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Professionals' perceived qualities for collaborative parent and professional partnerships

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

PROFESSIONALS' PERCEIVED QUALITIES FOR COLLABORATIVE
PARENT AND PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

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College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
School of Special Education
Program of Special Education

May, 2010

This Dissertation by: Shawn R. Sweet Piantoni

Entitled: *Professionals' Perceived Qualities for Collaborative Parent and Professional Partnerships*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Education in College of Education and Behavioral Sciences in School of Special Education, Program of Special Education

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ABSTRACT

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To truly appreciate and address the strengths and needs of children with disabilities, parents and professionals must be able to work collaboratively within long-term partnerships. Challenging the creation of parent and professional partnerships is a lack of common understanding or agreement upon what relationship qualities facilitate or deter from their development and preservation. This study investigated what relationship qualities are considered necessary according to a select group of professionals to foster collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents as well as to improve their handling of conflict. The study found that relationship qualities such as communication, respect, honesty, trust, flexibility, and confidence were believed essential by professionals for collaborative partnerships to exist. In addition, the professionals attributed these qualities as being critical for conflict prevention. This study also explored expectations professionals held for parents, relationship-building strategies, conflict-prevention strategies, and conflict-resolution strategies. The study found that the relationship qualities identified as important for collaborative partnerships and conflict prevention were reflected within the strategies for relationship-building and addressing conflict. However, the relationship qualities for conflict resolution were less apparent within the strategies identified for conflict resolution. This study provides a beginning

for parents and professionals to explore the values they bring to partnerships and whether they are demonstrating congruency between their values and actions. The professionals in this study believed that in collaborative partnerships, parents and professionals engage in open and honest communication, take responsibility to work together as a team across home and school environments, share common goals, and engage in mutual child-centered decision-making in order to move children forward and create positive student outcomes. Additional research is still needed to support the findings of this study and to gain the perspectives of parents and professionals representing different cultures and regions and other local systems of special education. Future research should continue to strive for a balance between the perspectives of parents and professionals and to focus on creating additional clarity regarding the meanings of mutually agreed upon relationship qualities as well as factors that indicate the presence of these factors.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Context

Research supports collaborative partnerships as a way to improve relationships, increase psychological health, and promote goal attainment (Johnson, 2003).

Collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals bring together two important elements of a local system of special education. A local system of special education can be defined as a tightly woven group of mutually influential and interactive elements that embrace a common purpose (Fullan, 2007; IDEA, 2004; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Senge et al., 2000). This common purpose is most clearly articulated within special education legislation, IDEA (2004), as improving the educational experiences and outcomes of children with disabilities so that these children may experience equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency during their adult lives.

Relationships in a local system of special education can include multiple role groups. These role groups include, but are not limited to: (a) administrators, (b) teachers, (c) related service providers, and (d) parents. The first three role groups are employed by and receive compensation from their representative agencies within a local system of special education. In the context of this study, these individuals are referred to as professionals and specifically by their professional titles such as superintendent, director

of special education, principal, or teacher. The last role group, parents, refers to biological parents, guardians, or surrogate parents (including foster parents, grandparents, or step-parents) who serve as the primary educational decision-makers (Wright & Wright, 2008).

Two important features of relationships between parents and professionals are positive and negative interdependencies. Positive interdependencies occur when individuals believe the success for their own goal achievement relies on the ability of others to mutually achieve their goals. In contrast, negative interdependencies occur when individuals believe they can achieve their goals only when the people they are competing against are unable to reach their goals (Deutsch, 1973).

The nature of interdependencies that exists among parents and professionals are important because they can influence whether conflict escalates or de-escalates during times of threat or disagreement. For example, when positive interdependencies exist, creative problem-solving is more likely, and parents and professionals are apt to focus on fostering mutual goal achievement. Conversely, when negative interdependencies exist, parents and professionals are prone to becoming competitive and have been known to vie to win at the expense of one another (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Johnson, 2003).

Problem

Research conducted that assessed the achievement of local systems of special education while enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes for children with disabilities indicates that these systems need improvement. Despite years of reform and innovation on behalf of these systems, children with disabilities continue to face both

academic and social failure, including poor post-school outcomes, compared to their peers without disabilities (Blackorby, Wagner, Knokey, & Levine, 2007; Wagner, Newman, Cameto, & Levine, 2006). Findings such as these raise important questions about what strategies must be implemented for these systems to develop their ability to meet the learning needs of children with disabilities as well as to facilitate their post-school success (Bassett, 2007; Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2007; Johnson, Stodden, Emanuel, Luecking, & Mack, 2002; Johnson, Thurlow, & Stout, 2007; Kohler & Field, 2003; Terzi, 2007; Thurlow & Johnson, 2000).

One solution supported by both research and policy is for parents and professionals to share mutual responsibility in the creation of beneficial educational opportunities for children with disabilities (Crockett & Yell, 2008; Pinkus, 2006). The value of this shared responsibility is based on the belief that parents and professionals understand children with disabilities in different, yet complimentary ways (Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Murray, 2000). Therefore, parents and professionals must work collaboratively within long-term partnerships for children's strengths and needs to be truly acknowledged and appreciated (Henderson, 2002; Pinkus, 2006).

Research further supports collaborative parent and professional partnerships through findings that associate parent involvement with a wide range of positive outcomes for children with disabilities (Blackorby et al., 2007; Fullan, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Newman, 2005). In a report on behalf of the National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, *A New Wave of Evidence*, Henderson and Mapp (2002) concluded, "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life" (p. 7).

Unfortunately, the positive outcomes that children can experience when parents and professionals work in collaborative partnerships are placed at risk if these relationships break down or become severed as a result of mishandled or unresolved conflict (Blackorby et al., 2007; Carter, 2002; Mueller, 2004; Nowell & Salem, 2007; Schrag & Schrag, 2004). Conflict arises when either or both parents and professionals sense real or perceived differences or threats to their own needs, values, or resources (Kusztal, 2002; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Once conflict occurs, it has the potential to escalate until the differences or threats are decreased or eliminated (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Research shows that conflict between parents and professionals often originates in individualized education program (IEP) meetings (Schrag & Schrag, 2004).

IDEA: A Passage for Parent/ Professional Relationships

IEP meetings are conferences in which teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and (when appropriate) the child work together to develop a unique educational program designed to meet the child's unique educational needs and to help the child to become involved and progress in the general education curriculum. Members participating in IEP meetings are charged with generating a document called an Individualized Education Program (IEP), a blueprint for the child's receipt of a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) as mandated by IDEA (2004). The LRE ensures that children with disabilities, to the maximum extent appropriate, will be educated alongside children who do not have disabilities. FAPE refers to a child's receipt of special education and related services that: (a) meet the standards of the representative State Education Agency, (b) are provided at no cost to the family, and (c) conform to the child's IEP (Wright & Wright,

2008). Feinberg, Beyer, and Moses (2002) have noted that “While the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting can be a mechanism for reaching consensus on issues, it can also be a forum that highlights disagreements that may exist among participants” (p. 5).

While the concepts of free and public education presented within FAPE are generally straightforward, the notion of “appropriate” remains vague and is often misinterpreted by IEP teams. In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court case, *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley* (1982), provided some guidance to IEP teams when it ruled that FAPE is met when children receive individualized instruction and sufficient support services that enable them to benefit educationally. Currently, the Supreme Court has referenced two criteria that can be used to measure the delivery of FAPE. The first is that all procedures implemented by schools for the provision of FAPE must comply with the procedural mandates of IDEA (2004). The second is that schools must show that children with disabilities are receiving some educational benefit as a result of their individualized instruction and support services (Katsiyannis & Herbst, 2004).

Despite the guidance provided by the Supreme Court in the *Rowley* ruling, the long-term impact that education has on the lives of children with disabilities creates a high-stakes atmosphere. This naturally produces fertile ground for strong emotions that can lead to disagreement and conflict between parents and professionals engaging in special education programming activities (Feinberg et al., 2002; Greene, 2007). To address the occurrence of disagreement and conflict, IDEA (2004) includes detailed procedural safeguards that were originally introduced in The Education for All

Handicapped Children Act of 1975. These procedural safeguards protect the right of parents to be included in all decision-making related to the provision of FAPE for their children. Also specified in the law are formal dispute resolution mechanisms to handle disagreements or conflict over the identification, evaluation, or placement of children or to address issues when parents perceive the rights of their children are being violated (Yell, 2006).

According to researchers, dispute resolution mechanisms offered by IDEA (2004) possess several drawbacks such as being reactive rather than proactive in their approach for resolving disputes (Mueller, 2009; Mueller, Singer, & Draper 2008). Beyer (1999) noted that these mechanisms (i.e., due process) tend to foster competitive relationships by positioning parents against the school system to fight for what is in the best interest of their child.

Research shows that the relationship qualities present in competitive relationships closely match the relationship qualities that induce or escalate conflict between parents and professionals (Deutsch et al., 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Escalated conflict may become destructive, deter progress, and sever collaborative relationships between parents and professionals (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, 2004; Mueller et al., 2008). Ultimately, these severed relationships could impede positive outcomes for children with disabilities (Blackorby et al., 2007; Fullan, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Newman, 2005).

The implementation of proactive strategies to develop positive interdependencies between parents and professionals prior to the occurrence of conflict is likely to

(a) increase the ability of parents and professionals to handle conflict more productively, and (b) facilitate promotive interactions that maintain their focus on shared goals and creative problem solving. A proactive strategy for the development of positive interdependencies is to build collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals (Schrag, 1996) that possess relationship qualities that foster cooperative and promotive interactions, minimize competitiveness, and deescalate conflict (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Deutsch et al., 2006; Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Unfortunately, the majority of the relationship qualities that have been identified by research are based upon the voice of parents, with minimal input from professionals. This creates an imbalance of perspective that could affect the implementation of successful collaborative parent and professional partnerships.

Purpose

Research from the parents' perspective has identified 10 common relationship qualities that are necessary to build collaborative partnership between parents and professionals and to improve the handling of conflict. These 10 qualities are: (a) open and frequent communication, (b) honesty, (c) trust, (d) respect, (e) acknowledgment and validation, (f) equality, (g) focusing on needs, (h) valuing children, (i) shared vision, and (j) sharing information and resources (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Since these 10 relationship qualities are based primarily upon the voices of parents, the goal of this research was to investigate the voices of professionals to see if

differences or similarities exist. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate which relationship qualities a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education considered necessary to foster collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents. The strategies relationship-building strategies that were employed by these professionals were also explored.

Rationale

By comparing the 10 relationship qualities previously identified by parents to those relationship qualities identified by professionals in this study, it is hoped that the knowledge base in special education will expand by providing a more balanced representation of the relationship qualities agreed upon as necessary by both parents and professionals for the development of collaborative partnerships and the improved handling of conflict. Results from the study can potentially be used to inform systems as they seek to improve professional development activities designed to enhance collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals. By improving the ability of parents and professionals to resolve conflict more effectively, local systems of special education can potentially decrease their reliance upon due process hearings and other costly formal dispute resolution techniques as recognized by IDEA (2004).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this investigation:

- Q1 How do professionals in the selected local system of special education define collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents of children with disabilities?
- Q2 What specific relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to effective collaborative partnerships with parents?

- Q3 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to conflict prevention?
- Q4 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical for conflict resolution?
- Q5 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?
- Q6 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents once conflict has occurred?

Definitions

The following definitions are provided to provide clarity about the terminology used throughout this study.

Collaborative partnerships. Participatory and reciprocal interactions between parents and professionals marked by mutual support and focused on meeting both the needs of children with disabilities and the parents (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). To exist as a partnership, both parents and professionals must perceive one another as partners (Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Keen, 2007).

Empowerment. A complex, multidimensional construct that transcends personal control. Empowerment involves professionals building the capacity of parents to access resources, understand alternatives, positively perceive their situation, and exhibit appropriate and relevant behaviors (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004).

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). A child's receipt of special education and related services that: (a) meet the standards of the representative State Education Agency, (b) are provided at no cost to the family, and (c) conform to the child's IEP (Wright & Wright, 2008).

Individualized Education Program (IEP). A blueprint for a child's receipt of a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment as mandated by special education law (IDEA, 2004).

IEP meetings. Conferences in which teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and (when appropriate) the child work together to develop a unique educational program designed to meet the child's educational needs and to help the child become involved in and progress in the general education curriculum (IDEA, 2004).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). An environment in which a child with a disability, to the maximum extent appropriate, will be educated alongside children who do not have disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2008).

Local system of special education. A tightly woven group of mutually influential and interactive elements that embrace a common purpose (Fullan, 2007; IDEA, 2004; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Senge et al., 2000).

Negative interdependencies. Situation that occur when individuals believe they can achieve their goals only when the individuals they are competing against are unable to reach their goals (Deutsch, 1973).

Parent and professional conflict. Issue that arises when parents or professionals sense real or perceived differences or threats to their own needs, values, or resources (Kusztal, 2002; Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Parents. Biological parents, guardians, or surrogate parents (including foster parents, grandparents, or step-parents) who serve as primary educational decision-makers and with whom a child with disabilities resides (Wright & Wright, 2008).

Positive interdependencies. Situations that occur when individuals believe the success for their own goal achievement relies on the ability of others with whom they are collaborating to mutually achieve their goals (Deutsch, 1973).

Professionals. Individuals with degrees in education or related services who are employed by and receive compensation from their representative agencies within a local system of education.

Delimitations

Delimitations of this study must be addressed. First, the results of this study are limited to the local system of special education located within a state in the Rocky Mountain region. Responses provided by participants from the qualitative interviews represent the opinions of professionals employed and compensated by the selected local system. These factors limit the generalizability of this study to other systems of special education. Second, researchers who conduct qualitative interviews are not “neutral, distant, or emotionally uninvolved” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). To foster openness on the part of participants, a researcher must rely on interpersonal tools such as sincerity, sensitivity, empathy, and humor. As an instrument of data collection, all observations and subsequent analysis can be unavoidably filtered through the researcher’s own construction of reality even though attempts were made to achieve a balanced perspective and retain sensitivity for any researcher bias (Merriam, 1998).

Conclusion

Collaborative parent and professional partnerships have been associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for children with disabilities. Unfortunately, the benefits of collaborative parent and professional partnerships are placed at risk when

these relationships break down or become severed as a result of mishandled or unresolved conflict.

Current dispute resolution mechanisms offered by IDEA (2004) possess several drawbacks in their approach for resolving disputes such as being reactive rather than proactive. A primary criticism is that these mechanisms appear to foster competitive relationships by positioning parents against the school system to fight for what is in the best interest of their child. Unfortunately, the qualities that are typically present in competitive relationships closely match qualities that have been found to induce or escalate conflict between parents and professionals. Escalated conflict has the potential to become destructive, deter progress, and sever collaborative relationships between parents and professionals that could ultimately impede positive outcomes for children with disabilities.

A local system of special education can address this risk by implementing proactive strategies that foster positive interdependencies between parents and professionals. Positive interdependencies are believed to: (a) increase the ability of parents and professionals to handle conflict more productively, and (b) facilitate promotive interactions that maintain their focus on shared goals and creative problem solving. One proactive strategy that can be used to facilitate positive interdependencies is to build collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals with inherent relationship qualities that foster cooperative and promotive interactions, minimize competitiveness, and de-escalate conflict.

One challenge for developing collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals is an imbalance of perspective regarding the identification of critical

relationship qualities. To date, many of the qualities identified reflect the majority perspective of parents with minimal input from professionals. The purpose of this study was to investigate which relationship qualities a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education considered necessary to foster collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. The relationship-building strategies that were employed by these professionals were also explored.

It is hoped that as a result of this study, the knowledge base in special education will expand by providing a more balanced representation of the relationship qualities for the development of collaborative partnerships and the improved handling of conflict as perceived as necessary by both parents and professionals. Results from the study might be used to inform systems as they seek to improve professional development activities designed to enhance collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals. By improving the ability of parents and professionals to more effectively handle conflict, local systems of special education could decrease their reliance upon due process hearings and other costly formal dispute resolution techniques recognized by IDEA (2004).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Foundations of Special Education

Before discussing research on factors considered to foster positive interdependencies and collaborative parent and professional partnerships in special education, it is important to understand the context in which these collaborative partnerships exist. Relationships between parents and professionals within a state system of special education are highly influenced by special education law. Turnbull (2005) explained that since its inception as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142), IDEA continues to socially engineer relationships between parents and special education systems. According to Turnbull, IDEA has maintained this function while also performing as a civil rights law, an educational reform law, and a welfare law. Turnbull states that,

However important IDEA is as a civil rights and education law, its greatest significance arguably is that it seeks to modify students' and parents' behavior and thereby to achieve a particular relationship between them and the schools and, on a different level, between them, governments, and their fellow-citizens." (p. 3)

Compulsory education laws introduced during the early 20th Century were one of the earliest influences on relationships between parents and professionals. Compulsory education laws established the requirement that children attend school so they could become productive and contributing members of society. Initially, attendance

requirements applied only to children without disabilities. However, these laws were eventually extended to include children with disabilities. Despite being included under these laws, the attendance of children with disabilities remained rarely enforced. This was especially the case for children with more severe disabilities. While early compulsory education laws exhibited several shortfalls, they provided a historical step towards including children with disabilities in educational settings (Winzer, 1993).

It was not until the late 1960s that the idea of including children with disabilities in education began to receive more attention. This attention was brought about by the American Civil Rights Movement, beginning in the mid-1950s and continuing through the late 1960s. The purpose of the Civil Rights Movement was to eliminate the oppression and exclusion of African American citizens so they could realize the same dignity and self-sufficiency afforded to White citizens. For many individuals serving as advocates for the Civil Rights Movement, education was perceived as a key factor to create an equalized society (Smith & Kozleski, 2005).

During the Civil Rights Movement, it was not only the children of racial and ethnic diversity who were experiencing prejudice, discrimination, and segregation (Smith & Kozleski, 2005). Children with disabilities were also subjected to these social injustices. However, the Supreme Court first had to acknowledge injustices for children of racial and ethnic diversity before it addressed the inequities for children with disabilities. In 1954, the Supreme Court cases *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955) equated the denial of an adequate education to children of racial and ethnic diversity to a denial for them to achieve in life. While these rulings did not specifically mention the educational marginalization of children with

disabilities, they addressed the educational needs and rights of all children (Skiba et al., 2008).

A movement advocating for the normalization in the lives of people with disabilities helped to further this premise. Advocates for normalization believed that individuals with disabilities required “the same patterns and conditions of everyday life which are as close as possible to the norms and patterns of the mainstream of society” (Nirje, 1969, p. 179). Normalization held that individuals with disabilities not only had rights to receive an education, but also had rights to obtain employment and live in everyday society alongside their peers without disabilities. This movement was essential for broadening the beliefs of society regarding the rights and abilities of citizens with disabilities. However, it took the assertion of parents to begin impacting legislation.

These historical constructs forged the way for parents of children with disabilities to begin pushing for the passage of legislation to include their children in typical educational settings. An initial success was the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Amendments of 1965 (Public Law 89-313). This legislation resulted in federal distribution of grants to state agencies of education for the delivery of educational services for children with disabilities attending state-operated or state-supported schools and institutions. Shortly thereafter, the ESEA Amendments of 1966 (PL 89-750) expanded this funding to include local education agencies (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1996).

While the ESEA (1965) and its Amendments (1966) provided much-needed financial support to states and local school districts to begin including children with disabilities in educational settings alongside their peers without disabilities, minimal

accountability existed. Following the path of the *Brown* civil rights suit, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) filed a right to education class action suit: *PARC v The Common Wealth of Pennsylvania* (1971). This suit argued that a Pennsylvania state law excluded children with mental retardation living in the state from receiving a public education alongside their peers and violated the findings of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Brown v. Board of Education* (1955). By excluding children with mental retardation from the public education system, the state was accused of denying these children success in life. The ruling in the *PARC* case created the specificity needed to secure the right of education for children with disabilities that was lacking under the *Brown* rulings. It also significantly contributed to the passage of landmark laws that began to define current day special education.

In 1974, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments (PL 93-380) were passed. Under this new legislation, the federal government mandated states to submit comprehensive plans that documented how they intended to provide full educational opportunities to all children with disabilities. Significantly, PL 93-380 was the first legislation to introduce procedural safeguards to protect children with disabilities and their families during educational decision-making such as identification, evaluation, and placement. Today, these procedural safeguards are one of six major principles found within special education law. These six principles are: (a) zero reject; (b) free appropriate public education; (c) least restrictive environment; (d) non-discriminatory evaluation; (e) parent and family rights to confidentiality; and (f) procedural safeguards (Friend, 2005).

Today, the most current and significant special education law is IDEA (2004) (PL 108-446). IDEA (2004) is a reauthorized version of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) originally passed in 1975. Between the original version of PL 94-142 and its current edition, IDEA has undergone two other major reauthorizations; one in 1990, and one in 1997 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The IDEA (1997) reauthorization significantly advanced the involvement of families in the educational decision-making for their children with disabilities and has greatly influenced the nature of parent and professional partnerships (Henderson, 2002; Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Social Interdependence Theory

For centuries, researchers have applied social interdependence theory to the study of cooperative and competitive human endeavors (Johnson, 2003). The long history of social interdependence theory has contributed to its status as one of the oldest areas of inquiry within social psychology. It can be linked to large number of research studies across the fields of education, business, and social services. The inclusion of participants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds within these studies has contributed its strong internal and external validity and generalizability (Johnson, 2003).

Social interdependence theory lends itself to an increased understanding of social conflict. Social interdependence theory is derived from Gestalt psychology and the early works of Kurt Koffka (Johnson, 2003). While studying group behavior, Koffka recognized that individuals working together in a group constituted a whole. He noted that individuals within a group display a variety of interdependencies that influence the overall performance of the group. Interdependencies describe how the goal achievement of one individual can be connected to the goal achievement of others. Interdependencies

have been described by psychologist Kurt Lewin as being the very essence of groups (Johnson, 2003).

Following the lead of these early psychologists, Morton Deutsch (1973) continued to inquire about the nature of interdependencies within groups. In his theory of cooperation and competition, Deutsch recognized that interdependencies are not only important for understanding group functioning, but can also reveal positive or negative group dynamics. For example, positive interdependencies occur among group members when individuals believe that the success of their own goal achievement relies on the ability of others with whom they are collaborating to mutually achieve their goals. In contrast, negative interdependencies occur when individuals believe that they can achieve their goals only when the people with whom they are competing are unable to reach their goals. Under this dichotomy, Deutsch asserted that human interactions tend to be either promotive or oppositional. Promotive interactions encourage and facilitate the success of a group. Oppositional interactions discourage and create barriers to prevent other members in the group from succeeding (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch et al., 2006; Johnson, 2003).

Deutsch's (1973) conception of positive and negative interdependencies established an important foundation for contextualizing group conflicts such as those occurring between parents and professionals within a local system of special education. His theory of cooperation and competition explains that the nature of interdependencies between group members play an important role in the handling of conflict. For example, when group members possess positive interdependencies, they are more likely to engage in creative problem-solving and remain focused on mutual goal achievement.

Conversely, when group members display negative interdependencies, the group is more likely to become competitive and focus on winning at the expense of others (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch et al., 2006; Johnson, 2003).

Intergroup conflicts such as those occurring between parents and professionals often evolve into an “us” versus “them” philosophy (Stephen, 2008). Advocates for reforming dispute resolution systems within special education have noted that current IDEA (2004) procedural safeguards that are intended to resolve conflict can actually foster competitiveness by positioning parents against the local system of special education to fight for what is in the best interest of their child (Beyer, 1999). When positive interdependencies are not established between parents and professionals prior to the occurrence of conflict, competitive relationships with oppositional interactions are likely to occur.

Many researchers believe that competitive conflict can be avoided through prevention and early dispute resolution strategies designed to foster positive interdependencies and promotive interactions (Bryce, 2007; Feinberg et al., 2002; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller 2004, 2009; Mueller et al., 2008). In 2004, Mueller investigated successful conflict prevention and alternative dispute practices that centered on parent school relationships using a multi-case study analysis of two school districts that had implemented systems change strategies for promoting parent-school partnerships. Nine categories of system practices that promoted positive parent-school relations were identified. These were: (a) communication, (b) trust, (c) professional development, (d) support, (e) partnership, (f) resource creativity, (g) educational services, (h) legal practices, and (i) alternative dispute resolution. Several of these practices, such

as creating partnerships, offering support, and promoting effective communication and trust, highlight a need for quality relationship development.

While studying conflict resolution, Deutsch et al., (2006) identified six specific relationship qualities considered to foster cooperation versus competition. These qualities were: (a) effective communication; (b) friendliness, help-giving, and minimal use of obstructive behaviors; (c) sharing, coordination, and productivity; (d) shared vision, synergy, confidence, and validation; (e) mutual empowerment; and (f) shared problem-solving. These relationship qualities show congruency with the findings of Mueller (2004) and with other research (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Soodak & Erwin, 2000) that has identified characteristics of relationships that promote collaborative parent and professional partnerships.

Deutsch et al., (2006) also identified relationship qualities considered to foster competition. These qualities were: (a) impaired communication, (b) dishonesty or inappropriate use of power, (c) decreased trust, (d) behaviors that obstruct, (e) negative perceptions of others, (f) lack of productivity, (g) critique and judgment, and (h) seeking legitimacy. Later in this chapter, it can be seen that these qualities align with research factors found by research to induce and escalate conflict.

Parent and Professional Partnerships in Special Education

For years, research within the field of special education has defined the relationships between parents and professionals as necessary partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dunst, 2002; Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005). The importance of partnerships as a method for parents and professionals to create long-

term collaborative relationships receives support from multiple provisions within IDEA (2004). These provisions mandate that schools include parents in all decision-making activities that address the provision of FAPE for their children with disabilities. While professionals hold direct responsibility for teaching and learning within school settings, parents share important responsibilities for their children's learning across structural boundaries (Adams, Forsyth, & Mitchell, 2009).

Partnerships between parents and professionals occur when they actively share responsibility for learning and attempt to improve the learning experiences of children through mutually defined goals (Adams et al., 2009; Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Keen, 2007). Although this definition provides a broad perspective about parent and professional partnerships, a universally agreed upon formula for creating collaborative parent and professional partnerships does not exist.

Two challenges have specifically been cited by research for the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. These challenges include a lack of a common understanding or agreement upon: (a) what relationship qualities facilitate or deter from the creation of effective parent and professional partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dunst, 2002) and (b) what roles parents should be expected or obligated to play in the educational process of their children (Adams et al., 2009). "Understanding of the specific, measurable indicators that comprise the 'meaning' of these intangible [relationship] qualities should lead to more effective evaluation of support" (Blue-Banning et al., 2004 p. 169) for both parents and professionals.

Factors that Facilitate or Deter Parent/ Professional Partnerships

Factors thought to foster or inhibit the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships have been identified at both a structural level and an interpersonal level (Nowell & Salem, 2007; Park & Turnbull, 2003). Factors at a structural level can be observed within interdependencies occurring between system elements. Factors occurring at an interpersonal level transpire as relational transactions between individuals and role groups.

Much of the research within special education addressing structural and interpersonal factors that contribute or deter from collaborative parent and professional partnerships remains exploratory. The factors identified to date focus on interpersonal level transactions or relationship qualities between individuals and role groups. In addition, these factors have strongly supported a philosophy of professionalism called family-centeredness (Dunst, 2002).

Family-Centeredness

At its core, the philosophy of family-centeredness embraces the concept of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. Family-centered practices are grounded upon assumptions that all parents and families possess the potential or capability to engage in informed choice-making, shared responsibility, and activities to improve and strengthen their own family functioning (Dunst, Boyd, Trivette, & Hamby, 2002). Professionals who embed family-centered practices into their work demonstrate relationship qualities that advance collaborative efforts and strategies that build the capacity of and provide opportunities for parents to be actively engaged in their

children's educational process (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004; Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Turnbull, Turbiville, & Turnbull, 2000).

Current-day family-centered models still retain many characteristics of early help-giving models that contributed to their evolution, such as compensatory and empowerment models (Brickman, Rabinowitz, Karuza, Coates, Cohn, & Kidder, 1982; Michlitsch & Frankel, 1989). The enduring patterns between early help-giving models and modern-day family centeredness are important because they demonstrate consistency around several fundamental concepts such as: (a) restraint from blaming parents and families for their problems; (b) assigning the source of problems to situations or the environment; and (c) holding parents and families responsible for generating solutions and engaging in their own problem-solving. The combination of these features supports the notion that parents should be empowered, rather than dependent. Empowerment is defined as a complex, multidimensional construct that transcends personal control (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004). Empowerment involves professionals building the capacity of parents to access resources, understand alternatives, positively perceive their situation, and exhibit appropriate and relevant behaviors. A positive outcome of empowerment is that parents have more positive views about their own parenting because they feel: (a) more competence in meeting the needs of their children, and (b) that they can influence their children's education (Dunst, 1999; Trivette & Dunst, 2002).

The Collective Empowerment Model

The collective empowerment model reflects a transformation from previous family-centered models that replaced emphasis on creating equality between parent and professionals with emphasizing cooperative action. Parent and professional relationships

under the collective empowerment model are described as having “power-through” relationships (Turnbull et al., 2000). In power-through relationships, all participants are expected to contribute to the achievement of mutually agreed upon goals by applying their strengths and showing a willingness to learn.

Looking back at Deutsch’s (1973) theory of cooperation and competition, the collective empowerment model supports creating positive interdependencies among group members. As mentioned earlier, positive interdependencies occur when people believe the success of their own goal achievement relies on the ability of others with whom they are collaborating to mutually achieve their goals. In contrast, negative interdependencies occur when people believe that they can only achieve their goals when the people they are competing against are unable to achieve their goals. The relationship qualities identified by Deutsch and colleagues (2006) considered to promote positive interdependencies and cooperative relationships easily align with the relationship qualities that have been identified by research in special education as facilitating collaborative parent and professional partnerships.

Relationship Qualities

A large proportion of the research conducted in special education to identify the relationship qualities considered to facilitate or deter from collaborative parent and professional partnerships has been qualitative. Since qualitative researchers attempt to capture the meaning conveyed by their participants, many of the qualities that have been identified are presented using various terminologies. However, a close analysis of the descriptions and indicators that support these qualities indicate there are similarities in meaning that allow common terminology to be applied. A review of literature

specifically seeking to identify relationship qualities that facilitate or deter collaborative professional partnerships resulted in 10 common qualities: (a) open and frequent communication, (b) honesty, (c) trust, (d) respect, (e) acknowledgment and validation, (f) equality, (g) focusing on needs, (h) valuing children, (i) shared vision, and (j) sharing information and resources (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Although these qualities are distinct in certain features, they exhibit explicit interdependencies. It is clear that some qualities could not exist without the presence of other qualities. More detailed explanations of these qualities are provided below.

Communication. The studies reviewed described communication in multiple ways. Overall, communication was portrayed as efficient and effective coordination of information to ensure clarity and understanding for all individuals. It was stated that communication should convey positive regard and respect, be open and honest, and should not be censored (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008). Parents described quality communication as occurring in a safe, welcoming environment where their values and interests are listened to and incorporated into action (Christie & Cooper, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008). Frequency and consistency of communication was deemed as important to keep parents informed regarding their children's strengths, challenges, and needs (Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Finally, parents and professionals alike indicated that communication should be reciprocal, understandable, free of jargon, and include reflective listening to avoid misunderstandings (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

In a study by Lake and Billingsley (2000), breakdowns in communication were found in to induce or escalate conflict. Parents expressed dismay with times when they felt they were not being told the truth or perceived that what they were being told were half-truths. Conflict was reported to occur or escalate when professionals showed an inability or reluctance to answer questions or substantiate decisions for service delivery. Specific examples included professionals appearing to refrain from offering a spectrum of program options, exhibit shortsightedness, or show unwillingness to review alternatives. Suspicion was especially reported when parents perceived that the reasons provided to them for denial of services were not authentic.

Additional factors attributing to the inducement or escalation of conflict were related to poor communication. Specific examples provided were infrequent or lack of communication, poor timing of clarification attempts, withholding information, and large IEP meetings that deterred from the full expression of needs and desires (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). In a study by Harry, Allen, and McLaughlin (1995), lack of communication regarding assessment and placement decisions was found to cause much confusion and stress for parents. It was observed by mediators who participated in the Lake and Billingsley (2000) study that both parents and professionals appeared to lack skills for effective communication and problem-solving. One parent observed, “Although there is nothing on IEP forms that directly addresses communication needs, it is critical that teams take the time and reach overt agreement about how, when, how often, and in what form communication will take place” (Esquivel et al., 2008, p. 248).

Honesty. Closely related to the quality of communication was honesty. Parents in the reviewed studies indicated that communication should be open and honest and that

professionals should not censor information (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Mueller, 2004). Parents expressed dismay when they perceived they were not being told the full truth. As mentioned earlier, conflict was reported to occur or escalate when professionals were unable or unwilling to answer questions posed to them by parents to substantiate their decisions for service delivery. Parents reported becoming suspicious when reasons provided to them for denial of services appeared unauthentic. For example, one parent expressed, “At IEP meetings where goals and services are laid out, I sense cost plays a role. This is not openly discussed” (Esquivel et al., 2008 p. 244). When the honesty of professionals is placed in question, trust between parents and professionals becomes compromised.

Trust. Trust was reported to exist when parents felt confident that professionals were dependable, competent, diligent, confidential, and truthful (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996). Regarding dependability, parents expressed dissatisfaction in feeling they must monitor their children’s education to ensure that it was: (a) meaningful, (b) in compliance with legal mandates, and (c) did not stigmatize their children (Harry et al., 1995). Parents expressed frustration when professionals did not follow through with their responsibilities or failed to implement agreed-upon actions (Esquivel et al., 2008; Mueller, 2004). As one parent stated, “It’s also negative when you have a meeting a year later and discover that things that were supposed to be done last year . . . are still not done” (Esquivel et al. 2008, p. 245). Finally, when trust existed, parents felt confident that their children were physically and emotionally safe within the school environment (Blue-Banning et al., 2004).

Respect. Like communication, respect was described by the reviewed studies in a variety of ways. Respect included communicating to parents in meaningful ways, valuing their opinions (especially during times of disagreement), and facilitating opportunities for them to participate in decision-making and problem-solving (Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Parents desired that professionals not view them as greedy or as monetary drains, but as seeking needed and entitled services because they cared about their children (Soodak & Erwin, 2000). A strong need was presented in the literature for parents not to feel judged or approached as difficult. Respect was often measured through simple courtesies such as scheduling meetings during convenient times for parents, arriving on time for meetings, and taking time to interact with them and their children (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996).

Acknowledgement and validation. Similar to respect was the quality of acknowledgment and validation. In the Christie and Cooper (2005) study it was concluded that, “establishing true partnerships with parents entail educators acknowledging and validating parents' views and ultimately sharing power” (p. 2271). Acknowledgment and validation was described as the willingness of professionals to learn from parents and try new things (Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Parents expressed a need for professionals to acknowledge their perspectives, rather than disregarding them (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Mueller, 2004). Acknowledgment and validation reflects the premise that parents and professionals understand children in different and complimentary ways. Therefore, they must work together to truly appreciate a child's needs and strengths (Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Murray, 2000). Advice one

parent provided was to “Keep an open mind. Never disregard what parents say. And try to think about what you would do if this were your child, not what you would do from where you're sitting” (Soodak & Erwin, 2000, p. 272).

Equality. The concept of collaborative partnerships denotes some level of equality in relationships. Equality was reported by parents as being achieved when harmony and ease existed within their relationships with professionals (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Characteristics of equality were: mutual influence, joint decision-making, and shared responsibilities (Soodak & Erwin, 2000; Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Other central features of equality were avoiding territoriality or the use of clout. These latter features were further supported by the Lake and Billingsley (2000) study that found that the use of power to gain advantage over a situation can induce or escalate conflict. Examples of power attempts included behaviors such as resistance, testing limits, and circumventing hierarchical channels (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Johnson (2003) seemed to capture the essence of equality after conducting a meta-analysis on the diverse variables that have been investigated within social interdependency research. Johnson concluded that individuals who believe that their performance impacts the success of others tend to work harder. These individuals appear to feel an increased sense of individual accountability and shared responsibility and, thus, engage in promotive interactions such as help-giving and resource sharing. Equality, as a relationship quality, may be considered an outcome of the behaviors described by Johnson.

Focusing on children's needs. An additional relationship quality was focusing on children's needs. Parents in the reviewed studies expressed satisfaction for

professionals who demonstrated an understanding about the needs of their children and who could address those needs while holding high expectations (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Christie & Cooper, 2005; Esquivel et al., 2008). Parents also appreciated professionals who could demonstrate a resourcefulness to make things happen and were capable of individualizing their children's education (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996). One parent articulated the disappointment parents can feel when professionals only attend to children's diagnosis or treat children as just "a case". "I find it very frustrating when people come to a meeting about my child then don't know my child. They talk about needs most children with his diagnosis have but not necessarily my child" (Esquivel et al., 2008, p. 243).

Place value on children. The ability of professionals to place value on children was a strong relationship quality supported across all of the reviewed studies. The absence of this quality was also identified in the Lake and Billingsley (2000) study as a factor that could induce or escalate conflict between parents and professionals. Parents clearly reported positive regard for professionals who could demonstrate an understanding for their children and who could show they valued the children by articulating their strengths and abilities during discussions. Conversely, parents expressed reluctance to enter partnerships with professionals who were unable to demonstrate the aforementioned qualities or who showed discrepant views of their children or their children's needs (Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). This reluctance was clearly articulated by one parent who stated:

If they [professionals] perceive someone as being less than human then they are going to treat that someone as an object. . . . I want [my son] to

feel like he belongs to the human race, like there's a place for him, like he fits in. (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p. 179)

Parents also expressed dissatisfaction when professionals approached their children as a part of diagnostic groups, rather than unique individuals (Esquivel et al., 2008). Parents preferred professionals who took time to personally form a relationship with their children.

Shared vision. The definition of partnership acknowledges working on mutually defined goals and supports shared vision as an important relationship quality. Parents who participated in the reviewed studies expressed dissatisfaction when professionals seemed to make up their minds prior to engaging in any meaningful dialogue with them. Parents specifically cited this as occurring at IEP meetings where they discovered that their child's IEP had already been written, and their role was identified as being to simply provide a signature (Harry et al., 1995; Soodak & Erwin, 2000; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003).

Shared information and resources. The final common relationship quality identified in the reviewed literature was sharing information and resources. This relationship quality has been associated with empowering parents and facilitating trust (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dempsey & Dunst, 2004). Parents in the studies expressed displeasure when professionals proved to be unreliable sources of information or failed to share information about available programs or alternative services (Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Parents also preferred that when given information, that professionals ensured it was accessible and organized.

Dispute Resolution

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 included detailed procedural safeguards to ensure that parents would be included in all decision making related to the provision of FAPE for their children. Additionally, dispute resolution mechanisms were included for times when parents and professionals experienced disagreement over the identification, evaluation, or placement of children or in cases where parents perceived that the rights of their children were being violated (Yell, 2006).

The term *dispute resolution* encompasses a wide spectrum of strategies that are used to resolve human conflict across diverse settings and situations (Hansen, 2008; Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996). According to Sweeney and Carruthers (1996), constructive and cooperative dispute resolution became an alternative to warfare as the world developed in literacy, community, and commerce. Literacy was especially relevant as it advanced possibilities for humans to resolve conflict in ways that transcended violent face-to-face exchanges, such as war, and engage in more peaceful solutions, such as dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation. Presently, dispute resolution is described as a process employed by individuals to generate creative solutions for resolving social conflict. The strategies employed within dispute resolution are diverse and can range from informal methods to more complex strategies that involve third-party intermediaries (Kriesberg, 1991; Sweeney & Carruthers, 1996). There are a variety of dispute resolution strategies used within the field of special education. To assist with describing these strategies, a framework of some of the most typical strategies follows.

Framework of Dispute Resolution Options

Researchers within the fields of special education and dispute resolution have noted a tremendous negative toll as a result of using adversarial procedures to resolve conflict between parents and professionals over the past decade (Markowitz, Ahearn, & Schrag, 2003; Reiman, Beck, Peter, Zeller, Moses, & Engiles, 2007). Many researchers are attempting to further understand and evaluate the impact of a variety of dispute resolution practices on collaborative relationships between parents and professionals (Bryce, 2007; Feinberg et al., 2002; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, 2004, 2009; Mueller et al., 2008). These include formal practices stipulated within IDEA (2004) and more informal or alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes thought to be less adversarial and more likely to improve the problem-solving abilities of parents and professionals in ways that strengthen their partnerships (Mueller, 2009; Mueller et al., 2008; Nowell & Salem, 2007; Reiman et al., 2007).

While there are several organizations conducting research on dispute resolution, the Consortium for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE) has been charged by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to help build the nation's capacity to effectively resolve conflicts within the field of special education. CADRE (2007), in collaboration with federal partners such as Project Forum at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), has conducted numerous research studies under the topic of dispute resolution. Their research has generated a framework that describes a continuum of dispute resolution strategies often used in special education. This continuum reflects the developmental stages of conflict and highlights strategies typically used within each stage. Like the nature of conflict,

however, the stages provided in the continuum should not be interpreted as progressive or linear, but rather as interrelated and dynamic.

Prevention

The first stage recognized by CADRE is prevention. According to researchers, the dispute resolution mechanisms within IDEA pose several drawbacks such as being reactive, rather than proactive when resolving disputes (Mueller, 2009; Mueller et al., 2008). Research by Mueller et al. (2008) concluded that school districts wishing to effectively address parental dissatisfaction are more likely to be successful if they relied on their own resolution strategies, rather than on strategies that depended upon outside parties, such as impartial hearing officers or mediators.

Prevention strategies are actions that a local system of special education can implement prior to conflict to build the capacity of parents and professionals to meaningfully collaborate and problem-solve. There is an increasing recognition that proactive resolution strategies can prevent legal action (Mueller et al., 2008). Prevention strategies often include creating stakeholder councils, engaging in collaborative rulemaking, and providing training (Feinberg et al., 2002). In a study by Henderson (2008), a group of state systems of special education with experience implementing prevention strategies such as stakeholder council reported positive outcomes as a result of these practices. Prevention strategies tend to promote opportunities for building consensus by opening lines of communication. They can also foster the development of positive group interdependencies through relationship-building activities. As explained earlier in this chapter, positive group interdependencies occur when people believe the success for goal achievement relies on the ability of others with whom they are

cooperatively connected to mutually achieve their goals. According to researchers, when positive interdependencies exist, creative problem-solving is more likely to occur in the event of conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch et al., 2006; Johnson, 2003). Providing professional development to promote understanding about important relationship qualities supported by research as contributing to effective professional partnerships such as: (a) open and frequent communication, (b) honesty, (c) trust, (b) respect, (d) acknowledgment and validation, (e) equality, (f) focusing on needs, (g) valuing children, (h) shared vision, and (i) sharing information and resources (Blue-Banning et al., 2004.; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Soodak & Erwin, 2000) is an important prevention activity.

Disagreement

The second stage of the dispute resolution framework is disagreement. Disagreement strategies informally respond to potential misunderstandings or differing opinions through tactics such as phone intervention, case management, or parent-to-parent assistance. One of the benefits of disagreement strategies is that they can be immediately implemented, instead of waiting for a third-party intervention (Brown, 2003; Feinberg et al., 2002). Using the aforementioned strategies, emphasis is placed upon communication enhancement. As explained earlier, open and frequent communication has been identified within multiple research studies as important relationship qualities that promote effective parent and professional partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Esquivel et al., 2008; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Also, research has indicated that poor communication, such as infrequent or a lack of, can induce or escalate conflict (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Conflict Strategies

The third stage of dispute resolution is conflict strategies. Conflict strategies attempt to resolve disagreements after informal attempts have proven unsuccessful. Conflict strategies require intervention from a neutral third party trained to resolve conflict through facilitative strategies or direct interventions. Conflict strategies include IEP facilitation, informal mediation, employing ombudspersons, or third-party consultation. Literature and preliminary research on conflict strategies reveal that IEP facilitation has become an increasingly popular and effective strategy across the United States to resolve conflict in a manner that preserves relationships between parent and professionals (CADRE, 2002; Mueller, 2004, 2009). IEP facilitation is considered effective for ensuring communication and remaining child-focused.

Procedural Safeguards

The fourth stage is procedural safeguards. Procedural safeguards represent more formal dispute resolution strategies. Procedural safeguards entail implementing the statutory requirements within IDEA (2004) to resolve conflicts. These requirements include state complaints, resolution sessions, formal mediation, and due process hearings. IDEA (2004) procedural safeguards are described in more detail.

State Complaints

Under IDEA (2004), parents and school personnel can file a written complaint to a state education agency if they believe there has been a violation of special education law surrounding the identification, evaluation, placement, or delivery of FAPE for a child with a disability. Written complaints must be signed and thoroughly reflect the conflict from the perspective of the complainant. Within 60 days, a State Complaint Officer must

conduct an investigation and return a written decision to the person who filed the complaint. The charge of the State Complaint Officer is to determine if the school correctly implemented special education procedures and abided by IDEA (2004) statute and regulations.

Resolution Sessions

Within IDEA 2004, Congress added the requirement of resolution sessions which mandates that all relevant parties in conflict meet prior to the initiation of any legal action. According to the statute, within 15 days of receiving a due process hearing request, a local school district must convene a resolution session between parents and other pertinent IEP team members who are involved in the conflict. The purpose of a resolution session is to provide a forum for parties in conflict to discuss issues that led to the due process hearing request and to then try to collectively resolve the problem.

A study by Henderson and Moses (2008) examining the practice of resolution sessions supported the strategy as a way to provide local school district administrators with an opportunity to attempt to locally resolve conflict. It was cited that resolution sessions are an important step within the dispute resolution process because administrators are often unaware or not included in conflict prior to a due process hearing request. Shortfalls of resolution sessions were also noted by the study. These shortfalls included: (a) challenges for schools to meet the 15-day timeline; (b) lack of confidentiality or presence of a neutral third party; (c) the ability of parties to rescind within three days of agreement; and (d) determination of what qualifies as a written agreement and its degree of contractual clout (Henderson & Moses, 2008). Further criticism of resolution sessions are that they remain a formalized process that is offered

only after a due process request has been filed. Therefore, the strategy is used too late to impose any positive impact on collaborative problem solving (Mueller, 2009).

Formal Mediation

In 1997, the United States Congress added formal mediation to the amendments of IDEA because it was perceived as a less adversarial approach for resolving conflict between parents and schools (Schrag & Schrag, 2004). Since its addition to IDEA, formal mediation has risen to become one of the most advocated strategies for preserving and promoting parent and school relationships in the face of adversity (Bar-Lev, Neustadt, & Peter, 2002; Goldberg, 2001).

Special education mediation is defined as a voluntary, confidential dispute resolution process that is available to both parents and schools when disagreements occur over the identification, evaluation, or placement of a child or where disagreement exists over a child's receipt of FAPE (Schrag & Schrag, 2004). Within mediation, both parties work collaboratively with an impartial mediator to reach a mutually acceptable agreement (Blau, 2007; CADRE, 2007). The collaborative nature of special education mediation creates tremendous appeal compared to its typically more adversarial and costly counterpart, due process (Beyer, 1999; Blau, 2007).

The practice of special education mediation has revealed multiple advantages for parents and schools to select mediation over due process. These include opportunities to: (a) re-define and potentially strengthen parent-school relationships through respect and effective communication; (b) build shared understanding using future-oriented problem-solving and joint decision-making; (c) maintain focus on needs and interests, rather than on positions and rights; (d) allow participants to sustain focus on the child and control

outcomes; and (d) utilize an expedited and less-costly process to resolve conflict (Bar-Lev et al., 2002; Beyer, 1999; Nowell & Salem, 2007; Talley, 2001). Unfortunately, despite what is known about special education mediation through its implementation, supporting research remains limited (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Reiman et al., 2007) and continues to yield mixed results regarding its value. First, since mediation typically precedes a due process hearing, it may be approached as a delay to a formal hearing (Mueller, 2004). The positive or negative nature of post-mediation relationships, has been found to depend on the degree of follow through after an agreement has been reached. When agreements are reached, but are subsequently not followed, the result is disempowerment and deterioration of relationships (Nowell & Salem, 2007; Schrag & Schrag, 2004).

Due Process Hearings

Due process remains the primary procedural safeguard within IDEA (2004) (Schrag & Schrag, 2004). A due process hearing may be defined as “a formal hearing in which both parties have the right to subpoena, examine, and cross-examine witnesses” (Yell, Ryan, Rozalski, & Katsiyannis, 2009, p. 70). Due process hearings have been found to account for the majority of conflict resolution activities with an estimated 6,763 cases cited across the US as compared to 4,266 mediation cases (Chambers, Harr, & Dhanani, 2003).

A due process hearing request may be filed by parents, a local director of special education, or a state department of education. Unlike a state complaint, due process hearings are designed to not only determine if special education law is being followed, but also to determine if the IEP accurately reflects the educational interventions and

supports needed by the child it is designed to serve. Essentially, due process determines if a child is receiving FAPE. Under IDEA, there is a 2-year statute of limitation to file a due process hearing.

Once a due process hearing is filed, an impartial hearing officer is assigned to hear arguments and review evidence surrounding the case. According to federal law, the hearing officer must provide a written decision within 30 days of receipt of the request. The hearing officer's decision is based upon: (a) the facts represented in the case, (b) legal rights and responsibilities, (c) federal and state law and regulations, and (d) precedents established as a result of other due process hearings or court rulings.

There are several shortfalls of due process cases beyond their reactive nature. Additional downsides include that they deplete time, money, and physical and emotional resources (Beyer, 1999; Feinberg et al., 2002; Markowitz et al., 2003). Due process has been described as adversarial procedure that does little for parent and professional partnerships (Mueller, 2004). Furthermore, due process tends to be counterproductive by damaging necessary long-term collaborative relationships between parents and professionals. As Beyer (1999) explained, "By positioning parents against school districts to achieve the best interests of the child, due process hearings create an adversarial environment in which parents and school officials are placed in opposition" (p. 2). Beyer further notes that due process poises parents to compete for their children's right to public resources, while requiring school districts to contend with resources seemingly incapable of meeting the needs of all children. Rural districts are especially at risk for due process hearing requests as a result of: (a) difficulties recruiting qualified

teachers, (b) a high reliance on paraprofessionals, and (c) increasing populations of students who require a high need of support (Scheffel, Rude, & Bole, 2005).

Litigation

When complainants are dissatisfied with the ruling of their due process case, they may further pursue their case in the federal district and appellate courts. The United States federal court system is comprised of more than 100 district courts, 13 courts of appeals, and a Supreme Court. The vast majority of litigation in special education takes place in district courts. Only a few cases addressing the education of children with disabilities under special education law have progressed as far as the United States Supreme Court. Those that do make it to the Supreme Court are interpreted as law for all individuals across the United States. Yell et al. (2009) have reported that the Supreme Court only heard seven special education cases between the years 1975-2005. However, in the last four years, the Court has already heard four special education cases, which shows a significant increase (Yell et al., 2009). These cases were: (a) *Schaffer v. Weast, Superintendent, Montgomery County Public Schools* (2005); (b) *Arlington Central School District Board of Education v. Murphy* (2006); (c) *Winkelman v. Parma City School District* (2007); and (d) *Board of Education of the City School District of the City of New York v. Tom F.* (2007). Three of these cases resulted in rulings by the Court. An important finding and commonality to all these high court rulings, particularly *Winkelman v. Parma*, are further mandates for parents to be included throughout their children's special education programming.

According to Quille (2000), approaches to dispute resolution should be guided by a concern for urgency for long-term sustainability. Reactive dispute interventions such as

resolution meetings, formal mediations, and due process are driven primarily by urgency. There is a strong need to eliminate conflict without attending to relationships and necessary change. Conversely, preventative dispute interventions such as advisory councils and IEP facilitation focus on providing parents and professionals the power to transform conflict through the proactive building of collaborative relationships.

Conclusion

The book, *Schools that Learn* (Senge et al., 2000), described single loop learning as a cycle that is most often used by school systems. Single loop learning entails improving behavior through observation, reflection, and decision-making. Single loop learning falls short when behaviors targeted for improvement are not effective or appropriate to the situation. In the context of this study, the nature of collaborative parent and professional relationships has evolved over time (Turnbull et al., 2000). As this evolution occurred, research has cited challenges for the development and implementation of collaborative parent and professional partnerships due to a lack of a common understanding or agreement upon: (a) what relationship qualities facilitate or deter from the creation of effective parent and professional partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004); and (b) what roles parents are expected or obligated to play in the educational process of their children (Adams et al., 2009).

Local systems of special education using a single loop learning process may not have fully adapted to the current conceptualization of collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals due to the continuing ambiguity surrounding important relationship qualities. This lack of adaptation may be especially true for local systems of special education still engaged in reactive practices that address the relationships of

parents and professionals only after conflict has occurred. Even though this reactive style is supported by IDEA (2004), local school districts cannot ignore the research that indicates that these practices can be destructive and ultimately sever relationships between parents and professionals (Beyer, 1999).

The dispute resolution framework presented in this chapter shows that less-formal options for handling conflict between parents and professionals exist. One of these options is prevention. Many researchers believe that the implementation of prevention and early dispute resolution strategies designed to foster positive interdependencies and promotive interactions can avoid or improve the handling of conflict (Bryce, 2007; Feinberg et al., 2002; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, 2004, 2009; Mueller et al., 2008). In order to effectively foster positive interdependencies between parents and professionals, it is necessary to develop a clear understanding about what relationship qualities are important to both parties to form collaborative partnerships. Since currently identified relationship qualities are based primarily upon the voice of parents, Chapter III will describe how this study investigated the voice of professionals

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHOD

Introduction

Research from the perspectives of parents has identified 10 relationship qualities that are necessary to build collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals and to improve the handling of conflict. These 10 qualities are: (a) open and frequent communication, (b) honesty, (c) trust, (d) respect, (e) acknowledgment and validation, (f) equality, (g) focusing on needs, (h) valuing children, (i) shared vision, and (j) sharing information and resources (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Since these 10 relationship qualities are based primarily upon the voice of parents, the goal of this research was to investigate the voice of professionals to see if any differences or similarities existed. The purpose of this study was to investigate what relationship qualities a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education considered necessary to foster collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. The relationship-building strategies that were employed by these professionals were also explored.

Rationale

By comparing the 10 relationship qualities previously identified by parents to the relationship qualities identified by professionals in this study, it was hoped that the

knowledge base in special education will expand through a more balanced representation of the relationship qualities perceived as necessary by both parents and professionals for the development of collaborative partnerships and the improved handling of conflict. Results from the study can be used to inform systems as they seek to improve professional development activities designed to enhance collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals. By improving the ability of parents and professionals to more effectively handle conflict, local systems of special education could decrease their reliance upon due process hearings and other costly formal dispute resolution techniques recognized by IDEA (2004).

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this investigation were:

- Q1 How do professionals in the selected local system of special education define collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents of children with disabilities?
- Q2 What specific relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to effective collaborative partnerships with parents?
- Q3 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to conflict prevention?
- Q4 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical for conflict resolution?
- Q5 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?
- Q6 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents once conflict has occurred?

Research Design

A research design demonstrates how research questions in a study are answered through the employment of a particular research process or methodology (Marshall &

Rossmann, 1989). The research methodology used in this study was a qualitative approach (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research enables researchers to serve as an instrument of data collection, allowing them to “listen so as to hear the meaning of what is being said” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 7). As instruments of research, researchers are able to gather data “up close” (Creswell, 2007) and attend to the meaning participants are assigning to their worlds through ideas, concepts, word selection, voice intonation, and non-verbal cues (Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). This approach was appropriate for this study because it allowed input to be collected from integral members of parent and professional partnerships (Creswell, 2007; Blue-banning et al., 2004).

Research Strategy

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perspectives of professionals regarding the relationship qualities they perceive to contribute to the development of collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents and improve the handling of conflict. The research strategy employed for this study was qualitative interviewing. “Qualitative interviewing is a way to find out what others feel and think about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews [researchers] can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which [they] did not participate” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 1). Interviews allow researchers to gain access and build rapport with participants to encourage these individuals to fully reflect about their experiences and provide rich descriptions using their own language. Active listening, curiosity and respect, and flexibility are among the many skills necessary to conduct successful qualitative interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Facilitating In-Depth Interviews

Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated, “One of the goals of interview design is to ensure that the results are deep, detailed, vivid, and nuanced” (p. 76). During the interviews, participants were asked to respond to semi-structured interview questions intended to generate a mixture of specific data and flexible data (Merriam, 1998). A set of predetermined interview questions were posed verbally in order to gather specific data. In addition, a flexible conversation strategy was used to obtain unguided perspectives of the participants (Merriam, 1998). Questions were changed and added to the research protocol to reflect an increased understanding of the issue as data were collected (Creswell, 2007).

In addition, several strategies were used to foster depth in the interviews. Since participants are often more willing to provide depth when they believe the interviewer is familiar and sympathetic to their reality, information about the local school district and the participants’ work environment was collected prior to the interviews in an effort to more fully understand the participants and their situations. Follow-up questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate upon their responses. Also, participants were asked to provide examples of their past experiences partnering with parents and engaging in conflict prevention and resolution activities. Their examples were uninterrupted and followed with further questions in order to clarify nuances and create a more vivid account of events.

Research Participants

A local school district in a state located within the Rocky Mountain region was selected for this study. A local school district was defined by this study as a tightly

woven group of mutually influential and interactive elements that embrace a common purpose (Fullan, 2007; IDEA, 2004; Lemke & Sabelli, 2008; Senge et al., 2000). The common purpose or mission of the articulated local school district selected for this study was to empower, challenge, and inspire individuals to learn, achieve, and excel. The district asserted that in order to accomplish its mission, everyone must be accountable and share responsibility.

The state in which the selected local school district resides contains an estimated population of 5,000,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Approximately 25% of the state's population consists of children below the age of 18. The state education system oversees 178 local school districts serving nearly 804,000 students and their families.

The selection of the local school district was based on the district's recent experiences with formal IDEA (2004) dispute resolution activities. Since 1998, the district has been involved in: (a) four state complaints, (b) four mediations, and (c) five due process hearings. As a result, members of the district's leadership such as the superintendent and the director of special education have expressed a strong desire to improve collaborative partnerships among parents and professionals. The state complaints have involved issues surrounding the IEP meetings, the IEP team, IEP development, IEP implementation, evaluation, eligibility determination, placement, and denial of FAPE. The due process hearings have involved issues around identification, IEP team meetings, the IEP team, evaluation, placement, and provision of services. IEP team issues can be described as parents not being informed or treated as if they are members of an IEP teams and, therefore, denied opportunity to actively or meaningfully participate. IEP development could include parents not being able to address their child's

strengths or concerns for enhancing their child's education or feeling as if the team is basing their decisions on a lack of information and data. Issues around IEP development could also include professionals neglecting to consider information or data submitted by parents including external evaluations. Parents may disagree with IEP decisions regarding children's eligibility for special education, or they may disagree with the school or classroom in which their child is placed. Finally, parents may feel that their child's IEP was not properly or fully implemented, resulting in a denial of FAPE.

The total pupil membership of the selected local school district at the time of the study was approximately 15,400 children. About 1,800 (12%) of these children were qualified for special education services under at least one of the 13 disability categories listed within IDEA (2004). These disability categories were: (a) autism, (b) deaf-blindness, (c) emotional disturbance, (d) hearing impairment (including deafness), (e) mental retardation, (f) multiple disabilities, (g) orthopedic impairment, (h) other health impairment, (i) specific learning disability, (j) speech or language impairment, (k) traumatic brain injury, or (l) visual impairment (including blindness). The presence of one of the preceding disabilities must have an effect on a child's educational performance in order for the child to be considered eligible to receive special education services (IDEA, 2004).

Participant Selection

Participants from the selected local school district were purposefully identified using a criterion sampling procedure (Patton, 1990) and by way of a recommendation from the director of special education. Purposeful criterion sampling enables a researcher to "select individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an

understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon of the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Criteria used for the selection of participants included: (a) employment and compensation from the local school district; (b) regard as being instrumental in the prevention and resolution of conflict with parents; and (c) some degree of involvement in parent and professional conflict during the last 5 years.

Further support for participant selection was based upon the beliefs and values conveyed by the selected local school district. For example, a review of district documents revealed that administrators such as the superintendent, the director of special education, and building principals were responsible for ensuring common commitment among other professionals and parents. Principals within the district were specifically noted as holding strong responsibility for promoting synergistic relationships. Also, the district documents stated that in the event of conflict, those closest to the problem were best situated to facilitate resolution. This information supported the inclusion of the following participants: (a) the superintendent; (b) the director of special education and the assistant director of special education; (c) the parent liaison; (d) at least one principal from each of the three levels of elementary, middle, and high school; and (e) at least one teacher for each of the three levels of elementary, middle, and high school levels.

The professionals selected to participate in this study represented multiple roles and worked at various levels within the local school district. The final sample of professionals was comprised of 14 professionals. These professionals were: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the assistant director of special education, (d) the parent liaison, (e) two school social workers, (f) a school psychologist, (g) two high school principals, (h) a middle school principal, (i) an elementary school

principal, (h) a high school teacher, (i) a middle school teacher, and (j) an elementary school teacher. All of the professionals were employed by and received compensation in the form of their salary from the local school district at the time of the study.

The professionals' experience ranged from being a recent graduate of higher education within the past 5 years, to being a veteran working in the field with nearly 40 years of service. The length of time professionals had worked in the selected school district ranged from 1 to 12 years. Table 1 provides information regarding the educational experience base of each professional who participated in the study.

Table 1

Educational Experience

Current Role	Years in District	Prior Roles
Superintendent	1	Deputy superintendent Director of curriculum and instruction Executive assistant of learning services Principal Teacher
Director of Special Education	12	Director of special education Teacher
Assistant Director of Special Education	5	Supervisor Teacher
Parent Liaison	16	Principal and coordinator for summer school State consultant Teacher
Social Worker 1	2	Resident counselor
Social Worker 2	10	Residential program manager and case worker Case worker
School Psychologist	4	Youth leadership programming
High School Principal 1	5	Assistant principal Teacher
High School Principal 2	8	Assistant principal Teacher
Middle School Principal	7	Assistant principal Teacher
Elementary School Principal	2	Teacher Physical education teacher
High School Teacher	4	Residential teacher
Middle School Teacher	9	Teacher
Elementary School Teacher	10	Residential teacher

The superintendent was relatively new to the school district, serving in this particular leadership role for approximately 1 year. Prior to coming to the school district, the superintendent had held several other leadership roles including deputy superintendent, director of curriculum and instruction, executive assistant of learning services, and principal. The superintendent also had experience working as a teacher at the elementary and high school levels.

The director of special education was a veteran of the school district, serving in this role for 12 years. The director of special education's prior roles included working as a director of special education within a different school district and working as a teacher at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

The assistant director of special education had been in the school district for 5 years. The assistant director's prior experience included serving as a supervisor for programs serving children with disabilities and working as a teacher of special education.

The parent liaison, another veteran of the district, had served in this role for 16 years. The parent liaison's other experiences included serving as a principal and coordinator of general and special education summer school, working as a consultant for the state department of education, and working as a teacher of special education.

Two social workers participated in the study. One social worker had been recently hired by the school district after completion of an internship. The second social worker was a veteran of the school district, having served in the role for 10 years. Both social workers had previous experience working in residential treatment centers--the first serving as a counselor, and the second, as a program manager and caseworker.

The school psychologist had also been recently hired by the school district upon completion of an internship. The school psychologist had worked in this position for 4 years. The school psychologist's prior experience included working in youth leadership programming.

Four principals participated in this study. The principals represented two high schools, one middle school, and one elementary school. The first high school principal served in this role for 5 years. This principal's prior experience included serving as an assistant principal within the district for 4 years and teaching general education. The second high school principal had held the position for 8 years. This principal's prior positions also included serving as an assistant principal and teaching in general education.

The middle school principal had held the position for 7 years. Similar to the two high school principals, the middle school principal had worked as an assistant principal and had experience teaching general education.

The elementary school principal was new to the district, having served in the role for 2 years. The elementary principal's prior experience included teaching in general education and working as a physical education teacher.

Three teachers participated in the study. These teachers represented high school, middle school, and elementary school. The high school teacher had taught special education within the school district for 4 years. The high school teacher's prior experience included working in a residential treatment center.

The middle school teacher had been a teacher in the district for the past 9 years. Her role involved teaching students with disabilities in inclusive settings. A teacher position had been the middle school teacher's primary professional role.

The elementary teacher had taught in special education at the middle and elementary school levels within the school district for the past 10 years. The elementary teacher's prior experience included working at a residential treatment center.

All 14 of the professionals listed above described their roles as "huge" for the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The middle school principal best described the sentiment of these professionals regarding the importance of partnering with parents by stating, "We build proactive relationships with our parents so that we can get to the core and the root of meeting the needs of the students" (personal communication).

Professionals' Experience with Informal And Formal Conflict Resolution

All of the participants in this study had experience with informal conflict resolution. The district administration such as the superintendent, the director of special education, and the assistant director of special education had the most extensive experience with formal conflict resolution. Their experiences ranged from state complaints through litigation. The parent liaison followed in experience with formal conflict-resolution practices. The parent liaison had been involved with formal conflict-resolution strategies from state complaints through resolution meetings. The related services providers, such as the two social workers and the school psychologist, stated that they had been involved in only a few formal resolution procedures, but indicated that they were often called upon to play an indirect role. The two high school principals had

some experience with the formal resolution practices such as state complaints, resolution meeting, and mediation. The remaining middle school and elementary principals and the teachers from each level did not have experience with formal conflict resolution procedures.

Table 2

Professionals' Experience with Informal and Formal Conflict Resolution

Role	Informal	Formal				
		State Complaints	Mediation	Resolution Meetings	Due Process	Litigation
Superintendent	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Director of Special Education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Assistant Director of Special Education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parent Liaison	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Social Worker 1	Yes	No*	No*	No	No	No
Social Worker 2	Yes	Yes	No*	Yes	No*	No
School Psychologist	Yes	No*	No*	No*	No*	No
High School Principal 1	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
High School Principal 2	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
High School Teacher	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No
Middle School Principal	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Middle School Teacher	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Elementary School Principal	Yes	No	No	No	No	No
Elementary School Teacher	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No

Note. *Indirect involvement such as consulting or submitting information.

Research Procedures

The first step of this study was to seek approval from the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board (Appendix A). Next, the director of special education of the selected school district was contacted via email in order to schedule a face-to-face meeting to provide an overview of the study and invite the district to participate. At the time of the of this meeting, the director was asked to recommend professionals employed by and receiving compensation from the district, professionals regarded as instrumental to the prevention and resolution of conflict with parents, and professionals who had been involved in parent and professional conflict during the last 5 years. Based on these criteria, the director recommended 36 professionals. These professionals represented: (a) the superintendent; (b) the director of special education; (c) the assistant director of special education; (d) the parent liaison; (e) building principals from elementary, middle, and high school; (f) school social workers; (g) school psychologists; and (h) classroom teachers from elementary, middle, and high school. After the identification of the aforementioned sample of professionals, a cover letter in the form of an email was provided to the department of special education administrative assistant to send to each individual (Appendix B). The email invitation presented a brief explanation of the study and of the study and included the researcher's phone number and an email link enabling the potential participants to directly contact the researcher regarding their willingness to participate. This method of contact ensured that only the researcher could identify the final participants in the research sample. A total of 14 professionals responded by both email and phone, agreeing to participate. These professionals included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education,

(c) the assistant director of special education, (d) the parent liaison, (e) two high school principals, (f) one middle school principal, (g) one elementary principal, (h) one high school teacher, (i) one middle school teacher, (j) one elementary teacher, (k) two social workers, and (l) one school psychologist.

Interviews were scheduled with the participants over the phone and by email. The date, time, and location of the interviews were based upon the comfort and convenience of the participants. Once an interview time was scheduled, each participant received a “welcome” email that provided them with written confirmation of the date and time of their scheduled interview. Attached to the email was a Human Subjects Consent Form (Appendix C), which clearly and understandably explained to the participants that their participation in the study was voluntary, that precautions would be taken to ensure their anonymity, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Also attached to the email was a set of anticipated interview questions (Appendix D) that the participants had the option of reviewing prior to their interview.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face and digitally recorded. At the beginning of each interview, participants were provided a printed copy of the Human Subjects Consent Form and asked if they had read the form and if they had any questions about either the study or their participation. After it was ensured that all participants had read and understood the consent form and the purpose of the study, they were asked to sign the consent form. Participants were also given a form on which to write their preferred contact information for follow-up purposes. At that point, the digital recorder was turned on, and the interview was conducted. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. It was noted that participants who had shorter interviews had prepared for

their interview by writing their thoughts down on the interview protocol emailed to them prior to the interview. At the end of the interview, the digital recorder was turned off, and the participants were thanked for their time. No compensation was provided

Multiple steps to maximize confidentiality were implemented by the researcher throughout the study. A numerical identifier was assigned to each participant in order to maintain anonymity. Only the researcher was knowledgeable of which numerical identifier matched a participant.

At the conclusion of the interviews, the digital recordings were transcribed verbatim into written transcripts. To ensure accuracy, each digital recording was carefully reviewed while simultaneously reading its corresponding written transcript. Also, interview notes were written as an additional strategy for documentation and reflection. The interview notes included feelings and impressions of the researcher, informal observations, and documentation of ideas thought to contribute to the research process. All interviews were immediately downloaded and saved into individual file folders on a password-protected computer. The interview recordings were backed up on a flash drive that was locked in a filing cabinet within the researcher's home office, as were the interview notes. The digital recorder was erased following the download and flash drive back-up procedures. All files from this study will be maintained on the password-protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet for up to 5 years from the date of the first interview and will then be permanently deleted.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is described by Merriam (1998) as a “complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (p. 178). Simply stated, it is the process by which the researcher makes sense out of the data. During the initial analysis of data, the researcher suspends all preconceived notions in order to “hear” what the data communicates (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2007).

The initial step in data analysis is data management. Data management entails organizing data and engaging in the data analysis process by “getting a sense of [the] whole database” (Creswell, 2007, p. 151). Once the written transcripts were determined to accurately match the digital recordings, each transcript was carefully reviewed until any new reviews failed yield new information. The purpose for the multiple reviews of each transcript was to identify and include all units of data relevant to the purpose of the study and to the research questions (Merriam, 1998). Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) refer to this process as identifying the “big ideas.” Key words, quotes, and concepts were highlighted, and the researcher’s thoughts, speculations, and questions were documented on the transcript. After the researcher determined that additional reviews were not contributing to the identification of new data, the notes on each transcript were transferred onto a cover sheet and attached to the transcript. As new transcripts were reviewed, the cover sheets of previously reviewed transcripts were referenced to in order to identify emerging patterns and commonalities between the transcripts. These emerging patterns and commonalities were listed on a combined master list. The master

list was then coded into a “short-list” of broad categories (Creswell, 2007). Merriam (1998) describes these categories as “conceptual elements that ‘cover’ or span many individual examples of that category” (p. 182). This process created a conceptual framework used for further data management and reduction (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). To retain the identity of the professionals with their responses, individual codes were generated and maintained alongside each unit of data documented on the master list.

Next, the units of data were reviewed for common themes. All common themes were grouped together in categories, and any supporting themes were indented under the common themes. This process continued until all units of data were placed within an appropriate and mutually exclusive category (Merriam, 1998).

Once mutually exclusive categories were formed, the researcher carefully examined the data under each to identify common terminology or language used by the professionals that could serve as a representative label for the category (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Merriam, 1998). After the categories were labeled, the participant codes were counted under each category. Only one participant code was tallied for each category or subtheme. This enabled the researcher to organize the categories according to their strength of support. Categories that received support from six or more professionals were included in the final results.

Interpreting the Data

Interpreting the data entails taking the findings of the study to determine its larger meaning. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) stated that “meaning can come from looking at differences and similarities, from inquiring into and interpreting causes, consequences, and relationships” (p. 127). Researchers pose questions about whether their findings

substantiate or contradict previous research. Through this process, the pre-existing relationship qualities identified by parents for collaborative partnerships were considered. These qualities were compared and contrasted to the meaning conveyed by the professional participants in this study as a way to determine commonalities or differences. Openness to differences in definitions or to new emerging qualities was maintained. The researcher used experience, knowledge, and intuition to guide a critical examination of the data across multiple angles.

Presenting the Findings

The findings of the study in an objective thick-descriptive narrative detailing what was learned as a result of this study follows. Direct quotes from the participants were contextually embedded to support and reinforce the research findings. The use of the participant's voice is used to build confidence that the data were accurately represented (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Research Trustworthiness

A universal goal of research is to produce valid and reliable research. According to Merriam (1998), "ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner" (p. 198). Research is most valuable in education when it is practical and can be applied in the field. Therefore, the audience of research must have confidence in its rigor (Creswell, 2007). The following procedures were applied to contribute to the rigor of this study.

Strategies for Internal Validity

Internal validity refers to the degree research findings accurately reflect reality. Since a foundational assumption of qualitative research is that true reality is dynamic and

impossible to grasp, the concept of reality is approached by attending to the individual realities constructed by participants.

Qualitative researchers possess an advantage for addressing internal validity in their studies. This advantage is their role as being instruments of data collection. This role places the researcher as closely as possible to the reality of their participants and enables them to closely attend to messages participants are conveying through ideas, concepts, word selection, voice intonation, and non-verbal cues. When viewed from this standpoint, internal validity may be regarded as a strength of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As an instrument of data collection, the researcher for this study embraced the importance of suspending all preconceived notions in order to ‘hear’ what the data were communicating. Also, the researcher strived to use the “voice” of the research participants in order to build confidence in the data. Two distinct strategies were used to address the internal validity for this study. These were: (a) member checks, and (b) peer examination.

Member check. To conduct a member check, the professionals from this study were provided with a preliminary analysis of the findings. They were invited to comment on the plausibility and accuracy of the findings (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998). Any perspectives gathered from the professionals were then incorporated into the final analysis of the study. More than half of the professionals responded to the members check. Those who responded supported that the findings of the study were both plausible and accurate.

Peer examination. The second strategy used to address internal validity was peer examination. Peer examination for this study involved debriefing and soliciting feedback

from a professional colleague regarding the findings of a study (Merriam, 1998). The colleague who served as the peer examiner for this study was both a parent of a child with a disability and a professional working within the field of special education. After being debriefed and supplied with all of the unidentifiable transcripts, the peer examiner for this study conveyed agreement for the clarity and accuracy of the findings for this study. The peer examiner felt that the subthemes supported the major categories, and the major categories addressed the research questions of this study.

Strategies for External Validity

External validity refers to the degree that the findings from a single study can be applied to other settings. Merriam (1998) states, “in qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (p. 209). When studying a small sample, traditional approaches to external validity can be problematic for qualitative research. Fortunately, researchers can use an alternative approach to address external validity in qualitative research called “reader generalizability” (Merriam, 1998). This method empowers the audience to decide if the findings of a particular study are applicable to their own settings. Empowering the audience to make this determination requires that the researcher offer sufficient detail. A strategy to provide this detail is thick description (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998).

Thick Description

Thick description provides an in-depth explanation about the setting and the participants under study. This process enables the audience of the research to assess if commonalities exist between their situation and the situation being described in the

research. Making this comparison empowers them to make their own determination about the external validity of a study as well as to decide if the findings are transferable (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Reliability

The reliability of a study refers to the extent the results of a study can be replicated. Reliability in qualitative research is challenged by: (a) the assumption that a single reality does not exist; and (b) the fact that human behavior is dynamic, and individuals are continually re-constructing their understandings about the world. To address reliability, qualitative researchers attempt to demonstrate that their findings are consistent with their results. In this study, an audit trail was used to address reliability (Merriam, 1998).

Audit Trail

Providing an audit trail can contribute to the reliability of this investigation. The purpose of an audit trail is to ensure that other researchers are able to follow the path of research in order to authenticate its findings. In this study, the audit trail included a detailed description about the data collection process, the data coding process, and the decision-making process as they occurred throughout the study. An audit trail was accomplished by creating a fieldwork interview journal which noted the research process. In addition, all relevant documents were meticulously maintained throughout the study (Merriam, 1998).

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate which relationship qualities a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education considered necessary to foster collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. The relationship-building strategies that were employed by these professionals were also explored.

The relationship qualities identified by the professionals interviewed in this study were compared to 10 reoccurring relationship qualities recognized by parents within previous research studies in order to provide a more balanced representation of relationship qualities supported by both groups for the development of collaborative partnerships and an improved handling of conflict. The relationship qualities were also compared to the strategies that the professionals identified for relationship-building and handling conflict.

Results from this study are useful for parents and professionals seeking to assess the presence of these qualities within their own partnerships as well as how these qualities align with the strategies that they are employing. The results are also useful for local education systems and preservice training programs seeking to foster and enhance collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents.

Strengthening collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals is a promising strategy for addressing conflict between these two groups. As a result, local systems of special education could decrease their reliance upon due process hearings and other costly formal dispute resolution techniques recognized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004).

Research Questions

A common means for organizing the findings of a qualitative study is to discuss how each of the research questions has been answered by the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Therefore, the next section presents the findings of this study according to the six research questions:

- Q1 How do professionals in the selected local system of special education define collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents of children with disabilities?
- Q2 What specific relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to effective collaborative partnerships with parents?
- Q3 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to conflict prevention?
- Q4 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical for conflict resolution?
- Q5 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?
- Q6 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents once conflict has occurred?

Additional data beyond answers for the six research questions also emerged from the study. These data resulted from the following interview questions:

- 1 What expectations do professionals hold for parents?

- 2 What barriers do professionals believe exist for creating successful collaborative professional and parent partnerships?
- 3 What do professionals perceive as contributing to or escalating conflict?
- 4 What strategies do professionals use to handle conflict?
- 5 What do professionals perceive as needs to establish collaborative parent and professional partnerships?

Research Question 1: Definition of Collaborative Parent/Professional Partnerships

The first research question was, “How do the professionals in the selected system of special education define collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents of children with disabilities?” The purpose of this research question was to explore the meaning the professionals in this study assigned to collaborative parent and professional partnerships. During the interviews, each professional was asked to supply his/her own definition for collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The 14 definitions were then compared to one another. This comparison uncovered the three common themes of mutual responsibility, open and honest communication, and goal sharing and child-centered decision-making. These themes contributed to the creation of a single definition for collaborative parent and professional partnerships. Before presenting the definition of collaborative parent and professional partnerships, a description of the three common themes is provided. These descriptions clarify how the final definition was created.

Theme 1: mutual responsibility. Mutual responsibility was the first theme that became apparent among the professionals’ definitions. It was believed that mutual responsibility must exist within collaborative partnerships as parents and professionals

work together as a team across home and school environments. This theme was supported by 11 out of the 14 interviewed professionals. The professionals who supported this theme were: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the assistant director of education, (d) the parent liaison, (e) the two social workers, (f) the school psychologist, (g) the high school principal, (h) the high school teacher, (i) the middle school principal, and (j) the elementary principal.

The superintendent described mutual responsibility as a “marriage of effort” between home and school. One social worker stated that collaborative parent and professional partnerships are “professionals and parents working together to better the lives and education of their child and student,” and added that both parents and professionals must show a “team approach” and be “open to trying new interventions and strategies, both at home as well as in school” (personal communication). The elementary school principal explained that partnerships are a “team effort . . . with the same goal in mind . . . and working in the same direction” (personal communication). The elementary school principal contributed that parents and professionals must “find out what might work at home to see if that is something that . . . can [be] implement[ed] at school and see if there is something [that parents] can do at home that might support what [professionals] are doing at school” (personal communication). Likewise, the middle school teacher defined collaborative partnerships as “parents and teachers working together to benefit the child, to move them forward through education, through schoolwork, or any school activities” (personal communication). These quotes support the idea of mutual responsibility by expressing that parents and professionals must team

together across school and home environments in order to achieve the common outcomes of moving children forward and improving their lives.

Theme 2: open and honest communication. Open and honest communication was the second theme that became apparent among the professionals' definitions. Honesty and communication are relationship qualities that will be discussed in more detail under Research Question 2. The theme of open and honest communication was supported by 9 out of the 14 interviewed professionals. The professionals who supported this theme were: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) one social worker, (e) the school psychologist, (f) one high school principal, (g) the high school teacher, (h) the elementary principal, and (i) the elementary school teacher.

Being open and honest was described by the professionals as providing complete and truthful information, not censoring information, and engaging in ongoing exchanges of feedback regarding what is working or not working across home and school environments. It also included sharing information about children's strengths, challenges, and needs.

Theme 3: goal sharing and child-centered decision-making. Goal sharing and child-centered decision-making was the third theme that became apparent among the professionals' definitions. The professionals supported the factors within this theme as being important for realizing positive outcomes for children. This theme was supported by 8 out of the 14 interviewed professionals. The professionals who supported this theme were: (a) the assistant director of special education, (b) the school psychologist, (c) two

social workers, (d) the elementary principal, (e) the high school teacher, (f) the middle school teacher, and (g) the elementary school teacher.

The assistant director of special education stated that collaborative parent and professional partnerships occur when “parties come together with a shared goal and a shared vision to create positive student outcomes from different perspectives” (personal communication). The elementary teacher added that “ultimately . . . the goal . . . is that child’s progress” (personal communication). Finally, one social worker added, “the key piece that we always want to look at is that most parents want their children to succeed in school and we [professionals] have that same kind of common goal” (personal communication). The professionals who supported this theme believed that parents and professionals contribute different, but valuable perspectives to partnerships.

Definition of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The three common themes presented above were used to create a single definition of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The final definition states: *Collaborative parent and professional partnerships are where parents and professionals engage in open and honest communication, take responsibility to work together as a team across home and school environments, share common goals, and engage in mutual child-centered decision-making in order to move children forward and create positive student outcomes.*

A comparison to previous research. The above definition shows both differences and similarities to the definition of collaborative partnerships provided in the literature review of this study. The definition presented in the literature review defined parent and professional partnerships as “participatory and reciprocal interactions between parents and professionals marked by mutual support and focused on meeting both the

needs of children with disabilities and the parents” (Blue-Banning et al., 2004, p.) as well as existing as a partnership in which both parents and professionals must perceive one another as partners (Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Keen, 2007).

One similarity between the two definitions is the idea that collaborative parent and professional partnerships are mutual or reciprocal relationships. The terms *mutual* and *reciprocal* are synonyms, denoting that within collaborative partnerships, parents and professionals both must contribute to and be able to gain from their relationships. The terms *mutual* and *reciprocal* also support the conclusions of Dinnebeil and Hale (1996) and Keen (2007) that parents and professionals must perceive one another as partners.

Differences can also be seen between the two definitions. One difference is the strength of terminology. The first definition states that parents and professionals hold responsibility to work together. This terminology is compared to the second definition which states that parents and professionals need to provide mutual support to one another. The term *responsibility* denotes accountability, and within the context of this study, accountability described parents and professionals working together, rather than working exclusively. The idea of shared responsibility between parents and professionals is supported by previous research and endorses the belief that parents and professionals understand children with disabilities in different, yet complimentary ways. To be successful, they must work collaboratively within long-term partnerships (Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Pinkus, 2006; Henderson, 2002; Murray, 2000). The second definition presented in the literature review uses the term *support*. Support entails parents and professionals offering assistance or encouragement to one another. The idea that parents and professionals are accountable to work together creates a different

connotation than parents and professionals supporting one another. Furthermore, the first definition specifies the responsibility that parents and professionals share transcends the boundaries between home and school. The first definition also specifies that working together means parents and professionals share goals and engage in mutual, child-centered decision-making.

A second difference between the definitions can be found by comparing the concept of “moving children forward to create positive student outcomes” to the concept of “focusing on meeting the needs of both children with disabilities and their parents.” The concept of moving children forward to create positive student outcomes indicates a long-term focus and is child-centered. The concept of meeting the needs of both children with disabilities and their parents places more emphasis on current issues and extends professional responsibility beyond meeting the needs of children. One explanation for this difference may be that the professionals in this study strongly supported the idea of maintaining focus on the child. For example, 11 of the professionals cited that one of their expectations of parents was that they focused on the needs of their child. Additionally, 8 of the professionals identified maintaining focus on the child as an important strategy for handling conflict. One of the social workers supported this sentiment by stating:

We are all here to work for students and that is our main focus, rather than getting wrapped up in everything else that is going on in the family’s life. That is not really our role. We shouldn’t be worried about that. We should be more worried about how we are going to help the students be more successful citizens in our community. (personal communication)

The professionals in this study indicated that their primary role was to serve the needs of children and ensure their success. However, the professionals in the interviews

did not exclude the importance of meeting the needs of families. Rather, they identified specific relationship-building strategies that they felt were appropriate within their role and capacity to meet the needs of families. These relationship-building strategies were to make parents feel they were a part of their child's educational experience, to meet parents where they are, and to prepare parents for partnership. These strategies are discussed in more detail under Research Question number 5.

**Research Questions 2, 3 and 4:
Relationship Qualities**

Research Questions 2, 3, and 4 explored the relationship qualities that professionals believed must exist for effective collaborative partnerships to occur with parents as well as the relationship qualities that professionals believed were critical for conflict prevention and conflict resolution. During the interviews, each professional was asked to verbally list and then describe the relationship qualities they perceived as important.

Before presenting the relationship qualities identified by the participants, an important consideration must be presented. During the interviews, the professionals showed a tendency to use relationship qualities and strategies interchangeably. Therefore, the researcher felt that a clear distinction needed to be made to separate these two concepts. The researcher relied on the context of the data to determine if the professionals were describing an inherent human characteristic or if the professionals were describing a method they used to accomplish a specific goal. If the professionals were describing an inherent human characteristic, data were labeled as a relationship quality. If the professionals were describing a method they used to accomplish a specific

goal, data were labeled as a strategy. The researcher believed this distinction provided more clarity to the results.

Following this distinction, the researcher was able to determine that the professionals identified seven common relationship qualities. Research Questions 2, 3, and 4 were separate questions intended to have the professionals distinguish between the qualities necessary for collaborative parent and professional partnerships and the qualities critical to conflict prevention and conflict resolution. The result was that the professionals consistently identified four of the same qualities for all three questions. These four qualities, presented in order of support, were: (a) honesty, (b) respect, (c) trust, and (d) flexibility. Two qualities were unique to collaborative parent and professional partnerships. These qualities were open and consistent communication and active listening. One quality was unique to conflict prevention and resolution. This quality was responsiveness. Table 3 demonstrates these qualities under their respective categories.

Table 3

Relationship Qualities

Necessary for Collaborative Partnerships	Corresponding	Critical to Conflict Prevention & Resolution
Open and consistent communication	Honesty	Responsiveness
Active listening	Respect Trust Flexibility	

Differences were not found between relationship qualities to prevent or resolve conflict. To support this conclusion, one of the interview questions asked the professionals, “Do you believe the relationship qualities used to prevent conflicts are the same as those qualities that are used to resolve conflicts?” Many of the professionals responded, “That is a good question!” With additional probing, many of the professionals responded, “Yes, the qualities are the same,” or made statements such as “I think they are absolutely similar,” or they were “probably not a whole lot different.” There were a couple of explanations for these responses. As indicated by these professionals, there may not be a distinction between the relationship qualities of conflict prevention and conflict resolution. An alternative and more likely explanation is that the professionals in this study did not have the experience or ability to distinguish between the relationship qualities for conflict prevention and conflict resolution. This latter conclusion is supported by the fact that the professionals seemed more familiar with and showed alignment between the qualities they identified for collaborative partnerships and conflict prevention and the strategies they identified for relationship building with parents. However, the same alignment was not apparent between the relationship qualities the professionals identified for conflict resolution and the strategies they identified to handle conflict. Therefore, it appeared the professionals were less versed at describing relationship qualities for conflict resolution.

A comparison to previous research. In previous studies, 10 common relationship qualities were identified as facilitating or deterring collaborative professional partnerships based on the perspectives of parents. These qualities were: (a) open and frequent communication, (b) honesty, (c) trust, (d) respect,

(e) acknowledgment and validation, (f) equality, (g) focusing on needs, (h) valuing children, (i) shared vision, and (j) sharing information and resources (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

Four of the relationship qualities identified by the professionals in this study directly corresponded with the relationship qualities identified by parents in previous studies. Three of the relationship qualities were uniquely described by the professionals in this study. All of the relationship qualities identified by the professionals are discussed in more detail below, starting with the mutually supported qualities. First, however, Table 4 provides a visual of the qualities supported by the professionals and the qualities supported by parents in previous research.

Table 4

Perceived Relationship Qualities by Professionals and Parents

Supported by Professionals	Corresponding Qualities	Supported by Parents
Flexibility	Open and consistent	Acknowledgment and
Responsiveness	Communication	Validation
Active listening	Honesty	Focusing on needs
	Respect	Valuing children
	Trust	Sharing information and resources
		Shared vision
		Equality

Corresponding Qualities Between Parents and Professionals

The four relationship qualities that showed direct correspondence between the professionals in this study and the parents in previous studies were: (a) open and consistent communication, (b) honesty, (c) respect, and (d) trust. Descriptions of these qualities follow.

Open and consistent communication. Open and consistent communication was the first mutually agreed upon relationship quality between the professionals in this study and parents in previous studies. Open and consistent communication was supported by 11 out of the 14 professionals interviewed. The professionals who supported this quality included: (a) the director of special education, (b) the parent liaison, (c) one social worker, (d) the school psychologist, (e) two high school principals, (f) the elementary principal, (g) the middle school principal, and (h) the three teachers representing high school, middle school, and elementary school.

Open and consistent communication was described by the professionals as an ongoing exchange of feedback with parents regarding what is working or not working across home and school environments. The high school teacher shared:

I think [communication is] critical! If you're trying to prepare kids succeed in high school, we're only with them 8 hours a day so you have to have some sort of communication with that other side if you are going to fully support the kid. (personal communication)

Nine out of the 14 professionals cited a lack of open and consistent communication as being a primary cause of conflict between parents and professionals. The director of special education shared a challenging situation that occurred in an IEP meeting where the parents refused to engage in mutual and open communication and, as a

result, kept the IEP team guessing regarding their thoughts, needs, and expectations. The director described that the parents would “whisper to one another or write notes to one another but they [didn’t] ever share their thinking with the team and so the team [was] always playing that guessing game” (personal communication).

The superintendent spoke about how detrimental a lack of communication can be for partnerships:

When we have conflict it is because I believe parties haven’t been talking to each other. It is like a parent says, “This is what I’m doing because you are not doing anything at school” . . . and the school says, “We are doing this at school, and you are not bridging what we are doing at school at home.” (personal communication)

Within the above quotes, the professionals described open and consistent communication in terms of regularly exchanging feedback about children across home and school environments. They also emphasized the importance of openly sharing thoughts, needs, and expectations, rather than keeping people guessing.

According to the parents in previous studies, communication was described as efficient and effective coordination of information to ensure clarity and understanding for all individuals. It was stated that communication should convey positive regard and respect, be open and honest, and should not be censored (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008). Parents described communication as occurring in a safe, welcoming environment where their values and interests are listened to and incorporated into action (Christie & Cooper, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008). Frequency and consistency of communication was deemed as important to keep parents informed about their children’s strengths, challenges, and needs (Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Finally, parents and professionals alike

indicated that communication should be reciprocal, understandable, free of jargon, and include reflective listening to avoid misunderstandings.

Taking both descriptions into consideration, the quality of open and consistent communication included parents and professionals: (a) conveying safety, positive regard, and respect; (b) providing complete and truthful information; (c) listening; (d) engaging in ongoing exchanges of feedback regarding what is working or not working across home and school environments; (e) sharing information about children's strengths, challenges, and needs, and (f) ensuring that information is clearly understood by all parties.

Honesty. Honesty was the second mutually agreed upon relationship quality between the professionals in this study and parents in previous studies. Honesty was supported by 11 out of 14 professionals interviewed. The professionals who supported this quality included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) one social worker, (e) two high school principals, (f) the elementary principal, (g) the middle school principal, and (h) the three teachers representing high school, middle school, and elementary school.

Honesty was described by the professionals as being upfront with parents by using transparent and open communication, avoiding backdoor motives, and showing a willingness to admit one's own mistakes. In the following comment, the director of special education stated that it is important that both parents and professionals avoid hidden agendas and promote transparency. "Sometimes [there are] hidden agendas . . . neither side might be as open. . . . I think the more transparent that we can be, the better off we are not hiding anything" (personal communication). The high school teacher stated that when honesty occurs, "both sides are really going to tell it like it is . . . there is

not going to be any back door motives . . . in the conversation we're having, it is just calling things as they are" (personal communication). Finally, the middle school teacher stated that honesty is "admitting your faults where you are weak" (personal communication).

Within the above quotes, the professionals described honesty as being transparent in communication by being up-front and telling the truth. In addition, the professional believed that honesty entailed admitting faults or areas of need.

According to parents in previous studies, honesty was described as practicing truthful and open communication. The parents felt that professionals providing them with the full truth was important and that professionals not censor information (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Mueller, 2004).

Taking into account both descriptions, the quality of honesty includes parents and professionals: (a) being upfront and practicing transparent and open communication, (b) not censoring information, (c) avoiding backdoor motives, and (d) showing a willingness to admit one's faults or areas of need.

Respect. Respect was the fourth mutually agreed upon relationship quality between the professionals in this study and parents in previous studies. Respect was supported by 11 out of 14 of professionals interviewed. The professionals who supported this quality included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the school psychologist, (e) the two social workers, (f) one high school principal, (g) the elementary principal, and (h) the three teachers representing high school, middle school, and elementary school.

The professionals described the quality of respect as parents and professionals mutually showing a desire and willingness to listen to one another, seeking understanding, and fostering a safe and unconditional environment. The superintendent provided an example of what respect might look like:

Respect . . . from my vantage point [is] the desire to . . . seek understanding of parent concern [and the] child's disability . . . [to] have a respect of the circumstance in which child and parents are in . . . provide some dignity to that . . . don't . . . cast dispersions about I agree or don't agree with the nature of the parenting . . . you are unconditional about that. (personal communication)

The school psychologist described respect as both parents and professionals showing a:

Willingness to understand where the other person is coming from . . . without judgment . . . and if you can't do that because you don't know where they are coming from, recognizing [that] . . . you and I are not coming from the same place . . . [so] where can we meet in the middle? (personal communication)

The assistant director of special education explained the how mutual respect can be demonstrated between parents and professionals:

I think in order for you to be able to demonstrate mutual respect, a safe environment has to be created because . . . mutual respect isn't always being in agreement. It's not always seeing things the same way, but it's being able to constructively express a difference of opinion and still be able to come together to work towards that common goal and feeling safe enough to do that. (personal communication)

Finally, the elementary school principal articulated that when parents feel disrespected, children can also feel disrespected:

If parents don't feel as if they're respected at the school or valued at the school then kids often have that same feeling. So in order to get the most out of kids, I think we need to have strong relationships with them and their families and parents. (personal communication)

Within the above quotes, the professionals described respect in terms of demonstrating respect to parents as well as how parents and professionals can show respect for each other. They emphasized the importance of parents and professionals seeking mutual understanding and creating a safe, non-judgmental environment.

The parents in previous studies described respect in a variety of ways. First, respect was described as professionals being able to communicate in meaningful ways, value parents' opinions, and suspend judgment. Respect was explained as facilitating opportunities for parents to participate in decision-making and problem-solving as well as acknowledging that parents' actions are driven by their care and concern for their children (Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Esquivel et al., 2008; Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

Taking both descriptions into consideration, the quality of respect included that parents and professionals engage in meaningful communication in which they can safely disagree with one another. Respect meant listening and seeking understanding. Respect also entailed valuing one another, engaging in joint decision-making, and problem-solving while fostering a safe and unconditional environment. Finally, respect was acknowledging a common desire to contribute to the success of children.

Trust. Trust was the third mutually agreed upon relationship quality between the professionals in this study and parents in previous studies. Trust was supported by 9 out of the 14 professionals interviewed. The professionals who supported this quality included: (a) the assistant director of special education, (b) the parent liaison, (c) one social worker, (d) one high school principal, (e) the elementary principal, (f) the middle school principal, and (g) the three teachers representing high school, middle school, and elementary school.

Professional described trust as professionals being able to “walk their talk,” parents and professionals having faith that both parties are working for the best interest of the child, and parents and professionals feeling safe to ask questions, voice concerns, or disagree with one another. The middle school principal stated that “it is through your actions and through your words and that you walk your talk that people begin to trust you and begin to build those relationships” (personal communication).

To explain the imperative nature of trust, the assistant director of special education stated, “If you don’t have trust you don’t have anything” (personal communication). Other professionals agreed, such as the elementary school principal who described the importance of parents having trust in professionals:

I think parents need to believe that the school and all the people working in the school are doing what they believe is best for [a] particular student. That when they send their kid out the door in the morning, or drop them off at the curb, or the kid gets on the bus that whatever is done is being done with the best interest of that child in mind. So there is a level of trust that the parents have to have in order to send their kids to school and then form that collaborative relationship. (personal communication).

The middle school principal reiterated the need for parents to trust professionals in the following statement:

[it] is so huge in a collaborative relationship that you have that relational trust with the parents that we are professionals; we do know what we’re doing when we are educating your child. If we don’t have the resources, we will find the resources, and we will work with you collaboratively. (personal communication).

Within the above quotes, the professionals described the quality of trust as keeping a child’s best interest at the forefront. They stated that professionals must be competent and resourceful and must show parents that they are willing to work

collaboratively. Finally, trust was built upon professionals showing integrity, matching their words with their actions.

According to the parents in previous studies, trust was described as having confidence that professionals are dependable, competent, diligent, confidential, and truthful (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996). Parents also wanted to feel confident that their children were physically and emotionally safe within the school environment and receiving a meaningful education in compliance with legal mandates (Harry et al., 1995).

Taking both descriptions into account, the quality of trust included that parents and professionals are truthful, match their words with their actions, and contribute towards a safe environment where they can ask questions, voice concerns, or disagree with one another. Trust entailed professionals demonstrating competency, dependability, and resourcefulness. Trust also included professionals striving to provide a meaningful education in compliance with legal mandates, ensuring confidentiality, and keeping children physically and emotionally safe. Finally, trust signified faith that everyone is working toward the best interest of the child.

Unique relationship qualities. Three relationship qualities were uniquely identified by the professionals in this study. These qualities did not exhibit a direct correspondence to the relationship qualities identified by parents in prior studies. The three unique relationship qualities were: flexibility, responsiveness, and active listening.

Flexibility. Flexibility was the first unique relationship quality identified by the professionals. Flexibility was supported by 9 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who supported this quality included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director

of special education, (c) the assistant director of special education, (d) the parent liaison, (e) one social worker, (f) the school psychologist, (g) the middle school teacher, and (h) the elementary school teacher.

The quality of flexibility was described in multiple ways. The superintendent explained flexibility as “the degree that we [professionals] . . . can waiver a little bit from the direct reading of policy and follow the spirit . . . rather than to the exact letter” and as “[parents] understanding that [professionals] are trying to fit their specific needs in terms of what the districts limitations are” (personal communication).

Flexibility entailed professionals following the spirit of special education law, rather than the strict word. It also meant that parents strive to understand that professionals have parameters within which they must work. The quality of open mindedness was also used to describe flexibility. One social worker stated it was important to “have your own value systems [and] be able to respect people that have different value systems” (personal communication). Finally, flexibility included showing willingness to try new interventions and strategies across home and school environments.

Responsiveness. Responsiveness was the second unique relationship quality identified by the professionals. The quality of responsiveness was supported by 8 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who supported this quality were: (a) the superintendent, (b) the school psychologist, (c) two high school principals, (d) the high school teacher, (e) the middle school principal, (f) the middle school teacher, and (g) the elementary school principal.

Responsiveness was described by the professionals as demonstrating an interest in taking action and resolving issues before they evolved into conflict. The school

psychologist summarized responsiveness by stating, “A parent can find someone who will listen, but is that the same person who can help them take action?” (personal communication). One of the high school principals discussed responsiveness as “If I hear that a parent is upset about something, I give them a call, and it is usually a call to talk to them on the phone and say, ‘What’s up? I’m just trying to get up to speed on this’” (personal communication).

The elementary school principal provided a specific example where he anticipated a potential source of conflict as a result of feedback from parents and responded to prevent the conflict:

One of the things I heard from parents at the beginning of this year was . . . that they felt like they didn’t have enough information for the first day of school. They didn’t know where to have their kids line up, they didn’t know necessarily if they should come into the classroom with them, that type of thing . . . [so] we invited every kid . . . registered for kindergarten to come in so they could see the school, they could see where to line up, where and when to be, where to pick up their kids and that type of thing. (personal communication)

Responsiveness as a quality for conflict prevention and resolution can be summarized as anticipating or reacting to potential sources of conflict by engaging in actions that prevent or remedy situations. Responsiveness was considered to be interdependent upon the qualities of open and consistent communication and active listening.

Active listening. Active listening was the third unique relationship quality that professionals believed was important. Active listening was supported by 7 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who supported this quality included: (a) the director of special education, (b) the parent liaison, (c) the two social workers, (d) one high school principal, (e) the elementary principal, and (f) the middle school principal. This

relationship quality was primarily supported by professionals representing administrative and related service roles.

The director of special education stated, “The basic thing is try to listen; what is it that the parents want?” (personal communication). One of the social workers agreed by stating, “I think you have to be able to really listen and identify what each other want” (personal communication). Finally, the elementary school principal stated:

The first step that I often take is just giving people the opportunity to air their feelings and sometimes it takes a great deal of patience to get through that, but sometimes that’s all it takes to let them know that they have been heard and listened to, and that can be enough to resolve the conflict.
(personal communication)

Therefore, active listening was described by the professionals as both parents and professionals experiencing mutual opportunities to be heard. Demonstrating good listening skills was also identified by professionals as being an important strategy to resolve conflict.

Secondary finding. Confidence was identified as a unique relationship quality by the professionals. Since confidence was supported by only 5 out of 14 professionals, it did not meet the criteria for a primary finding; however, the researcher felt it was an important secondary finding due to the extent to which it was discussed during the interviews. The professionals who supported this quality were: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) the school psychologist, (d) the middle school principal, and (e) the middle school teacher.

The director of special education provided a detailed description of confidence and the role it plays in partnerships:

The thing that annoys me more than anything . . . is when I go into an IEP meeting and our team sits there and says, “Well I don’t know parent, what

would you like?" And the parent sits there like, "I'm not the professional, shouldn't you be telling [me]?"..I keep encouraging the team to . . . go in with your data, go in with your evaluations and your assessments, [and] say what it is you know; what's your recommendation. Now say, "What do you think about that?" When you just [say], "I don't know, what do you want?" [it] doesn't make us look like we are at all prepared or have any knowledge about anything . . . we go to great extents to do assessments and all of that. . . . We should have an opinion about what . . . we think would be best for that child and then certainly bring in what the parent thinks and include that. But sometimes we don't do that. I think we lose confidence when we don't go in and act like we know what we are talking about or...have any information or data that supports what we are talking about or why we are making recommendations. . . . I think parents want their kids in the hands of people that they feel confident with . . . [people who] are knowledgeable and know what to do. (personal communication)

The assistant director of special education supported the above sentiment and discussed the impact confidence can have on preventing conflict:

I think [when] parents come to meet with you or whoever is representing the school, [if] they perceive you to be competent; that goes a long way in preventing conflict. Because . . . when they doubt your ability to adequately meet their child's needs, that promotes conflict. It is also an issue of trust. They don't trust that you know what you are talking about or that you know what you are doing. (personal communication)

The middle school teacher shared an experience where conflict had been avoided with parents by being prepared and showing confidence:

I had done my research, and I had been doing what I could do or what I was supposed to do according to the IEP. So when [the parents] came in a little upset about a couple of grades I said, "No, this is . . ." And they said, "He said it was this." And I said, "No," having evidence of work from the [child's] portfolio. (personal communication)

Confidence was described as professionals being prepared and able to back up their knowledge with data. A lack of confidence was thought to promote a lack of trust which was supported by professionals in this study as a primary factor that contributed to or escalated conflict between parents and professionals.

Summary. All together, six relationship qualities were identified by the professionals in this study as being important for collaborative partnerships with parents. The six qualities were: (a) open and consistent communication, (b) honesty, (c) respect, (d) trust, (e) flexibility, and (f) active listening. Responsiveness was the one relationship quality identified by the professionals as being critical for conflict prevention and resolution. Four qualities identified by the professionals directly matched the qualities identified by parents in previous research as being necessary for collaborative partnerships. These qualities were: (a) open and consistent communication, (b) honesty, (c) respect, and (d) trust. Three qualities were uniquely identified by the professionals in this study. The unique qualities were: flexibility, responsiveness, and active listening. The quality of confidence was also described as a secondary finding.

Research Question 5: Strategies to Build Relationships with Parents

Past research has supported family-centered practices as important for the development of parent and professional partnerships. Family-centered practices are grounded upon the belief that all parents and families possess the potential or capability to engage in informed choice-making, shared responsibility, and activities to improve and strengthen their own family functioning. Professionals who embed family-centered practices into their work are said to demonstrate relationship qualities that advance collaborative efforts and strategies that build the capacity of and provide opportunities for parents to be actively engaged in their children's educational process. These findings are consistent with previous investigations (Dempsey & Dunst, 2004; Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Trivette, 1996; Turnbull et al., 2000).

To explore what kind of practices the professionals used to build relationships with professionals, a fifth research question asked, “What strategies do the professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?” Many of the strategies the professionals identified were strategies considered to build the capacity of and provide opportunities for parents to be actively engaged in their children’s education. The professionals interviewed for this study identified six common strategies. These six strategies, presented in order of support, were: (a) engage in open, upfront communication with parents; (b) make parents feel they are a part of their child’s educational experience; (c) use promising IEP facilitation practices; (d) prepare parents for partnership; (e) meet parents where they are; and (f) invest time.

Strategy 1: engage in open, upfront communication. Engaging in open, upfront communication with parents was the first and most strongly supported strategy identified by the professionals. All 14 professionals supported this strategy. The professionals who supported this strategy included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the assistant director of special education, (d) the parent liaison, (e) the two social workers, (f) the school psychologist, (g) the two high school principals, (h) the high school teacher, (i) the middle school principal, (j) the middle school teacher, (k) the elementary school principal, and (l) the elementary school teacher.

Engaging in open and upfront communication included communicating clear expectations, using terminology that parents understand, and using clarifying techniques to avoid miscommunication or misunderstandings. At the beginning of the academic school year, the professionals discussed the importance of determining parents’ preferences for method and frequency of contact. The professionals emphasized the

value of making positive contact with parents before making any negative contact. They also cited the benefit of maintaining a higher ratio of positive contact over negative contact with parents. The professionals emphasized the importance of keeping parents current to avoid surprises. They suggested routinely checking in with parents to inquire about their thoughts, wants, and concerns as well as demonstrating openness for parents to contact them with any questions or concerns.

One of the social workers expressed the importance of communication while partnering with parents: “I think oftentimes people think it takes up too much time to communicate, but I think that’s a big piece and being able to partner with parents is having that open door policy . . . open and willing to talk to them” (personal communication).

In the following quote, the director of special education described the importance of checking in with parents: “I called up the family to say, ‘How is your son doing?’ and out of the blue, to get that phone call from the director . . . the parent is . . . really pleased . . . mostly that they got a call out of the blue that I was checking to see how their kid was doing” (personal communication).

The school psychologist discussed the importance of showing an openness to hear from parents and a willingness to answer their questions:

I think more often than not parents leave meetings feeling like, “I said that a million times and no one ever addressed it. Just give me an answer. Just tell me no, and tell me why, but have addressed it so I don’t feel like I leave with this like I’m going to have to say it more aggressively next time for them to give me an answer.” (personal communication)

The high school teacher discussed the value of making positive contact with parents.

Something I do, beginning of every school year, I try to make the positive phone call, as soon as possible, if it's the first day of school, if the kid does something great, I will pick up the phone and call home just to establish that initial positive contact. I really try not to call on anything negative until I have been able to call on positive first. (personal communication)

The professionals who supported this strategy agreed that taking time to communicate was an important strategy for relationship-building with parents. They suggested that open and upfront communication needs to occur in order to let parents know positive things about their children. They also felt it was an important strategy to convey that they cared about the parents and their children. Finally, the professionals emphasized it was important to be open and willing to talk or listen to parents' needs and concerns. This strategy supported the qualities of open and consistent communication and honesty.

Strategy 2: make parents a part of their child's education experience.

Making parents feel that they are a part of their child's educational experience was the second strategy supported by the professionals. Thirteen out of 14 professionals supported this strategy. These professionals included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the assistant director of special education, (d) the parent liaison, (e) the two social workers, (f) the school psychologist, (g) one high school principal, (h) the high school teacher, (i) the middle school principal, (j) the middle school teacher, (k) the elementary school principal, and (l) the elementary school teacher. Support for this strategy was shown across all professional roles and levels.

To help make parents feel a part of their child's educational experience, many of the professionals emphasized the importance of relationship-building with parents and

children. The parent liaison stated, “Building the relationship is the most important thing to building partnership and collaboration” (personal communication).

Professionals supported familiarizing parents with the school at the beginning of the year, showing parents they were welcome through open-door policies, and demonstrating helpfulness by being approachable and accessible. The professionals discussed the value of feeding and supporting parents’ desires to be involved. They believed parents could be involved by including parents in their child’s academic work, incorporating parents’ ideas, and complimenting parents regarding their contributions.

Strategy 3: meet parents where they are. Meeting parents where they are was the third major strategy supported by the professionals. Eleven out of 14 professionals supported this strategy. The professionals who supported this strategy included: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the two social workers, (e) the school psychologist, (f) the two high school principals, (g) the middle school principal, (h) the middle school teacher, and (i) the elementary school teacher.

Meeting parents where they are was described in two ways. The first was that professionals should try to understand the perspectives of parents. The second was that professionals should try to understand the life circumstance of parents. Both concepts supported the belief that parents and professionals bring diversity into partnerships. Differences exist in educational backgrounds, cultural values, experiences, or life demands of parents and professionals. The professionals expressed that failing to understand the perspectives of parents or their life circumstances places them at risk for making inaccurate judgments about the motives of parents. The professionals in this

study also acknowledged that while the special education environment was an everyday experience for them, it was only a partial experience for parents. Therefore, parents were likely to hold different perspectives about their children than professionals.

The elementary school principal described challenges professionals may face when attempting to understand parents:

Oftentimes the place that teachers are is very different than the place the parents are . . . so we try to put ourselves into their world. Sometimes . . . it goes back to a difference in education, and teachers are maybe underpaid, but well paid professional people, and many of the families that are coming in are having to work multiple jobs at minimum wage to try to make ends meet. And so the part the school professional oftentimes needs to put themselves in the other person shoes. (personal communication)

The assistant director of special education stated:

I . . . have to keep reminding myself that I live in this arena [special education] 5 days a week. Things that are . . . status quo that I encounter on a daily basis are not [the same] . . . that parents encounter, and it's very difficult for them to navigate. I mean, special ed is confusing for all of us, let alone being a parent stepping into it. So trying to remind myself to always look at it from the parents' perspective and how daunting this can be for them. (personal communication)

The middle school principal discussed a situation where trying to understand the perspective of parents helped prevent conflict:

A situation this year . . . we had kind of condensed two rooms to one room . . . the parents kind of freaked out about it. It was like, 'Why are you guys freaking out about this? It is not that big of an issue.' From my perspective, it wasn't, but for the parents, it was because there was one student who was non-communicative and was very loud at times, and the parents just wanted to know does my kid have an escape to go and get away from the noise because that noise agitates my child. Well, once we listened and were like, okay, everybody worked together and we created a solution. (personal communication)

Understanding the life circumstances of parents included showing parents respect by showing them flexibility in scheduling meeting dates, times, and locations.

It was believed that professionals should also show flexibility with setting up meetings according to need. The professionals suggested reaching out to help parents overcome any negative feelings they might have towards the school or to help quiet parents feel more welcome and comfortable in participating. The professional also felt it was important to support parents by sending reminders to parents regarding meetings. The director of special education commented:

Some of our parents, when they have to take off work for a meeting, don't get paid because they are paid hourly. So every time we ask them to come in, they are probably losing money, and I just think we need to be very aware of that, especially in this economy. (personal communication)

The overall sentiment of the professionals was that parents come into schools with diverse personality traits, backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and responsibilities. Professionals must improve their awareness of these factors by reaching out to parents and demonstrating understanding.

Strategy 4: use promising IEP facilitation practices. Using promising IEP facilitation practices was the fourth major strategy supported by the professionals. Ten out of the 14 professionals supported this strategy. The professionals who supported this strategy included: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the two social workers, (e) the school psychologist, (f) the high school teacher, (g) the middle school principal, (h) the middle school teacher, and (i) the elementary school teacher. Support for this strategy was shown across the majority of professional roles and levels.

Basic IEP facilitation practices suggested by the professionals included having an agenda, establishing norms, using visual strategies, focusing on the child and the child's strengths, making concrete connections between home and school, and concentrating on

common goals for student success. The professionals discussed the importance of presenting information collaboratively, which they described as spending time on what was important to everyone, ensuring parents understand what was being discussed in meetings, making sure parents had a voice, and showing sensitivity to what parents had to say. Other suggestions were to keep things constructive by presuming positive intent, avoiding any preconceived ideas, judgments, or assumptions about parents or the reasonableness of parents' requests, and recognizing when parents were angry or grieving. The practices identified by the professionals showed similarities to the seven essential IEP facilitation practices identified by Mueller (2009). The similarities were: (a) have an agenda; (b) establish norms or ground rules; (c) identify goals; (d) foster a balance of power using communication strategies; and (e) create an environment that supports collaboration. Only two practices suggested by Mueller were not identified by the professionals. These were using an impartial facilitator and using a parking lot to reserve items that deterred progress.

The professionals supported the above basic IEP facilitation practices and discussed a few challenges in the following statements. The director of special education articulated the importance of maintaining focus on the child within IEP meetings: "Keeping it focused on the child I think is one of the most important things we can do because we get into other things sometimes, and we always are going back to the core issue of it's the child that we are here for" (personal communication).

The parent liaison and the school psychologist pointed out challenges that current structures of IEP meetings can have on hindering meaningful dialogue between parents and professionals.

There is a time constraint with an IEP meeting. You only have so much time and for [professionals] to get through what they need to get through legally, they don't have always a lot of time to sit down and explain what they are doing and why they doing it.

IEP meetings, I don't think, as they are right now, are structured in a way that is really helpful for having a dialogue outside of what we are here to talk about: strengths, needs, goals, services, and then the teacher has got to get back to class. (personal communication)

The school psychologist continued to say that the onus is on the professionals to raise their comfort levels with current IEP structures and to involve parents in the IEP process:

If I notice that a parent doesn't seem very comfortable, or has asked a question a few times, or doesn't seem very satisfied with the answer they have gotten, or have gotten no answer, it's like "You know, let's stop and talk about this for a second. Are you feeling comfortable with the information that you heard?" And just ask those direct questions and being willing to give up the meeting structure. But that's hard because people want to hold onto that [structure] because it is comfortable for the teams. This is what we do every time. We are used to this. You know, you come in and ask a question out of left field, I'm not prepared to answer that question. (personal communication)

Within the above quotes, the professionals discussed the importance of focusing on the child during IEP meetings. They also discussed the difficulties time constraints could present for facilitating IEP meetings because of the minimal time professionals had to get through the items that are legally mandated. Finally, the professionals discussed that despite time constraints, it was important for them to ensure that parents understood what was being discussed in IEP meetings. They also believed that professionals should try not to hold too tightly onto IEP meeting structure simply because that is what they know and are comfortable with.

Strategy 5: prepare parents for partnership. Preparing parents for partnership was the fourth strategy identified by the professionals. Nine out of the 14 professionals

supported this strategy. The professionals in support of this strategy included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the two social workers, (e) the school psychologist, (f) one high school principal, (g) the middle school principal, and (h) the elementary school principal. Support for this strategy was shown primarily across administrators and related service providers. Less support for this strategy was evident in the responses of teachers.

The professionals acknowledged a need to empower and build the confidence of parents. The director of special education supported this by stating, “The more prep we can do ahead of time with the family . . . the more collaborative it will be when they come in” (personal communication).

Other suggestions were to educate parents and share knowledge about special education law and processes. The parent liaison offered, “I don’t believe that you can build collaboration or partnerships or anything else unless [parents] are on somewhat of an even playing field” (personal communication). The principal of the elementary school described challenges parents face participating in partnerships when they are not provided with support and knowledge about the services that are available to their child:

I think one of the things that interferes with [equality between parents and professionals] is parents might attend a meeting or discussion about their child, and they know their child, but they don’t necessarily know everything that the school has to offer, so it’s not always a truly equal relationship. But I think ideally it would be. (personal communication)

Another important aspect of preparing parents for partnership was identified as helping parents understand the school’s responsibilities and limitations and connecting parents to other useful resources. In addition, the professionals supported pre-meeting

with parents to review the special education process, share successful practices, and review data regarding a child's strengths and needs.

Strategy 6: invest time. Investing time was the fifth major strategy supported by the professionals. Eight out of the 14 professionals supported this strategy. The professionals included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the assistant director of education, (d) the parent liaison, (e) one social worker, (f) one high school principal, (g) the high school teacher, and (h) the middle school principal. Those who supported this strategy represented primarily administration and related services.

The professionals in support of this strategy believed it was important to acknowledge that they were not working in a 9:00-to-5:00 job that was easily checked in and out of each day. In order for professionals to successfully meet the demands of their jobs, professionals must demonstrate a willingness to be available and accessible to parents and children. This requires a commitment to work above and beyond the call of duty. The director of special education stated, "We need to be available to our parents when they have questions to ask of us. That might mean beyond the regular office hours" (personal communication).

The middle school principal stated:

The teachers that are most successful are the teachers that go above and beyond. If you have somebody that is a clock watcher, it doesn't work . . . sometimes it is more than 8 hours, and that's because we are professionals, and we do whatever it takes to meet the needs of our students. (personal communication)

The professionals regarded investing time as a natural part of their roles as educators. The professionals agreed that investing time was an important factor

for building relationships, preventing conflict, and resolving conflict. This strategy closely aligns with the quality of responsiveness identified by the professionals.

Summary. This study identified a total of six strategies the professionals perceived as being important for building relationships with parents. The six qualities were: (a) engage in open, upfront communication with parents; (b) make parents feel they are a part of their child's educational experience; (c) prepare parents for partnerships; (d) use promising IEP facilitation practices; (e) meet parents where they are; and (f) invest time. Several of these strategies aligned with promising practices identified by previous research such as exhibiting family-centeredness practices and utilizing effective IEP facilitation. In addition, these strategies were mutually supportive and incorporated many of the relationship qualities presented earlier in this study.

**Research Question 6:
Repairing Relationships
after Conflict**

Research has associated parent involvement with a wide range of positive outcomes for children with disabilities (Blackorby et al., 2007; Fullan, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Newman, 2005). Unfortunately, the positive outcomes that children can experience when parents and professionals work in collaborative partnerships is placed at risk if these relationships break down or become severed as a result of mishandled or unresolved conflict (Blackorby et al., 2007; Carter 2002; Mueller, 2004; Nowell & Salem, 2007; Schrag & Schrag, 2004). Therefore, it is important for professionals to know strategies they can employ to rebuild their relationships with parents following conflict. To contribute to the knowledge base, the sixth research question asked, "What

strategies do the professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?"

In response to this question, the professionals identified one major strategy. This strategy was to keep the door open and reach out to parents. The professionals described this strategy in two ways. First, they emphasized demonstrating care and interest for children and children's needs. Second, they discussed the importance of taking the high road by letting go of the negativity surrounding conflict and moving forward.

The professionals in this study explained that in order to repair relationships with parents, they needed to show parents that they were willing to let go of any negativity surrounding conflict and move forward. By taking the "high road" and providing parents with respect, the professionals felt they demonstrated to parents that they remained committed to finding ways to meet the needs of children and address parental concerns. The professionals felt it was important to take things slowly and start by sharing examples of success with parents. The parent liaison explained how this strategy can go a long way towards showing parents that professionals care about their children: "I try to get both of them [parents and professionals] to start back very slowly. Let's do just this little thing, and then a parent can see, okay, that was successful. The teacher really does like my kid, you know, she doesn't hate him" (personal communication).

Earlier in this study, it was discussed that parents from previous studies believed respect included professionals' willingness to acknowledge that parents' actions are driven by care and concern for their children. The high school teacher supported this sentiment by stating, "I think there are some [parents] that have been kind of ugly, and I always speak to them, and I'm always pleasant . . . it's their children, and I give them a huge pass on that" (personal communication). The superintendent explained, "I do think

what we need to be consistent about trying to address the concern that the family might have and do it in as an honorable way as we can. We always have to take the high road” (personal communication).

The professionals also shared specific situations in which they had experienced conflict with parents. The parent liaison described a situation in which a professional had damaged her trust as a parent of a child with a disability and what it took for that professional to regain her trust:

What probably won me back was that that teacher took a lot of caring and a lot of interest in my son. And that is pretty much it. And I started to see my son come home happy again with school, boast about school. In one case . . . he was able to get involved in an activity at school that we wanted him involved with . . . I mean I had been trying to talk to the swim coach and getting him involved in swimming, and this teacher took a real interest. His teacher went to the coach and said, “You know, mom isn’t all about winning. Mom is about just having him participate.” And that is the level we started at. And the teacher also came to swim matches. (personal communication)

The elementary school teacher shared another situation in which it was necessary to rebuild trust with a parent:

It is a situation where the student has been in probably five different schools in the past 3 years in the district and it’s gone ugly--I mean the parents are really upset, and they are feeling like their needs aren’t being met and so when they came to us this spring and we had a meeting, there were probably 18 people sitting around the room, and it was so uncomfortable. The mother was just glaring at all of us and whispering to people around her, and it was a very uncomfortable situation . . . but by the end of the school year, the mother, in particular, really came around and was very complimentary on what we tried to do with her son this last quarter, and I think she felt like we cared about him. That was the biggest thing, I think, really. It goes a long way towards patching some of those things up when they feel like you really care about their son or daughter. (personal communication)

When asked in what ways professionals could show parents that they cared about a child, the elementary teacher provided the following example.

Just little things like . . . this particular student is really into animals and space or the solar system so, you know, just letting him bring his dog in for sharing. His mom was just thrilled. She was so excited that he got to do that. I think that was like the first little break through the armor, if you will. And then I found out he was redoing his whole room with the solar system, you know, theme, and so I found some neat stuff online and sent it home. And recipes for asteroid mashed potatoes and just stuff I thought he would be excited about. And, you know, she really appreciated it, I think. (personal communication)

Again, the teacher continued to build a relationship with the child despite experiencing conflict with the parent. The teacher demonstrated care for the child by reaching out and supporting the child's interests. Steps such as these can re-open the door for establishing collaborative partnerships.

Summary. A main strategy that the professionals believed could rebuild relationships with parents after conflict was to keep the door open and reach out to parents. The professionals described this strategy by sharing examples of how they continued to show care and interest in children and children's needs, regardless of experiencing conflict with parents. The professionals felt it was important to take the high road by letting go of the negativity surrounding conflict and moving forward. This strategy was supported by the relationship quality of respect and the relationship-building strategies of meeting parents where they are.

Additional Research Findings

Six interview questions resulted in additional findings from the interviews with the professionals. The interview questions explored the expectations that professionals held for parents; barriers to creating successful collaborative partnerships that the professionals believed existed; factors that the professionals felt contributed to or escalated conflict; strategies the professionals used to handle conflict; and needs the

professionals believed must be fulfilled in order to establish collaborative parent and professional partnerships.

Expectations Professionals Hold for Parents

Current research provides that, while professionals hold direct responsibility for teaching and learning within school settings, parents share important responsibilities for their children's learning across structural boundaries. Yet, understanding the role parents can be expected or obligated to play in the education of their children has been cited as a challenge for the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships (Adams et. al., 2009). To date, research regarding the expectations that parents and professionals hold within collaborative partnerships appears to focus primarily on what parents expect of professionals. To expand the research base, this study asked the professionals to identify what expectations they held for parents. The professionals identified two expectations for parents with whom they were collaborating. These expectations were that parents engage in collaborative behaviors and that parents focus on the needs of their child.

Parents engage in collaborative behaviors. Parents' willingness to engage in collaborative behaviors was the first expectation the professionals identified for parents. This expectation was supported by 11 out of the 14 professionals. Professionals who expressed this expectation included: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the two social workers, (e) the school psychologist, (f) one high school principal, (g) the high school teacher, (h) the middle school teacher, (i) the elementary principal, and (j) the elementary teacher. Support for this expectation spanned all professional levels and roles.

The expectation that parents engage in collaborative behaviors called upon many of the relationship qualities identified by professionals earlier in this study. These qualities were communication, honesty, respect, and trust. Communication was described as parents answering their phones, returning phone calls, contacting teachers regarding their questions and concerns, and listening to what professionals had to say. The professionals described honesty as parents showing a willingness share their thinking with professionals as well as showing a willingness to discuss core issues related both to school and their own parenting. Respect was described as a desire and willingness to listen and making an effort to seek understanding of others, while fostering a safe and unconditional environment. Trust included that parents had faith that professionals were doing the best they could and with an intent to help, not to harm.

In addition to the relationship qualities mentioned above, the professionals identified additional relationship qualities such as being open-minded, non-judgmental, and non-adversarial. The professionals felt that parents should provide them with “a fair shake” by trusting their opinions and giving them time to follow up on concerns. The professionals expected that parents avoid creating an adversarial relationship by approaching professionals appropriately with their ideas or concerns, rather than establishing opposing sides. The professionals expressed that they expected parents to commit to the importance of their child’s education and actively participate in their child’s education. This included asking their children about school and making time in their day to read with their children and go over homework. Finally, the professionals expected that parents show reasonableness by trying to understand the nature of their own problems and acknowledging the parameters within which professionals work.

Parents focus on the needs of their child. Parents' willingness to focus on the needs of their child was the second expectation the professionals expressed for parents. This expectation was supported by 11 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who expressed this expectation were: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the assistant director of special education, (d) the two social workers, (e) the psychologist, (f) one high school principal, (g) the high school teacher, (h) the middle school teacher, (i) the elementary school principal, and (j) the elementary teacher. Support for this expectation spanned all professional levels and roles.

Focusing on the needs of their child was described as parents' willingness to work collaboratively with professionals on common goals. This included supporting recommended interventions at home; communicating with professionals about what is occurring within the home; and problem-solving. The professionals also conveyed the expectation that parents meet the basic needs of their children. The school psychologist expressed, "My most basic expectations of parents are that they meet the basic needs of their kids; get them up in the morning, feed them, clean the, get them to school on time" (personal communication).

From a different perspective, one of the high school principals stated that the only true expectation schools can have of parents, according to state law, is that parents will get their child to school. He discussed that, with all the challenges that parents face in today's economy, schools must be aware that parents may be struggling:

I guess in some ways part of the realities of teaching today is the bare minimum expectation that I have is what state law says, and state law says that parents are responsible to get their children here . . . Outside of that, I think the rest is nice . . . I think there is still a whole segment of us that work in schools that have an expectation that [parents] are going to have

that breakfast, that they will be well read, that there are books in the home. These are things that are just not realistic. (personal communication)

The expectation that parents focus on the needs of their children supports the definition of parent and professional partnerships provided by this study. The concepts of sharing common goals, engaging in communication, and working as a team across home and school environments are reinforced by this expectation.

Summary. Two common expectations for parents were identified by the professionals. These two expectations were that parents engage in collaborative behaviors and that parents focus on the needs of their child. Several relationship qualities were embedded within these expectations such as such as communication, honesty, respect, and trust.

Barriers to Creating Successful Collaborative Partnerships

Historically, the field of special education has struggled with putting collaborative parent and professional partnerships into practice. Adams et al. (2009) have stated, “The seemingly simple approach of building interdependent relationships with parents is often a daunting challenge. Conceptualizing a relational utopia is quite different from bringing one into existence” (p. 6). To provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by parents and professionals, this study asked professionals to identify barriers they believed prevented them from creating successful collaborative partnerships with parents. The professionals interviewed for this study identified three common barriers. The barriers perceived by the professionals, presented in descending order of support, were parental barriers, professional barriers, and shared barriers.

Parental barriers. Parental barriers were identified by 11 out of 14 professionals.

The professionals who supported these barriers included: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the school psychologist, (e) two high school principals, (f) the high school teacher, (g) the middle school principal, (h) the middle school teacher, (i) the elementary school principal, and (j) the elementary teacher.

Three examples of parental barriers were provided. These examples included: (a) parents' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavioral barriers; (b) parents own negative experiences in schools or negative experiences from their child's education; and (c) parents dealing with their own issues and conflicts in life.

Parents' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavioral barriers. The professionals described parents' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavioral barriers in four ways. They discussed parental apathy, mistrust, unrealistic expectations and assumptions, and disrespect. Apathy was described as parents not wanting to be involved in their child's education or parents being unable to be involved due to competing life demands. Examples provided were parents failing to show up for meetings or neglecting to return phone calls. The school psychologist stated:

Parents don't want any involvement, either because they don't care or because they are so overwhelmed with their life as it is. It's like one more thing. We have got so many . . . families that are just trying to get by that the school calling every day and telling them that their kid is misbehaving is not helping. (personal communication)

The professionals also discussed that parents might hold unrealistic expectations for schools or make assumptions regarding the motives of professionals. The professionals felt both these factors fostered mistrust. Finally, the professionals shared

that parents might feel disrespected by professionals or may engage in disrespectful behaviors themselves. The professionals believed these factors created difficulties for successful collaborative partnerships.

Parents' negative experiences. The professionals believed that the negative experience of parents during their own education or during their child's education could cause parents to experience anxiety or show resistance during times when they must enter their child's school or interact with their child's educational team. The professionals felt that parents were often uncomfortable or unwilling to share their fears or anxieties, making this a difficult barrier to overcome. One of the high school principals stated: "Overwhelmingly, and I think this is sort of the little dirty secret, high school was probably for 60-80% of the people an unpleasant experience. And so when [parents] come in, they bring that baggage" (personal communication).

The school psychologist gave the following description:

[The] parents who had a hard time in school themselves . . . those parents have a really hard time coming in. And . . . ones that I have formed a really good relationship have told me, "You know, people always made me feel stupid." They remember walking through those halls and how they were made to feel. They don't want their kid to feel that way. And they are afraid to come back in that door because they don't want to feel that way again. They are adults, but they won't forget that. (personal communication)

The elementary teacher identified that it is the role of professionals to assist parents in overcoming their negative experiences by providing them with more positive experiences:

A lot of the parents have had negative experiences with the schools over the course of their child's education or even looking back at their own education, they might have some real negative feelings about school, in general. So, I feel like it's part of my job to overcome that with them and

make them feel like they're welcome and a part of their student's school experience and that we want their input. (personal communication)

The parent liaison pointed out possible negative consequences if parent's anxieties are left unaddressed:

I think it's the stress put on parents by work or whatever and that grief cycle, and they felt someplace in their life that maybe they were wronged or treated bad or had a bad experience with school, and so they are going to come in, and they are going to lay the law down and be very, very competitive with the teacher . . . I mean, they will keep upping the stakes. (personal communication)

The negative experiences of parents as a result from their own school encounters or from experiences related to their child's education was identified as a challenging barrier for professionals to surmount. All of the qualities and strategies identified by the professionals in this study can be useful in breaking down this barrier; however, these strategies may not be enough if parents choose to not disclose this type of information.

Parents dealing with their own issues and conflicts in life. The professionals acknowledged that parents can have a lot going on in their lives in addition to the education of their child. Competing factors such as work schedules, having a disability themselves, dealing with mental health issues, or facing the consequences of a bad economy were cited as reasons parents might feel overwhelmed. The elementary school teacher articulated, "I think . . . a lot of our parents or families struggle in different ways, financially, with mental health issues. Way beyond the scope of what school can really help with" (personal communication).

In relation to parents having their own disabilities, it was expressed that it would be helpful if parents disclosed their disabilities to school professionals. The school psychologist offered the following explanation.

One of my absolutely favorite parents is completely deaf. The first time I met her . . . I didn't know that. That is helpful information to know upfront, and I feel like parents need to frontload schools with that [information] so that we cannot make everyone's life miserable and people be embarrassed and frustrated . . . And same thing . . . with parents that have cognitive difficulties. (personal communication)

Similar to the previous barriers, professionals might not be aware of the complex issues faced by parents if parents choose to not disclose this information. Therefore, overcoming these barriers, to a great extent, relies upon how much parents trust professionals to engage in open and honest communication beyond sharing information about their children.

Professional barriers. Professional barriers were identified by 9 out of 14 professionals. The professionals who supported these barriers included: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the school psychologist, (e) two high school principals, (f) the high school teacher, (g) the middle school principal, (h) the middle school teacher, (i) the elementary school principal, and (j) the elementary teacher. Professional barriers were described in three ways: limited time and resources; professionals' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavioral barriers; and the structure of IEP meetings.

Limited time and resources. Limited time and resources was described as financial restraints, professional restraints, and training restraints. The professionals stated that these barriers hindered their ability to accomplish everything they needed or would like to achieve with children and families. For example, the assistant director of special education stated:

There always seems to be a lack of time to get everything that is so important done . . . trying to figure out where this fits in and how to

accomplish that with all of the other competing things that require time and money. I think that that's a barrier. (personal communication)

The elementary school principal added the following statement.

I think that most people know that we all have parameters with which we have to work. And so, given the parameters, and often its financial restraints, that this is the best that we can offer your child within this particular setting within this particular school within this particular time. And it's helping people understand that there are parameters in which we have to work, so there are probably times when it may not be the BEST that can be done for your child, but it is the best we can provide in our current circumstance. (personal communication)

One of the social workers expressed frustration in working in an underfunded system. The social worker explained the difficulty in trying to get parents to understand that professionals wanted to provide optimal services, but were often restrained by resource parameters:

Yeah, this is the law but, we are really underfunded. You know? That these laws are made, but somebody hasn't sent us money--and that needs to be something that we talk about because it's reality. You know you are not supposed to talk about it because of the law. So there is a lot of conflict in law and practice that don't make sense. (personal communication)

The professionals described time restraints that hindered their ability to get all important things done that they needed to get done and that resource restraints caused by an underfunded system provides an even greater challenge. Even though special education law states that financial reasons cannot be cited as a reason for the denial of services, the professionals felt that parents needed to understand and acknowledge the parameters that restrained professionals.

Professionals' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavioral barriers. Professionals' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavior barriers were described in multiple ways. First, the professionals mentioned that some of their colleagues might struggle with their comfort

level in building relationships and interacting with parents. One possible explanation for this discomfort was that professionals could feel reluctant to relinquish control and delegate responsibility to others, especially parents. Another explanation was that professionals tended to be protective of their personal time. Professionals might struggle with how much they should give of themselves to parents. This pointed to professionals struggling with boundaries. Second, the professionals mentioned that some professionals tended to judge what parents should or shouldn't be or made assumptions about parents. The professionals stated that some professionals assigned stigmas to parents or children and then perpetuated those stigmas with other professionals. Finally, the professionals discussed that education, by nature, is a helping field and that educators often carried the trait of help-giving. Therefore, they struggled with conflict and how to handle that conflict.

The factors related to professionals' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavior barriers appeared to relate to training issues for professionals. Preservice training often focused on meeting the needs of children and spent little time instructing professionals on how to build relationships or partner with parents. Topics such as how to establish boundaries and how to handle conflict were important to prepare educators to work collaboratively with parents. Later, it will be explained that the professionals supported this conclusion by identifying a need for training regarding how to better partner with parents.

The structure of IEP meetings. Earlier, the professionals identified the use of promising IEP facilitation practices as a strategy to build relationships with parents. Within that strategy, the professionals identified several components supported by research as essential for effective IEP facilitation. These strategies were: (a) have an

agenda; (b) establish norms or ground rules; (c) foster a balance of power using communication strategies; and (d) create an environment that supports collaboration. The professionals in this study identified additional strategies: (a) using visual strategies; (b) focusing on a child and a child's strengths; (c) making concrete connections between home and school; (d) keeping things constructive by presuming positive intent; (e) avoiding any preconceived ideas, judgments, or assumptions about parents or the reasonableness of parents' requests; and (f) recognizing when parents were angry or grieving.

The professionals explained that current IEP structures present obstacles such as time limits or involvement of too many people in the meetings. These obstacles were felt to restrain communication and the implementation of effective IEP facilitation practices. The fact that the professionals identified IEP facilitation as a recommended strategy and IEP structures as a barrier indicates that more information is needed regarding the interaction of these factors.

Shared barriers between parents and professionals. Shared barriers between parents and professionals represented several different types of barriers that professionals believed were preventing them from creating successful collaborative partnerships with parents. Examples were: (a) difficulty understanding or maneuvering the special education system; (b) electronic communication; (c) societal barriers; (d) different values about school; (e) power imbalance between parents and schools; (f) parents and professionals doing their own things, instead of working together; and (g) trainings that tell parents they need to fight.

The professionals acknowledged that the special education system can be complex and difficult to understand or maneuver. They cited that clashing laws, practices, and the inflexibility of the system created challenges for both themselves and parents. Another challenge was the reliance on electronic communication between parents and professionals. Using electronic communication was perceived as creating more opportunity for miscommunication and misunderstandings due to the inability to include affect. Societal barriers were described as a bad economy, changing demographics of the school, and language barriers. Another explanation for shared barriers was that parents and professionals hold different values regarding school. This was believed to contribute to a lack of prioritization that created self-agendas contradictory to collaboration. Finally, the professionals felt that, by nature, schools are designed to hold more power than parents. They believed that this design creates competitiveness at parent trainings and, as a result, parent advocates advise parent to fight schools to get their children's needs met.

Summary. The professionals interviewed for this study identified three common barriers they believed prevented successful collaborative partnerships with parents. These three barriers were parental barriers, professional barriers, and shared barriers. Many of the barriers presented by the professionals relied upon parents disclosing information about themselves or included factors beyond the control of the professionals.

Factors that Contribute to or Escalate Conflict

Previous qualitative inquiry (Lake & Billingsley, 2000) identified eight factors considered to escalate parent-school conflict. The factors were: (a) discrepant views of a child or a child's needs; (b) knowledge; (c) service delivery; (d) reciprocal power;

(e) constraints; (f) valuation; (g) communication; and (h) trust. This study sought similar information by asking professionals to identify factors that they believed contributed to or escalated conflict between professionals and parents. The professionals in this study identified three factors. These three factors, in descending order of support, were a lack of trust, communication issues, and discrepant views of a child or a child's needs. These factors directly correspond with three of the factors identified in previous research.

Trust. Parents in previous studies reported conflict after they felt lied to or misled. These experiences damaged parents' trust in professionals. Examples parents provided about being misled were professionals failing to provide a variety of program options or alternatives and professionals exhibiting shortsightedness. Specifically, parents cited that conflict arose after they became suspicious that the rationale provided to them by professionals for denial of services was not authentic.

In this study, the professionals described conflict as occurring or escalating when parents began developing doubt that the school was capable of providing educational services to their child. A lack of trust was supported by 9 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who supported this factor were: (a) the assistant director of special education, (b) the parent liaison, (c) the two social workers, (d) one high school principal, (e) the middle school principal, (f) the middle school teacher, (g) the elementary principal, and (h) the elementary school teacher.

The school psychologist discussed a specific conflict situation in which a parent had difficulty trusting professionals due to a lack of evidence that her son was making progress:

For the parent I was talking about, a big part of where she got frustrated, her son wasn't making the growth that she wanted her son to make--a little bit of

grieving--which is understandable and [the mom] needed to see evidence, and there wasn't any. It was just the teacher's word. Well, of course, we are going to get into the hot seat then. The kid had made a lot of growth, but we literally had no way of documenting or proving it. (personal communication)

By comparing the findings of previous research with the findings of this study, a lack of trust can be regarded as a factor capable of causing or escalating conflict between parents and professionals. Trust was considered lost when parents felt lied to or misled. To maintain trust, the professionals felt they must show competency and maintain data to support their decision-making as well as hold high expectations for children. In addition, the professionals felt they must be authentic in their communication and not withhold information from parents. Finally, the professionals believed they must offer parents choices, rather than presenting them with single options.

Communication. Parents in previous studies identified poor communication as a factor capable of escalating conflict between parents and professionals. Poor communication was described by parents as a lack of communication, poor clarification attempts, withholding information, and large IEP meetings suppressing expression of needs and concerns

In this study, the professionals also cited communication issues as contributing to or escalating conflict. This factor was supported by 9 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who supported this factor were: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education, (c) the assistant director of special education, (d) the two social workers, (e) the school psychologist, (f) one high school principal, (g) the high school teacher, and (h) the middle school principal.

Communication issues were described by professionals as a lack of communication between parents and professionals. A lack of communication was

considered cutting off communication, showing an unwillingness to listen, and failing to clarify expectations or engaging in honesty. Other communication issues were described as miscommunications or misunderstandings between parents and professionals. The middle school principal discussed conflict resulting from miscommunication or misunderstandings and the need for professionals to reach out to parents in these situations:

Most conflict, I believe, is created because of miscommunication and misunderstandings. And so it is our job to seek understanding, seek for clarification, you know, to help parents visualize what is going on, to help them understand the thinking process so that they understand where we are coming from, and then they can also have that opportunity to clarify so we understand where they are coming from. So, painting that clear picture from both sides so we can then bridge that gap so we can come to a mutual understanding to meet the needs of the student. (personal communication)

A comparison of previous research and this study supports poor communication or a lack of communication as creating or escalating conflict between parents and professionals. Examples of poor or infrequent communication were a lack of honesty, withholding information, unwillingness to listen, miscommunication or misunderstandings, poor clarification attempts, and unstated expectations.

Discrepant views of a child or a child's needs. Parents in previous studies described discrepant views of a child or a child's needs in two ways. First, discrepant views occurred when professionals did not regard a child as an individual with distinctive strengths and abilities. The second occurred when professionals approached a child using a deficit model and focused on what a child could not do, rather than the child's strengths.

The professionals in this study described discrepant views of a child or a child's needs as parents and professionals having different perspectives regarding services for a

child. Discrepant views of a child or a child's needs were supported by 7 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who supported this factor were: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) one social worker, (d) the school psychologist, (e) one high school principal, (f) the elementary principal, and the (g) the elementary teacher.

The elementary school teacher described discrepancies between parent and professional viewpoints by stating, "We don't always have the same viewpoint or priorities when we are looking at their student or don't see things quite the same way" (personal communication). Some professionals felt that parents could be overprotective of a child and perceive a child's disability as impacting the child more than what the professionals perceived. The school psychologist shared a particular instance when parents and professionals did not see eye to eye regarding the needs of a student and the frustration caused by that situation:

Certainly that kid was by no means like a high needs kid from where I was standing. It was a high needs parent. And so that kid ended up getting a lot more attention, and a lot of other kids weren't getting what they needed because we were having to deal with that parent . . . or put in time that they should've been putting in on kids. And that's where people get mad. (personal communication)

The parent liaison talked about her experience as a parent and the frustration she felt when she could not find common ground with her son's teacher regarding his needs:

The only teacher that I remember vividly . . . I never could reach her. I could never. She felt I was making excuses for [my son] and that if I back away and that he tried a little harder, he could do these things. And so she felt that I was enabling him, and she felt I was holding him back. And on the other hand, I didn't feel that way. I saw him struggle when [he] came home at night [and] I would try to sit down and work with him . . . I saw a kid who was trying his heart out, and he was still struggling with certain things. And so I never could get her to see that. (personal communication)

A comparison of previous research and the findings of this study supports discrepant views of a child or a child's needs as a factor capable of creating or escalating conflict between parents and professionals. Parents felt that professionals could overlook children's individuality or approach children from a deficit perspective. Professionals expressed that parents could be overprotective of their children and view the impact of their children's disabilities in different ways. Regardless, discrepant views of a child or a child's needs was felt to create difficulties for parents and professionals in establishing common goals and working toward those goals.

Secondary Finding

Adversarial advocates. Adversarial advocates was a fourth factor considered by some of the professionals in this study to contribute to or escalate conflict between parents and professionals. Although this factor was supported by only 4 out of the 14 professionals, the researcher felt it was an important secondary finding due to the nature of the information discussed and the possible implications for future research. The professionals who supported this factor were: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of special education, (c) the school psychologist, and (d) one high school principal. This factor was primarily supported by administration and related services.

The assistant director of special education described how one specific experience made her cautious of the role advocates can play in parent and professional partnerships:

Based on my experience, my perception is that when an advocate has been involved, it has initially been a more adversarial relationship. I have occasionally run into advocates who, from my perspective, appear to be genuinely concerned and focused on the best interest of the students and have helped to create that partnership with parents. They have been a

bridge and have truly worked with both parties on behalf of the student. However, most of the time the advocates, in my perspective, have entered into the arena creating conflict. (personal communication)

As this quote represents, adversarial, overbearing, or demanding advocates were regarded as outside parties that often came between parents' and professionals' ability to work as a team. It was expressed that advocates tended to upset people and create additional conflict, rather than help facilitate problem solving.

Summary. The professionals interviewed for this study identified three factors as contributing or escalating conflict between parents and professionals. The three factors included a lack of trust; communication issues, and discrepant views of the child or the child's needs. These three factors directly corresponded with factors found in previous research (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Strategies Professionals Used to Handle Conflict

Previous research has discussed disagreement strategies as methods to immediately address conflict, rather than waiting for third-party intervention (Brown, 2003; Feinberg et al., 2002). Disagreement strategies attempt to enhance communication among individuals experiencing conflict. In this study, the professionals identified four major disagreement strategies that they used to handle conflict with parents. These strategies supported the importance of communication enhancement. The four strategies that the professionals identified, presented in order of support, were: (a) get everyone to the table to identify the core issue and make sure people are on the same page; (b) problem-solve; (c) be a good listener; (d) get the parents' perspective, and (e) keep the focus on the child.

Eleven out of the 14 professionals in the interviews discussed the importance of getting everyone to the table to identify core issues and make sure everyone was on the same page. Good listening skills were identified by 10 of the professionals as important and, more specifically, listening to the perspectives of parents. One social worker expressed, “I think getting a good resolution for an existing conflict is largely built upon trying to redefine the problem, so there requires questioning and good listening” (personal communication). One of the high school principals explained:

I think trying to defuse the situation or trying to at least calm the situation is important. You can tell by my office that it is a calming office because when I bring a parent in, I’m trying to calm them down. I use a lower voice, I just listen to them, take notes, I ask questions, I show concern, I show empathy. We talk about things beyond just the immediate concern. How are other classes going? How are other situations going? Try to get to know them personally because I think that helps the parent relax, first of all, but also feel like somebody cares. (personal communication)

The assistant director of special education added:

I had this self-talk. I have to keep reminding myself to take a step back and remove my emotions to things and then try to approach [the situation] in a more positive way. And that is what I did . . . I tried to show her [the parent] that I was willing to listen and willing to work with her and that I really had her child’s best interest at heart. At this point, I would say we have a pretty positive relationship. (personal communication)

The importance of being solution oriented or willing to problem solve was supported by 9 of the professionals. The elementary school principal described problem solving as “sitting down together and defining what the problem is and trying to identify why that problem may be existing. Exploring different solutions” (personal communication). Eight professionals also discussed the importance of keeping the focus on the child and avoiding getting wrapped up with everything else going on with the family. One of the social workers discussed this.

Oftentimes . . . in meetings, we get emotional. We start to not focus on what we are actually here for, which is to talk about the child's education; whether is it going well, or what we need to work on. So I think going back to helping the team go back to realizing what we need to focus on, and this is what we are here for, the child. (personal communication)

The strategies the professionals identified for handling conflict incorporated many of the qualities and strategies that have been presented throughout this study. Being an active listener was one quality that supported the above strategies. However, this quality was not identified as being critical to conflict resolution. Relationship-building strategies such as engaging in open and upfront communication, meeting parents where they are, and investing time were also mutually supportive.

Needs for Creating Successful Collaborative Partnerships

Previous research has indicated a need for professional development in the areas of conflict prevention and alternative conflict resolution (CADRE, 2002; Mueller, 2004). The professionals in this study agreed with this need by stating that in order for them to be successful in developing collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents, preservice and inservice training must be available to improve their ability to better partner with families, effectively resolve conflict, work with difficult people, and successfully facilitate IEP meetings. One of the social workers stated:

I think that all school personnel should have training in the importance of partnering with families and parents. And an understanding that we are all here to work for students, and that is our main focus, rather than getting wrapped up in everything else that is going on in the family's life. That is not really our role. We shouldn't be worried about that. We should be more worried about how we are going to help the students be more successful citizens in our community. (personal communication)

This need was supported by 7 out of the 14 professionals. The professionals who supported this need were: (a) the director of special education, (b) the assistant director of

special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) the two social workers, (e) the school psychologists, and (f) the elementary principal. This support primarily represents those professionals in administrative positions and related services.

Conclusion

Previous research has suggested that one challenge for the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships is a lack of a common understanding or agreement upon which relationship qualities facilitate or deter from the creation of effective parent and professional partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dunst, 2002). To date, there has been an imbalance of perspectives regarding the relationship qualities considered necessary for collaborative parent and professionals partnerships. Previous research has primarily represented the voice of parents. This study attempted to bring balance by contributing the perspectives of various professionals representing multiple roles within a local school district. It also compared the qualities identified by professionals in this study to the qualities identified by parents in previous research.

Prior to discussing the relationship qualities identified by the professionals, a common definition using three reoccurring themes within the professionals' personal definitions is presented. The definition for collaborative parent and professional partnerships was: *Collaborative parent and professional partnerships are where parents and professionals engage in open and honest communication, take responsibility to work together as a team across home and school environments, share common goals, and engage in mutual child-centered decision-making in order to move children forward and create positive student outcomes.*

After establishing a definition for collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents, the professionals in this study identified seven relationship qualities they perceived as necessary for collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents to occur. These qualities were: (a) open and consistent communication, (b) honesty, (c) respect, (d) trust, (e) flexibility, (f) responsiveness, and (g) active listening. Of these seven qualities, four qualities showed direct correspondence to the relationship qualities identified by parents in previous studies. The four relationship qualities supported by both parents and professionals were: (a) open and consistent or frequent communication, (b) honesty, (c) respect, and (d) trust.

The professionals in this study also identified six strategies that they believed were important for building relationships with parents prior to the occurrence of conflict. These six strategies were: (a) engage in open, upfront communication with parents; (b) make parents feel they are a part of their child's educational experience; (c) use promising IEP facilitation practices; (d) prepare parents for partnership; (e) meet parents where they are; and (f) invest time. Many of these strategies support the collective empowerment model which embraces cooperative action between parents and professionals (Turnbull et al., 2000). Strategies such as engaging in open and upfront communication with parents, making parents feel they are a part of the child's educational experience, preparing parents for partnership, and meeting parents where they are demonstrates to parents that they are important contributors to the achievement of their children. These strategies also communicate to parents that professionals have expectations of them and are willing to support them to meet those expectations. In

addition, these strategies demonstrate to parents that professionals agree that they must invest time and show parents they are competent to perform their roles.

Also of importance was these professionals' support of IEP facilitation strategies. The use of promising IEP facilitation practices is quickly becoming an important focus of research and practice (Mueller, 2009). IEP facilitation creates an environment that is student-centered and is supportive of meaningful dialogue on behalf of all team members (CADRE, 2002; Mueller, 2009).

While the importance of collaborative parent and professional partnerships has been noted throughout this study, the realization of partnerships continues to face challenges. This study asked professionals to identify barriers they believed hindered the development of successful collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The professionals identified three common barriers for creating successful collaborative partnerships with parents. The three barriers were parental barriers, professional barriers, and shared barriers.

The long-term impact that education has on the lives of children with disabilities creates a high-stakes atmosphere that can naturally produce fertile ground for strong emotions leading to conflict between parents and professionals (Feinberg et al., 2002; Greene, 2007). Escalated conflict may become destructive, deter progress, and sever collaborative relationships between parents and professionals (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Mueller, 2004; Mueller et al., 2008). Ultimately, these severed relationships can impede positive outcomes for children with disabilities (Blackorby et al., 2007; Fullan, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Newman, 2005).

Related to conflict, this study asked professionals to identify the factors that they believed contributed to or escalated conflict between professionals and parents. The study also asked the professionals to identify the strategies they used to handle conflict once it arose. Finally, the study asked professionals to identify strategies that they used to rebuild their relationships with parents after the occurrence of conflict.

The professionals in this study identified three factors that they believed contributed to or escalated conflict between professionals and parents. These three factors were lack of trust, communication issues, and discrepant views of a child or a child's needs. These three factors support the findings of previous research (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Next, the professionals in this study identified four major strategies that they employed to handle conflict with parents. These four strategies were: (a) get everyone to the table to identify the core issue and make sure people are on the same page; (b) problem solve; (c) be a good listener; and (d) keep the focus on the child.

In addition, professionals also identified one major strategy that they used to rebuild their relationships after conflict. This strategy was to keep the door open and reach out to parents.

A second challenge cited by research for the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships has been identifying what roles parents should play in the educational process of their children (Adams et al., 2009). The professionals interviewed for this study identified two common expectations for the parents with whom they were collaborating. These two expectations were that parents engage in collaborative behaviors and that parents focus on the needs of their child.

Finally, the professionals in this study identified one common need that must be fulfilled in order for them to successfully develop collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents. The major need identified by the professionals was the development of preservice and inservice training for teachers regarding how to partner with families, effectively resolve conflict, work with difficult people, and successfully facilitate IEP meetings.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate which relationship qualities a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education considered necessary to foster collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. The relationship-building strategies that were employed by these professionals were also explored.

The relationship qualities identified by the professionals interviewed in this study were compared to 10 reoccurring relationship qualities recognized by parents within previous research studies in order to provide a more balanced representation of relationship qualities supported by both groups for the development of collaborative partnerships and an improved handling of conflict. The relationship qualities were also compared to the strategies that the professionals identified for relationship building and handling conflict.

Results from this study are useful for parents and professionals seeking to assess the presence of these qualities within their own partnerships as well as how these qualities align with the strategies that they are employing. The results are also useful for local education systems and preservice training programs seeking to foster and enhance collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents.

Strengthening collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals is a promising strategy for addressing conflict between these two groups. As a result, local systems of special education could decrease their reliance upon due process hearings and other costly formal dispute resolution techniques recognized by IDEA (2004).

Research Questions

Six research questions guided this study. These six research questions were:

- Q1 How do professionals in the selected local system of special education define collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents of children with disabilities?
- Q2 What specific relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to effective collaborative partnerships with parents?
- Q3 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical to conflict prevention?
- Q4 What relationship qualities do professionals perceive as critical for conflict resolution?
- Q5 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?
- Q6 What strategies do professionals use to build relationships with parents once conflict has occurred?

In addition to the above six research questions, five interview questions contributed meaningful data to the results of this study. These five interview questions were:

- 1 What expectations do professionals hold for parents?
- 2 What barriers do professionals believe exist for creating successful collaborative professional and parent partnerships?
- 3 What do professionals perceive as contributing to or escalating conflict?
- 4 What strategies do professionals use to handle conflict?

- 5 What do professionals perceive as needs to establish collaborative parent and professional partnerships?

Fourteen in-depth interviews with individuals representing various professional roles at multiple levels within a local school district were carefully analyzed in order to reveal answers to the above questions. The data analysis yielded 10 key findings. These key findings contribute to a more balanced representation of relationship qualities supported by both parents and professionals for the development of collaborative partnerships and the improved handling of conflict. In addition, the findings shed light upon the kind of expectations these professionals hold for parents as well as provided insight into what relationship-building strategies, conflict-prevention strategies, and conflict-resolution strategies the professionals perceived as being successful. Prior to summarizing the 10 key findings of this study, a brief overview explaining the connection between the findings and the theories that supported this study is provided.

The Connection of Findings to Theory

Two theories supported the development of this study: the theory of social interdependence (Johnson, 2003) and the theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1973). The theory of social interdependence supports the idea that when individuals function within a group, they engage in an array of interdependencies that influence how their overall group functions. Elaborating upon this basic principal, the theory of cooperation and competition holds that understanding these interdependencies can help determine the presence of positive or negative group dynamics. For example, when interdependencies among group members are positive, group members tend to believe that their own goal achievement is dependent upon the ability of others with whom they are collaborating to also achieve their goals. Conversely, when

interdependencies between group members are negative, group members believe that their own goal achievement is only possible if others with whom they are competing are unable to achieve their goals. As a result, individuals functioning within groups with positive interdependencies tend to demonstrate promotive or collaborative behaviors aimed at facilitating and encouraging group success. In addition, when faced with conflict, these individuals are more likely to focus on mutual goal achievement and to engage in creative problem-solving. The individuals functioning within groups with negative interdependencies tend to display more oppositional or competitive behaviors aimed at discouraging or creating barriers for others while pursuing their own interests. When confronted with conflict, these individuals remain focused on winning at the expense of others (Deutsch, 1973; Deutsch et al., 2006; Johnson, 2003).

Developing and enhancing positive interdependencies among group members, such as parents and professionals participating on educational teams, are important for ensuring their success with creating positive school experiences and outcomes for children with disabilities. However, a clear understanding of what relationship qualities contribute to the development of these positive interdependencies are generally vague within previous research.

Only one study (Deutsch et al., 2006) in the literature review suggested relationship qualities that might be important for the development of positive interdependencies. Deutsch et al. (2006) identified six relationship qualities considered to foster cooperative interdependencies, rather than competitive interdependencies in groups. These relationship qualities were: (a) effective communication; (b) friendliness, help-giving, and minimal use of obstructive behaviors; (c) sharing, coordination, and

productivity; (d) shared vision, synergy, confidence, and validation; (e) mutual empowerment; and (f) shared problem-solving.

This study was conceptualized with much the same approach, but rather than focusing on relationship qualities that foster cooperative rather than competitive interdependencies, it specifically focused on exploring the relationship qualities that a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education considered necessary for the development of collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents as well as to improve parents' and professionals' handling of conflict. In addition, this study explored the expectations the professionals held for parents and attempted to offer insight into what relationship-building strategies, conflict-prevention strategies, and conflict-resolution strategies the professionals perceived as being successful within their own practice.

The findings of this study reflected themes similar to the Deutsch et al. (2006) study. While the terminology used by the professionals in this study was different than the terminology presented in the study by Deutsch et al., concepts such as shared vision, collaboration, effective communication, mutual empowerment, and problem-solving remained consistent.

The next section offers a brief summary of the findings of this study. Following this brief summary, a detailed discussion relating the findings of this study to the findings of previous research is provided.

Summary

The following 10 findings from this study present a more balanced representation of relationship qualities supported by both parents and professionals for the development of collaborative partnerships as well as the improved handling of conflict. In addition, the findings shed light upon the expectations professionals held for parents and offers insight regarding the relationship-building strategies, conflict-prevention strategies, and conflict-resolution strategies professionals perceived as being successful within their own practice.

1. The professionals interviewed for this study contributed to the development of a common definition for collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents of children with disabilities. This common definition was identified by participants and summarized in Chapter III. *Collaborative parent and professional partnerships are where parents and professionals engage in open and honest communication, take responsibility to work together as a team across home and school environments, share common goals, and engage in mutual child-centered decision-making in order to move children forward and create positive student outcomes.*

2. The professionals interviewed for this study identified seven common relationship qualities that they believed must exist for effective collaborative partnerships with parents to occur. These seven qualities were: (a) open and consistent communication, (b) honesty, (c) respect, (d) trust, (e) flexibility, (f) responsiveness, and (g) active listening.

3. The professionals interviewed for this study identified one unique relationship quality that they believed was critical for preventing and resolving conflict between professionals and parents. This quality was responsiveness.

4. The professionals interviewed for this study identified six common strategies they believed were important for building relationships with parents prior to the occurrence of conflict. The six strategies were: (a) engage in open, upfront communication with parents; (b) make parents feel they are a part of their child's educational experience; (c) use promising IEP facilitation practices; (d) prepare parents for partnership; (e) meet parents where they are; and (f) invest time.

5. The professionals interviewed for this study identified one common strategy that they used to rebuild their relationships with parents after the occurrence of conflict. This strategy was to keep the door open and reach out to parents.

6. The professionals interviewed for this study identified two common expectations for the parents with whom they were collaborating. These two expectations were that parents engage in collaborative behaviors and focus on the needs of their child.

7. The professionals interviewed for this study identified three common barriers that they believed prevent them from creating successful collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. These three barriers were parental barriers, professional barriers, and shared barriers.

8. The professionals interviewed for this study identified three factors that they believed contributed or escalated conflict between professionals and parents. These three factors were: (a) a lack of trust, (b) communication issues, and (c) discrepant views of a child or a child's needs.

9. The professionals interviewed for this study identified four major strategies that they employed to handle conflict between professionals and parents. These four strategies were: (a) get everyone to the table to identify the core issue to make sure people are on the same page; (b) problem-solve; (c) be a good listener; and (d) keep the focus on the child.

10. The professionals interviewed for this study identified one common need that must be fulfilled in order for them to successfully develop collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. The major need identified by the professionals was the development of preservice and inservice training for teachers regarding how to partner with families, effectively resolve conflict, work with difficult people, and successfully facilitate an IEP meeting.

Discussion

The discussion section provides the researcher's interpretation regarding findings of this study, offers recommendations, and highlights implications for practice. All findings should be considered according to the limitations of this study. First, the results of this study were limited to a local system of special education located within one state in the Rocky Mountain region. The data were collected through the implementation of in-depth qualitative interviews and represent the opinions of professionals employed and compensated by the selected local system in the form of salaries. This factor limits the generalizability of this study to other local systems of special education. Second, the design of this study did not incorporate observations to verify if the professionals were actually employing the strategies they identified.

Finding 1: Defining Collaborative Parent/Professional Partnerships

The first research question was, “How do the professionals in the selected system of special education define collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents of children with disabilities?” The purpose of this research question was to explore the definition the professionals in this study assigned to collaborative parent and professional partnerships. During the interviews, each professional was asked to supply his/her own definition for collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The 14 definitions were then compared to one another. This comparison uncovered the three common themes of mutual responsibility, open and honest communication, and goal sharing and child-centered decision-making. These themes contributed to the creation of a single definition of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. This definition states:

Collaborative parent and professional partnerships are where parents and professionals engage in open and honest communication, take responsibility to work together as a team across home and school environments, share common goals, and engage in mutual child-centered decision-making in order to move children forward and create positive student outcomes.

Each professional defined parent and professional partnerships in different ways. A lack of unity surrounding a definition for collaborative parent and professional partnerships indicates that more must be done to create synergy between professionals regarding how they define collaborative partnering with parents. It is unrealistic to expect professionals to develop and enhance collaborative partnerships with parents when they lack clarity regarding what they are striving to accomplish. Without a clear definition, professionals are further

challenged to provide guidance and share the meaning of collaborative partnerships with parents. Finally, it is difficult for professionals to assess the quality of their partnerships without possessing knowledge of the essential components of collaborative partnerships that are valuable to both parents and professionals.

Recommendations and implications. First, personnel preparation programs are charged with the task of introducing educators to the meaning and importance of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. These programs rely on research to provide them a universally agreed upon or supported definition for collaborative parent and professional partnerships that represents the values of both parents and professionals. The professionals interviewed for this study contributed to the beginning of a common definition; however, additional research is needed to incorporate the perspectives of parents and other professionals from additional local systems of special education representing different cultures and regions.

Second, the availability of a universally agreed upon or supported definition of collaborative parent and professional partnerships can serve as a guide for local school districts striving to develop and implement strategies that will build or enhance the partnerships between their parents and professionals. It is recommended that local school districts remain aware of current definitions of collaborative parent and professional partnerships.

In practice, it would benefit local school districts to share the meaning of collaborative parent and professional partnerships with their professionals and parents.

Since the values and needs of parents and professionals are likely to be unique from partnership to partnership, local school districts are encouraged to invite parents and professionals to discuss the definition supplied by the district and personalize it to reflect the meaning that fits their own partnerships. This dialogue can serve as a beginning for parents and professionals to clarify the purpose and goals behind their partnership and initiates the incorporation of the qualities identified in this study as necessary for collaborative partnerships and conflict prevention such as communication, honesty, trust, and respect.

Findings 2 and 3: Relationship Qualities

The second research question was, “What specific relationship qualities do the professionals believe must exist for effective collaborative partnerships with parents to occur?” The purpose of this research question was to understand what personal values in the form of qualities the professionals expected or desired in collaborative partnerships. Research Questions 3 and 4 extended this inquiry to identify what relationship qualities the professionals perceived as critical to conflict prevention and conflict resolution.

Overall, seven relationship qualities were identified by the professionals. Four of these qualities showed consistency between collaborative partnerships, conflict prevention, and conflict resolution. These four qualities were: (a) honesty, (b) respect, (c) trust, and (d) flexibility. Two qualities remained unique to collaborative partnerships. These two qualities were open and consistent communication and active listening. Only one quality was unique for conflict prevention and resolution. This quality was responsiveness.

Four of the qualities identified by the professionals in this study showed a direct correspondence to the relationship qualities identified by parents in previous studies. The qualities that corresponded were: (a) respect, (b) honesty, (c) trust, and (d) open and consistent or frequent communication.

A difference was not found between the relationship qualities to prevent conflict and the relationships qualities to resolve conflict. To support this conclusion, one of the interview questions asked the professionals, “Do you believe the relationship qualities used to prevent conflicts are the same as those qualities that are used to resolve conflicts?” Many of the professionals initially exclaimed, “That is a good question!” After additional probing, the professionals responded, “Yes, the qualities are the same,” or made statements such as, “I think they are absolutely similar,” or they are “probably not a whole lot different.” These responses point toward a couple of considerations. First, a distinction may not exist between the relationship qualities of conflict prevention and conflict resolution. Or, it may be that the professionals in this study did not have the experience or ability to distinguish between the relationship qualities for conflict prevention and conflict resolution. The latter conclusion is supported by the fact that the professionals showed alignment between the qualities they identified for collaborative partnerships and conflict prevention and the strategies they identified to build relationships with parents. Yet, the same alignment was not apparent among the relationship qualities the professionals identified for conflict resolution and the strategies they identified to handle conflict. Perhaps with more experience discussing this topic, the professionals may have indicated a greater distinction.

Table 5

Strategies and Corresponding Qualities for Relationship Building

Strategies for Relationship- building and Conflict Prevention	Corresponding Qualities for Partnerships and Conflict Prevention
Engage in open, upfront communication with parents	Open and consistent communication, honesty
Make parents feel they are a part of their child's educational experience	Respect, open and consistent communication
Use promising IEP facilitation practices	Open and consistent communication, respect
Prepare parents for partnership	Open and consistent communication
Meet parents where they are	Respect, active listening
Invest time	Respect, responsiveness

Table 6

Strategies and Corresponding Qualities for Conflict Resolution

Strategies for Conflict Resolution	Corresponding Qualities Necessary for Conflict Resolution
Get everyone to the table to identify the core issue and make sure people are on the same page	Honesty
Problem-solve Be a good listener Keep the focus on the child	Respect

Second, during the interviews the professionals in this study showed a tendency to use relationship qualities and strategies interchangeably. Since this study sought to make a distinction between what professionals value (qualities) and what professionals do (strategies), the researcher felt that a clear distinction needed to be made to separate these two concepts. The researcher relied on the context of the data to determine if the professionals were describing an inherent human characteristic, or if the professionals were describing a method they use to accomplish a specific goal. If the professionals were describing an inherent human characteristic, data were labeled as a relationship quality. If the professionals were describing a method they used to accomplish a specific goal, data were labeled as a strategy. Unfortunately, the research did not make

this distinction between relationship qualities and strategies until the analysis of this study. In hindsight, if the researcher would have made this distinction and clarified this with the professionals prior to their interviews, the relationship qualities they identified may have shown differences or received different levels of support. Also, this distinction made it difficult to compare all of the relationship qualities identified by the professionals in this study to the relationship qualities identified by parents in previous studies. Under the distinction, 6 out of the 10 relationship qualities identified by parents were regarded as strategies under this study.

Recommendations and implications. Future research should focus on identifying relationship qualities important to collaborative partnerships, conflict prevention, and conflict resolution as well as the meaning behind these qualities. Research must include a balance between the perspectives of parents and professionals representing diverse cultures, regions, and local systems of special education. To increase the clarity of findings and enable better comparisons between different research studies, future research should provide an initial distinction between inherent human qualities and strategies to achieve a particular goal. Also, additional research is recommended to determine if the relationship qualities believed to be critical for conflict prevention are the same as or different from the relationship qualities believed to be critical for conflict resolution.

In terms of practice, local school districts are encouraged to invite parents and professionals to engage in discussions about what relationship qualities are valuable to them and how they would define those qualities. The relationship qualities and the definitions from this study can offer a valuable starting point to initiate meaningful

dialogue. Creating a common understanding can assist parents and professionals to be mindful to include these qualities or enable them to self-identify when qualities are missing from their relationships. Also, when parents and professionals are knowledgeable about the qualities they value, they are more capable to align these qualities with their actions.

**Finding 4: Strategies
for Relationship-Building
with Parents**

To explore what kind of practices the professionals were using to build relationships with professionals, the fifth research question asked, “What strategies do the professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?” The professionals interviewed for this study identified six common strategies. These six strategies were: (a) engage in open, upfront communication with parents; (b) make parents feel they are a part of their child’s educational experience; (c) use promising IEP facilitation practices; (d) prepare parents for partnership; (e) meet parents where they are; and (f) invest time. The majority of these strategies aligned with promising practices identified by previous research such as family-centered practices and IEP facilitation. In addition, many of the strategies mutually supported the other strategies of this study and incorporated the relationship qualities.

The strategy of engaging in open, upfront communication received overwhelming support by all 14 of the professionals in the study. Communication was identified as both a quality that reflected the professionals’ tendency to be open and consistent communicators as well as a strategy by which professionals promoted clear expectations, fostered understanding, and built relationships by keeping parents up to date and sharing

positive information about their children. Communication was described in a diverse number of ways and was an embedded theme throughout all responses of the participants. Within the design of this study, it was difficult to capture all of the various aspects of the value of communication and its role in parent and professional partnerships.

The strategies of making parents feel a part of their child's educational experience and preparing parents for partnership were mutually supportive. The first strategy addressed building initial relationships with parents by orienting them to their child's school, encouraging their participation, and building the image of professionals as partners. The second strategy discussed empowering and building the confidence of parents by sharing knowledge, information, and resources. Both strategies were supported by the majority of professionals.

Using promising IEP facilitation practices was also strongly supported by the participants. The participants identified five essential IEP practices out of the seven that were identified by previous research (Mueller, 2009). This is promising, considering that previous research has shown that conflict between parents and professionals often originates in IEP meetings (Schrag & Schrag, 2004). However, given this district's history of state complaints and due process hearings involving issues around IEP meetings, the IEP team, IEP development, IEP implementation, evaluations and re-evaluations, eligibility determination, placement, and denial of FAPE, question remains as to what might be missing or what might be contributing to professional difficulties in IEP meetings. Some of the professionals identified the structure of IEP meetings as hindering the ability of the team to discuss everything that is important to parents and

professionals due to limited time and over-attendance of participants. This is an important focus that needs to be explored on a deeper level.

The strategies of meeting parents where they are focused on understanding that parents come into schools with diverse personality traits, backgrounds, cultures, and economic status. Since professionals might not be aware of all the factors that affect parent involvement, the professionals supported reaching out to parents, rather than expecting parents to reach out to them. This strategy also recognizes that while the educational environment is an everyday experience for professionals, it can be a daunting experience for parents. This can affect the perspectives of parents and create discrepancies between viewpoints. Also, the professionals acknowledged that often parents know their children best and, therefore, can contribute different perspectives of their child of which professionals may not be aware. Therefore, professionals emphasized the importance of listening to the thoughts, concerns, and ideas of parents in order to improve their understanding and enhance their partnership skills.

The strategy of investing time emphasized that the role of being an administrator, teacher, or related service provider requires an investment of time. Specifically, investment of time for this study infers both being available and accessible to children and parents.

Recommendations and implications. Additional research is needed regarding the strategies that professionals believe are important for building relationships with parents prior to the occurrence of conflict. The strategies identified in this study were limited to the perspectives of the professionals who were interviewed. Therefore, future research should focus on additional local systems of special education and represent

different cultures and regions. The perspectives of parents should be added, as well, to confirm whether they agree with the strategies identified by professionals. Further identification of indicators supporting the implementation of these strategies would also be valuable. Specific research targeting communication and its role in parent and professional partnerships, effective IEP facilitation strategies, and how professionals handle areas in which they feel they need more professional development is strongly recommended.

In terms of practice, local school districts are encouraged to engage parents in discussions about their preferences to be included in the education of their child and how professionals can support them for partnership. It would be beneficial for local school districts to foster dialogue between parents and professionals to discuss the various aspects communication and its role in parent and professional partnerships. Also, local districts are encouraged to assess how professionals are facilitating IEPs and where additional support might be needed.

**Finding 5: Strategies
to Build Relationships
after Conflict**

The sixth research question asked, “What strategies do the professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?” The professionals identified one major strategy. This strategy was to keep the door open and reach out to parents. The professionals described this strategy using two indicators. First, they emphasized the importance of demonstrating care and interest in children and their needs. Second, they discussed the importance of taking the high road by letting go of negativity and moving beyond conflict.

Beyer (1999) noted that the dispute-resolution mechanisms offered by IDEA (2004) tend to foster competitive relationships by positioning parents against the school system, fighting for what is in the best interest of their child. The professionals in this study alluded that once parents have made up their minds that they needed to fight, professionals become positioned against a law that fosters competition and makes it difficult for them to re-convince parents regarding the benefits of collaboration.

The strategy of keeping the door open and reaching out to parents is one way the professionals identified to overcome this obstacle. This strategy conveys the importance of taking action when trying to repair relationships with parents. Through their actions, professionals can demonstrate to parents that despite the presence of conflict, that they are dedicated to providing children an education that offers benefit. The professionals emphasized the importance of taking the high road by continuing to show parents respect and moving past the conflict. They then expressed the importance of demonstrating care and interest in children. Demonstrating care and interest in children was described by the professionals as using stories where they advocated for children and fostered their interests. In essence, their commitment to children communicated to the parents they were not working on opposite sides.

Recommendations and implications. The challenges professionals face to repair relationships with parents after conflict highlights a critical need for research and training that equips them with conflict prevention and alternative dispute-resolution practices that are less adversarial compared to those acknowledged by IDEA. It is recommended that future research supply professionals with a broader repertoire of

strategies that can assist them to repair relationships with parents after conflict. This research should include strategies identified and supported by parents.

In terms of practice, this finding can be used to initiate dialogue with parents and professionals who have successfully repaired their relationships after conflict to determine if they used similar or different strategies. Sharing effective strategies with other parents and professionals may assist these individual to rebuild relationships before completely severing them. This is important so children with disabilities can continue to benefit from their different, yet valuable, perspectives and contributions (Dempsey & Keen, 2008; Fullan, 2007; Murray, 2000).

Finding 6: Expectations Professionals Hold for Parents

The first interview question asked the professionals to identify their expectations for parents. The professionals identified two common expectations for parents with whom they were collaborating. These expectations were that parents engage in collaborative behaviors and parents focus on the needs of their child.

The expectations identified by the professionals incorporated many of the relationship qualities identified by the professionals as being necessary for collaborative partnerships and critical to conflict prevention. The supported qualities were communication, honesty, respect, and trust. In addition to these qualities, the professionals identified other qualities such a parents remain open minded, non-judgmental, and non adversarial.

Several of the professionals couched their expectations in terms of hopes. There appeared to be some discomfort for professionals to express their expectations of parents.

This could be related to the relationship-building strategy they identified as meeting parent where they are. Under this strategy, the professionals stated that oftentimes the reality of parents was unknown to them. This created hesitancy for professionals to assert expectations for parents when they knew those expectations might be contradictory to parents' culture or abilities. Unfortunately, it is difficult to have a partnership when individuals are unable to rely on one another. It also goes against the concept of parents and professionals holding mutual responsibility, which was expressed in the definition of parent and professional partnerships.

Recommendations and implications. Further research is needed to explore what types of expectations are appropriate for professionals to hold for parents while engaging in parent and professional collaborative partnerships. Professionals need to feel comfortable in communicating their expectations for parents as partners. They must also find a balance between their expectations and maintaining respect for the competing demands parents face within other aspects of their lives. Part of the challenge of clarifying and solidifying collaborative parent and professional partnerships is overcoming the foggiest surrounding the expectations that professionals can identify and hold for as well as express to parents.

In terms of practice, local school districts can encourage parents and professionals to incorporate into their relationships the relationship qualities supported by this study as well as the strategies such as preparing parents for partnership and meeting parents where they are. This may help parents and professionals reach a comfortable place in which it is safe for them to mutually express and clarify their expectations.

Finding 7: Barriers to Creating Successful Collaborative Partnerships

To provide a better understanding of the challenges faced by parents and professionals to establish collaborative partnerships, this study asked professionals to identify the barriers they believed were preventing them from creating successful collaborative partnerships with parents. The professionals interviewed for this study identified three common barriers. The three barriers were: parental barriers, professional barriers, and shared barriers.

The barriers identified by the professionals supported a need for training regarding how to partner with families, effectively resolve conflict, work with difficult people, and successfully facilitate an IEP meeting. Partnering with parents requires that professionals have skills to address the challenges presented by parents' perceptual, attitudinal, or behavioral barriers as well as by parents' negative experiences. In addition, professionals need to enhance their abilities to overcome their own perceptual, attitudinal, or behavioral barriers. Unfortunately, some barriers identified by the professionals are more difficult to address, such as a lack of time and resources and assisting parents to deal with their own issues and conflicts in life.

Recommendations and implications. The scope of this study made it difficult to gain meaningful clarity regarding all of the barriers that professionals face in establishing collaborative parent and professional partnerships. More research is necessary to confirm, clarify, or add to the barriers revealed by this study. In addition, research is needed to determine what strategies school districts use to address these barriers and other identified barriers.

In terms of practice, local school districts are encouraged to facilitate discussions with parents and professionals to explore barriers that are hindering the establishment of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The barriers identified in this study can be used as discussion points to encourage parents and professionals to explore their own barriers. Districts may wish to examine whether they already have strategies in place that address the barriers identified in this study or whether other strategies might need to be implemented to address other identified barriers.

**Finding 8: Factors that
Contribute to or
Escalate Conflict**

The professionals interviewed for this study identified three factors that they believed contributed to or escalated conflict between professionals and parents. These three factors were: lack of trust; communication issues; and discrepant views of a child or a child's needs. These three factors directly supported findings from previous research (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Earlier in this study, communication and trust were identified as two qualities necessary for collaborative parent and professional partnerships to occur. It is not surprising that a lack of these qualities was identified by the professionals in this study as well as in the Lake and Billingsley study (2000) as contributing to or escalating conflict. A discrepant view of a child or a child's needs was also supported by both studies. The professionals described discrepant views of a child or a child's needs as not sharing common perspectives with parents regarding a child's abilities or having different opinions regarding the impact that a child's disability has on their achievement. Discrepant views are created by the different lenses through which parents and

professionals view a child. The professionals in this study pointed out that difference in knowledge regarding educating children with disabilities can also create different perspectives between them and parents.

Recommendations and implications. Future research is recommended to determine additional factors that parents and professionals believe contribute to or escalate conflict. It is recommended that future inquiry offers balanced perspectives from parents and professionals representing other local systems of special education and different cultures and regions.

Local school districts are encouraged to use the results of this study to initiate discussions with parents and professionals regarding factors that are felt to create or escalate conflict. It is recommended that districts reflect upon the strategies they currently use to build the capacity of parents and professionals to address communication issues; discrepant views of children; or breakdowns in trust.

Finding 9: Strategies to Handle Conflict

The professionals interviewed for this study identified four major strategies that they employed to handle conflict between professionals and parents. These four strategies were: (a) get everyone to the table to identify the core issue and make sure people are on the same page; (b) problem-solve; (c) be a good listener; and (d) keep the focus on the child.

The strategies the professionals identified to handle conflict reflect many basic conflict-resolution strategies. Of important note was the professionals' desire to gather different perspectives in order to get to the core of the issue and to make sure people were on the same page. This speaks to the relationship qualities of respect, honesty, open and

consistent communication, and active listening. It also addresses some of the factors that the professionals identified as creating or escalating conflict. Factors such as communication issues and discrepant views of a child or a child's needs can be uncovered only when all parties are able to contribute to the discussion. The strategies identified by the professionals to handle conflict also showed a balance of relationship-building strategies such as engaging in open, upfront communication with parents, meeting parents where they are, and investing time. As discussed earlier, less correspondence was seen between the relationship qualities that the professionals identified as being critical to conflict and the strategies that they identified for handling conflict.

Recommendations and implications. More information is needed regarding the strategies that professionals employ to handle conflict with parents. The strategies identified in this study were limited to the perspectives of the professionals interviewed. Future research should focus on adding the perspectives of professionals from other local systems of special education that represent different cultures and regions. Also, additional research should incorporate the perspective of parents to confirm if they agree that the strategies identified by the professionals are effective. In addition, future studies need to address what kind of strategies parents use to handle conflict with professionals. Clarification regarding what performance indicators support the implementation of these strategies would also be helpful.

Finding 10: Needs for Successful Collaborative Partnerships

The professionals interviewed for this study identified one common need that must be fulfilled in order for them to successfully develop collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. The major need identified by the professionals was the development of preservice and inservice training for teachers regarding how to partner with families, effectively resolve conflict, work with difficult people, and successfully facilitate an IEP meeting.

The majority of the professionals cited minimal to no preservice or inservice training related to collaboratively partnering with families or conflict resolution. The barriers and factors that create and escalate conflict identified by the professionals support their expressed need to receive training in how to deal with difficult people. Finally, the professionals' support for the strategy for effectively facilitating IEPs combined with the history of issues that resulted in state complaints and due process support the professionals' identified need to learn how to effectively facilitate IEPs.

Recommendations and implications. Training models and curriculum need to be designed and evaluated to assist local systems of special education to successfully develop and enhance collaborative partnerships between professionals and parents. Recommended topics of training from this study were: how can professionals improve their partnerships with families, how can professionals be more effective with resolving conflict, how can professionals overcome working with difficult people, and how can professionals successfully facilitate IEP meetings. The professionals in this study identified a need to improve their ability to partner with families, effectively resolve

conflict, work with difficult people, and successfully facilitate IEP meetings. Local school districts can use this information in conjunction with their own needs assessment to design inservice training that emphasizes what is important for both parents and professionals for collaborative partnerships to occur and to improve their handling of conflict.

Conclusion

For years, research within the field of special education has defined the relationships between parents and professionals as necessary partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dunst, 2002; Lopez et al., 2005). Research has stated that if parents and professionals wish to be truly successful with appreciating and addressing the strengths and needs of children with disabilities, they must be able to work collaboratively within long-term partnerships (Blackorby et al., 2007; Fullan, 2007; Pinkus, 2006; Newman, 2005; Henderson, 2002; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). This study contributed to the initial formation of a single definition of collaborative parent and professional partnerships. A definition such as the one below can provide parents and professionals with guidance regarding the meaning and purpose of collaborative partnerships. This definition states: *Collaborative parent and professional partnerships are where parents and professionals engage in open and honest communication, take responsibility to work together as a team across home and school environments, share common goals, and engage in mutual child-centered decision-making in order to move children forward and create positive student outcomes.*

Understanding the type of interdependencies that exist among parents and professionals is considered important for the development and strengthening of

partnerships between them. Enhancing existing positive interdependencies or replacing negative interdependencies can help parents and professionals display more promotive and collaborative behaviors within their partnerships. Also, the fostering of positive interdependencies can assist parents and professionals to remain focused on mutual goal achievement and engage in creative problem-solving in the midst of conflict.

This study suggests that one way to assess the nature of interdependencies between parents and professionals is to examine the relationship qualities that they mutually support. Research has suggested that one challenge for the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships is the lack of a common understanding or agreement upon which relationship qualities facilitate or deter from the creation of effective parent and professional partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Dunst, 2002). To date, there has been an imbalance of perspectives regarding the relationship qualities that are considered necessary for collaborative parent and professionals partnerships to occur. Previous research has primarily represented the voice of parents. This study attempted to bring balance by contributing the perspectives of various professionals representing multiple roles within a local school district. Additional research is still needed to support the findings of this study and to gain the perspectives of parents and professionals representing different cultures and regions and other local systems of special education. Future research should continue to strive for a balance between the perspectives of parents and professionals and to focus on creating additional clarity regarding the meanings of mutually agreed upon relationship qualities as well as factors that indicate their presence

In addition to contributing to a balance of relationship qualities considered necessary for collaborative parent and professionals partnerships to occur, the study contributed findings regarding the kinds of expectations these professionals hold for parents. It also gave insight into what relationship-building strategies, conflict-prevention strategies, and conflict-resolution strategies the professionals perceived as being successful.

This study compared the relationship qualities the professionals identified as necessary for collaborative partnerships and critical for conflict prevention and resolution. The study revealed that the qualities the professionals valued are reflected in the strategies they used to build relationships with parents. However, additional research is needed because the qualities the professionals valued for conflict resolution were not evident within the strategies they identified for handling conflict.

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APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



University of Northern Colo.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Application for Expedited or Full Review Guidelines

Section I - Problem/Purpose

Collaborative parent and professional partnerships have been associated with a wide range of positive outcomes for children with disabilities (Blackorby, Wagner, Knokey, & Levine, 2007; Fullan, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Newman, 2005). Unfortunately, the benefits of collaborative parent and professional partnerships are placed at risk when these relationships break down or become severed as a result of mishandled or unresolved conflict (Blackorby et al., 2007; Carter 2002; Mueller, 2004; Nowell & Salem, 2007; Schrag & Schrag, 2004).

Current dispute resolution mechanisms offered by IDEA (2004) possess several drawbacks such as being reactive rather than proactive in their approach for resolving disputes (Mueller, 2009; Mueller, Singer, & Draper 2008). A primary criticism is that these mechanisms foster competitive relationships by positioning parents against the school system to fight for what is in the best interest of their child (Beyer, 1999). Unfortunately, the relationship qualities typically present in competitive relationships closely match the relationship qualities that are associated with inducing or escalating conflict between parents and professionals (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Escalated conflict can become destructive, deter progress, and sever collaborative relationships between parents and professionals and may ultimately impede positive outcomes for children with disabilities. (Blackorby et al., 2007; Fullan, 2007; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Lake & Billingsley; Mueller, 2004; Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008; Newman, 2005).

A local system of special education can address this risk by implementing proactive strategies to foster positive interdependencies between parents and professionals. Positive interdependencies are believed to: (a) increase the ability of parents and professionals to handle conflict more productively, and (b) facilitate promotive interactions that maintain their focus on shared goals and creative problem-solving. One proactive strategy for facilitating positive interdependencies is to build collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals with inherent relationship qualities considered to foster cooperative and promotive interactions, minimize competitiveness, and deescalate conflict (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Dinnebeil & Hale, 1996; Deutsch et al., 2006;

Esquivel, Ryan & Bonner, 2008; Lake & Billingsley; Mueller, 2004; Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

A challenge that exists for the development of collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals is an imbalanced perspective regarding which relationship qualities are critical among parents and professionals. Many of the qualities identified to date, reflect the majority perspective of parents, with minimal input from professionals. The purpose of this study is to investigate which relationship qualities are considered necessary, by a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education, to foster collaborative partnership between themselves and parents. The relationship building strategies that are currently employed by these professionals will also be explored.

It is hoped that this study will expand the knowledge base in special education by providing a more balanced representation of the relationship qualities perceived as necessary by both parents and professionals for the development of collaborative partnerships. Results from the study may potentially be used to inform systems as they seek to improve professional development activities that are designed to enhance collaborative partnerships between parents and professionals. By improving the ability of parents and professionals to handle conflict more effectively, local systems of special education could potentially decrease their reliance upon due process hearings and other costly formal dispute resolution techniques that are recognized by IDEA (2004).

The following research questions will guide this investigation:

1. How do the professionals in the selected local system of special education define collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents of children with disabilities?
2. What specific relationship qualities do the professionals believe must exist for effective collaborative partnerships with parents to occur?
3. Which relationship qualities do the professionals perceive as critical to conflict prevention?
4. Which relationship qualities do the professionals perceive as critical for conflict resolution?
5. What strategies do the professionals use to build relationships with parents prior to conflict?
6. What strategies do the professionals use to build relationships with parents once conflict has already occurred?

Section II – Method

The research methodology that will be used in this study will be a qualitative approach (Merriam, 1998). Qualitative research enables researchers to serve as an instrument of data collection, allowing them to, “listen so as to hear the meaning of what is being said” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 7). As instruments of research, researchers are able to gather data “up close” (Creswell, 2007) and attend to the meaning participants are assigning to their worlds through ideas, concepts, word selection, voice intonation, and non-verbal cues (Merriam; Rubin & Rubin). This approach is appropriate for this study

because it allows input to be collected from integral members of parent and professional partnerships (Creswell, 2007; Blue-banning et al., 2004).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perspectives of professionals regarding the relationship qualities they perceive to contribute to the development of collaborative partnerships between themselves and parents. The research strategy that will be employed for this study is qualitative interviewing. "Qualitative interviewing is a way to find out what others feel and think about their worlds. Through qualitative interviews [researchers] can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which [they] did not participate" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 1). Interviews allow researchers to gain access and build rapport with participants to encourage these individuals to reflect fully about their experiences and provide rich descriptions using their own language. Active listening, curiosity and respect, and flexibility are among the skills necessary to conduct successful qualitative interviews (Rubin & Rubin).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) have stated, "one of the goals of interview design is to ensure that the results are deep, detailed, vivid, and nuanced" (p. 76). During the interviews, participants will be asked to respond to semi-structured interview questions intended to generate a mixture of specific data and flexible data (Merriam, 1998). A set of predetermined interview questions will be posed verbally in order to gather specific data. In addition, a flexible conversation strategy will be used to obtain unguided perspectives of the participants (Merriam). Questions may change or be added to the research protocol to reflect an increased understanding of the issue as data is collected (Creswell, 2007).

In addition, several strategies will be used to foster depth within the interviews. Since participants are more often willing to provide depth when they believe the interviewer is familiar and sympathetic to their reality, information about the selected school district and the participants' work environments will be collected prior to the interviews. Follow-up questions will be used to encourage participants to elaborate upon their responses. Also, participants will be asked to provide examples about their past experiences while partnering with parents and their engagement with conflict prevention and resolution. Examples provided by the participants will be uninterrupted, but then followed up by questions to clarify nuances and create a more vivid account of events. A second round of interviews may be scheduled if the interviews do not achieve saturation (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

1. Participants:

A local school district within the state has been selected for this study. The selection of this school district was based on the district's recent experiences with formal IDEA (2004) dispute resolution activities. Since 1998, the school district has been involved in: (a) three state complaints, (b) four mediations, and (c) five due process hearings.

A minimum of ten participants (over the age of 18) from the selected local school district will be purposefully chosen using a criterion sampling procedure (Patton, 1990) and by way of recommendations of the director of special education. Purposeful criterion sampling enables a researcher to "select individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon

of the study” (Creswell, 2007, p.125). Criteria that will be used for the selection of participants include: (a) employment and compensation from the local school district, (b) regard for the professionals by the school district as instrumental to the prevention or resolution of conflict, and (c) involvement by the professionals in parent and professional conflict during the last five years.

Further support for participant selection will be based upon the beliefs and values that are conveyed by the local school district of interest. For example, in reviewing district documents provided on its website, it is evident that administrators, such as the superintendent, the director of special education and building principals are responsible for ensuring common commitment among other professionals and parents. Principals within the district were noted by these documents as specifically holding a strong responsibility for promoting synergistic relationships. Also, the district documents stated that in the event of conflict, those individuals closest to the problem are best situated to facilitate resolution. This information supports the inclusion of the following participants: (a) the superintendent, (b) the director of special education and the assistant director of special education, (c) the parent liaison, (d) at least one principal from each of the three levels of elementary, middle, and high school, and (e) at least one teacher for each of the three levels of elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Initial contact with the participants for this study will be through email or by telephone. The purpose of this initial contact is to explain the nature and purpose of the study and to inquire about the potential participants’ interest to partake in the study. In the event that participants express verbal or written confirmation that shows their willingness to participate, each will be given or mailed a Human Subjects Consent Form (see Appendix A). The Human Subjects Consent Form clearly and understandably explains to the participants that their participation in the study is voluntary and that they can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The consent form also informs participants that precautions will be taken to ensure his/her anonymity. In addition to the consent forms, participants will receive a written cover letter (see Appendix B) providing them with a clear and understandable description of the nature and purpose of the study. The cover letter will also include a set of anticipated interview questions (See Appendix C) for the participants to review prior to their engaging in an interview. After the consent forms are collected by the researcher, interview dates and times will be scheduled at a time and place that is convenient and comfortable for the participants. Twenty-four hours before each interview, participants will receive an email or telephone call (based on their preferred method of contact) to confirm their interview appointment.

2. Procedure:

The cover letter that will be sent to participants will include a set of anticipated interview questions (See Appendix C) for the participants to review prior to their engaging in an interview.

Interviews will be conducted either face-to-face or via telephone. All interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Follow-up interviews may be scheduled in the event that more information is needed. No compensation will be provided.

3. Proposed Data Analysis:

Data analysis is described by Merriam (1998) as a, “complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation” (p. 178). Simply stated, it is the process by which a researcher makes sense out of their data. During the initial data analysis, any preconceived notions or questions of the researcher will be suspended in order to “hear” what the data is communicating (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2007).

A beginning step in data analysis is data management. Data management entails organizing data and engaging in the data analysis process by, “getting a sense of [the] whole database” (Creswell, 2007, p. 151). This involves reading through each interview transcript and reviewing all interview notes several times to identify units of data that are relevant to the purpose of the study and the research questions. Bloom and Volpe (2008) refer to this process as identifying the “big ideas”. As the transcripts and interview notes are reviewed, words, quotes, or concepts that reflect reoccurring patterns will be written in the margins. In addition, the researcher’s thoughts, speculations, or questions will be noted. After a thorough reading of each transcript, the margin notes will be transformed into a list and attached to the transcript. This list will be referred to during the review of the next transcript in order to identify regularities or commonalities that are reflected in the data. These reoccurring patterns will then be placed into a master list. This process will be repeated until all the transcripts and interview notes have been reviewed (Merriam, 1998).

Next, the master list created during the aforementioned review process will be coded into a “short-list” of broad categories (Creswell, 2007). Merriam (1998) describes these categories as “conceptual elements that ‘cover’ or span many individual examples of that category” (p. 182). This process creates a conceptual framework that is used for further data management and reduction (Bloom & Volpe, 2008). As additional reviews of the data are completed, related data are assigned to the broader categories. Exhausting the data in this manner reflects an evolving and more accurate understanding of the meaning being communicated in the data. It also ensures that the data can be placed in mutually exclusive categories (Merriam). During this process, the pre-existing relationship qualities that were identified by parents for collaborative partnerships will be considered. These qualities will be compared and contrasted to the meaning conveyed by the professional participants in this study to determine commonalities or differences. Openness to differences in definitions or to new emerging qualities will be maintained. Once this review process is complete, labels will be assigned to the categories that are sensitive to what is reflected in the data and use terminology specifically from the participants (Bloom & Volpe; Merriam). These categories will reflect the purpose of the study and address the research questions of the study. After the coding process is complete, quotes will be extracted from the transcripts that provide support for the categories.

Interpreting the data entails taking the findings of the study to determine its larger meaning. Bloom and Volpe (2008) have stated, “meaning can come from looking at differences and similarities, from inquiring into and interpreting causes, consequences,

and relationships (p. 127). Researchers pose questions about whether or not their findings substantiate or contradict previous research. They explore differences and similarities among their own findings and the findings of other researchers. They use their own experiences, knowledge, and intuition to guide them in a critical examination of the data across multiple angles.

The findings of the study will be objectively conveyed using a thick descriptive narrative that details what has been learned as a result of the study. Direct quotes from the participants will be contextually embedded to support and reinforce the research findings. Using the participant's voice is a way to build confidence that the data has been accurately represented (Bloom & Volpe, 2008).

Section III – Risks/Benefits and Costs/Compensation to Participants

There are no foreseeable risks to participants. Participation will be voluntary and all participants will be over the age of 18. Also, multiple steps to maximize confidentiality will be implemented by the researcher. A numerical identifier will be assigned to each participant in order to maintain their anonymity. Only the researcher will know which participant matches which numerical identifier.

All interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and immediately downloaded and saved into individual file folders on a password-protected computer. The interviews will be backed up on a flash drive that will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within the researcher's home office. The digital recorder will be erased following the download and flash drive back-up procedures. All recorded files will be maintained on the same password protected computer for up to five years and then permanently erased. The back-up copies on the flash drive will be permanently erased upon the conclusion of the study.

In addition to the digital recordings, the researcher will maintain detailed interview notes throughout the study as an additional strategy for documentation and reflection. The interview notes will detail written accounts of the research process, feelings and impressions of the researcher, informal observations, and documentation of ideas that can contribute to the research process. All interview notes will be maintained in a file folder on a password protected computer. The interview notes will also be backed up on a flash drive that will be stored in a locked filing cabinet within the researcher's home office. All interview note files will be maintained on the same password protected computer for up to five years and then permanently erased. The back-up copies on the flash drive will be permanently erased upon the conclusion of the study.

All print materials, including printed transcripts of interviews will be maintained in a locked file cabinet within the researcher's home office during the study's implementation. These materials will be shredded at the conclusion of the study. Any electronic correspondence, such as email, will be printed and stored in the locked file cabinet and permanently erased from the email account.

In addition, a universal goal of research is to produce valid and reliable research. According to Merriam (1998), "ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner" (p. 198). Research is most valuable in education when it is practical and can be applied in the field. Therefore, the audience of research must have confidence in its rigor (Creswell, 2007).

Internal validity refers to the degree research findings accurately reflect reality. Since a foundational assumption of qualitative research is that true reality is dynamic and impossible to grasp, the concept of reality is approached by attending to the individual realities constructed by participants.

Qualitative researchers possess an advantage for addressing internal validity in their studies. This advantage is their role as being instruments of data collection. This role places researcher as closely as possible to the reality of their participants and enables them to closely attend to messages participants are conveying through ideas, concepts, word selection, voice intonation, and non-verbal cues. When viewed from this standpoint, internal validity may be regarded as a strength of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2007; Merriam 1998; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Two strategies that will be used to address the internal validity in this study will be: (a) member checks and (b) peer examination.

To conduct a member check, researchers provide their participants with preliminary analyses of their findings and invites commentary on the plausibility (Creswell 2007; Merriam, 1998). In the context of this study, a member check will be implemented by providing participants with an opportunity to reflect and offer a critique on the initial results of the study. The perspectives gathered from the participants will be incorporated into the final analysis of the study.

Peer examination involves debriefing and soliciting feedback colleagues regarding the findings of a study (Merriam, 2008). In this study, peer examination will be used by in inviting colleagues in the areas of qualitative research, parent and professional partnerships, and conflict resolution to review and provide feedback on the results of the study.

External validity refers to the degree that the findings from a single study can be applied to other settings. Merriam (1998) states, “in qualitative research, a single case or small nonrandom sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand he particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (p. 209). When studying a small sample, traditional approaches to external validity can be problematic for qualitative research. Fortunately, qualitative researchers can use an alternative approach for addressing external validity in qualitative research, called reader generalizability (Merriam). This method empowers the audience to decide if the findings of a particular study are applicable to their own settings. Empowering the audience to make this determination requires that the researcher offer sufficient detail. A strategy to provide this detail is thick description (Creswell, 2007; Merriam).

Thick description provides an in-depth explanation about the setting and the participants under study. This process enables the audience of the research to assess if commonalities exist between their situation and the situation being described in the research. Making this comparison empowers them to make their own determination about the external validity of a study, as well as decide if the findings are transferable (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The reliability of a study refers to the extent the results of a study can be replicated. Reliability in qualitative research is challenged by (a) the assumption that a single reality does not exist and (b) the fact that human behavior is dynamic, and individuals are continually re-constructing their understandings about the world. To address reliability, qualitative researchers ensure attempt to demonstrate that their

findings are consistent with their results. In this study, an audit trail will be used to address reliability (Merriam, 1998).

Providing an audit trail can contribute to the reliability of this investigation. The purpose of an audit trail is to ensure that other researchers are able to follow the path of research in order to authenticate its findings. In this study, the audit trail will include a detailed description about the data collection process, the data coding process, and the decision-making process as they occurred throughout the study. An audit trail will be accomplished by creating a fieldwork journal in which notes about the research process and related documents will be meticulously maintained throughout the study (Merriam, 1998).

Section IV – Grant Information

Not Applicable

Section V – Documentation

Please refer to the attached appendices:

- a. Cover Letter (see Appendix A),
- b. Human Subjects Consent Form (see Appendix B)
- c. Proposed Interview Protocol (see Appendix C)

APPENDIX B
COVER LETTER



Date:

Dear _____,

Because of the knowledge and expertise you hold within your role as a _____ for in partnering with parents of children with disabilities, you have been selected to participate in an exciting study being conducted at the School of Special Education at the University of Northern Colorado called *Professionals' Perceived Qualities for Collaborative Parent and Professional Partnerships*. The purpose of this study is to investigate which relationship qualities are considered necessary, by a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education, to foster collaborative partnership between themselves and parents.

It is hoped that the knowledge base in special education will expanded by this study to provide a more balanced representation of the relationship qualities perceived as necessary by both parents and professionals for the development of collaborative partnerships and the improved handling of conflict. Results from the study may potentially be used to inform systems as they seek to improve professional development activities that are designed to enhance collaborative partnerships between parents and

professionals. By improving the ability of parents and professionals to handle conflict more effectively, local systems of special education could potentially decrease their reliance upon due process hearings and other costly formal dispute resolution techniques that are recognized by IDEA (2004).

Attached is an Informed Consent Form to Participate in Research. It provides more detail regarding your participation. Also attached, you will find examples of the questions that may be asked during the interview.

Please feel free to contact me via phone or e-mail if you have any questions or concerns about the study.

Sincerely,

Shawn Sweet

APPENDIX C
HUMAN SUBJECTS FORM



University of Northern Colorado
School of Special Education
Human Subjects Consent Form for Participation in Research

Project Title: *Professionals' Perceived Qualities for Collaborative Parent and Professional Partnerships*

Researcher: Shawn R. Sweet

Phone: 970-302-3292

Email: shawnrsweet@gmail.com

Greetings! I am a doctoral learner at the University of Northern Colorado. I will be interviewing professionals working within your school district about collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The interview will consist of questions related to your education, training, and involvement in partnering with parents of children who have disabilities.

Direct quotes from your interview will be used to illustrate findings of the study, however, any elements that identify you as a participant will be omitted to assure confidentiality. Your answers will be kept confidential and your name will not be used when sharing information learned through the interviews.

If you agree to meet with me, we will spend 60-90 minutes together discussing relationship qualities that you feel are critical for collaborative parent and professional partnerships. The interview will be recorded for the purpose of allowing me to correctly report the information. An additional interview may be necessary in the event that I need

to collect additional information from you. The second interview can occur in person or by phone and will last approximately 30 minutes. Also, I will be providing you an opportunity to reflect and offer a critique on the initial results of the study. I will send you the results through mail or email for you to review and provide feedback.

The digital recordings and documents generated from your interview will be assigned a numerical code to assure your anonymity. These recordings and documents will be maintained on a password protected computer. Back-up copies will be maintained on a flash drive that will be secured in a locked file cabinet. Data will be kept in this manner for five years and then destroyed.

Please feel free to contact me via phone or e-mail regarding any questions or concerns about your participation in the study. If you are interested in participating, please read the passage below.

Thank you for assisting me with my study.

Sincerely,

Shawn R. Sweet

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected and will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Having read the above introduction and having had the opportunity to ask questions, please provide the sign below if you agree to participate in this research.

A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Sponsored Programs and Academic Research Center, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80630; 970-351-1907.

Please return this form to Shawn R. Sweet at the following address: 616 63rd Avenue, Greeley, CO, 80634 or provide a copy with your signature at the time of your interview. Thank you!

Participants Full Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Title of Study: Professional's Perceived Qualities for Collaborative Parent and Professional Partnerships

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to investigate which relationship qualities are considered necessary, by a select group of professionals working within a local system of special education, to foster collaborative partnership between themselves and parents.

Date:

Time of Interview:

Location:

Participant Code:

Job Title:

Basic Information:

To begin with I am going to ask for a little information about you....

- A. Please describe your current position.
 - a. How long have you worked in this position?
- B. What other types of administrative positions have you held?
 - a. What position?
 - b. Where?
 - c. How long?
- C. What other types of positions have you held?
 - a. What position?
 - b. Where?
 - c. How long?
- D. What training prepared you the most to work with parents?

Interview Questions

1. Describe expectations you have for parents as partners.
 - Tell me about the strategies you use to help parents to meet these expectations?
2. Describe your role in developing collaborative parent and professional partnerships.
 - Tell me about the expectations you hold for yourself as a partner to parents.
 - What could be changed to better assist you in meeting these expectations?
3. How would you define collaborative parent and professional partnerships?

4. Describe how you believe an ideal collaborative parent and professional partnership should function.
5. Tell me about any challenges that exist for the development of collaborative parent and professional partnerships.
6. What strategies do you personally employ to actively involve parents in the education of their children?
7. Describe specific relationship qualities that you believe must exist for effective collaborative partnerships with parents to occur? (Participants will be asked to define each relationship quality they identify.)
8. Which relationship qualities do you believe are critical for conflict prevention?
 - Describe strategies that your school district employs to prevent conflict with parents.
 - Describe strategies you personally employ to prevent conflict with parents.
9. Think about a situation in which you participated when a conflict was avoided with parents...
 - Tell me about the relationship qualities that were present in that situation.
 - What factors do you believe prevented or the conflict?
10. Which relationship qualities do you believe are critical for conflict resolution?
11. Think about a time you were involved in an escalating conflict with parents...
 - Tell me about the relationship qualities you felt were lacking in that situation.
 - Explain what factors you believe escalated the conflict?
 - Describe the strategies that were used to try to resolve the conflict?
 - After the conflict occurred, tell me about the strategies that were used to try to re-establish a relationship with the parents?
12. What types of formal conflict resolution procedures have you been involved?
 - State complaints
 - Mediation
 - Resolution Meetings
 - Due Process
 - Litigation
13. Have you participated in other conflict resolution practices procedures? Please describe.