerships requires intentional strategies that address the structural design of meetings, the communication routines that shape everyday interactions, and the relational competencies that build trust. Facilitated IEP models redistribute power and prevent conflict. Structured communication routines and communication training promote transparency, reciprocity, and shared understanding. Trust-building practices and system-level coherence ensure that these improvements are sustained across contexts. Together, these strategies transform the emotional climate of the IEP process, creating conditions in which parents feel respected, informed, and able to participate fully.

When considered alongside RQ1 and RQ2, the strategies identified in RQ3 directly address the emotional, relational, and structural barriers illuminated earlier in the chapter. RQ1 revealed the emotional burdens and systemic inequities parents navigate. RQ2 demonstrated how

cultural, relational, and structural conditions shape the quality of collaboration. RQ3 shows that these challenges can be mitigated through intentional structures, relational practices, and system-level coherence. Together, these findings reveal a coherent narrative of the systemic conditions that shape family–school partnerships within the IEP process and point to broader themes that define the current landscape of IEP collaboration.

Summary of Literature Review Findings

Taken together, the findings across RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 illuminate recurring patterns that clarify both the roots of the problem and the conditions necessary for meaningful improvement. Parents' experiences are often shaped by emotional strain, relational breakdowns, and structural inequities, yet the literature also demonstrates that these challenges are neither inevitable nor immutable. Instead, they emerge from deeply rooted interpretive frameworks, institutional norms, and communicative practices that can be intentionally reshaped through coherent, partnership-centered approaches.

Across the literature, researchers show that parents and educators often enter the IEP process with fundamentally different interpretive frameworks that shape how they understand disability, expertise, and partnership. Lalvani (2015) illustrates how parents frequently draw on sociocultural, contextual, and identity-based understandings of their child, while teachers tend to rely on medicalized or deficit-oriented frameworks rooted in professional training. Similar patterns appear in studies documenting how deficit assumptions and institutional norms can marginalize parent knowledge, particularly when parents' cultural or experiential perspectives diverge from school-based expectations, as shown in the work of Connor and Cavendish (2018) and Zeitlin and Curcic (2014). These interpretive mismatches contribute to misunderstandings, strained communication, and feelings of exclusion during IEP meetings. At the same time,

research shows that when educators adopt more relational, strengths-based, and culturally responsive approaches, parents report greater trust, clarity, and shared understanding, as demonstrated in the studies by Francis and colleagues. Taken together, these studies illustrate how interpretive frameworks, rather than individual intentions, shape the quality of family–school interactions and help explain why many parents experience the IEP process as misaligned with their lived realities.

Limitations and Considerations

Although the literature provides a rich foundation for understanding and improving the IEP process, several limitations warrant consideration. Many studies rely on qualitative designs with small, context-specific samples. While these designs offer deep insight into lived experiences, they limit generalizability, as seen in the work of Lalvani (2015), Love and colleagues (2017), and Zeitlin and Curcic (2014). The perspectives of marginalized parents, including Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and linguistically diverse parents, remain underrepresented, and the field lacks robust intersectional analyses that examine how race, language, disability, and socioeconomic status intersect to shape IEP participation. Burke and Hodapp (2016) and Irwin and colleagues (2024) highlight this gap and call for research that centers on parents most affected by systemic inequities.

Much of the existing research examines parent or educator perspectives in isolation rather than capturing the full ecology of IEP teams, which includes administrators, related service providers, and students themselves. Studies by Azad and colleagues (2018) and Mueller and Vick (2019) illustrate this limitation. Several studies focus on perceptions rather than direct observation of IEP practices, which restricts insight into how relational dynamics unfold in real time, a limitation noted by Sanderson (2023) and Zagona and colleagues (2019). Finally,

intervention studies such as communication training or facilitated IEP models often occur under controlled conditions or with highly motivated participants, raising questions about scalability and sustainability in typical school settings, as seen in the work of Azad and colleagues (2018) and Mueller and Vick (2019).

These limitations do not diminish the value of the literature but highlight the need for continued research that is more diverse, intersectional, and practice-embedded. They also underscore the importance of designing improvement efforts that are adaptable, culturally responsive, and attentive to the relational and emotional dimensions of IEP participation, as emphasized by Francis and colleagues and by CADRE (2023). Considered as a whole, these limitations clarify not only where the current knowledge base is strong but also where it remains incomplete, underscoring the need for practical, policy-level, and research-driven strategies that address the systemic conditions shaping the IEP process, as noted by Irwin and colleagues (2024) and the U.S. Department of Education (2024).

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research

The literature points to several high-leverage practices that schools can adopt to strengthen family–school partnerships. Educators should implement structured communication routines and co-develop communication plans with parents, as demonstrated by Azad and colleagues. IEP meetings should include dedicated time to clarify roles, goals, and shared expectations, a practice supported by Francis and colleagues. Schools should adopt facilitated IEP models or other meeting structures that promote equity, reduce conflict, and ensure that parents' voices are centered, as shown by Mueller and Vick. Professional learning should prioritize communication competence, cultural responsiveness, and relational trust building as core professional skills, a need highlighted by Hamm and Mousseau and by Francis and

colleagues. Finally, schools should monitor relational indicators such as trust, perceived voice, and communication quality alongside procedural compliance to ensure that improvements address both technical and relational dimensions of the IEP process, as recommended by Fulton and colleagues.

At the policy level, the literature highlights the need to move beyond compliance-driven interpretations of IDEA toward policies that support relationally grounded, family-centered practice. States and districts should invest in training and resources that promote equitable IEP processes, including funding for facilitated IEPs, family engagement specialists, and culturally responsive professional development. Policies should also address systemic inequities by requiring data collection on relational indicators and by supporting parents who face linguistic, cultural, or socioeconomic barriers to participation, a need underscored by Connor and Cavendish. Policymakers must also recognize that the assumption that all parents can advocate effectively is flawed and inequitable. Policies should therefore be designed to reduce the burden on parents, as emphasized by Burke and Hodapp (2016).

Future research should prioritize intersectional analyses that center the experiences of parents from historically marginalized communities. More studies are needed that examine IEP interactions through direct observation, capturing the real-time relational dynamics that shape decision making, as suggested by Sanderson (2023) and by Zeitlin and Curcic (2014). Research should also examine the scalability and sustainability of promising practices such as communication training, facilitated IEPs, and continuous improvement cycles, as demonstrated by Azad et al. (2018, 2024), Mueller and Vick (2019), and Fulton et al. (2025). Finally, scholars should investigate how system-level conditions, including leadership practices, staffing structures, and organizational culture, shape the emotional and relational climate of IEP

meetings. Viewed collectively, these implications highlight that improving the IEP process requires coordinated action across practice, policy, and research.

Synthesis of Findings and Implications for the Problem of Practice

A synthesis of findings across the three research questions shows that parents' experiences within the IEP process are shaped far more by the relational, procedural, and systemic conditions of special education than by the intentions of individual educators. Although each study approaches the IEP process from a different angle, their findings converge on several themes that illuminate the core Problem of Practice and clarify why partnerships so often break down.

Divergent Interpretive Frameworks

A persistent conceptual divide separates how parents and educators understand disability and the purpose of special education. Research shows that educators frequently rely on medicalized or deficit-oriented frameworks, while parents draw on sociocultural, contextual, and identity-based understandings of their children. This misalignment shapes expectations, communication, and the emotional climate of IEP meetings. Parents often feel misunderstood or marginalized when their experiential knowledge does not align with school-based norms, a pattern documented across studies of parent participation and educator discourse. When educators adopt relational, strengths-based, and culturally responsive approaches, parents report greater trust and shared understanding, suggesting that conceptual alignment is foundational to partnership.

Structural and Procedural Barriers

The literature consistently documents structural features of the IEP process that limit parents' opportunities for meaningful participation. Parents describe being excluded from

pre-meeting decision-making, encountering limited transparency in service delivery, and navigating procedural routines that prioritize compliance over collaboration. These patterns reflect systemic norms rather than isolated incidents. They reveal an IEP process that often operates in ways that inadvertently constrain family voice and reinforce professional authority.

Relational Dynamics and Power Imbalances

Relational dynamics within IEP meetings are frequently shaped by power imbalances, deficit-based communication, and assumptions about parents' capacities or motivations. These dynamics erode trust and require parents, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, to engage in heightened advocacy, emotional labor, or strategic navigation simply to secure appropriate services. Studies show that parents often feel evaluated, dismissed, or positioned as adversaries, which contributes to emotional strain and undermines the possibility of authentic collaboration.

Inconsistent Implementation and Systemic Variability

Even when IEP decisions are made collaboratively, implementation is often inconsistent. Parents report having to monitor service delivery, follow up on unmet commitments, and navigate variability in educator preparation and resource availability. These inconsistencies contribute to frustration and diminished confidence in the system. They also reinforce inequities across schools and districts, as parents with greater resources or knowledge are better positioned to intervene when implementation falters.

Family Adaptation and Compensatory Strategies

In response to these systemic barriers, parents develop a range of adaptive strategies. They cultivate informal relationships with individual educators, seek external evaluations, leverage community networks, or become deeply knowledgeable about special education law.

These strategies reflect parents' resilience and expertise, yet they also highlight the extent to which parents must compensate for systemic shortcomings. The need for such compensatory efforts underscores the absence of structures that reliably support equitable participation.

Implications for the Problem of Practice

Viewed collectively, these findings reveal a system that aspires to partnership but is not consistently designed to support it. The patterns across studies align directly with the Problem of Practice identified in Section 1: the absence of coherent, research-aligned structures that promote equitable, transparent, and trust-based collaboration within the IEP process. The literature suggests that improving family–school partnerships will require more than isolated interventions or individual goodwill. It will require intentional, systemic approaches that address conceptual alignment, relational trust, procedural transparency, and implementation consistency.

This synthesis establishes the empirical foundation for examining whether a research-aligned improvement model could strengthen the conditions necessary for genuine partnership. The next section builds on these findings by identifying the components, practices, and organizational supports that such a model would need to include in order to advance equitable and collaborative IEP processes.

Section 3: Improvement Model

The synthesis in Section 2 shows that the IEP process is shaped by systemic conditions that routinely limit parents' opportunities for meaningful participation. These challenges arise not from individual educator shortcomings but from structural, relational, and procedural patterns embedded within special education systems, patterns documented across studies of parent participation and educator practice (Francis et al., 2016a; Connor & Cavendish, 2018; Burke & Hodapp, 2016). Research describing exclusion from pre-meeting decisions, opaque communication, inconsistent implementation, and deficit-oriented assumptions illustrates that the IEP process often operates in ways that inadvertently constrain family voice and reinforce professional authority (Love et al., 2017; Zagona et al., 2019; Lalvani, 2015). As a result, improving the IEP process requires more than isolated strategies or interpersonal goodwill. It requires a coherent, research-aligned model that integrates meeting design, communication practices, and organizational supports around the principles of equity, transparency, shared responsibility, and inclusive decision making.

Section 3 builds on this insight by presenting an improvement model grounded in the empirical evidence reviewed across RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3. The model responds directly to the conceptual misalignments, relational barriers, procedural inconsistencies, and implementation challenges identified in the literature, including mismatched interpretive frameworks (Lalvani, 2015), communication breakdowns (Azad et al., 2018), power imbalances in meetings (Connor & Cavendish, 2018), and uneven follow through on IEP decisions (Zagona et al., 2019). It outlines the core components and enabling conditions necessary to create IEP processes in which parents feel respected, informed, and able to participate as genuine partners in decision making. The section begins by articulating the guiding principles that anchor the model, drawing from the

relational and structural conditions shown to support effective collaboration (Francis et al., 2016a; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). It then describes the specific practices and tools that operationalize these principles within IEP meetings and across the broader IEP cycle. Finally, it identifies the organizational supports, including leadership commitments, professional learning structures, and continuous improvement routines, that are required to sustain these practices over time (Fulton et al. 2025). Together, these elements form a research-based framework for strengthening family–school partnerships and advancing more equitable, transparent, and collaborative IEP processes.

Guiding Principles

The improvement model is anchored in a set of guiding principles derived from the empirical findings across RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3. These principles reflect the relational, conceptual, and organizational conditions that support equitable and collaborative IEP processes. Rather than functioning as abstract ideals, they operate as practical commitments that shape how teams design meetings, communicate with parents, and make decisions across the IEP cycle. They provide the conceptual foundation for the model's components and the organizational supports required for sustained implementation.

Relational Trust

Relational trust is essential because parents' experiences of the IEP process are deeply influenced by the quality of their interactions with educators. Trust develops when parents feel heard, respected, and able to express concerns without fear of dismissal or retaliation, a pattern documented in studies of inclusive school cultures and communication competence (Francis et al., 2016; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Improvement efforts must therefore prioritize relational practices such as transparent communication, active listening, and shared agenda setting that

cultivate psychological safety and affirm parents' expertise. Relational trust is not an interpersonal nicety. It is a structural condition that shapes whether parents can participate as equal partners.

Conceptual Alignment

Conceptual alignment is essential because studies across RQ1 and RQ2 reveal that misaligned beliefs about disability, learning, and the purpose of special education often lead to misunderstandings and conflicts (Lalvani, 2015; Connor & Cavendish, 2018). When educators operate from deficit-oriented assumptions while parents adopt more holistic or sociocultural perspectives, teams struggle to reach a shared understanding. An effective improvement model must therefore support teams in developing shared conceptual frameworks that move beyond deficit orientations and toward culturally responsive, strengths-based understandings of students. Conceptual alignment strengthens communication, clarifies expectations, and lays a foundation for collaborative decision-making.

Procedural Transparency

Procedural transparency is essential because parents consistently describe the IEP process as opaque, unpredictable, and dominated by professional expertise (Love et al., 2017; Zagona et al., 2019). Transparent procedures, such as previewing agendas, clarifying roles, explaining decision-making rationales, and documenting agreements in accessible language, help redistribute power and enable parents to participate more fully. Transparency is not merely a technical feature of the process. It is a relational practice that signals respect, reduces uncertainty, and fosters shared understanding.

Implementation Consistency

Implementation consistency is essential because even when IEP teams reach agreement, inconsistent follow-through erodes trust and places additional monitoring burdens on parents (Zagona et al., 2019). Improvement efforts must therefore include structures that support reliable implementation, including clear communication channels, progress-monitoring routines, and mechanisms for addressing concerns when services are not delivered as planned. Implementation consistency reinforces credibility and strengthens the partnership between parents and schools.

Continuous Improvement

Continuous improvement is essential because sustainable change requires iterative cycles of reflection, testing, and refinement. System-level improvement studies highlight the value of routines such as Plan–Do–Study–Act cycles, which enable teams to examine their practices, gather feedback from parents, and make data-informed adjustments (Fulton et al., 2025). Continuous improvement ensures that the model remains responsive to local contexts and evolving needs rather than functioning as a static set of procedures.

Model Components

The improvement model comprises a set of mutually reinforcing components that translate the guiding principles into concrete practices throughout the IEP cycle. Each component responds directly to challenges identified in the literature, including power imbalances, communication breakdowns, conceptual misalignment, and inconsistent implementation. Together, these components create IEP processes that are equitable, transparent, and relationally grounded. Rather than functioning as isolated strategies, they operate as an integrated system designed to strengthen communication, clarify expectations, and support shared decision making between parents and educators.

Structured Meeting Routines

A central component of the model is the use of structured meeting routines that promote predictability, transparency, and shared ownership. Research on facilitated IEPs shows that intentional meeting design can redistribute power, reduce conflict, and create space for parents' perspectives to shape decisions (Mueller & Vick, 2017). Studies of structured communication protocols similarly demonstrate that clear agendas, explicit role clarification, and collaborative goal setting support more equitable participation and reduce the emotional burden on parents (Azad et al., 2018). The model incorporates routines such as co-developed agendas, parent-identified priorities, and explicit discussion of roles and decision-making processes. Embedding these structures into the IEP process creates conditions in which parents can participate more confidently and meaningfully while reducing the unpredictability and professional dominance that often characterize traditional meetings.

Communication Practices That Build Relational Trust

A second component involves communication practices that intentionally cultivate relational trust and foster reciprocal understanding. Studies across RQ3 highlight communication competence as a professional skill that shapes parents' perceptions of trust and partnership (Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Behaviors such as active listening, clear explanations, and responsive follow-up are consistently associated with stronger family–school relationships. Research on communication routines further shows that predictable, transparent communication reduces uncertainty and strengthens partnerships (Azad et al., 2018, 2024).

The model, therefore, incorporates practices such as pre-meeting communication plans, accessible explanations of assessment data, and consistent updates on service implementation. These practices ensure that parents are not only informed but engaged as partners throughout the

IEP cycle. By reducing ambiguity and demonstrating responsiveness, communication routines help create the psychological safety that allows parents to express concerns, ask questions, and contribute meaningfully to decision-making.

Tools and Processes That Support Implementation Consistency

A third component centers on tools and processes that support consistent implementation of IEP services. The literature shows that even well-designed IEPs can falter when implementation is uneven or poorly monitored, placing additional burdens on parents to track services and advocate for follow-through (Zagona et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017). Inconsistent implementation erodes trust and contributes to conflict, particularly for parents who already face systemic barriers (Burke & Hodapp, 2016).

To address these challenges, the model includes mechanisms such as progress-monitoring templates, shared documentation systems, and structured check-ins that enable teams to track implementation, address concerns proactively, and maintain accountability. These tools reinforce the credibility of the IEP process and reduce the emotional and logistical labor often placed on parents. By making implementation visible and predictable, they help ensure that agreements reached during the meeting translate into consistent classroom practice.

Practices That Cultivate Shared Conceptual Frameworks

A fourth component focuses on cultivating shared conceptual frameworks among team members. Misalignment in beliefs about disability, learning, and the purpose of special education can undermine communication and decision making (Lalvani, 2015; Connor & Cavendish, 2018). Research shows that when educators adopt more relational, strengths-based, and culturally responsive approaches, parents report greater trust, clarity, and shared understanding (Francis et al., 2016a, 2016b).

The model incorporates opportunities for teams to develop shared understandings through reflective discussions, collaborative review of student strengths and needs, and the use of asset-based language that supports more coherent and culturally responsive practices. These routines help bridge the conceptual divide between deficit-oriented professional frameworks and the more holistic, contextualized perspectives often held by parents. Strengthening conceptual alignment enhances relational trust and improves the quality of collaborative problem solving.

Together, these components operationalize the guiding principles by embedding relational, conceptual, and procedural coherence into the IEP process. They provide a practical, research-aligned structure for strengthening family–school partnerships and improving the overall quality of IEP decision making (Mueller & Vick, 2017; Azad et al., 2018, 2024; Francis et al., 2016; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023; Fulton et al., 2025).

Organizational Supports

While the model components offer concrete practices to improve the IEP process, their effectiveness depends on organizational supports that enable consistent, sustainable implementation. The literature on system-level improvement underscores that meaningful change requires more than individual skill development. It requires leadership commitments, professional learning structures, and continuous improvement routines that reinforce and sustain new ways of working (Fulton et al., 2025; Francis et al., 2016). These supports create the conditions for partnership-centered practices to take root and flourish.

Leadership Commitments

Leadership plays a foundational role in establishing the expectations, resources, and cultural norms that shape IEP practice. When leaders prioritize relational trust and equitable family engagement as core elements of special education, they signal that the quality of

collaboration is as important as procedural compliance. Research on inclusive school cultures demonstrates that leadership commitments such as allocating time for preparation and reflection, modeling relational competencies, and reinforcing expectations for transparent communication create environments in which educators feel supported in adopting new practices and parents experience greater respect and responsiveness (Francis et al., 2016a, 2016b). Leadership is therefore not a peripheral support but a central driver of sustainable change.

Professional Learning Structures

A second organizational support involves professional learning structures that build educators' capacity to engage in transparent, culturally responsive, and trust-building communication. Studies across RQ3 demonstrate that communication competence is not innate. It can be developed through targeted training, coaching, and reflective practice (Azad et al., 2024; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Professional learning must extend beyond technical compliance to include opportunities for educators to practice relational skills, examine their assumptions, and receive feedback on their communication behaviors. These structures help ensure that the model's components are implemented with fidelity and sensitivity to diverse family experiences, strengthening the relational foundation of the IEP process.

Continuous Improvement Routines

A third organizational support is the establishment of continuous improvement routines that enable teams to examine their practices, gather feedback from parents, and make data-informed adjustments. Improvement science literature emphasizes the value of iterative cycles that allow teams to test changes, learn from results, and refine their approaches over time (Fulton et al., 2025). Embedding these routines into the IEP process ensures that the model remains responsive to local contexts and evolving needs rather than functioning as a static set of

procedures. Continuous improvement also reinforces shared responsibility by positioning educators and parents as co-learners in strengthening the partnership.

Family Support Structures

Finally, organizational supports must include conditions that reduce the logistical and emotional burdens placed on parents. This includes providing access to interpreters, family engagement specialists, and culturally responsive materials; ensuring that meetings are scheduled at times that accommodate family needs; and offering multiple avenues for parents to share input. These supports address systemic inequities and ensure that all parents, not only those with time, resources, or specialized knowledge, can fully participate in the IEP process (Connor & Cavendish, 2018; Burke & Hodapp, 2016). Reducing family burden is therefore both an equity imperative and a practical requirement for meaningful partnership.

Together, these organizational supports provide the infrastructure for implementing the model components consistently and sustainably. They ensure that partnership-centered practices are not dependent on individual educators' efforts but are embedded within a coherent system that values relational trust, shared responsibility, and continuous learning.

Theory of Action

The theory of action guiding this improvement model posits that when schools adopt structured meeting routines, strengthen communication practices, cultivate shared conceptual frameworks, and implement tools that support consistent follow-through—and when leaders provide the organizational supports necessary for sustained implementation, including professional learning, protected time, relational expectations, and continuous improvement routines—IEP teams will experience greater clarity, transparency, and relational trust. As these conditions take hold, parents will be able to participate as genuine partners in decision making

because the practices directly address the systemic conditions that currently undermine partnership, including power imbalances, communication breakdowns, conceptual misalignment, and inconsistent implementation.

As these shifts occur, the IEP process becomes more equitable, collaborative, and responsive to students' and parents' needs. These improvements are expected to enhance the quality of educational decision-making and improve student outcomes for students with disabilities. The theory of action, therefore, links structural redesign to relational transformation, emphasizing that meaningful partnership emerges when systems intentionally align their routines, expectations, and supports around equity and shared responsibility.

Logic Model

The logic model (Appendix C) illustrates how the improvement model functions as a coherent system. It begins with a set of inputs that include leadership commitment to relational trust and equitable family engagement, professional learning structures, time for preparation and collaboration, tools for communication and progress monitoring, and routines for continuous improvement. These inputs support a series of activities, including implementing structured meeting routines, co-developing communication plans with parents, providing communication competence training for educators, using progress-monitoring and documentation tools, facilitating reflective discussions about beliefs and assumptions, conducting regular check-ins with parents, and engaging teams in iterative improvement cycles.

These activities generate outputs that include predictable, transparent IEP meetings, clear, reciprocal communication between parents and educators, shared conceptual frameworks among team members, consistent follow-through on IEP decisions, increased opportunities for family voice and leadership, and data on relational indicators and implementation fidelity. In the short

term, these outputs lead to increased clarity and shared understanding, improved relational trust, reduced conflict and emotional burden, greater alignment in beliefs about disability and learning, and more consistent service implementation.

Intermediate outcomes include stronger family–school partnerships, more collaborative decision making, increased family confidence and participation, and improved educator capacity for relational and culturally responsive practice. Over time, these shifts contribute to long-term outcomes such as more equitable IEP processes, improved educational decisions for students with disabilities, stronger organizational cultures of trust, transparency, and shared responsibility, and sustainable system-level improvement in special education practice.

Taken together, the logic model (Appendix C) demonstrates that meaningful collaboration is not the result of isolated actions but of aligned, mutually reinforcing practices embedded within a supportive organizational environment.

Intervention Overview

The intervention developed for this Capstone translates the improvement model into a structured, relationship-centered IEP meeting format designed to strengthen family–school partnerships across the IEP cycle. It includes four integrated components: pre-meeting communication planning, a structured meeting routine, implementation-consistency tools, and strengths-based student profiles. Each component is directly mapped to the guiding principles and empirical findings from RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, and together they operationalize commitments to relational trust, conceptual alignment, procedural transparency, and implementation consistency.

A central component of the model is a brief, co-developed communication plan that outlines preferred modes of communication, frequency of updates, and expectations for sharing

concerns. Research shows that predictable and transparent communication reduces uncertainty, strengthens relational trust, and supports more equitable participation (Azad et al., 2018, 2024; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Establishing communication norms before the IEP meeting creates a foundation for shared understanding and reduces the emotional and cognitive load often placed on parents.

The second component involves a structured meeting protocol that includes a strengths-based opening, explicit role clarification, a co-developed agenda, opportunities for parents to identify priorities, and collaborative goal setting. Evidence from facilitated IEP models and structured meeting routines shows that intentional design can redistribute power, reduce conflict, and create space for parents' perspectives to shape decisions (Mueller & Vick, 2017; Francis et al., 2016). The structured routine provides predictability and transparency while keeping the meeting focused on the student's strengths, needs, and aspirations.

A third component centers on tools that support consistent implementation of IEP services, such as shared progress-monitoring templates, service-delivery tracking tools, and scheduled check-ins with parents. The literature documents that inconsistent implementation is a major source of conflict and mistrust, often requiring parents to assume the role of monitors or advocates to ensure follow-through (Zagona et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017). These tools reinforce the credibility of the IEP process by making implementation visible, predictable, and accountable.

A fourth component focuses on an asset-based student profile that highlights strengths, contextualizes needs, incorporates family knowledge, and uses culturally responsive language. This profile addresses conceptual misalignment by foregrounding the student's capabilities and lived experiences, thereby supporting more holistic and culturally responsive decision-making

(Lalvani, 2015; Francis et al., 2016a, 2016b). Beginning with strengths establishes a relational tone that affirms the student's identity and centers the family's expertise.

Together, these components form a coherent intervention that embeds relational, conceptual, and procedural alignment into the IEP process. They are designed to be feasible within typical school constraints while addressing the systemic barriers identified in the literature.

Implementation Supports

To ensure fidelity and sustainability, the intervention is supported by organizational conditions aligned with system-level improvement research. Leadership support includes scheduling time for planning and reflection, reinforcing expectations for transparent communication, and modeling relational competencies. Professional learning focuses on communication competence, strengths-based framing, and culturally responsive engagement. Continuous improvement routines allow teams to test changes, gather feedback, and refine practices. Feedback loops collect input from parents and educators after each meeting, ensuring that the intervention remains responsive to local needs. These supports ensure that the intervention is not dependent on individual educators' goodwill but is embedded within a broader organizational commitment to partnership-centered practice.

Scope and Duration

The intervention is designed to be implemented over one IEP cycle, approximately six to eight weeks, and includes one pre-meeting communication planning session, one structured IEP meeting, two follow-up check-ins, and one reflection and feedback cycle. This scope allows for meaningful testing of the model while remaining feasible for educators and parents. The duration

also aligns with improvement-science principles, which emphasize small-scale tests of change that generate rapid learning and inform iterative refinement.

Anticipated Mechanisms of Change

The intervention is expected to strengthen the partnership by increasing predictability and transparency, reducing emotional and cognitive load on parents, improving relational trust, enhancing clarity and follow-through, and aligning team members' conceptual frameworks. These mechanisms reflect the theory of action and the empirical patterns identified across RQ1-RQ3. By addressing the relational and structural conditions that shape the IEP process, the intervention aims to create a more equitable and collaborative decision-making environment.

Implementation Context

The improvement model and accompanying intervention were designed for use in a public elementary school serving a highly diverse student population across academic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic dimensions. Academically, the intended site enrolls students with a wide range of learning profiles, including those performing above grade level, receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, and those with disabilities requiring specialized instruction and related services. Culturally and linguistically, the school community reflects more than a dozen home languages, with large populations of Black, Latinx, and immigrant families, including families from West African, Central American, and Caribbean backgrounds. Approximately one-third of students are multilingual learners, and more than half qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

These intersecting forms of diversity shape how families experience the IEP process and mirror the systemic conditions identified in the literature. The school operates within a district committed to inclusive practices but facing challenges common across the field, including staffing shortages, variable educator preparation, and inconsistent implementation of special

education procedures. This context informs the design of the intervention and represents the type of environment in which the model is intended to be tested in future improvement cycles.

Measures and Data Collection

The intervention was not implemented as part of this Capstone, so the data-collection plan is presented as a proposed measurement framework that would guide future testing. The framework aligns with the improvement-science methodology and distinguishes between formative measures that support iterative refinement during implementation and summative measures that assess the intervention's impact across an IEP cycle.

Formative measures are designed to provide real-time insight into how the intervention is enacted and where adjustments may be needed. These measures would include structured observation checklists that document whether key elements of the meeting routine are carried out, educator self-assessments that prompt reflection on communication behaviors and conceptual alignment, and artifacts such as agendas, communication plans, and progress-monitoring templates that can be reviewed for clarity and completeness. Together, these tools would help teams refine the intervention as they learn from each testing cycle.

Summative measures would be used at the end of an IEP cycle to assess changes in partnership quality and implementation consistency. These measures would include family feedback surveys that draw on validated trust and communication scales, educator reflection forms that capture shifts in communication practices and conceptual alignment, and semi-structured interview protocols for parents and educators that provide qualitative insight into relational dynamics and communication clarity. Implementation-consistency checklists would document whether services are delivered as planned and whether follow-up routines occur as scheduled. Taken together, these summative measures would offer a triangulated picture of how

the intervention influences relational trust, communication quality, procedural transparency, and follow-through.

Intervention Design

The intervention developed for this Capstone translates the improvement model into a structured, relationship-centered IEP meeting format designed to strengthen family–school partnerships across the IEP cycle. It consists of four integrated components: pre-meeting communication planning, a structured meeting routine, implementation-consistency tools, and strengths-based student profiles. Each component is directly mapped to the guiding principles and empirical findings from RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3. Together, they operationalize commitments to relational trust, conceptual alignment, procedural transparency, and implementation consistency.

Core Intervention Components

Pre-Meeting Communication Plan

The first component is a brief, co-developed communication plan that outlines preferred modes of communication, frequency of updates, and expectations for sharing concerns. Research shows that predictable and transparent communication reduces uncertainty, strengthens relational trust, and supports more equitable participation (Azad et al., 2018, 2024; Hamm & Mousseau, 2023). Establishing communication norms before the IEP meeting creates a foundation for shared understanding and reduces the emotional and cognitive load often placed on parents.

Structured Meeting Routine

The second component is a structured meeting protocol that includes a strengths-based opening, explicit role clarification, a co-developed agenda, opportunities for parents to identify priorities, and collaborative goal setting. Evidence from facilitated IEP models and structured meeting routines shows that intentional design can redistribute power, reduce conflict, and create

space for parents' perspectives to shape decisions (Mueller & Vick, 2017; Francis et al., 2016). The structured routine provides predictability and transparency while keeping the meeting focused on the student's strengths, needs, and aspirations.

Implementation Consistency Tools

The third component includes tools that support consistent implementation of IEP services, such as shared progress-monitoring templates, service-delivery tracking tools, and scheduled check-ins with parents. The literature documents that inconsistent implementation is a major source of conflict and mistrust, often requiring parents to assume the role of monitors or advocates to ensure follow-through (Zagona et al., 2019; Love et al., 2017). These tools reinforce the credibility of the IEP process by making implementation visible, predictable, and accountable.

Strengths-Based Student Profile

The fourth component is an asset-based student profile that highlights strengths, contextualizes needs, incorporates family knowledge, and uses culturally responsive language. This profile addresses conceptual misalignment by foregrounding the student's capabilities and lived experiences, thereby supporting more holistic and culturally responsive decision-making (Lalvani, 2015; Francis et al., 2016a, 2016b). Beginning with strengths establishes a relational tone that affirms the student's identity and centers the family's expertise.

Together, these four components form a coherent intervention that embeds relational, conceptual, and procedural alignment into the IEP process. They are designed to be feasible within typical school constraints while addressing the systemic barriers identified in the literature.

Implementation Supports

To ensure fidelity and sustainability, the intervention is supported by organizational conditions aligned with system-level improvement research. Leadership support includes scheduling time for planning and reflection, reinforcing expectations for transparent communication, and modeling relational competencies. Professional learning focuses on communication competence, strengths-based framing, and culturally responsive engagement. Continuous improvement routines allow teams to test changes, gather feedback, and refine practices. Feedback loops collect input from parents and educators after each meeting, ensuring that the intervention remains responsive to local needs. These supports ensure that the intervention is not dependent on individual educators' goodwill but is embedded within a broader organizational commitment to partnership-centered practice.

Scope and Duration

The intervention is designed to be implemented over one IEP cycle, approximately six to eight weeks, and includes one pre-meeting communication planning session, one structured IEP meeting, two follow-up check-ins, and one reflection and feedback cycle. This scope allows for meaningful testing of the model while remaining feasible for educators and parents. The duration also aligns with improvement-science principles, which emphasize small-scale tests of change that generate rapid learning and inform iterative refinement.

Anticipated Mechanisms of Change

The intervention is expected to strengthen the partnership by increasing predictability and transparency, reducing emotional and cognitive load on parents, improving relational trust, enhancing clarity and follow-through, and aligning team members' conceptual frameworks. These mechanisms reflect the theory of action and the empirical patterns identified across

RQ1-RQ3. By addressing the relational and structural conditions that shape the IEP process, the intervention aims to create a more equitable and collaborative decision-making environment.

Implementation Context

The improvement model and accompanying intervention were designed for use in a public elementary school serving a diverse student population across academic, cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic dimensions. Academically, the intended site enrolls students with a wide range of learning profiles, including those performing above grade level, receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, and those with disabilities requiring specialized instruction and related services. Culturally and linguistically, the school community reflects more than a dozen home languages, with large populations of Black, Latinx, and immigrant families, including families from West African, Central American, and Caribbean backgrounds. Approximately one-third of students are multilingual learners, and more than half qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

These intersecting forms of diversity shape how families experience the IEP process and mirror the systemic conditions identified in the literature. The school operates within a district committed to inclusive practices but facing challenges common across the field, including staffing shortages, variable educator preparation, and inconsistent implementation of special education procedures. This context informed the design of the intervention and represents the type of environment in which the model could be tested in future improvement cycles.

Conclusion

Section 3 presented a comprehensive improvement model designed to strengthen parent–school partnerships within the IEP process by addressing the relational, conceptual, and structural conditions identified in the literature review. The guiding principles established the commitments needed to create equitable and collaborative IEP processes. The model components

translated these commitments into concrete practices across the IEP cycle, while organizational supports ensured their sustained implementation and integration into the broader ecology of special education.

Together, the guiding principles, model components, and organizational supports form a coherent framework for a partnership-centered IEP system. They move beyond isolated strategies by creating a set of mutually reinforcing practices that address the systemic barriers documented in the literature. This framework provides the foundation for the intervention described in this section and establishes the conditions necessary for genuine partnership.

The intervention developed from this model integrates structured meeting routines, strengthened communication practices, implementation-consistency tools, and strengths-based frameworks within a supportive organizational environment. These design elements reflect the commitments identified in the literature and translate them into practices that can be enacted in real school contexts, creating the relational and procedural conditions needed for more equitable and collaborative decision-making.

Section 4 outlines the proposed approach for examining how this model could function in practice. It describes the types of data to be collected, the indicators used to assess relational and procedural change, and the ways in which iterative improvement cycles can surface insights into partnership quality. This forward-looking framework establishes the methodological foundation for future testing of the model and clarifies how the theory of action would guide analysis once implementation occurs.

Section 4: Anticipated Findings

Framing the Findings

Although the partnership-centered IEP model had not yet been implemented at the time of this Capstone, the findings presented in this section synthesize the model's anticipated relational, procedural, and conceptual outcomes. These anticipated findings draw on the diagnostic evidence, the systematic literature review, and the model's theory of action to illustrate how the redesigned routines are expected to strengthen the conditions for partnership. Rather than reporting empirical implementation data, this section analyzes how the model is designed to function, the shifts it is intended to produce, and the mechanisms through which those shifts are expected to occur within the IEP process. This approach aligns with the Capstone's purpose as a design-based improvement project and emphasizes the model's coherence, feasibility, and expected impact.

Section 4, therefore, examines how the partnership-centered IEP model is expected to operate in practice. Whereas Section 3 outlined the guiding principles, model components, and organizational supports necessary to strengthen family–school collaboration, this section analyzes the anticipated relational, conceptual, and procedural shifts the model is designed to produce. Drawing on the literature review, diagnostic evidence, and the model's theory of action, the analysis illustrates how the redesigned routines are expected to influence communication quality, relational trust, procedural clarity, and implementation consistency. Together, these anticipated findings provide a research-aligned understanding of how a comprehensive improvement model could strengthen the conditions for partnership within the IEP process.

Positioning Student Voice Within the Model's Scope

Although student perspectives are an essential component of equitable special education practice, the present model does not include student voice as a core design element. This reflects the scope of the Capstone, which focuses specifically on strengthening family–school partnerships and draws exclusively on research centered on parent experiences. Student-only studies were intentionally excluded from the review due to their distinct developmental, legal, and methodological considerations.

While student voice is not incorporated into the current model, future iterations could explore developmentally appropriate ways for older students to participate in IEP discussions or for younger students' perspectives to be represented through family narratives and educator observations.

Anticipated Implementation Fidelity

Anticipated implementation fidelity examines the extent to which the partnership-centered IEP meeting model is expected to be enacted as designed across IEP teams. Because the intervention relies on the alignment of relational, procedural, and conceptual practices, fidelity reflects not only the presence of discrete behaviors but also the coherence with which teams are expected to integrate the model's routines, communication practices, and implementation-consistency tools throughout the IEP cycle.

Expected Use of Structured Meeting Routines

Projections based on the model's design suggest that teams are likely to consistently implement the core elements of the structured meeting routine. Strengths-based openings are expected to foster a more positive, collaborative tone. Explicit role clarification is anticipated to support shared understanding, although the depth of explanation may vary. Shared agendas are

expected to redistribute early agenda-setting power by inviting parents to contribute priorities. The most variable element is likely to be explicit discussion of decision-making processes, which may be abbreviated unless reinforced through professional learning.

Expected Communication Practices and Relational Behaviors

Fidelity to communication practices is expected to be strong. Communication plans developed before meetings are anticipated to clarify expectations, reduce uncertainty for parents, and help educators prepare more intentionally. During meetings, active listening behaviors such as paraphrasing, checking for understanding, and pausing to invite questions are expected to occur frequently. Clear explanations of assessment data may remain uneven, with some educators providing accessible descriptions and others relying on technical language. Communication after meetings is expected to be consistent and aligned with the communication plans, which supports transparency and trust.

Anticipated Use of Implementation-Consistency Tools

Progress-monitoring templates and service-delivery tracking tools are expected to be used consistently, although the level of detail may vary. These tools are anticipated to increase transparency and reduce the monitoring burden on parents. The inclusion of a brief summary of next steps is expected to improve clarity and support shared understanding of responsibilities. These tools are also likely to help identify early implementation gaps, allowing teams to address concerns before they escalate into conflict.

Anticipated Cultivation of Shared Conceptual Frameworks

Fidelity to practices that support conceptual alignment is expected to be moderate but promising. The strengths-based student profile is anticipated to shape the opening discussion in all meetings. Reflective conversations about student strengths and contextual factors are

expected, though the depth of these discussions may vary depending on team familiarity with the student and educators' comfort with asset-based framing. In many cases, the profile is expected to prompt reconsideration of deficit-oriented assumptions and support more culturally responsive and holistic conceptualizations of disability.

Overall Anticipated Fidelity Patterns

Taken together, anticipated fidelity patterns suggest that teams are likely to implement the model's core components consistently and intentionally. Structured routines and communication practices are expected to show the strongest fidelity, while conceptual alignment practices may demonstrate meaningful but uneven uptake. These patterns reflect both the model's feasibility within typical school constraints and the areas where additional professional learning or leadership reinforcement may be needed. The anticipated fidelity findings also provide essential context for interpreting the relational and procedural outcomes described in the next subsections.

Anticipated Family Experiences of the Redesigned IEP Process

Parents are expected to experience the redesigned IEP process as more predictable, transparent, and relationally grounded. Communication plans developed before meetings are anticipated to reduce uncertainty by clarifying the meeting purpose, agenda, and roles in advance. Parents are likely to feel more prepared and more confident entering the meeting, particularly when they have opportunities to contribute priorities to the agenda. The strengths-based opening is expected to validate family expertise and create a more welcoming tone, counteracting the deficit-oriented framing that often shapes traditional IEP discussions.

During the meeting, parents are expected to experience increased conversational space and more balanced participation. Active listening routines and intentional pauses for questions are likely to support psychological safety and reduce the sense of being rushed or marginalized.

Clearer explanations of assessment data and explicit discussion of next steps are anticipated to strengthen parents' understanding of their child's needs and the rationale for decisions. Over time, these shifts are expected to reduce the emotional burden parents often carry and support more collaborative and trusting relationships with educators.

Anticipated Educator Experiences with the Redesigned IEP Process

Educators are expected to experience increased clarity, confidence, and intentionality when engaging in partnership-centered IEP practices. The structured meeting routine provides predictable scaffolding that helps educators organize their communication, manage time, and ensure essential meeting components are addressed. Communication plans developed before meetings are anticipated to support more thorough preparation by prompting educators to review data, anticipate questions, and coordinate with colleagues.

Educators are also expected to develop greater awareness of power dynamics and the importance of accessible communication. As they practice explaining assessment data in family-friendly language and engage in reflective conversations about student strengths, educators may experience shifts in their conceptual framing of disability. The implementation-consistency tools are expected to support follow-through and reduce the likelihood of miscommunication or oversight, strengthening educators' sense of efficacy and professionalism. Collectively, these experiences are anticipated to reinforce educators' commitment to partnership-centered practice.

Anticipated Relational Outcomes

The model is expected to strengthen relational trust between parents and educators by increasing transparency, predictability, and shared responsibility. The strengths-based opening and shared agenda are anticipated to signal respect for family expertise and create a more

collaborative tone. Clearer communication routines and consistent follow-through on commitments are expected to reduce the relational strain that often emerges when parents feel excluded or uninformed.

Over time, these relational shifts are expected to support more open dialogue, reduce adversarial dynamics, and create conditions in which disagreements can be addressed constructively. The model's emphasis on shared understanding and mutual accountability is anticipated to foster a more equitable partnership that aligns with the literature's call for relationally grounded IEP practices.

Anticipated Procedural Outcomes

Procedural clarity is expected to improve due to the model's structured routines and communication tools. Parents are likely to gain a better understanding of the meeting flow, decision-making processes, and next steps. Educators are expected to benefit from clearer expectations and more consistent preparation routines. The implementation-consistency tools are anticipated to strengthen accountability for service delivery and reduce the monitoring burden on parents.

These procedural improvements are expected to support more efficient meetings, reduce confusion, and enhance the credibility of the IEP as a planning document. By aligning procedural clarity with relational trust, the model is designed to create a more coherent and equitable IEP process.

Expected Mechanisms of Change

The model's anticipated outcomes are grounded in several mechanisms of change identified in the literature and embedded in its theory of action. Structured routines are expected to reduce cognitive load for both parents and educators, allowing them to focus on substantive

discussion rather than navigating procedural uncertainty. Strengths-based framing is anticipated to shift the emotional tone of the meeting and support more holistic conceptualizations of student needs. Transparent communication routines are expected to reduce power imbalances and support more equitable participation.

Implementation-consistency tools are expected to strengthen follow-through and reinforce trust by making commitments visible and trackable. Together, these mechanisms are designed to address the relational, procedural, and conceptual barriers that have historically undermined family–school collaboration in the IEP process.

Contextual Factors Shaping Expected Implementation

Several contextual factors are expected to influence the model's enactment. Educator workload, scheduling constraints, and competing initiatives may affect the consistency with which routines are implemented. Variability in educators' communication skills and comfort with strengths-based framing may shape the depth of relational and conceptual shifts. Family experiences may be influenced by cultural and linguistic factors, prior interactions with the school system, and access to interpretation services.

Leadership support is expected to play a critical role in reinforcing expectations, protecting time for preparation, and providing professional learning. School culture, team dynamics, and existing collaboration structures may also shape the model's uptake. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for anticipating implementation challenges and designing supports that promote sustainability.

Conclusion

The anticipated findings presented in this section illustrate how the partnership-centered IEP model is expected to strengthen the relational, procedural, and conceptual conditions that

support equitable collaboration between parents and educators. The analysis suggests that the model's structured routines, communication practices, and implementation-consistency tools have the potential to increase clarity, predictability, and shared responsibility throughout the IEP process. These projected shifts reflect the model's alignment with the needs identified in the diagnostic phase and the broader research base, which emphasize the importance of transparent communication, strengths-based framing, and culturally responsive engagement.

The anticipated outcomes also highlight the importance of coherence across the model's components. Improvements in relational trust are closely connected to procedural clarity, and both are reinforced by consistent follow-through and shared conceptual frameworks. These interdependencies underscore the value of a comprehensive design that attends to the emotional, cognitive, and structural dimensions of the IEP process simultaneously. Although the model has not yet been implemented, the analysis presented here provides a research-informed rationale for its potential effectiveness and identifies the contextual factors that are likely to shape its enactment.

This foundation sets the stage for Section 5, which translates the model into a practical resource for educators and school teams and supports them in creating more accessible, transparent, and collaborative experiences for parents. The practitioner-facing product builds on anticipated findings by offering concrete tools and guidance to promote implementation and strengthen the conditions that enable parents to participate as full partners in the IEP process.

Section 5: Practitioner-Facing Product

Section 5 presents the practitioner-facing toolkit developed from the findings of this review and the logic model outlined in Section 3. The toolkit translates the model's core routines, enabling conditions, and anticipated outcomes into accessible, actionable resources to strengthen communication, relational trust, and shared decision-making throughout the IEP process. It includes two complementary one-page infographics: an educator-facing version that distills the model into a concise summary to support professional learning, team planning, and consistent implementation, and a family-facing version that provides plain-language guidance to enhance transparency, predictability, and shared understanding for parents. Together, these tools offer quick-reference supports that reinforce the model's commitments to clarity, equity, and partnership-centered practice. Both infographics are included in the appendices (see Figures 2 and 3).

The anticipated findings presented in Section 4 provide the foundation for translating the partnership-centered IEP model into a practical resource that supports implementation in real school contexts. This section introduces the practitioner-facing product, a comprehensive toolkit designed to help educators and school teams enact the routines, communication practices, and conceptual shifts that the model requires. By offering clear guidance, accessible tools, and structured supports, the toolkit strengthens the conditions that allow parents to participate as full partners in the IEP process and connects the model's theoretical rationale with concrete materials for practice.

Purpose and Orientation of the Product

The toolkit serves as the primary practitioner product for this Capstone and the central mechanism through which the partnership-centered IEP model is operationalized. It translates the

model's core routines and communication practices into materials that can be used throughout the IEP cycle, aiming to promote transparency, shared understanding, and consistent follow-through. To meet program dissemination requirements, the Capstone also includes a poster presentation that summarizes the toolkit's purpose, structure, and intended impact for practitioner audiences at conferences, district meetings, and school-based professional development. Together, these products bridge the design-based analysis of earlier sections with the practical work of strengthening family–school collaboration.

Design Principles Guiding the Toolkit

The toolkit is grounded in design principles that reflect both the research base and the needs identified in the diagnostic phase. Clarity and accessibility guide the use of plain language and intuitive organization to reduce cognitive load for educators and parents. Predictability and coherence ensure that the materials align with the IEP cycle, helping teams maintain a consistent, comprehensible process. Shared responsibility emphasizes distributed roles for communication, preparation, and follow-through, reinforcing equitable participation. Strengths-based and culturally responsive engagement prompts educators to center student strengths and attend to cultural and contextual factors that shape family experiences. These principles mirror the guiding commitments of the improvement model and ensure that the toolkit embodies the relational, conceptual, and procedural coherence described in Section 3.

Clarifying the Role of Student Voice

The toolkit is designed to support partnerships between families and educators and, therefore, does not include routines for eliciting or integrating student voice. This reflects the Capstone's parent-centered scope and the evidence base on which the model was developed. However, the materials can be adapted in future improvement cycles to incorporate student

perspectives, particularly for older students who participate in their own IEP meetings, and for younger students, whose interests and preferences can be represented through strengths-based profiles.

Components of the Toolkit

The toolkit includes several components aligned with the model's core routines. The communication planning template supports pre-meeting preparation by clarifying the meeting purpose, identifying key discussion points, and documenting family priorities and preferred communication methods. The structured meeting guide provides a step-by-step routine for the IEP meeting itself, including strengths-based openings, role clarification, shared agenda setting, and explicit discussion of decision-making processes. The progress-monitoring and follow-through tools help teams document service delivery, track progress toward goals, and communicate updates to parents through clear summaries of next steps, responsibilities, and timelines. The strengths-based student profile organizes information on students' strengths, interests, and contextual factors to support more holistic, culturally responsive discussions. Each component is designed to be intuitive, adaptable, and aligned with the model's theory of action.

Product Inventory and Completion Statement

To accompany this design, a full set of practitioner-ready materials has been developed, compiled, and formatted for use by schools and districts. The practitioner-facing product includes a doctoral-level poster presentation, an educator-facing one-page infographic summarizing the Capstone process and findings, a practitioner presentation on the Partnership-Centered IEP Toolkit, facilitator planning forms, a timing overview, facilitator cue cards, a Family Planning Form for pre-meeting preparation, a fillable Shared IEP Meeting Agenda, a Strengths Snapshot, a Decision Log written in plain language, the full Improvement

Seminar slide deck with a corresponding script, the educator-facing guide Strengthening Family–School Partnerships in the IEP Process: A Toolkit for Educators, and a complete family-facing toolkit titled Partnering Together in the IEP Process, which includes a family-friendly infographic and two one-page family guides. An optional family-facing presentation, a tri-fold brochure diagram, and additional forms within the Partnership-Centered IEP Toolkit complete the set. These products operationalize the model's core routines and are provided as print-ready PDFs, editable Word templates, fillable forms, and slide decks to ensure immediate usability in practice settings.

Intended Use and Implementation Supports

The toolkit is designed to be flexible enough to accommodate variation across schools while providing a coherent structure that supports consistent practice. It can be used during team planning sessions, in preparation for IEP meetings, and as a reference during the meeting itself. Guidance for school leaders outlines strategies for introducing the materials, supporting professional learning, and reinforcing expectations for consistent use. Implementation supports emphasizing protecting time for preparation and collaboration, modeling strengths-based and family-centered communication, providing coaching and feedback, and integrating the toolkit into existing routines to sustain practices over time. These supports mirror the organizational conditions described in Section 3 and reinforce the model's emphasis on coherence, shared responsibility, and continuous improvement.

Connection to Anticipated Outcomes

Each component of the toolkit is aligned with the anticipated outcomes described in Section 4. The communication planning template promotes transparency and predictability. The structured meeting guide supports balanced participation and clearer decision-making. The

strengths-based student profile reinforces the conceptual shifts necessary for inclusive and culturally responsive practice. The progress-monitoring tools strengthen follow-through and support shared accountability. By grounding the toolkit in the model's theory of action and anticipated findings, this section demonstrates how the design can be enacted in practice to support more collaborative and equitable IEP experiences for parents.

Conclusion

The toolkit presented in this section serves as the practitioner-facing product for this Capstone and the primary means through which the partnership-centered IEP model is translated into practice. Together with the accompanying poster presentation, it provides educators and school teams with clear, accessible, and research-aligned materials that support more transparent, predictable, and inclusive IEP experiences. This section completes the bridge between the study's design-based analysis and the practical work of improving parent–school collaboration. The final section of the Capstone considers the broader implications of the model and toolkit for future research, practice, and leadership.

Appendices

Appendix A

Table 1

Literature Review Article Results

Author	Design	Results
RQ1: What patterns characterize parental experiences in special education decision making within the IEP process?		
Lalvani (2015)	Qualitative	Identified a "profound conceptual chasm" between parents and teachers: teachers tended to adopt a medical model (disability as individual deficit justifying segregation), while parents emphasized sociocultural understandings (stigma, marginalization, contextual barriers). These divergent frameworks fueled paternalism, undermined equal-status collaboration, and shaped parents' experiences of exclusion and emotional strain in IEP decision making.
Zeitlin & Curcic (2014)	Qualitative	Parents described IEP meetings as stressful, dehumanizing events rather than collaborative problem-solving spaces. Many felt invisible or treated as obstacles, with intense emotional toll (e.g., feeling judged, anxious, or dreading meetings). Findings highlight how meeting structures and professional dominance produce fear, marginalization, and the need for heightened advocacy just to participate.
Sanderson (2023)	Qualitative	Showed that team talk, routines, and interactional patterns can either open space for parent voice (welcoming cues, clear purposes, flexible scripts) or constrain it (rigid scripts, prewritten goals, jargon). Parents' experiences ranged from supported and included to silenced and peripheral, depending on these

		interactional features.
Love et al. (2017)	Qualitative	Parents reported feeling included when educators solicited their priorities, acknowledged their expertise, and followed through; they felt excluded when input was only superficially acknowledged or relegated to notes. Analyses of meeting transcripts showed that parent contributions were often recorded but not meaningfully integrated into IEP decisions, reinforcing a pattern of constrained influence.
Miller et al. (2019)	Qualitative	Identified a spectrum of reactive identities (e.g., victim, advocate, perseverer, educator, broker/negotiator, surrenderer) that parents adopt in response to exclusionary, adversarial IEP experiences. These identities reflect the emotional labor and vigilance required to navigate a system that often feels dehumanizing and structurally disempowering.
Burke & Hodapp (2016)	Mixed-methods	Found that high-intensity advocacy was strongly associated with negative school experiences, poor partnerships, and dissatisfaction with services. Parents who advocated frequently described refusals, opaque communication, and adversarial relationships; those reporting low advocacy more often described collaborative partnerships. Advocacy emerged as a symptom of structural failures rather than a cause of conflict, highlighting systemic patterns that shape parental experience.
Batz & Blanchard (2025)	Qualitative	Showed that even parents with deep professional expertise encountered dismissal, resistance, and structural exclusion in IEP processes. Their dual roles highlighted that barriers are systemic, not due to parental ignorance, and that emotional strain and vigilant monitoring

		are common even for highly knowledgeable parents.
Zagona et al. (2019)	Mixed-methods	Documented "consistency gaps" between written IEPs and classroom practice, forcing parents into ongoing monitoring roles. Parents described needing to police implementation as a "second full-time job," contributing to frustration, mistrust, and a sense that the IEP process is unreliable and burdensome.
Elbaum, Blatz, & Rodriguez (2016)	Mixed-methods	Parents' experiences of collaboration were powerful predictors of how they rated schools on IDEA Indicator 8. Negative collaborative experiences (e.g., rigid choices, failure to solicit or respond to input) dramatically reduced the likelihood of positive ratings; effective, responsive services increased positive ratings. This shows that everyday relational and procedural experiences shape how parents evaluate the IEP process and schools' facilitation of involvement.
Connor & Cavendish (2018)	Commentary-based synthesis	Synthesized multiple studies to show that IEP meetings are often high-stakes, emotionally taxing events marked by guilt, shame, and anticipatory dread for parents. Highlighted how proceduralism, jargon, and professional dominance silence parent and student voices, reinforcing systemic inequities despite policy language about partnership.
RQ2: What relational and systemic factors within the IEP process support or hinder effective collaboration between parents and schools?		
Francis et al. (2016a)	Qualitative	Identified a constellation of conditions that support collaboration: a strong inclusive school culture where all students belong, visible and committed administrative leadership, educators who demonstrate respect, transparent communication, and professional competence, and meaningful opportunities for family involvement.

		These factors created an emotionally affirming climate in which parents felt welcomed, respected, and connected, supporting authentic, trusting partnerships.
Francis et al. (2016b)	Qualitative	Showed that trust is cultural and structural, not only interpersonal. Trust was strengthened when school culture normalized diversity, upheld high expectations, and honored family knowledge; it eroded when deficit-based assumptions or low expectations prevailed. Relational transparency (honest, proactive communication, shared problem-solving) and alignment between school and family values were central systemic conditions supporting collaboration.
Azad et al. (2018)	Qualitative	Both groups valued partnership but emphasized different aspects of communication (parents: detailed content and transparency; teachers: manageable mechanisms and routines). Misaligned expectations, unspoken assumptions about each other's burdens, and a sense of undervalued expertise on both sides hindered collaboration. The authors argue that explicit role clarification, structured expectation-sharing, and intentional validation of each party's expertise are necessary relational and organizational supports.
Azad et al. (2024)	Mixed-methods	Demonstrated that communication skills can be explicitly taught and improved. Teachers reported significant gains in communication quality, skill use, and fewer problematic interactions; parents reported improved communication quality and reductions in target child concerns. The study shows that structured communication training is a relational intervention that can strengthen partnership and align practices across home and school.

Kervick (2017)	Qualitative	Illuminated how parents develop and mobilize expertise within multidisciplinary teams. Parents described initiating meetings, creating communication routines, and strategically managing emotion to be heard. Effective collaboration depended on recognition and integration of parent expertise; structural inequities and professional norms often constrained their contributions, showing that team functioning and role clarity are key systemic factors.
Burke & Hodapp (2016)	Mixed-methods	Found that high-intensity advocacy is linked to negative school experiences, poor partnerships, and inequitable practices, while more positive partnerships are associated with lower-intensity advocacy. Advocacy emerged as a response to systemic failures (refusals, opaque communication, unsafe practices) rather than parental aggressiveness. Relational trust, transparent communication, and equitable treatment are thus core systemic conditions that reduce adversarial engagement.
Mueller & Vick (2017)	Quantitative	The study identified several facilitation procedures that supported stronger collaboration, including meaningful neutral facilitation, a sustained student-centered focus, and intentional consensus-building structures. These features shifted the tone of IEP meetings from adversarial to collaborative, increased balanced participation, and reduced conflict. The findings demonstrate that the structural design of the meeting itself, through facilitation, shared decision rules, and student-centered routines, functions as a powerful systemic lever for strengthening family–professional partnerships.
Zagona et al. (2019)	Mixed-methods	Highlighted “implementation consistency”

		as a critical systemic factor. When accommodations and services were not implemented as written, parents had to monitor and enforce the IEP, undermining trust and collaboration. Reliable follow-through and transparent progress monitoring are thus essential structural supports for effective partnerships.
Hamm & Mousseau (2023)	Quantitative / mixed-methods	Identified educator communication competence as a central relational predictor of parental trust. Clear, responsive, and respectful communication increased trust and partnership quality, while poor communication eroded both. This positions communication skill as a systemic competence requirement, not a "soft" add-on.
Connor & Cavendish (2018)	Commentary-based synthesis	Synthesized multiple studies to show that organizational pressures (accountability, exam-driven cultures) and procedural norms (jargon, compliance focus, telling rather than listening) create emotionally charged, inequitable IEP environments. These norms systematically limit authentic participation and trust, underscoring that collaboration is shaped by institutional culture and policy contexts, not only by individual intentions.
RQ3: What strategies can schools implement within the IEP process to strengthen partnerships and improve outcomes for students with disabilities?		
Mueller & Vick (2019)	Qualitative	The study examined facilitated IEP (FIEP) meetings using interviews and document analysis. FIEP incorporates a neutral facilitator, structured agendas, student-centered practices, and consensus-building norms. These features redistributed power, supported balanced participation, reduced adversarial dynamics, and strengthened communication between parents and educators. Parents and educators reported

		that facilitation de-escalated conflict, elevated parent voice, and fostered more collaborative decision-making. The authors recommend using FIEP proactively—not only in high-conflict cases—as a strategy to prevent disputes and build stronger family–professional partnerships.
Azad et al. (2018)	Quantitative	Identified parent- and teacher-generated strategies for better communication: structured routines for updates, explicit expectations about frequency/mode/content, dedicated IEP meeting time for clarifying roles and shared goals, and co-developed communication plans. Embedding these structured routines into the IEP cycle can reduce uncertainty, correct misaligned expectations, and strengthen transparency and reciprocity.
Azad et al. (2024)	Randomized controlled trial	A brief, structured communication training plus consultation improved communication quality, skill use, and reduced problematic interactions; both parents and teachers reported clearer, more respectful exchanges and reduced child behavior concerns. Shows that communication can be explicitly taught and that integrating communication skill-building into IEP-related consultations is an effective strategy to strengthen collaboration and instructional coherence across home and school.
Francis et al. (2016a, 2016b)	Quantitative	Describe concrete practices that build trust: co-constructed agendas, strengths-based openings, visible principal support for inclusion, multiple formal and informal opportunities for family involvement, and transparent, follow-through-oriented communication. These practices show how schools can institutionalize trust-building routines

		within and around IEP meetings to support authentic partnership and shared decision-making.
Hamm & Mousseau (2023)	Quantitative	Finds that parents' ratings of educators' communication competence strongly predict trust, framing communication skill as a core professional competency. Suggests that districts should implement targeted communication training and coaching, integrate communication into evaluation, and treat communication routines as key levers for improving IEP partnerships and outcomes.
Fulton et al. (2025)	Mixed-methods	Implemented a multicomponent package: facilitated IEP structures, communication training, culturally responsive engagement practices, and aligned tools/protocols, all iteratively refined via PDSA cycles. Schools that aligned meeting design, communication routines, and cultural practices saw measurable gains in trust, clarity, and perceived voice. Demonstrates that system-level coherence and continuous improvement structures are necessary strategies for sustainable IEP process change.
Zagona et al. (2019)	Qualitative	Parents described needing to monitor services and accommodations because implementation was inconsistent. The study recommends progress-monitoring templates, shared documentation systems, and structured check-ins as strategies to support implementation consistency, reduce family burden, and sustain trust.
Love et al. (2017)	Qualitative	Parents proposed strategies such as inviting them into agenda-setting, explicitly discussing placement rationales, and building in time to explain decisions and options. Findings point to structural changes in meeting design—co-developed agendas, transparent rationales, and

		explicit space for parent priorities—as ways to strengthen collaboration and reduce reactive, crisis-driven decisions.
Murry & Wiley (2017)	Multi-phase mixed-methods	Identified creation of culturally grounded "safe spaces," improved teacher training in disability and Native cultural contexts, and community-based support structures as top strategies to improve participation. While broader than IEP meetings alone, these strategies inform culturally responsive IEP practices and underscore the need to address resource inequities and historical trauma in partnership work.
Connor & Cavendish (2018)	Commentary-based synthesis	Highlight alternative models (e.g., SpedEx, other dispute-resolution approaches) that emphasize shared decision-making, transparency, and relational trust. Recommend strategies such as cultural humility, relationally attuned dispositions, and intentional empowerment of parents and students—particularly from marginalized communities—as ways to redesign IEP processes toward genuine partnership.

Appendix B.

Table 2

Methodological Critique Matrix

Author(s), Year	Purpose / Rationale/ Research Questions	Design/ Methods/ Procedures/ Analyses	Sample / Participants	Key Findings	Relevance to Study
Azad et al., 2018	Examine parent and teacher perspectives on "ideal interactions" in ASD contexts	Qualitative interviews	Parents and teachers of children with ASD	Identified mismatches in expectations, communication styles, and relational needs	Highlights relational gaps and communication misalignment central to family–school partnership challenges
Azad et al., 2024	Assess feasibility, acceptability, and usability of communication training within Partners in School	Mixed-methods feasibility study	Teachers and parents participating in training	Training improved communication confidence and perceived partnership quality	Demonstrates the value of structured communication supports for partnership-building
Batz & Blanchard, 2025	Explore experiences of parents who are also educators navigating special education	Qualitative study	Parent-educators	Dual roles created tensions, advocacy burdens, and insider–outsider dynamics	Illuminates identity-based complexities in family–school interactions

Burke & Hodapp, 2016	Identify correlates and conditions shaping parental advocacy	Quantitative survey	Parents of children with disabilities	Advocacy linked to knowledge, confidence, and school responsiveness	Reinforces the role of school climate and communication in shaping advocacy
Connor & Cavendish, 2018	Explore experiences of parents of children with learning disabilities through a disability-studies lens	Qualitative study	Parents of children with LD	Parents experienced marginalization and deficit-based assumptions	Adds critical perspective on structural inequities
Elbaum et al., 2016	Examine how parents' experiences predict state accountability ratings of schools' facilitation of involvement	Quantitative analysis	Statewide parent survey data	Positive experiences predicted higher ratings of school involvement efforts	Connects parent perceptions to system-level accountability
Francis et al., 2016a	Explore cultural dimensions of trust in inclusive schools	Qualitative interviews	Parents of students with disabilities	Trust shaped by cultural responsiveness, respect, and relational continuity	Emphasizes culturally responsive partnership practices
Francis et al., 2016b	Identify parent perspectives on building trusting partnerships	Qualitative study	Parents of students with disabilities	Trust built through communication, shared goals, and	Reinforces trust as a foundational condition for

				relational consistency	effective partnerships
Fulton et al., 2025	Examine family perspectives on PTIs and service coordinators in early intervention	Mixed methods	Parents in early intervention	Parents valued relational support and clear communication from coordinators	Shows how intermediary roles support partnership and navigation
Hamm & Mousseau, 2023	Predict parent trust based on professionals' communication skills	Quantitative study	Parents of students with disabilities	Communication clarity and empathy strongly predicted trust	Directly links communication behaviors to trust formation
Lalvani, 2015	Explore stigma, otherness, and relational dynamics between parents and teachers	Qualitative study	Parents and teachers	Identified deficit framings and stigmatizing interactions	Highlights structural and interpersonal barriers to equitable partnerships
Love et al., 2017	Examine parent experiences in educational decision-making	Qualitative study	Parents of children/youth with disabilities	Parents reported exclusion, tokenism, and procedural barriers	Illuminates systemic inequities in decision-making processes
Miller et al., 2019	Explore parent identity and partnership enactments in decision-making	Qualitative study	Parents of students with disabilities	Parents enacted multiple identities (advocate, collaborator, protector)	Shows how identity shapes engagement and partnership behaviors

Mueller & Vick, 2017	Examine how facilitated IEP meeting structures influence relational climate, communication, and parent participation	Qualitative interviews and document analysis	Parents, educators, facilitators	Facilitated meetings improved communication, balanced participation, and reduced adversarial dynamics	Shows how organizational meeting structures shape parents' ability to participate and influence decisions
Mueller & Vick, 2019	Evaluate facilitated IEP meetings as a conflict-prevention and partnership-buildin g practice	Qualitative interviews	Parents, educators, facilitators	Facilitation redistributed power, improved communication, and reduced conflict	Demonstrates a concrete, school-controlled strategy that strengthens partnerships
Murry & Wiley, 2017	Identify barriers and solutions for Native American parent involvement	Mixed methods	Native American parents	Barriers included cultural mismatch, historical mistrust, and communication gaps	Highlights culturally specific partnership needs
Sanderson, 2023	Document parent advice for navigating IEP meetings	Qualitative study	Parents of students with disabilities	Parents emphasized preparation, assertiveness, and anticipating conflict	Reveals parent-generated strategies shaped by adversarial experiences
Zagona et al., 2019	Explore parent perspectives on implementation of team decisions	Qualitative study	Parents of students with disabilities	Parents reported inconsistent follow-through and lack of transparency	Highlights implementation gaps that erode trust

Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014	Examine parent experiences with IEP meetings	Qualitative study	Parents of students with disabilities	Parents described stress, power imbalance, and emotional labor	Reinforces emotional dimensions of partnership challenges
Additional policy/historical sources (EAHCA, CEC, CADRE)	Provide historical, policy, and structural context	Policy analysis / historical review	National datasets, policy texts	Establish systemic conditions shaping family–school partnerships	Used for contextual framing rather than empirical synthesis.

Appendix C.

Table 3

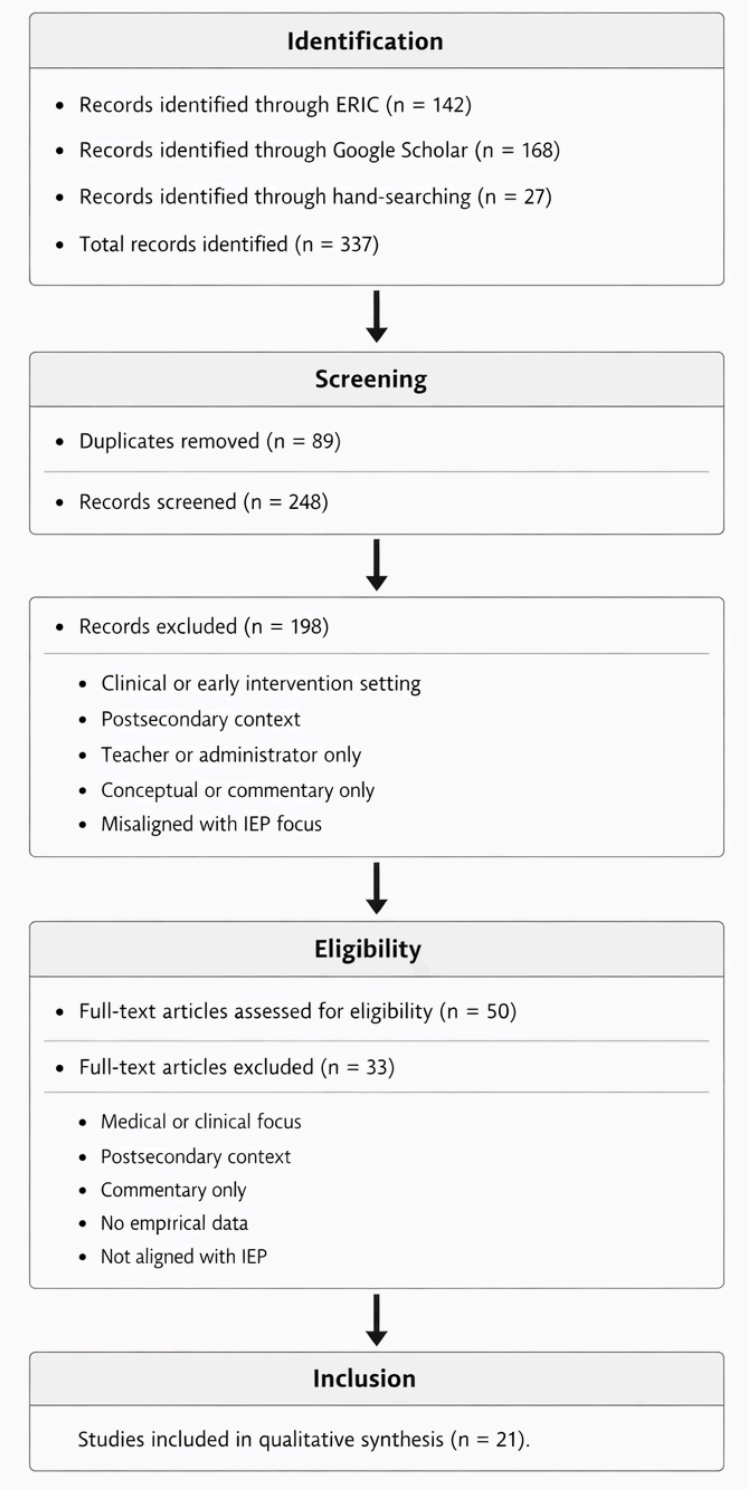
Logic Model for Strengthening Family–School Partnerships in the IEP Process

Category	Elements
Inputs	- Leadership commitment to relational trust and equitable family engagement - Professional learning structures - Time for preparation, reflection, and collaboration - Tools for communication, progress monitoring, and shared documentation - Continuous improvement routines (e.g., PDSA cycles)
Activities	- Implement structured meeting routines - Co-develop communication plans with parents - Provide communication competence training for educators - Use progress monitoring templates and shared documentation systems - Facilitate reflective discussions on beliefs and assumptions - Conduct regular check-ins with parents - Engage teams in iterative improvement cycles
Outputs	- Predictable, transparent IEP meetings - Clear, reciprocal communication between parents and educators - Shared conceptual frameworks across team members - Consistent follow-through on IEP decisions - Increased opportunities for family voice and leadership - Data on relational indicators and implementation fidelity
Short-Term Outcomes	- Increased clarity and shared understanding - Improved relational trust between parents and educators - Reduced conflict and emotional burden - Greater alignment in beliefs about disability and learning - More consistent implementation of IEP services
Intermediate Outcomes	- Stronger family–school partnerships - More collaborative decision-making - Increased family confidence and participation - Improved educator capacity for relational and culturally responsive practice
Long-Term Outcomes	- More equitable IEP processes - Improved educational decisions for students with disabilities

	- Stronger organizational cultures of trust, transparency, and shared responsibility - Sustainable, system-level improvement in special education practice	

Appendix D

PRISMA-Style Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process.



This figure illustrates the systematic review process, including records identified (n = 337), duplicates removed (n = 89), records screened (n = 248), full-text articles assessed (n = 50), and studies included (n = 21). Reasons for exclusion are documented to ensure transparency and replicability.

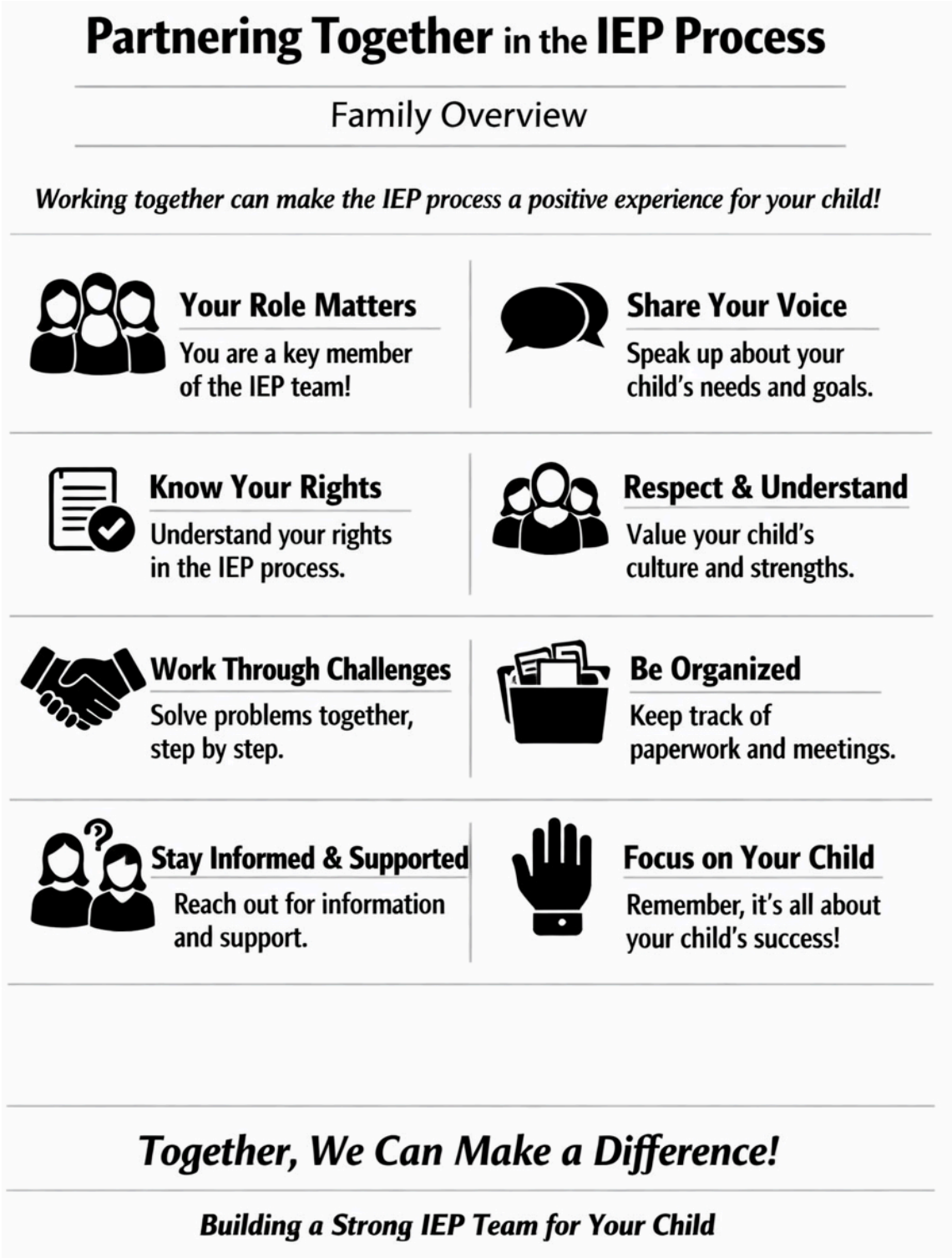
Appendix E.

Educator-Facing One-Page Infographic

This infographic provides educators with a concise overview of partnership-centered strategies for improving the IEP process. It highlights seven evidence-based practices: trust and communication, advocacy recognition, cultural responsiveness, collaborative conflict resolution, system clarity, ongoing training, and implementation fidelity, which foster equitable, trust-based collaboration between families and schools.

Appendix F.

Family-Facing One-Page Infographic



This infographic provides families with an accessible overview of partnership-centered strategies for participating in the IEP process. It highlights eight key actions: understanding roles, sharing voice, knowing rights, respecting diversity, resolving challenges collaboratively, staying organized, seeking support, and focusing on the child's success, which promote equitable, trust-based collaboration between families and educators.

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