

**EXPLORING INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANS IN A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING**

by

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PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF EDUCATION  
IN  
SPECIAL EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

July 2016

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that influence the meaningful use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for teachers at the high school level. While there is substantial research regarding the effectiveness of IEP documents at the elementary school level, the volume of research at the high school level in respect to the IEP is not commensurate. My research explored the elements that prevent educators from developing a useful IEP document and uncovered the factors that influence the meaningful use of this document at the high school level. Findings from this qualitative research indicated that the 10 teachers who I interviewed provided varied understandings of the purpose of an IEP as well as extremely limited to no participation in its development. Additionally, there was a great deal of frustration from the teachers regarding the purpose, development and usage of the IEP. Despite the frustration and lack of generalized understanding, the teachers believed that the IEP could be used meaningfully if the right steps took place. Recommendations taken from my research include a more collaborative, structured approach to the development, implementation, and reflection of the IEP.

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### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to take the time to thank my husband Darren for his unwavering support. Thank you to our children Zachary, Keira and Liam for their understanding and patience during this journey. Thank you to my mom Trudy for helping out whenever necessary. Finally, thank you to my committee members. Dr. Andrew Kitchenham, thank you for answering my endless emails and guiding me through this process. Dr. Tina Fraser, thank you for your thoughtful comments and Ms. Margaret Olsen, thank you for your honest feedback.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) should be a document that guides meaningful instruction for students with special needs. All educators can meaningfully influence the lives of students who require an IEP. In my opinion, the current level of practice should be examined as there are many students who have IEPs that may not be working toward goals that support the diversity of their needs. At high schools, there are a number of factors that can impede the development and implementation of IEPs. According to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, people with mental or physical disabilities must have the same advantages as those without (*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, section 15 (1), 1982.) When a student with an exceptionality struggles to meet his or her full potential, educators are tasked with helping him or her find a path to meet his or her diverse needs. In British Columbia, students with special needs are entitled to programming that will help them reach their potential (*School Act*, section 168 (2) (a), 2013).

In my experience, such programming is typically developed through the IEP process; however, the development of the IEP can be a task that is completed more for file compliance than for a functionality and effectiveness that reflects individual student needs. There is an expectation put forth by the Province of British Columbia (2001) that there should be collaboration and consultation with all stakeholders involved with a student with an exceptionality. Moreover, such collaboration should, whenever possible, include the student. This document also highlights the necessity of support from the district in the creation of the IEP document. Such support is defined as time and space

for planning, sharing of information amongst stakeholders, establishing qualifications for those preparing the IEP and providing in-service to encourage development.

At the high school level, I have observed a multitude of IEPs that do not come close to meeting, or even adequately addressing, the needs of the students for which they were designed. These experiences left me questioning the validity of a document that is prepared without the student and their complex needs comprehensively considered. This project sought to determine the current state of the meaningful use of IEPs in high schools in my school district.

This chapter will introduce the project by discussing the purpose of the study, background of the project, and will conclude with an overview of the research.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that influence the meaningful use of IEPs for teachers at the high school level. While there is substantial research regarding the potential effectiveness of IEP documents at the elementary school level (Avramidis & Silverstein, 2000; Capizzi, 2008; Dilberto & Brewer, 2012; Drasgow, Eric, Yell, Mitchell, Robinson, & Rowland, 2001; Fish, 2008; Garriot & Snyder, 2000; Huefner, 2000; Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2002; Jung, Gomez, Baird & Keramidas, 2008; Lee-Tarver, 2006; Menlove, Hudson & Suter, 2001; Myers & Eisenman, 2005; Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O'Raw & Zhao, 2012; Sanches-Ferreira, Lopes-dos-Santos, Alves, Santos, & Silveira-Maia, 2013; Shriner & Destefano, 2003; Smith, 1990; Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007), my research indicated that the volume of research at the high school level in respect to the IEP document is not commensurate. It was my opinion that understanding what factors may be working or not working for high



school teachers regarding IEPs would only benefit a student's ability to find success. My research explored the elements that prevented educators from developing a useful IEP document and uncovered the factors that influenced the meaningful use of said document at the high school level.

### **Background**

From my 13 years of teaching experience in my school district, there appears to be a systemic lack of commitment from educators and administrators regarding IEP documents at the high school level that is a dramatic shift from the elementary school level. Based on my experience teaching at the elementary school level and from numerous years being a part of the IEP process with my son, substantial release time is afforded to teachers, educational assistants and support teachers to attend meetings to develop the IEP document. Meetings are scheduled to support the inclusion of as many stakeholders as possible in order to best support the student and the development of their IEP. There is a commitment from the administration to provide the necessary funds to ensure that teachers teaching on call (TTOCs) are present to release teachers so they can be present. Educational Assistants (EAs) who work with the child for whom the meeting is scheduled are also supported so they can attend. The inclusion of the EAs at the IEP meeting is critical as they are often the people who spends the most time with the child directly implementing the strategies included in the IEP. Moreover, invitations to attend the IEP are often forwarded to relevant parties, such as: speech and language therapists, behaviour consultants and interventionists, as well as counsellors. Another unique attribute to the elementary school IEP meeting is the attendance of an administrator. Having an administrator present at the IEP meeting demonstrates to the parents that their

child is important and that they will have first-hand knowledge of the goals and strategies identified to be implemented to assist their child.

At the high school level in the school district an equally-proportionate amount of release time is provided to the school; however, it is not necessarily offered to teachers to support the collaborative development of a meaningful IEP. Once money has been released to the school, there is a discretionary element to how that money will be used. While the funds are allocated to the schools, there is no guarantee the money will go to providing collaborative opportunities for the development of an IEP.

Case management is a struggle at the high school level in my district as there are often many students with exceptionalities. The distribution of case managers to students can often be disproportionate as there are few full time student support teachers. The inclusion of learning support teachers as an alternative to qualified student support teachers who have coursework and background in special education creates numerous issues. One negative result is the development of situations where teachers are writing IEPs for the first time without guidance or mentorship. Another issue is that learning support teachers often do not have the experience, knowledge, or training that is relevant to the specific learning challenges of students on their caseload. As a result, this lack of experience and training would likely hinder the writing of an effective IEP. Additionally, there have been many times when I have viewed IEPs that were written by case managers who had not met the students for whom the document was designed. I can only surmise that ineffective IEPs are the result of those writing or updating the IEP not having the depth of understanding or awareness that their actions are not in the best interest of the student and definitely not in the spirit of the Ministry of Education's policies regarding

IEPs and Special Education. The underlying concern in the practice of writing IEPs without meeting the student is that it has become common practice. Despite these factors, and the fact that there are many outstanding resources available on-line to support teachers in writing IEPs, there does not appear to be an impetus to examine best practice and procedures at the high school level.

Furthermore, in my experience in this school district, high school classroom teachers are rarely consulted on the development of measureable goals in the specific curricular area they instruct. The practice of not including classroom teachers in the IEP process clearly does not align with the elementary school practice where classroom teachers are viewed as an integral part of the IEP development. This lack of consultation and collaboration marginalizes input thereby limiting ownership of the document by the classroom teacher. As a result of this process, or lack thereof, the IEP is not prepared to support the student, but for file compliance. In some cases, fulfilling the Province's mandate for up-to-date- IEPs has resulted in case managers simply changing the date on the document and forgoing the collaborative process of updating the components of the plan. Case managers typically run IEP meetings and create and update the document. Often, these teachers have little training in organizing meetings or writing legal documents. In my experience, this is the norm in my school district. In my opinion, an IEP created in this manner cannot be seen as meaningful. Even when some attempts are made to collaborate with teachers who have special knowledge or insight into the needs of the student involved, it is challenging to coordinate.

There are multiple challenges when attempting to include parents in the process. Some parents are resistant to participate, others attend the meetings but offer little input,

and some do not feel their contributions are acknowledged. Some parents are not even aware their children require an IEP.

Recently, I came into contact with a parent who had no idea her 14 year-old son had been designated as Moderate Behaviour. Neither the child nor the parents were invited to participate in the development of the IEP. Only when the child was being asked to leave the school did the subject of the designation and IEP come up for discussion. It goes without saying that the parents were particularly alarmed by the information brought forth by the administration team. Not fulfilling the obligation to include the parent in the IEP process could result in potential legal consequences for the school district.

Given the multitude of difficulties surrounding the development of an IEP, the result can be an inconsistent document that does little to guide meaningful practice. Through this process, the needs of the student are ineffectively addressed.

### **Research Overview**

To conduct research on high school IEPs, I used interpretivist qualitative research methodology. My goal was to interview three to five teachers from each high school in the target school district. Currently, our district has six high schools with one slated to close in June 2016 and one scheduled to re-open in September 2016. Each high school has a teacher-leader (Department Head) for the major academic and non-academic subject areas. It was my intent to first target the department heads for English, Social Studies, Math, Science and Physical Education for interviews using a semi-structured interview approach. The first choice of department heads in the areas of English, Social Studies, Math, Science and Physical Education was purposeful as these teachers are often

considered to be educational leaders in their respective teaching areas. If the department heads were unable and/or unwilling to participate in my research, I planned to broaden my search to any teachers who would be willing to share their experiences with me.

The research question was to explore the meaningful use of IEPs at the high school level. It was my goal that, through thoughtful and honest contemplation, educators would be able to express whether or not they meaningfully use an IEP, and the level of participation they have experienced in the development of IEP for their students with exceptionalities.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the research by including the significance, purpose of the study, and background of the project. Several more chapters are included in this project. Chapter 2 will include a literature review outlining key aspects including time and training, collaboration and communication, creation and implementation and writing and reviewing goals. Chapter 3 will focus on research including methodology, qualitative research, specific qualitative methodology, ethical considerations, confidentiality and anonymity, research procedures, recruitment of participants, consent, interviewing, data analysis, evaluation and validity. Chapter 4 will discuss the results of the research, while Chapters 5 and 6 will contain discussion and conclusions, respectively.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

While the literature may be limited in the realm of the high school IEP, relevant data can be gleaned from the research documenting the inherent successes and struggles of teachers in elementary schools as they relate to the process of creating and collaborating to create meaningful IEPs. There appear to be numerous factors that could influence the development of a document that meaningfully guide practice.

In this literature review, the literature on the time and training necessary to formulate IEPs will be surveyed first. The literature review begins with the first steps in the development of the IEP. The process of effectively developing an IEP starts with being educated on how best to prepare the document itself. Without the appropriate training, the resulting IEP may not be developed to best meet the needs of the student for whom it was designed. Subsequently, there will be a focus on the literature as it pertains to the time needed to effectively prepare the IEP. Second, the focus will be on collaboration and communication in the IEP process. Once the time and training to prepare the IEP has been provided to educators, the next step in the process would involve opportunities for collaboration and the importance of communication. Collaborating and communicating with all stakeholders is critical in the successful development of an IEP document. Next, the next steps of the IEP process—the creation and implementation of the IEP will be explored. The literature review will conclude with the final steps of the IEP process—the monitoring and reviewing of the IEP goals. The intent is that the literature review will guide the reader through the logical steps of the IEP development process.

## **Time and Training**

Finding the time necessary to meet, collaborate, and write an IEP can be challenging for educators. Moreover, providing professional training opportunities for educators to learn the nuances involved in the preparation of IEPs is equally challenging.

Myers and Eisenman (2005) interviewed six teachers in mid-Atlantic United States regarding their experiences with student-involved IEPs. The authors sought to uncover the Special Education teachers' experiences in their approach to student involved IEPs, their goals and concerns and their successes and challenges. The researchers used oral and written reports and interviews to document the educators' experiences. The resultant case studies demonstrated that one of the most challenging aspects of working with students to develop their IEPs is finding the time to meet. Drasgow et al (2001) highlighted Smith's (1990) view that the strain on a teacher's time can limit the development of a meaningful IEP. Further research by Johns et al. (2002) discussed the fact that the time necessary to construct a meaningful IEP can be challenging to find. The researchers acknowledged that the actual time necessary to create an IEP can greatly exceed the time allotted to general and Special Education teachers. Several studies (Drasgow et al., 2001; Johns et al., 2002; Myers & Eisenman, 2005; Smith, 1990) showed that providing educators with the time to create the IEP is crucial if it is to impact the student it is written to support.

Providing educators with the training necessary to understand the complexities of an IEP is a step that is often overlooked. Combined with a lack of time, lack of training can prevent educators from truly grasping the realities involved in contributing to

programming that can be vital to a student's success. Sanches-Ferreira, Lopes-dos-Santos, Alves, Santos, and Silveira-Maia (2013) explored the findings of their quantitative study regarding the development of IEP goals. The researchers investigated the relationship between goals established by educators on a student's IEP with the outcome of said goals. Of primary interest to the authors were the implications of teacher training on the educators' abilities to formulate quality, functional, and appropriately leveled IEP goals. The researchers concluded that further training is necessary in the areas of goal development, measurability of goals, and assessment.

Dilberto and Brewer (2012) outlined the importance of training for educators who are a part of IEP teams. The authors discussed that the need for educators to have the knowledge to become active and functional participants in the development of an IEP is vital. Furthermore, development of and reflection upon IEP goals is critical for developing programs for students with special needs.

Jung et al. (2008) reflected the importance of providing training for IEP teams to afford members with the skills to be able to implement the goals that had been developed. Through a survey of the literature and an acknowledgement of educational law, the authors concluded that knowledge of methodology and best-practice concepts could be the best way to link the IEP goals with the most logical strategies.

Huefner (2000) elaborated on the challenges surrounding IEPs under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA )1990 and 1997. The author analyzed the core language component changes between IDEA 1990 and 1997. The resulting determination was that the expectations put on teachers in the United States were



challenging prior to the legislation and it was noted that more training would be necessary to support general and Special Education teachers in the development of IEPs.

Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, and Park (2007) furthered the concept of a need for training by focusing on parent to teacher collaboration. The authors discussed a three-year project in Connecticut that provided a nine-hour course to 1300 parents and educators highlighting the importance of collaboration. The purpose of the project was to outline a training model that stressed the critical nature of a collaborative discourse with parents, educators and para-professionals. The researchers argued that without such collaboration, there is a legitimate risk of programming for students with exceptionalities becoming irrelevant or even counterproductive. During the first year of the project, researchers paired a parent of a child with an exceptionality with a professional well-versed in Special Education. A two-day training seminar was provided for the professional and the parent. The goal of the seminar was to prepare the 'team' to be able to educate the parent population with children with special needs on the collaborative IEP process. After the program, the participants indicated they recognized the importance of collaboration as an effective way to positively impact the lives of the students on IEPs (Whitbread et al., 2007). Drasgow et al. (2001) also argued that collaboration between parents and educators/administrators is critical in ensuring that the IEP is created in a legally acceptable way. The collaborative and communicative pieces of IEP development should be regarded as crucial.

Further examination uncovered the fact that teacher training can provide vital knowledge in the development of an IEP. Lee-Tarver (2006) postulated that the results

of her survey indicated that teachers require more training to understand the purpose, development and implementation of IEPs. This inadequacy was echoed in Drasgow et al. (2001) who cited Smith (1990) as identifying a deficiency in the knowledge level of teachers in respect to IEP writing due to poor or non-existent training. Fish (2008) provided findings of his study that supported this notion. The researcher concluded that school districts should be responsible for consistently providing training for educators on the importance of writing and implementing meaningful IEPs. This concept would cost the districts a great deal of money, but would provide necessary training for educators who may have the desire, but not the skill to write and implement relevant IEPs. Providing training for educators who are involved in the IEP process was also discussed by Johns et al. (2002). The researchers determined that one of the many roadblocks educators are faced with is a lack of knowledge gleaned through training. They further discussed that this training should be comprehensive and involve understanding the complexities of each student's needs, how to best meet these needs and how to reflect on progress. Shriner and Destefano (2003) also studied the effectiveness of training for educators and concluded that training can provide important understanding of how an IEP should be utilized.

There is also a need to examine the importance of providing parents with some training regarding the writing of an IEP. As stated earlier, the collaboration between parents and educators can be a valuable tool that is often overlooked. Many parents can feel out of place in such a meeting. Providing parents with opportunities to learn can bridge the perceived gap in understanding. Whitbread et al. (2007) discussed how parents can be a significant part of the IEP process if provided with the scaffolding

necessary to create an understanding of the purpose of the document. Their training module emerged from a belief that the laws surrounding the IEP can be fully met when all parties involved are as knowledgeable as possible. The authors stated that their modules would provide parents with the ability to confidently participate in the IEP process with the acquisition of skills and knowledge. This was echoed in Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder's (2000) mixed-methods study which examined the perceptions of parents about the development of the IEP. The study was conducted by graduate students who used purposeful sampling by selecting participants they knew from their hometowns. The study provided parents with a survey using a Likert scale and asked for them to reflect on their level of satisfaction during the creation of the IEP. In addition to the Likert scale, the parents were also provided with open-ended questions. The researchers indicated that, while the analysis of quantitative data appeared to reflect a fairly positive result, the answers to the open ended questions yielded results that warranted concern (Garriot et al., 2000). While on the surface it appeared that parents were mostly satisfied, 26% of parents were not satisfied with their level of involvement. The researchers indicated that the answers to the open-ended questions provided a higher level of insight. The conclusions drawn by Garriot et al. (2000) included the importance of training for educators on how to make the IEP more inclusive for parents and to provide parents with the training necessary to be more engaged participants in the process.

Avramidis et al. (2000) conducted a quantitative study in England to determine the attitudes of general education teachers towards inclusion including the preparation of IEPs. The sample included 16 urban, suburban and rural schools (primary and secondary) and 100 surveys containing Likert scale and three open-ended questions. The

surveys were randomly sent out. The return rate for the study was 50.6% and no follow-up data were selected. The findings of the study indicated that 49.38% of teachers felt that the more training they had the more confident they felt in their abilities to write and implement an effective IEP. The research further determined that those teachers who had been trained were far more confident than those who were not. The researchers concluded that teachers require the opportunity for training in order to meet the complex needs of creating an IEP document.

### **Collaboration and Communication**

Once all stakeholders have the tools to meaningfully participate in the IEP process, the next step is collaboration and communication. There are a number of studies that emphasize the importance of collaboration between parents and teachers, teachers and teachers, and students and teachers during the writing of the IEP document.

Menlove, Hudson, and Suter (2001) questioned the importance of increasing teacher participation in the IEP process in the wake of IDEA '97. The article states that Menlove (2001) surveyed 1,005 members of various IEP teams in Utah. The results indicated that elementary teachers had the highest level of satisfaction, while high school teachers had the lowest level (Menlove et al., 2001). This prompted a follow-up focus group which yielded results that were very clear. One of the themes established was the idea of collaboration. Many general education teachers did not feel a part of the process for a variety of reasons. One reason was that many decisions regarding the IEP were made prior to the meeting being held, which negated the possibility of input (Menlove et al., 2001). This disconnect would inevitably impact the classroom teacher's belief in

respect to the value of their feedback and this perceived marginalization could negatively impact their use of the document.

Johns, Crowley, and Guetzloe's (2002) research focused on the collaborative and communicative roadblocks in successfully using an IEP. They outlined the challenges educators in the U.S. face when trying to write an IEP. This study used anecdotal recollections to elicit the concerns that many teachers face while writing the document. The authors claimed that one concern raised was that Special Education teachers may find that general education teachers will not work collaboratively to ensure that a student with an IEP is provided access to mainstream classrooms or ensure that an open line of communication is established. Johns et al. (2002) also stated that teachers can be influenced by administrators to ignore an IEP on the basis of a lack of resources available to the school or district. As such, one remedy the researchers offered was to ensure that collaboration with families, educators, para-professionals and administrators occurred promptly and consistently.

Lee-Tarver (2006) discussed the results of her survey from the southern U.S. She stated that the IEP process could be seen as positive when approached from a collaborative perspective. The survey also discussed the research on collaboration and communication. The researcher also indicated that teachers can feel disconnected when not included in the IEP process. In order to build an IEP that works there must be a concerted effort to acknowledge that "successful inclusive schools provide a unified educational system in which general and special educators work in a collaborative manner" (Lee-Tarver, 2006, p. 270). Additionally, Sanches-Ferrira et al. (2013)

indicated in their quantitative study discussed earlier that their findings should prompt further investigation. The researchers indicated that the collaboration between parents and teachers and teachers and teachers could likely produce an increase in the quality of IEP goals. In order for educators to collaborate and write meaningful IEP documents, adequate time and training should be provided.

### **Creation and Implementation**

The next step in the IEP continuum would be the process of creating and implementing the document. Rose, Shevlin, Winter, O'Raw, and Zhao (2012) studied the Irish school system and its implementation of potentially-mandated IEPs. While, at the time of the research, Ireland had not mandated the development and use of IEPs for students with special needs, many schools developed and used the document. In the qualitative study, Rose et al. (2012) targeted specific stakeholders including parents, students, teachers, support staff, educational assistants, and principals. They collected data from 10 schools with stratified descriptors—from rural to urban, private to public and secular to non-secular. Using semi-structured interview techniques, the researchers posed four essential questions that focused on the implementation of the IEP document and the attitudes associated with such use. The research was robust, as they visited each school twice in a two-year period, recorded and transcribed data, and triangulated findings by using member checking and perusal of documents to confirm findings. Moreover, they (2012) used two researchers to categorically code and theme the data and found that all 10 schools targeted for the study used a type of IEP for students despite their use not yet being mandated. The variety of usage was inconsistent and did not

reflect a true understanding of the purpose of the document. Similarly, in a pre/post-study, Shriner and Destefano (2003) concluded that the use of IEPs to assist in state-wide assessment tests in the U.S. was inconsistent. This quantitative study sampled three districts in Illinois—one urban, one rural and one suburban. The procedure involved isolating students who had an IEP developed for them and reviewing the goals on the document to determine if they were successfully implemented. Test scores from state assessments were the assessment tool utilized. After the test was first administered, a gap year was provided to allow for the implementation of specific strategies to support goals on the IEP. Testing was repeated to determine if the implementation of the goals derived from targeted interventions resulted in an increase in test scores for the students involved (Shriner & Destefano, 2003). Much like Rose et al. (2012), there was little consistency in the implementation of the IEP. After careful analysis of the results, the researchers concluded that the level of involvement of the person implementing the IEP directly related to the success of the goal.

Fish (2008) used a quantitative study to examine parents' perceptions of students with special needs and the implementation of their child's IEP. The researcher focused on 51 participants from middle to upper-class socioeconomic backgrounds and mailed a survey containing 32 Likert-scale questions and two open-ended questions. The study was limited in scope as it involved a small sample size and used purposeful sampling by excluding parents of lower-socioeconomic means (Fish, 2008). As a result, the findings were challenging to generalize. For the purpose of this research, one question in particular directly related to parental perceptions of how knowledgeable staff were regarding the implementation of IEPs shall be isolated. The responses to this question

led Fish (2008) to determine that it is important that educators maintain a high level of understanding in respect to educational law so that the implementation of IEPs can be meaningful.

Huefner (2000) discussed the struggles and opportunities for IEP implementation in the U.S. The author examined the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) and its potential challenges as they relate to Special Education. Huefner explained that the personnel who were tasked with developing and implementing IEPs struggled with the task. The origins of these difficulties were related to a number of factors. Primarily, he found that in order for implementation to occur there must exist a general understanding of how to implement an IEP for a student with special needs. The author noted that one large challenge was that some general education teachers lacked the knowledge that some of their students even had an IEP. Clearly, this would make the implementation of such a document impossible. Huefner further noted that many classroom teachers are fearful that implementation of an IEP will result in less than ideal situations for special needs students due to a lack of support. The author noted that, while the theory of IDEA '97 was sound, the reality of implementing an IEP document is steeped in challenges. Drasgow, et al. (2001) also discussed the legal challenges in implementing IEP documents in the U.S. In their article, the authors detailed the legal expectations and ramifications of the IEP. Many of these questions led to a number of legal challenges that resulted from schools who did not follow the mandated use of IEPs (Drasgow et al., 2001). The authors argued that there are a number of reasons why schools struggle to meet the demands of the law. They cited Smith (1990) who determined that problems can include the expectation of compliance during the planning



and implementation phase without true reflection of what the reality dictated. Both articles acknowledged the inherent struggles of implementing a document that has been legally-mandated for use. The reality which emerged was that IEP documents can be challenging to create for a myriad of reasons. The creation of a document that is difficult to implement in practice was often the result.

The challenges of successfully planning and implementing an IEP were further discussed by Lee-Tarver (2006). The researcher surveyed 123 generalist teachers in the southern U.S. to glean their perceptions of IEPs for students with special needs. The quantitative study presented respondents with a questionnaire containing 16 questions. These questions were presented using a Likert scale, and were collected over a three month period. While the results were fairly positive, Lee-Tarver noted that there were several areas of concern. In terms of planning the IEP document, the author noted that many teachers did not feel that they were a part in the selection and development of IEP goals. It would be challenging for teachers to feel attached to documents that they have had no input in developing. Furthermore, a study by Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2013) yielded results that should prompt further research in the realm of the implementation of IEPs for students with special needs. The researchers examined the quality of goals for students with IEPs in northern Portugal. The quantitative study involved a sample of 135 Special Education teachers from elementary to high school. There were four researchers who reached an interrater reliability of 85% using the Revised IFSP/IEP Goals and Objectives Rating Instrument (R-GORI) and 90% for the categorization process using the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, version for Children and Youth (ICF-CY) after analyzing 2497 IEP goals (Sanches-Ferreira et al., 2013). The

researchers concluded that future research is warranted on the implementation of IEPs goals.

While there are challenges for teachers who feel they are not a part of the planning of the IEP, there are other teachers who are ill-prepared to participate. Myers and Einsenman (2005) provided insight into student-led IEP meetings. This action research project involved six Special Education teachers in the mid-Atlantic U.S. with varied teaching histories. The article revealed interesting perceptions amongst the teachers involved. The researchers discussed how valuable the teachers found the process of student-led IEPs, yet voiced frustration regarding the number of general education teachers who arrived at the meetings unprepared to participate in the process. It could be argued that teachers who are unable to discuss the IEP with the student for whom it is being written may find it challenging to actually implement the document in a meaningful way. Diliberto and Brewer (2012) supported this theory in their article. The authors outlined their ideas for the logical planning and implementation of an IEP document. They argued that the planning of the IEP can only occur after meaningful communication in a structured meeting. This communication piece encompasses the importance of creating a document that can be meaningfully implemented for students with special needs (Dilibert & Brewer, 2012). Capizzi (2008) furthered this argument. In his article, the author outlines the challenges of mandated-IEPs in the U.S. The author stated that IEPs without clear goals make meaningful planning and implementation of the document challenging (Capizzi, 2008). Diliberto and Brewer (2012) and Capizzi (2008) outlined the importance of functional meetings in order to prepare, plan and implement a document that will have the best chance of being put into practice by teachers.

## **Writing and Reviewing Goals**

When it comes to actually writing the IEP, many problems can arise. As previously discussed, without collaboration, communication, time, and training an IEP can be virtually unusable. These challenges can be compounded when IEPs are written poorly with no clear goals or strategies indicated.

Furthermore, if the IEP is not seen as a fluid, meaningful document more problems can occur. Johns et al. (2002) stated in his article that “an IEP that is poorly designed and crafted cannot be used effectively” (p .5). The effectiveness of the IEP is rooted in its inherent goals and strategies. In their study, Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2013) concluded that the relevance of goals and logical strategies are a key element of an effective IEP. The ability for educators to craft goals that are relevant, measureable and logical is considered vital to the success of the document. Shriner and Destefano (2003) reflected in their study that IEP goals often lack in many areas including comprehensiveness and precision.

## **Summary**

This literature review encapsulated the complexities surrounding the writing of a meaningful IEP for students with special needs. While many may perceive the process to be a relatively simple chore necessary to maintain funding levels by completing the tasks deemed necessary for file compliance, the realities are very different. The opportunity to collaborate and communicate information pertaining to the student requiring the IEP is critical. In order to collaborate and communicate effectively, adequate time must be afforded. As well, educators require sufficient training in the process of writing an IEP

for the document to be used for the intended purpose. After a document is written, there is a further responsibility placed on educators, all stakeholders and the student to ensure that goals are being met. If a goal is not achieved, there must be an opportunity to explore the reasons. Students with special needs are entitled to a document that meaningfully assists them in reaching their full potential.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000), stated that educational research implores educators to help all students reach their full potentials. The qualitative research used for this study sought to do just that. Through discussions with a number of high school teachers, data were analyzed and there was evidence of the elements that supported or hindered educators in their ability to use an IEP in a meaningful way.

This chapter will review the rationale for the use of qualitative versus quantitative research methods, provide a systematic breakdown of qualitative methodology, and elaborate on the foundations and subsequent choice of action research methodology. Additionally, there will be an overview of the ethical considerations that were adhered to during the research as well as an acknowledgment of the strategies that were utilized to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees. Research procedures including the recruitment of participants, consent, interviewing format and the content of questions will also be elaborated upon. Finally, there will be an explanation of the analysis of data and the evaluation techniques that were utilized to confirm the validity of the study.

#### **Qualitative Research**

Selecting qualitative research for this study was a logical choice. The process of writing and monitoring meaningful IEP documents at the high school level is a complex job. General and Special Education teachers often struggle through the process for myriad of reasons. The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that influence the meaningful use of IEPs for teachers at the high school level. The level of

understanding needed to comprehend the complexities of this issue could not be ascertained by any other means of data collection. The researcher elicited a sufficient level of detail from each participant. Direct questioning and probing questions afforded each participant the opportunity to fully explain their thinking as it related to the factors that impact their use of IEPs at the level they teach.

Creswell (2012) described qualitative research design as a way to better understand the shared experiences of a group of people. Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001) believe that qualitative studies are able to present a phenomenon from the perspective of the participant through the interview process. Berg and Lune (2012) argued that quantitative research is often believed to be more scientific, yet qualitative researchers are expected to be critical of their research techniques and their writing.

Qualitative research was used for this study because it afforded the researcher the opportunity to gain the depth of knowledge required to comprehend the nuances of the research question. This research explored the elements that prevented educators from developing a useful IEP document and sought to reveal factors that promoted the development and implementation of useful IEPs. The goal was to establish common themes, which might lead to a better understanding of the challenges high school teachers face when writing and monitoring the content of IEP documents.

There are two assumptions on which this research was based—ontological and epistemological. The ontological belief was that IEPs were not, for myriad reasons, being written and used in the manner for which they were intended. The epistemological belief was that there was an inherent lack of quality provisions being afforded to

educators to facilitate the use of IEPs for their intended purpose. These beliefs were formed as a result of the researcher's experiences at the elementary and high school levels.

### **Specific Qualitative Methodology**

The interpretivist methodology selected for this study was action research. In keeping with interpretivist tradition, the researcher sought to interact with the participants to better understand their interpretations of the IEP process at their school (Kitchenham, 2014b). Berg and Lune (2012) and Sagor (2000) outlined the varied purposes of action research, which included the collaborative investigation into a situation in order to elucidate and solve problems. The importance of collaboration cannot be understated. For this research, tapping into the educators' beliefs in respect to which factors influence the meaningful development of an IEP was critical, as they are the people who not only potentially write, but who are also taxed with the implementation of the document. Essentially, the inherent prejudices of educators can negatively or positively influence this process. The significance of action research as a lens for this qualitative study rests in the fact that, compared to other methodologies, it seeks to elicit change (Berg & Lune, 2012; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Sagor, 2000).

Several authors (Adelman, 1993; Kemmis & Taggart, 1988; Masters, 1995; McKernan, 2000) described Kurt Lewin as the creator of action research, who sought to marry psychological concepts to practical applications. The authors purported that one of the fundamental beliefs of Lewin's action research model was the necessity of the participants of a specific target area being active in the work they research. The lens

from which the researcher seeks to uncover the underlying patterns of meaningful usage of the IEP is that of general and specialist educator, which support Lewin's philosophy of active immersion. The theoretical lens from which action research is grounded could include Vygotsky's Social Learning Theory, which connects culture to a child's development (Stringer, Christensen, & Baldwin, 2010). The authors explained how understanding the complexities of children best occur when as many stakeholders as possible are involved said discussions. The connection of action research to social learning theory is that, through the active engagement, educators can better understand the child for which they are tasked with supporting.

Sagor (2000) explained that action research is a cycle of a seven-step process. The action research process includes selecting a focus, clarifying theories, identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing data, reporting results and taking informed action. In step one, selecting a focus, Sagor (2000) explained that in order to move towards a purpose for beginning action research a researcher must earnestly reflect on the topic they wish to investigate. Step two, clarifying theories, encompasses the identification of the researcher's core beliefs and theoretical foundations that will guide the research. Identifying research questions is step three. Sagor (2000) explained that manufacturing questions that will elicit the most authentic responses from participants is vitally important to the outcome of the research. Once the research is completed, the necessity of ensuring the data are valid and reliable is critical. Sagor (2000) expounded that phase four (data collection) can be considered the most daunting to the researcher as many questions regarding the development of effective instruments often arise. In step five, researchers will analyze the data collected using a meticulous process of sorting,



sifting, ranking and examining (Sagor, 2000). According to Sagor (2000), the data collected should be able to answer two general questions: “what is the story told?” and “why did the story evolve the way it did?”. The answers to those questions should help the researcher acquire a deeper level of comprehension regarding the research questions (Sagor, 2000). The sixth step of the action research cycle is reporting the results. Sagor (2000) elucidated that reporting the results of completed research can be challenging yet very rewarding. He explained that it is often easier to share the results of action research informally rather than formally, but also extolled the power that comes with the results of action research being shared with other professionals in any mode possible. The final step of the action research cycle is taking informed action (Sagor, 2000). Using the data collected and analyzed will help guide future action and can often result in the researcher gaining more data for future research (Sagor, 2000).

Berg and Lune (2012) condensed the seven-step process into a three-phase cycle of action research: looking, thinking, and action. Looking consists of establishing what dictates current practice, gathering important information from stakeholders, and then assessing the information gathered to form a non-judgemental rendering (Berg & Lune, 2012). For this research, it was critical to establish, from a number of high school teachers, their thoughts in respect to the IEP process. In order to establish current practice, the researcher must be open and non-judgemental. The thinking portion emerges from the looking stage. During the thinking phase, the researcher will examine the data collected through semi-structured interviews as a means of highlighting areas of concern (Berg & Lune, 2012). These areas of concern will serve as the basis for the final stage—action. In the action stage, the researcher can offer suggestions that may

positively elicit change for the stakeholders involved (Berg & Lune, 2012). For the purposes of this research, these changes could impact the special needs students for whom the document has been written. Ultimately, the goal of this research was to improve the current level of practice through, as Berg and Lune (2012) and Sagor (2000) described, empowering the participants using knowledge gleaned from the data collected.

Berg and Lune (2012) and McKernan (2000) considered the three types of action research as technical/scientific/collaborative mode, practical/mutual collaborative/deliberate mode, and emancipating or empowering/enhancing/critical science mode. This research sought to explore the emancipating or empowering/enhancing critical science mode, as it attempted to enlighten the participants through theory, which will result in positive changes (Berg & Lune, 2012; McKernan, 2000). The goal was that educators would recognize the challenges they are dealing with when attempting to write or implement an IEP for a student with special needs. As a result of this knowledge, the secondary goal was that they be willing to be a part of cultural shift to make the process and resulting IEP document more effective and implementable in practice.

While other methods met some of the criteria for this research, they had to be rejected. For example, the technical/scientific/collaborative mode relies on the relationship between researcher and educator to be primarily technical and intervention is quite often footed in pre-specified theoretical foundations. Additionally, the technical/scientific/collaborative model can often result in abrupt change in the current level of practice (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Masters, 1995). Given the

complexities of the IEP process and document, it would seem unlikely that change in current levels of practice would occur that instantaneously. The practical/mutual collaborative/deliberate mode of action research involves the collaboration between the researcher and the educator to become the impetus of the research itself (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). The goal is to create long-lasting changes rather than the quick changes described in the technical/scientific/collaborative model of action research (Holter & Schwartz-Barcott, 1993). Nonetheless, the changes tend to be directly tied to the individuals with whom the research was conducted. The practical/mutual collaborative/deliberate realm would not be the best fit for this research as the goal was to understand the fundamental strengths and weaknesses for the IEP process to create a long lasting, systemic change. The ultimate goal of enacting change could best be met by using emancipating or empowering/enhancing critical science action research.

While it could be argued that teachers are not considered to be marginalized therefore the use of emancipating or empowering/enhancing critical science action research may not be the best fit, there is a group of individuals who can potentially be marginalized—students with exceptionalities. It could be argued that by empowering educators through action research regarding high school IEPs, students with special needs would be less likely to be marginalized by a process that is supposed to be there to facilitate the best possible opportunities for learning. Through the interview process, information emerged that supported the hypothesis that the teachers interviewed did not fully understand or participate in the IEP process in a way that would provide the best learning opportunities for their exceptional students. Reflecting on their and their

school's practice may result in a shift towards less marginalization for students with special needs.

### **Ethical Considerations**

There were a number of ethical issues to consider in this study. The *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (TCPS2) (2014) requires that comprehensive ethical considerations are addressed prior to conducting research. The TCPS2 (2014) acknowledges the importance of human research on the understanding of the world, while stressing the critically important commitment to adhering to a set of guidelines and principles. The document states that the goal of the council is to adhere to three core principles—the respect of the persons who are partaking in research, the concern for their wellbeing and the commitment to justice.

Firstly, the Research Ethics Board (REB) of the University of Northern British Columbia reviewed and approved a research proposal prior to the researcher beginning the study. The proposal underwent several revisions in the attempt to address all of the concerns posited prior to beginning research with humans. Secondly, participants were provided with a detailed letter that informed them of the purpose or aims of the study, the implications the study may have on their lives, the right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence, a guarantee of anonymity, and an assurance that they may benefit from the research. Thirdly, the high schools in which the research takes place were respected. In order to display the level of respect for which the schools should be provided, the researcher made several attempts to make contact with the school-based administrator with the hopes of using their building and accessing their staff

for the purpose of conducting the necessary interviews. That being said, the research could not begin without the expressed written consent of John Blain—Superintendent/CEO of School District 68, which was obtained in August 2015. The consent form included a description of the research, the level of permission sought, the purpose of the study and the desired outcomes of the research. Finally, the data collected and findings of the study were truthfully reported.

Recognition of the biases of the researcher was considered and acknowledged when reflecting on the data collected. The biases of the researcher included the mother-son relationship of a child with an exceptionality, several years' experience in working closely with high school aged students in a learning support teacher role, and a number of formal and informal meetings with school-based administrators, senior management and union officials regarding concerns with the validity of high school IEPs.

**Confidentiality and anonymity.** The participants purposefully selected for this study were assured confidentiality and anonymity. Confirmation of anonymity appeared in the informed consent form obtained from the participants prior to the commencement of the interview process. Any identifying features (including, but not limited to the participants name and their associated school) was removed from the data collected. Additionally, any electronically-collected data were deleted and paper documentation was shredded.

## **Research Procedures**

In order to conduct this research, a number of important aspects needed to be addressed. First, there was a description of the process involved in the recruitment of participants for the research. Encompassing the participants' recruitment was information regarding consent. Following the information on consent was a detailed description of the interview techniques that were utilized and the interview questions that were posed. Subsequently, an overview of data analysis and validity will be explained.

**Recruitment of participants.** Since the focus of this study was to explore the factors that influence the meaningful use of IEP's for teachers at the high school level, purposeful sampling was used. Teachers from three of the five secondary schools were asked to participate by responding via email or cell phone number to a research recruitment poster placed in the staff room of their respective schools. The result was 10 interviewees. The scope of the research was important, as there are diverse socio-economic groups amongst the high schools. One high school is considered to be inner-city school, one is located in an average socio-economic area, and one is within a more affluent catchment area. Including high schools representing different socio-economic status was significant because there may be fewer instances of students on IEPs in one school in respect to another, which may distinctly affect the experiences of the teachers.

**Consent.** All participants voluntarily signed an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview process. The informed consent form consisted of an invitation to be part of a study entitled "Exploring Individual Education Plans in a High School Setting" as part of the requirement of a graduate study program from the University of

Northern British Columbia. The consent letter further explained that the purpose of the research was to explore the current level of knowledge and personal experiences with IEPs in the high school setting with the confidence that this research would highlight the successes and challenges high school teachers experienced regarding IEP documents. As well, the faith was that the research would add to the limited body of knowledge available regarding such experiences for high school teachers. Furthermore, the consent letter explained that the participants were being asked to participate in this research because their experiences—positive and negative—mattered to the overall understanding of the IEP document and, if the participants agreed to voluntarily participate in this research, their commitment would be one twenty to thirty minute, one-on-one interview. The letter also stated that there were no known potential risks to this study with the only inconvenience being the time needed to complete the interview. Moreover, the consent letter explained that the benefit of participating would be the knowledge gleaned from their critically important experiences, which have the potential to positively impact students with special needs. A critically important aspect of the consent letter included the caveat that participation in this research is completely voluntary and that participants may withdraw at any time without consequences or explanation and that all responses would be kept confidential with recordings deleted and data shredded after it is collected. Finally, the letter articulated that the results of this study will be compiled in the form of a project to be filed for public perusal at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, British Columbia and that all aspects of this study would follow the guidelines set forth by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of

Northern British Columbia. The letter in its entirety can be found in the Appendix of this proposal.

**Interviewing.** After informed consent was received by the researcher, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews followed. Kvale (1996) stated that the purpose of a qualitative interview is to attempt to understand the perspective of the interviewee and to discover the significance of their practices. According to Creswell (2012), one-on-one interviews are perfect for participants who are verbose and open to discussion. The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to guide the participants through the interview with structured questions, yet offer the opportunities for elaboration as the situation warrants. Berg and Lune (2012) outlined a general sequencing of interview questions involving sensitive and non-sensitive questions interspersed with probes and follow-ups. Sensitive questions should be carefully developed and used as they may alienate the interviewee. Using sensitive questions further into an interview may provide more authentic responses (Creswell, 2012). According to Creswell (2012), probes are necessary when the researcher seeks to clarify (clarifying probes) or have the interviewee expand upon their responses (elaborating probes). Furthermore, Creswell (2012) and Kvale (1996) articulated the necessity to carefully develop the questioning for one-on-one interviews using a variety of questions to yield the best data. Following Sagor's (2000) model for interviewing, the researcher limited the number of questions to 10, ensured the questions were relevant and focused, was prepared with probes, used electronic devices for the recording of information, previewed the questions with a colleague or friend to ensure clarity, limited the interview to a maximum of 45 minutes



and avoided leading responses by suggesting, asking leading questions, and using non-verbal cues. For this research the following questions were asked:

1. How long have you been teaching?
2. What subjects do you primarily teach?
3. How long have you been teaching at \_\_\_\_\_(insert name of school)?
4. How would you describe an Individual Education Plan?
5. What do you see as the potential benefits of an IEP?
6. How does the IEP meaningfully impact your teaching?
  - a. If the answer is “it doesn’t” use the probe: “Why do you think that is?”
7. Describe your involvement in the development of an IEP document for a student with special needs in your class?
  - a. If the answer is “I’m not involved” use the probe: “Why do you think that is?”
  - b. If the answer is “I’m involved” use the probe: “How does that impact your use of the IEP?”
8. What do you see as challenges surrounding the development of the IEP?
9. How often are you asked if specific goals for your students with an IEP were met?
  - a. If the answer is “I’m not” use the probe: “Why do you think that is?”
10. How functional are the IEPs at the high school level?
  - a. If the answer is “not functional”, use the probe: “What would make them more functional?”
  - b. If the answer is “functional”, use the probe: “What do you think makes them so effective?”

While generating the semi-structured interview questions, keeping the research question (what are the factors that influence the meaningful use of IEPs for teachers at the high school level?) in mind ensured the researcher reflected on the nature of the question as to ensure the most valid and authentic responses, which lead to effective answers to the research questions. For the purposes of this study, leading educators to honestly acknowledge the inherent pros and cons to the IEP process will assist the greater educational community in understanding the realities of the development and uses of the IEP at the high school level. Each question and probe was generated to ensure maximum results for the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

Using methods described by many researchers (Creswell, 2012; Rose et al., 2012; Saldaña, 2013), the recordings of the interviews were categorically coded in order to determine recurrent themes. Saldaña (2013) stated that coding is a method to arrange information in a clear and concise way and that there are a number of elements involved with coding. According to Saldaña (2013), the first element is pre-coding, which is taking the time to isolate any information gleaned from the interview process that the researcher may find thought-provoking. The second element is preliminary jottings, which can consist of writing down any initial codes in the form of words or phrases as to ensure the researcher remembers them as the process of interviewing evolves. Saldaña (2013) noted that these initial codes may not necessarily be the final codes used, but they may help solidify the final coding choices. Due to the fact that the preliminary jottings are just that—preliminary—they were carefully separated on the paper copies as not to confuse them with final thoughts. Saldaña (2013), cited Auerbach and Silverstein (2003)

on the next aspect of coding—questioning the data in relation to the research question. Auerback and Silverstein (2003) suggested keeping a copy of the researcher’s questions, theoretical foundation, and goals on hand during the coding process as a way to focus in on the motivation behind the research. Saldaña (2013) suggested comparing/contrasting codes from participants as the next realm of the coding process. Here, it is recommended that the researcher code each participant’s data as they are completed as a way to ensure maximum variety during coding. Making analytic notes regarding the data collected, the coding process, the emerging categories and themes is also an important part of the coding process (Saldaña, 2013).

All the data gleaned from the research was subjected to first and second-cycle coding (Kitchenham, 2014a; Saldaña, 2013). The first cycle of coding is the process of initial coding of data and could involve any combination of Attribute, Holistic, Descriptive, and InVivo coding (Saldaña, 2013). The first cycle coding method of Attribute coding falls under the heading of Grammatical Methods with its primary purpose being the documenting of data and demographic aspect of the interviewees for reference (Saldaña, 2013). Holistic coding falls under the Exploratory coding umbrella and is claimed to be a broader code at beginning stages of the more detailed coding of the data as it evolves (Saldaña, 2013). Under the first cycle coding umbrella of Elemental methods falls Descriptive and InVivo coding. Descriptive coding uses a single word or phrase to encapsulate an aspect of the data collected, while InVivo coding uses the actual language of the participants as codes (Saldaña, 2013). According to Saldaña (2013), the use of Attribute, Holistic, Descriptive and InVivo coding can provide the beginning qualitative researcher the most consistent results. The second cycle required more

specific and focused coding with the goal of consolidating data (Kitchenham, 2014a). Once the data was coded to saturation, themes were ascertained, and data emerged for discussion. Themes were ascertained by grouping a set of data in a way that organized the thoughts of the participants together and resulted in the growth of a more critical theoretical understanding (Saldaña, 2013). The discussion that arose from the data formed the basis of understanding, which led to enhancement of the researcher's knowledge.

When a participant indicated that their involvement in the IEP process was either non-existent or minimal, the response was coded as *staff participation*. The interviewees often mentioned the lack of student participation, which was coded as *participatory*. In order to meld the codes into *staff*, the researcher highlighted phrases including “other teachers, other staff, student support teachers and counsellors”. The student code emerged in isolation during the interview process.

Through the researcher's careful sorting of the collected data, she concluded that there was a disconnect between many stakeholders as it was frequently mentioned by participants. The codes of staff to staff, staff to student, staff to parent, emerged when the interviewees discussed the inherent flaws in the IEP process. Participants used examples of the lack of effective discourse between staff members—once again the phrases “other teachers, other staff, student support teachers and counsellors” were used and condensed into the code of staff to staff. The codes of written and verbal emerged through the participants' feelings around the way information was shared. Keeping the codes of written and verbal separate was purposeful as each was its own concern. Many participants believed that there was too much verbal information being shared and not

enough written or formal discourse. Eventually, the theme of communication was established to best represent the variety of codes describing the lack of communication between many of the stakeholders in the IEP.

Participants discussed the lack of fundamental and meaningful opportunities to collaborate and communicate. Through the interview process, the concept of the level of expectation put on Special Education teachers and student support teachers was oft mentioned. When an interviewee indicated that the student support teachers are tasked with too many expectations, the response was coded as overworked. Additionally, participants discussed the expectations for student support teachers who are often classroom teachers as well. The code of multitasking was established from the thoughts of the participants that it is challenging to be able to adequately and effectively address the complex needs of exceptional students while still teaching an academic subject. The belief that educators who are both classroom teachers and student support teachers are often faced with lack of opportunity furthered developed into the codes of lack of funding and opportunity. The lack of funding code emerged through the participant's thoughts that the government does not adequately fund Special Education specialists thereby forcing the classroom teacher to double-duty as the case manager for students with exceptionalities.

When the interviewees were asked to describe what an IEP was and what they viewed as the potential benefits of the IEP, the results developed into a number of codes. Many of the participants shared that they were unsure of what the IEP process should look like, which led to the code of unsure of process. There were significant questions surrounding the development and reflection of the goals set forth by the IEP. The

participants were consistently confused by which staff member should be doing what and when in relation to the development and reflection of goals. Additionally, the participants discussed confusion around who should be included in the IEP process. The codes of consulting on goals and reflecting on goals were kept separate due to the challenges each presented to the interviewees. Overall, there was an inherent confusion around the inclusion in the entire IEP process. The code of file compliance emerged through the visible frustration that was shown from all of the participants regarding the IEP process.

### **Evaluation**

Once the research was completed and data were examined, there was an opportunity to reflect on the findings to ensure that the results were, in fact, a valid and reasonable representation of the sample.

**Validity.** In order to confirm the validity of the study a variety of techniques were employed. According to Sagor (2000), triangulation and member checking are two of the ways to ensure the validity of an action research study. Triangulation of the data occurred by using multiple participants as interviewees, while member checking was employed by asking colleagues to review the data collected and comment on whether or not they believe it represents their population. Several colleagues who teach at the high school level and who were not participants were given the research question and the data was preliminarily coded data. The colleagues work in a variety of schools, including those schools that were not part of this study. From this member checking practice, the data were confirmed to be a legitimate representation of their IEP experiences in the high school system.

### **Summary**

From my experience as a high school teacher in School District 68, there appears to be a cultural and systemic lack of shared constructive usage of IEPs at the high school level. While elementary schools appear to be able to apply the basic principles needed to collaborate, construct and monitor IEPs, high schools do not appear to satisfy even the most basic of expectations regarding IEPs.

The research indicates that, at the elementary school level, there are common themes that emerge that prevent effective IEPs from being written and reflected upon. There is lack of research at the high school level related to the same subject. It would appear that the literature on the use of IEPs at the elementary level provides an interesting insight into the reflection of the IEP process. It may be that, given the disparity between the amount of literature on elementary IEPs versus the amount of information on high school IEPs, the focus is clearly leaning in one direction.

## **Chapter 4: Research Findings**

The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that influence the meaningful use of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for teachers at the high school level. The research explored the elements that prevent educators from developing a useful IEP document and uncovered the factors that influence the meaningful use of that document at the high school level.

Qualitative methodology was used to uncover the meaningful use of IEPs at the high school level. Ten teachers from three different high schools were interviewed using a semi-structured interview model.

This chapter will be broken down into three sections. The first section will contain demographic information as disclosed by each teacher during the interview. The demographics of the teachers interviewed was important to the overall interpretation of the use of IEPs at the high school level as the school where the teacher interviewed works can directly impact the number of IEPs the teacher is responsible for implementing. Additionally, the years of teaching experience for each interviewee relates to the volume of involvement with students with exceptionalities. The second section will break down the research results by detailing the questions set forth by the interviewer and providing a synthesis of results. Each response to the question posed provided details, which help to better understand the experiences of high school teachers in regards to the IEP. The final section will discuss the themes as they emerged through first and second cycle coding. The themes which emerged through the coding process will provide a synthesized examination of data that emerged through the interview process.



## **Demographic Information**

The teachers interviewed for this research project came from a variety of experiences in varied school environments. Depending on the students involved, the patterns of experiences in the understanding and use of IEPs could vary from school to school. Table 1 summarizes the demographics of each teacher interviewed and was an important step in understanding the depth of overall understanding based on the teacher's experiences.

## **Research Results**

Between October 2015 and January 2016, 10 interviews took place. Six occurred at the school at which teachers were employed, and four occurred off school property. In the instances where the interviews took place at a school, permission to access the building was provided by the administrator. Emails from the principals to the Research Ethics Board were provided as proof of permission. Each interview lasted between 30 and 35 minutes and was audio recorded on an iPad and an iPhone to ensure clarity and reliability. As explained in the preceding chapter, there were 10 questions asked to each interviewee with prompts used as necessary and appropriate. The first three questions were demographic questions with the results highlighted in Table 1. The subsequent questions with significant responses are detailed below.

**IEP description.** When asked to describe an IEP, the results of the interviews revealed a variety of interpretations. There were some obvious commonalities amongst the respondents. From the 10 interviewed, seven described the IEP as a way for teachers to guide their instruction for students with special needs in their class, while two believed it to be a way to highlight strengths and weaknesses and one described it as “something I

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Respondents*

Subject	Years Teaching	School Demographic
Mathematics	16	Affluent Socio-Economic Catchment
Social Studies	30	Average Socio-Economic Catchment
Social Studies	20	Average Socio-Economic Catchment
French	5	Affluent Socio-Economic Catchment
English	12	Average Socio-Economic Catchment
Foods and Nutrition	18	Average Socio-Economic Catchment
Business Education	9	Lower Socio-Economic Catchment
Science	15	Average Socio-Economic Catchment
English	20	Lower Socio-Economic Catchment
Psychology	15	Average Socio-Economic Catchment

look at when I have to.” Only one respondent commented on the goals that IEPs should contain—the comment made was that IEPs “sometimes have goals.” Moreover, three teachers explained that they saw the IEP as a way to help the student find success, but commented that they would not know what the success might look like as they were not

involved in the process. Finally, four teachers commented that they believed that the process usually involves a number of individuals from inside and outside of the school. When the responses are examined collectively, there appears to be limited knowledge of what an IEP represents.

**Potential benefits of an IEP.** Asking the respondents to reflect on the potential benefits of the IEP resulted in a range of responses. Six of the 10 interviewees described the background information, such as past testing, as a benefit. Additionally, three teachers indicated that the IEP prompted them to pay more attention to the designated student, but they were all unable to describe what that looked like for them on a day-to-day basis. One teacher described it as a “focused approach” to intervention with the intervention occurring in the implementation of some of the adaptations provided, while two teachers specifically stated that the list of adaptations was helpful. Interestingly, one teacher stated that they saw no benefits to the IEP. If a teacher is unable to see the benefit of an IEP, it would be challenging to believe that they are going to be willing to implement the document for students with exceptionalities.

**Meaningful impact an IEP has on teaching.** The interviewees were asked to describe how the IEP meaningfully impacts their teaching. The lack of impact the IEP had on instruction was a common statement. Six teachers stated that the IEP does not impact their teaching in a meaningful way. Of those six teachers, two stated that the IEP does provide some background information that may indirectly impact their teaching, but it is often causal, not purposeful. Two teachers felt that the IEP does provide a guide—one teacher describe it as a “rudder” for teaching. All 10 teachers felt that the IEP does

not *directly* impact meaningful instruction. It would be difficult to argue that a document that is not viewed as a meaningful would be used as effectively as it could.

**Involvement in IEP development.** When asked to describe their involvement in the development of an IEP document for students with special needs in their classes, the teachers had very similar experiences. Nine teachers stated that they have never been involved in the development of an IEP for a student with exceptionalities in their class. One teacher stated that, over a 20-year career, they have been involved in creating an IEP, but “not very often”. When examining the responses, and taking into consideration the length of time the majority of the interviewees have been teaching, it is clear that there is disconnect between the IEP document and the teachers.

**Prevented involvement in IEP development.** Given the results of the previous question, the teachers were asked what they felt prevented their involvement in the development of an IEP. Eight of the 10 teachers believe that lack of time to meet and collaborate as a team was the most significant reason why they do not have involvement in the development of an IEP, while one teacher felt that the IEP was just “rhetoric”, so that precludes the necessity for their involvement. Furthermore, one teacher believed that there may not be enough communication and that the case managers are “swamped” with the paperwork themselves, which may make meeting with the classroom teacher even more challenging. Systemic and logistical challenges appear to be preventing the interviewees from becoming active participants in the IEP process.

**Challenges surrounding IEP development.** When asked to reflect on the challenges surrounding the development of an IEP, the teachers interviewed shared a variety of opinions. Two teachers stated that they did not believe teachers know what

IEPs are, while nine teachers believed that there is not enough specific information available for the student, which makes developing an appropriate IEP challenging. Of the 10 teachers interviewed, all of them mentioned in various ways the time constraints, lack of communication and lack of knowledge of the IEP itself as challenges.

**Consultation on IEP goals.** The interviewees were asked how often they are consulted on whether or not the goals in the IEP were met. The expectation would be that the teachers would only comment on IEP goals that pertained to their subject area. All 10 teachers stated that they have never been asked if IEP goals were met. The response to the question of whether or not the interviewees were asked about the fulfillment of the IEP goals as they pertained to their subject area indicated that there is a significant underrepresentation of the purpose of the IEP document.

**Explanation of lack of consultation on goals.** After the preceding question was asked, a follow-up query asked teachers to reflect on their opinions as to why they were not consulting on whether or not the IEP goals were met. One teacher stated that there is a lack of clear process, while nine teachers believed it was due to a combination of lack of time, communication and follow through. Furthermore, one teacher stated that the people leading the IEP process may not “think it’s that important”. Not fully understanding whether or not the goals set forth on the IEP were met would directly impact the educational plan for students with exceptionalities.

**Functionality of IEPs.** All of the interviewees were asked to reflect on the functionality of the IEP at the high school level. Of the 10 teachers interviewed, eight stated that they felt IEPs at the high school level are either not at all functional or not as functional as they could be. One teacher felt that it is dependent on the student and the

situation—in some instances the IEPs can be quite functional, while another described the high school IEP as “not a living document”. The beliefs of the teachers interviewed indicated a fundamental detachment from the document. If a teacher does not believe the IEP is functional there is very little impetus to use the document.

**Explanation of making IEPs more functional.** The follow-up question to the teachers was posed asking them to elaborate on what they feel would make the IEP document more functional. One teacher was unable to explain what would make the IEP more functional as they felt that “it is an ‘I’ dotted and a ‘T’ crossed”, while eight purported that more communication and collaboration would be necessary. Furthermore, three teachers believed that making the implementation of the IEP mandatory or expected would make the document more functional. Of the 10 teachers interviewed, nine had a good idea of what would help make the IEP document more functional for teachers, thereby making it more meaningful for students.

### **Analysis of Results**

The previous section outlined the questions set forth by the interviewer and an overview of results. Table 2 categorizes the results, using first and second-cycle coding and establishes subsequent themes (Kitchenham, 2014a; Saldaña, 2013). The researcher used Attribute, Holistic, Descriptive and InVivo coding and once the data was coded to saturation, themes were ascertained. The following section will describe each theme in more detail.

**Collaboration.** Analysis of the qualitative data gathered indicated that the most significant theme to emerge was that of the opportunity to *collaborate*. Of the 10

Table 2

*Representation of the Coded Data by Themes with Supporting Quotations*

Theme	Codes	Total Number of Examples	Quotation
Collaboration	With Staff With Students	35	"I look in my mailbox and there is an IEP sitting there."
Communication	Staff to Staff Staff to Student Staff to Parent Written Verbal	31	"I've never been asked [if a student in the class met the goal on the IEP]."
Time	Overworked Multitasking Lack of funding Opportunity	29	"I've seen IEPs where the only thing that has changed from year to year is the date."
Process	Unsure of process Consulting on goals Reflecting on goals Inclusion in process	24	"I'm wondering if the people involved in the...process...think it's that important."
Frustration	Process Time Follow-through File Compliance	21	"It's not a document for the students... it appears to be an 'I' dotted and a 'T' crossed and a funding formula situation."

teachers interviewed, there were 35 utterances that related to the lack of collaboration that occurs in relation to the development, implementation and reflection of the IEP.

Teachers described the lack of collaboration between staff members as the primary presenting concern. One teacher described the collaboration process as merely opening his school mail drawer and finding the completed IEP document there. Only one teacher suggested that collaboration in the development of the IEP has occurred during their lengthy career, but elaborated further to explain that it does not happen “as frequently as it should”. The other nine teachers described the opportunity to collaborate on the IEP as non-existent. Moreover, seven teachers described the importance of including the student in the IEP process. One teacher noted that often the student is not even aware that they have an IEP. Five teachers noted that there should be an opportunity for staff to collaborate with students with an IEP—especially at the high school level when they often can be an advocate for their own learning. All 10 teachers mentioned that they felt the parent should be a part of the collaborative IEP process, but like themselves, they are unlikely to be included.

When the teachers interviewed were questioned about what would make the IEP more meaningful, eight of 10 teachers purported that significant collaboration could be beneficial. The interviewees explained that it would be almost impossible to create a plan for an exceptional student with an IEP that could be meaningfully implemented in their classrooms without this opportunity to collaborate.

**Communication.** There were several codes that emerged under the theme of *communication*. Teachers mentioned staff to staff, staff to student, staff to parent communication as a challenge in the IEP process. There was also discussion of how information is communicated as a concern. Collectively, there were 31 utterances about communication during the interview process. The lack of communication between staff



members was the primary concern of the 10 teachers interviewed. There was discussion about how teachers are not collaboratively included in the process of developing the IEP as well as how teachers are not asked if IEP goals, as they pertain to the courses they teach, were met. None of the 10 teachers interviewed were asked if IEP goals relating to their subject were met. The teachers felt that the lack of communication between staff members was of great concern. Furthermore, the lack of communication between staff and parents and students was also mentioned. Two of the teachers believed that the lack of communication between the school personnel and the students and parents led to some confusion. That confusion was not, in their opinion, the best way to meet the needs of their exceptional students. Moreover, there was discussion regarding how information regarding the student was communicated. Three teachers discussed that informal verbal communication did not suffice as meaningful collaboration and that often what was said was not what ended up on the IEP. One teacher stated that “we’re inconsistent in how we provide information...the communication piece is a big challenge”.

As with the previous theme of collaboration, several of the teachers interviewed noted that bridging the communication gaps would undoubtedly help make the IEP more meaningful. It was noted that without the opportunity to collaborate, communication in a large high school can prove challenging.

**Time.** The third most-mentioned theme was that of *time*—more notably the lack of time afforded to the IEP process. There were a total of 29 utterances under the theme of time. Of the 10 teachers interviewed all of them mentioned that they felt there was a lack of school time afforded to meet and collaborate on the IEP. Seven of the 10 teachers believed the lack of time is a systemic problem relating to the fact that IEPs are often

completed to fulfill the Ministry of Education's expectations for IEPs rather than a priority to meaningfully service the exceptional students for which the document is created. One teacher stated that the IEP "is not a document for the students". Additionally, there were multiple references by the interviewees that staff charged with developing the IEP are "swamped", "overworked" and "overwhelmed". Furthermore, one teacher discussed the fact that often the case managers tasked with developing, and maintaining the IEP are "full-time teachers or counsellors....so they don't have the time to do the job right". Three teachers mentioned that there is not enough funding to provide case managers the time to develop the IEP the "right way".

Opportunities for collaboration and productive communication can only occur when time is provided for such aspects of IEP development to take place. All of the teachers interviewed believed that, with an increased amount of release time provided, an IEP has a legitimate opportunity to become far more meaningful than it is currently.

**Process.** There were multiple utterances related to the lack of understanding of the IEP *process*. Eight of the 10 teachers discussed that there appeared to be a fundamental lack of understanding of who is responsible for what in the development of the IEP. Of these eight teachers, three mentioned that they are unsure as to the skill level of those developing the IEP themselves. One teacher stated that "the most conscientious person might not be qualified to do that job". Additionally, five of the teachers were not aware that they, as classroom teachers, *should* be included in the process of developing the IEP. One teacher stated that there is a lack of understanding in terms of how the IEP is to be used as a tool to meaningfully impact learning and that it should be "made clear whether or not the teacher needs to use the IEP". The process of including goals on the

IEP was also mentioned by two teachers. Both teachers felt that goals were “optional” to the IEP.

Eight of the 10 teachers interviewed believed that there needs to be more of a focus on the understanding, and then the follow through with the IEP process at the high school level. The teachers’ collective experiences demonstrated that there is an inherent belief that the high school IEP could be more meaningful if the teachers involved with the student truly understood what was expected versus what was optional.

**Frustration.** All 10 teachers interviewed voiced *frustration* over the development, implementation, and reflection of the IEP. There were 21 utterances including frustration with the uncertainty of the process to follow. Eight teachers, six of those with 10-25 years teaching experience, felt that there was no clear process to follow and that there is a great deal of inconsistency. This inconsistency emphatically created a sense of disconnect with the document. All 10 teachers felt frustrated with the lack of time afforded to the development. One teacher suggested that “the lack of time provided makes me question how important the IEP is in the first place”. Another point that was mentioned by all interviewees was the lack of follow-through. It was mentioned by several participants that a document that is created and then never looked at again lacks validity. One teacher stated that they believed the IEP is solely created as a means to satisfy Ministry requirements and that it is frustrating to be a part of a system that does not legitimately seek to help the student for which it was intended.

### Summary

The results of the research indicated there are a number of concerns regarding the meaningful use of IEPs at the high school level. The interviewees have teaching

experience ranging from five to 30 years and have taught a variety of subjects. Given the amount of teaching time of most of the interviewees, a great deal of weight can be placed on their experiences with the IEP document. These are not teachers who have had only a few students with exceptionalities come through their classroom doors. These are teachers who have taught a multitude of students with special needs throughout their careers. The reflections gleaned through the interview process brought forth a number of themes to be explored. Through interviews with 10 teachers from three schools in the school district, the themes of collaboration, communication, time, process and frustration emerged.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Chapter 1 of this project introduced the research question, discussed the significance and purpose of the study, provided background information, and provided an overview of the project. Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature as it pertains to IEPs through four main themes: time and training, collaboration and communication, creation and implementation, and writing and reviewing goals. Chapter 3 provided information regarding the research methodology for this qualitative study. The chapter further discussed the ethical considerations addressed and the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Moreover, Chapter 3 detailed research procedures used and it provided particulars regarding recruitment, consent, and interviewing of participants. Chapter 3 also described the data analysis used and the evaluation and validity of the study. Chapter 4 outlined the research findings where demographic information regarding the interviewees was provided as was a breakdown of the research results in a question-by-question format. A formal analysis of results was also provided in Chapter 4 outlining the themes as they emerged through first and second cycle coding. Through the coding and theming process, five categories emerged: *collaboration*, *communication*, *time*, *process* and *frustration*. Chapter 5 will explain the results of the research using these five categories.

In this chapter, the categories of *collaboration*, *communication*, *time*, *process* and *frustration* will be discussed. The research conducted yielded data that helped explain how 10 teachers in this school district responded to questions as they pertained to the understanding, implementation, and reflection of the IEP at the high school level. Each category will be explained as a way of interpreting the results.

## **Collaboration**

This study yielded results which stated that lack of collaboration was the primary concern. The 10 teachers interviewed provided 35 utterances relating to the theme of *collaboration*. Nine of the 10 teachers interviewed were not included in the process of developing the IEP. It should be noted that the interview question did not limit the interviewees to their involvement for the current school year, but rather through their entire teaching careers. A review of the demographic information provided, yielded the fact that the interviewees had between five and 30 years of teaching experience. Only one teacher had been invited to collaborate on the development of the IEP, but acknowledged that it did not happen as often as it should.

Through the interview process, the researcher noted that the teachers who responded did not appear to be particularly upset by this exclusion. Rather, the researcher noted a tone of resignation from the interviewees—it appeared to be what was expected rather than a feeling of surprise that the exclusion occurred. There appeared to be a significant disconnect between the teachers interviewed and the idea of a collaborative IEP process. This disconnect was echoed in a study by Lee-Tarver (2006) whose results indicated that teachers felt disconnected when not included in the IEP process.

The lack of collaboration in the creation of the IEP document for a student with an exceptionality limits the teacher's ownership of the document and, as a result of this limitation, the document is not as meaningful as it potentially could which is supported by Johns et al. (2002) who pointed out how lack of collaboration between teachers in the IEP process is of great concern. The relationship between case manager (those teachers

tasked with writing the IEP) and the classroom teacher cannot be overstated. Without the fluid collaboration between classroom teacher and case manager, accurate goals for the student cannot be meaningfully developed. A case manager trying to develop IEP goals for a student without the involvement of the classroom teachers is tenuous at best, as they are not the teachers expected to fulfill the obligation to meaningfully implement strategies to meet the goals. As Menlove et al. (2001) concluded, when decisions are made without the involvement of the classroom teacher, it negates the collaborative process

Additionally, the collaboration between and among students and their families and case managers and teachers was analyzed in this study. When students enter high school, many of them are capable of participating in the process of developing their IEP. Furthermore, parents are often the school's best resource on their child. This research indicated that there is lack of involvement of students and parents in the IEP process. One teacher noted that there have been many occasions when a designated student in their class did not even know they had an IEP. Lack of collaboration with a student and their family in the creation of an IEP can be counterproductive in the student's educational process. As Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2013) discussed, the more involved the students and families are the more likely there will be a quality IEP with meaningful goals included. Having a teacher open their school mailbox to find a copy of a completed IEP document with no opportunity to collaborate does not equate to a document that is expected to be meaningfully implemented. This example was highlighted in Table 2 and was one of the interviewee's experiences of collaboration at the high school level for students with IEPs.

Several teachers, however, acknowledged that an increase in collaboration has the potential to make the high school IEP more meaningful. During the interview process, all but one teacher stated in various ways that there is a desire to improve the chances of an IEP being used more purposefully by increasing the opportunity for teachers to collaborate on the document. The belief that the IEP had the potential to be more beneficial for students with exceptionalities demonstrated that teachers want their students to be able to meet with success.

### **Communication**

This study found that *communication* emerged as another significant theme. The lack of communication between staff members and parents and students was another concern for the teachers interviewed. There appeared to be a significant lack of communication on all levels. If, as indicated by the results, there is a lack of opportunity to collaborate in respect to the IEP document, there is likely a problem with communication. In any given high school, there are multiple teachers involved with a single student and communication can be challenging. However, students with IEPs are entitled to a document that meaningfully impacts their learning in a way that enables them to find success.

While the teachers interviewed stated that they believed that helping students with exceptionalities find success was critical, they also acknowledged that lack of communication was a huge stumbling block preventing from that occurring. The lack of collaboration precludes effective communication from occurring. While the interviewees acknowledge that informal conversations may take place, there is lack of formality in the evolution of communication. An example of the lack of communication in practice



occurs when teachers were asked how often they are asked if goals for the student they teach were met. Unequivocally, the teachers stated that, in their teaching careers ranging from five to 30 years, they have never been asked if goals for their students with an IEP were met. The lack of communication between case managers and teachers diminishes the importance of creating the goals for the student in the first place. If a teacher is never asked if a goal has been achieved, there is little value placed on said goal. Johns et al. (2002) stated that consistency is important to the communication process—a sentiment that was echoed by one interviewee.

The findings of Dilberto and Brewer (2012) supported the results of this research by acknowledging that planning an IEP can only occur after meaningful communication. Without open, consistent communication the IEP document has little chance of being used to its full potential.

The results of the research demonstrated that teachers interviewed have a desire to make the IEP document more meaningful at the school level. However, these teachers also acknowledged that the lack of purposeful communication was preventing, in large part, that from happening. Nine of the 10 teachers interviewed discussed how the increase in collaboration and formal avenues to communicate information were important elements in making the high school IEP more meaningful. As mentioned above when discussing the theme of collaboration, there is a common belief amongst the teachers interviewed that the students for whom the IEP was developed deserve communication between those who write the IEPs and those who are supposed to be implementing the goals and strategies set forth in the document. The teachers interviewed were motivated

to find ways to increase the communication in order to benefit those students who required an IEP.

### **Time**

The third most-prevalent theme identified in the study was that of *time*. The 29 utterances coded for this theme primarily involved the lack of time afforded to teachers to collaborate on IEPs. The experiences of the teachers interviewed for this study echoed the studies by Drasgow et al. (2001), Johns et al. (2002), Myers and Eiesenman (2005) and Smith (1990), which stated that the lack of time provided to teachers to create an IEP can be detrimental to the success of said document. Several interviewees stated that they felt that there is a significant lack of school time provided for meetings to occur, and that the lack of time is a systemic problem—not just that of the school itself. There was further discussion that this lack of time equates to the level of importance the document holds. It should be noted, however, that many elementary schools use the funds provided to the school to release teachers to attend IEP meetings. The utilization of funds so that teachers can attend IEP meetings for their students demonstrates that elementary schools do hold the view that the IEP is an important document. Only one of the teachers interviewed in this study has been asked to attend IEP meetings with the intent to collaborate—albeit “not as often as it should happen”. Johns et al. (2002) discussed the challenges surrounding finding time to meet, yet stressed the need to target efforts to ensure teachers are provided with the time necessary to meaningfully collaborate to create IEPs. The results from this research indicated that teachers feel overwhelmed by the amount of work and that school time provided in the form of release time is the only way meaningful interactions can occur.

The findings of this research also brought forth the idea of the struggles of time for those tasked with writing the IEP. Many of the interviewees acknowledge the inherent challenges with which case managers are faced. One of the interviewees noted that often case managers are full-time teachers or counsellors and are not afforded with release time to complete the IEPs. This lack of time can result in an IEP which is written for file compliance purposes rather than a document that is meaningfully developed with the students' needs in mind. It was also noted by a teacher that, when time constraints are what they are, case managers have only changed the date on the IEP and not given any meaningful thought to the progress or changes to reflect the student's emerging needs.

The time needed to collaborate and compose the IEP document cannot be understated. This research indicates that teachers and case managers are in need of more time to create a document that can yield the best results for a student with an exceptionality.

### **Process**

Teachers interviewed for this research indicated that there are considerable concerns regarding the *process* of developing, implementing, and reviewing an IEP. Given that nine of 10 teachers had not been invited to participate in the creation of an IEP in their careers, they were unsure as to whether or not they were *supposed* to be included in the development in the first place. The process of developing the IEP includes the expectation that classroom teachers will be active participants in the discussion of the needs of a student with exceptionalities in their class, as well as be able to participate in the creation of goals that support that student in finding success in a class. Without the

teachers knowing they should be part of the process, it is unlikely that teachers would initiate participation on their own. The respondents indicated that there should be a clear procedure to follow whereby all teachers are afforded the information on how to best meet the needs of their exceptional students.

Moreover, without knowing they should be involved, teachers are unable to participate in the setting of goals and evaluative process for a student with an IEP. If a teacher does not participate in the setting of goals, they cannot be an active participant in the evaluation of whether or not that goal was met. The lack of clarity in the process leads to a murky document with no concrete evidence that it supports learning. During the interview process, one teacher legitimately questioned whether or not people involved in the process think it is important. The teachers interviewed had little reason to believe that the process is important as they, as classroom teachers, were excluded from participating in the creation of the document in the first place.

The results of this study mirrored that of Rose et al. (2012) who concluded that there was inconsistent understanding of the purpose and use of the IEP document. It could be argued that the absence of a solid base of understanding of the purpose and use of an IEP coupled with the actualization of the document that meaningful consideration for student learning through the IEP strategies is not a possibility.

### **Frustration**

The final theme that will be discussed is that of *frustration*. Without a doubt, the interviewees, while resigned to the lack of cohesive understanding of the IEP, displayed an element of frustration. The codes that emerged reflected frustration with a lack of understanding of process, lack of time, lack of follow-through and the belief that IEPs are

created for the sole purpose of satisfying the Ministry of Education. The frustration with a lack of understanding of process and lack of time were discussed in the previous sections.

To summarize, the interviewees felt frustrated that there is lack of a general understanding regarding the expectations of how the IEP process should evolve. There were a number of legitimate concerns voiced by interviewees surrounding the process—most notably who should be included in the development. The frustration by teachers can lead to disengagement with the process, which can negatively impact students with an exceptionality. The teachers interviewed were also frustrated by the lack of time provided during the school day. This concern regarding a lack of time included time with teachers to collaborate with case managers, parents, and students. This lack of collaboration time hindered participants from active participation in the process, thereby limiting the document itself. The lack of time afforded to case managers to develop a document that has a hope of becoming a meaningful tool to guide the learning of the student with an exceptionality is therefore a limiting factor from the outset. In order to mitigate these frustrations, the results from the study indicated that an acknowledgement of the concerns, coupled with an action plan, could help to repair the level of frustration so that teachers once again become a key piece to a complex IEP puzzle.

An additional code that emerged was that of IEPs being written as a way to fulfill the expectations of the Ministry of Education. Several of the participants indicated, directly and indirectly, that they felt that the primary purpose of the IEP was not to help students with exceptionalities but rather to meet file compliance expectations. One teacher interviewed stated that the IEP is “not a document for the students...it appears to

be an ‘I’ dotted and a ‘T’ crossed and a funding formula situation”. The argument of IEPs written for file compliance versus IEPs written for students is a paradigm that was brought up several times during the study. The results of this study, which indicates a strong disassociation between teachers and IEPs at the high school level, could support the notion that IEPs are not documents that are written to assist in the educative process for students with exceptionalities. Several of the teachers interviewed argued that the lack of understanding is rooted in a lack of leadership and that there should be a plan to ensure all parties involved in the process of educating an exceptional student are appropriately educated in the expectations. Moreover, it could be debated that, if the IEP was developed in a way that it could be meaningfully implemented by classroom teachers, appropriate time would be not only available to collaborate and communicate, but it would be mandated for such uses.

All of the interviewees displayed various levels of frustration in the IEP process. The inconsistent understanding of the process coupled with the lack of time and follow-through led most of the teachers interviewed to view the IEP through the lens of file compliance versus student rights.

### **Summary**

The 10 participants in this research eloquently voiced their concerns regarding the meaningful use of IEPs at the high school level. Through the semi-structured interview process, these 10 teachers described their involvement and feelings regarding their current level of use and understanding of the IEP document. The themes that emerged from the coding process indicated that there is an inherent disconnect between teachers and the IEP document. According to the research findings, there is lack of *collaboration*,

lack of *communication*, lack of *time* and lack of clarity regarding the *process* in which to follow regarding the IEP document. These findings, coupled with a general feeling of *frustration* from the teachers interviewed, leads this researcher to conclude that there is limited value placed on the IEP, which minimizes the meaningfulness of the document designed to support students with exceptionalities.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

Chapter 1 of this project introduced the research question, discussed the significance and purpose of the study, provided background information, and provided an overview of the project. Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature as it pertains to IEPs. The review of literature was broken down into four main themes: *time* and *training, collaboration* and *communication, creation* and *implementation*, and *writing* and *reviewing goals*. Chapter 3 provided information regarding the research methodology for this qualitative study. The chapter further discussed the ethical considerations addressed and the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Moreover, Chapter 3 detailed research procedures used and it provided particulars regarding recruitment, consent, and interviewing of participants. Chapter 3 also described the data analysis used and the evaluation and validity of the study. Chapter 4 outlined the research findings. Demographic information regarding the interviewees was provided as was a breakdown of the research results in a question-by-question format. A formal analysis of results was also provided in Chapter 4 using a table to represent the themes as they emerged through first and second cycle coding. Through the coding and theming process, five categories emerged: *collaboration, communication, time, process*, and *frustration*. Chapter 5 comprehensively discussed the results of the research using the categories above as a guide.

Through the detailed discussion and careful consideration of the research results, Chapter 6 will conclude this study with several recommendations. The research yielded specific areas of concerns including *collaboration, communication, time*, and *process*. At the conclusion of the research, considerable time was spent analyzing the data. There



are a number of areas in which there could be improvement for those who are involved in the creation and implementation of an IEP for students in high school. The recommendations for growth include areas of *collaboration*, *communication*, *time*, and *process*.

## **Conclusions**

This qualitative study sought to better understand the factors that impact meaningful use of IEPs at the high school level. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers from three schools in a school district in British Columbia a number of conclusions can be made. The current practice of creating, implementing, and reflecting on IEPs at the high school level is negatively impacted by lack of *collaboration*, *communication*, *time*, and by a limited understanding of *process*. Combined, these deficits are leading teachers to feel frustrated, which is undoubtedly impacting the meaningful use of IEPs in high school settings.

**Lack of opportunity to collaborate.** The teachers interviewed for this study repeatedly expressed concern over the lack of opportunity afforded to collaborate on the development of an IEP for students with exceptionalities in their classroom. These teachers also expressed a desire to improve upon the current level of collaboration that is occurring in their schools. However, there is a systemic flaw that appears to be preventing that from consistently occurring. There is no clear level of expectation for teachers to collaborate on the IEP document for these high school teachers. Many of those interviewed were not even sure they were supposed to be included in the process at all. This disconnectedness cannot be beneficial for the students the IEP are designed to support.

**Lack of a clear means of purposeful communication.** Much like the lack of opportunity to collaborate, many of the teachers indicated a complete breakdown in the communication process. There were questions about who was supposed to be invited to IEP meetings, how the teachers were accessing information regarding students' IEPs, and how the teachers were supposed to implement and then report on the goals set forth by the IEP. This disconnect in communication drove many of the teachers interviewed to disengage from the IEP. There needs to be a clear line of communication established in order for teachers to become an essential part of the creation of the IEP.

**Lack of time provided to effectively collaborate and communicate.** Another key piece gleaned from the study was the lack of time provided during the school day to adequately participate in the IEP process. Teachers expressed their concerns with the growing amount of work and expectations placed on classroom teachers and case managers. Several of the teachers interviewed indicated that is almost impossible to be able to develop a plan for students with exceptionalities during the school day without release time provided. As many teachers noted, at the high school level, many case managers are full-time teachers as well. Attempting to case manage effectively and successfully run programming as a classroom teacher with ever-growing class sizes is an unrealistic challenge. At elementary schools, the case manager (often the Student Support Teacher) is provided time to arrange and manage IEP meetings with the classroom teacher always present. Providing a Teacher Teaching on Call to release classroom teachers to be active participants in the IEP meeting solidifies the IEP as a document that is created with the best interest of students in mind. At the high school

level, an IEP developed with no contribution from the classroom teacher cannot be expected to be used in a meaningful way.

**Lack of clear understanding of the process.** The teachers interviewed for this study had varied understandings of the IEP process. Many of them were unsure as to how the IEP was developed and whether or not their participation would make any difference to the student. The IEP goals were considered by some teachers to be “optional” and there were breakdowns in understanding as to the level of collaboration that was expected. All of the teachers felt that the IEP was important at some level, but one teacher legitimately questioned the importance of the document to those who are tasked with writing it. That question was a clear indication of the disconnect between teachers and the IEP. A document that is supposed to be the guiding tool for students with exceptionalities is lost on many teachers because of continued lack of involvement and understanding. It should be noted, again, that the teachers interviewed have years of classroom experience—and many of them are still unsure as to the process involved in writing an IEP.

## **Recommendations**

The following section will offer some recommendations garnered from results from this qualitative study exploring the meaningful use of IEPs at the high school level and a closing summary will conclude this report.

The purpose of this study was to discover the factors that influence the meaningful use of IEPs for teachers at the high school level. Ten teachers from three high schools were interviewed using a semi-structured interview structure. The limitations of this study include the small sample size and the limited equal participation

from schools in the district with six interviewees coming from one school. It would be injudicious to attempt to generalize the findings of this study to all high schools. Based on the results of the interviews, coding, and theming, the results ensued four major themes—*collaboration, communication, time, process* which will form the basis of the recommendations.

**Increase the opportunities for collaboration.** Without a doubt, the lack of collaboration presented the greatest concerns for the teachers interviewed. There needs to be a common enforced expectation that teachers will become active collaborators in the development of an IEP for each designated student in their class. The idea that a case manager, in isolation, could possibly anticipate and then formulate goals in relation to a specific class without the meaningful input of the classroom teacher is unrealistic and irresponsible. Classroom teachers need to be able to drive the goals set forth for students with exceptionalities as that is the best way that students will be able to demonstrate growth in a specific subject area. The IEP cannot be used meaningfully if the person tasked with using the document has not been a part of its development. These opportunities to collaborate need to include purposeful meetings that are designed specifically to discuss how to best meet the needs of the student with an IEP. Moreover, there needs to be a commitment from all educators that the collaboration process is not optional—it is a right of the student with the IEP to have educators evaluate and discuss their learning needs and take the steps necessary to meet those needs in the most effective way possible. The IEP should not be an afterthought.

**Ensure there is a clear line of communication.** In order to collaborate, a clear line of communication must be established. One of the most significant results gleaned

from the research is that no one seemed to understand who was responsible for what when it came to the development of the IEP. A large part of ensuring that students with IEPs are meeting their full potentials is by setting realistic goals that focus on their zones of proximal development. Establishing goals that are within students' instructional zones will ensure that the IEP plan challenges students without promoting frustration. Without a clear line of communication between teacher, case manager, student, and parent awareness of development has no chance of occurring. Establishing a clear line of communication should be a priority. The best way to ensure that the IEP for a high school student is used meaningfully is to make sure that open communication has led to collaboration.

**Provide adequate and equitable time.** The amount of time provided to elementary school teachers to meet with case managers, parents, and administrators during the IEP process and the time afforded to high school teachers is not commensurate. The teachers interviewed described in detail their concerns regarding finding the time to collaborate and effectively communicate with stakeholders during the school day in the IEP process. Administrators need to acknowledge the value of the IEP by providing, if not mandating, an acceptable amount of time to classroom teachers to be a part of the IEP process. As stated earlier, the results of this study and studies by Drasgow et al. (2001), Johns et al. (2002), Myers and Eiesenman (2005) and Smith (1990), demonstrate that lack of time to be meaningful participants in the development of an IEP diminishes the effectiveness of the document itself. During the IEP writing process, teachers should be provided with a minimal amount of time to be released from their classes to participate in the discussion surrounding a student with an exceptionality

that they teach. Once the semester or term has begun, teachers should be periodically released from their classes to meet with the case manager to discuss progress on any goals that are pertinent to students. This would directly impact students at the school level. In the School District, there are one or two opportunities during the school year for Student Support Teachers to meet in a collaborative manner during the school day to work on IEPs; however, these “IEP Bootcamps” are focused more on how to use the software rather than improving the understanding and skill set in writing meaningful IEPs. Due to the fact that these specific meetings do not provide a mechanism for staff who work with individual students to collaborate about student progress as it relates to IEP goals, there is no direct impact on learning. Moreover, in-service opportunities offered during the school day should be focused on guiding teachers through developing an authentic IEP rather than providing technical support. Providing the time to meet during the school day will increase the communication which could only positively affect the collaboration process.

**Create a clear procedure to ensure understanding of the process.** It was slightly disheartening to listen to long-term teachers describe how unsure they were of the IEP process. While some teachers interviewed had a moderate understanding of the process, some also had a very rudimentary understanding. Given the fact that IEPs for students with exceptionalities in British Columbia are not optional, every teacher should be very well-versed in the policies and procedures surrounding their development. It could be argued that teachers are, in fact, educated in IEP policy and procedure during their teacher training. It also could be argued that, without sustained and consistent use of that knowledge, it will inevitably diminish. Each school should have clear policy and

procedures that should be followed to ensure that the IEP document is not just written to fulfill Ministry of Education expectations, but also to meet the expectations of the students they are designed to help. Administrators should be ensuring that those teachers tasked with developing the IEP have beyond a superficial understanding of what is mandated and, most importantly, that teachers are a significant part of the process. Results from this study indicate that meaningful implementation of the IEP at the high school level is suffering due to a lack of cohesive understanding of the process.

### **Summary**

Students with exceptionalities are often faced with significant, life-long challenges. When provided with the best opportunities find success, being part of a school community can be a great equalizer for many students. The IEP should be a document that guides meaningful practice for high school teachers; however, creating a document that does not include the input of all relevant teachers makes little sense. This qualitative study was borne from a significant level of discontentment on the part of the researcher. After watching document after document created without the input of the teachers teaching the students for whom the IEP was designed, there was a strong belief that the process could improve. After interviewing 10 teachers and listening to their experiences, there is evidence to support the theory that improvement is necessary.

There are four areas of improvement that became evident at the conclusion of the research. First, the school district should increase the opportunities for meaningful collaboration for teachers so that they can become active participants in the IEP process. Second, the school district should ensure a clear line of communication between and among students, parents, and the school. Third, the school district should provide

adequate and equitable time for high school and elementary teachers to meet with necessary stakeholders to ensure the IEP is not only created in a way that is respectful of the student, but also provides the greatest opportunity for student growth. Finally, the school district should create a clear and consistent process in which all school staff are thoroughly aware of the policies and procedures that are expected to adhere to during the IEP process. The students deserve a system where a document, which is intended to support them, is created by all individuals who teach them with just that in mind. If the IEP continues to be a document that does not respect the rights of the exceptional student, then it leaves all stakeholders to question the point of writing the document in the first place.



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## **Appendix**

### **Information Letter / Consent Form**

Exploring Individual Education Plans in a High School Setting

#### **Who is conducting the study?**

##### **Principal Researcher:**

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This research project is part of the requirement for a degree of Master of Education in Special Education. The results of this study will be compiled in the form of a project to be filed for public perusal at the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George, British Columbia. Additionally, a copy will be provided to School District 68 and will be available at the District Main Office.

#### **Why am I doing this study? Why are you being asked to take part in this study?**

The purpose of this study is to explore the current level of knowledge and personal experiences with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in the high school setting. It is the hope that this research will highlight the successes and challenges high school teachers experience regarding IEP documents. As well, this research may add to the limited body of knowledge available regarding such experiences for high school teachers. You are being asked to participate in this research because your experiences—positive and negative—matter to our overall understanding of the IEP document. Your participation in this research is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without consequences or explanation. Any information you have provided up to that point will also be withdrawn and securely destroyed unless you explicitly consent to your information being retained and analyzed.

#### **What happens if you say “Yes, I want to be in the study”?**

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your commitment would be one twenty to thirty minute, one-on-one audio-recorded interview. This interview will be transcribed by the principal researcher.

**Is there any way that participating in this study could harm you?**

During the interview process, there is a possibility that you may feel uncomfortable or uneasy about your level of awareness regarding the IEP process. The researcher will strive to ensure that you understand that there will not be judgment placed upon you and your responses are completely anonymous.

If at any point, you feel uncomfortable or upset and wish to end your participation, please notify the researcher immediately and your wishes will be respected.

**What are the benefits of participating?**

The benefit of participating would be the knowledge gleaned from your critically important experiences, which has the potential to positively impact students with special needs.

**How will your identify be protected?**

Your anonymity will be respected. Participants will be identified by code number only. All responses will be kept confidential with recordings deleted and data shredded after it is collected and disseminated for information.

All data will be stored in a locked cabinet in my home and digital information will be stored on a password protected computer. Once information has been transferred to the computer, recordings will be deleted.

Although best efforts will be made to protect your identity, due to the small sample size and the use of demographic information, it cannot be guaranteed. Please note that the use of the research data will be restricted to this study and only I will have access to the raw data. However, the results will be present in thesis format and may be in journal articles, conferences, and presentations.

**Who can you contact if you have questions about the study?**

If you have any questions about what the research entails, please contact the researcher of this study at [crawfo6@unbc.ca](mailto:crawfo6@unbc.ca) or her supervisor at [andrew.kitchenham@unbc.ca](mailto:andrew.kitchenham@unbc.ca). The names and further contact information are listed at the top of the first page.

Additionally, you may contact the UNBC Research Ethics Board at [reb@unbc.ca](mailto:reb@unbc.ca) or 250.960.6735 should you have any ethical concerns or complaints about this study.

**Consent**

I have read or been described the information presented in the information letter about the project:

YES                      NO

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this project and to receive additional details I requested.

YES                      NO

I understand that if I agree to participate in this project, I may withdraw from the project at any time up until the report completion, with no consequences of any kind. I also understand that the data will be destroyed if I withdraw unless I agree to allow the researcher to use the anonymized data.

YES                      NO

I agree that the researcher can keep my interview data should I decide to withdraw from this study at any time.

YES                      NO

I have been given a copy of this form.

YES                      NO

I agree to be recorded.

YES                      NO

Signature:

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Name of Participant (Printed):

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Date:

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