



Research article

Lived-Experiences of Parents' Involvement in Individual Education Plan Development for a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out within a constructivist framework using a single embedded case study approach. It investigated the lived experiences of a couple in their involvement in the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for their child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There were five (three male and two female) participants. Parents sat for individual semi-structured interviews describing their experiences in IEP development. In addition, three IEP team members of the child were also interviewed individually along with a review of documents to support the validity of parents' experiences. Teachers' perspectives about the parents identified in this study and their involvement in an IEP were also discussed. Four themes emerged in response to the research questions examining supports to authentic parental participation in IEP meetings; IEP meeting and parents' involvement; knowledge of parents' rights, special education laws, and child's disability; parents' belief and unmet expectations, and teachers' misconception of parents' involvement (PI). The findings indicated that a paucity of communication and collaboration was the significant barrier of PI in IEP. Other factors included lack of awareness about parents' rights, special education laws, and their child's disability. It also revealed that Bhutanese cultural background and parents' unmet expectation by the school limited their participation in the IEP meetings. Additional findings suggested that the passive PI in the IEP process exacerbated teachers' misconceptions of parents. Beyond teachers' misapprehension, the data also revealed that parents were participating in their child's education in ways that were not obvious to the teachers. Several recommendations to address the gap to authentic PI in the IEP meetings were suggested, including relationship building through consistent communication, accommodating parents' work schedule, preparing parents for an IEP meeting, including parents' voices, educating parents, providing flexi-time for parents, and empowering teachers knowledge on IEP and Special Education Needs (SEN) policies. Several suggestions for future research are provided.

Key Words: Lived experiences, parental involvement, IEP meetings, parental input

Introduction

The Two-Stage Disability Study 2010-2011 reveals that more than one in five children between 2-9 years old have at least a mild disability in Bhutan, which can have lifelong impacts, and that 0.7% have severe disabilities (MoE,2017). As of June 2020, there were 24 schools with SEN programs, two specialized institutes, and two Draktsho Vocational Training Centres with a total of 997 students and 741 students enrolled in 24 schools with the Special Education Needs (SEN) program (Annual Education Statistics, 2020, p.48). Triple Eight School (TES) was selected for this study as it is one of the public schools in western Bhutan that accepts students with disabilities, catering to a total of 30 (23 boys and 7 girls) students by general classroom teachers (MoE, 2020). It was located in a semi-urban area, at a distance of about 12 kilometers from the most urbanized area in western Bhutan, established in 1962. Encompassing only grades prekindergarten to eight, the school was led by a principal, vice-principal, 42 regular education teachers, a full-time counselor, and six support staff. There were five participants in the study including the parents of a child with ASD, and three (two male and one female) IEP team members of the child. The parents were selected as one of their children was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and had been attending the school since 2017, and both the parents had experiences of attending IEP

meetings. The parents were educated and employed in government services and the couple has two children. Their elder child (Sonam) was diagnosed with ASD at the age of seven. Sonam has been studying at TES since Kindergarten and is now studying in grade four. Sonam is taught in self-contained class due to the nature and severity of his disability. He has been on IEP since 2017. Parents described their role as being responsible to attend meetings, being present at meetings, dropping off and picking their child from school, and supporting him at home.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), guarantees not only the right to free and appropriate education for all children with disabilities, but it also ensures the continuous involvement of parents in educational planning, decision making, and implementation (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2015). In addition, Bhutan also has formal guidelines such as the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities in Bhutan (GNHC, 2019), Standards of Inclusive education (MoE, 2017), and Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014-2024 (MoE, 2014), which emphasize PI in IEP development. For example, MoE (2014, p.26) states “schools will collaborate with parents and the general public to provide the necessary support to children with special educational needs”. Further, the GNHC (2019, p.26) states “all agencies in the public and private sector shall ensure participation of parents, caregivers, and representatives of persons with disabilities in making decisions pertaining to children with disabilities”. These laws guarantee special education services for those meeting certain requirements and govern how schools provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible children with disabilities through IEP. Researches on the lived experiences of parents in IEP development are sparse in Bhutan. However, there are researches conducted elsewhere that provide insights on the parent-school partnership in IEP development for children with special needs including ASD (Fish,2006;2008; Kurth et al., 2019; Senay & Konuk, 2019; Reiman et al., 2010; Rossetti et al; 2018). Yet, their outcomes cannot be generalized to the Bhutanese context. Much of the research about PI in IEP has utilized quantitative (Fish, 2008; Kurth et al., 2019; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013), and mixed methods (Elbuam et al., 2015; Goldstein et al., 1980; Klinger & Harry, 2006). In contrast, this study will employ a qualitative single case study method to make meaning from exploring the lived experiences of parents of a child with ASD in IEP development. The extant literature in Bhutan has tended to study PI in inclusive education in general but takes no notice of their involvement in IEP development (Jigyel et al., 2018a; 2019; 2020; Sherab et al., 2015). Existing literature indicates that insufficient involvement of parents may result in programs being less responsive to the unique needs of students with disabilities (Edwards & Fonte, 2012; Lo, 2012; Reiman et al., 2010). Burke and Sandman (2015) assert that research focusing on parents’ experiences in the IEP process is needed because their experiential knowledge is imperative to consider as part of a comprehensive approach toward improving the IEP process and special education as a whole. Despite a voluminous body of research on the importance of PI in IEP, there is limited in-depth contextual knowledge derived from the constructivist perspective that supports the development of the partnership.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of the parents of a child with ASD in IEP development. Findings would add to the body of knowledge about PI and parent-teacher collaboration in the IEP process. The study also suggested recommendations on how to enhance PI in the IEPs of a child with ASD. This is important because increased PI is essential in developing meaningful IEPs to improve special education services for students (Lo, 2012; Edwards & Fonte, 2012; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Listening to the stories of parents and learning about their experiences will serve to further inform special education teachers about PI to support the desired outcomes of the IEP process.

Materials and Methods

According to Gargiulo and Metcalf (2015,p.66), “IEP is the guide to the design and delivery of customized services and instruction and it also serves as the vehicle for collaboration and cooperation between parents and professionals as they jointly devise appropriate educational experiences.”Smith et al. (2015, p.91) define IEP as a “well described legal document under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and contains a summary of a child’s strengths, limitations, and needs, and the corresponding special education and related services planned to address those needs.” The IEP serves to direct and monitor all components of a student’s special education program. These components include educational needs, goals and objectives, placement, evaluation criteria, and present levels of educational performance (Bateman et al., 2007; Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2015). The IEP aids in providing appropriate supports and services to allow the individual to fully access the general education curriculum and also includes explanations to the extent to which the student requires services, modifications, and accommodations to access the general curriculum (GNHC, 2019). It clarifies how often the student receives services and specifies who provides the services (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2015; Smith et al., 2015). Finally, the IEP explains the extent to which the student participates with non-disabled students in general education classes. For students 16 years and older, the IEP includes a statement of any transition services necessary for the student (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2015). This study is guided by Gargiulo and Metcalf’s definition of IEP mainly because it highlights the importance of partnership between parents and educators besides academic supports.

Importance of PI in IEP process

Family involvement is not only a mandate of IDEA (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2015) and the policy documents in Bhutan (GNHC, 2019; MoE, 2017; MoE, 2014) but it is also considered best practice among educators and researchers (Lo, 2012; Reiman et al., 2010; Shepherd & Kervick, 2015). Parents know their children in ways educators do not and their insights shed light on the child’s strengths and needs that can inform the education planning process (Burke & Sandman, 2015; Shepherd & Kervick, 2015). PI in IEP is even more important in the case of students with ASD. According to Hall (2018, p.164) “learners with ASD have overall reduced rates of communication”. This may affect the child’s ability to communicate and require parents to become more involved in the educational program of their child (Hall, 2018).

With regard to PI in the Bhutanese context, there is a significant amount of research emphasizing the importance of PI in inclusive education in Bhutan (Jigyel et al., 2018a, 2018b; 2019; 2020; Sherab et al., 2015; UNICEF, 2014). For example, Jigyel (2018b) documented that PI is very limited in Bhutan. Therefore, Jigyel et al. (2018b,p. 226) recommended “IEP as a core topic of interest could provide a structure for practices of PI in creating IEPs with the schools. Such individual planning provides for excellence in inclusive education that responds to the individual needs of each student”. In addition, Sherab et al. (2015) conducted a case study of three schools pioneering inclusive education in Bhutan. Results showed that all three schools had contact with parents to some extent but parents did not consider their participation as mandated by laws.

Parents’ Legal Rights in the Individual Education Plan

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2006) requires the school to provide a copy of legal rights under IDEA for parents to ensure that their child receives the services according to their needs. NCLD (2006, p. 20) asserts that

“When parents understand these rights, they can take action when necessary to ensure that the special education process is working in the best interests of their child.” Parents’ rights under IDEA include:

- 1) providing timely notification of the meeting,
- 2) scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed upon time and place,
- 3) using alternate means of parent participation, such as individual telephone calls or conferences,
- 4) keeping records to document attempts to arrange a mutually agreed upon time and place (e.g., telephone calls, correspondence, home visits),
- 5) maintaining the confidentiality of information,
- 6) seeing and getting explanations for child’s records, and
- 7) Providing an interpreter for parents with deafness or for those whose native language is not English (NCLD, 2006).

However, many studies (Kurth et al., 2019; Lo, 2008; Reiman et al., 2010; Salas, 2004) found that the intent of the law is not always fulfilled. It has been found that troubles often exist between parents and teachers when collaborating on identifying appropriate programs, accommodations, and placement for students.

Bhutanese Parents’ Understanding of Educational Rights, Special Education Laws, and Policies

A qualitative study by Jigyel et al. (2020) examined the parental awareness and understanding of educational rights and access to educational policy relevant to their children with a disability in Bhutan. Findings revealed that many parents were not aware of educational rights and policies and had very little knowledge related to education for their children. However, parents demonstrated a willingness to know their rights. Therefore, a group of parents of children with a disability had established a parental advocacy group (Phensem Parents Support Group, PPSG) which intends to create awareness about educational rights and Special Education Needs (SEN) policies to the Bhutanese community. (Choedey, 2021) reported that PPSG is now one of the first registered parents support groups as CSOs in 2020. It works in advocating, empowering, and building the capacity of the parents and families”. According to Jigyel et al. (2020, p.70),

Access to information about the rights of their children provides parents with the awareness of the potential educational opportunities for their children, so they can make informed decisions, and advocate for their children within the education system and the community of Bhutan.

Collaboration and Communication

Developing a functional and productive IEP requires effective communication and collaboration between parents and teachers. Therefore, importance of collaboration and communication should also be considered. Building a culture of collaboration within the IEP team must begin with a focus on relationship building (Patel et al., 2012). Research indicates that a final factor essential to building and maintaining a collaborative relationship is communication. Communication underpins how people understand each other and is an element in the transfer of knowledge (Patel et al., 2012). Another prominent study by Edwards and Fonte (2012) argue that collaboration and communication with parents is a priority for educators and should not just occur in the early years but throughout the students' school experience. Edwards and Fonte (2012, p.8) provide five strategies for effectively communicating and collaborating with families of students with disabilities: (1) be positive, proactive, and solution-oriented, (2) respect families’ roles and cultural backgrounds in their children’s lives, (3) communicate consistently, listen to families’ concerns, and work together, (4) consider simple, natural

supports that meet individual needs of students, and (5) empower families with knowledge and opportunities for involvement in the context of students' global needs.

Collaboration Preceding Formal Meetings

Many researchers have emphasized helping families and finding successful ways to collaborate with them. Researchers such as Edwards and Fonte, (2012); Lo, (2012); and Singh and Keese, (2020) assert that schools can take many avenues to help encourage parents to participate in creating their child's IEP. Often the beginnings of this relationship are formed with school-community events such as open houses and meet-the-teacher nights. These opportunities for interaction between teachers and families take place in a less formal setting and can allow for friendly introductions and face-to-face interactions that will facilitate the more meaningful exchanges to follow. Similarly, researchers advise schools to take proactive measures to open lines of communication with parents, such as sending home weekly or daily progress checks, Parents' night, sports day, concerts, fairs, making regular phone calls home, and even allowing for evening meetings to avoid conflicts with parents' work schedules (Edwards & Fonte, 2012; Jigyel et al., 2018a; Lo, 2012; Singh & Keese, 2020).

The need for schools to develop good experiences for parents during the initial meetings to set the tone for future IEP meetings was emphasized by Dabkowski (2004). Doing so will provide the foundations of trust and respect for further enhancing future collaboration (Dabkowski, 2004). The ideal IEP meeting includes pre-conferencing between parents and teachers to ensure parents will come adequately prepared (Edwards & Fonte, 2012; Goldstein et al., 1980; Lo, 2012; Mueller, 2009; Weishaar, 2010). Collaboration before formal IEP meetings may be as simple as asking parents for their input and explaining to them what to expect at the IEP meeting, defining participant roles, establishing ground rules, creating an agenda, and developing equal communication strategies as is the case in a facilitated IEP (Mueller, 2009). In addition, Lo's (2012) study suggests similar ideas for teachers to follow before conducting the IEP meetings (see appendix F).

Collaboration during Individual Education Plan Meetings

The research on demystifying the IEP process for diverse parents of children with disabilities by Lo (2012, p.19) provides teachers with useful suggestions regarding how to increase parent participation in IEP meetings during the formal IEP meetings as mentioned below. Lo (2012) recommends that teachers and school administrators can facilitate participation on the day of the IEP meeting by using the six checklists below:

- Have one of the IEP team members escort parents to the meeting room.
- This professional should be someone the parents feel comfortable with and have met before. If the welcoming professional does not speak the parents' native language, have the interpreter also greet and escort the parents.
- Have team members introduce themselves and state their roles in the meeting.
- Ask parents open-ended questions to ensure that they understand the meeting discussions.
- Pay attention to parents' verbal and nonverbal cues.
- Invite parents to ask questions and offer feedback.

Collaboration after the IEP Meeting

To help parents understand and remember the large amount of information that is shared during the meetings Lo (2012, p.19) further suggests ways to increase collaboration and participation after the IEP meeting for educators;

1. Provide a written meeting summary and invite parents to call, e-mail, or meet if they have questions.
2. Inform parents what will happen after the IEP meeting, such as when they will receive a copy of the proposed IEP and what their rights are if they disagree with the IEP.
3. Have the IEP available to parents in a timely manner.

Collaboration and communication between teachers and parents are critical for planning IEPs for children with disabilities (Fish, 2008; Lo, 2012; Reiman et al., 2010). That is because, “parents are experts about their children and serve as accountability mechanisms, so parental input in the special education process is crucial” (Burke & Sandman, 2015, p. 72). Also, Shepherd and Kervick (2015, p.2) argue that “family members bring wisdom, experience, and passion for improvement that is critical to improving the systems of care designed to support them”. Therefore, Lo (2012) argues, continuous professional development (PD) is a must for all professionals to meet the needs of parents and their children, as the importance of collaboration and communication emerge as effective practices.

Parental Involvement and Cultural Beliefs

A qualitative study using constructivist paradigm by Bezdek et al. (2010) investigated professional attitudes toward partnerships with families. They interviewed and administered scale measuring perceptions of family-professional relationships to 20 participants from four service delivery outlets such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech-language pathologists, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and health professionals. The findings indicated that although professionals used family-centered philosophy in their responses, they still blamed families for the inadequacy in family partnerships rather than seeing the problems coming from the service delivery system. For example, they saw parents’ low level of participation as a sign of a lack of caring about their children. This view is incompatible with the Bhutanese cultural beliefs. Research on PI in Bhutan by Jigyel et al. (2018b) explained:

Poor PI can be attributed to parents’ beliefs that teachers in the school are in the best position to make decisions about teaching and learning, the Bhutanese culture of unquestioning faith for teachers, and some parents think that it would be ungrateful to question anything about the free public education system (p.2).

A similar finding was revealed by UNICEF (2014), where community involvement in remote schooling in Bhutan was minimal due to community members’ reluctance to get involved with schools as they believe the teachers are the best to make decisions about teaching and learning. This pervasive belief has the potential to prevent parents from seeking support for their disabled children (UNICEF, 2014). Jigyel et al.(2020, p.58) argue that “there is a potential opportunity to bring to the attention of parents, schools, policymakers, community and the Government, the benefit of addressing parental roles and responsibilities in the existing policies in Bhutan.”

Parents' Experiences in IEP Meetings

Parents as equal partners must be a part of the IEP process for effective collaboration to occur (Gargiulo & Metcalf, 2015; NCLD, 2006). Reiman et al. (2010,p.1) suggest that “professionals in the field of special education must reflect upon and learn from experiences of parents to gain insights that are vital to developing best-practice guidelines for conducting IEP meetings.” Current research report mixed findings about PI with the IEP process, and many authors draw general conclusions that parents generally have negative experiences with IEP development (Fish, 2008). Studying parents' experiences in the IEP meetings would allow teachers to consider their needs during the planning. Zhang and Bennett (2003) advise teachers to make special efforts if parents are not familiar with the IEP process. The following sections will review relevant literature on both negative and positive experiences of parents in IEP development.

Negative Experiences of Parental Involvement in Individual Education Plan

A study using semi-structured interviews and 10 focus groups with individuals with ASD, parents, classroom teachers, school administrators, adult service providers, and state policymakers in the USA by Snell-Rood et al. (2020) examined various stakeholders' perspectives on transition planning, implementation, and outcomes for students with ASD. One of the themes identified was ‘collaborative relationships required for evidence-based practices were unclear’. For example, according to Snell-Rood et al. (2020, p.5), “Some parents simply did not participate due to lack of awareness about the purpose of meetings, negative experiences at schools, or work demands”. Equally, in a study conducted by Vera et al. (2017) Latino parents often struggled to cope with the demands placed on outside of school, such as working and caring for their children or working multiple jobs. A mixed-method study by Elbaum et al. (2015) in a large southeastern state in the USA reported some negative experiences such as the school did not solicit or was not receptive to parent input, the school was rigid in terms of choices provided, teachers were not accessible, and the school did not provide parent training. Elbaum et al. (2015, p.23), found that “Parents' trust in school professionals was undermined when professionals failed to implement the provisions of the child's IEP, implemented the provisions inappropriately, or implemented them only with extensive delays”. Hebel and Persitz (2014) explained that barriers such as minimal communication of parents with school staff, insufficient knowledge of parents about special education practices, and passive participation of parents in IEP meetings have been shown to affect parents' participation. Furthermore, parents did not feel valued in the IEP meetings. For example, Reiman et al. (2010) shared one family's experience where educators in a rural southeastern school in the US had already prewritten the student's goals and because of this, the parents felt their presence was merely a legal obligation, and their input was unwanted.

One qualitative study that does look at a broader perspective involved interviews with twenty fathers of children with disabilities on IEPs to gain insight into their experiences with the IEP process (Mueller & Buckley, 2014) in the western United States. Seven sub-themes were revealed within three broad areas: IEP meeting, collaboration with educators, and conflict with educators. According to Mueller and Buckley (2014) fathers in the study referred to IEP meetings as paperwork driven, insufficient, and fast-paced. Also, regarding collaboration with educators, fathers indicated that the IEP meeting atmosphere was defined by their relationship with the educators. Fathers in this study shared that when they fail to build a good relationship with educators they didn't feel valued as equal team members in the IEP development. So, they experienced communication breakdowns every time and suggested the importance of including their voice in their child's

IEP. These fathers talked about wanting to find a resolution and working together as a team. Therefore, Mueller and Buckley (2014) suggest educators re-evaluate the IEP meeting process and identify a more parent-friendly and meaningful practice for both mothers and fathers so that true collaboration can happen. Bonner (2008) conducted a study on parents who have had ample experience in the team planning meeting process to see how they perceived their experiences. The researcher studied seven suburbs in a large Midwestern metropolitan area in America with 12% of students who had an IEP. Seventeen parents were emailed a survey that inquired about their experiences in the IEP meetings they attended. Many participants shared negative experiences with regard to communication between educators, professionals, and parents. For example, parents wanted to feel they are an important part of the team and not just mandated to be there to sign the paperwork. In addition, with respect to problem-solving that includes the parents as well as the educators, parents wanted there to be open communication to discuss the problem at hand in order to come up with a solution agreed upon by all and not just the educator. Findings from Bonner's (2008) study fit well in the Bhutanese context where PI was found weak in collaborating with schools (Jigyel et al., 2019; Sherab et al., 2015) because Bonner (2008) provides good suggestions as to how to improve the whole IEP process and how to make it better for all parties involved. For instance, Bonner (2008) recommends that educators can improve the team meetings for the parents just by recognizing that they are the experts on their own child and proposes that educators would do better if they spoke about the child as an individual and not as a diagnosis. Further, Klinger and Harry (2006) pointed out that most of the parents do not actively participate in meetings, instead spend most of their time listening to educators. Some of the factors that seem to limit parental participation are; "parents lack information about the IEP process, professionals have limited skills in consulting with parents, parents feel intimidated, and logistical problems such as a lack of transportation make it hard for parents to attend meetings. Therefore, Klinger and Harry (2006) recommend schools to provide additional PD for everyone involved. PD on how best to communicate and interact with parents would benefit because parents reported a willingness to give input at IEP meetings if special education teachers asked them (Salas, 2004). Findings from Klinger and Harry (2006) are relevant to the situation of Bhutan where parents are found to be passive participants in the schools (Jigyel et al., 2018a; 2018b; Sherab et al., 2015). Finally, Lo (2008) reported the silencing of parents' voices by professionals when the parents demanded a change in services or tried to share their knowledge with professionals at the IEP meetings. Parents' input was either given little weight to or ignored, thereby impeding rather than facilitating collaboration and partnership. Although educational laws dictate a true partnership between the school and the parents, it is often barred by the dissonance between parents' practices and educators' beliefs about parents. According to Klinger and Harry (2006), different factors influence educators' beliefs, including assumptions and generalizations resulting from various socio-cultural experiences.

Positive Experiences of Parental Involvement in Individual Education Plan

Fortunately, some research indicates that over time parents become more knowledgeable about the IEP process and report more positive experiences in the child's later years of education (Reiman et al., 2010). Fish (2008) conducted a survey of 51 families of students with an IEP in the USA. Most of the parents were middle-to-upper-middle class, and more than 75% were Caucasian. In his study, most parents reported a positive overall IEP meeting experience. They believed that IEP team members treated them with respect and as equal decision-makers by providing a welcoming atmosphere that made them feel comfortable during IEP meetings. Further, most parents agreed that they had a clear understanding of the IEP process and

special education law because they were trained on the IEP process by one of the family support service agencies. Fish pointed out that despite an unequal relationship between parents and IEP team members, things did improve after educational awareness was developed for parents. Similarly, Fish (2006) maintained that the more a parent knows and understands about the IEP, the better the partnership between home and school is and the better the IEP meeting goes. Once a partnership is formed, the child benefits due to increased communication between the school and home. Similar to Fish's (2008) and Fish's (2006) study, Burke's (2016) research focused on parent training to help parents of children with intellectual or developmental disabilities who received information, referral, and individualized assistance from the Parent Training and Information Center. It was aimed to help parents who struggle to learn their rights and be equal partners with the school. Parents demonstrated significant increases with respect to empowerment, special education knowledge, and satisfaction with services. Parents who participated in Bonner's (2008) study not only reported negative experiences but have also shared some positive experiences. Parents felt more comfortable when there were fewer people present, and there were also reports of positive meeting interactions when the parent was told that their child was progressing and making significant strides.

Feasibility in Bhutan

In the context of Bhutan, although parents' experiences from other developed contexts can be relevant to the situation in Bhutan, there is a need to be aware of specific cultural and contextual differences such as economic status, geographies, the distance to schools, and the resources available in schools for children with disabilities. The experiences of the well-developed countries in their journey towards inclusion including the benefits that can be gained from listening to the voices of parents and local communities can be useful lessons for countries like Bhutan, where the inclusive movement is a recent phenomenon (Drukpa & Kamenopoulou, 2018). This study is in agreement with (UNICEF, 2014, p. xv) that states, "The Bhutanese version of inclusion should draw on what's useful from outside Bhutan, but pay the greatest attention to what is locally available". The different needs of developing countries and that of local contexts need to be appreciated. That is because the concept of policy borrowing, imitating, or translating international policies has been criticized as problematic in Bhutan (Schuelka, 2012).

Research conducted in India by Rose et al. (2013) asserts:

In attempts to transport a westernized approach to education to cultural contexts which differ greatly from those in which inclusive schooling has been advanced. The potential for cultural dislocation is clearly in evidence and may prove to be an inhibiting factor rather than a means of promoting the inclusion agenda (p.1).

Understanding parents' experiences with the services available for children with disabilities, which are very much influenced by the unique characteristics of Bhutanese society, requires local and contextual wisdom (Schuelka, 2012).

The findings from this present literature may not be a quick fix to all the gaps between the current practices of involving parents in IEP development in the field, but it is hoped that this study will be able to provide socially and culturally appropriate ways to explore better possibilities. The results of this study will facilitate the policymakers, practitioners, parents, and Bhutanese society to better understand the impact of collaboration and consider their roles as a core factor in improving the effectiveness of special education services. Therefore, it will provide a timely addition to the literature and to

our understanding of PI in IEP development in Bhutan. It is also hoped that knowledge gained from this study will help professionals learn ways to become more supportive partners in the education of students with disabilities.

Methodology

Research Method and Design Appropriateness

This study is a qualitative descriptive case study (QDCS) positioned in a constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative method allows an in-depth study for understanding the parental involvement (PI) in individual education plan (IEP) meetings by participating in one of the semi-urban schools in western Bhutan (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2018). A two-fold definition of the case study (CS) by Yin (2018, p.45) states: "An empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." Yin (2018) recommends asking oneself what form the research questions can determine the most appropriate research method. The 'how' and 'why' were the key elements that this study investigated, gathering data regarding parents' experiences in the IEP meetings (Yin, 2018). Therefore, a CS method was selected because it was useful to obtain in-depth experiences of parents of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in their involvement in the child's IEP meetings and it focused on their contemporary issues about PI in the IEP meetings at Triple Eight School (TES) (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2018). Further, case study approach facilitated the collection of multiple sources of evidences from the real-life context. Interview with parents was done in their homes. Interview with teachers was conducted in the staffroom and classrooms after school hours on different days. Multiple home visits were made. Before the formal data collection, permission was requested from the Institutional Review Board.

Informed Consent and Confidentiality

This study complied with the Paro College of Education's ethics protocol (Appendix A). Respect for persons was maintained by obtaining informed consent. According to Silverman (2014, p.141), "Informed consent should mean that you do not pressure people into agreeing to participate in your study." Participants were acknowledged on the level of risk they agree to by participating in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This was made sure by explaining the purpose of the study, potential risks involved in participating, rights to discontinue participation without consequence in the informed consent, and indicated that individual interviews be audio-recorded (Silverman, 2014). Before signing the informed consent document, each participant was given a chance to ask for any clarification regarding any concerns they had about their role in the research. After signing, each participant was given a copy for records. The original copies were secured in a safe location accessible only to the researcher.

The identity of the school and the individual participants were kept confidential when reporting the findings by using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the human subjects involved (Silverman, 2014). The school was named Triple Eight School (TES). The key participants were mentioned as the father and mother and the child was named as Sonam in this study. Other participants were referenced as Team members and coded as TM, TD, and TC. Before initiating the research, permission was obtained from the school principal.

Participants

The participants in this study were both parents of the child with ASD, and three IEP team members of the child based on their willingness and availability using “purposive criterion sampling “technique (Fuller & Templeton, 2019, p.194). This helped in employing information-rich cases and gained in-depth understanding of parents’ experiences in the IEP meetings and teachers’ perceptions of parents’ involvement in the IEPs (Merriam, 2002). The parents were selected based on their experiences in IEP meetings for their child. To achieve “information-rich” data (Merriam, 2002, p.12) the following inclusion criteria were applied to the recruitment of participants:

- The child must have at least three years of enrolment at TES School and currently on IEP.
- Parents have to be the biological parents of the child and have attended at least three IEP meetings.
- The IEP team members who will participate in the study should be the child’s current general education teachers or special education teacher who has been teaching the child for at least three years.

The targeted participants for this study represented people currently engaged in the IEP process of the child with ASD at TES.

Parent Participants: The father is from Paro and earned an undergraduate degree. He is a farm manager by profession. Sonam’s mother is from Tsirang and earned a high school diploma. She is a nurse at the local Basic Health Unit (BHU). Both of them are biological parents and had equal experiences of participation in the IEP meetings.

Teacher Participants: The teacher participants included two male and one female teacher. To anonymize the data, teachers were given pseudonyms TC, TD, and TM. All the teachers held a bachelor’s degree and they had experiences teaching students with special needs. TC had 15 years of teaching experience and has been at Triple Eight School (TES) for seven years. TC taught Sonam (the child with ASD) for three years and had participated in six IEP formal meetings. TD had ten years of teaching experience and has been at TES for five years. TD was one of the IEP team members on Sonam’s IEP for three consecutive years. Another team member TM was the senior-most teacher. TM had 26 years of teaching experience and has been at TES for ten years at the time of this research. TM attended Sonam’s IEP team for three consecutive years.

Data Collection Tools

Case study data can be collected via interviews, observations, archival records, physical artifacts, documents, and participant-observation (Yin, 2018). This study employed multiple sources of data collection tools which helped in triangulation: (a) individual semi-structured interviews with the parents of the child and the three IEP team members of the child; (b) review of documents such as child’s three IEP documents from 2017 to 2019 and the school’s Special Education Needs (SEN) policy; (c) and detailed field notes about the physical environment, gestures, and facial expressions of participants over a period of 42 days in the field was also maintained. In addition, memos were written based on observations made at the school sites or at the parents’ home during and after the data collection.

The interview questions (IQs) we recreated by using the theoretical propositions developed in chapter two on factors that may impact PI in IEP development and these questions were refined after the pilot study conducted at TES before the

formal data collection. As Creswell and Creswell (2018, p.295) recommended open-ended IQs were developed that allowed “the participants to share their ideas freely, not constrained by predetermined scales or instruments”. These IQs mapped directly to the RQs that was developed for this study. Prior to collecting the data for the actual research, the interview questions were edited by the supervisor and the co-supervisor to make sure the data collection devices were meaningful and valid. As advised by Yin (2018), a pilot case study was conducted which helped to refine the data collection plans with respect to both the content of the data and the procedures to be followed. The interview questions were piloted through a volunteer parent who had a child with autism and a teacher who knows more about that child. The pilot data provided considerable insights into the basic issues to be studied. A form was created to collect specific information from the documents such as the child’s IEP document from 2017 to 2019 and school SEN policy. This form is provided in appendix C.

Data Gathering Process

Interviews were conducted as informal conversations which were the primary sources of data for this research. During data collection, parents were encouraged to share their experiences and insights in participating in their child’s IEP meetings and teachers were asked to share their perceptions on parents’ participation in the IEP process. In addition, documents and field notes also complemented and substantiated the interview data.

Interviews in the form of Informal Conversations

A conversational form of interview helped parents to express their experiences more naturally prior to IEP, during, and after IEP meetings for their child. Moreover, these conversations allowed flexibility and adjustment to incorporate participants’ views as per contextual needs. As expressed by the parents, it was the first opportunity they had to speak up or to raise their voices and concerns. As such, the interviews adopted an open and relaxed environment. Further, the informal nature of the interviews in this research allowed delving deeper into the experiences and understandings of Sonam’s parents and teachers. They were asked, through open-ended questions and prompts, to elicit their experiences about attending their child’s IEP.

Language and Recording Conversations

The interviews were held in Dzongkha and English. All conversations and discussions were audio-recorded (Voice recorder from the phone) after receiving written permission from the participants. A copy of the written consent was obtained from each of the participants before audio-recording. The form used to obtain participant consent is provided in Appendix E. The conversations with parents were 1.39 minutes to 2.40 minutes long, while the interview with teachers lasted 57 minutes to 1.30 minutes.

Documents and Field Notes

The documents collected from the school and the field notes complemented the data sources. The documents gathered during the field visit included school special education needs (SEN) Policy and the child’s IEP from 2017 to 2019. In those documents, the researcher sought information related to IEP such as parents’ roles and responsibilities in IEP, parents’ contribution, attendance, and IEP goals. In addition, field notes were also used to take notes of interesting events,

reflections, and insights during 42 days of professional experience at TES. It also includes data from home visits and personal communication with people in the community. The field notes assisted in taking note of nonverbal aspects, settings, subtleties, and nuances and were later used during the data analysis phase, to articulate the stories heard from the participants. These documents substantiated statements made by parents and probed for further information regarding how parent experiences and the delivery of services were provided for the child with ASD within an educational setting.

Overall, the data collection procedures were flexible. This flexibility offered an opportunity to make adjustments in the initial plan as were necessary for the field. Three different tools, namely, interviews, documents, and the field notes to collect data; each data set complemented the others at the analysis phase, although interview conversations were the major data sources.

Data Analysis

Data analyses consisted of examining and categorizing the data, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes. All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. After transcribing all the interview data, the researcher took the unstructured data and browsed the transcripts entirely. While reading the transcripts, notes were made on the documents explaining the first impressions that the researcher developed. After the interview transcripts were read completely, the interviews were then read one by one and more notes were made. All the interview responses and data sources were assigned numeric numbers for identification. When reporting the findings, the father’s conversations were referred to as FD1, FD2, consecutively while the mother’s responses were assigned to MD1, MD2, and so on. In addition, teachers’ interview conversations were coded according to their pseudonyms. For example, TC’s conversations were coded as TC1, TC2, correspondingly, and TD’s conversations as TD1, TD2, and so on. Further, documents such as SEN policy was assigned as SP and the child’s IEP documents for 2017-2019 were indicated as IEP. Notes were made while reviewing these documents and they were given numbers for identification.

The coding process was used to create labels to identify parts of the interview transcripts that stood out as important. Through the coding process, the researcher looked for ideas that were repeated. During the coding process, underlying patterns started to emerge and codes were created. Once codes were created, the researcher worked to combine codes that were similar and ignored codes that no longer seemed as significant. Themes started to emerge as the codes and categories were refined. Upon the completion of this process, the codes were grouped into themes and a table with categories/ themes and summaries was created (see Table 1). This table helped to visualize the data. Finally, the themes and categories were refined by the supervisor. In addition, participants were requested for feedback regarding the emerging findings by providing member checks (Yin, 2018) to ensure that the participants find the interpretation of findings true (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). During the interpretation of the findings, two or more methods, data sources, and theories were triangulated to increase the validity of this study.

Table 1

Categories	Themes	Summary statements
1. Before the IEP Meetings		Teacher’s insufficient guidance of the IEP process
2. The Day of the IEP Meetings	The IEP Meeting and	resulted in limited parental knowledge of the IEP

3. After the IEP Meetings 4. Noteworthy IEP meeting practices	Parents' Involvement	process, therefore reducing parents' participation in the IEP process. However, there were some best practices that were worthy of mention.
1. Parents' rights under IDEA 2. Parents knowledge about their child's disability 3. Teachers' Knowledge about Special Education Laws	Knowledge of Parents' roles, rights, policies, and the child's disability	Both teachers' and parents' lack of knowledge of parents' legal rights, special education laws, and knowledge of the child's disability led to limited PI in the IEP meetings.
1. Cultural belief of Parents 2. Parents' expectation of services to their child	Parents' belief and an unmet expectations	Parents place a lot of importance on their child's education, but they do not believe it is their place to interfere with teachers' jobs. However, parents expressed frustration with the teachers' inability to cater to the needs of their child that impacted their participation in the IEP meetings.
1. Teachers' perceptions of parents participation in the IEP 2. Parents' participation at home	Teachers' Misconceptions of Parental Involvement	Due to poor communication between the school and the home, teachers failed to recognize the many ways that parents were contributing to their child's education. Therefore, teachers' failure to recognize PI practices as defined by parents created disconnect between teachers' expectation and parents' perceptions of the meaning of involvement.

Note. The data analysis path from categories to themes to summarized statements appears in Table 1.

Results and Interpretations

This study investigated the lived experiences of the parents of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in developing the individual educational plan (IEP) for their child. Factors preventing parents' involvement in the IEP meetings and teachers' perceptions about their participation in the IEP meeting were also included. The theoretical propositions developed in chapter two guided in data analysis. Since the answers to the five research questions were inextricably interwoven throughout the four themes in the analysis, the findings will be reported in four sections reflecting the four key themes as they relate to lived experiences of the parents of a child with an ASD in participating in the IEP meeting for their child, and teachers' perceptions of their involvement. The four themes were: 1) IEP meeting and parents' involvement, 2) knowledge of parents' rights, special education laws, and child's disability, 3) parents' belief and unmet expectations, and 4) teachers' misconception of parents' involvement. The findings will be situated in the literature and plausible analysis for the findings will be provided.

As described in chapter three, the findings and analysis reported in this chapter resulted from multiple sources of data: individual interviews with both the parents and three teachers, who are on the child's IEP team, documents (child's past three years (2017-2019) IEP and school special education needs (SEN) policy, field notes, and memos. These different types of data were triangulated in the discussions to illustrate each sub-themes and themes.

Individual Education Plan Meeting and Parents' Involvement

Parental participation in the IEP meeting was affected by many factors. Parents seemed inadequately equipped to handle the demands associated with the IEP meeting, thus resulting in minimal participation. Unlike professionals who are guided by the special education laws, parents lacked the guidance needed to become more active participants.

Before the IEP Meeting

Limited parental participation in the IEP meetings was attributed to the procedures of the IEP in Triple Eight School (TES). The teachers were attempting to fulfill the paperwork requirements of the IEP process with little regard for the legal requirements of the law. This was evident when the father said, "*I thought the meeting could be the requirement of the school and felt teachers might have something to say.*" (FD5, August 24, 2021) Similarly, the mother also spoke, "*I don't remember teachers explaining the purpose of the IEP meeting.*" (MD4, August 28, 2021) These examples revealed that parents were not aware of the purpose of IEP and what they were supposed to contribute in the meeting which impeded their participation. While the task of participating in an IEP meeting for a special education teacher may be routine, parents may not have suitable knowledge and strategies for contributing to IEP. Therefore, pre-conferencing as recommended by Goldstein et al.(1980); Mueller, (2009); Lo, (2012) and Weishaar, (2010) such as providing information on the purpose of the IEP, the preparation they might want to consider making before the IEP meeting, and the importance of their participation in the process would help the parents in contributing during the IEP. As predicted by the proposition in chapter two, parents 'and teachers' lacked the knowledge of IEP, lack of training on IEP process, and limited communication and collaboration between parents and teachers affected parents' level of participation during the IEP meetings for their child.

The father wanted the school to prepare them ahead of the formal meetings. This was evident in his statement below:

For future improvement, the school must inform us in advance and give us time to discuss within ourselves and they should make sure that all the parents get the information about the meeting, instead of passing message from one to another. Again, teachers should also explain the objectives of the meetings, and explain what the parents are supposed to say during the meeting (FD31, August 21, 2021)

This indicated teachers' limited skills in consulting with parents (Hebel and Persitz (2014; Klinger & Harry, (2006); Snell-Rood et al. (2020). Collaboration and communication prior to the annual IEP meeting can provide the necessary support for parents to play an effective role in developing the IEP because it is unfair to expect any individual, including a parent, to contribute to the development of an IEP without required knowledge (Edwards & Fonte, 2012; Hebel & Persitz, 2014; Lo, 2012). The school needed to consider offering training or workshop for parents before the formal IEP (Edwards & Fonte, 2012; Lo, 2012). In addition, within the confines of meeting the paperwork requirements, they proffered little room to accommodate the parents' needs. This was evidenced by a number of factors including the limited time given to parents between notice of the meetings and the meetings themselves, and the lack of effort to accommodate parents' work schedules. The parents shared that balancing work and involvement posed a challenge to participating in IEP meetings. This was apparent from what the father shared:

We got information one day ahead of the meeting. The meeting was scheduled as per the school's convenience. When my wife is busy, I have to attend the meeting but it was difficult for me to come all the way from Haa due to transportation problems"(FD4, August 24, 2021).

Moreover, the memo written after teachers and parents' interviews revealed the following procedural flow of informing parents about the meeting by the school which was summarized as follows:

The teachers used media to notify the parents (i.e., telephone calls, WeChat forums, and oral invitations when parents were dropping off or picking up their children from school). For the initial IEP meetings, the parents often received invitations through phone calls. However, parents did not receive a written notification, which is in violation of the mandate. Parents were notified either the day before as they were dropping off or picking up their children or by weChat forum which is another violation of the mandate. Sometimes, the special education teacher would see them in the school playground and tell them there was going to be a SEN meeting the next day and that they needed to attend. The short meeting notice was often incompatible with the parents' work schedule. Both the parents of Sonam were government employees. Father is a Farm Manager at Haa and mother is a Nurse working at the local Basic Health Unit (BHU). Attendance is crucial in those jobs. Parents complained of the limited time they had and how the meeting conflicted with their work schedule. This finding corroborated with and supported the findings in other studies (Snell-Rood et al., 2020; Vera et al., 2017). It indicated parental stress and obligations which was consistent with previous literature (Vera et al., 2017) and can be a particularly relevant issue for employed parents who live where stressors associated with daily living can be exacerbated. This finding was in accord with propositions that when teachers failed to maintain effective communication and collaboration between parents, they fail to consider parents' work schedules affecting their participation in their child's IEP meetings.

The Day of the IEP Meeting

Beyond the process of informing parents, the way that the IEP meetings were run at TES was not conducive to parental participation. Based on the memos written after the interview with teachers and parents, it was evident that the initial IEP meeting started with the presentation of the principal's welcome speech. This was followed by the Special education needs coordinator (SENCo) explaining the process of the meeting, asking the parents to share the interest and needs of the child, and then signing the IEP document. At the beginning of the meeting, the SENCo shared the child's progress with the parent, told the parent if there was any change in services, and then asked the parent to sign the papers. The manner of conducting IEP meetings indicated that parents were given less opportunity to provide inputs and they were not treated as equal partners during IEP development as seen in (Elbaum et al., 2015; Hebel & Persitz, 2014; Klinger & Harry, 2006). The father said:

I experienced a situation where they don't treat us as equal partners. Umm.... because mostly it was like one-way communication. They just ask one or two parents about what they have to say or if they want to include something. Most of the time, teachers will have fixed plan (FD13, August 24, 2021).

Similarly, the mother shared, "I didn't feel like an equal partner in developing IEP because teachers do most of the job and they just ask us about the child's interest and what he can do." (MD15, August 28, 2021) These examples revealed that instead of making collaboration possible, it impeded collaboration and partnership in IEP development and parents spent most of their time listening to professionals who aligned with (Lo, 2008; Klinger & Harry, 2006; Salas, 2004). According to Bonner (2008) and Elbaum et al. (2015) educators can increase PI in IEP by recognizing parents as experts on their children (Burke & Sandman, 2015; Edwards & Fonte, 2012; Shepard & Kervick, 2015). Teachers can also improve parents' experiences by soliciting parent feedback during meetings and encouraging attendance and contributions from all team

members (Lo, 2012). Parents in the present study wanted active collaboration with teachers in developing IEP for their children. The father desired, “*IEP should be developed collaboratively. I feel it is important to take equal responsibility in developing IEP*”. (FD31, August 24, 2021) The mother also shared, “*If teachers ask, me to mention at least one point about my son, I will say something.*” (MD36, August 28, 2021) These revealed that parents were expecting collaboration and they wanted to be treated as equal partners in developing an IEP for their child (Bonner, 2008; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). The insights provided by parents in this study reminded teachers at TES to review the IEP meeting process and identify relevant and parent-friendly practices to increase true collaboration (Mueller & Buckley, 2014).

Many times, during the IEP meetings, papers were already filled out by teachers before the parents’ arrival and asked the parents if they wanted to add anything, followed by signing the papers as indicated in the following statement, “*When we explain their child’s present level of performance and future goals, they agree with what we have planned.*” (TD8, September 11, 2021) This signaled that the teacher had written the IEP in advance and asked the parents if they agree or disagree. When the IEP forms were filled up in advance it tended to convey the message that parent participation is merely a legal obligation of schools and leaves little room for parental input (Reiman et al., 2010). During the meeting, Muller (2009) suggests teachers to facilitate inputs from parents by working with parents and allocating equal amounts of time and attention to parents. It was assumed that when parents were not treated as equal partners, their involvement would be impacted. The assumption was supported by these findings.

After the IEP Meeting

After developing an IEP, teachers must provide a copy of the minutes of the meeting and the child’s IEP because parents will not be able to process the large amount of information that is shared in the meetings (Lo, 2012). Unfortunately, teachers in this study did not provide the minutes of IEP meetings and IEP copy. However, teachers feel that they need to provide a copy to parents in the future to help them guide their children at home. This was evident in the statement below:

To be honest, we make only one copy of IEP and keep that in the school. We have never shared the copy with parents. Henceforth, we need to provide a copy of IEP with parents and they should use IEP document to support their child at home (TM33, September 10, 2021).

Teachers expressed the need to share a copy of the child’s IEP as well as the minutes of the meeting for future reference and to support the child at home using IEP as indicated in the statements below.

Henceforth, we need to provide a copy to them because they should know the services that their child is receiving and also parents should provide support at home to achieve the IEP goals collaboratively. I feel we need to share the Minutes of Meeting too with the parents because we are very forgetful, so to remind the resolutions of meeting we need to provide a copy each for parents (TD 37, September 11, 2021).

In the same way, the mother realized that the need to ask for a copy of the child’s IEP minutes of the meeting which is evident in: “*After meeting I need to ask them to share the minutes of meeting and a copy of child’s IEP so that it will help us to guide our child*” (MD36, August 28, 2021). This was consistent with one of Lo’s (2012) findings that providing verbal as well as written communication to parents helps in ensuring that they understood the IEP in order to best serve the child. In addition, findings appeared consistent with theoretical proposition that limited communication and collaboration between the school and the home hindered PI in the IEP meetings.

Noteworthy IEP Meeting Practices: Although parents' experienced more negatives than positive experiences during their child's IEP meetings, there were some good aspects of the IEP meeting practices at TES. Parents reported that teachers were able to use parent-friendly language during the meetings which made them understand what is happening during the meeting. The father said, "*I remember teachers explaining and simplifying the terms in the language that parents are comfortable with.*" (FD17, August 24, 2021) Similarly, the mother added:

They do not use confusing terms. Usually they use abbreviated terms such as 'LDs' but later they clarify the term by mentioning as 'Learning Difficulties' in place of LDs. So, I have not faced any issues in understanding language used in the meetings (FD20, August 28, 2021).

It indicated that teachers were able to accommodate parents' needs in terms of understanding educational terms. This was consistent with Fish's (2008) suggestion for teachers to use common terms instead of jargon to lessen confusion and increase parents' involvement in the IEP meetings. It was further evidenced by the statement given below:

We speak Dzongkha and other languages such as local dialect that parents speak. If there is a technical term then we explain that to parents. So we do not stick on the exact word that is confusing (TM 18, September 10, 2021).

This finding was in contrast to Salas (2004), Lo (2008), and Mueller and Buckley (2014), where parents reported feeling isolated and marginalized during the IEP meetings due to unfamiliar use of terms. This finding did not support the proposition that use of confusing terms limited PI in the IEP meetings. That was because teachers created the meetings that are free of jargon as possible, gave explanations as needed, and shared relevant information. Teachers worked diligently to avoid barriers to communication.

Another notable practice at TES was the teachers' ability to start with positives and success the child has demonstrated that year. TD said, "*During the meeting, I mention all the positive points about the child rather than pointing the weaknesses. So, the parents feel great and they start participating more*" (TD19, September 11, 2021).

This indicated teachers' proactive strategies to involve parents in the meetings and it was in agreement with Bonner's (2008) study where parents reported positive meeting interactions when they were told their child was progressing. Acknowledging the child's interests and strengths was identified as one of the best practices for ensuring active participation in the IEP meetings by researchers (Bonner, 2008; Reiman et al., 2010). These are some examples of good, collaborative practice at TES which facilitated active PI in IEP. This was consistent with the proposition that teachers who used positive tone in the beginning of the IEP meetings encouraged parents to participate better in the IEP meetings.

Knowledge of Parents' Rights, Special Education Laws, and Child's Disability

Parents' limited knowledge of the special education process was their lack of knowledge about their rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and limited knowledge about their child's disability. Furthermore, teachers' lack of knowledge about parents' rights also impacted PI in IEP.

Parents' Rights under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): During the interview, the mother said, "*I am not aware of parent's rights and laws for IEP.*" (MD32, August 28, 2021) Equally, the father noted, "*I was not aware of rights in IEP meeting and knowledge about special education.*" (FD29, August 24, 2021) In addition, TM mentioned similar ideas: "*Parents are not aware of their rights.*" (TM5, September 10, 2021) A lack of knowledge of their rights was

another barrier that prevented parents from fully participating in the IEP meetings as seen in (Hebel & Persitz, 2014). Parents suggested Ministry of Education (MoE) lead the role in educating them through training or advocacy programs. The father proposed, “*The officials from the ministry level should lead in providing awareness about IEP development and monitor if these practices are implemented at school level*” (Father FD34, August 24, 2021).

Similar to parents in Jigyel et al.’s (2020) study, these parents wanted to know more about their rights. This indicated that training parents on their rights could help in increasing their participation in the IEP (Burke, 2016; Fish, 2008; Jigyel et al., 2020; Lo, 2012; Klinger & Harry, 2006). In addition, Fish (2008) found that when parents understand their rights, teachers are more likely to listen to them.

Parent’s Knowledge about their Child’s Disability: Furthermore, when asked, “What could be the reason for not being able to contribute much in the IEP development?” TC explained, “*Though they are educated, they are not aware of nature of the child’s disability, the special education services and programs suited for their child’s disability.*” (TC16, September 09, 2021) This authenticated with what the father said, “*We help our son but it’s difficult for us to support him because we don’t know how to meet our son’s needs.*” (FD23, August 24, 2021) These indicated that parents have limited knowledge about a child’s disability. In the literature, parents’ experiences were also characterized by parents reporting a lack of understanding of a child’s disability (Hebel & Persitz, 2014; Jigyel et al., 2020). The parents interviewed reported similar experiences.

Research suggests that parents should initiate to educate themselves about special education issues and should request need services continually for their children (Fish, 2006). In contrast to Fish (2006), Hebel and Persitz (2014) argue that the school must provide families with training programs to improve parents’ understanding of special education issues and encourage PI in IEPs.

Along similar lines, parents in Hebel and Persitz’s (2014) study demonstrated familiarity with the characteristics of their child’s diagnoses after attending advocacy programs about how to support children with different needs. It helped parents discuss opportunities for better practices in school.

Teachers’ Knowledge of Special Education Laws: Not only the parents but also the teachers were not aware of parents’ rights in IEP under IDEA. When teachers were asked, if they explained parents’ rights in participating in the IEP meeting, all the teachers conceded that they were not aware of it. One of the teachers argued that “*No formal documents are stating the roles, responsibilities, and rights of parents in developing IEP.*” (TM34, September 10, 2021) This indicated that teachers have limited knowledge about special education laws as well (i.e IDEA). Teachers feel that they are not in a position to empower parents because they are not aware of it themselves. Therefore, teachers in this study suggested the MoE, particularly the Special Education Needs (SEN) Division to initiate an awareness program or training for both parents and teachers. This finding was accordant with Fish’s (2008) and Burke’s (2016) studies where parents’ involvement in the IEP meetings increased significantly after providing training on their rights, the special education laws, and policies. Similar to parents, teachers can also benefit from such training and awareness.

The findings under this theme supported and enhanced many theoretical propositions. Parents’ limited knowledge of their rights in the IEP process, lack of awareness of special education policies, insufficient knowledge about their child’s

disability, and absence of trainings related to IEP affected parents' involvement in the IEP meetings. The possible reason for this correlation includes teachers' lack of knowledge about special education process which limited their skills to involve parents in the IEP process.

Parents' Belief and Unmet Expectations

Conventionally, parents place complete trust in teachers in Bhutan, believing that teachers will act in the best interest of their children (Jigyel et al., 2018b). Although parents expressed concerns about the teacher's inability to educate the child appropriately, they did not attempt to influence teachers' practices.

Cultural Belief about a Teacher: In addition to having limited knowledge of educational rights and a child's disability, limited participation was attributed to parents' belief in Bhutanese tradition about teachers. Parents were inclined to allow teachers to decide their child's educational course because traditionally in Bhutanese culture, teachers were regarded with 'Faith and devotion' (Phuntsho, 2013, p.102). Although Sonam's parents place a lot of importance on his education, they do not believe it is their place to interfere with the education process. This was evident in what the father said who admitted not having initiated contacts with the teachers by stating:

"We didn't ask any questions to the teachers and we don't want to provide feedback because it's difficult to think, how teachers would react to it. Being Bhutanese, there is compartment created between school and parents." (FD 25, 24 August 2021)

This indicated that parents were hesitant to interfere in teachers' jobs which were consistent with Jigyel et al. (2018b) and UNICEF (2014), where parents considered teachers as the best decision-maker for their child and felt ungrateful to question them. This finding indicated that parent beliefs, values, and views were influential factors in their choice to be involved.

Parents' faith in the teacher was further authenticated in what the teachers said: *"They just attend and accept whatever we tell them in the meeting."* (TD14, 11 September 2021) Further, TC mentioned, *"They are happy with the decisions made by the teachers. They never argue with teachers regarding the decisions made"*. (TD16, 10 September 2021)

The data from the home visit also revealed that Sonam's parents never interfered with teachers' jobs. This line of thinking reflects the parents' attitudes toward teachers. Teachers are placed on a pedestal and parents, therefore, avoid interfering with school matters as much as possible (Jigyel et al., 2018b; Phuntsho, 2013; UNICEF, 2014). Research suggests that these practices should not be regarded negatively but should be seen as an opportunity for the school to provide the necessary supports to strengthen parents' performance (UNICEF, 2014). Additionally, UNICEF (2014, p.77) recommends "Communication for development to address social practices and norms." This finding was consistent with the proposition that PI in the IEP meetings was affected when teachers are not aware of parents' cultural beliefs that influenced their participation. It is worthy of mention that parents in this study reported their willingness to give input at IEP meetings if teachers asked. This supports the idea that parents would become more involved if teachers invited them to participate.

Parents' Expectation of Services to their Child: As indicated in the earlier description, parents often stayed out of school affairs and did not interfere with the education that their child was receiving at school, thinking the teachers would act in their child's best interest. However, parents were dissatisfied with the teachers many times. First, they were dissatisfied with the way the teachers take care of the child with special needs. They felt the school was not properly staffed. The father pointed to teachers' poor supervision as stated below:

My son was bullied many times in the school. Sometimes he comes with bloody nose and blood stains on his lagay. I feel, all the students and teachers should know about the behaviors of children receiving SEN supports and how to interact with those children. Teachers should lead and introduce children like my son to the whole school either in the assembly or in their respective classes, and make them aware of their behavioral issues, characters, and how to deal with them appropriately. If all are aware of it, there is a chance of mingling more and understanding more about each other. Otherwise, the behavior of children with SEN would become worst (FD19, 24 August, 2021).

This finding indicated that the father expected the teachers to advocate on behalf of his son's disability and behaviors in order to create an inclusive culture in the school and shared his concerns with teachers. However, he was dissatisfied with teachers when they responded rudely to his concerns. Father said, "There are a few teachers who use a harsh tone" (FD11, August 24, 2021).

Secondly, during one of the home visits, the mother explained:

"Today, I reached the school before the bell to pick my son. To my dismay, I found him knocking the door of other class. He was left outside without a teacher. This is not the first time, I saw him outside during the class hours many times. I had a conflict with some teachers due to the same problem. The teacher who is responsible should be monitoring the child rather than letting the child on his own without adult supervision" (HV, September 4, 2021).

She also explained that the situation could have been improved if teachers were taking on more of a supervisory role. Parents in this study described instances when their child was neglected several times. During these times the parents felt a lack of trust toward the teachers which impacted their participation in IEP. Parents entrusted the education of their child to teachers and relied on them for decision-making, but they mistrusted them when it came to taking care of their child at school. This indicated communication breakdown between teachers and parents due to lack of skills in handling problems by teachers as in Klinger and Harry's (2006) study. Therefore, Klinger and Harry (2006) recommended professional development for everyone and also guidance in how best to communicate and interact with parents. It also indicated poor communication and collaboration between teachers and parents. Edwards and Fonte's (2012) study recommended teachers play the role of help givers with parents.

Thirdly, parents were disappointed by teachers' incompetence in teaching which impeded their willingness to participate in the IEP meetings. This was evident in what the father indicated:

Teachers working for children with SEN should be committed and willing to work from his/her heart. As per the teachers' guidance we will also be able to give our best. If not IEP is just for the sake of documenting. There is no progress in child's performance. It is the same... therefore, teachers play very vital role (FD33, August 24, 2021).

This supports the idea that parent involvement is affected by the effectiveness of services provided to the child. Without the commitment from the teachers, an IEP will have a high probability of not effectively serving students (Fish, 2006). Similarly; the mother shared her frustrations towards teachers as follows:

Teachers always tell us they are not trained so it makes us think, 'what to ask them'? One of the teachers shouted, 'I am not trained but I have volunteered to work for them.'
If they are not trained, what else to ask them? I have no expectation from them (MD36, August 28, 2021).

Parents expressed frustration with the more informal aspects of the special education process including initiation of services. This perceived indifference was mainly the practice of vague communication which limited their involvement in IEP meetings as predicted in chapter two. Surprisingly, the review of the child's IEP document from the year 2017 to 2019 indicated that the same exact IEP goals were repeated for three consecutive years. This aligned with the mother's observation: *"The goal that is set in the previous year was repeated in the following year"* (MD22, August 28, 2021). It indicated that the IEP was prepared for meeting the formalities of the school and it was not intended to meet the child's needs. This may leave parents to believe that the teachers are not valuing the best interest of their child. Apparently, the IEP documents are being viewed only during the time of the IEP meeting and not looked at again until the next meeting. It is possible that the child is not being monitored. If there were no gains from previously set goals, then adjustments should be made. If the IEP is treated as a living and breathing document, it will always be current because the teacher is monitoring, documenting, and addressing the child's needs for progression.

Teacher's Misperceptions of Parental Involvement

Parents are often viewed as not being sufficiently involved in the education of their child. Although the data indicated that PI in the IEP process was limited, there is evidence that parents were willing to participate in other aspects of their child's education, and they were doing a lot to assure their child's success, despite the fact that the aspects of their involvement remained hidden to teachers due to limited communication between the school and the home and also the teachers' failure to implement SEN policy mandates. The parents' limited participation in direct school matters on campus negatively influenced teachers' perception of PI.

Teacher's Perceptions of Parents' Participation in Individual Education Plan: The teachers in general seemed to be dissatisfied with parents' level of participation. TC, commented, *"I did not find enough contributions in IEP from them."* (TC12, 09 September 2021) Similarly, TM reflected on the parents' role with the statement, *"Their role is not very effective."* (TM12, 10 September 2021) Referring to their participation TD also added, *"It's limited."* (TD13, September 11, 2021) Similar perceptions were shared concerning parents' involvement in the education of their child in general. The teachers felt that the parents did not attend to their child's educational needs and were not involved directly in school affairs. They realized that the parents only came when there were called for meetings. This was consistent with the previous findings in the literature that concluded that teachers see parents' perceived limited involvement as a lack of caring (Bezdek et al., 2010). Teachers in this study felt that they were doing everything possible to involve the parents but parents were not active. Parents were blamed for the inadequacy in parents-school partnerships (Bezdek et al., 2010).

Moreover, the school SEN policy document (SP, 2014, p.9) has clearly stated: "Parents of special needs students will need communication through home-school diaries, parent-teacher meetings, and social stories." However, there was no evidence of maintaining home-school diaries. This indicated the huge gap between policy and practice (Schuelka, 2014). It indicated that blaming parents resulted from teachers' failure to communicate with parents and their negligence to implement the school SEN policy. In that regard, this finding reminds teachers to take proactive measures to open lines of communication with parents through informal events to allow friendly introductions and face-to-face interactions that will facilitate the more meaningful exchanges to follow as suggested by (Edwards & Fonte; Jigyel et al., 2018a; Lo, 2012). In addition, the

administrator should monitor and review how the policies were implemented by the teachers and find out how the achievements have been made.

Parents' Participation at Home: Parents' views of what their role should be in education have limited parents' participation. There were evidences indicating that their participation and involvement often took place at home, away from teachers' sight. This was evident in the amount of investments they made in the education of their child and was contrary to teachers' beliefs that parents were not participating in the education of their child. The resource they target most was tutoring and after-school care such as helping with homework and teaching daily living skills. In addition to tutoring, the parents also take their child on recreational activities such as walking, riding, and shopping. When asked about helping her child at home, the mother replied:

I let him write and provide him with phone as he is interested with fiddling phone. I also send a copy of his work sample to the teacher in chat account. He was provided with the laptop by his father for learning. We also bought white board for him. He scribbles on it with the board marker. He will always ask for reinforcement after learning such as taking him on ride and walk. So I do it (MD25, 28 August 2021).

In addition, during one of the informal visits at home, the father explained that his role is limited to helping the child with homework, making sure their child is in school and attending meetings for the child. Mother also added, "Every morning, I drop him at school before I get ready for my office. In the afternoon, I make sure to pick him from the school". (HV, 09 August 2021) These examples illustrate their proactive behavior toward their son's needs for extra support. One of the parents who is attending the school daily also acknowledged their support. It happened:

After having lunch I went to the school canopy to get some fresh air. Zom, the smiley and openhearted lady greeted me and said, Joen...Joen.... While we were chatting like old friends, we saw sonam's mother in the playground. Upon seeing her she opinionated, "She will always come to pick and drop their son. But when father is at home, he takes care of the son" (Zom, Personal communication, September 1, 2021)

All these instances indicated that parents were doing much more than what was apparent to teachers. Parents were willing to work collaboratively with teachers. However, they were not sure in what capacity. The father explained, "Parents should be given a certain role, instead of going one-way." (FD29, 24 August 2021) Both the parents agreed that if the teachers invited them, they would participate. Although they admitted to not having initiated any contact with the school, they were interested in knowing how their child was doing and what they could do to help. The School Policy (SP, 2014, p.9) also stated clear roles of parents: "Parental contributions should include supervising homework and home exercises as recommended by the school." Although teachers failed to implement policy, parents shouldered their responsibilities as expected by the school, but parents' contribution remained unnoticed to teachers due to limited communication and collaboration between school and home. As predicted in the literature, lack of communication and collaboration between parents and teachers limited PI in the IEP process.

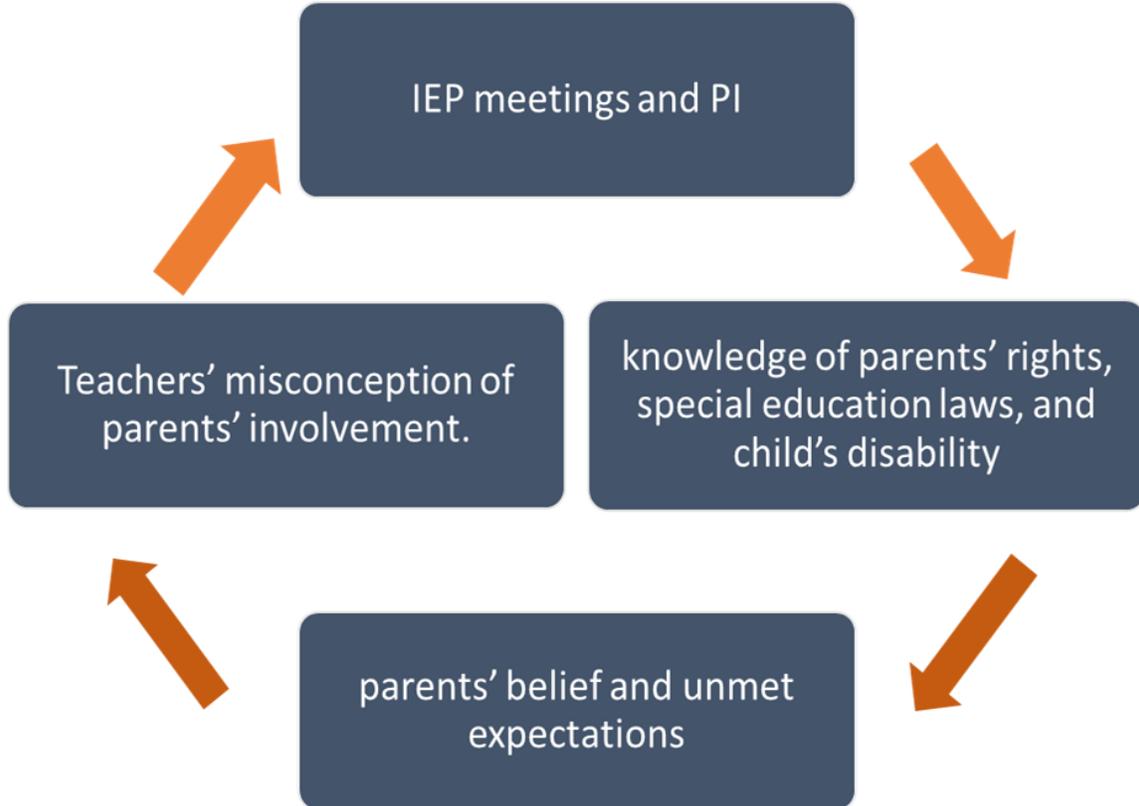
Parents in Bezdek et al. (2010) experienced similar situations where teachers saw problems with the parents and not with teachers themselves. This appeared that teachers were not willing to change their own behavior in order to increase school-parent partnership.

Interrelationships among the Four Themes

Figure one provides a visual representation of the interrelationships among the four themes. Teacher's insufficient support of the technical aspects of the IEP process, coupled with limited knowledge about special education rights, laws, policies,

and their child's disability reduced parents' participation in the IEP process. In addition, teachers' failure to recognize culturally based PI practices, as defined by parents, exacerbated the disconnect between teacher's expectations and parents' perceptions of the meaning of involvement (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Theme Interrelationships



Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the lived-experiences of the parents of a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the IEP development. The findings indicated that parents are often the recipients of information rather than equal partners in the IEP development. Other findings included that parents and teachers were not aware of the parents' rights under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and teachers' inability to teach the child impeded the parents' willingness to participate in the IEP. Further, this study found a gap between parents' and teachers' understanding of involvement.

Due to a lack of communication and collaboration between teachers and parents, teachers were not aware of the ways that parents are involved in their child's education. In contrast, parents' limited involvement in IEP meetings was a result of culturally determined attitude towards teachers. Further, parents were willing to collaborate with teachers, know their rights, and were willing to contribute to the IEP development. However, during their journey of attempting to connect with teachers and support their child, parents encountered several challenges, including unequal relationships. Under these circumstances, teachers need to pay closer attention to factors that prevent parents' involvement in the IEP. Data suggest that merely

developing an IEP for the child is not enough to address the needs; rather this study emphasizes the urgent needs to focus on the factors affecting the effectiveness of the services delivered. Therefore, it is important to note, that without sharing information, open communication, and positive team collaboration, it is not possible to hold productive IEP meetings. Relevant stakeholders' support is imperative in order to help parents learn more about the IEP, their rights, and laws so that they become equal partners and fully participate in the education of their child.

The significance of this study is that it will provide valuable information for the teachers and administrators to help develop best IEP practice guidelines. This information can be useful as they plan, design, and execute IEP with parents of children with ASD who require IEPs. Also, Ministry of Education in Bhutan, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), and the inclusive schools in particular would find this information useful. Since research on parental involvement (PI) in IEP is limited in Bhutan, this study will contribute to the literature in the special education field about how to involve parents actively in the IEP meetings and address the barriers that prevent PI in their child's IEP meetings. This chapter provided information regarding the recommendations regarding how to involve parents meaningfully in planning the IEP for their child. In addition, future studies proposed in this study would also help examine the potential for teachers, administrators, and relevant stakeholders to share successful practices for others to replicate.

Recommendations

In order to achieve inclusive Individual Education Plan (IEP) team participation, everyone should be on the same page regarding the supports needed. In the light of the findings of this study, following recommendations will improve the current practices and potentially effect positive change for both parents and teachers involved in the IEP process at TES.

Prioritize Relationship Building: Creating welcoming relationships must become a priority for teachers. This should be done through informal interactions and frequent communication that includes positive messages when possible. One way is to increase informal communication through email or texting. Using personal phone to share a quick photo of something fun a child did during the day or an assignment the child was working on will allow connecting with parents. Struggles or challenges require a phone call home, or at least an email allowing parents to be aware of concerns. It is not solely the responsibility of the special education teacher to communicate with parents. It is a shared responsibility with general education teachers and specials teachers. Parents will feel they are truly a part of a team if all teachers are reaching out to them with positives and challenges regularly. Communicate consistently, communicate positive stories and communicate in a manner that makes parents willing to accept. Once parents know their child is cared for, the door to collaborative school-parent partnerships will open.

Accommodate Parents' Work Schedule: If parents fail to attend IEP meetings, teachers should hold meetings in the evenings or before and after school to help parents improve their participation and feel valued. Another option is to use alternate means of parent participation, such as individual telephone calls or conferences for developing IEP for their child.

Prepare Parents for Individual Education Plan Meetings: Teachers should provide parents with ample notice to allow them sufficient time to effectively prepare for the IEP meetings. Prior to the IEP meeting, parents should be briefed on their roles, rights, and their impact on the child's learning through active participation. They should be invited to ask questions and make suggestions. Parents should also be encouraged to think about what they would like to discuss at the IEP meeting

or if they have concerns they want to bring up. Lack of time may be a factor here, but the openness and willingness of teachers to listen to parents and work together are certainly some of the most important factors in supporting collaboration.

Include Parents' Voices: Goal writing should be the main part of the discussion at the IEP meeting. There is a wealth of research describing this as best practice, however, time or other excuses often make special education teachers believe the goals can be written ahead. Goals that are written ahead of time eliminate team participation. If parents are not participating as expected, they should be asked open-ended questions to gather their thoughts and ideas. Parents should be invited to ask questions or suggest possible changes if they believe they are needed.

Educate Parents: Another recommendation involves creating opportunities for parents to learn about the IEP process from teachers and other parents. Providing a parent guide booklet or brochure about IEP process, their roles, responsibilities, rights of the parents in the IEP development, and explaining them in the parent-friendly language would help parents in taking active roles in IEP developments. School-community events are suggested to explain the process, articulate how IEP meetings are conducted, and detail the rights of the parents or guardians. These meetings should also be an opportunity for parents to ask questions, voice concerns, and make suggestions for how the process could be improved. It needs to be two-way communication with opportunities for parents to speak and teachers to listen. Another important component of School-community events would be to connect parents with other parents. Parents can be a fantastic support network for each other. Helping parents to find this network and provide opportunities to share ideas will increase parents' comfort level for participating in IEP meetings.

Flexi-time Options: As parents in this study are employed civil service, the Royal Civil Service Commission (RSCS) and the concerned authorities must consider providing 'Flexi time' (GNHC, 2019, p.28) for these parents to cater to the daily needs of their child with autism spectrum disorder. This will help in relieving parents' stress between work and other obligations (i.e. IEP meeting) and uplift their livelihood.

Empower Teachers' Knowledge: Finally, teachers should be empowered through training on special education laws, how to increase parental involvement in IEP, assess the educational needs of students experiencing difficulties with learning, set achievable IEP goals, and how to use IEP documents to meet the needs of the child. This will increase teachers' confidence and they will feel empowered. Furthermore, teachers may feel accountable for teaching the child experiencing difficulties with learning if their assessments are relevant to their teaching. In order to enable these changes, further research is necessary.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study could be expanded in the following ways:

Firstly, future studies could include the experiences of other stakeholders such as counselors, school administrators, or others involved in IEP. While this study recruited a couple with a child with ASD, perhaps a study that focuses on parents of children with other disabilities might suggest different results. Secondly, the parents in this study are educated and employed public civil servants. Therefore, not all the parents of children with disabilities are as well educated to understand the process of the IEP meetings. Moreover, these parents had enough experience with the IEP process, but, parents who are new

to IEP meetings will have different experiences. Therefore, future studies can have parents with different educational backgrounds and experiences in IEP meetings.

Thirdly, future studies may use observation as additional methods to examine the classroom teaching to see specific requirements from IEPs are planned explicitly into every lesson, and also observe the IEP meetings for a longer duration to see how parents involve in the IEP development for more explicit findings.

Parents in this study stressed the importance of training to facilitate their understanding of the IEP process in order to improve their involvement. Thus, future research can use this study to train parents, create professional development opportunities, and conduct a research to study the impact of training on their involvement in the IEP development. Finally, this research has identified a gap between school SEN policy and teachers' practice in relation to collaboration and communication between the school and the parents in IEP development. Future research is needed to explore how administrators are evaluating the implementation of school policy into practice in order to enhance the effectiveness of special education service delivery.

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