

2013

## Inclusive Education: Perceptions of Parents of Children with Special Needs of the Individual Program Planning Process

Michael D. MacKichan

Mary J. Harkins  
MaryJane.Harkins@msvu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/ejie>



Part of the [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), and the [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

MacKichan, M. D., & Harkins, M. J. (2013). Inclusive Education: Perceptions of Parents of Children with Special Needs of the Individual Program Planning Process, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 3 (1).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education* by an authorized editor of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact [library-corescholar@wright.edu](mailto:library-corescholar@wright.edu).

**Inclusive Education: Perceptions of Parents of Children with Special Needs of the  
Individual Program Planning Process**

by

Michael Derry MacKichan  
Strait Regional School Board

Mary Jane Harkins  
Mount Saint Vincent University

### Abstract

In inclusive education, students with special needs may access the curriculum through adapted or individualistic plans. Parental involvement in developing the individualistic plans is pertinent to the success of both their children's education and the plan itself. Research from the United States offers insight into how parents perceive the process of developing individualist plans; however, limited research has been conducted with parents of children with special needs in Canada. This current study examines parental perceptions concerning the Individual Program Planning (IPP) process in Nova Scotia, Canada. Eight parents were interviewed using a guided interview format that consisted of 16 questions based on prior research on the subject matter. Qualitative analysis of the eight interviews resulted in the emergence of four key themes: a) *Educator-Parent Communication*, b) *Parental Perception of Educational Climate*, c) *Parent Knowledge*, and d) *Improvements to the IPP process*. Each category is reviewed here and supported with samples of direct quotations from parent interviewees. Recommendations are then suggested for educators and parents of children with special needs to promote positive and productive Individual Program Planning meetings.

## **Introduction**

Inclusive education policies and procedures are designed to ensure equal rights for all children (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2008). The most significant aspect of these policies for students with special needs is the Individual Program Plan (IPP) (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2008). The IPP is a plan based on students' individual strengths and challenges that ensures teachers are accountable for educating students who are unable to achieve the outcomes of the regular curriculum (Vaughn, 2003). The IPP's design uses yearlong curriculum goals, and breaks said goals down into smaller ones so that progress can be more easily tracked for students with exceptionalities (Vaughn, 2003). Many individuals are involved in forming an IPP, such as administrators, teachers, students, and parents (Department of education, 2006); as forming an IPP requires a great amount of effort from the people involved (Cooper, 1996). As a result, those involved in IPPs have formed opinions and perceptions concerning the program, particularly surrounding the creation process, and the added workload needed to develop and maintain an IPP.

Past research has focused on attitudes toward the IPP process with input coming from teachers, students, and parents. Research on teachers' attitudes towards IPPs has been conducted in Nova Scotia (Edmunds, 1998; Edmunds, 2000; and French, 1998), whereas research on parental attitudes and perceptions is limited in Nova Scotia. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to explore the attitudes and perceptions of parents and/or legal guardians regarding the IPP process.

## **Special Education in Canada**

In Canada during the 1970s specialized segregated education was at its pinnacle. Many students with disabilities were placed in segregated schools, and many in the educational field began to express dissatisfaction with the segregation process (Bunch, 1994). In the 1980s, more students with mild to moderate disabilities were moved into regular classrooms. Also of great consequence to special education was the enactment of Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982 (Department of Education, 2001). Section 15, Equality of Rights, states that, “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability” (Department of Justice, Canada, 1982, 15 (1)). In the 1990s the trend of inclusive education had gained considerable momentum (Edmunds, 2000). Inclusion promotes the integration of students with special needs into the regular classroom with an emphasis on individual needs (Edmunds, 2000).

Education in Canada is currently provincially mandated (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2008) therefore; each province or territory has unique legislation regarding special education. According to current Nova Scotia legislation, schools are required to create programs for students with special needs in a regular educational setting with their peers (The Education Act, 2002). If a student is having difficulty learning within the regular classroom setting an individualistic approach to his or her education may be needed (Special Education Policy, 2008). Therefore, the student may be placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or in an Individual Program Plan (IPP). In Nova Scotia, the individual

plan is called an Individual Program Plan (or IPP). When referring to matters pertaining to Nova Scotia, the term IPP will be used from here on. On the other hand, when referring to research outside this Province, the term IEP will be used.

### *Individual Education Plans*

According to the Nova Scotia Department of Education, the IPP is defined as

“... a statement of annual individualized outcomes and specific individualized outcomes based on the student’s strengths and needs that is developed and implemented for every student for whom Nova Scotia’s public school programs curriculum outcomes are not applicable and/or attainable” (Department of Education, 2006, p. 5).

Planning for a student’s transition from formal education to community after graduation is also part of the program planning process (Special Education Policy, 2006); this process typically starts in junior high. Transition planning determines appropriate resources for the student’s independent living, recreational pursuits, and employment strategy (Special Education Policy, 2006). To create an individualized transition plan, an analysis of the student’s strengths and challenges is again conducted, this time also taking into account the student’s long-term aspirations (Special Education Policy, 2006).

Nova Scotia educators generally feel that IPPs can be effective when appropriate resources are available (Edmunds, 1998; Edmunds, 2000). These resources, however, may not be accessible to teachers practicing in an inclusive classroom (French, 1998). The difficulties surrounding the development and monitoring of individual plans are not unique to Nova Scotia. In fact, research from the United Kingdom highlights similar struggles (Cooper, 1996; Tennant, 2007; Wedell, 2001; Carnine & Granzin, 2001; Lingard, 2001).

Frankl (2005) for example, states that since IEPs have become obligatory in the UK and many schools have developed an intricate system to monitor, write, and review IEPs. Moreover, a recurrent theme emerged in the literature on IEPs; the programs take up a great deal of the teacher's time, because of all the paper work and lack of support necessary to meet the needs of the students. Due to time constraints and lack of resources some professionals develop negative attitudes towards IEPs (Tike-Bafra & Kargin, 2009). Unfortunately, as Tennant (2007) cautions, these negative views of IEPs could result in becoming self-fulfilling prophecies, causing the IEP to be of little benefit to the student.

Students are not usually included in the development of the IEP and when they are included they do not seem to understand the process (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Martin, Van Dycke, Greene, Gardner, Christensen, Woods, & Lovett, 2006). As Goepel (2009) points out, the IEP process is most beneficial when there is a mutual exchange of information between parent, child, and educator. Not including the child in the decision-making process risks alienating the child, therefore rendering the IEP less effective than if it was based on the students' interests. Of course the child's age and ability to understand the process likely play a role in whether or not to involve the child in the process.

#### *Parental Perception of IEPs*

In the US there is a minimum amount of parental involvement in the IEP process that is legally required so, many parents feel left out of the decision-making process (Fish, 2008). Many parents feel that their opinions are not heard because educators rely too heavily on educational assessments (Fish, 2008). Since parents may not be as knowledgeable about special education, educators tend to insist that they are the experts who should be making the decisions (Fish, 2008).

Fish (2008) assessed parental perceptions of the IEP process. Fifty-one parents of children who received special education support from a support service agency took part in the study. The author created a questionnaire based on the literature of parental involvement in the IEP meetings. The results showed that 73% of parents disagreed with educators at one point during the IEP process, while only 27% felt that there were generally no disagreements with educators. In the second portion of the survey, Fish asked parents about their level of knowledge and their perceptions concerning the educators' level of knowledge on the subject of the IEP process. Results indicated that 24% of parents strongly agree and 39% agree that they understood the IEP process. Yet, only 16% of parents strongly agreed and 32% agreed that educators had sufficient knowledge of the IEP process.

To assess parental perception of the IEP conference, Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) sent a questionnaire to 84 parents of students with disabilities. Results showed that 89% of parents always attended the IEP conference for their child. Fifty-five percent of parents said they attended to provide input to educators, 25% said they attended to fulfill parental duties, and 19% said they attended to advocate for their child. Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) state that 42% of the open-ended responses seemed to indicate parents were taking a passive role in the IEP conference, meaning that parents attended meetings to be informed of progress and to find out what educators had planned for their children. Twenty-seven percent of parents stated that they attended the IEP conference with a partner or spouse, while 73% of parents indicated that spouses or partners did not attend the meetings. In this study mothers often assumed the major responsibilities of the child during the meeting. Forty-five percent of parents indicated that they always felt treated as

respected equals and indicate that educators asked for parental input and were willing to listen. Twenty-seven percent of parents felt they were usually treated as equals and as respected team members. Generally, however, parents wanted be respected or recognized as experts of their child's needs. Another 27% felt they were never treated as an equal contributing member of the IEP team. These parents generally felt useless or inadequate. Forty-six percent of parents said they always had enough input during IEP conferences. Twenty-four percent of parents said they usually had enough input during IEP conferences. Conversely, 27% of parents said they were never satisfied with their input into their child's IEP.

Fish (2006) states that, "Often times, IEP meetings have failed to build an equal partnership among parents of students with autism and educators (p. 58)." Therefore, Fish (2006) examined parental perceptions of IEP meetings, as well as how educators participating in these meeting perceived them. Participants in this study were members of The Association for Neurologically Impaired Children (AFNIC), a non-profit family support group advocating quality educational services for children with neurological disabilities. He asked five questions that dealt with the quality of services, their treatment by the IEP team, any changes they would recommend to the process, as well as how parents and schools could improve IEP meetings. When asked to describe the quality of services that their child received as a result of the IEP meetings, parents reported negative experiences during the IEP meetings. The majority of parents indicated that the negative experiences stemmed from disagreements about the best approach for educating their children. A general theme among responses was that parents felt educators saw them as being unreasonable. In some cases, parents were blamed for the difficulties their children

encountered due to their disabilities. Responses concerning the changes parents would like to see in their child's IEP meeting can be categorized into two fields: a need for increased understanding of their child and the implementation of all of the IEP objectives. Parents were often under the impression that educators did not understand their child's disability, asserting that educators believed that the child was exhibiting certain behaviors purposefully, rather than because of their disability. Furthermore, parents noted that many objectives created during IEP meetings were not implemented. They felt that the IEP meeting was merely a formality and, once the meeting was completed, objectives were not put into practice.

Results from this study also indicate that parents felt they should be more involved in the process leading up to the meeting instead of just showing up to sign the document. In some cases, parents indicated that schools were adversarial and deceitful to themselves and other parents. Likewise, when asked about what parents could do to improve IEP meetings parents clearly stated more parental involvement was needed. Fish (2006) recommends that future research be conducted that attempts to replicate this study with parents of children with autism, as well as with different disability categories and family support groups.

### **Current Study**

In Nova Scotia parents are expected to participate in the IPP process. Pertinent to the Individual Program Plan (IPP) is the concept of inclusive education adopted by the Department of Education in Nova Scotia. According to the Department of Education, the process of achieving inclusive education is complex and dependent upon many factors. One of these factors is the involvement of parents from the onset of the IPP process. The vision of the Department of Education is to have all schools in Nova Scotia implementing an inclusive practice. In schools that practice inclusion, the Department of Education documentation states that parents are contributing participants in the IPP development.

Research conducted in Nova Scotia echoes the sentiments expressed in the studies reviewed above (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Fish, 2008; Gopel, 2009; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000). For instance, in May of 2000 the Minister of Education formulated a committee to review the Special Education Policy of 1996. The committee reported that, “In terms of the program planning process, further efforts need to be made to ensure that meaningful parental involvement occurs” (Department of Education, 2001, p. 2). It is evident that parents and school personnel have different opinions on whether the program planning process has improved. Only 26% of parents of children with special needs who responded to the survey felt there was significant improvement in the program planning process. Conversely, 54% of school administrators and 51% of resource teachers felt the program planning process had significantly improved. Although the group facilitators did not formally assess parental involvement, many of the individuals involved in the focus groups noted that overall parental involvement had increased. The results of the survey indicated a different response from the parents. According to the survey, only 24% of parents of a student with special needs stated that parental involvement had

increased. Again, more school administrators (37%) felt that parental involvement had increased.

Since the publication of these findings in 2001, the Department of Education has published two documents aimed at explaining to parents what their role is in regards to the IPP process. The first document is titled, *The Program Planning Process: A Guide for Parents*. The Department of Education formulated this program-planning guide for parents after the Special Education Policy was reviewed in 2000. The focus of this guide is to educate parents on their rights and responsibilities in the program planning process. A second document titled, *Program Planning: A Team Approach*, was also produced for parents. This two-page document is a quick reference guide to explain the individual program planning process to newcomers.

Educators have mixed opinions on the importance of individual plans for students with special needs. There are some educators who believe that the process is a bureaucratic exercise that causes significant amounts of paper work that eventually detracts precious time from educating children with special needs. Some educators feel that in the right context an IEP can be highly effective. As stated earlier, there is much research on teachers' perceptions of the IEP process, but there is limited research on parental perceptions. In fact, there is limited research conducted to assess parental perceptions of IPP meetings in Nova Scotia since the publication of the Special Education Review Policy, and since the Department of Education's increased efforts to disseminate information to parents about the IPP process. Therefore, the primary goal of this study was to assess parental perceptions of the IPP process in Nova Scotia. A secondary goal of the current study was to build on the work of Fish (2006, 2008) by acquiring more in-depth knowledge of parental

perceptions, and to include different disability categories and family support groups in Nova Scotia.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the current study was to gain insights about the Individual Program Planning process in Nova Scotia from the perspective of parents of children with special needs. By understanding parental perceptions it may be possible to gain a better understanding of the overall IPP process, as well as identify areas that need improvement. Parents are a vital part of their children's education, thus, their voices need to be heard in order to be meaningfully involved in the development and implementation of their child's IPP.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research allows one to make sense of the undisciplined confusion of everyday experiences as they occur in natural settings (Richards & Morse, 2007). The intention of this study was to learn from parents how they experienced the IPP process; how they interpreted their experiences; and what meaning they attached to the IPP process.

### *Procedure*

This study was first submitted to and approved by the University Research Ethics Board. Disability organizations and a school board were contacted to determine if they were interested in participating in the study. Letters of invitation were provided to parents who expressed an interest in participating in the study. Accessing participants through various disability organizations and a rural school board presented a challenge as some organizations and school principals were reluctant to participate in the current study. The

majority of organizations and principals however, did agree to participate.

### *Participants*

This study targeted parents of children with special needs across different disability categories in an urban area, as well as a rural school board in Nova Scotia. Eight parents participated in the semi-structured interviews. All participants were females ranging in age from 25 to 54. Seven out of eight parents had post secondary education. The average number of children per household was two, with a range from one to four. The average number of children on an IPP per household was one, with a range from one to two. The average age when the child was first placed on an IPP was about six years old. The range was as young as five to as old as 11. The average length of time that a child was on an IPP was about seven years with a range from one year to 15 years.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Data was systematically collected and then analyzed, resulting in information and theories that are close in association to one another (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Theories formed using this method are known to offer insight, increase comprehension, and provide a significant guide to action (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the current study data was collected using a guided interview format. The theme and open-ended questions were predetermined; however, room was left for follow-up questions by the interviewer and changes of topics by the interviewee. The questions were based on previous research (Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Fish, 2006, 2008; Gopel, 2009; Garriott, Wandry, & Snyder, 2000). The interviews were approximately 30 minutes in duration. Participants were also asked to fill out a short questionnaire that measured various demographics.

Data collection and data analysis occurred in tandem (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998).

The analysis was conducted on the transcribed participants' interviews. The transcribed interviews were coded in order to simplify and focus on particular characteristics seen in the data (Richard & Morse, 2007). Analytical coding, which was used in the current study, allows the researcher to categorize or develop patterns from the data (Richard & Morse, 2007) by grouping the participant's words into themes (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998). The most common keywords were used to identify emerging themes that represented the participants' perceptions. The results section does not contain an identification key to track what each individual participant said. This precaution was taken because there were a small number of participants and, therefore, they may have been identified by speech patterns or personal experiences. The results of the semi-structured interviews produced a great deal of data. Not all data, however, could be used in this study; only the key themes were used in the findings.

### **Results and Discussion**

The results of this study are descriptive aspects of the day-to-day lives of parents involved in the Individual Program Planning process. Eight parents of children on IPPs were interviewed in order to access their perceptions of the IPP process in Nova Scotia. Each participant was interviewed using a guided interview format consisting of 16 questions (Appendix A). The questions were based on the literature regarding parental perceptions of the Individual Education Plan. The results can be considered a summary of how the participants' experienced events in the context of the IPP process during the meetings at the school, and also from the perspective of raising a student on an IPP. The themes in the data were organized into four key themes: a) *Educator-Parent Communication*, b) *Parental Perception of Educational Climate*, c) *Parental Knowledge*,

and d) *Improvements to the IPP process*. The themes are based entirely from the perspective of the participants.

a) *Educator - Parent Communication*

The first theme, *Educator-Parent Communication*, identified several areas where the communication between educators and parents influenced the IPP process in a positive or negative manner. For instance, some participants indicated that they felt the IPP was a formality or a form-filling exercise:

“It’s almost like going through the motions.”

“They just fill in their blanks on the form, and then an IPP is presented to me to review...”

Similar sentiments were found in the research of Cooper (1996).

Other participants indicated that they were not included in the process of developing goals for their son or daughter, which is consistent with previous research (Frankl, 2005 & Fish, 2008). Some participants went as far as to say the process was a waste of time:

“So yes, you know what you want, you can say what you want and all that kind of stuff, but I walk out the door and I’m thinking, I think I just wasted an hour of my time because I don’t think any of my input is actually going to make any difference.”

Similarly, some participants did not feel respected by educators during the IPP process, which corresponds with results in Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000). As one participant asserted, “Yeah, I didn’t feel respected that’s for sure.”

Other participants however, indicated they had considerable input into their child's program. They felt their opinions were heard and valued in the context of the IPP. Along the same line, some participants felt like respected contributing members of the IPP team:

“Absolutely [it's a team process]. I think that's the only way it'll work. I think that's the only way it'll work because when three o'clock is done at school, it has to continue at home.”

Although some participants may not have felt respected, the majority of participants indicated that there were few disagreements, and that they got along well with educators in most cases. This finding appears to contradict results from Fish (2008):

“Oh, it's wonderful, it's very you know, we just have coffee and talk. It's very amicable.”

“Really good, I think. Really good, yeah [getting along with educators].”

Another common aspect was how participants felt educators perceived them. Most participants reported they forcefully advocated during their child's IPP meetings, and were perhaps seen as being difficult to work with by educators. This theme was also found in Fish (2006). As a participant stated:

“I mean, I'm pretty laid back now, but the first few years I was really in your face when it came to Andrea. Yeah, well I felt like I had to be, so I guess you develop a reputation as a parent that, you know, either you make this work or there's going to be – just, you're going to be challenged on it.”

There was a mixed response from participants regarding whether the process was collaborative:

“I am [consulted] in form, but I don't feel I am [consulted] in substance.”

“They just fill in their blanks on the form, and then an IPP is presented to me to review, we have the meeting and I'm giving my input, then at Christmas time I get an IPP to look at to sign, and I don't know where half of it came from.”

“... I really engaged in it right from the very beginning, and so there was never an issue of that (showing up and the IPP was completed). I think it’s really important to develop strong rapport with teachers. Because like I said, the parents know the child best, so they know what works and doesn’t work for them in terms of learning. And you know that because you’ve raised them. You know how they think.”

*b) Parental Perception of Educational Climate*

The second major theme, *Parental Perception of Educational Climate*, identified several areas where certain school policies, rules, or issues of leadership have influenced the IPP process. One category that emerged was that some participants were rushed during the IPP meetings. These participants stated that the meetings were not long enough to actually finish what needed to be done:

“The only thing is I find them very rushed.”

“Because it is, they’re rushed through and like I said, I don’t have any issues and so that’s okay, but for a parent who might have a lot of issues, I can see the process being very frustrating like trying to get changes done.”

Although some participants felt the meeting was rushed, most participants thought the schools were very accommodating in terms of scheduling the meetings:

“It’s never been an issue. Until high school, they were generally after school and they always work with you to set up the time.”

“Oh, very convenient....”

“Very [accommodating]...”

Many participants stated that the leadership of the school was a determining factor in the success of the IPP. In some cases participants indicated that it was the resource teacher or the principal that set the attitude for the IPP process, as indicated by the following comment:

“When you’ve got a special needs child, it depends on the leadership at the school.

“

Similar results were found in Cooper (1996) and Tennant (2007). Along similar lines, some participants perceived that administration and resource teachers were knowledgeable about the process. Other participants felt that some educators understood the process, whereas others did not:

“From what I’ve seen, yes [educators understand the IPP process]. They were on target with the things that I’ve seen so far, so yeah, I would say.”

“Some administrators do [understand the IPP process], resource teachers for the most part do, classroom teachers, hit and miss.”

“I don’t think they do. Honestly, I think that the people who put them in place as in the principals, the resource teachers, the reading recovery people, I think they know the IPP. I think when you get new graduates that are teaching students, that sometimes they’re not aware of what the IPP actually is, other than to make their classroom environment a little more manageable for them.”

### *c) Parental Knowledge*

The third major theme, *Parental Knowledge*, identified many areas that could be seen as unique to the majority of parental experiences during the IPP process. For example, participants were asked if they understood the IPP process. The majority of participants indicated that they currently understood the IPP process:

“Yeah, I understand [the IPP process], I just don’t always agree with how it’s implemented. Well I’d like to be back in middle school, where I had a lot more contact – I see resource teachers as my liaison between administration and classroom teachers.”

“So, well I work in the field so I guess I have a little bit of an understanding there maybe more so than other parents.”

“...very much so [understanding of IPP process]. And it’s because it’s presented at the meetings, you know, well presented and there’s tons of literature out there for you to educate yourself on it.”

Fish (2008) also determined that many parents felt they understood the IEP process. Some participants indicated that they thought the process was initially confusing, but that they have gained considerable experience. Similarly, most participants did not feel adequately prepared for the first IPP meeting. Some participants relied on past work experience, while others learned as much as possible about the process prior to the meeting:

“No. Not totally prepared.”

“Semi-prepared. We had been involved in a parent support group. So having listened to some of that and the Student Services’ person actually come and spoke to our group, so I felt, yeah, I felt somewhat prepared because I had that background behind me that a lot of people may not have.”

“No, I felt outside of the box because I had no information. I had no knowledge. So as a parent, you research, you dig into what you need to know in order to be a team player with teachers, principals, school psychologists, because it is your child, right? It’s no one else’s child, it’s your child. So you need to be on par, and that’s through knowledge.”

When asked how they felt during the first meeting, many participants indicated they felt scared and overwhelmed. Others welcomed the IPP, thinking that it would benefit their child:

“It was a bit frightening. I felt anxious going to the first IPP meeting.”

“Oh scary, [the first IPP meeting] was overwhelming, yeah. Yeah, it was overwhelming because especially the whole word, IPP, and then there’s obviously lots of paperwork involved.”

“It was a little intimidating.”

“And I did find it difficult in the beginning, because the thing is that you have to realize when people are talking about your kid, you’re not always hearing everything.”

“Well I kind of suspected it, with my background I knew about IPPs.”

“It was tough to take.”

“I thought it was great.”

When asked what their roles were as parents, some participants responded that they felt they were there to advocate for their child’s rights. Others indicated that being involved as much as possible and supporting their child was the proper role. This is contrary to what Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) reported. In particular, Garriott, Wandry, and Snyder (2000) found that many parents chose a passive role in the IEP process.

*d) Improvement to the IPP Process*

The fourth major theme, *Improvements to the IPP process*, encompassed ideas from participants on how the IPP process could be improved. For instance, one participant felt that the transition phase should be implemented once a child on an IPP becomes a certain age. Some participants stated that schools needed to be more open to outside consultants. One participant suggested that there should be a system where experienced parents came to support parents who were new to the IPP process. Other participants felt that the teacher assistants (TA) should be more involved in the IPP meeting. Participants stated that since the TA is with the student for a great deal of time throughout the school day, they should be included in the meetings to provide feedback. Participants in the current study generated several ideas on how the process could be improved:

“But okay, there are policies around transition, for example. Maybe we need to mandate that when you hit a certain age or whatever, that those policies are handed out in paper copy to the parents around the table. I’m sure some teachers do it, probably some don’t, because there’s probably more Department of Education policy out there that I’m not aware of that would be useful if I was.”

“They need to be more open to outside consultants.”

“I’d like to see a system where new parents coming in have parent advocates that sit down beside them, as it can be overwhelming I know, to some people. That would be a nice thing to add for new parents, I think.”

“I do think the meetings should be longer than what they are.”

“So like you know, if there’s problems, to make sure that the principal there, the TA – oh yeah, and that’s one thing I don’t agree with. The TA can’t sit in on the IPP meetings. That is a huge, huge detriment to the process because they’re the ones who deal with most of these behaviours. And then their information is relayed to the teacher, and the teacher wasn’t really there [when] the behaviour [happened], so it doesn’t stick out in their mind as much.”

Parents in Fish (2006) also indicated that more parental involvement was needed to improve the process.

### **Recommendations and Directions for Future Research**

Future research could focus on accessing a larger population in Nova Scotia. An Internet based survey sent to parents could be a convenient way of accessing parental perceptions surrounding the IPP process. An Internet based survey will alleviate the scheduling of interviews, and may ease hesitations around participating in an audio-taped interview. Although not a focus of the current study, an important area for future research could be to do an in depth examination on how parents feel the IPP process could be improved. Such research has not been conducted on a large scale in the area of this research since the publication of the Report to the Special Education Review Committee that reviewed the Special Education Policy of 1996 (Department of Education, 2001). Although the primary focus of the current study is parental perceptions of the IPP process, it could be beneficial for future research to focus on perceptions of pre-service teachers and their preparedness for working with parents developing IPPs. Specifically, future research could focus on the perceptions of pre-service teachers in regard to parents and parental involvement in the IPP process.

### ***Recommendations for Educators***

1. The initial IPP meeting can be very intimidating for parents. The process usually consists of one or two parents walking into a room with several educators. Parents can feel overwhelmed by such formality. Care should be taken in approaching the situation initially. Contact should be made well in advance of the meeting to explain to parents how many people will be at the meeting and what their roles will be.
2. During the meeting, especially the initial meeting, information should be provided to parents about the process in writing so it can be read during or after the meeting. Parents may be anxious at the time of the meeting and it can be difficult to process information once someone has become emotional.
3. It is important to empathize with parents and try to understand their perspectives. Parents can, at times, become emotional but they may be just trying to ensure their son or daughter was getting all of the services they needed.
4. Every effort should be made to invite the parents into the IPP process of developing goals prior to the first formal meeting. This may alleviate opinions of the meetings being rushed, and could address the lack of collaboration that some parents may be feeling.
5. Parents feel that they have knowledge to contribute when it comes to their children and they want such knowledge to be respected. If educators listen to parents and integrate their thoughts and ideas into the development of an IPP, this will enhance feelings of collaboration between parents and educators. Accessing parental knowledge could be as simple as asking about their son or daughter's strengths or preferences.
6. Another issue that emerged from this current study was that teachers needed training in reacting to frustrations expressed by parents in an empathetic way. Many participants interviewed in this study stated that at one point during their history of IPP meetings they

became emotional, upset, or frustrated with educators. Therefore, education programs at universities and teacher professional development sessions need to explicitly teach their pre-service and in-service teachers how to work with parents in a caring and empathetic manner.

### ***Recommendations for Parents***

1. It is important for parents to initiate follow-up contact with the school after the initial IPP meeting. They need to contact the school on an ongoing basis to check on their child's progress with educators.
2. The first IPP meeting can be quite intimidating. It would be beneficial for parents to meet with other parents who have participated in this process. It would also be helpful to bring along an experienced parent or parent advocate to the very first IPP meeting to help ease feelings of intimidation or fear.
3. Become educated on the IPP process and rights as parents with the documents provided by the Department of Education. Ask knowledgeable parents about their experiences with the IPP process.
4. It would be beneficial to attempt to check all emotions at the door. When educators focus on the emotional parents it can detract from the IPP process.
5. Bring someone to the meeting to take notes or for support. It can be difficult to take notes and listen to what is being said at the same time. It is beneficial to debrief after the meeting with someone else who attended the meeting.
6. The IPP meetings can be rushed so to save time and to ensure that parents' voices are heard, parents may want to write down questions and suggestions prior to the meeting.

7. It is important for parents to take an active role as an advocate for their child to ensure that their child receives available resources.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The findings of this study demonstrate how valuable parents are to the IPP process and how important it is to involve them at the beginning of the development of the IPP. Parents can provide crucial information regarding their child's strengths and challenges. By creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere, educators can truly connect with parents early on in the process. Educators and parents can then become partners in the students' learning. When, and only when, a genuine partnership exists between parents and educators, the Individual Program Plan becomes much more than a form filling exercise.

## References

- American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Children with Disabilities (1999). The pediatricians' role in development and implementation of an individual education plan (IEP) and/or an individual family service plan (IFSP). *Pediatrics*, *14*(1), 124-127.
- Bogdan, R.C., & Biklen, S.K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Toronto, ON: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bunch, G. (1994). Canadian perspectives on inclusive education from there to here: The passage to inclusive education. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, *4* (3 & 4), 19-35.
- Carnine, D., & Granzin, A. (2001). Setting learning expectations for students with disabilities. *School Psychology Review*, *30*(4), 466-472.
- Conroy, T., Yell, M.L., & Katsiyannis, A. (2008). Schaffer v. Weast: The Supreme Court on the burden of persuasion when challenging IEPs. *Remedial and Special Education*, *29*(2), 108-117. doi: 10.1177/0741932508317273
- Cooper, P. (1996). Are individual education plans a waste of paper? *British Journal of Special Education*, *23*(3), 115-119.
- Denzin, N.K., Lincoln, Y.S., & Giardina, M.D. (2006). Disciplining qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *19*(6), 769-782.  
doi:10.1080/0951839060075990
- Edmunds, A.L., & Edmunds G. (2008). *Special Education in Canada (1<sup>st</sup> ed)*. McGraw-Hill, Ryerson.

- Edmunds, A. (2000). Teachers' perceived needs to become more effective inclusion practitioners: A single school study. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 10 (3), 3-23.
- Edmunds, A. (1998). Classroom teachers are not prepared for the inclusive classroom. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 8 (2), 27-40.
- Fish, W.W. (2008). The IEP meeting: Perceptions of parents of students who receive special education services. *Preventing School Failure*, 53(1), 8-14.
- Fish, W. (2006). Perceptions of parents of students with autism towards the IEP meeting: A case study of one family support group chapter. *Education*, 127(1), 56-68.
- Flick, U. (2007). Preface. In U. Flick (Ed.), *Doing Interviews: The SAGE qualitative research kit*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Frankl, C. (2005). Managing individual education plans: Reducing the load of the special educational needs coordinator. *Support for Learning*, 20(2), 77-82.
- French, C. (1998). *Educators' perceptions of the IPP process*. Halifax, NS: Nova Scotia Teachers Union.
- Garriott, P.P., Wandry, D., & Snyder, L. (2000). Teachers as parents, parents as children: What's wrong with this picture? *Preventing School Failure*, 45(1), 37-43.
- Goepel, J. (2009). Education plan: Confusion or collaboration? *Support for Learning*, 24(3), 126-131.
- Hesse-Biber, S.N., & Leavy, P. (2004). Distinguishing qualitative research. In S.N. Hesse-Biber, & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice* (pp. 1-15). New York: Oxford.

- Konya-Weishaar, M. (2001). The regular educator's role in the individual education plan process. *The Clearing House*, 75(2), 96-98.
- Lingard, T. (2001). Does the *Code of Practice* help secondary school SENCOs to improve learning? *British Journal of Special Education*, 28(4), 187-190.
- Martin, J.E., Van Dycke, J.L., Greene, B. A., Gardner, J.E., Christensen, W.R., Woods, L.L., & Lovett, D.L. (2006). Direct observation of teacher-directed IEP meetings: Establishing the need for student IEP meeting instruction. *Exceptional Children*, 72(2), 187-200.
- Martin, J.E., Marshall, L.H., & Sale, P. (2004). A 3-year study of middle, junior high , and high school, IEP. *Exceptional Children*, 70(3), 285-297.
- Nova Scotia. Department of Education. *Program planning: A team approach*. Nova Scotia: Author.
- Nova Scotia. Department of Education (2008). *Special Education Policy*. Nova Scotia: Author. doi: 371.95'09716-dc22
- Nova Scotia. Department of Education (2006). *The program planning process: A guide for parents*. Nova Scotia: Author. doi: 371.10207
- Nova Scotia. Department of Education (2001). *Report of the special education implementation review committee*. Nova Scotia: Author.
- Office of Special Education Programs (2000). *History: Twenty-five years in educating children with disabilities through IDEA*. Washington, DC. Author.
- Ottawa. House of Commons. *Constitution Act. Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. Saskatchewan: Regina, 1982.

- Richards, L. & Morse, J.M. (2007). *Read me first for a user's guide to qualitative methods (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, California.
- Strauss, A.L. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, California.
- The Education Act [Nova Scotia]. 2002, c. 5, ss. 8-16. URL:  
<http://nslegislature.ca/legc/statutes/eductn.htm>
- Tike-Bafra, L., & Kargin, T. (2009). Investigating the attitudes of elementary school teachers, school psychologists and guidance research center personnel on the process of preparing the individualized educational program and challenges faced during the related process. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 9(4), 1959-1972.
- Tennant, G. (2007). IEPs in mainstream secondary schools: an agenda for research. *Support for Learning*, 22(4), 204-208.
- Tod, J. (1999). IEPs: Inclusive educational practices? *Support for Learning*, 14(4), 184-188.
- Vaughn, S., Bos, C.S., & Schumm, J.S. (2007). *Teaching students who are exceptional, diverse, and at risk in the general education classroom*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Wedell, (2001). When is an IEP worth the paper it is written on? *British Journal of Special Education*, 28(1), 45-46.