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**POLICIES AND PROCEDURES IN THE COMMUNICATION AND
COLLABORATION OF IEP TEAM MEMBERS FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN**

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ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurological disorder, affecting the functions of the brain. These individuals struggle with adjusting and adapting, and often avoid, anything unfamiliar, unknown, or any change in their rigid sameness and routine. Cognitive abilities also vary from normal to extreme challenges with other characteristics and deficits that can significantly impair an individual's ability to develop the necessary skills to live a full and independent life. In 1990, Congress added autism as a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Under this law, autistic children have a legal right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Under these laws, parents of autistic children have the legitimate and legal right to participate in all aspects of their autistic child's education. An Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is developed for every child meeting the IDEA's eligibility requirements, and outlines the child's FAPE; further, the IEP is developed by the IEP Team, which includes the parents, the Local Education Agency representative (school principal), the special education teacher, the general education teacher, and the school psychologist. Because special education is governed by multiple mandates simultaneously, that of the federal, state, and local school districts, a grey-area exists and allows school administrators to develop and implement their own special education policies and procedures as long as they are not contrary to those mandated in the federal and state laws. As school administrators have chosen to develop and implement two separate special education policies and procedures for different IEP Team members, one set for the professionals on the team, and another entirely different set for the parents on the same team, parents have felt they really are not a part of their own child's IEP Team. Further, IEP Team disagreements, negative characterizations between parent-professionals permeate special education, and litigation has increased. Intergroup Theory is used to explore special education communication policies and procedures, and to understand how it is creating group membership and vice versa. Suggestions are offered as how to include parents as equal IEP Team members and to increase positive characterizations between parents and professionals of the same IEP Team, and to decrease litigation.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong neurological disorder, affecting the functions of the brain. Often times, these individuals report histories of normal physical growth and physical development yet display development impairments and problems in thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others. Symptoms range from mild to severe, dependent upon the individual, and typically affect boys more than girls. Characteristics include extreme attention, boarding on obsessiveness, to routine and sameness, in schedules, surroundings, environment, food, and activities. These individuals struggle with adjusting and adapting, and often avoid, anything unfamiliar, unknown, or any change in their rigid sameness and routine. Cognitive abilities also vary from normal to extreme challenges and a few also have problems with sleep and experience seizures. Other characteristics include the following: 1) communication impairments and oddities: difficulty using or understanding language, typically containing conversations to a few narrow topics of interest, and frequently repeating certain phrases; 2) struggles in relating individuals, things, and situations: difficulty in making friends and socializing with peculiar mannerisms, an inability to read facial expressions, and a lack of eye contact in communication and socialization, and 3) engaging in repetitive, self-stimulatory body movements/behaviors, such as hand/arm flapping, spinning, rocking and/or repeating sounds/phrases, in response to sensory stimuli. Often times, the original diagnosis is accompanied by a co-morbid diagnosis which can include anything from mental retardation, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and/or depression (American Psychiatric Association, 1994 & 2000; Simpson, 2003). As outlined, those being diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum possess a varying range of intellectual and language abilities, as well as disabilities; further, these abilities and disabilities manifest themselves early on and, typically, do not carry a promising prognosis

(Heflin & Simpson, 2003). Clearly, these unique clusters of characteristics, challenges, and deficits can significantly impair an individual's ability to develop the necessary skills to live a full and independent life (Heflin & Simpson, 1998; Simpson, 2003).

According to Braithwaite and Thompson (2000), "The field of special education has both the advantage and disadvantage of being governed by federal, state, and local school district mandates." (p. 104). Congress declared in the Individuals with Disabilities Act: "Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no-way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities" <https://utser.specialedreference.com/>. In 1990, Congress added autism as a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under this law, federal government utilizes the state, and the state in turn utilizes the school districts who are obligated to identify and evaluate and to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all eligible students with disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and to allow the parents of children with disabilities to be involved in every single aspect of their child's education (Stoner, Bock Thompson, Angell, Heyl & Crowley, 2005). Stoner & Angell, 2006, explain the significance of the 1997 IDEA amendments as it "legalized" and "legitimized parents' role in the education" of their own children" (p.177).

In the education of special needs children, specifically autistic children, it is critical that the state, represented by the school district and administrators, engage the parents of autistic children by communicating and collaborating with them as equal members on the child's educational team to achieve the goals and comply with the laws of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and to provide Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to build a

“strong and effective educational experience for children with disabilities” (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl & Crowley, 2005). Congress has defined FAPE as “a special education and related services that (a) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (b) meet the standards of the state educational agency, (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the state involved, and (d) are provided in conformity with the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401(8))” (Yell, Katsiyannis, Drawgow & Herbst, 2003).

Within this framework, Congress did not give a substantive definition of FAPE but did detail the procedural requirements that schools must follow in order to comply with providing a student with special education services. The procedural requirements were hoped to be a safe guard to a student’s right of a FAPE by ensuring the meaningful engagement of parents in the developing and implementing process of their own child’s education program. The procedural safeguards a school district is required to provide to parents of students with disabilities under IDEA are the following: “(a) prior written notice, (b) parental consent, (c) opportunity to examine records, (d) independent educational evaluation (e) and the right to request an impartial due process hearing” (IDEA Regulations 34 C.F.R.§§ 300 500-515)(Yell, Katsiyannis, Dragow, & Herbst; 2003).

Before a child can received special education services, they must first be determined eligible under IDEA. If the child is not school aged, the specifics of the child’s FAPE are outlined in an Individualized Family Services Plan (IFSP): however, if the child is school aged, the specifics of the child’s FAPE are outlined in an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The biggest difference is that the IFSP focuses on the entire family’s needs, whereas the IEP only targets the child, typically their academic needs over their non-academic needs, and it never addresses the needs of the family (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005, pg. 44).

Typically, a parent raises a concern, and the school assembles a team to work with the parent in thoroughly assessing and evaluating the child in all areas: academic and non-academic. It is important to note that the members on this assessment/evaluation team typically are the same members of the IFSP/IEP Team; further, it is critical to point out that the parent is a part of the IFSP/IEP Team. The team analyzes the collected data and creates a baseline from which they determine two things: 1) the child's eligibility, and 2) the child's personal educational needs (Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2003, p. 184). The child's personal educational needs include the following: 1) the child's special education services, 2) the child's related services, 3) the child's least restrictive environment (LRE), 4) and measuring the child's continued progress (Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2003, p.).

The IEP Team is to create the IEP for the individual child. The IEP Team is typically made up of the following members: 1) Local Education Agency, (LEA), typically the school principle, 2) district/school psychologist, 3) special education teacher, 4) general education teacher, and 5) parents of the autistic child. What constitutes a FAPE for one child will vary according to the specific needs and abilities of the individual child, and thus, additional members of a typical IEP Team include: 1) Occupational Therapist, 2) Physical Therapist, and/or 3) Speech-Language Pathologist. However, the IEP Team members are equally charged with the same duty and responsibility of evaluating, assessing, and measuring the academic and non-academic progress of the individual child; however, it is critical to note that the parent is the one who is to approve all decisions of the team, not the other members of the team, the professionals, dictating educational decisions to the parent of the child.

IDEA and FAPE require the IEP, at a bare minimum, is reviewed and updated annually. Throughout the year, data is to be collected and at the end of the year, another assessment is to be conducted to again determine the child's eligibility and personalized educational needs. The entire

IEP Team is to conduct and carry out these new evaluations, to collect the data, and to analyze it in making these determinations. Braithwaite and Thompson (2005) state that the IEP is the format to facilitate parent-professional communication to create understanding of the following between parents and professionals: 1) the capabilities, non-academic as well as academic, of the student and the school, 2) mutually determined goals, 3) co-operation in parent-professional data collection, 4) agreement of related data for future conversations, and 5) review checks to ensure understanding between both parties (p.105-106).

Hardwood, Giles, & Palomares (2005) stress that Intergroup communication takes place when one side defines the other's identity within a social situation and clearly links the self and other characterizations in a way that has meaning to all parties involved (p.1-7). It is important to note that not all parties have to acknowledge or have an awareness of the message and characterizations in order for Intergroup communication to take place: only one side needs to take an Intergroup perspective in order for Intergroup communication to occur (Harwood, Giles, & Palomare, 2005, p.1-7). Three elements exist in order for Intergroup communication to occur: 1) a clear and distinct categorization of the self and the other within a social interaction, 2) a salience in the categorization of the self and other for all parties involved that is social and not personal, and 3) relevance of the categorization of the self and other for all parties involved by linking the separate categorizations together (Harwood, Giles, & Palomare, 2005, p.2-3). Intergroup communication research examines "the ways in which group memberships shape and are shaped by communication," which are typically attributed to and grounded in intergroup issues and lead to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Harwood, Giles, & Palomare, 2005, p.1-2).

Much like a sports team, an IEP Team needs to facilitate and strengthen intergroup communication and collaboration, while resolving disagreements in ways to build trust and strengthen an Intergroup Identity and cohesiveness. As previously stated, Stoner & Angell, 2006,

pointed out the 1997 amendment to IDEA mandated parents' legal and legitimate right to be involved in every aspect of their disabled child's education; further, they stress that IDEA "stipulates that parents must be invited to participate on their children's education team as these teams identify and evaluate children for special education, set educational goals, and make service delivery choice (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services [OSERS] 2000)." Stoner & Agnell, 2006, also found that "effective communication is vital to enhancing parental involvement, partnerships, and family centered approaches to service delivery" and is an "effective intervention strategy for children with autism" (p. 177-178). Soodak and Erwin (2000) also document the widely known fact that parental involvement "has been identified as a necessary and valid indicator of quality outcomes in the education of young children with disabilities" and point to the criticalness of enhancing and creating "meaningful parental involvement" (p.29). Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley (2005) define parental involvement as "the communicative and collaborative interactions between parents and professionals" (p.39). Unfortunately, research has shown school districts are failing in this regard: "Evidence suggests that the arena of interaction between parents and education professional is often fragmented and poorly integrated. Confusion, frustration tension, and less than optimal levels of cooperation often emerge, affecting the overall efficacy of service delivery and the eventual wellbeing of those being serviced" (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl & Crowley, 2005).

Within the IEP Team, professionals negatively characterize parents; further, parents report difficulties in attempts to collaborate with professionals and in contributing to their own child's IEP. Kohler (1999) found in his research that "professionals view families as unreliable sources of information, and even as adversarial" (p.157). Likewise, Stoner & Angell (2006) found parents with autistic children reporting that "the educational system identifies them as adversarial, demanding, and hostile" (p.177). Canary and Jackson (2016) found parents experienced

difficulties in attempts to collaborate with professionals in order to make decisions for their autistic children (p.17). Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley (2005) found parents reporting difficulties in both obtaining services and in the delivery of those services, as well as a lack of parent-professional collaboration (p.39). Stoner & Agnell, 2006, again found these same issues to be major parental concerns a year later, with the addition of parents of disabled children reporting no parental involvement in the development of their own child's IFSP and/or IEP (p.178). Braithwaite & Thompson (2005) discovered that parental participation during IEP meetings is significantly reduced, and almost non-existent, as parents are "on the receiving end of one-way communication from the professional to the parent" (p. 117).

Studies continue to show significant communication problems between home and school, breaking down the IEP Team, and leading to an increase in litigation. Lake and Billingsley, 2000, in their analysis found that parent-professional communication ranged from miscommunication, a lack of communication, a repression of communication, non-communication, an unwillingness to communicate and/or listen to the other members, and the use of communication intimidation tactics, especially in team meetings (p.248). Further, their research confirmed the use of these communication tactics were major factors in escalating conflict between school districts and the parents of autistic children and leading to increased litigation (p.248).

When professionals do not communicate and collaborate effectively with parents as critical and equal members of their own child's IEP Team, it "Leaves parents feeling there is no one to hear their concerns: their concerns are not equally as valid as those of the "professionals" (Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005, p. 48-49). It further reinforces the historical perspective of parents by the educational system, as Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005, point out, that parents are "viewed as peripheral in their child's education and treatment" (p.39). Parents come to the conclusion that they really are not a part of their own child's

IEP Team, and the only way for them to be acknowledged as an equal IEP Team member by their professional counterparts and the educational system is to exercise their due process rights. As Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005, point out the sobering reality, “Although IDEA’s provisions are straightforward and fundamental, attitudinal and implementation complexities often deter the law’s well intended focus” (p.39).

Hardwood, Giles & Palomare, 2005, stress the importance of studying group communication patterns, which significantly impact the way group identity is created, maintained, and negotiated, and leads to questions of group authenticity (p.1-7). Further, they stress the criticalness of studying “the ways in which some individuals exist on the margins or boundaries between groups. . . These liminal identities raise questions for others in the environment about the legitimacy of an identity and encourage difficult attributions” (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005, p.1-7). The purpose of intergroup research is two-fold: 1) to understand how human divides, such as prejudice and discrimination, are created through communication processes and cause many intergroup problems, and 2) how communication processes can inclusively represent and embrace group diversities and identifications to create positive social identities and disaffirming human divides (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005, p.13).

In terms of an IEP Team, it is then critical to examine the administrative policies and procedures within the special education system that dictate the communication, collaboration, disagreement, and educational practices between parents and professionals to identify the ways professionals are meeting the well-intended focus of IDEA and FAPE and/or keeping parents of autistic children on the peripheral of their own child’s education. What are the administrative policies and procedures for communication, collaboration, disagreement, and education between parents and professionals that comprise the IEP Team? Moreover, in what way do these policies and procedures engage and include parents as a part of their own child’s IEP Team, and in what

way do these policies and procedures minimize and exclude parents from their own child's IEP Team? Lastly, in what way, if any, can these policies and procedures be changed to facilitate more engaging communication, collaboration, disagreement resolution, and education for parents and professionals as equal IEP Team members.

METHOD: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF TWO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

To explore these questions, the principle investigator recruited relevant school district staff and parents for the research interviews. The principle investigator used her personal network of parents of children with autism to recruit parent participants from two different school districts. Snowball sampling was used to gain additional participants. After identifying the relevant school district staff on the two different school district websites, the principle investigator sent email invitations to each relevant school district staff personnel to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was used to identify relevant affiliates that opted to participate in the study as well. The principle investigator conducted interviews, some recorded and some handwritten, at the location of the participant's choice. The principle investigator transcribed the interviews, both handwritten and recorded, for analysis. Any names in the transcripts were changed to pseudonyms to provide confidentiality and protect participant's identities (see Table 1).

A comparative case study was used to try to identify and understand the differences in school district special education policy interpretation and implementation and the different experiences of parents with autistic children within the school different school districts. Questions were drafted for the different stakeholders to address their individual positions and interests within the special educational system and interviews were conducted. When possible, these interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed. When not possible, interviews were handwritten, further transcribed and then analyzed as well. The following was used as a unit of analysis in each interview to identify patterns and themes within each interview: 1) each new topic that arose

between the interviewer and interviewee during the interviews, 2) each new change in speaker and/or each turn in talk between the interviewer and the interviewee, and 3) each new additional question and/or reiteration from the interviewer to the interviewee to expand and clarify the interviewee's verbal communication. Thus, each new topic and each turn in talk was used as a unit of analysis in each interview. During analysis, different themes and patterns were identified and logical conclusions obtained. Interview data was analyzed using qualitative interpretive methods.

Within school district number one, nineteen recruitment letters were emailed out to special education staff/personnel. The director of special education, sent an email "kindly opting out" of the study (Special Education Director, email, January 9, 2017). Three special education personal within school district number one agreed to and were interviewed for this study. Within this school district, four parents of autistic children living in and attending school district number one, were conducted.

Within school district number two, thirty recruitment letters were emailed to special education staff/personnel. I was contacted by the Director of Accountability and Program Services within school district number two and informed I needed to fill out and submit an application, along with all relevant documents showing authenticity and verification of research being conducted through the University of Utah and being overseen and directed by an affiliated professor from the University, requesting permission to conduct research within the school district. Moreover, I was informed that a Review Board would be convened within 30 days and a decision regarding my request would be made. After 30 days, my request was denied and no interviews for the special education staff/personnel were conducted within school district number two (Director Accountability and Program Services, email, March 8, 2017). However, two parents, with autistic children living within and attending school district number two were interviewed.

In addition to the above interviews, two affiliate interviews were conducted. One interview was with an affiliate from the Utah Parent Center, a support/resource provided by the State of Utah for parents of autistic children, and the other was with the Special Education Director from the Utah State Board of Education.

TABLE 1

Data Sources: Interviews with Relevant Stakeholders

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Position in Special Ed</u>	<u>Type Interview</u>	<u>Nature of Interview</u>
<u>Length of Interview Length</u>			
Educator #1	Special Programs Coordinator	Digitally Recorded	46:12
Educator #2	Lead Psychologist	Digitally Recorded	48:17
Educator #3	Teacher Leader	Digitally Recorded	58:56
Educator #4	Special Education Director	Email	
Educator #5	Director Accountability and Program Services	Email/Letter/Phone	15:00
Affiliate #1	Utah Parent Center Liaison	Phone/Handwritten	40:00
Affiliate #2	Utah State Board of Ed	Phone/Handwritten	30:00
Parent #1	School District #1	Oral/Handwritten	60:00
Parent #2	School District #1	Oral/Handwritten	60:00
Parent #3	School District #1	Oral	10:00
Parent #4	School District #1	Oral	10:00
Parent #5	School District #2	Oral	15:00
Parent #6	School District #2	Oral/Handwritten	10:00

RESULTS

Federal, state and local laws mandate each child with a disability is provided with a free appropriate public education and provide special funding and services, in addition to those

provided by the local education agency, in order to accomplish this goal. Further, IDEA and FAPE have legitimized and legalized a parents' right to be involved with every aspect of their child's education. Governmental agencies rely upon and utilize the local school districts and administrators as their agents and liaisons to communicate, identify, evaluate, educate, coordinate, and collaborate with the parents of autistic children within the local communities they serve; further, they rely upon these entities to communicate and disseminate information regarding available services and supports between the governmental agencies and the parents of special needs children without filtering, withholding, or omitting critical information. Further, the local education agency, under the umbrella of the school district and administration, is charged with assembling the IEP Team for each child to determine each child's special education goals and services.

However, when I interviewed Affiliate Number Two, who is the Special Education Director for the Utah State Board of Education, she informed me that even though the school administrators are the mediators between the state and the parents of autistic children in the dissemination of policies/procedures/information, that the school administrators had a "grey area" they were legally allowed to operate within regarding this accountability and responsibility (Affiliate #2, personal communication, May 3, 2017). She informed me that all of the school administrators were "very much aware of the services," as she met with these individuals on a regular basis to communicate and disseminate information regarding changes and/or updates regarding special education policies and procedures and the state funded services and supports offered to the school district and/or parents of autistic children to access and utilize through the state of Utah (Affiliate #2, personal communication, May 3, 2017). However, this affiliate also informed me that the school administrators were allowed to develop their own individual special education policies (and procedures) within their individual school districts (that) "can be different but not contrary to the

state policy” (Affiliate #2, personal communication, May 3, 2017). When I questioned further, she repeated this phrase (Affiliate #2, personal communication, May 3, 2017). She attempted to explain that if the school administrator chose to “opt out” of utilizing the services and supports, they could do so without being required to communicate this decision to anyone; further, if they developed a special education policy to “opt out” of utilizing the state funded and provided services and supports, they were not under any obligation to disseminate this decision or information to anyone, even the parents of autistic children for the parents to pursue on their own (Affiliate #2, personal communication, May 3, 2017).

It appears that Administrators are indeed taking advantage of this “grey-area” by filtering and withholding information about the state funded and operated services and supports. Moreover, School Administrators have chosen to develop and implement different policies and procedures for different IEP Team members: one set of policies and procedures for the professionals and a completely separate set of policies and procedures for the parents. This is especially confusing why the administrators would choose to do this when the laws specifically state and research has confirmed the criticalness of parent-professional communication/collaboration in the success and positive outcomes in the education of special needs children. Further confusing is administrators’ avoidance of conversations regarding their special education policies and procedures with outsiders, as well as with parents within their own school district. As previously stated, school district number two refused to allow me to interview any of their personnel for this research. Also, parents within that school district reported attempting to contact the school district special education administration on multiple occasions with no response from the administrator (Parent #6, personal communication, March 9, 2017). Special education administration within school district number one quickly opted out of this study, again, as previously mentioned (Email between special education administration and researcher, January 9, 2017). When administrators will not

respond to parents regarding their concerns for their children, yet administrators respond to the professionals, it sends the clear message that the parents are not as important as the professionals and that administrators do not see parents as equal members as professionals on their own child's IEP Team.

When I interviewed each educator within school district number one, they were not aware of the state funded and operated services offered to parents of autistic children; however, they were aware of their school district's participation in one of the state funded and operated supports (Educator #1, personal communication, February 2, 2017; Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017; Educator #3, February 28, 2017). Further, none of the educators knew what their school district's policy was regarding parents of autistic children being able to access and utilize these state services (Educator #1, personal communication, February 22, 2017; Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017; Educator #3, personal communication, February 28, 2017). Interestingly enough, educator number two was aware of her school district's contract with a third party agency to provide health services to the children living within the school district; moreover, she was confused why the school district would opt not to contract with the state regarding these services, especially when there would be no additional cost to the school district; also, she was confused why the school district would not make this information available to the parents of autistic children (Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017).

Of the six parents that I interviewed living within the two school districts, only one was aware of the state program for additional services and resources for their autistic children from a flyer that had been posted outside her daughter's early intervention sensory class at Kauri Sue Hamilton (Parent #6, School District #2, personal communication, March 9, 2017). The parent reported that none of the special education teachers, school principals, and/or administrators knew about the program and none of these personnel had ever communicated and/or disseminated any

information of this sort to her, or to the other parents (Parent #6, School District #2, personal communication, March 9, 2017).

Administrators in School District Number One have created and maintain special education policies and procedures that clearly send the message that parents are not really a part of their own autistic child's IEP Team. One way they have done this is by developing, maintaining, and enforcing two separate procedures for individuals to access for communication and/or disagreements. One line of communication and/or disagreement discussion/meetings for the "professionals" on the IEP Team, and another "Chain-Of-Command" for "parents" of the IEP Team.

The communicative policies and procedures for the "professional" IEP Team members include: 1) on-going, monthly training meetings, to educate and update all individuals on the federal and state and local special education policies and procedures; 2) on-going monthly "Teacher Co-Hort" meetings, designed to encourage collaboration by the sharing of information regarding what had worked through their experiences of "Trial-and-Error" with various autistic children and to offer this information to other special education staff to utilized in their encounters with the same autistic child; and, 3) special "Staffing" meetings utilized when the "whole (professional) team is not on the same page" so that they can "discuss the data and kind of what they are thinking. . . .without the parent," and to avoid "a heated discussion with the parent" and to appear "more professional," to remind the "staff" that "this is what is happening in the meeting," and "to remember this data, and this is what the data is showing and supporting just so they don't get caught off guard," at an IEP meeting and to present a "united front" in front of the parents at the IEP meeting (Educator #1, personal communication, February 22, 2017; Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017; Educator #3, personal communication, February 28, 2017). This is utilized to get all professionals on the same page with the data and then allow the

professionals to “get the parent to understand” the data driving the professional decisions, which essentially cut the parent out of the data collection, collaborative data interpretation and decision-making process in their own child’s special education (Educator #1, personal communication, February 22, 2017; Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017; Educator #3, personal communication, February 28, 2017). All educators interviewed did state they often forget that parents are hearing this information for the first time and that they have heard it so many times and been involved on so many IEP Teams, that they forget to slow down and listen to and/or explain information to a parent (Educator #1, personal communication, February 22, 2017; Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017; Educator #3, personal communication, February 28, 2017).

The communicative/disagreement policies and procedures for the parents in School District Number One with other IEP Team Members included: 1) notification of the yearly IEP Meeting, 2) a possible email of their child’s IEP Plan for their “review” prior to the IEP meeting, 3) receiving a copy of the pamphlet, “Procedural Safeguards and Annual Parent/Guardian Notices” at the yearly IEP meeting, 4) utilizing the “Chain-Of-Command,” which operated much like the game of gossip, in the case of any disagreement, 5) possibly being referred to a third-party outside affiliate for understanding of special education policies and procedures, 6) filing a complaint with the Utah State Board of Education Special Education Director, and 6) exercising their “due-process rights” by filing a legal complaint (Educator #1, personal communication, February 22, 2017; Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017; Educator #3, personal communication, February 28, 2017). It is critical to point out that the “Chain-of-Command” communication forces the parent to communicate with one individual of the IEP Team at a time. That one individual then communicates the parents disagreement/concern with the rest of the team, and then the rest of the IEP Team sends a message, through this one individual, back to the parent, who is a “critical

member of the IEP Team.” If the disagreement is not resolved, the parent then communicates with the next individual up the chain, until they reach the school administrator, and/or contact/file a complaint with the Utah State Board of Education Special Education Direction. Typically, the parents reported their disagreement being forgotten, minimalized, and ignored (Parent #1, personal communication, February 22, 2017; Parent #4, personal communication, February 1, 2017; Parent #5, personal communication, February 1, 2017; Parent #6, personal communication, March 25, 2017). One parent in School District Number Two reported being completely ignored by her multiple attempts to meet with the Special Education Administrator regarding her concern (Parent #6, School District #2, personal communication, March 25, 2017). Further, upsetting is the fact that Outside Affiliate Number Two, (who is the Special Education Director for the Utah State Board of Education), reported that when they informed the school administrators of a complaint filed by a parent within their school district, that the school administrators were “unaware” when any disagreements and/or concerns were reported in the form of a complaint (Affiliate #2, personal communication, May 3, 2017). Affiliate number two stated they do receive complaints and filed legal claims against the school district but that when they contact the administrator in the school district that the administrator is “unaware” there in a problem, implying the parent did not utilize the “chain-of-command” or that they thought the disagreement was “effectively resolved” (Affiliate #2, personal communication, May 3, 2017). One parent in School District Number One reported, “In my personal experience, we have talk(ed) to the principal, and she sympathized with us long enough to placate or concerns. She “promised” to help us out, the promptly forgot we existed” (Parent #1, School District #1, handwritten questionnaire, February 22, 2017). Parents interviewed in School District Number Two reported similar experiences, with one parent making a request during her child’s IEP Meeting, having the data to back the necessity of her request, and was promptly informed by the principle, in front of the entire IEP Team, “we cannot meet every

child's individual need" (Parent #6, School District #2, personal communication, March 25, 2017). When the parent reminded the principle that this was a special-needs, autistic child, with a very clear need, the principle told the parent to "exercise (your) due process rights, but the answer is no" (Parent #6, School District #2, personal communication, March 25, 2017). Another parent of a child in School District Number Two reported the special education teacher, the one responsible for putting the IEP plan into action every-day in the classroom with the autistic child, did not attend the IEP Meeting; further, the parent was never informed if the teacher received a copy of the IEP and/or was disciplined for non-attendance (Parent #5, School District #2, personal communication, February 2, 2017).

Another dividing fact is that these administrators have given the distinction of "professional" to a third party outside affiliate, who is funded and maintained by the state. This third party outside affiliate, however, is granted the same rights, privileges, and access to the same information, resources, and education as that of the "professionals" that comprise the IEP Teams. Moreover, these outside affiliates are invited to, regularly attend, and are allowed to participate in the active discussion, collaboration, and decision making regarding the autistic children the IEP Team professionals are serving, while the parents of the autistic children, who are identified as IEP Team members, are not informed of these meetings, are not informed of this third party being involved in these meetings and open discussions regarding their children, and are not invited to participate in these meetings that make critical decisions regarding the education of their own children (Educator #1, personal communication, February 22, 2017; Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017; Educator #3, personal communication, February 28, 2017; Affiliate #1, personal communication, February 23, 2017).

A parent school district number one stated that she had no idea what constituted and Free Appropriate Public Education for her autistic son. Further, she stated, "I wouldn't even know

where to go or who to talk to to find that out. I would not be surprised to find out that my son is not even receiving half of the services he's entitled to. He attends a charter school for autistic children. I know the school is given funds to provide speech/OT/social therapy services. He does receive some, but not nearly enough. But I have no knowledge of what I am allowed to ask for" (Parent #1, School District #1, written questionnaire, February 11, 2017). This parent admitted that she is "pretty ignorant when it comes to understanding my son's rights. Yes, we have the policies and procedural handbook. But, I have not really looked through all the legal jargon. The only thing I do get from that book, is that I have a right to make special request for my son and have a right to have a review board help me out if I do not agree with my son's education plan. But who is there to tell me what I can ask for? Frankly, I'm worried that if I ask for anything more, then I would be inconveniencing the staff" (Parent #1, School District #1, written questionnaire, February 11, 2017).

Through the development and implementation of different policies and procedures school administrators have gone contrary to IDEA and FAPE by not engaging, including, inviting, and informing parents of every aspect of their own child's education as a legal and legitimate member of the IEP Team. The development and implantation of two different policies and procedures for special education communication, collaboration, disagreements, and education, school administrators have shaped the IEP Team membership; further, they have clearly defined the IEP Team membership by the two different policies and procedures for special education communication, collaboration, disagreements, and education that the IEP Team Members are required to utilize.

One way to facilitate a more cohesive IEP Team is to inform and invite parents to participate in the same communication, collaboration, disagreement, and education formats provided for the IEP Team professionals. One educator did detail the difficulties one IEP Team

ran into with an autistic child. While the professionals had tried everything, they had failed to utilize their most critical and longest IEP Team member in the assessment of this child: the parents. The educator explained how the professionals had met and tried every intervention they could think of, without success. The IEP Team called a meeting to discuss the serious nature of this issue and to collaborate regarding other possible solutions to resolve the on-going problem. The parents were invited and held the critical component of knowledge that unraveled the mystery on the on-going problem: the child had an extensive medical history that had been previously ignored by professionals in the evaluation and data collection process. Once the professionals actually listened to and collaborated with the parents and this critical element came to light, measures were taken and goals implemented that were able to resolve the problem quickly (Educator #2, personal communication, February 17, 2017). This stresses the importance of inclusiveness of parents as IEP Team members, and validates parents as experts regarding their own child.

DISCUSSION

Administrators two separate communication policies and procedures have shaped the IEP Team group membership by excluding parents and including a third-party outsider, who is not even a legitimate or legal part of the IEP Team; further, these policies and procedures have shaped the IEP Team group membership communication, again, by excluding parents and not only including, but granting the same rights, privileges, and authority to a complete outsider as the professional IEP Team members. It sends the clear message that parents are not really a part of their own child's IEP Team. It then gives the IEP Team ingroup, a.k.a. the professionals and outside third party, institutional approval to reinforce stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations against the outgroup IEP Team members, a.k.a. parents.

Much like a sports team, parents are the Head Coach of the IEP Team, having the authority to make the final decision on all educational decisions for their autistic children. The school

administrators operate much like an offense or defensive coordinator, disseminating information to the Head Coach, giving their recommendations, and informing the Head Coach what the team is and is not capable of performing. The other IEP Team members are the vital and important team members, putting into action the decisions of the Head Coach and the administrator. From a parental perspective, it can feel that the administrator and other team members are joining the game (a.k.a. the educational needs of the autistic child) at half-time, throwing away their play book (a.k.a. expert observations/knowledge regarding their child and requests and recommendations for services and/or placement) and demanding the parent sign off on the play book of the administrators (a.k.a. separate special education policies and procedures with a pre-determined IEP and no invite to the IEP Team informal meetings) without receiving a copy of the play book and without being informed of and/or invited to the informal team meetings. From a professionals' stand point, it is easy to view the parental position as always being swapped out with different individuals and thus is an alternative position and not really a valued, contributing member of the IEP Team. Thus, it is easy for professionals to fall into the mindset that parents are not experts, are constantly being recast, and therefore, it is best that the parents sit this one out on the sidelines and let the professionals, who are experts and really know what is going on, handle the situation as they know what is best for the educational needs of the autistic child. These gross mischaracterizations reinforce the stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations so ingrained and institutionally accepted special education policies and procedures by which the IEP Team operate, and which are at the root of most of the conflict between parent-professional communications and collaborations. With the creation and implementation of two separate special education communication policies and procedures, administrators are effectively by-passing the parental Head Coach authority, legitimately and legally granted to them under IDEA and FAPE, and engaging in team mutiny and insubordination: the equivalent of Group Based Injustice.

While the state of Utah grants school administrators the discretion to develop and implement special education policies and procedure that are different but not contrary to IDEA and FAPE, the creation and implementation of two special education communication policies and procedures are directly contrary to IDEA and FAPE. As Stoner and Angell, 2006, point out, “The 1997 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandated that parents of children with disabilities have *the legal right to be involved in all aspects* of their children’s education” (p.177, italics added for emphasis). Further, Stoner and Angell, 2006, explain that “The IDEA stipulates that *parents must be invited to participate on their children’s education teams* as these teams identify and evaluate children for special education, set educational goals, and make service delivery choice (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services [OSERS], 2000) p.177, italics added for emphasis). This means parents have a legal right and the professionals have the obligation to invite parents to all informal IEP Team meetings of other IEP Team members to communicate, collaborate, educate regarding IDEA, FAPE, and local special education policies and procedures, as well as the settlings of disagreements among IEP Team members. While administrators will claim inviting parents and having them participate in these IEP Team group communications, collaborations, educational trainings, and disagreements violate privacy and confidentiality laws, it is critical to note that the administrators are already violating privacy and confidentiality laws by allowing a third party, outside, non-sanctioned and non-approved individual to attend and participate in these informal IEP Team meetings without prior parental knowledge and without written parental consent, which is stipulated in IDEA and FAPE. Administrators have the capacity to change and consolidate the separate special education policies and procedures: sadly, they are refusing to do so and further maintain the divide between IEP Team members.

Having two separate special education policies and procedures for different IEP Team members clearly sends the message that parents are not really part of their own child's IEP Team; further, it clearly creates an ingroup, a.k.a. professionals, and an outgroup, a.k.a. parents, within the IEP Team members. It then gives the ingroup institutional approval to reinforce stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminations against the outgroup. It produces the understanding that IEP Team meetings with both ingroup and outgroup members are more hostile Intergroup negotiations, necessary technicality in special education procedures, rather than the communicative collaborations between equal parent-professional IEP Team members IDEA and FAPE designed and intended them to be. When this occurs, Polzer's (1996) research on Intergroup Negotiations discovered the following: 1) ingroup members favor their other ingroup members over outgroup members, 2) randomly placing individuals into groups was enough for individuals to favor their ingroup members over those these viewed as the outgroup, 3) ingroup members still favored their ingroup option over that of the outgroup even when the outgroup option would provide the entire group with the most good, and 4) characterization of outgroup by ingroup as less trustworthy and honest, fueling an increased lack of trust between ingroup and outgroup members, and 5) defensive negotiating between the parties, including a refusal and/or incomplete communication, and a withholding of information, resulting in unproductive negotiations (p.679-681).

Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, & Crowley (2005) all recommend administrators listen to parental perspectives, as these are vital in policy changes that lead to enhanced programing (p.48-49). Bos & VanReusen (1986) confirmed the effectiveness of parental and student attendance at a strategy training session, which included five trainings sessions and focused on communication skills, over a single IEP orientation meeting and a simple IEP review session. Parents and students who attended the strategy training session demonstrated an increased ability to facilitate IEP goals at the student's IEP session over those parents and students attending the

single IEP orientation meeting and those attending an IEP review session (p.144). In addition, Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Ange, Heyl, & Crowley, 2005, also see the need for administrators to provide trainings to enhance parental understanding of autism and special education services and supports, value parental expertise, encouraging parental participation in the IEP process through changes in procedures, facilitating communication with parents by listening to their concerns and giving extra information to parents about their child, and participating in and/or providing support to parental support groups, and validate the potential to increase and/or reduce trust with every parent-professional interaction” (p.48-49). Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner (2008) found that parent participation in meetings increased when parents’ contributions were recognized, accepted and acknowledged as having an influence the meeting outcome, and when disagreements were honestly recognition instead of being ignored or denied (p.256-257).

Braithwaite and Thompson, 2005, stress the importance of changing professional perceptions of parents as passive, subordinate, dependent participants through trainings and using a more collaborative communication model, requiring special education and school administrators to actually listen and respond to parental concerns; further, professional mind-shifts of working “for” parents can be changed to working “with” parents. Lastly, helping to create an inclusive sense of unity among parents and professionals will help change parental perceptions of professionals holding all the power, and forge a partnership relationship between parents and professionals (p.117). Further, Braithwaite and Thompson (2005) recommend parents and school district personnel hold meetings prior to the IEP meeting, and during the year to facilitate interactions and resolve disagreements between these critical IEP team members (p.106).

Returning to the analogy of the sports team, an IEP Team can strengthen intergroup communication and collaboration, while resolving disagreements in ways to respect differences, while creating a positive Intergroup Identity through the same communication policies and

procedures for all IEP Team members. Group membership will then be reinforced by communication processes as much as communication processes will be reinforced by group membership. The current special education policies and procedures send the message that parents need to sit this one out on the bench, and let the professionals, who really know what is going on, handle the situation. Administrators and professionals fail to remember it is the parent who has the legal and legitimate right to be involved in every aspect of their child's education and to make all educational decisions for their autistic child, not them. Parents of the autistic child need to be acknowledged as the original and longest member of their child's special education team, with a very deep, complex, and multifaceted understanding of their child. Parents' assessments and knowledge of their child should be acknowledged and respected as reliable and accurate sources of data, equally valid as the data collected by the professionals. In some cases, parental assessment needs to be acknowledged as more accurate than that of the professionals, as the parent has observed the child in multiple environments and diverse situations, while the professionals typically only observe and assess the child within an academic environment. Also, as one special education professional discovered, the parent can often hold the key information to unravel the pervasive mystery of the child's needs. Parents also need to recognize the limitations placed upon the school district and administration. Administrators can show parents that they are critical and necessary members of their own child's IEP Team, by consolidating their special education policies and procedures, inviting and encouraging parental participation in the same communication, collaborations, disagreements, education and trainings as the other IEP Team members. Until this happens, a negative characterization and a hostile ingroup/outgroup mentality will continue to be the norm for IEP Teams for autistic children, and parents will never really be a part of their own autistic child's IEP Team.

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