

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN IEP MEETINGS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

by

SOPHIE COOPER

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The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

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Examining Committee:

Laurie Ford, School and Applied Child Psychology
Supervisor

Rachel Weber, School and Applied Child Psychology
Supervisory Committee Member

Kim Zebehazy, Special Education
Additional Examiner

Abstract

At present, over 10% of students who attend public schools in British Columbia are identified as having a special need and require an Individual Education Plan (IEP). This plan is created or revised in yearly meetings in which parents, teachers, and others decide on individualized goals, adaptations, modifications, support, and measures for tracking achievement, all related to the student's educational planning. Although students are encouraged to participate in these meetings, little is known about what students' involvement looks like. Supporting students' autonomy has several positive outcomes including increased academic motivation and academic self-efficacy. When students are given the training and opportunity to take on roles that go beyond passive participation during the IEP process, benefits including increased academic performance, motivation for learning, and the development of self-determination skills can result. However, at present, research surrounding IEP participation has only been conducted in the US and very little research has directly studied students' perceptions of their involvement. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, in this study, semi-structured interviews were used to explore student perspectives on their participation in the IEP process and how students with learning disabilities felt they could become better involved in their educational planning. Themes that emerged related to the students' perceptions of their involvement included involvement, lack of involvement, advocacy and perceptions regarding the purpose of the IEP and the IEP meeting. Themes regarding how the students thought other students could become better involved in their meetings included acknowledgement of successes, collaboration, honesty and acceptance.

Lay Summary

Students in North America who are identified as having a disability require an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP identifies and records goals related to the students' needs, strategies and supports to be used, and measures for tracking progress. Parents, teachers, and others meet yearly to create, update and discuss this IEP. In British Columbia, students are encouraged to attend these meetings. However, it is unclear how students perceive their involvement in their meetings. This study takes information from six interviews conducted with teenagers and seeks to discover student perspectives on their involvement and how the participants feel other students can become better involved. Students reported how they perceived their involvement in the meetings, advocacy and the purpose of the IEP and IEP meeting. They also suggested ideas relating to acknowledgement of successes, collaboration, honesty and acceptance in regards to how other students could become better involved in their meetings.

Preface

The present study was conducted by the graduate student, Sophie Cooper, under the supervision of Dr. Laurie Ford. Ms. Cooper was responsible for the data collection, and primarily responsible for the analysis and writing components. The research conducted in the present study was approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research and Ethics board (BREB) under certificate H17-02520.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

According to the most recent information regarding students with designations, over 10% of the students enrolled in British Columbia (BC) public schools had designations that identified them as having special needs (BC Ministry of Education, 2017). Under the Individual Education Plan Order in BC, every student with special needs is required to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) designed and implemented by their school. An IEP typically consists of goals, adaptations and modifications, services that the student may receive, as well as measures to track progress. Yearly meetings are held with the purpose of devising or updating a student's IEP. School administrators, special education teachers, general education teachers, parents of the student, and others who provide related services usually attend IEP meetings. However, little is known about student attendance at these meetings in British Columbia. Unlike in the United States (US), students attending secondary school in British Columbia are not required by law to be invited to their IEP meetings (BC Ministry of Education, 2017). Not only is it unknown how many students in British Columbia are attending their IEP meetings, the level of engagement and participation for students who are attending their IEP meetings remains unclear.

Students who attend their IEP meetings in the US are more likely to report perceiving their parents and other adults as having decided their futures with little input from the students themselves (Georgallis, 2015). Further, students who were not given the opportunity, nor the training, to advocate for themselves during IEP meetings, were less likely to understand the meeting's purpose and goals, less likely to know what to do

during the meeting, as well as more likely to think that attending the IEP meeting was a meaningless activity compared to other participants at the meeting (Martin et al, 2004). When students are given the opportunity to participate in their own educational planning, benefits include increased investment in learning and academic success and decreased drop out rates, (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Kortering & Christenson, 2009). Additionally, when students are trained in directing their IEP meetings, they are more likely to gain a better understanding of the IEP process and its purpose, as well as show increased engagement and leadership during the meeting (Martin et al, 2006). Given that these results were found in the US where secondary students are required as a part of federal special education law to be invited to their IEP meetings, it is important to better understand the nature of student participation in their IEP development within the British Columbian context where there are no such laws. At present, the majority of the research surrounding student participation in IEP meetings is conducted in the US where there are different laws and guidelines. More research is needed to explore student involvement in educational planning for students with special needs within the British Columbian context.

Key Terms

Individual Education Plan (IEP): An IEP is a documented plan developed for a student with special needs that summarizes and records the individualization of a student's education plan. The plan typically includes individualized goals linked to the student's assessed special needs, strategies to be used, services and resources to be provided, measures for tracking achievement and adaptations and/or modifications. (BC Ministry of Education, 2009)

Student with Special Needs. For the purpose of this study the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines definition of student with special needs will be used. A student who has a disability of an intellectual, physical, sensory, emotional or behavioural nature, has a learning disability or has special gifts or talents is identified as special needs. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016)

Learning Disabilities. A number of disorders, which may affect the acquisition, organization, retention, understanding or use of verbal or nonverbal information are referred to as learning disabilities. These disorders affect learning in individuals who otherwise demonstrate at least average abilities essential for thinking and/or reasoning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016)

Rationale for Present Study

While researchers have primarily employed quantitative methods to study student participation in their IEP meetings (including length of time meeting participants spoke and understanding of IEP goals), there is a gap in the current research with regards to how students participate in and view their participation in meetings outside the bounds of rating scales. It is important to gain an understanding of how the students themselves believe they can become actively involved in planning their goals and futures. While teachers and parents may guess students' perceptions of meetings, by asking students themselves we can discover what the students view as feasible and how they personally would like to participate. Previous studies have found that students with learning disabilities who actively participate in their educational planning are more likely to experience increased self-efficacy, self-determination and knowledge about their

disability (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Hughes, Cosgriff, Agran & Washington, 2013; Stodden & Conway, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997).

Little research has been conducted in Canada surrounding student IEP participation. As the laws surrounding student attendance for IEP meetings vary from country to country, it would be imprudent to assume that students are attending their IEP meetings in Canada to the same degree that they are attending their meetings in the US. Under British Columbia's Ministry of Education, students with special needs are required to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) created or reviewed and updated for them at least once a year (BC Ministry of Education, 2016) . While the wording of the ministry procedures encourages student participation in the creation or review of an IEP, it does not require it by law. As discovered in studies conducted in the US, some students either do not attend their IEP meetings or are not commonly given the opportunity or training to actively contribute during these meetings and are at a disadvantage compared to those students who do actively participate.

Summary

All students in British Columbia who have a designation are required to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The IEP is a legal document that is designed to address a child's learning issues, and includes specific educational goals. School administrators, special and general education teachers, parents of the student, and others providing related services typically provide input on the IEP. While students are encouraged to attend their IEP planning meetings, little is known in the British Columbian context about their participation. Previous studies have demonstrated that

students who are active participants in their educational planning show increased investment in their learning, more academic success and decreased drop out rates.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

This study is informed by the literature on the involvement of students in their educational planning. In the following section, I discuss how involvement in educational planning is related to several positive outcomes, examine what current student involvement in the IEP process looks like in the US, and share the British Columbia Special Education policy on IEP meeting student participation. I will also discuss the rationale for this study and its research purpose and questions.

Student Involvement in Educational Planning

Several studies have demonstrated the importance of giving all students the opportunity to be involved in their educational planning. Students' perception that faculty at their schools are supportive of students making decisions about their own educational planning is related to a number of positive outcomes. In a US survey of 154 students in tenth grade, students who perceived that the school they were attending had made efforts to facilitate student involvement, versus those who attended schools where they did not feel that the school had made an effort, were more likely to be on track for graduation by the end of tenth grade and subsequently were more likely to graduate secondary school (Cavendish, 2013). In a study of 426 secondary school students in Italy across a school year through surveys and examinations of grade records, students who thought their teachers were supportive of their autonomy were more likely to have higher academic self-efficacy. These students were more likely to demonstrate stronger academic performance and increased levels of self-determination (a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated,

autonomous behaviour). In turn, a higher level of self-determination was predictive of decreased intentions of dropping out (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011). Again, the relationship between adult support of students' autonomy and increased graduation rates was demonstrated. Other studies point to a link between the tangible support of autonomy and academic benefits. In these studies, students whose teachers gave them a variety of choices relating to which tasks they wanted to perform, as well as when and where they wanted to perform these tasks, were more likely to use a range of strategies to solve tasks. This increased autonomy was also related to the students working longer on difficult tasks than those students whose teachers did not support their students' autonomy (Turner, 1995; Perry, 1998). These studies demonstrated that students who believed their autonomy was supported by school faculty were more likely to graduate secondary school, and showed increased academic self-efficacy and performance as well as increased levels of self-determination. Moving beyond the perceptions of support, students whose teachers demonstrated support for student autonomy were more likely to approach academic tasks with more creativity and persistence.

In contrast, those students who did not perceive that their teacher supported their autonomy were more likely to endorse negative outcomes. Assor, Kaplan, Kanat-Maymon, and Roth (2005) measured the student perceptions of their teachers' autonomy-support related behaviour through a survey with 319 fourth and fifth graders. They also measured student anger and anxiety in the classroom, motivation, academic engagement, and academic competence. The researchers discovered that students who identified their teacher as engaging in 'directly controlling teacher behavior' (endorsing items such as "Teacher is willing to listen only to opinions that fit her views") were more likely to

endorse feelings of anger and anxiety in the classroom. Specifically, these controlling behaviours included interfering with students' preferred pace, giving frequent directives, and not allowing for open critical discussion. The researchers suggest that these emotions were in part related to students' decreased academic motivation and engagement (2005). This research further demonstrates the importance of students both perceiving and having autonomy in their education with regard to academic motivation and engagement.

Students who were given the chance to develop skills associated with cognitive engagement, such as self-regulation, autonomy, and goal setting were more likely to engage in personal goal orientation and investment in learning. This relationship in turn was associated with academic success (Kortering & Christenson, 2009). The association between autonomy and positive educational outcomes has also been demonstrated for parents who support their children's autonomy. For example, Wild and Krapp (1995) demonstrated that parents who supported their child's autonomy were more likely to have children who were more self-determined and competent in relation to their education, as well as perform stronger academically than parents who were less supportive of their child's autonomy.

Involving students in the decisions surrounding their own education in the general education classroom setting and at home is associated with a multitude of beneficial factors such as increased: graduation rates, personal goal setting, investment in learning, academic success, self-determination, persistence in the event of difficulty, sense of educational competency, and use of multiple strategies (Cavendish, 2013; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Kortering & Christenson, 2017; Perry, 1998; Turner, 1995; Wild & Krapp, 1995). The previous research indicates this it is important for schools and

professionals working within the school setting to provide opportunities and resources that will aid students in making their own educational decisions.

In the USA in 2006, 59% of students with a specific learning disability and 57% of students with a behaviour or emotional disability who were at an age to complete secondary school graduated. This is a much lower rate than the US national graduation rate of 85% for all students eligible (Kortering & Christenson, 2017). In BC in 2017, 69.4% of students with special needs who were at an age to graduate did so, where as 84% of the entire student population who were at an age to graduate did so (DataBC, 2017). Given the research connecting student educational autonomy and increased graduation rates, it becomes apparent that students who have special needs may benefit from increased autonomy in their educational planning.

Autonomy for Students with Disabilities

Hughes, Cosgriff, Agran, and Washington (2013) sought to discover the potential relationship between students with intellectual disabilities' self-determination skills and inclusive activities offered at their schools and in their communities through interviews with 47 high school students, from three high schools, who were diagnosed with intellectual disabilities. The results were compared with the opportunities at each school for students to participate in inclusive classrooms as well as in activities in the community. The authors found that those students who attended the school that afforded the most opportunities for inclusive education and community-based instruction possessed a higher level of self-determination skills (2013). In this study it was demonstrated that students with special needs can reap the benefits of participating in an educational environment where they experience increased opportunities to independently

make choices, solve problems or self-advocate. In another US study, Gruber (2016) examined five college students with disabilities' perceptions of the self-advocacy instruction they had received in high school. Students in the study reported confidence in their knowledge surrounding their disability and in expressing their needs related to their disability. However, Gruber also discovered that these students did not perceive that they were knowledgeable about their rights and laws regarding persons with disabilities nor had they been taught leadership skills related to self-advocacy in high school. Abery, Rudrd, Arndt, Schauben, and Eggebeen (1995) developed a classroom-based competency-building program designed to provide young adults with mild cognitive disabilities training to increase skills related to autonomy, planning for the future, self-determination and knowledge surrounding their rights and responsibilities. The researchers recruited 18 young adults who attended high school to participate in the training program that lasted seven months and consisted of 24 weekly sessions. The students were taught information related to self-determination and given opportunities to practice skills in the classroom and in other environments. The researchers also worked with the students' families in one to four sessions and provided them with education and instruction on supporting their children's self-determination skill development. The researchers found that all students demonstrated enhanced choice-making, interpersonal problem-solving, self-regulation, and advocacy skills after the program. Specifically, they found that the students experienced more control over the types of activities they did with friends, how they chose to spend their free time, and their personal appearance. Additionally, the authors noted that a key component to the program was providing education to the students' families and found that those students became more involved

in making family decisions. Durlak, Rose, and Bursuck (1994) recruited eight high school students with learning disabilities and provided self-determination training. During these training sessions, the researchers defined a skill associated with self-determination, demonstrated the skill, allowed for questions, and had the participants rehearse the skill. The rehearsals were videotaped and played back to allow for discussion and feedback. Students were then given opportunities to practice skills learned at their high school in an effort to promote skill generalization. The students and their general and special education teachers were asked to complete measures of self-awareness, self-advocacy and assertiveness. The results from the study indicated that the students had acquired, maintained and generalized skills associated with self-determination and self-advocacy. These studies indicate there are several routes for aiding students with disabilities in enhancing their self-determination and self-advocacy skills and that engaging students in these opportunities can positively impact their future outcomes.

Student Participation in their IEP Development Outside Canada

One primary way for students with special needs to become involved in their educational planning is to become involved with their Individual Education Plan (IEP). According to the BC Ministry of Education, “an IEP is a documented plan developed for a student with special needs that described individualized goals, adaptations, modifications, the services to be provided, and includes measures for tracking achievement. It serves as a tool for collaborative planning among the school, the parents, the student (where appropriate) and, as necessary, school district personnel, other ministries and/or community agencies” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 16). The IEP ensures that a child attending an elementary or secondary educational institution who has

special needs receives specialized instruction and related services. These plans must either be created or revised at yearly meetings attended by the above-mentioned participants. (BC Ministry of Education, 2016).

The BC Special Education Services Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines states that the Individual Education Plan works best when “there is collaboration and ongoing consultation among teachers, administrative and support personnel, parents, students and representatives of district/community/regional agencies [as well as] parents/guardians and students hav[ing] the opportunity to be active participants in the process, to initiate discussions regarding the learning needs or request school-based access to support” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 12). The policy states also states that “As a rule, students should be included in all phases of the process unless they are unable or unwilling to participate” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 12). However, there is no current law *requiring* student attendance at IEP meetings. This differs from the US’s Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) in which students 14 years old and older *must* be invited to attend their IEP meetings when transition planning is to be discussed (Martin, Huber Marshall, & Sale, 2004). As such, the majority of the research surrounding IEP student participation is conducted in the US with US populations. The following section will discuss what student IEP participation and attendance in the USA currently looks like.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 mandated that all students with disabilities in the USA should participate in their IEP meetings when appropriate. Subsequent revisions of the law, now the Individuals with Disability Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004) also required that when transition services as a

component of the IEP are to be discussed, those 14 years and older must be invited to these IEP meetings (Barnard-Brak & Lechtenberger, 2010). In a survey of 6,860 students aged 15 and older that sought to discover how these laws transferred to real world applications and looked at student attendance in IEP meetings, it was found that 82.9% had attended their IEP meetings (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, & Valdes 2012).

Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Javitz, and Valdes (2012) also sought to examine participation of students who had attended their IEP meetings. They found that 10% of students who attended the meeting took a leadership role, 49% provided some input, and almost 30% of students participated very little or not at all. In another US study that explored member participation in 130 middle and high school IEP meetings, the authors found that, on average, students talked for only 3% of the total meeting time. They also found that in the majority of meetings students did not introduce themselves nor IEP team members, state the meeting's purpose, review past goals and progress, ask for feedback, ask questions to clarify things they did not understand, or express their skills, limits, options, and goals (Martin et al., 2006). Cavendish and Connor (2018) interviewed 16 secondary school students with a learning disability. Only six of these students had attended an IEP meeting in the last year and only two perceived that their opinions were considered during the meeting. Additionally, one of the four students who did not believe their opinion was considered, reported that the IEP "wasn't really about me" (pg. 37). While the majority of students are attending their IEP meetings in the US, it appears that their presence in these meetings does not necessarily translate into active participation or taking on a leadership role in their educational planning.

Additional evidence supports the need to move beyond a model of simply having students present for the IEP process. Martin, Huber Marshall, and Sale (2004) surveyed over 1500 IEP meeting participants. The authors found that, in comparison to other meeting participants, students who attended their IEP meetings knew what to do during the meeting, talked at the meeting, felt comfortable expressing their thoughts, understood what was discussed in the meeting and felt positive about the meeting *less* than any other of the meeting participants. However, when students attended the meetings, administrators talked more about the students' strengths, needs, and interests. General education teachers also reported that they were more comfortable saying what they thought, were more likely to understand the next steps in the process and reported overall better feelings about the meeting when students attended. While the presence of students at IEP meetings is associated with a number of benefits, it appears that students themselves are not directly reaping these benefits and may leave these meetings uninspired and unmotivated to be involved in their educational planning. This is further supported by a phenomenological study of nine postsecondary students that found mixed results when the author asked about adults at secondary school IEP meetings taking student suggestions into consideration (Georgallis, 2015). Some students interviewed expressed that they perceived that adults in the meeting had decided their futures for them with limited input from the student. While two participants indicated that other members of the meeting had listened to them, two other participants responded that their mothers had decided their futures for them. Additionally, several students reported perceiving they were not given ample opportunity to provide their own perspectives and feedback related to the educational planning process (Georgallis, 2015).

Research findings suggest that students are not being given adequate opportunities to actively participate or contribute in meaningful ways to their IEP meetings and thus are not benefitting from being involved in their educational planning. Indeed, Martin and colleagues (2006) suggest student participation in IEP meetings without real and meaningful engagement can at best be viewed as tokenism, with students being given no tangible opportunities to express their preferences and meaningfully contribute to their educational experience during the meetings (2006).

Active Student Participation in their IEP

When students are trained on how to actively participate in their meetings, there can be benefits. Martin and colleagues (2016) recruited teachers to teach the Self-Directed IEP. The Self-Directed IEP includes a video that shows a student modeling leadership of an IEP meeting. The student in the video demonstrates introducing themselves and other team members, stating the meeting's purpose, reviewing past goals and progress, asking for feedback, asking questions, dealing with differences of opinion, asking for support, expressing skills, interests, limits, options and goals and finally closing the meeting. Teachers trained in the Self-Directed IEP showed students this video, gave scripted lessons, and provided students with a workbook designed to help them plan an IEP meeting. The authors found that students who learned to actively participate and lead their meetings through the Self-Directed IEP were more likely to gain a better understanding of the IEP process and its purpose compared with those who were not trained. Additionally, students who were encouraged to actively participate in these meetings were more likely to show increased engagement and leadership during the meetings as well as have more positive perceptions of the IEP process. Benz, Lindstrom,

and Yovanoff (2000) found similar results and linked active participation in transition planning to the demonstration of greater motivation and ability to achieve goals compared to students who did not participate. These outcomes demonstrate the importance of not only having students present during meetings, but also the necessity of providing students with the opportunity and support necessary for them to become active participants.

Similar positive results were found in a study that implemented the use of a self-monitoring checklist as a component of the Self-Directed IEP (Diegelmann & Test, 2018). The authors trained two middle school students and two high school students with intellectual disabilities on the Self-Directed IEP. They also provided students with a self-monitoring checklist with picture prompts that they used during the training and during mock IEP meetings. The authors found that these students were more successful in following the Self-Directed IEP when using the self-monitoring checklist. The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities and middle schoolers in this study indicates that students of varying degrees of intellectual functioning, adaptive ability and age are capable of demonstrating meaningful participation in their IEP meetings.

Active student participation in IEP meetings was also associated with the development of self-determination skills, skills that are necessary for students with disabilities to be successful as they enter adulthood (Stodden & Conway, 2003). In their study of 80 young adults with learning disabilities, Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) found that those who had acquired the skills of self-determination during high school better understood the impact of their disability on their learning, as well as their rights and responsibilities associated with their disability than those who had not acquired the

skills. A year after graduation those students who had developed self-determination skills were also more likely to be employed and earn more than their peers who had not developed the skills. In another study that involved four students ages nine to thirteen with disabilities, the researchers created six lessons designed to help students communicate their goals and identify necessary supports at their IEP meetings. The authors observed the IEP meetings, interviewed the students, parents, and teachers and analyzed the students' previous IEPs, new IEPs, and field notes from the lessons. Results indicated that these meetings had become more student-centred, the students had the opportunity to develop self-determination skills, and everyone in the meeting engaged in more collaborative problem solving. The authors also identified some barriers to active student participation. They found that the special educator was still seen as the person viewed most responsible for the IEP, meeting attendees continued to remain unaware of the importance of self-determination, and special educators reported a lack of knowledge regarding preparing students to contribute in the IEP meetings (Danneker & Bottge, 2009). Six families whose children had been trained on a student centred individualized education program planning tool were interviewed in a study by Childre and Chambers (2005). They discovered that training in this tool was associated with increased family satisfaction in the IEP process and a higher level of collaboration by all IEP meeting participants. They also discovered that parents and students believed that their input during the meeting was valued and taken into consideration when developing IEP goals. The above studies indicate that when educators choose to train students on engaging in their IEP results in benefits such as increased satisfaction in the process, learning of self-advocacy skills, and greater motivation and ability to complete IEP goals.

Summary

Supporting students' autonomy in relation to their educational planning can lead to decreased drop out rates and increased positive academic outcomes. When students do not feel that their autonomy is supported they are at risk for decreased academic motivation and self-efficacy, as well as failure to graduate. As students with high-incidence disabilities are at a greater risk for dropping out before graduation, it is vital that their autonomy in educational planning be supported and encouraged. Students 14 years and older are mandated by US to attend the IEP meetings and one study found that the majority of the students in the study did attend their meetings (Wagner et al, 2012). However, their participation in these meetings is often passive, with adults at the meetings making all the decisions with little student input. When students are given the opportunity and training to actively participate, outcomes that include increased engagement in education, motivation and ability to achieve goals, and the development of self-determination skills can result.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

In the following chapter a brief description of the methodology of the study, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is provided. Participants and their recruitment are detailed. Also described is data collection, including a background questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a reflexive journal. Finally, ethical considerations, data analysis, and procedures for ensuring scientific rigor are discussed. The current study involved interviews with teenagers on how they perceived their participation at IEP meetings and how these students perceived they could become better involved in the IEP process.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to explore the involvement of students in their IEP meetings in British Columbia. In this study the researcher sought to discover if students with learning disabilities believe they have the preparation, education, and opportunity to actively participate in their IEPs. While the research has demonstrated the benefits of increased active participation, if students are not being given the chance, or education on how to actively participate, it is unlikely that they will see these benefits. By discovering how students perceive their opportunities and education surrounding IEP participation, those involved in the education planning process will be better equipped to help students navigate their IEP meetings and further educational planning.

Research Questions

For students with Learning Disabilities who attend their IEP meetings:

Research Q1: What are students' perceptions of their involvement in the meeting(s)?

Research Q2: What are students' perceptions of ways to engage students in the meeting(s)?

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the methodological framework because it allowed for a detailed examination of the personal lived experience of secondary school students with a BC Ministry of Education designation who have attended their IEP meetings. IPA allowed the researcher to examine how students have made sense of their experiences. One aim of the study was to gain an understanding of the participant's point of view. IPA allowed for in-depth analyses of participants' experiences and to find patterns of convergence and divergences across participants' experiences and perceptions (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

In IPA the researcher seeks to discover what is meaningful and what matters to those students in the context of their experience with their educational planning. While research has been conducted on what happens during IEP meetings in terms of logistics (e.g. who is present, how long each member talks for, who takes the leadership role), the current research used IPA to attempt to gain a sense of how the students viewed these meetings and how they placed importance on aspects of the meetings. IPA allowed the researcher to go beyond a description of the participant's experience in educational planning to gain insight into how the participant understood and made sense of their experience (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

“IPA has been developed specifically in order to allow the researcher to produce a theoretical framework which is based upon, but which may transcend or exceed, the participants' own terminology and conceptualizations” (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006,

p. 113-114). In the context of this research study it was vital that the students' own terminology and conceptualizations were considered. However, by taking the literature, the context of the student, and their physical environment into account, using IPA the researcher attempted to develop a more interpretative account of the students' experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in IPA methodology. Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate for answering the research questions as they allowed the researcher to regulate what was discussed while allowing for themes, events, or ideas that were important to the participant or researcher to be further explored (Frost, 2011). Additionally, while an interview schedule served as a basis for the interview, IPA allowed for the researcher to deviate from the interview schedule and 'elicit the gem(s)' (Smith, 2017, p. 303) that seemed particularly relevant to the participant's experience and allowed for richer analysis. As this was the first time research asked secondary school students in BC for their personal experiences with IEP meetings, it was important that the research methodology selected be both rigorous and systematic yet also allowed for exploration and creativity (Smith, 2017).

Ethics Approval and Recruitment

University Ethics Approval. Ethical approval was obtained through the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at the University of British Columbia. Agency/organization approval was obtained to recruit through the various sites that provided services to students with special needs. Members of the organizations and parents of students who had been assessed at a psychoeducational assessment clinic acted as gatekeepers to recruitment and were given information they could choose to give to

parents of students or students that included a description of the study and the researcher's contact information. If parents of potential participants expressed interest in taking part in the study they were supplied with more information about the study and the consent form. The researcher began each interview with an explanation of the parent consent form and the student consent form to both the student and their parent. If participants agreed to begin the interview, they and their parent signed the consent forms and students completed a background questionnaire (see Appendix A). Students were informed that they could end the interview, revoke consent and discontinue the study at any time. They were also informed that they could choose not to answer any questions if they felt uncomfortable.

Recruitment. The researcher attempted to recruit students through multiple sources: professional organizations that provide services to secondary students with special needs, parent support organizations (and in turn access to the students from the parents), psychoeducational assessment clinics in the Lower Mainland, and a secondary school. These agencies were contacted and informed of the study's purpose. Professionals helping with the student recruitment were informed of the time, effort, and commitment required of participants. They were also provided with information that could be made available for parents and students who fit the study's criteria for recruitment. The information included contact information for the researcher as well as an offer of a \$20 Amazon gift card in return for study participation.

One agency that provided psychoeducational assessments allowed the researcher to directly contact parents who had had their children assessed through the office as they had permission from parents who received services at the agency. Another

psychoeducational clinic posted the recruitment flyer. Several tutoring services for students with learning disabilities in the Lower Mainland also posted the recruitment flyer. One school in the Lower Mainland sent information to parents about the study via their parent newsletter. Professionals working in the public school system and colleagues of the research team agreed to disseminate information about the study to people that they knew who had children with learning disabilities. Finally, an online parent support organization displayed several posts advertising the study on their Facebook group.

Participants

The following criteria was employed in selecting students for the proposed study:

1. The participants were in grades 8-12.
2. The participants attended one or more IEP meeting(s) in the current or past school (academic) year.
3. The participants attended a secondary school in British Columbia.
4. The participants had a BC Ministry of Education special needs designation of Learning Disabilities (Category Q).

A copy of the background questionnaire is provided in Appendix A. Six participants took part in the study. This sample size meets IPA criteria that typically calls for five to ten participants. Small sample sizes are the norm when conducting with IPA, (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Collins and Nicolson (2002) state that using large sample sizes may result in losing any potential nuances; thus, interviewing six participants for the present study had the benefit of allowing the discovery of common themes between participants as well as the ability to spend ample time and effort conducting in-depth analyses. Selecting students who were in grades eight to twelve was important to the research as

these students are preparing to enter either the workforce or post-secondary education after they graduate. It is crucial that these students are involved in their educational and transition planning prior to graduation where they will step into the role of a self-advocate. Selecting students in the lower mainland of British Columbia and Vancouver Island area was more convenient and practical for this study, as interviews were conducted in person. A screening questionnaire was implemented to ensure that each participant met the study criteria. year.

Table 1

Characteristics of Participants

Participant ¹	Grade	Type of School	Area of Learning Disability	Total Number of IEP Meetings Attended	Months Since Last IEP Meeting Prior to Interview
Alyssa	11	Private	Reading	6	4
Max	10	Private	Reading & Writing	7	11
Olivia	8	Private	Reading	6	10
Leah	8	Private	Reading, Writing and Math	1	9
Jasper	10	Public	Writing	5	5
Luke	8	Public	Reading, Writing & Math	1	5

¹ Pseudonyms

The participants attended five different schools in British Columbia, four private and one public. The students ranged from Grade 8 to Grade 11 and consisted of three males and three females. Data was collected from August 2018 to June 2019. The interviews took place at coffee shops close to the participants' homes. To ensure that students' identity remained confidential, pseudonyms were assigned for each student and used in the summaries. A brief description of each participant is provided below.

Alyssa. Alyssa was a student in Grade 11 who was diagnosed with a learning disability in reading. She attended a private school and had been to six IEP meetings with

the most recent one four months prior to the study interview.

Max. Diagnosed with a learning disability in the areas of reading and writing, Max was in Grade 10 at the time of the interview. He had been to seven IEP meetings at his elementary school and private secondary school with the most recent eleven months prior to the interview.

Olivia. Olivia attended a private school and had been to six IEP meetings. A student in Grade 8, she was diagnosed with a learning disability in reading. The most recent IEP meeting she attended was ten months prior to the interview.

Leah. Leah had attended her first and only IEP meeting nine months before she took part in the interview. She was in Grade 8 and diagnosed with a learning disability in reading, writing and math.

Jasper. Jasper was diagnosed with a learning disability in writing and in Grade 10 at a public school. He had attended his fifth IEP meeting five months before taking part in the study.

Luke. In Grade 8 at a public school Luke was diagnosed with a learning disability in reading, writing and math. He was recently diagnosed with the learning disability and had attended his first and only IEP meeting five months prior to the interview.

Data Collection

Student Background Questionnaire. The students were asked questions concerning their background including grade, gender, number of IEP meetings they had previously attended, and the date of their most recent IEP meeting prior to the start of the interview. This Student Background Questionnaire is found in Appendix A.

Semi-Structured Interviews. In person, semi-structured interviews served as the

primary source of data in the present study. These interviews were utilized to obtain participants' experience and perspectives of their IEP meetings. The interviews involved only the researcher and the participant. An interview guide was prepared in advance (see Appendix B). Participants were asked to reflect on their experience with the IEP process and how this process impacted them.

During the interview the participant was considered the 'experiential expert' and the researcher the 'enabler' who assisted the participant in bringing their experience to life (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Efforts were made to ensure that answers to questions were received in a sensitive and empathic manner so as to communicate to the participant that they could be open and forthcoming with their perceptions (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The researcher met with the supervisor and other members of the lab to review initial interviews and discuss ways to elicit rich responses to the questions. As participants were still in school, efforts were made to ensure that the questions were not too abstract and specific prompts were available if needed. Questions that were more sensitive in nature were asked later in the interview in hopes of the researcher and participant being more at ease with each other in order to facilitate greater openness on the part of the participant.

Interviews were audio-recorded after gaining consent from the participants to do so. Before the interviews were analyzed, the researcher followed up with the student by sending the student a transcript of the interview. While students were encouraged to read over the transcript and expand on their responses to questions and add additional information, none of the students had additions or clarifications.

Reflexive Journal. A reflexive journal was employed by the researcher to aid in documenting impressions, knowledge, and potential biases related to working with

students with special needs. The journal took two formats, notes taken during the interview and an audio journal. During the interview, the researcher made notes about the content discussed by the participation, the tone of what was said as well as other non-verbal communication. After the interview, the researcher audio recorded herself speaking about the interview, highlighting any salient memories from the discussion. The journal was used by the researcher to reflect on what was said by the participant, the researcher's interpretation of what was said, as well as what the researcher felt and thought about what was said. (Frost, 2011; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). While the journal was not formally analyzed as a part of the results, it did provide contextual information for the interview results and interpretation.

Data Analysis

Method. IPA allowed the researcher to identify and explore themes that emerged from the interviews. Through these themes, an understanding of the students with special needs' perceptions of their educational planning experiences was elicited as well as how the students believed that those students with IEPs could become better involved in the educational planning process.

Process. IPA recognizes 'the central role for the analyst' in making sense of the personal experiences of researcher participants and thus the researcher took an active role in analyzing the data. Smith describes IPA as a double hermeneutic in which the researcher attempts to interpret how the participant made sense of the phenomenon (2004). Data analysis was conducted following the guide described by Smith and Osborn (2007).

Stage 1: Looking for themes in the first case. Data analysis began with the

transcription of interviews verbatim. After transcription, the interviews were read several times to allow the researcher to become familiar with the data. The researcher focused on the interview context, language use, context the student was in, any interpretations, and made notes and comments in the left-hand margins. At this point in the analysis there were no rules for what was commented on. Therefore, the researcher summarized, paraphrased, commented on similarities and differences, repetitions, amplifications, conducted preliminary interpretations, commented on the language chosen or other factors. Initial notes were then used to elicit emerging themes, which were noted in the right-hand margins. As this was the preliminary stage, no passages were omitted or specifically concentrated on as the entire transcript was considered data.

Stage 2: Connecting the themes. Themes that were noted in the right-hand margin were transferred to paper and the researcher studied them for connections between themes. As these connections emerged, they were referenced back to the original transcript to see if they made sense in the context of the participant's words. Including the participant's phrases that related to the particular theme on the paper further supported the transference from the transcript to themes. A table of themes was then created to aid in the clustering of separate and distinct themes. These clusters were given names and represented superordinate themes. Each theme on the table included where in the transcript it could be found and the phrase that supported it.

Stage 3: Continuing the analysis with other cases. The process in Stage 1 and 2 was repeated with the second interview and subsequent interviews, one at a time. New themes further added to existing themes and superordinate themes discovered from the first transcript, or new themes and superordinate themes emerged. Thus, the researcher

recognized the ways that participants' experiences converged and diverged. Once all the interviews had gone through this process, a final table of themes and superordinate themes was created. Prevalence of themes as well as richness of particular passages that highlighted certain themes aided the researcher in prioritizing and reducing the data. Once the researcher had gathered possible themes, she revisited the research questions and selected themes that addressed the two research questions. A reflexive journal was utilized through out the data analysis process to allow the researcher to reflect on her impressions, knowledge, and potential biases related to the analysis.

Ensuring Scientific Rigor

Overview. Ensuring scientific rigor can be thought of as the trustworthiness of the research in a qualitative study. The procedures used for ensuring scientific rigor in the present study included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010).

Credibility. Credibility refers to the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research findings. There are several ways in which credibility was maintained for the duration of the study. Firstly, *description* was employed in which the researcher attempted to show rather than tell the readers the findings of the study. This was accomplished by providing rich detail about both what was said and what was not said during the interviews (Tracy, 2010). *Triangulation* of different methods was employed as a strategy aid to aid in credibility. The use of multiple types of data (analysis of transcripts, the researcher's reflexive commentary, and the student background questionnaire) served to deepen understanding and elicit consistent interpretation (Shenton, 2004). The researcher attempted to employ *Member checking* and took the

transcripts back to the participants to see if they wanted to include additional information or clarify their responses. However, they did not respond. (Tracy, 2010; Shenton, 2004). *Frequent debriefing sessions* between the researcher and her supervisor occurred to discuss alternative approaches, as well as collaboratively develop ideas and interpretations. These sessions also allowed for potential biases on the part of the researcher to be highlighted by her supervisor (Shenton, 2004). *Peer scrutiny of the research project* also aided in credibility. The researcher employed the use of ‘critical friends’ who were able to view the research with more detachment than the researcher. These critical friends went over the interview and its analysis to bring light to potential areas where the researcher may have inserted her beliefs in projecting or ignoring relevant content (Berger, 2015; Shenton, 2004). Finally, the selection of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in this research study was informed by *the adoption of research methods well established*, a component of credibility. IPA is commonly used in qualitative research and is considered applicable and useful in wide variety of research topics (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Transferability. Although these experiences discussed in this study are unique, they can serve as an example of student experiences of educational planning in British Columbia. The researcher provided contextual information about each student’s situation (e.g. type of school attended, type of learning disability and age of student) to the reader so they can decide for themselves if they think the study is transferable to their own situation. Those reading this study may include teachers (general and special education), school psychologists, and students in secondary school thus, the researcher has made attempts to write in an accessible way.

Dependability. Given the nature of qualitative research and IPA, the goal of dependability is not for future researchers to be able to replicate the results, but rather to allow for future researchers to replicate the work. Thus this final thesis includes: the research design and its implementation, a detailed account of the data gathering, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the whole process. Information about the research design includes a copy of the student background questions in Appendix A and the interview guide in Appendix B. An account of data gathering is included in the methods section and an evaluation of the effectiveness is reviewed in Chapter 5: Discussion section of this thesis (Shenton, 2004).

Confirmability. Confirmability ensures that the findings of the research have not resulted from the characteristics, assumptions, and biases of the researcher, but from the experiences and perspectives of the participants. *Triangulation* was employed to decrease bias on part of the researcher. The researcher used a reflexive journal that she referred back to during the analysis portion of the research as well as researcher field notes that were taken during the interviews. Additionally, the researcher used direct quotes when possible to demonstrate and illustrate the themes (Shenton, 2004).

Summary

In Chapter 3, a description of the chosen methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was given. Participations and the recruitment of participants was outlined. Data collection and data analysis were discussed. Finally, criteria that was employed to ensure scientific rigor as well as research approval and ethical considerations were reviewed.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this study was to examine student participation in IEP meetings in British Columbia. The researcher sought to identify how students with learning disabilities perceived their involvement in these meetings and how these students thought they and others could be better involved in the educational planning process. Interviews were conducted with six adolescents and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the results. Seven broad themes and nine subthemes were identified. These themes will be discussed in this chapter.

Overall Themes

The researcher took a holistic approach to analyzing the data and examined the interview data for overall themes. After the thematic analysis was conducted, the researcher explored how the themes answered the research questions. The themes that emerged will be discussed as they relate to the two research questions: 1) what are the students' perceptions of their involvement in the meeting(s) and 2) what are students' perceptions of ways to engage students in the meeting(s)?

Table 2

Overall Broad Themes and Subthemes

Broad Theme	Subtheme	Number of Participants Endorsing the Theme
1: Lack of Involvement	1.1: Limited Knowledge	4
	1.2: Limited Preparation	5
	1.3: Lack of Inclusion	3
2: Involvement	2.1: Opportunities for Involvement	5
	2.2: Valued Involvement	4
3: Advocacy	3.1: Parents as advocates	3
	3.2: Self as advocate	4
4: Purpose of IEP	4.1: Goals and Support	6

Broad Theme	Subtheme	Number of Participants Endorsing the Theme
4: Purpose of IEP	4.2 Evidence of Need	4
5: Acknowledgement of Successes		4
6: Collaboration		4
7: Honesty and Acceptance		3

Research Question 1: What are Students’ Perceptions of Their Involvement in the Meeting(s)?

Students discussed how they were involved in their own IEP meetings. They described a range of experiences in which some of the students felt unwelcomed and unwanted and others in which some of the students felt valued and that their opinions mattered to others in the meeting. They also discussed how they saw the role of an advocate in relation to their parents and themselves. Finally, they described how they saw the purpose of both having an IEP and an IEP meeting.

Table 3

Research Question 1 Broad Themes and Subthemes

Broad Theme	Subtheme	Number of Participants Endorsing the Theme
1: Lack of Involvement	1.1: Limited Knowledge	4
	1.2: Limited Preparation	5
	1.3: Lack of Inclusion	3
2: Involvement	2.1: Opportunities for Involvement	5
	2.2: Valued Involvement	4
3: Advocacy	3.1: Parents as advocates	3
	3.2: Self as advocate	4
4: Purpose of IEP	4.1: Goals and Support	6
	4.2: Evidence of Need	4

Broad Theme 1: Lack of Involvement

This broad theme, Lack of Involvement, represents participants' perceptions that they were not fully included in the IEP process. Some participants identified that there were times during meetings where they felt unwelcome and unprepared. Three subthemes were identified under this broad theme: Limited Knowledge, Limited Preparation, Lack of Inclusion.

Subtheme 1.1: Limited Knowledge. Participants discussed the paucity of knowledge surrounding the IEP process that they had prior to the meeting. Max identified feeling uncomfortable participating in the meeting because he did not know what to expect from the meeting, "I guess it was kind of awkward and I didn't know what to say because I didn't know what was going to happen. I guess that's to be expected from my first actual IEP meeting." He further identified his lack of understanding of the purpose of the IEP meeting prior to his first meeting when asked about what he remembers,

I'm not too sure why it happened. It's not like an every year thing, it's kind of weird actually. But like, I don't know if my parents said something, but there's this head of the EA people and she organizes some of them. [Max]

None of the participants indicated that other meeting participants taking part in the meeting (i.e. their parents or teachers) had spoken with them prior to the meeting about what to expect. When asked what parents can do to help their child before the IEP meeting, Alyssa said "...maybe talk to them, warn them what's going to happen." Max identified how teachers could help students with regards to ensuring that they feel comfortable and prepared going into the meeting and relayed an example of a teacher who provided reassurance,

Beforehand, maybe let [the student] know that it's not going to be super stressful.....my woodworking teacher stayed because I was nervous because there was a lot of people... and he stayed through the meeting, even though he wasn't supposed to be there.

Subtheme 1.2: Limited Preparation. Participants also discussed not being engaged in activities prior to the meeting to help them prepare for participation. No participants reported that they had thought about goals or points to discuss with the meeting participants prior to the meeting prior to the meeting. When asked if they had any goals they want to talk about at the meeting, Leah said “not really”. Two other participants identified ways that they could prepare for future meetings reporting that they would find it helpful to use their parents and teachers as resources to aid them with this preparation. Max reported that knowing the questions he was going to be asked prior to the meeting would be helpful, “.....probably one of the people running the meeting could've asked me the questions in advance so I could've thought up more.” Alyssa reported that her parents did not help her prepare for the meeting, but had ideas for ways parents could help their children. “Maybe talk to them, warn them what's going to happen and maybe show them their notebooks or whatever they have before the meeting. Like my parents, they could show me what they have written.” Conversely, Olivia reported not wanting to prepare for the meeting and that she was happy to just attend the meeting,

Well maybe, [there's something I'd want to do] but I don't know. I don't really have a lot of time for that. I just kind of show up and she goes over the whole plan because she makes it so I'm just going over it and agreeing with what she's

written. I wouldn't really want to make up the whole plan because I have school to finish right now.

From this student's understanding of preparation prior to the meeting it appeared she perceived that she would be required to make the plan herself.

Subtheme 1.3: Lack of Inclusion. Some of the participants reported feeling unwelcome or like they were not wanted at their IEP meeting. While Max reported a positive experience at his most recent IEP meeting, he reported feeling unwelcome at his first IEP meeting based on few questions raised. “[I felt] Forgotten, no, ha ha. No, kind of just pushed to the side a little bit, like I shouldn't have been there. It should've just been my parents and the teachers.” He also expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities to participate in the meeting. “Both my parents were there and I didn't feel like I got a lot of time to answer the questions. I should've gotten more time because it was like a meeting about me”

Alyssa reported feeling unease at potential conflict during the meetings and due to this, did not feel that she was wanted at her meeting by her parents,

I just don't really go, I think my parents, they just, I don't know if my parents want me there, I think, so they don't really tell me when they happen and then all of a sudden they're at my school and I'm like “hey”

She further reported that it was a common experience for her to sit in meetings and not fully engage in them except to answer some questions,

Kind of my parents and my key teacher. They just kind of go back and forth of their list of all things and they just kind of talk about them, like let's keep this one, and they ask questions so it's kind of, mostly my parents and key teacher. I'm

just kind of there for questions... I find them, like a little bit, I just sit there and you know, I get questions here and there but I just sit there the whole time so it's just kind of me listening.

Some difficulty actively participating in the meeting due to the language used was reported when Luke was asked what the teachers could have done differently, "I think they could've made it a lot easier for me to understand a lot of the words" and reporting it was hard to understand and that he did not talk during the meeting and was not asked any questions.

Broad Theme 2: Involvement

While some participants reported a lack of involvement during their IEP meetings, others expressed they were involved and perceived that their opinions were welcomed and valued. The theme of Involvement represents participants' perceptions that their input was valuable and encouraged by other meeting participants. Two subthemes were identified: Opportunities for Involvement and Valued Involvement.

Subtheme 2.1: Opportunities for Involvement. Most of the students interviewed reported that they were given opportunities during the meeting to express their opinions. However, participants reported varying degrees of these opportunities. Olivia reported that while she was not given the opportunity to set goals, she believed that she was given the chance to adjust the goals as needed, and seemed satisfied with this approach,

It's okay, I don't really, I can, I do have the opportunity to change the goal off of it, but they make the basis of the goal I guess and that's fine, as long as I get to change it a bit.

Leah reported that she was able to express which academic areas she wanted to further develop. She reported feeling positive about this experience and like she was listened to. “.....they all want to help me learn and she asked me what I wanted to improve on and I said my handwriting and my math.....[this made me feel] good....because then I could say what I wanted to do.”

Max emphasized how much he appreciated being given opportunities to speak during the meeting and how he perceived being able to express himself sufficiently,

I had a really large chance to bring up anything necessary... I think it was a lot better because this one was actually a meeting and not like a side part. And it was a lot more respectful of everybody and I had time to talk, which was good.

Jasper compared his opportunities to participate in his most recent IEP meeting to opportunities at his first IEP meeting and reported an increased sense of responsibility provided to him by the adults in the meeting,

There was more input on my end as to what I think should be going into it ... I feel like it's more of a right that's being passed on, like a privilege, like you've done well so now you can have an input.

Subtheme 2.1: Valued Involvement. Moving beyond believing they had no opportunities for involvement, several students also reported perceiving the input they provided was valued by other team members. These students reported believing other adults at the meeting listened to them and that they felt positively about their experience. Leah and Jasper perceived that when other members attending the meeting writing down what they were saying as evidence of their opinions being valued. “They were writing stuff down, they weren't talking to each other when I was talking.....[it made me feel]

...Good.” . Max reported how the teachers present at his meeting also wrote down what he was saying, “they all typed it in. I’d sneeze and they’d write it down”. He relayed that while this was “a little bit stressful” for him, overall it was a positive experience and he saw that the ideas that he had expressed in the meeting were employed in his classroom. Jasper reported that he felt like he was the one who dictated the decisions in the meeting and that he appreciated the increased sense of responsibility. “It was me telling her [his teacher] what I needed. It was cool to have a say in what was going on, it was also nice to have an opinion in what was going to happen, moving forward.”

He further shared perceiving that the majority of questions asked during the meeting were directed at him, rather than his mother. He indicated that he appreciated the opportunity to be able to directly answer the questions “...[he felt]like more of a grown up than [he] felt previously”.... and [felt]more as an adult rather than a kid with no say what was going on”. Max reported similar perceptions of his involvement in the meeting compared to his mother’s involvement, “She didn’t really have too much stage time or anything, or when she did, the teachers would be like, let him answer.”, He reported that he was pleased that he had more time to speak and answer questions at the meeting.

Olivia recalled that at one point in the meeting her support teacher informed her that she wasn’t using a particular electronic device (designed to help with spelling) how this teacher thought it was intended to be used. The student reported feeling upset when she was told this. However, Olivia relayed that she was able to explain during the meeting that she used the tool in a way that worked for her and felt like she was able to convey that information. She indicated that her teacher took her opinion into consideration and she was able to keep using this tool in a way that worked for her.

Broad Theme 3: Advocacy

Students reported different views of advocacy. They discussed who they saw as advocates and how they viewed the process of self advocacy. Half of the participants indicated that they saw their parents' role in the meeting, as well as at their school as the role of an advocate for them and is discussed under the theme, Parents as Advocates. Four of the students discussed how they saw the process of learning how to self-advocate as their responsibility to initiate and is discussed under the theme, Self as Advocate.

Subtheme 3.1: Parents as Advocates. Half of the students indicated that they were more comfortable having their parent advocate for them than advocating for themselves. They indicated appreciating having their parent attend the IEP meetings and that they saw their parents' role during the meeting was to be their advocate. Alyssa reported that she did not always feel comfortable bringing challenges she was having in the classroom with teachers or educational assistants to these staff and instead preferred to tell her parents who would then advocate on her behalf. She spoke about how she was happy to go to her beginning of year IEP meetings where it's "really light and everyone's nice" but "when [she is] having problems at school [she'll] just tell [her] parents at home or tell [her] key teacher during the year and then they'll discuss in the meeting without [her]". She spoke about how this method of advocacy was preferable and that she perceived that she conveyed her concerns through her parents effectively and saw resulting changes in her classroom. Max shared this same view and recalled a time when the educational assistant he was working with did not understand his need for accommodations in the classroom. Max brought up the issue with his mother and then she brought the issue to the school and it was resolved. This student indicated that this

was a preferable way of advocacy for issues that made him uncomfortable. Olivia appreciated having her mother present during the meeting and expressed that she saw her mother's role during the meeting was to be her advocate and to ensure that the school kept her support,

That's why my mom comes, just to make sure that they don't do that to me since I need the tools. Cause sometimes they would do that to someone, like, no you're all good, you're at the same level as everyone else, you don't need these tools anymore so we're just going to take it all away from you... She just goes through it, make sure everything's okay. Make sure they don't take away my help and yeah, just make sure that everything's okay.

She also said she relies on her mother to represent her needs and that she would not want to attend the meeting without her mother present.

Subtheme 3.2: Self as Advocate. The majority of students spoke about how they valued the opportunity to speak during the meeting and some reported that they believed that their opinion was valued, as discussed under the theme Involvement. Other students discussed how they viewed self-advocacy. Max and Alyssa indicated that they saw the process of learning how to self-advocate as well as the actual act of self-advocating as their responsibility to initiate. In reference to preparing for the meeting, Max reported "... probably one of the people running the meeting could've asked me the questions in advance so I could've thought up more. *But I didn't think to go to them*". He perceived the responsibility for getting the questions prior to the meeting as being placed on him and something that he was responsible for. Alyssa indicated a similar sentiment when asked how her parents could help her prepare for the meeting. She indicated that it may

be helpful for her parents to give her a notebook and show her the notes that they take during the meeting, but she had never asked, but thought they would if she asked. She viewed self-advocacy as something that it was her responsibility to initiate and that she would have to seek out adults to learn the skills. When asked how others could prepare for a meeting, Leah suggested that students could think what questions they may be asked and prepare answers for them. She appeared to perceive it as her responsibility to come up with answers to potential questions instead of her teachers' responsibility to help the students prepare for the meeting.

Broad Theme 4: Purpose of IEP

Students spoke about their understanding of the purpose of both the IEP and the IEP meeting. Two themes emerged from this discussion: Goals and Support and Evidence of Need. All of the participants identified that the reason for having an IEP, and subsequently the IEP meeting, was to set goals for them, and to ascertain what support in terms of accommodations and tools they would need in the classroom. Four of the participants also viewed their IEP as physical proof that allowed them access to needed support.

Subtheme 4.1: Goals and Support. The participants all spoke about how they saw the purpose of the IEP and the IEP meeting was to establish goals and identify potential supports that would help them reach their goals. Jasper described the IEP as a “tailored learning experience to students instead of pretty much what the main stream is like” and spoke about how having an IEP provides students with learning disabilities help that goes beyond what other students in the classroom receive. Several students used the word ‘help’ when asked about what they thought the purpose of the IEP and the IEP meeting

was. “I know they’re supposed to help kids and they’re supposed to be there and have all kind of the kid’s resources so the teachers know.” [Alyssa]

Students discussed how in the meetings, participants reviewed ways to provide help to allow the students to meet the goals. Max, who had the majority of his teachers attend his meeting, spoke about how he understood that the teachers were there to provide help and to aid him in navigating his learning disability to succeed in the classroom. Olivia spoke about how she thought her IEP helped her to succeed at school,

Well, I feel like without it, I wouldn’t succeed as well as I do, especially this year, cause my grades have been getting a lot better cause I use the help that I’m given because of it. And like without it, I don’t think I would succeed as well because yeah, it helps me.

Several other students shared that the primary purpose of the meeting was to set goals for the upcoming school year. Leah discussed how she was able to talk about the areas she wanted to improve on,

It’s like talking about what you want to succeed in at in the beginning of the year, so like you can work towards at the end of the year... I’d say like, it’s good, you get to talk about what your goals are and it’s really good to talk about what your goals are because then you can improve.

Subtheme 4.2: Evidence of Need. Four of the students spoke about how they saw the purpose of their IEP as beyond that outlining their goals and need for support. They discussed how they were able to use their IEP to demonstrate that they were eligible for accommodations and tools in the classroom. Alyssa shared how she saw the IEP as proof of her needs,

So it's in paper for when teachers if they don't believe or something...it's always kind of there as a back up, because sometimes new teachers, they might not believe me or they're like, no, because sometimes we have super small quizzes and they're like, oh, it's five questions, you can read it and I'm like, no I really can't read this paper, so it's kind of there as a back up.

Olivia shared a similar view of her IEP as evidence of need,

I need the tools that I need and you can't stop me from having this because I have the plan. And I can tell teachers that, and that's the best feeling ever. When you just can tell teachers, this is what's happening and you cannot say no.

Olivia further described her IEP as “authorization to use [her] tools”, an opinion shared with some of the other students who were interviewed. These students appeared to draw comfort from telling their teachers or substitute teachers that their IEP gave them permission to accommodations in the classroom. The students understood their IEP as documenting confirmation of their need for support and that the purpose of the IEP meeting was to outline these supports. Jasper expressed his frustration that many of his teachers had not read his IEP and were not aware of his learning disability, but indicated that he appreciated having a document that he could show to his teachers to allow him use a computer instead of writing by hand.

Research Question 2: What are Students' Perceptions of Ways to Engage Students in the Meeting(s)?

During the interviews, students elaborated on several ways other students could be engaged and involved in their IEP meetings. Three broad themes emerged from their ideas: Acknowledgement of Successes, Collaboration, and Acceptance and Honesty.

These ideas related both to what other adults in the meeting could do to involve students as well as what students themselves could do.

Table 4

Research Question 2 Broad Themes

Broad Themes	Number of Participants Endorsing the Theme
5: Acknowledgement of Successes	4
6: Collaboration	4
7: Acceptance and Honesty	3

Broad Theme 5: Acknowledgement of Successes

Four of the participants spoke about how they appreciated that their teachers took the time to acknowledge the improvements that they had made over the school year as well as their strengths. Max, who had all of his teachers attend his meeting, recounted that the meeting was started by his support teacher asking his other teachers what they liked best about him. The student reported that this made him feel “happy, I felt welcomed” and that “it was nice because I knew everybody and they were open with complimenting me so I was like, oh, this is okay”. Other students indicated a high point from the meeting was when the improvements that they had made over the school year were discussed. When talking about her upcoming meeting, Olivia emphasized her excitement,

I feel happy, especially when, I’m excited for the one this year because I feel like I’ve improved in so much so I’m excited to see what she says. And they’re usually very positive. She tries to make most of the things positive and the least things negative.

Leah indicated being particularly proud when her principal spoke about the progress she had made, saying she felt “Nervous good.....[because]I wasn’t sure what she was going

to say and I was kind of excited to hear what she said.....[because]I think they saw a difference in how I've improved.

Alyssa reported that her support teacher “talked about for like 20 minutes on the good stuff that [she'd] been doing, from like the differences that she'd seen from the year kind of thing”. She recalled this as one of the parts she liked most during the meeting, but also shared she would have appreciated having her improvements and strengths integrated with her areas to work on.

Broad Theme 6: Collaboration

Collaboration was a theme that emerged from participants discussing how they believed that the IEP meeting was an opportunity to work together with their parents and teachers to develop goals and discuss classroom supports. Alyssa noted that the process of building the IEP was something that was done as a team,

I normally go to the IEP meeting at the beginning of the school year so then, my parents, me and my teacher, because it's same tutor I have every year, we all build it together and then we kind of build upon as the year goes on.

In addition to the idea of building the IEP together as a team, she also expressed that it was important for her to have everyone “on the same page” and that “everyone knows what's up, everyone talks about the problems and just kind of puts them all on the table so we're all aware of them”. She viewed the IEP meeting as a chance for her parents, teachers and her to collaborate and to express concerns in an environment where everyone was present and attentive.

Max, Leah, and Olivia discussed the importance of having teachers present at the meeting. Leah stated that it was helpful for these teachers to be present “because then

they can know what [her] goals are and how they can help [her]”. She also spoke about how she found it beneficial to discuss the goals that she had for herself as well as the goals that her teachers had for her in a setting where everyone was present and could work together. Olivia whose support teacher and parent only attended the meeting, discussed teachers in classes she struggled with attending future meetings,

Well, I wouldn't like it if all my teachers came, like maybe just teachers that I struggle in their class, like not struggle but I need help. For example, like for French and Math.

Collaboration between those involved in these students' education seemed important to the students and they all spoke about how it was, or would be, helpful to them to have their teachers present at their meetings.

Broad Theme 7: Honesty and Acceptance

Being honest with participants at the meeting and accepting of their need for help was highlighted by some of the participants. Alyssa discussed needing help had taken attending several IEP meetings to come to terms with, and shared this when asked how other students could prepare for their own IEP meetings,

Just to kind of like accept that it is harder for them and like this stuff is going to help them, so like your parents are like 'oh she's a terrible reader or something', don't go, no, I'm really good at reading, just accept that cause you'll get help kind of thing cause I do now. When I was younger and then I'd go to the meetings and I wouldn't really understand it and my parents would always help me and uh, say 'we'll be saying stuff and you're not going to want to hear, like it's going to end

up helping you, so you've just go to zone it out or something'. And now I know what's actually happening.

Olivia shared that her disability afforded her the right to receive supports and she needed to have some degree of acceptance surrounding her disability, "I have dyslexia, this is what's happening, I need the tools that I need and you can't stop me from having this because I have the plan." She went on to offer advice to other students who may attend their IEP meeting,

I'd tell them to try their best and to keep on working and keep on persevering and it's not bad to have the help, it's not bad to have the tools. You shouldn't be ashamed of it, because it's something that will help you succeed.

Finally, Max shared the importance of being honest with those in the meeting about the accommodations that he needed and what help his teachers could provide him. All three participants stressed being open and honest about their learning disabilities and that honesty and acceptance would allow them to gain the supports that they needed in the classroom.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter the results from the analysis of the information collected from the interviews conducted with participants was summarized. Seven broad themes and nine subthemes were identified using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with interviews from six adolescent students with IEPs. The students were asked questions regarding their involvement in their IEP meetings and ways they thought that other students could become better involved in their own IEP meetings. The students discussed *Lack of Involvement, Involvement, Advocacy* and *Purpose of IEP* in relation to their own

involvement in the meeting and *Acknowledgement of Successes, Collaboration* and *Honesty and Acceptance* in relation to how other students could be involved in their meetings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

The purpose of the present study was to examine how students with learning disabilities in British Columbia perceived their involvement in IEP meetings, as well as to explore ways that students felt they could become better involved in their meetings. Six teenage students participated in semi-structured interviews, and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to identify several themes relevant to students' perceptions of their involvement in meetings. In this chapter research relevant to the identified themes from the present study are discussed. Limitations and strengths of the study are also highlighted. Implications of the findings for educators and school psychologists working with students who may attend their IEP meetings are also discussed. Finally, directions for future research are reviewed.

Findings of the Present Study Connections to Previous Literature

“Lack of Involvement” and Relevant Literature. One of the themes identified in the study was students' perception of lack of involvement in their meetings. The students discussed how they felt unprepared in terms of knowledge about the meeting, how they were not given opportunities to prepare for the meeting and how they did not feel included in the meeting. These findings reflect some of the literature surrounding student participation in IEP meetings in the US. In the study by Martin et al (2006) discussed in Chapter 2, students who attended their IEP meetings did not feel comfortable asking questions relating to information they did not understand or expressing their limitations, skills or goals. Cavendish and Connor (2018) also found in their study that the majority of students they interviewed did not feel that their opinion was taken into

consideration during the meeting. Some of the findings in this present study indicate similar student perceptions of lack of involvement in IEP meetings in the British Columbia education context. Regarding IEP development, the current BC Ministry of Education policy states, “students have the opportunity to be active participants in the process, to initiate discussions regarding the learning needs or request school-based access to support..... as a rule, students should be included in all phases of the [IEP] process unless they are unable or unwilling to participate” (2016, p. 12). Although this present study found that some of the participants viewed their participation in their IEP meetings as meaningful and valued, other students did not feel this way. Some of the students did not believe that they were meaningfully included in all phases of the IEP process and were left feeling undervalued and unwanted at their own IEP meetings. While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 in the US requires that students aged 14 years and older must be invited to attend their IEP meetings when transition planning is to be discussed, there is no such law in BC. One student, Alyssa reported that she was not always aware when her IEP meetings were and that her parents did not invite her to some meetings because they knew her aversion to potential conflict. None of the students reported that they were invited to the meeting by their teachers, but rather invited by their parents when their parents deemed it appropriate for them to attend the meeting.

“Involvement” and Relevant Literature. While some students identified the aforementioned perceptions of lack of involvement, others identified perceptions of involvement in their meetings. The students discussed how they were given opportunities to participate and how they perceived that other meeting attendants took their opinions

into consideration. The participants relayed how the efforts their teachers had taken to include them in the meeting made them feel positively about their attendance. Some of the students reported how they appreciated this increased sense of responsibility. Several studies that were examined in Chapter 2 explored methods of engaging students and allowing them to have meaningful participation in their IEP meetings. A popular method, The Self-Directed IEP, trained students how to participate in and lead their meetings. Martin and colleagues (2016) identified that students who were trained on this method demonstrated increased engagement and leadership as well as more positive perceptions of the IEP process. This present study's theme of Involvement also explored how participants viewed their participation in the meeting, albeit using a semi-structured interview format versus the survey method used in Martin's study. Students reported similar feelings of increased engagement and positive perceptions in the meeting. Students in the present study identified several ways in which others in the meeting both encouraged their participation and demonstrated that they valued the students' opinions. Some reported that they were either given the opportunity to set their own goals, or to adjust goals that their teachers had set for them. Two of the students recalled that they believed their opinions were valued when they observed teachers at their meeting writing down what the student was saying and viewed these as tangible and physical displays of respect for the students' involvement. Participants also discussed how teachers at their meeting directed their questions to the student instead of to the students' parents. Finally, one student relayed that she valued being able to discuss a difference of opinions and felt like her teacher was able to take her opinion onboard. These perceptions of how others in the meeting encouraged and valued their involvement

demonstrated ways that adults present at the meeting were able include students in their educational planning.

“Advocacy” and Relevant Literature. None of the students in the study indicated that they had prepared for their IEP meeting with either a teacher or parent. When asked about this, some of the students indicated that they saw the process of learning skills associated with advocacy as their responsibility to initiate. The literature discussed in Chapter 2 indicates that students who are explicitly taught skills associated with advocacy are more likely to demonstrate increased choice making, interpersonal problem solving, self-regulation and advocacy skills. While several students in the current study reported that they felt they were able to share their opinions in the meeting and that they were able to have input into their future education, based on the previous literature, these students may further benefit from explicit instruction on self-advocacy. Several students in the present study also reported that they saw the role of their parent as an advocate for them. These students indicated that they appreciated having their parent present and sometimes were more comfortable having their parent advocate for them when they encountered contentious issues at school or at the meeting. While this may seem like an effective means of advocacy, it is important that students with learning disabilities are able to advocate for themselves. Competency in skills related to advocacy becomes especially important as students transition into adulthood. Adults with learning disabilities will encounter scenarios in post-secondary education, in the workforce and in their communities where they must be able to advocate for themselves and it will not be appropriate to have their parent continue in the role of primary advocate.

“Purpose of IEP” and Relevant Literature. Research regarding how students with disabilities view the purpose of their IEP and IEP meetings is sparse. Students in this present study reported that they saw the purpose as creating and revising goals and supports. Some of the students further reported that they saw the IEP as evidence of their needs. Under the Goals and Supports theme, the participants outlined that they understood the purpose of the IEP and IEP meeting as means of teachers helping them navigate their learning disabilities. One of the students, Olivia, relayed that she relied on the support and accommodations that she received and did not think that she would be able to succeed as well without the help. Four of the participants also indicated that it was important to them to have a document that explicitly outlined both their need for support and the accommodations that they were eligible for. However, despite these students reporting that they viewed the IEP as authorization for access to accommodations, none of the students reported that they had seen the actual IEP document. Given that some of the students reported that there were times that they had to tell their teachers or substitute teachers that they were allowed to use specific accommodations, it may be beneficial for students to receive copies of their IEP so they can be further informed of what forms of support is available to them.

“Acknowledgement of Successes” and Relevant Literature. Several of the participants reported that their teachers acknowledged their strengths and the improvements that they had made. These findings relate to what Martin, Huber, Marshall and Sale (2004) found, that administrators were more likely to talk about students’ strengths when students attended their IEP meetings. Students in this study reported that having their teachers discuss their strengths and improvements helped to create a

welcoming environment during the meeting and that they subsequently left the meeting with positive feelings about their experience.

“Collaboration” and Relevant Literature. Collaboration was a theme related to how students viewed their meeting and to how other students could become better involved in their meetings. The students recounted that they saw the IEP meeting as an opportunity to discuss their goals and needs as a team. The majority of the students reported that their meetings consisted of only them, their support teacher and one of their parents. One student stated that she would have found it helpful to have teachers from classes that she struggled in present at the meeting. Another student reported that most of his teachers did not attend his meeting and some were not aware that he had an IEP. Given that the literature demonstrates better outcomes when there is a high level of collaboration between all persons associated with a students’ education it would likely benefit the students to have their teachers attend (Spina, Klenowski, & Carrington, 2018). Indeed, the current BC Special Education Services Manual of Policies, Procedures and Guidelines states that an IEP works best when “there is collaboration and ongoing consultation among teachers, administrative and support personnel, parents, [and] students” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 12). It is important that the school team, students and their parents are able to work together in an official setting such as the IEP meeting and be able to discuss ways in which students can succeed in their education.

“Honesty and Acceptance” and Relevant Literature. In regards to how other students could be better involved in their own IEP meetings, some of the participants discussed the importance of being open and honest about their learning disability diagnosis and the support that they required. The current literature has demonstrated that

students who are knowledgeable about their disability and needs are more likely to be able to demonstrate self-advocacy skills (Hughes et al, 2013; Stodden & Conway, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997). This relationship between active participation in educational planning and acceptance of needs may be viewed as reciprocal; the more students are able to demonstrate active and meaningful participation, the more accepting they may become of their learning disability and their needs related to it, and the more accepting they become, the more comfortable they may feel participating.

Limitations and Strengths of the Study

Limitations. One of the primary limitations of the study, and a limitation that is associated with the research methodology used, is the generalizability of the findings. IPA typically calls for a small sample size with the goal of gaining an in-depth analysis into participations perspectives of their experiences. The participants were all students in British Columbia. As education is province mandated, the findings may not be replicated if the study was conducted in another Canadian province under different guidelines. Additionally, four out of the six students attended private schools, some of which were specialized for students with learning disabilities. Their experiences may look different from the majority of students who attend public schools in BC. Additionally, half of the participants were recruited from a psychoeducational assessment clinic. Given that having an assessment conducted privately can be costly, these students may have higher socioeconomic status than the majority of students in special education. Pair this with four of the participants attending private schools; the generalizability of the study is further reduced.

Another limitation of the study is the recruitment method used. Participants' parents acted as gatekeepers to the study and could choose to inform their children about the study. Half of the sample was recruited from an online parent support group for parents of students with learning disabilities. These parents may be better versed in advocacy and knowledge surrounding the rights of their children than parents who do not belong to such groups. Students whose parents have experience acting as an advocate may be more likely to be stronger advocates themselves and be more knowledgeable about their education, learning disability and rights. As it is not required under Provincial law to invite students to meetings, there may be many students whose parents are less involved in their education that do not invite their children to IEP meetings or do not encourage their child's participation. These students would either not be eligible for the study, or may not have been informed by their parents about participating.

A further limitation of the study was the grade of students who participated. Three of the students were in grade eight. These students had less experience than the older students in attending IEP meetings. For these younger students, attending their meetings may have been a more intimidating experience and they may have felt less comfortable in speaking. Having this distinct age gap between participants reduces the cohesiveness of the results. Additionally, educators may be more reluctant to include younger students in their IEP meetings and thus their experiences may be different compared to that of older students. Further, as future goals for education and work post secondary school may not be discussed for younger students, their IEP meetings and IEP may follow more of a template that is learning disability specific rather than student specific, further reducing the cohesiveness of the results.

A fourth limitation of the study was the execution of member checking. Students were sent transcripts of their interviews and invited to include additional information or clarify their responses. None of the students responded to the invitation. Given that all of the students in this study were diagnosed with a learning disability in reading, it is possible that reading through the transcript and making comments was not a feasible goal. Alternative methods, such as sending students the audio recordings of the interview may have encouraged more responses.

Strengths. Although there are limitations to this study, the study has strengths that underline the importance of examining students' perspectives on their educational planning. Firstly, the research methodology selected, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allowed the researcher to understand what the students deemed as meaningful and explore how they made sense of their experiences. Using IPA allowed students themselves to share their perspectives and for the researcher to expand on their perspectives and relate the findings to the current literature surrounding student involvement in educational planning. Further, most of the research conducted surrounding IEP meetings has focused on teacher and parent perspectives. Thus, another strength of this study was working with the students themselves to gain an understanding of how they see their role and others' roles in these meetings. Directly eliciting information from students on how they believe other students can become better involved in their IEP meetings may help teachers and parents as they embark on involving students in their own educational planning. Finally, most of the current research surrounding IEP meetings has been conducted in the US. As laws surrounding special education differ in

British Columbia, it is important to gain information in the British Columbian context regarding this topic.

Implications for Educators

Themes generated in this study elicit several implications for educators who may want to explore ways to further include students in IEP meetings. One way that educators can encourage student involvement is to help prepare students prior to the meeting.

Students in the study suggested that it would be helpful to give them an idea of the types questions that may be asked of them during the meeting. As participants also reported not knowing what to expect from their first IEP, giving students an agenda or outline of the meeting may also help them feel more prepared. Some of the students reported that their parents were the ones who invited them to the meeting; educators may want to explore directly inviting the students. While more difficult in secondary school, having all of the students' teachers, or the teachers in which classes the students struggle in might demonstrate that the students' educational success is important to the teacher as well as allow an open discussion between all participants involved in the students' education. Some of the students who reported feeling positively about their meetings discussed how they felt like their teachers were listening to them and that they were pleased with the opportunities they were given to talk during the meeting. Having meeting participants display active listening and providing opportunities for the student to talk may encourage increased involvement of the student. Additionally, students relayed that they felt positive when staff noted their strengths and improvements. Finally, none of the students reported being explicitly taught advocacy skills. Teaching these skills to students will likely benefit them as they continue on past secondary school.

Implications for School Psychologists and Practice in Schools

While school psychologists do not typically attend IEP meetings in British Columbia, this study highlights the importance of students being able to advocate for themselves. Part of advocacy is knowledge about one's needs. School psychologists may consider either educating students about their diagnosis when they conduct their assessments or providing parents with the resources so parents can educate their children. Further, school psychologists may also want to consider providing consultation with teachers to explore ways to educate students about their learning disabilities and ways to include students in their educational planning. It may be helpful for school psychologists to discuss with teachers how both professionals can work together to educate students about how they can participate in their IEP meetings. Additionally, as previous literature has demonstrated the value in multidisciplinary teams, school staff, parents and students will likely benefit from working as a team to ensure that students with learning disabilities can perform to their potential. Schools may also want to consider a more formal approach to student attendance and participation in meetings. Directly inviting students to their own meetings may send a message to students that they are welcome and wanted. Teachers who work closely with the students may also find it helpful to work with students to prepare answers the questions that will be asked during the meeting. This would give students the opportunity to feel like their opinion is valued. Demonstrating to students that their input is respected will likely further encourage involvement in their educational planning and thus encourage the learning of advocacy skills that students will need after graduation from secondary school.

Recommendations for Future Research

As the research method selected has limited generalizability, future researchers may want to consider alternative approaches that allow for findings to be more applicable for students with learning disabilities in a variety of different settings and/or special education needs. It may be beneficial to consider research conducted in the US and apply research methodology used to the Canadian setting. For example, several studies conducted in the US trained students on programs that allowed them to either lead their IEP meetings or establish meaningful participation. It would be interesting to see these same training programs examined in a setting that is not obliged under law to include students in meetings. This study only looked at students' perspectives of their meetings. Little is known about what happens in IEP meetings across British Columbia and how the process differs across schools. It may be beneficial to add direct observations of IEP meetings to the current Canadian literature. Further, there are no present statistics specifying the number of students who are attending their IEP meetings in British Columbia. This would be useful information to have when considering how we can encourage students to become more actively involved in their educational planning. It would also add to the literature to include perspectives of others who attend meetings in British Columbia such as parents or special education teachers. Finally, British Columbia has recently shifted to using a Competency Based IEP that is designed to focus on strength-based goals. This IEP format includes a section in which the student is asked questions relating to their interests, how they display their learning, and areas they want to improve. Given that students are given an explicit form for providing input to be

included in their IEP, it may be beneficial to study how this impacts students' involvement in IEP meetings.

Summary

Overall, this study explores how students with learning disabilities perceive their involvement in IEP meetings and how they think other students can become better involved in these meetings. While the majority of the literature is focused on IEP meetings in the US, and either focused on teacher or parent perspectives or was quantitative in nature, this current study employed a qualitative research method that sought to explore student perspectives. Participants discussed ways in which they did and did not feel included, how they viewed the purpose of the IEP, how they viewed advocacy, and the importance for collaboration, honesty and acceptance regarding their diagnosis and subsequent needs. These findings add to the literature surrounding student involvement in educational planning and suggest future considerations for educators, administrations, parents and school psychologists when working with students with learning disabilities.

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Appendix A: Student Background Questionnaire

What is your age?

What gender do you identify as?

What grade are you currently in?

When was your last IEP meeting?

How many IEP meetings have you attended?

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction and Orientation:

- Introduction of self and study
- Review and sign consent/assent forms

Interview Guide Questions:

1. I want you to tell me what you know about Individual Education Plans (IEPs).
2. What does having an IEP mean to you?
 - a. Is it important to you?
 - b. Why or why not?
3. Get you to think about an IEP meeting that you've attended. It can be the most recent one, or most memorable one, up to you.
4. We're going to talk about that meeting...
 - a. When was the meeting?
 - b. Who was at the meeting?
 - c. Do you remember about how long the meeting was?
 - d. What about your preparation for the meeting? What did you do to prepare?
 - e. Did anyone help you prepare? How?
5. Why did the meeting take place? Did you know the purpose for the meeting?
6. We're going to talk more about yours and everyone's actual participation in the IEP meeting.
 - a. Who started off the meeting?
 - b. Who else spoke? Did they speak directly to you, or to the group in general?
 - c. Did you get a chance to speak?
 - d. How much do you think you spoke?
 - e. What sorts of things did you share or talk about?
7. What were your goals going into the meeting?
 - a. How were you able to communicate your goals?
 - b. Were you heard?
8. What do you think were the main things discussed in the meeting?
9. What do you wish was discussed during the meeting that wasn't?
10. What did you like about the meeting? *Try to tell me one positive thing.*
11. What did you not like about the meeting?
12. Do you think that you will attend your next IEP meeting?
13. What will you try to do differently next time you take part in an IEP meeting?
14. What do you think students should do before and during their IEP meetings?
15. What would you say to a student who is about to attend an IEP meeting?
16. What do you think teacher and other school staff should do before or at the meetings help students?
17. What do you think parents should do before or at the meetings to help students?
18. Are there things I haven't asked that you would like to share with me?
19. If you plan to attend your next IEP meeting, would you be willing to sit down with me again to discuss your experience at the meeting?

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



children, families
and communities LAB

Are you a high school student with a Learning Disability?

Have you attended your IEP meeting in the last year?



We are interested in learning about the experience of high school students with Learning Disabilities who have attended their IEP meetings. Students who participate in the study will be gifted with a \$20 Amazon or Starbucks gift card.

If you would like to help us and learn more about the work we are doing, please contact us or have your parent contact us:

Laurie Ford (Principal Investigator) & Sophie Cooper (Co-Investigator)

Email: xxxx@ubc.ca

Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX

Student IEP Study: Version 2: June 5, 2018
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Appendix D: Parent and Student Recruitment Letter



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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Faculty of Education Vancouver Campus
Educational & Counselling Psychology,
And Special Education
298 - 2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Phone xxx-xxx-xxxx
Fax xxx-xxx-xxxx
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

Student Participation in IEP Meetings in British Columbia Letter for Initial Contact for Parents and Students

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxx@ubc.ca

Student Co-Investigator: Sophie Cooper
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxx@alumni.ubc.ca

Dear Parent/Guardian/Caretaker and Student,

We are writing to invite you to be part of a research study about exploring student perceptions of their involvement in Individualized Education Plan meetings. Your participation is very important to help us better understand experiences concerning student involvement in their educational planning. This letter is intended to introduce you to the student and to describe what it would mean to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to explore the involvement of secondary school students in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings in British Columbia. While student attendance at IEP meetings is encouraged by the BC Ministry of Education, very little is known about what student participation looks like, and how students perceive their experiences in meetings. Active student participation in educational planning is related to increased investment in learning and in turn, academic success. Therefore, it is important to explore the experiences that students who have attended IEP meetings have had. This study will seek to discover if students with learning disabilities perceive they have the preparation, education, and opportunity to actively participate in their IEPs.

We hope the results of this study will help us better understand effective ways to include students with learning disabilities in their educational planning.

What is involved if you take part in the study?

The research study involves taking part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately 1 hour and will be conducted at a time and place you and the researcher agree on. There may be a need for a brief follow-up interview to expand on or clarify information from the first interview. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Your identity will remain confidential, but parts of your interview and/or direct quotes from the interviews may be used in Sophie Cooper's thesis without sharing any identifying information. If you would like, a summary of the results will be sent to you once the study is completed.

Taking part in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to take part or withdraw at any time. Students who participate in their study will be given a \$20 Amazon or Starbucks gift card. More details will be given when you provide your informed consent prior to the interview. If you would like to learn more about the study or would like to take part, please contact Sophie Cooper by email or phone number listed at the beginning of this letter.

Sincerely,

Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Principal Investigator
University of British Columbia

Sophie Cooper, B.A.
M.A. Student in School Psychology
Co-Investigator
University of British Columbia

Appendix E: Professionals Recruitment Letter



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THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Faculty of Education Vancouver Campus
Educational & Counselling Psychology,
And Special Education
298 - 2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Phone 604-822-0091
Fax 604-822-3302
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

Student Participation in IEP Meetings in British Columbia Letter for Recruitment of Potential Participants

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxx@ubc.ca

Student Co-Investigator: Sophie Cooper
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxx@alumni.ubc.ca

Dear Dr _____

We are writing to ask that you help with the recruitment of high school students for a study we are conducting. We are looking for students with a learning disability that may have attended their Individual Education Plan meeting while attending high school. Our study aims to better understand the experiences of students with learning disabilities in their educational planning. This letter is intended to introduce the study and outline how you may help us with recruitment.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to explore the involvement of secondary school students in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings in British Columbia. While student attendance at IEP meetings is encouraged by the BC Ministry of Education, very little is known about what student participation looks like, and how students perceive their experiences in meetings. Active student participation in educational planning is related to increased investment in learning and in turn, academic success. Therefore, it is important to explore the experiences that students who have attended IEP meetings have had. This study will seek to discover if students with learning disabilities perceive

they have the preparation, education, and opportunity to actively participate in their IEPs. We hope the results of this study will help us better understand effective ways to include students with learning disabilities in their educational planning.

What is involved in taking part in the study?

The research study involves taking part in a one-to-one interview. The interview will take approximately 1 hour and will be conducted at a time and place parent/child and the researcher agree on. There may be a need for a brief follow-up interview to expand on or clarify information from the first interview.

Taking part in this study is voluntary and the parent or child may refuse to take part or withdraw at any time. Students who participate in their study will be given a \$20 Amazon or Starbucks gift card.

What is involved in helping with recruitment?

If you have worked with a high school aged student who has a learning disability and who you think may be appropriate for this study, we ask that you send the child's parent the flyer and recruitment letter that we have provided in this package. The flyer and recruitment letter will provide contact information that potential participants can use to contact us.

If you would like to learn more about the study please contact Sophie Cooper by email or phone number listed at the beginning of this letter.

Sincerely,

Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Principal Investigator
University of British Columbia

Sophie Cooper, B.A.
M.A. Student in School Psychology
Co-Investigator
University of British Columbia

Appendix F: Parent Consent Form



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Faculty of Education Vancouver Campus
Educational & Counselling Psychology,
And Special Education
298 - 2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Phone 604-822-0091
Fax 604-822-3302
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

Student Participation in IEP Meetings in British Columbia Parent Consent

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx Email: xxxx@ubc.ca

Student Co-Investigator: Sophie Cooper
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxx@alumni.ubc.ca

Dear Parent/ Guardian/ Caretaker,

Please read the following carefully. This is a request for your child to take part in the study we are doing with students with Learning Disabilities who have attended an Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. If, after reading this letter, you and your child would like to take part in this research study, please sign one copy and keep the other copy for your records.

Purpose:

The purpose of the study is to explore the involvement of secondary school students in their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings in British Columbia. In this study, the researcher will seek to discover if students with learning disabilities perceive they have the preparation, education, and opportunity to actively participate in their IEPs. We are asking 1) what are students with Learning Disabilities perception of their involvement in IEP meeting(s)? and 2) what are students with Learning Disabilities perceptions of ways to engage students in the IEP meeting(s)?

Research Study Participation:

1. Taking part in the study means that your child will take part in a one-to-one interview between your child and the researcher about their experience in an IEP meeting that they have attended. There will be time before the interview starts for

you or your child to ask any questions and questions may also be asked by your child during the interview.

2. The interview will take place at your home or another location mutually agreed upon that is quiet and works well for you and your child.
3. The initial interview will take approximately 1 hour. We might ask if your child would like to take part in a follow up interview. If so, we will decide that at the end of the first interview and the 2nd interview will not last more than an hour.
4. The interview will be audio-recorded and notes will also be taken with yours and your child's permission. After the interview, the researcher will transcribe the audio recording.
5. If you agree to have your child take part in and they agree to take part in the study, we will ask your child to answer a background questionnaire prior to the interview.
6. After the interview is transcribed the researchers will contact you and your child to give your child an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy, clarification, and need for any changes. This may take up to 30 minutes and will be done in person or over the phone, your child's choice. If it is done over the phone, the transcript will be emailed to your child in advance via password protected file so your child has it in front of them to review while we talk with them.
7. We are not aware of any risks if your child takes part in the study. If, however your child feels uncomfortable, or you no longer want to provide consent, you or your child may choose to stop at any time. If any of the questions in the interview make your child feel uncomfortable, your child may choose not to respond to those questions. You or your child is welcome to contact us with any questions.
8. Taking part in the study means that you and your child agree to the information being used for the purpose of reporting the results of the research in presentations or publication without the inclusion of any information that would identify your child, you or their school.
9. The information you give us is strictly confidential. **No individual information will be reported and no participant identified by name** in any reports about the study. Potential publications may use direct quotes; in these instances the quotes will be disguised and not attributed to your child. The information collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and any electronic files will be password protected and encrypted at the university office of the researchers. The only people who will have access to the information you give us are the researchers working on this study.
10. To thank you and your child for your time, your child will receive a \$20 gift card to Amazon or Starbucks.
11. If you consent for your child to participate, your child can still decline consent and choose to not take part in the study.

Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study?

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Consent to Participate in this Research Project

By signing below, it means you consent for your child to take part in this research study. When you sign below is also means that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your Name (Please Print)

Your Signature

Date

Additional Questions

If you would like a summary of our results upon completion of the study, please indicate below and provide your email and mailing address so we can send you a copy.

_____ Yes I would like a summary of the research when your work is completed.

Email: _____ OR

Mailing Address (include postal code):

Appendix G: Student Consent Form



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Faculty of Education Vancouver Campus
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And Special Education
298 - 2125 Main Mall
Vancouver, B.C. Canada V6T 1Z4

Phone 604-822-0091
Fax 604-822-3302
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

Student Participation in IEP Meetings in British Columbia Student Consent

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx Email: xxxx@ubc.ca

Student Co-Investigator: Sophie Cooper
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology &
Special Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxx@alumni.ubc.ca

Dear Student,

Please read the following carefully. This is a request for you to take part in the study we are doing with students with Learning Disabilities who have attended an Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. If, after reading this letter, you would like to take part in this research study, please sign one copy and keep the other copy for your records.

Purpose:

The purpose of the study is to explore the involvement of secondary school students in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings in British Columbia. In this study, we would like to know what it was like for you to participate in an IEP meeting. We are asking questions like: How did you prepare for the meeting? Did you feel heard in the meeting? What did you like about the meeting? What did you not like about the meeting? We would also like to hear your ideas about how the meetings could be improved.

Research Study Participation:

1. Taking part in the study means that you will take part in an interview between you and the researcher about your experience in an IEP meeting that you have attended. The interview will be conducted by the researcher. There will be time before the interview starts for you or your parent to ask any questions. You may also ask questions during the interview.

2. The interview will take place at your home or another location that both you and the interviewer agree on and is quiet and works well for you.
3. The first interview will take about 1 hour. We might ask if you would like to take part in a follow up interview. If so, we will decide that at the end of the first interview and the 2nd interview will not last more than an hour.
4. The interview will be audio-recorded and notes will also be taken with your permission. After the interview, the researcher will write down the interview from the the audio recording.
5. If you agree to take part in the study, we will ask you to answer a background questionnaire before the interview.
6. After the interview is transcribed the researchers will contact you to give you an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy, clarification, and need for any changes. This may take up to 30 minutes and will be done in person or over the phone, your choice. If it is done over the phone, the transcript will be emailed to you in advance via password protected file so you have it in front of you to review while we talk with you.
7. We are not aware of any risks if you take part in the study. If, however, you feel uncomfortable, you may choose to stop at any time. If any of the questions in the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to respond to those questions. You are welcome to contact us with any questions.
8. Taking part in the study means that you agree to the information being used in presentations or publications. No one in your school will know what you said in the interview.
9. or your school will not be named in any presentations or publications. No individual information will be reported. Potential publications may use direct quotes, in these instances the quotes will be disguised and not attributed to you. The information collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and any electronic files will be password protected and encrypted at the university office of the researchers. The only people who will have access to the information you give us are the researchers working on this study.
10. To thank you for your time, you will receive a \$20 gift card to Amazon or Starbucks.
11. If your parents consents for you to participate, you can still decline consent and not take part in the study.

Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study?

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598

Consent to Participate in this Research Project

By signing below, it means you consent to take part in this research study. When you sign below is also means that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your Name (Please Print)

Your Signature

Date

Additional Questions

If you would like a summary of our results upon completion of the study, please indicate below and provide your email and mailing address so we can send you a copy.

_____ Yes I would like a summary of the research when your work is completed.

Email: _____ OR

Mailing Address (include postal code):

