To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jeffrey Brian Romanczuk entitled "Implementation of a Special Education Parent Advisory Committee: A Mixed Methods Investigation into the Members' Experience of Parental Involvement with the School System." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, with a major in Educational Administration and Policy Studies.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF A SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE: A MIXED METHODS INVESTIGATION INTO THE MEMBERS' EXPERIENCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT WITH THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

A Dissertation
Presented for the
Doctor of Education
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jeffrey Brian Romanczuk
December 2006

DEDICATION

In memory of Alexander “Rush” Romanczuk (1926-2003), who believed in the power and value of formal education more than anyone I’ve ever known, except for his wife, maybe.

Memory eternal.

University Park, Pennsylvania, March 1982

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ABSTRACT

This research was intended as a mixed methods case study of the initial effectiveness of one school system's Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC). It was not until well into the study that it became clear the phenomenon at the root of the this research was actually the broader one of special education parental involvement in the schools, with the Rush County (a pseudonym) School System's Department of Special Education as the case study. Although phenomenological inquiry is primary, the mixed methods research design employed included both thematic development and verification based on data obtained by both qualitative and quantitative means. Quantitative data were collected annually from 2002 through 2005, using a state-developed survey instrument sent each spring to half of the families with children receiving special education services. The primary qualitative data were collected from nine individual interviews of PAC charter members. Observational notes, the researcher's field log, and archival documents from the PAC were also examined.

The main quantitative findings were that the parents of special education students in Rush County return consistently positive responses when asked yes/no type questions about their children's educational programs. The only areas in which negative responses were more than 20 to 30% concern the parents' own participation in school system activities. The quantitative finding that special education parental involvement in the school system is limited was also one of the qualitative findings. These are the four phenomenological themes developed:

- "It's all about the kids" (the parent as primary advocate),
- "Our own little group" (parents' focus on special education),
- "One person can't get it done" (being helped or hindered by a range of others), and
- "Get them involved, and then we'll make them care" (the range of parental involvement in the school system).

These findings were verified using member checking, peer examination and debriefing, and commentary from a group of university instructors and graduate students who regularly read transcripts with the goal of understanding the essence of each experience described.

The main outcome of analyzing these themes was the realization that in public education (particularly special education), as others decrease in proximity to the child, their impact on that child also decreases. The PAC has become more than an advisory committee for the special education director; it is a support and advocacy group for special education parents as well. The discussion of findings explored the possibility that information sharing (support) is taking a primary role because the PAC investigated is still in its early years. The discussion also pointed out that the support, advisory, and advocacy functions of the PAC were all written into its charter from the start.

To relate the main result of this research to theory and practice in public education: the parents provide the most support, then the child's teacher to a lesser degree. The parents' view is that the school system and community have very little to do with the day-to-day help the child receives, other than keeping a structure in place for education to occur. Parental involvement is a spectrum and the school system has to have

methods in place (especially during students' transitions from one school to another) that allow parents to get involved to the levels with which they are comfortable. One way to do this is for school systems that do not already have special education PACs to organize them.

A lesson learned from this study is that the PAC will need years to grow and become known and used in the school system and community. Although the move from school to work for special education students has no clear progression, this unfortunate finding can result in a positive outcome since it highlighted the need for public school systems to establish and use special education parent advisory committees as vehicles for home-school-community interaction.

This research closes with a recommendation for a follow-up or longitudinal study of Rush County's Special Education PAC as well as for research that would include teachers, school administrators, and the parents of other than school-aged people with disabilities. A related study that specifically correlates parental involvement with outcomes for families could also complement this research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Chapter Introduction

Parental involvement in special education is getting more attention at the national level, due in part to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act reauthorizations of 1997 and 2004 (IDEA 97 and IDEIA 2004 [See Appendix A for a quick reference to the acronyms used in this dissertation.]). As a result, parental involvement is getting closer attention at the state and local levels as well. The federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) implemented a program to monitor each state's compliance with special education laws. The Tennessee Department of Education's response was to enact the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP). CIMP monitors from the state used OSEP's federal guidelines to specify 49 indicators arrayed in six areas. One of these areas is parent involvement. (In late 2005, this monitoring process was renamed the Cyclical Performance Review at both the federal and state levels, but was known as CIMP during most of the research span and so will be referred to this way only.)

At the individual school level, parental involvement amounts to the mutual concern for the special education child whose future the school and parents hope to shape. From school-district level positions, however, concern for students is more generalized than individualized, focused instead on the best use of the resources available for the good of all students. I have worked as a special education administrator at the school system level since 2001. Special education administrators

are often left to decide these system-wide (that is, school-district wide) issues without the same kind of regular parental contact that school-level special education teachers usually have. I use "usually" because of Lommerin's (2000) acknowledgement that considering the "enormous stake in ensuring the positive outcome" that parents have, there is little participation from them in the educational process (p. iv). Lommerin further asserted that it is the school personnel's task to create opportunities for parents to be effectively involved by ensuring that their schools are inviting, welcoming, friendly places to be. More detail on this viewpoint is discussed in the next chapter. For now, I will admit Lommerin is not alone in this bleak assertion. Epstein et al. (2002) open the Introduction to the second edition of *School, Family, and Community Partnerships* with the line, "There is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for parent involvement" (p. 1).

In October of 2002, the special education director for the Rush County School System (a pseudonym) solicited parent volunteers to serve on a newly established special education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) to foster district-level parental input. (The geography and demographics of the county are described in detail in the "Participants" section of Chapter 3.) The special education director solicited these volunteers through countywide consultants or through senior special education teachers at schools lacking the populations required to be served by a special education consulting teacher.

The use of consultants is not unique to this school district, but is rare enough that some explanation is warranted. Special education consultants are usually teachers

with a lot of special education experience. Many earn a supervisory endorsement and some become the local educational agency (LEA) representative at educational planning meetings for special education students. (The LEA representative is the person who can make decisions and obligate funding for educational services. In most systems, the school's principal or vice principal serves in this capacity at special education planning meetings. Even in Rush County, only three consultants double as LEA representatives at students' educational planning team meetings.) Special education consultants also help teachers in their assigned schools with administrative requirements and sometimes with creating or modifying classroom materials for special education students. They also set up parent meetings as needed. Rush County has six such consultants who are physically located at schools around the system. For schools with no assigned consultant, the senior special education teacher fills the consultant role. Designated consultants generally have a reduced case load. They have fewer special education students they are directly responsible for so they can help with the students assigned to the special education teachers they serve. Collectively, the consultants and lead special education teachers in Rush County Schools are called the county's "special education leads."

As the special education director explained it to the special education leads, his purpose in starting the special education PAC was to improve overall program delivery and foster dialog about upcoming programs, thereby directly involving parents. The special education PAC is a forum for people to offer suggestions for improving the delivery of services to children with disabilities in Rush County.

Statement of the Problem

Since the Rush County special education PAC was recently formed, this research can provide a timely focus on the problems that necessitated creating the special education PAC and on how the group began to address these issues. Documenting the participants' experience of being a special education PAC should be of value for Rush County and useful to other school systems as well.

The specific goals for the PAC are threefold:

- Improve program delivery across the school system
- Meet student needs at the parent-to-teacher level
- Have the special education PAC work as a school system/community liaison.

The special education director's goal was that—as often as possible—the parent and the classroom teacher should work out their differences without having these disputes moved to the special education director or to his supervisor, the county's director of education. As may be assumed from these articulated goals, implementation of special education programs countywide varies from school to school, even for schools with the same grade-span levels. Since state and federal education laws stipulate that Individual Education Programs (IEPs) are to be individually conceived and carried out, this variety of program delivery should be expected and is not a problem. It becomes problematic when parents at an IEP meeting do not agree with the services offered and press for more or different services.

In the system under study, principals usually delegate their LEA representative duty to attend IEP meetings to a vice principal or to their school's special education consultant. Therefore, the first step when there is a problem at an IEP meeting is to take the issue to the principal. The next step is to take the issue to the special education director. Parents, however, are not constrained by these "usual" steps and have gone directly to the county Director of Schools (the superintendent's official title in the Rush County School System). Less frequently, parents have decided to initiate a due process hearing following dissatisfaction at an IEP meeting.

What is rare in school-related parent advisory committee research is an emphasis on the parent perspective. Perhaps this should not be surprising, since refereed school journal literature's intended audience is the educator, not the family. What is even more rare is the special education parent's perspective. In preparing to do the literature review (Chapter 2), I found only one book length source on building home-school-community partnerships that was special-education specific, Turnbull and Turnbull's (2001) *Families, Professionals, and Exceptionality.* I found no phenomenological studies on this topic. Therefore, this research clearly has a gap to fill, with its exploration of the uniqueness of the special education parents' perceptions about school system's special education parental involvement efforts.

The parent/school interaction dynamic can be more difficult for the parents of special education students since special education has a presence at each school but no discernable countywide identity. That is, teachers and parents may identify with a school, or even with the sports or extra-curricular activities in which their children are

involved. However, this parent/school connection does not extend to special education as an entity. Further complicating this matter is that the special education director has the authority to make policy for special education teachers in the school system; but he is not their supervisor. They are hired, fired, and evaluated by their principals. Adding to the complication, the paraprofessional staff (teaching aides and attendants) are hired, fired, and assigned by the special education department although this is customarily done with input from school principals. Therefore, the working relationship the special education director has with each school's administrators affects the level of support and attention special education receives in that school. The politics of this working arrangement at one or more schools could have some influence on why this special education PAC succeeds or fails and on whether or not parents of special education students get involved.

It is not always clear to parents what they should do first when they are not satisfied with their child's educational program. There is a sea of gray between the IEP team process and litigation. The special education director's vision in calling for a special education PAC is that the group, after gaining recognition in the community, would become a vehicle for resolving conflicts at a lower, local level. How problematic conflict resolution can be is one of the issues discussed in the next chapter. How well the special education director's vision will be realized extends beyond the scope of this study.

Purpose

Schorr (1997) summed up successful community/school programs by saying they are comprehensive, flexible, and persevering; they keep the children in the context of their families, have a long-term "preventive orientation" and a clear mission (p. 12). They evolve over time. Successful programs encourage "strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect" (Schorr, p. 12). The purpose of the special education PAC is to become such a program for Rush County.

The purpose of this mixed methods, phenomenological case study was to explore the perceptions of the parents of special education students about their experience of the PAC working on its three main goals:

- to meet special education students' needs at the parent-to-teacher level
- to improve program delivery across the school system
- to act as a school system/community liaison.

For the purposes of this research, the measure of this program's success was not based on objective indicators of effectiveness, but on the parents' experience of the special education PAC and their own influence within the special education department. I investigated the parents' view of the influence parent/guardian involvement in the special education PAC has had on both individual and system-wide special education program delivery. This investigation used both phenomenological and guided inquiry with accompanying reflection and survey data collection, analysis, and synthesis. The short-answer surveys (Appendix B) are part of the state's monitoring process and go out to at least half of the special education families each

year. These are how the opinions of parents outside of the PAC were incorporated. However, a phenomenological inquiry of the special education PAC's first members was at the heart of this research. Skolowski (2000) described phenomenology as the study of human experience, of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience. Creswell (2003) observed that phenomenology is an appropriate strategy when studying individuals and case studies are appropriate for exploring processes. Case studies are explorations of a bounded system, group, phenomenon, or process (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). By these two methods—that is, with parent-member perceptions about the special education PAC's initial efforts in the Rush County School System as the case study and individual members of the PAC as interview participants—I explored if and how the special education PAC was helping the school system meet special education students' needs at the parent-to-teacher level. I also inquired into the change in the PAC's role as a school system/community liaison and vehicle for program improvement.

Research Questions

Maxwell (1996) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) emphasized the need to integrate research purposes, the methods used, conceptual framework, validity strategies, and research questions. All five components should not only interact but also can be mutually supportive of one another. At least, they should not be in conflict or work against each other. The questions guiding this research were derived from the three goals for the committee and focus on the self-described influence the parents have on special education program delivery at the personal, school, and district levels.

These three goals and their three related concerns are addressed directly and indirectly within these two research questions:

1. What are the special education PAC members' perceptions about how their membership in the special education PAC affected program delivery for them, their children, other families, and the school system/county in general?
2. Compared to before the PAC was implemented in February 2003, what changes have occurred in parents'/guardians' experience with the school system's special education services, their child's access to these programs, the degree to which the school system personnel keep them informed, and their own use of this information?

Definitions

Definitions are supplied for commonly known words or phrases used in a particular way or for words/phrases that may be new to the reader. Any vocabulary particular to phenomenological research will be explained where it is used, fully the first time it comes up each chapter, then only as completely as necessary for the instances of the concept appearing later in each chapter.

Advisory: Giving advice to the special education director primarily, but also to the other special education parents, is the key mission of the special education PAC researched. The special education PAC was not chartered as an advocacy group and is not a parent support group. Epstein et al. (2002) recommended establishing school

advisory committees so "education leaders hear from parents and the community on partnerships and other educational issues" (p. 273).

Parent, also "special education parent:" As used in this research, the term includes legal guardians (such as foster parents) and primary care givers (such as grandparents having full-time custody of their grandchildren). The National Parent Teacher Association (2000) broadened this to any other adult who has "primary responsibility for a child's education and development" (p. 8). "Special education parent" is used as a term of convenience herein to avoid the more accurate though cumbersome *parent of a child receiving special education services*.

Special education: Any of the educational programs and services designed to provide a free and appropriate public education to eligible children, that is, those who have disabilities identified by federal or state education laws.

Special education PAC charter members: Those parents who have joined the group during its first year of meetings (dated from the first meeting, February 2003).

Special education placements: The three placements mentioned several times in this research are comprehensive developmental classroom (CDC), resource room, and inclusive or mainstreamed special education. The entitlement to "a free, appropriate public education" in the "least restrictive environment" was first codified by 1975 passage of Public Law Number (Pub. L. No.) 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act. This law was the United States government's attempt to

assure that to the greatest extent possible "disabled children be educated side by side with children who are not disabled" (Smith, 1995, p. 245).

A CDC placement is for those who are severely learning disabled, but not so severely handicapped that they need full-time residential or home placement. These students spend most of their school day in a self-contained classroom with a few classmates who may have various disabilities (hence, the "comprehensive"). CDC placements offer a higher staff-to-student ratio than most students receive (Sadker & Sadker, 2005; Smith, 1995). They generally attend only lunch or specific activities with their school's population.

A resource room is a one in which students with moderate learning disabilities receive special help in certain areas for a few hours each day or week, usually reading or mathematics (Smith, 1995).

Inclusive education is for the highest functioning special education students. They spend most or all of their school day in general education settings and may have certain accommodations to the instructional delivery or modifications to the curriculum that are appropriate to their individual situation (Sadker & Sadker, 2005; Smith, 1995). These accommodations and modifications can change year to year.

Special needs children (or students), also special education students: Those students assigned to special education classrooms, programs, or services. This also includes children diagnosed with a disability or disabilities covered by federal or state education laws, whether or not they receive services. I use "child" when the

parent is the reference point and "student" when the relationship with the school system, school, or teacher is being discussed.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

Creswell (2003) suggested using delimitations to narrow the study's scope. The main delimitation of this study is its focus on special education parents, making secondary to this the roles of teachers, administrators, students, and the community. While acknowledging the National Parent Teacher Association's (2000) caution that we cannot look at schools and homes in isolation, but must see how the school, community, and home are interconnected in the world at large (what Epstein [1994] called "overlapping spheres of influence," p. 41), I tied in discussions of students and of the surrounding community as these occurred. No students, however, were participants in the research, nor were any local community members who were not also special education parents.

Two additional ways in which this research was delimited were in the exclusion of teachers or principals from the interview process and by the use of a Tennessee Department of Education-generated annual survey to address parent satisfaction at the school system level. I am the only special education PAC charter member who was also a special education certified teacher, now working as an administrator. There are also four other special education parents who are county employees and are on the committee and recently two of these have become special education teachers in Rush County. Even so, the teacher's or administrator's

perspectives are uniquely different from the parents' and would have to be the focus of additional research.

I used the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) parent survey results for quantification of the system-wide special education parent opinion—that is, the perceptions of members and nonmembers of the special education PAC—about the system meeting student needs and improving program delivery. From 2002 through 2004, the state's survey asked parents 12 yes/no questions (Appendix B) on a wide range of topics the Tennessee Department of Education tracked because these aligned with federal requirements. Only six of the question replies were used for this research and these remained the focus of the survey as the state revised it for 2005. More detail on the specific questions tracked is in Chapter 3.

A final delimitation is related to keeping the research focused on parent advisory work during the students' school years, from 3 to 22 years of age. Therefore, advisory options for the parents of adults with disabilities are not covered. Even for those born with disabilities, the policies that apply from birth through their third year are very different from those they are impacted by during their school years, calling for a different kind of advisory and advocacy role from parents (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). As with advisory roles in support of adults with disabilities, the birth-to-three advisory issues were not addressed, except as is necessary to cover those transitioning to school.

Limitations

According to Creswell (2003), limitations "identify potential weaknesses of the study" (p. 148). Use of the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) Parent Survey results for Rush County could be such a limitation. The CIMP parent survey was a statewide, state-developed set of questions. (See Appendix B for this protocol). The state's directive was that it be delivered to at least half of the special education parents each year for self-administration. The survey is anonymous and there is no obvious, clear incentive for parents to complete or return it. Beyond this, there were inherent limitations in the quality of the survey and in how much it revealed, due to it containing only closed-ended questions (Fink, 2003a). For example, question 4a asks if the parent has participated in program improvement activities. A parent who attended one school function and another who attended everything offered both could have answered "Yes" even though their level of involvement varied greatly. The yes/no format with no designated space to add comments further limited inferences about how often a certain reply is true or how much a certain instance came up. Granted, the CIMP survey could have been a more useful document if it asked for more specificity, such as, how many school functions the parent attended each month, quarter, or year. Instead, its designers opted for the simplicity of yes or no answers. Even so, the survey does highlight general year-to-year trends from which to conduct basic statistical work and it does get at what Fink (2003a) upheld as the focus of surveys: attitudes. Also, with the 2004-2005 version of

the survey (the third page of Appendix B), the State Department of Education began to address the CIMP Parent Survey's shortcomings.

Lack of transferability—the qualitative corollary to external validity (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002)—could be another limitation. Since this is a phenomenological case study of one rural, southeastern school district's special education PAC, generalizing the research may not be obvious or possible. As Wertz (1985) observed, describing the significance of the individual participant's lived reality is the object of reflection. Ihde (1986) pointed out that "because phenomenology directs its first glance upon experience," reflection must include "introspective data" (p. 22). However, Ihde also acknowledged that "for phenomenology, the central feature of experience is a structure called intentionality" (p. 23), which is extrospective and can be reflected upon. Intentionality as used in phenomenology is less like the more common synonym related to planning and more like intuition, self-evident personal knowledge. Intentionality "describes the structure of the situation for each participant" in an experience (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, p. 7). Sokolowski (2000) added that "intentionality" as used in phenomenology relates to personal knowledge, not personal actions. Patton (2002) added that "the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are intentionally related" (p. 483). Although we do not all perceive the world in the same way, "the world is what we perceive" individually (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2003, p. xviii). The knowledge is always connected to the knower. How this epistemology is worked out in phenomenology

was clarified by what Merleau-Ponty (1964) called the "primacy of perception," meaning

> the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values, are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent logos; that it teaches us, outside all dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action. It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of knowledge. (p. 25)

Perception does not yield truths, like geometry, but "presences" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 14). The back (not visible) sides to objects we see are not "possible perceptions," nor are they "necessary conclusions" (p. 14). This is not the Piagetian idea of object permanence, although both authors do acknowledge that the world is always experienced from a specific perspective. Perception is a "practical synthesis" (p. 14) of what we do experience that allows us to experience the rest of what is present to us, but unseen. Perception is primary in phenomenological psychology, as thinking is in cognitive psychology and actions are in behavioral psychology (H. R. Pollio, unpublished lecture notes, 2004). Ideas and feelings are objects just as real as the three-dimensional items we experience through our senses (Brentano, 1874/1997). For example, the sound a crowd of people hears is real, but how each person in the crowd reacts to the sound is just as real. The reactions reveal the complex interconnectivity of each person's internal and external perceptions.

Although this emphasis on individual experience in phenomenology highlights the limits of its generalizability, the more detailed description that studying one system allowed offset this possible limitation. Coupled with this was the limitation that the interviewer has observed the participants living through very few of the events they relayed in the interviews. Patton (2002) wrote of this as an advantage to direct observation research, from which the researcher can infer meanings of which the participants are not aware. However, direct observation of the participants doing the activity being researched is not possible with the phenomenological method. All experience is private. Even so, through language (and other forms of communication), experiences can be shared and shared meaning understood. Kennedy (1979) acknowledged as much in her article (written mainly for the clinical, medical field) about generalizing from single case studies. She asserted that although confounding influences on the results are tough to avoid, the "intricate details" (p. 663) learned about how well a treatment is working can offset this drawback of the single case method. Special education is common to public education at the kindergarten to twelfth grade level, so the transfer of some or all of the findings to other school systems, even ones apparently unlike Rush County, should not be such a great stretch. Most of what is important to the special education families participating could apply to all special education families. Also, it is not the people or even the setting that was investigated, rather as Thomas and Pollio (2002) put it, the meaning of the life-world themes of those interviewed.

The final one is more of a limitation, but somewhat a delimitation, too. I was sole researcher. I am the parent of two teens with autism, a charter special education PAC member, a special education administrator, and coordinator of special education PAC activities. The possibilities for researcher bias and interference are huge. Senge's (1990) warning against teams giving the appearance of cohesion while squelching disagreement is one concern I am carrying into this research. Specifically, reactivity (Maxwell, 1996)—my influence on the special education PAC—is the bigger worry; how free the participants felt to be open with me could have affected the data collection, especially since I attempted to ascertain not so much any absolute measure of the effectiveness of the special education PAC, but the members' perceptions of its effectiveness. The parents participating have talked with me regularly since early 2003 and were less likely to be distanced by my special education position than parents I am less familiar with would be. I consider myself receptive and unimposing, though it was not be the obvious instances of my own interference, but rather the subtle ones that were the most difficult to limit. Even so, if I were not in this unique position as special education parent, administrator, and PAC coordinator, I would not care so much about the work for me as principal investigator. The strong data resulting from my sincere caring more than offset any weak data resulting from my influence on the participants in the special education PAC and in the school system.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this mixed methods, phenomenological case study is related to the significance of the special education PAC itself. Special education parental focus groups could be convened for specific issues, but there is no on-going alternative for revealing what special education parents as a group need and believe is important, for showing what they want and what they think than having a special education PAC. Each school has its own parental involvement mechanism and liaison between that school's staff and the parents. However, the special education department has no countywide corollary to this. Individual special education teachers and administrators meet with parents one-on-one to work out what is best for an individual student but there was no group of parents weighing in on what is important to a cross section of special education families. This has started to be done by administering surveys in recent years, but the limitations of the survey were mentioned already. That the survey method is not a real-time dialog—its biggest limitation—was not addressed. The establishment of the special education PAC helped to remedy this deficit.

The significance of the study, then, was to provide first person specifics on how special education parents believe the school system is doing with special education program delivery. I have documented one school system's journey from chartering a special education PAC to having it become a regular influence on local special education policy and programs. Not only are methods for how to do the same

now available to other systems, but also the value of creating and using special education PACs is described from the parents' perspective.

Overview of the Case Study

Merriam (1998) described a case study as an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (p. xiii). Parent-member perceptions about the special education PAC's initial efforts in the Rush County School System define this case study.

Chapter 2 provides research and reference material to document what has been found on how special education PACs influence the school systems using them, as well as broader research results concerning special education PACs. Intersects with (and distinguishing features of) parent support groups and parent advocacy groups were also addressed. The chapter summarizes key issues and discusses their impact on this research.

Chapter 3 describes of the methodology used to conduct this study. The chapter included information about the participants, research design, phenomenological framework, data collection, and techniques for data analysis, including efforts made to ensure trustworthiness and limit researcher bias.

Chapters 4 through 7 discuss in turn each of the four themes as developed and verified by several methods. These thematic development methods included the use of interviews, observational notes, a field log, archival documents, and survey results. The thematic verification methods employed included member checking of the

transcripts and initial analysis with the participants, and peer examination (of the interview transcripts and research in progress) and debriefing of the initial analysis by three coworkers, and transcript discussions with The University of Tennessee's Phenomenology Group. The quantitative data addressed in Chapters 4 to 8 were taken from four years of special education parents' survey results.

Chapter 8 integrates the thematic analyses done individually in Chapters 4 to 7. Qualitative analyses covered phenomenological methods, field notes, artifacts, the constant comparative method, Constas' (1992) components of categorization, and qualitative research quality indicators (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Chapter 8 also included a full quantitative analysis of all special education parent survey data related to the research questions. Chapter 9 is a discussion of the outcomes and implications of this research. How the findings relate to the literature and current theory is addressed in Chapter 9. This final chapter also offered recommendations for further research and for educational administration of pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade special education programs at the county, state, and federal levels.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Chapter Introduction

This chapter includes a review of literature related to the purpose of the study, which is to explore the members' perceptions about their involvement in the special education Parent Advisory Committee's (PAC's) as it works initial efforts to meet its three main goals:

- To meet special education students' needs at the parent-to-teacher level
- To improve program delivery across the school system
- To act as a school system/community liaison.

Merriam (1998) observed that a function of the literature review is to "provide a foundation for contributing to the knowledge base. No problem in education exists in isolation from other areas of human behavior" (pp. 50-51). With this in mind, among the literatures reviewed are school advisory committees in general, special education advisories and parent advisories in particular, and the more general parent/school interaction. Parent "support" groups are a related literature worth exploring, as are groups that promote parent "advocacy" in addition to the "advisory" role. I focused on sources since 1980 because the special education laws that were implemented in the 1970s greatly changed special education program delivery in the United States. I included some pre-1980 sources for their historical perspective on special education PACs, however. This emphasis on the recent literature was

recommended by Galvan (1999), who also cautioned, “try to cover your topic as completely as necessary, not as completely as possible” (p. 37).

Literature Overview

According to Merriam (1998), the purpose of a literature review is to synthesize and critique what has been done on the topic at hand, highlighting the strengths and shortcomings of the work to date. In this chapter, I reviewed monographs, journal articles, conference proceedings, and informational pamphlets concerning special education parent groups, special education laws concerning parents’ rights/responsibilities, schools’ obligations to parents/families, and parent roles/involvement in their children’s schools. The literature review highlights the questions to be asked and the problem to be resolved.

Rationale for These Literatures

These literature review topics provided a reasonably broad but manageable scope. Maxwell (1996) noted that looking into prior research can help researchers justify the need for a study, inform their decisions about methods and approaches to use, and illuminate for the researcher how the new work will either clarify or generate theory. On the topic most closely related to this research—the members’ perception of the effectiveness of the special education PAC—there is not much published, indicating a need for the study at hand. There is, however, a lot on parent advocacy and parent involvement in schools, although not much of it is special education-specific or phenomenologically grounded.

Types of Sources and Issues Addressed

This review covers the 49 topical sources found. Twenty of the 49 are Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) documents, mostly conference proceedings and a few pamphlets. Eleven are journal articles, two are web sites, nine are monographs on home-school-community relations, six are book chapters, and one is a doctoral dissertation on what principals do to encourage and nurture parent involvement. The issues addressed range from distinguishing advisory roles from advocacy and support roles, the influence of special education laws, schools' obligations to parents, parents' involvement level in schools, conflict resolution, and some special education PAC success stories.

Differences Among Parent Information, Support, and Advocacy Groups

Because parents of special needs children tend toward both support groups and professional help (or advocacy) groups (Solomon, Pistrang, & Barker, 2001), it is difficult to isolate literature on only one of these areas. Since the two areas often overlap, I deemed it unwise to exclude a potential reference without reviewing the source document itself but base this exclusion on only its title or abstract. For example, Solomon et al. make the point that even in parent support groups that do not intend an advocacy role, the parents often give and receive advice, benefiting from the knowledge of other parents who have dealt with similar issues. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) define advocacy as "taking one's own or another's perspective to obtain a result not otherwise available" (p. 350). Another reason I chose not to dismiss

parental support groups as unrelated to the topic is that while professional help and advocacy organizations tend to provide medical or educational advice specific to an identified need, mutual support groups are more likely to supply whole-ordeal coverage for the parents involved in them (Solomon et al.). Urbain and Lakin (1985) acknowledged that the importance of associating with other parents of special education students is not stressed enough at the workshops that the Parent Advocacy Coalition for Education Rights (PACER) conducts. These authors also noted that 30% of workshop attendees stated that their purpose in going to the PACER workshops was to meet other parents with disabled children; this was the most frequent reason given. Getting information on assessment and educational planning was second at 22%. Admittedly, mutual support, a sense of community, emotional support, role models, parenting ideas, and a "sense of control" (Solomon et al., p. 114) are more likely to come from support groups than from workshops, or even from advocacy or advisory groups.

On the other hand, information/support groups are a lot less likely to create friction and stir tempers than are advisory/advocacy agencies. In a presentation to the 1996 conference of the American Educational Research Association, McKerrow (1996) discussed in detail an advocacy group that became dysfunctional as they and school district employees began fighting more for allegiances and to limit the other side's domination of the process than they did for mutually shared improvements to program delivery.

There are also special education PACs that fill both roles. The one that Diamond (1994) researched had been in existence for more than 20 years. Although advisory in nature, Diamond admitted that its "main purpose" was to hold a few social events each school year. Even so, this organization had at least one or two parents who functioned independently of the school system, always ready to serve as advocates when the need arose. The Nation Parent Teacher Association (2000) noted that any time a parent looks to improve a child's school experience, they are advocating. Solomon et al. (2001) were writing of only parents' mutual support groups when they indicated that an important outcome is that parents become active members rather than passive recipients of services.

Parent Information/Mutual Support Groups

The difference between being an active member of a support group and taking on an advisory role gets subtle. In this section, I discuss solely supportive/information sharing groups that are not designated advocacy or advisory groups as well. The purpose of the Arizona Parent Information Network (PIN) —that state's affiliate of the National Parent Information Network—is to provide information and technical assistance to families and schools through the Arizona Department of Education. Launched in 1991, it has promoted district-to-district information swapping throughout the state. The Arizona PIN has also sponsored guest speakers to talk on specific special education topics at venues throughout the state. It has even created a video library available to parents unable to make these guest-speaker sessions. The Arizona Department of Education, through the PIN, worked to make its publications

more “parent friendly” (Raabe, 2000, p. 135). The state’s PIN has also offered grants to districts in rural areas to help offset the costs involved in participating in the PIN. Capper (1989) noted that because families are few in number and widely dispersed, serving rural populations is tougher than providing services in cities. Capper added that compounding the rural school system’s difficulty in simply reaching its families is the reality that there is no common, organized vision to rural education.

In the Solomon et al. (2001) study, what the parents identified as most helpful about belonging to mutual support groups was the high cohesion of the groups. The authors claimed these groups offer parents “a range of coping resources” (p. 126). (More about this study and its results appears near the end of this chapter under “Methods Most Commonly Employed to Study Special Education Parent Groups.”)

In their study of more than 800 parents of children diagnosed with emotional disturbance, Koroloff and Friesen (1991) found more than 31% identified being involved with other parents as the most helpful coping activity. This study was a comparison of those who belonged to support groups with those who did not. One curious finding was that members of support groups report needing, using, and having trouble finding information and services more often than nonmembers. The authors attributed this apparent contradiction to those in support groups having higher expectations and a better knowledge of what should be available, and Urbain and Lakin’s (1985) results support this view. In their contrast of the “experimental group” (parents attending at least one of the six annual workshops) with the “contrast group” (parents who did not sign up for or attend any sessions), Urbain and Lakin noted that

the “experimental” parents were more knowledgeable about special education law, more likely to request services not offered by the school system, and more likely to supply other parents with information. Urbain and Lakin also observed that the experimental group had lower satisfaction with their children’s educational programs and that it was this group, ironically, that “felt more alone” (p. 40) than the parents who did not attend any workshops.

Koroloff and Friesen (1991) again defy conventional wisdom in their exposition of the socioeconomic status of support group members contrasted with nonmembers. They acknowledged that the typical, expected member would be a white woman of middle income, well educated, and slightly older than the nonmembers of support groups. While this expectation was borne out for the gender, the rest of what separated a support group joiner from a parent who chooses not to is how “preoccupied” the parent is with the “loss” of their child (p. 268). (“Loss” referred to the nondisabled child that could have been.) Urbain and Lakin (1985) highlighted the same gender imbalance in their workshop sessions’ attendance, noting that the typical attendee is usually a woman from a two-parent family. In fact, she is often a full-time homemaker who has more formal education than the special education students’ mothers who did not attend the workshops.

Koroloff and Friesen (1991) indicated that the most tangible benefit of belonging to a parent support group is information sharing. The intangibles include emotional support, help with coping, and reducing isolation. The authors asserted that the need for support groups has grown because established service delivery systems

have failed to ease the care-taking load of parents with disabled children. Capper (1989), in insisting that the service a family receives depends on the strength of its external supports, observed that funds are not distributed by a set plan, but by "the squeaky wheel method" of interagency competition (p. 6). Solomon et al. (2001) were unwilling to go as far (or be as negative) as Capper or Koroloff and Friesen, but admitted that the nature of mutual support has changed over time, as has what people find helpful about belonging to such groups. They recommended longitudinal research in this area.

Parent/School Special Education Advocacy

Advocacy groups tend to be more formalized in their structure and ways of doing business than are support groups. In fact, the Arizona Parents Information Network mentioned in the previous section was spun off of the Parents Are Liaisons in Schools (PALS) advocacy group because the parents involved saw the need to keep information sharing distinct from advocacy. Establishing the function, admittedly, is only the first step in ensuring appropriate advocacy for children with disabilities (Lucky & Gavilan, 1987).

Stoecklin (1994) described advocacy as speaking on behalf of another to procure services that person needs. Because the parents know their child best, O'Harra (1991) held that they should use this knowledge to advocate for the child. Siegel (2004) cautioned parents against assuming that teachers, administrators, and experts know everything while they as parents know nothing. "You do not need to be a special education expert or a lawyer to be an effective advocate" (Siegel, p. 1-3). As

an “expert” on that child, the parent should be the top advocate, for as O’Harra puts it, “if we don’t advocate for our children, no one else is likely to” (p. 4). Especially early in one’s advocacy journey, the information sharing is common to both advocacy and support groups. As Stoecklin pointed out, knowledge acquisition should be the first step to advocacy and those with experience are always a good resource for those new to a knowledge base. Raabe (2000) commented that one of the primary functions of the PALS advocacy group in Arizona is to facilitate meetings between school officials and parents new to the school. She also added that orientation to PALS for parents wishing to join is thorough, with only those who have been members more than one year asked to facilitate such mixed PALS/school staff meetings.

Stoecklin (1994) acknowledged that although the parent would be the ideal advocate, especially for providing family-centered services, parents of children with disabilities may not have the time or energy to advocate. She also added that different cultures may view such advocacy less favorably. Another problem area for parents of special needs children being education advocates is that parents tend to highlight the physical shortcomings inherent in a disability while school systems tend to see the cognitive delays as the primary handicapping condition (Urbain & Laken, 1985). Ammer and Littleton (1983) quantify this mismatch as occurring 44% of the time. Allen and Hudd (1987) further acknowledge that the advocate role is not suited to all parents. For every parent comfortable with the role, many are not. One solution that the PALS advocates worked out for the lack of time issue is to be flexible in their meeting times and get school personnel to do the same. PALS also takes the concerns

and suggestions from the parents they support to state planners to help shape development of new initiatives (Raabe, 2000).

The only author who suggested that such working relationships are not always ideal was McKerrow (1996). She found both educational and advocacy organizations to be exclusionary, with any interaction centering on dominance/submission rather than on shared decision-making. Lucky and Gavilan (1987) admitted only that some advocacy groups are powerful while others are a mere rubber stamping body for the school system's administration. Bond and Keys (1993), although dealing with community-wide interactions (not just schools), found that the parents of those with developmental disabilities and other community members have interacting histories of involvement in the service of those with disabilities. Indeed, Stoecklin (1994) described all goals of advocacy as grounded in these three fundamentals of positive interaction:

(1) decide what is in the child's best interests by recognizing and responding to the child's needs,

(2) work with others to get information and services, and

(3) use the information and services found (p. 1).

This dovetails with the National Parent Teacher Association's (2000) suggested role for parents as ones to help make decisions, solve problems, and develop policies.

Lucky and Gavilan (1987) also suggested a useful and practical step of creating a smaller steering committee of the advisory group that meets more regularly or as needed, using subcommittees for budget, liaison with community agencies, or

whatever else is essential to the group's work. Another of Lucky and Gavilan's insights—offered without explanation—is to always have more than half of the group be parents (the rest being teachers, administrators, or members of county agencies) and always have a parent as chair. The authors may be guided by what Turnbull and Leonard (1981) described as the "redistribution of power" and equalization of relationships inherent in advocacy (p. 37). Even so, Turnbull and Leonard realized that special education advocacy is too complex and demanding for parents to go it alone. Raabe (2000) and Siegel (2004) echoed this acknowledgement in noting that although the parents are now seen as "equal decisionmakers" (Siegel, p. 1-3), there is a lot to know about special education law, conflict resolution, and specific disabilities. For this reason, PIN tasks are rotated among parents based on their interests and skills, and the PALS director regularly works with Arizona's special education director.

The Influence of Special Education Laws on Parents' Rights

There were laws governing the treatment and education of handicapped children prior to the 1975 passage of Public Law Number (Pub. L. No.) 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (or EHA, for short). As the "baby boom" parents of the late 1940s and 1950s began to get more influence in local governance, states began mandating special education services and colleges began offering education courses in this specialized field of study (Kish, Hamburg, & Merluzzi, 1980). According to the Learning Disabilities Association of America's *Advocacy Manual* (1992), however, these laws were not uniformly enforced or guaranteed. The United States government got more involved in schools with the Head Start provisions

for early childhood that were part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, one of many pieces of "War on Poverty" legislation from the Johnson administration (Gestwicki, 2004). Head Start is a federally funded education program to benefit preschool-aged children from low-income families. The political changes that culminated in the passage of EHA also created new options for parents of disabled children. Allen and Hudd (1987) and Gestwicki indicated that many applauded these changes as heralding increased responsiveness from professionals and new rights for parents. The LDAA, however, warned that the advocacy necessary to get the law enacted became even more important *after* its passage to ensure the "free and appropriate public education" in the "least restrictive environment" for all 6 to 21 year olds (p. 2). EHA was later amended by Pub L. No. 99-457 to include 3 to 5 year olds (Diamond, 1994), arriving at the age span covered by special education laws to date.

Harry (1992) pointed out that EHA's only role for parents as policy makers was to serve on parent advisory committees. A reauthorization of EHA in 1983 (Pub. L. No. 98-199) even set aside federal funds to support such advocacy (Harry). Even this, however, was limited to the system-wide level, not to individual schools, and the particulars of managing such committees was left to various states' laws to codify (Redding & Sheley, 2005). Harry blithely recommended that parents become teaching assistants if they want to get involved in special education at the building level. However, their individual rights as parents of children with disabilities continued to improve (O'Harra, 1991). In 1990, EHA was reconstituted as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, Pub. L. No. 101-476), with two major

reauthorizations since then (in 1997, then in 2004). IDEA added to and clarified the documentation required by Individual Education Programs (IEPs, the topic of the next section). Gestwicki (2004) added "Goals 2000," the Educate America Act of 1994, to this list of federal mandates. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) makes a great point that IDEA "is the only federal law that is specific in its requirements for parental involvement in the decision making process" (p. 234). However, the federal government specified funding of these efforts only recently. For school systems receiving at least $500,000 in federal Title I funding, the Title I provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 added a requirement that school systems earmark at least 1% of this funding for "parent involvement" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 18). IDEIA 2004 (now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education *Improvement* Act, emphasis added) also included much more detail on parent involvement in the IEP process, specifically what actions by the school system require consent of the parents and when this consent must be in writing.

Sadker and Sadker (2005) and Stoecklin (1994) emphasized that these federal laws make clear that the legal rights gained are entitlements for families of children with disabilities, not favors bestowed by school systems. The Parent Advocacy Coalition for Education Rights (PACER) of Minnesota (1995) used a term that has become common for special education law coverage in saying that their handbook covers the "rights and responsibilities" (p. 4) of parents of special needs children. Unlike Stoecklin's concern about parents having the time and energy for advocacy, Redding and Sheley (2005) and Turnbull and Leonard (1981) asserted that since the

special education laws tend to be IEP-development focused, parents are better motivated to take responsibility for the skills and knowledge necessary to be their child's foremost advocate. Even so, Turnbull and Leonard acknowledged that a broader kind of advocacy tends to follow.

Funding, not involvement, is the tougher part. Although largely the schools' and not the parents' concern in public special education, Diamond (1994) admitted that cost is a factor in the trend toward integration of services. This gets especially troublesome when "expensive" service options are not justified by a student's present level of performance (p. 15).

Individual Education Programs (IEPs)

Appendix A of IDEA 1997 specified parental involvement in the IEP process. "The parents of a child with a disability are expected to be equal participants along with the school personnel, in developing, reviewing, and revising the IEP for their child. This is an active role in which the parents . . . provide critical information" [Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities (1997), II(1)5]. Diamond (1994) focused on a reality of parent involvement in the special education process. Parents are heavily involved during the initial identification and certification of the disability and resulting program of service. However, once the child is placed in special education, parental involvement drops off. Based on special-education teacher-reported attendance at school conferences, only about half of the parents are showing up by the middle school years, even fewer during the students' high school years. As early as 1979, one finding from a national study was that 83% of parents

attend IEP meetings (across the K-12 span) (Turnbull & Leonard, 1981). Another key finding from this same study was that 52% of parents reported that the IEP was done ahead of time, without their input.

A suggestion Harry (1992) offered to curb both of these trends is giving parents more time during the IEP development cycle. She is not merely suggesting listening closer to the parents at the annual meeting itself (although this would be a step in a good direction), but also suggesting more two-way communication in the weeks leading up to the meeting. Harry also suggested getting parent input on the current assessment update, including rather than excluding them. The Nation Parent Teacher Association (2000) echoed this need for "regular, two-way, and meaningful" communication between home and school and added that schools need to "communicate clearly and frequently with parents about school policies and programs, and their children's progress" (p. 22). Epstein et al. (2002) also stressed the need for regular two-way communication, as well, even suggesting a notepad in the child's backpack for the parents and teachers to write back and forth. Summers et al. (2005) encouraged such communication as a necessary component of a "family-focused relationship" (p. 78), but saw it as only one of the two dimensions of family-professional partnerships. The other, equally important dimension is child-focused relationships that tie in components such as commitment, competency, and respect (Summers et al.).

Gestwicki (2004) noted that the increased empowerment of parents has changed the model for parent involvement from the old parent-child-teacher triangle to

a new model of two concentric circles, the child on the inside circle and the parents and teachers surrounding the child on the outside circle. (See Figures 1 and 2). Unfortunately, the new model (Figure 2) remains more a hope than a reality. Epstein (2003) started an article on school/family partnerships with the line: "The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about families" (p. 354). Epstein favors when schools hold that they work with "children" rather than "students" because the connotation of the former is that families and schools are working together rather than in isolation (Epstein, p. 354). Epstein highlighted the very dichotomy I pointed out in the "Definitions" section of the previous chapter. However, I stand by my denotational distinction between "children" and "students" not to further contribute to the division between rearing children and instructing them, only to highlight the current reality of it, especially in special education.

This new emphasis on parent involvement and renewed emphasis on home-school-community interaction and communication should be an area of concern for school systems if the results of Urbain and Lakin's (1985) survey of parent attendees at their workshops are widespread. Only 33% answered "yes" to the question about asking for and getting an explanation of their child's assessment from the school system. Turnbull and Leonard (1981) indicated that the special education teacher talks twice as much as the parents do at IEP meetings, usually to review an already-developed IEP. However, Turnbull and Leonard mentioned that research done about the same time as their own found that even with this low involvement, parents reported

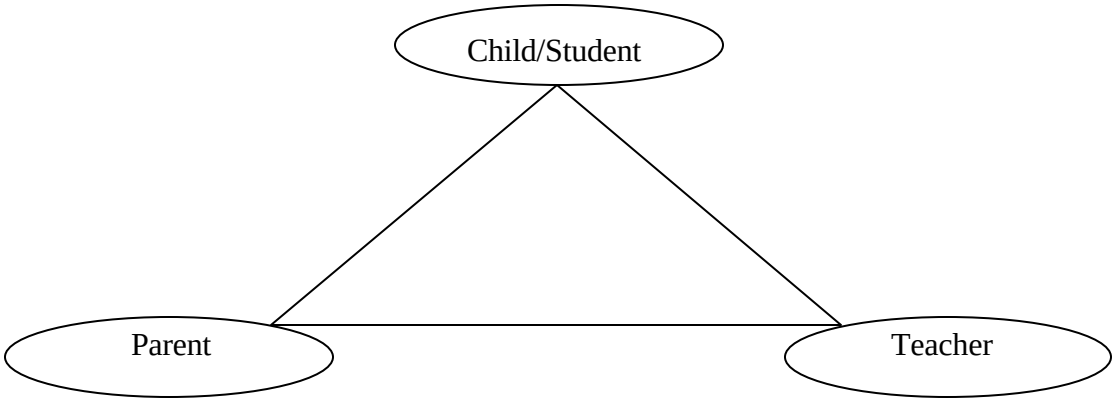

Figure 1. Old Model of Parent Involvement

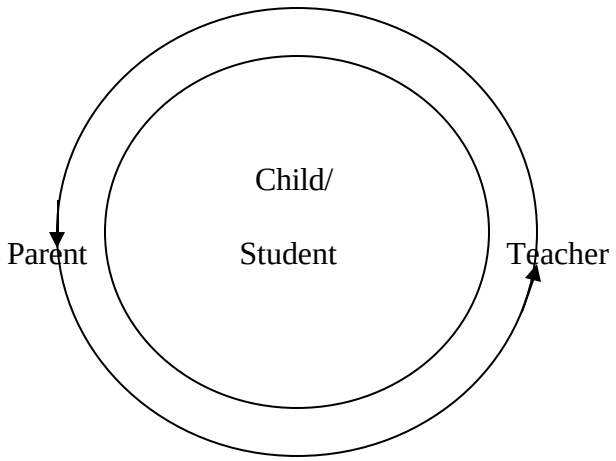

Figure 2. New Model of Parent Involvement

high satisfaction with the process. Turnbull and Leonard hypothesized that parents are either content with passive involvement or did not feel knowledgeable enough to be more involved.

Perhaps parents *are* as involved as they want to be. Urbain and Lakin's (1985) survey of those attending the special education parent training sessions indicated that 58% of parents made changes to the IEP and 31% took home the IEP for further review rather than just signing it at the meeting. The underlying good news in all of this must be that at least IEP meetings are happening and have been including parents since the late 1970s.

In their work to take IEPs to the next level, the PACER Center (1995) listed "good IEP components" (pp. 21-23). A couple of these components include indicating the setting where the services will be provided and stating how much time and in what

areas the student will be with nondisabled peers. The federal laws since IDEA 1997 have required that the teaching environment be decided on a continuum of least-to-most restrictive placement appropriate. Since the PACER Center is based in Michigan, Urbain and Lakin (1985) describe the continuum of special education services offered there, ranging from "level 1" full-time general education, to "level 6," around-the-clock placement in a special education program at a residential facility. Rush County (under Tennessee Board of Education Rule 0520-1-9, "Special Education Programs and Services") covers the same range of placements with ten options of service, based on the number of hours per week a student spends in special education placements and the amount of staff support required for the student's program. In the more than ten years since the PACER Center's good IEP components were published, IDEA 1997 and IDEIA 2004 have made many of them requirements rather than suggestions. For example, the federal law now requires that a child's general, regular education teacher be part of the IEP Team and that the parents must consent in writing for members of the IEP Team to be absent from the meeting. Wording in this latest law also allows for IEP meetings every three years for all but those students being assessed by alternative means. The latest reauthorization also allows for up to 15% of the special education funding that the federal government sends to the states to be spent on interventions aimed at preventing struggling students from becoming special education students (IDEIA 2004, website at http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?c108:2:./temp/~c108gBkrmL: retrieved May 7, 2006). IDEIA 2004 has

not yet been codified in the federal laws as of August 4, 2006. It is expected by the end of August.

The Learning Disabilities Association of America's (LDAA's) *Advocacy Manual* (1992) recommended timeliness in assessing eligibility for special education services. However, their position on the matter was that if the student is not achieving commensurate with his own age and grade peers, or has uneven ability levels in various areas, this should fast-track the transition to special education.

Two other good practices for IEP tracking—recommended by the special education advisory committee that Lucky and Gavilan (1987) discussed—concern comparing what the IEP team recommended with what services were actually delivered and also including coverage of graduation requirements at the IEP meetings of high-school-aged students. LDAA (1992) kept itself to more mundane suggestions such as not trying to finalize the IEP during the meeting and remembering to keep in mind the least restrictive environment requirements even for students being put in alternative placements.

Schools' Obligation to Parents

Turnbull and Leonard's (1981) study of parent involvement—done more than twenty-five years ago when federal special education laws were still new—led them to conclude that parents are quite content to leave education to the educators. O'Harra (1991) ten years later contended this is too much abdication on the part of parents. After all, the school professionals see the children with "public faces" (p. 4) and only in school settings. Epstein et al. (2002) admitted that this is not always true. Whether

school staffs view their charges as just students passing through or as children from families and within communities can vary from school to school and teacher to teacher. Even so, Innocenti, Rule, and Fiechtl (1987) pointed out that only the parent is required to answer the tough questions like "Why do I go to a different school than my friend next door?" or "Why am I in a 'special' classroom part of the day?" (p. 1). They contend that this is why, especially during the initiation of services, the parent needs to be educated to become the primary advocate.

Diamond (1994) and O'Harra (1991) noted that more often than not school personnel offer little support to parents during the early transition to (and acceptance of) special education services. School personnel may or may not make clear to the parent all that went into determining their child's need for special education services, that the evaluation process is not based on a single test. In fact, since the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, it is illegal to base an educational placement on one test (LDAA, 1992; Williams & Goodale, 1983). In her study of African American parents' involvement in special education, Harry (1992) found a low awareness among her participants of the procedures involved and the rights they have. My own anecdotal experience with parents of all ethnicities matches Harry's findings. Although the main rights are usually summarized verbally and the latest publication on the topic is given to the parents at each IEP meeting, many tend not to focus on what is being said until the topic turns to their child's present level of performance and goals for the coming year.

As Harry (1992) suggested, sometimes the subtle attitude and behaviors of the professionals around the table contribute to the parents' clear sense of being the outsider. What Harry called professional's inappropriate interactions to exclude parents include such actions as calling the school employees by their first names while calling the parents "Mr. and Mrs. ---," or the not as subtle failure to remind the parent at the start of the IEP meeting who are all these employees and what are their job functions. McKerrow (1996) even warned that especially in small-town settings, the parents may feel like raising issues could result in subtle or overt retaliation, negatively affecting their child's education. Harry observed that parent training would help, but her reasons for saying so are disheartening. She noticed that the parents' participation in the educational process is not valued by the educators unless and until the parents have had formal training.

Although Harry is referring to training in the specific disability (medically-based training), training in more prosaic matters would benefit the parents as well. The LDAA (1992) took a step in this direction, with practical suggestions for parents appended to the manual. Such advice as making a list of what you want to say at the IEP meeting, audiotaping the session, and having someone take notes are all great IEP meeting suggestions for parents. The LDAA's two cautions that parents new to special education may not realize warn against both being passive and against telling the school staff everything that is on your mind.

The school personnel tend to see the limit of their responsibility as the appropriate education of the special education student. Allen and Hudd (1987), in

their caution against pressing parents to fill professional gaps, took the school's charge to another level in suggesting that the IEP should also cover the needs of the family, not only of the child. While they admitted the schools' ability to do so is limited, they pointed out that schools are in a better position than are most service agencies to know exactly what help families need. At a more realistic, one-to-one level, Diamond (1994) highlighted her finding that the interest teachers take in the whole child affects parent involvement in the educational process. At the very least, the school system should be the agency to get parents relevant materials and explain to the parents how to use these (Turnbull & Leonard, 1981). Finally, what League and Ford (1996) suggested for special education students is also true for their parents, so teachers need to include both in the life of the school. They should inform parents of what is happening in the classroom and the school without assuming that the parents will not be interested or able to be a part of it.

Guilt and Blame

If schools felt an obligation to understand and help parents, rather than blaming them and helping the child only, it would contribute much toward alleviating the three kinds of guilt special education parents come to feel. Solomon et al. (2001) acknowledged that raising a child with a disability adds stressors of grief, loss of the child that might have been, and guilt (over even considering the child that might have been). Koroloff and Friesen (1991) mentioned guilt parents feel over possibly having caused the disability, blaming themselves. The coauthors are referring to emotional disturbance children, although this guilt is real for genetically transmitted disabilities

as well. The guilt involved in being ashamed of their children echoes the "might have been" line from above, but more guilt is heaped on when relatives, professionals, and friends blame the parent for the disability as well (Koroloff & Friesen; Summers et al., 2005). The final type of guilt creeps in when parents fail to embrace with energy and enthusiasm their newly found roles as champions of whatever disability has hijacked their family's future. While it is true that parents of special needs children have rights and responsibilities, Allen and Hudd (1987) cautioned that how much responsibility they can take on has to be the parents' own decision and their rights have to remain parental rights and not become "imperatives" (p. 133). If parents prefer to be only minimally involved in the life of the school or school system, no one else knows their reasons or should fault them. Even so, parents often report these professional judgments as an added stressor (Summers et al.).

Parental Roles Other Than Advocacy

In addition to the advocacy role and the usual tasks as mother or father, Allen and Hudd (1987) described four other roles for parents: educational decision maker, teacher, case manager, and program evaluator. The authors warned that if parents of special education students can and want to take on these quasi-professional roles, then things are fine. If parents cannot or will not take on these responsibilities, however, professionals cannot back away from this job. Even if parents do want to take on these roles, in the interest of balance, the professionals supporting them need to continue supporting them. Gestwicki (2004) noted that a smoothly working "parent-teacher

relationship can give parents the feeling of being not quite alone in their responsibilities" (p. 171).

On the other hand, part of the parents' role as educational decision maker entails being part of the system of checks and balances that holds schools responsible (Allen & Hudd, 1987). In reality, parents are more passive than active and are far from the equal educational partners ascribed to in state and federal policies. Some parents prefer (or at least are not bothered by) being relieved of educational responsibility for their children. Moles (2005) cited a national survey of special education parents that revealed 90% regularly attended IEP meetings. A third of the parents in the survey Moles referenced indicated that school personnel tended to develop the IEP goals and that the parents would like to be more involved in the process. However, parents who want to be active often lack support as schools downplay the need for (and value of) parental involvement (Allen & Hudd). The Nation Parent Teacher Association (2000) encouraged schools to support parents in becoming active participants in their children's learning by providing resources and instruction.

The positive aspects of the parents' role as the first and primary teacher of their child are more obvious than the negative components. It is cost effective and makes the home-school continuum link better (Allen & Hudd, 1987). However, Allen and Hudd asserted that gaining facility with the competencies expected in teaching a child with special needs is equivalent to earning a master's degree in special education. Even worse, blatantly making "teacher" a parental role sucks the joy of just playing

together out of a situation by making it “work” (Allen & Hudd, p. 136). Granted trips out into the community always present parents and children with many opportunities to stimulate the child’s development (O’Harra, 1991), but League and Ford (1996) point out that the role of “parent” is big enough, without adding “teacher” to it.

Helping the school get materials and reinforcing school learning at home are big expectations. Having the parent regularly participate in teacher conferences, parent/teacher organizations, and IEP meetings is bigger still (League & Ford, 1996). The parent-to-parent training that Urbain and Lakin (1985) strive for in their workshops is the biggest expectation of all. This level of parent involvement is also at the heart of the “Friends of Special Education” program in Chicago (Cadavid, Carroll, Mayo, Stephens, & Wolf, 1989) and the “Parents Training Parents” program in Michigan (Cassidy, Pratt, Brocklehurst, & Granzow, 1986). “Friends of Special Education” is a Chicago Public Schools program aimed at improving the communication and working relationships between school administrators and the parents of special education students. The train-the-parent-trainer program in Michigan is part of CAUSE (the Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education, Inc.). CAUSE is funded federally through the Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (Cassidy et al.).

The parents’ role as case manager happens when poor coordination of services in the school or community force the one who knows best what the child needs to go after these needs. The downside to parents actively filling this role is that the parent may not know best what is available and where to get it (Allen & Hudd, 1987).

Keeping good documentation can help parents with this part (Autism Outreach Project, 1996; Learning Disabilities Association of America, 1992).

A good paper trail can also serve the parent as program evaluator. Allen and Hudd (1987) admitted that program delivery personnel need to listen better to parents but the parents' evaluation should not be taken as formal due to potential conflict of interests. The husband and wife may be at odds themselves over what is best for the child, or may be too focused on the here-and-now to think about the future. The way this role tends to work in practice is that when advocating to continue a program is called for, parents are the "best advocates" (Allen & Hudd, p. 135). When parents are contesting the appropriateness of a program, however, professionals do not want to hear from them (Urbain & Lakin, 1985).

In addition to the parent roles Allen and Hudd (1987) described, other authors have added a few more. A Kirk and Gallanger study in the early 1970s (as cited by Turnbull & Leonard, 1981) added "scapegoat," "program organizer," "political activist" and "program participant" (p. 37). This study was surprisingly early in calling for moving away from the idea that parents are contributing to the problem and toward the notion that parents can contribute to the solution.

Stoecklin (1994) was not being completely facetious in adding four "advocacy-problem personalities:" "policeman," "lawyer," "dictator," and "Minnie Mouse" (p. 31). By "policeman" she meant a member overly concerned with the laws, legal technicalities, and "catching the district" at fault. The "lawyer," of course, lives to take the school system to due process. "Dictators" are always well prepared, but not

for teamwork. Their point in being on any advocacy group is to "demand things" for their child (p. 31). "Minnie Mouse" is active but goes along with things, fearing repercussions for her child. The district likes her because she is always agreeable.

All humor aside, Turnbull—a special needs parent herself—called for a recognition of the family frustration/exhaustion point, when advocacy supersedes the rest of the parents' priorities (Turnbull, as cited in Allen & Hudd, 1987). This can happen more quickly when parents agree to take on (or feel obliged to get involved in) activities that do not match their strengths. McKerrow (1996) mentioned one principal who suggested that a parent who struggles with writing write an article for some occasion. Even so, there are a few tasks that, no matter how difficult parents find them, should be left to the parents. O'Harra (1991) suggested that explaining the child's disability to him or her is one. Even with this one, though, school psychologists can help (Turnbull & Leonard, 1981).

Levels of Parental Involvement in Schools

Many have written of the link between parental involvement in the school and students' success at school (Diamond, 1994; Epstein, 2003; Griffith, 2000; League and Ford, 1996; Lommerin, 2000; National PTA, 2000; O'Harra, 1991; and the PACER Center, 1995). It affects student achievement, self-concept, sense of independence, and self-regulation. League and Ford claimed students with involved parents set higher goals for themselves than those with less involved parents. In the Foreword to The National Parent Teacher Association's (2000) *Building Successful Partnerships*, Comer flatly stated that the "separation of parent and school is based on a mechanical

model of teaching and learning, wrong and outmoded" (p. vii) because it ignores how important child development is to learning. Clearly, both the school and the student benefit from increased parental involvement. Diamond observed that the positive benefits extend even farther, to the community as a whole. O'Harra got specific, adding that when parents are involved in the school, their child gets a better education.

This conclusion coincides with a study cited by Diamond (1994) that the home has as much influence as the school on student learning, especially if the home and school are collaborating. The PACER Center (1995) flatly stated that improvements happen in special education because parents and professionals strive for them. Kelker (1987) noted that the need for parents and professionals to work together is always cited in the literature concerning treatment of children with disabilities. Unfortunately, as teachers gain more years of experience, they begin to believe that parent involvement is not as important to student success (Diamond). However, Allen and Hudd (1987) pointed out that teachers still expect parents to be interested in what is happening at school and are not sympathetic with parents who are not involved. By the high school years, the best that can be said is that the child has replaced the parent as collaborator with the school (Diamond). However, Kelker (1987) pointed out that the obstacles to home-school communication are worth confronting, since the parents need information and support services and the professionals need the parents' history of the student. Gestwicki (2004) highlighted that teachers' knowledge of the student tends to be in one-year spans, which does not even start until three years old or later.

By contrast, the parents' conception-to-present knowledge of the child cannot be obtained anywhere else.

Considering this dichotomy between home and school, perhaps advocacy burnout is not as easy for the teachers (who are not living it) to understand. In the survey results that Ammer and Littleton (1983) reported, fully 87% of the special education students' parents admitted they are not involved at all at school, although 49% said they would join a special education parent group if one were available; another 14% said they might. Thirty-two percent stated "no one provided any assistance" (Ammer & Littleton, p. 9). Everyone can sense the benefit of involvement; it is tougher to see that many parents end up giving more than they get. All they counted on was advocating for their child, or for more information on whatever disability their child has. A parent's fight, however, often gets generalized to *all* disabilities and *all* special needs families (Allen & Hudd, 1987). This is the "professionalization" of parents that Allen and Hudd warned against and that the PACER Center bases its workshop training schedule upon (Urbain & Lakin, 1985). When parents want to increase their knowledge and involvement, it is easy to overlook the pitfalls of them doing so.

Williams and Chavkin (1989, as cited in Diamond, 1994), described a better way for parents to ease into bigger involvement. They outline seven "basic" components of parent involvement: networking (with other schools and agencies), training, "open and comfortable" two-way communication, partnering, written policy, administrative support, and a way of evaluating success (p. 25). Similarly, Epstein

(2003) focused on six types of parent involvement as a framework for home-school-community interaction:

1. Collaborating with the community by both parents and schools together
2. Including parents in "school decisions;" developing "parent leaders"
3. Learning at home (information and ideas for families to consider and use)
4. Volunteering (recruiting and organizing parental help in the schools)
5. Developing effective two-way, or even three-way, communication
6. Creating conditions in homes that are conducive to learning (excerpted from pp. 359-366).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) noted that this "offers a theoretical framework for parent and community engagement in school as well as practical applications, guidelines, strategies, and templates to help schools create successful programs for partnerships with parents" (p. 250). To her credit, Epstein highlighted not only the benefits of implementing each type of involvement, but also admitted to the challenges of each. Additionally, Epstein mentioned some sample practices evident for each type: from home visits by school personnel (as a type six involvement) to integrated home and school service to the community (type one). Coordinated recycling efforts were an example type one activity Epstein mentioned.

Not surprisingly, parents who enjoy school advocacy are always stunned at the low level of parent involvement in public education, deriding those less involved as taking on parenting as "spectator sport" (McKerrow, 1996, p. 16). Although such parents may have useful knowledge to pass along to the less involved parents, how

well received these lessons would be from such an opinionated bunch could undercut their utility.

The special education parent advisory committee that is the subject of Diamond's (1994) study devoted much energy to improving parent involvement in special education PAC-sponsored activities. They held not only their monthly business meetings, but also regular social gatherings to try boosting participation. Diamond acknowledged that one reason parents forego involvement is due to their own negative experiences from their school days. It could be denial or parental resistance to labeling (Harry, 1992). Conversely, Diamond offered that some parents may view the certifying label as an "out," so they do not have to deal with the "real problems" in raising their child (p. 10). Diamond also acknowledged, however, that apparent parental apathy could be due to more mundane causes, such as work schedules or logistical matters. McKerrow's description of how difficult four parents (who did not work outside the home) found it merely to stay in touch with each other, and try to stay current on disability issues of mutual concern, accented this point. Diamond's description of the bureaucracy she encountered in just trying to have teachers attend a special education PAC meeting bordered on comical. A major sticking point was that the teachers already were at their union quota of meetings at the school level and were therefore unable to attend such a district level meeting. Also, each school in the district was on a slightly different schedule.

Parents' "Comfort Level" with the School

In many of the sources used in this research—conference presentation summaries more so than journal articles—the idea surfaced that the parents' level of comfort in dealing with their child's school affected the support their family received. How familiar they were with the special education programs available and how they were delivered at the school—how comfortable parents were about simply visiting the school—affected not only their perceptions of their child's success in the special education program, but also their child's progress at school. A lot has been written (Diamond, 1994; Epstein, 2005; Gestwicki, 2004; League & Ford, 1996; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; O'Harra, 1991; PACER Center, 1995) about how a greater parental connection with the school leads to greater student progress (or at least the parents' perception of their child's progress). Gestwicki added that the children also feel more secure when their parents are comfortable with their teachers.

Parents' satisfaction with their child's school situation, and even the more basic feelings about how comfortable they are simply visiting the school, resonated throughout the issues discussed here. Griffith (2000) discussed the school climate as based on subtle "social perceptions" (p. 36). Lommerin (2000) was less subtle about it, indicating it is the school's job to enhance the visiting parent's comfort level. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) also avoided subtlety in highlighting family-school boundaries that promote "relational enmity" and "territorial warfare" (p. xvii, xxi). Lawrence-Lightfoot opens her book about parent/teacher conferences with a story about how only at her school did her otherwise sure and decisive parents seem "off-

balance and reluctant" (p. xv). Diamond (1994) put forth that the parents' comfort level is important because people "frequent places where they feel comfortable" (p. 17). Acknowledging how the "unwelcoming environment" of some schools—especially as security concerns increase—may be giving parents the message to stay away, the Nation Parent Teacher Association (2000) recommended setting aside a place in the school for parents to use. Many teachers and administrators, however, work in an opposite direction, unwittingly shrinking the parent comfort zone because "they feel they must portray an image of condescending professionalism . . . that often makes parents feel uncomfortable" (Diamond, p. 17). However, Summers et al. (2005) view this reaction less as condescension and more as the professionals' own lack of comfort in relating to families. Chavkin (2005) pointed out that very few teaching and education administration programs require course work in dealing with parents. She added that only 22 states address working with families in their teaching standards. Diamond asserted that parents would prefer that educators be more personal than professional and McKerrow (1996) agreed, adding that especially when there is a problem, parents prefer direct contact with the teacher and principal. McKerrow also noted that schools make the relationship worse by viewing with suspicion or even hostility any outside services that parents enlist. Kelker (1987) observed that, especially with children diagnosed with emotional disturbance disorder, many school employees viewed the parents as the source of the problem, or at best, a barrier to the solution.

Harry (1992) conceded that when educators focus on legal compliance rather than on collaboration, parents are more likely to feel like “consent givers” than partners (p. 123). Mizell (1979) acknowledged that if Title I did not require parent advisory committees, administrators would not have them since many “do not want to be bothered with an effective PAC” (p. 81), or want to consider its input as “only” advisory (p. 83). The perception becomes that the professionals hold all of the power and the parents become alienated. The Nation Parent Teacher Association (2000) acknowledged that there are many barriers to overcome, mainly in what is lacking on both sides: trust, respect, time, and money. Raabe (2000) admitted that one reason Arizona began the Parent Information Network was to create for school systems and special needs families a “comfortable environment for becoming acquainted with each other” (p. 134). The LDAA (1992) closed with an admonition to both sides to keep lines of communication open. Stoecklin (1994) closed her manual by suggesting that parents develop a relationship with the school by sharing family-relevant information, keeping good records, and asking for clarification when they are not clear about anything.

League and Ford (1996) took the position that aside from dual working schedules, the parents’ discomfort level at school is the main barrier to family involvement in the educational process. A problem early on is that the onus is on the teacher to create a comfort zone, often without any gains being realized until much later (League & Ford). The PACER Center’s handbook (1995) attempted to balance this early communication burden by giving parents sound advice such as keeping in

touch with the teacher by phone, note, or visit and specifically asking how their child is doing with class work and with other children. The handbook suggested being a good listener, but also being able to express your feelings clearly. Harry (1992) cautioned that while parents can and will disagree with the school, they should not let the disagreement shut down communication. Instead, the LDAA (1992) advised settling disagreements by focusing on the main concerns, describing problems in writing, and by staying nonconfrontational. O'Harra (1991) added that the best education of students begins with cooperation between parents and teachers.

In their study of the father's role in the special education process, League and Ford (1996) observed that most fathers are disappointed with the schools' efforts and timeliness in communicating with them. Fathers in the study felt that the schools did not reach out, instead leaving communication up to parents. This was one of three themes League and Ford discovered in analyzing participant interviews, the other two being the fathers' view of their role in the educational process and their level of satisfaction with the school and its practices.

School World Versus Parents' World

The divide between how teachers deal with students and how parents deal with their children is based on what each side thinks they are preparing the children to do and be. The Autism Outreach Project's *Advocating for Your Child* (1996) pamphlet indicated a main difference between the advocate and the school system is that the advocate's commitment to the child's welfare is long term. School settings tend to be limited to academics while parents take the broader view that they are getting their

children ready for the world. This is advocacy, especially when children cannot verbalize what they need for themselves (O'Harra, 1991). It is academic, but it is also social, interpersonal preparation (Solomon et al., 2001). Social development takes place at school, of course, but it is not part of the formal curriculum. More likely, it is self-taught as part of the student's intrapersonal identity development. This sense of self and sense of community is intertwined, according to McKerrow (1996). So it often causes resentment when schools think they know better than families and communities do what is best for the children.

One way to avoid these kinds of confrontation is by having school personnel and parents work together on community boards and school committees. It opens the eyes of educators to the parents' world view and helps them see parents that do care about and value public education. Such involvement also helps each parent see his or her own child (and the disability) in a more accepting light. If they do not reach the point of considering the handicap "normal," they will at least get a sense that they are not alone (Solomon et al., 2001). One reality educators are likely to see is that parental involvement with the school is mainly the mother's domain. Solomon et al. acknowledged that gender imbalance is always a problem in school-related groups and Urbain and Lakin (1985) stated that women are "the preponderant sex at PACER workshops" (p. 24). Getting more fathers involved, however, is not as critical a problem as is supporting special education students. Stoecklin (1994) quoted Louis Pasteur in supplying a focus for parents and schools working together: look at a child

with “affection for what he is now and respect for what he may one day become” (p. 13).

Conflict Resolution

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the last two issues addressed, conflict management is frequently discussed in the parent/school literature. Parents’ comfort level at school and their world view versus the school’s only hint at a serious byproduct of increased parental involvement in schools. The need to recognize differences in point of view and work through variations in plans of action cannot be swept under the school administration rug. Two of the biggest problems with conflict resolution are that people tend to learn it the hard way and there are not many who are naturally skilled at it. This is certainly true for parents. Both Diamond (1994) and Turnbull and Leonard (1981) also point out how little time the teachers’ preparation or the school psychologists’ preparation programs devoted to the even more general topic of working with parents. Harry (1992) attempted to bridge this learning gap by reminding us that truth is not one-sided, so an open and even-handed dialog is needed. She cautioned that when school professionals start from an adversarial position, this is guaranteed to make parents either passive or confrontational. Harry noted how quickly what started as a concern for the child’s program can degenerate into a power restructuring concern over who will be rewarded and who will be deprived. Contrary to this, the Nation Parent Teacher Association (2000) recommended that schools and parents should express confidence in their ability to solve problems together.

One of O'Harra's (1991) main points was that advocacy should not begin when problems arise, but intervene early while the issue is germinating. Since advocacy is designed to stop problems from developing by settling issues early and at the lowest working levels, O'Harra's reminder should not need stating. However, the slow, quiet growth of issues can often prevent advocacy groups from becoming aware of them until the issue has festered into a messy problem. Lucky and Gavilan (1987) observed that issues have come to their special education advisory panel only after intraschool channels—or outside agency and individual school channels—did not work. Sometimes the issues surfaced in parent/school meetings around the system, then were referred to the panel for recommended resolution by the superintendent of schools (Lucky & Gavilan).

Raabe (2000) mentioned that one of the stated goals of the Arizona Parents Information Network is to serve as a "regional consultant" on "nonadversarial conflict resolution" (p. 138). Even before an issue leaves the school building, though, Turnbull and Leonard (1981) offered a great suggestion for curbing conflict: have someone at the IEP meetings—probably either the school psychologist or special education teacher—designated to answer any parent questions, clarify the proceedings, and explain the jargon. One interesting finding from their research was that in schools that have been explicit about assigning this duty, the parents tend to talk more at IEP meetings. McKerrow (1996) emphasized the importance of having someone introduce the other team members to the parents and explain their roles. The default alternative

is to make the parents feel "out of the loop" by failing to explain to them who is "in the loop" (p. 21).

Background on Special Education Parent Advisory Committees

Bond and Keys (1993) characterized as typical the birth and evolution of the Midwest Association of Retarded Citizens (MARC). MARC was formed in 1959 by a group of parents of children with mental retardation out of the parents' frustration with a lack of services. The parents pooled their resources and began to provide the services themselves. They grew, incorporated, and began looking for outside agencies to join them. By the 1970s, their fundraising and other operations were formalized, bureaucratic, and large. Then the in-fighting began, with the parents clearly on one side and all who were not parents on the other.

In Bond and Keys' (1993) history, it would appear introducing nonparents into the mix introduced the problems. However, Diamond's (1994) special education parent advisory committee went too far the other way. Diamond's special education PAC was created at the same time the special education department began operating. It started with only one or two parents and four or five school system members running one or two activities per year, which they planned and executed without any outside community input, or even any input from individual schools. They did not understand why they repeatedly ran into communication and attendance problems. The source of these problems seems too obvious to point out, but somewhat in their defense McKerrow (1996) pointed out that rejection of "outsiders" is common for both school administrators and parents, despite the advice that the best working advisory

councils balance parent participation with that of community/local business representatives, retirees, human services agency representatives, and educators (Anderson, Carter, Cote, Gilles, Kaufmann, Manzo, O'Keefe, & Rubin, 1980).

Accomplishments of Special Education Parent Advisory Committees

To finish with the success stories, the special education advisory committee that Lucky and Gavilan (1987) wrote of had been operating since 1980. In its first seven years, the group interceded to shorten bus routes for special education students, lobbied Florida legislators and drafted rewording for upcoming legislation, oversaw the uniform delivery of adaptive physical education around the district, and set graduation requirements for special education students (Lucky & Gavilan). This group also advocated for minority students in special education in two ways.

1. They urged the superintendent to end the practice some schools in predominantly minority neighborhoods were engaging in of moving special education programs (with mostly white students) to their schools solely to make the overall racial percentages look better.
2. They helped to end over-identification of black students as mentally retarded when these students should have been diagnosed as either learning disabled or not special education eligible.

This latter problem is not restricted to the district of which Lucky and Gavilan wrote. Williams and Goodale's work (1983) focused on the problem of minority overrepresentation in special education and the United States Department of Education and Office of Civil Rights continue to track these percentages to this day. In Lucky

and Gavilan's case, the advisory committee standardized the diagnostic testing instruments across grade spans and across the schools in their system.

The first big challenge for Face to Face—the advocacy/advisory group of which McKerrow (1996) wrote—occurred when they were able to intervene (in lieu of a due process hearing) between a family wanting to use an outside evaluation and a principal unwilling to accept the diagnosis the independent evaluator developed. The special education PAC Diamond (1994) researched had more modest successes. In fact, the activities might be termed "successful" only because they took place at all. The pizza fundraiser made little money, but it did expose a lot of bureaucratic and communication problems in the system. Their ice cream social happened as planned, but had to be "pulled off by core committee members" (p. 43).

Mizell (1979) offered more general advice about what has worked for parent advisory committees: be clear about what the members are supposed to do and how they might do it. He even suggested having formal job descriptions for PAC members and a board with elected, rotating officers. Mizell's main advice, though, was to have the membership adopt specific programs and go for results they can see. Turnbull and Turnbull (2001) highlighted eight "obligations" of reliable home-school alliances. Among these are:

- knowing oneself,
- knowing families,
- building on strengths,
- "promoting family choices,"

- "communicating positively," and
- "warranting trust and respect" (p. 58).

Methods Most Commonly Employed to Study Special Education Parent Groups

The Solomon et al. (2001) study of what parents found helpful about belonging to mutual support groups used a mixed methods approach. Their quantitative piece was based on results from Elliott and Wexler's Session Impacts Scale, a Likert scale instrument to quantify "helpfulness" for areas such as "satisfaction" and "group climate" (p. 117). This instrument is widely used in clinical settings. In addition to this quantitative instrument, the researchers used focus group discussions and open-ended questions to understand more fully the participants' perspectives on mutual help (Solomon et al.). Their analysis used the constant comparative method, creating categories until all data were categorized. The three highest level categories arrived at were: parent control/agency in the world, belonging to a community, and experiencing self change (Solomon et al.).

McKerrow's (1996) "Advocacy and Ideology" conference presentation described her multiple methods of data collection and analysis. She used participant observations, interviews, and an analysis of documents collected over five years (McKerrow). McKerrow triangulated results among these three data sets and tried to supply participant anonymity. She was the special education director at the start of the study and an elementary school principal when it ended. Interestingly, McKerrow mentioned without explanation that the special education director who replaced her declined to be interviewed, as did her superintendent of schools.

Bond and Keys (1993) used both individual interviews and focus groups to collect data from 16 people involved in the Midwest Association of Retarded Citizens (9 parents, 4 community members, the immediate past president, a past executive director, and a long-term staffer for the organization). League and Ford (1996) used a focus group approach for their study of the fathers' involvement in their children's special education programs. The authors did not always have the whole group together, but worked with discussions in smaller groups. These talks were generally "focused topic," after starting with a "grand tour" question (p. 11). They did not use individual interviews, but did note that the participants included one Hispanic man, four black men, and four white men. The authors triangulated the resulting transcripts with a "reflexive journal" (p. 12) they kept during data collection and their field notes (League and Ford).

Koroloff and Friesen (1991) used a mass-mailing survey instrument (which they also distributed in a few other ways), then worked with the 966 responses they received to compare and contrast members of support groups with nonmembers. They admit to a possible biasing factor in that they obviously heard from only those motivated enough to return the survey (Koroloff & Friesen). Even so, they first separated the 315 who were in support groups from the 519 who were not. (The remainder of the 966 respondents did not answer this question and so were not used.) The authors then attempted to distinguish these two groups further: by gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, and race (Koroloff & Friesen).

Diamond (1994) was studying methods of increasing special education parent involvement in both social and informational sessions sponsored by the special education PAC, so her method was unique. Diamond's methods section concerns how she attempted to get six new parents to help plan and work a fundraiser during the school year and get at least six parents to attend each monthly special education PAC meeting. Diamond does not indicate how or why six parents became the goal for each. She wanted to measure an increase in parent involvement over the course of the study, but did not design or give baseline data (Diamond).

Most Frequently Cited Authors

Turnbull (solo, with spouse, or with others) not only surfaced many times on searches of parent advisory and special education parent topics, but also this name was cited most by the other authors in this literature review. The Turnbulls are parents of a child with a disability. Aside from Turnbull, few names stand out among the authors. Joyce Epstein is cited often in the parental involvement literature; however, parent advisory committee literature in general—and special education PAC references in particular—appear to be the domain of organizations. The Concord (Massachusetts) Special Education Parent Advisory Committee formed in 1998 and was the first to have a website: http://www.concordspedpac.org/. Their role is IEP- and initial evaluation-advocacy, parent education, and access to "professional" help. The PACER (Parent Advocacy Coalition for Education Rights) Center in Minnesota has published many pamphlets and longer manuals on special education parent/school interaction as an outgrowth of their many workshops given for and by special

education parents. Cassidy, Pratt, Brocklehurst, and Granzow (1986) wrote about parents training parents, a goal of CAUSE (the Citizens Alliance to Uphold Special Education, Inc.). Michigan-based CAUSE is funded federally through the Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services with a mission of providing support by improving program delivery. The CAUSE website (http://www.causeonline.org/) links to information on legislation pending and also to parent advisory committees throughout Michigan. Raabe (2000) wrote in detail about the Arizona Parent Information Network. There is also a National Parent Information Network (NPIN)—run by the Education Resources Information Center—with many state affiliates (http://www.npin.org/about.html). Although the role of the NPIN is mainly informational, its work does delve into advocacy and even advisory roles.

Summary

On the topic most closely related to this research—the members' perceptions of the special education PAC—there is not much published. There is, however, a lot on the related topics of parental support, parental advocacy, and parental involvement in schools. Also explored were pertinent special education laws concerning parents' rights/responsibilities, home-school conflict resolution, and schools' obligations to parents/families. These issues are all part of the larger topic of what concerns need to be the focus of an effective special education PAC.

It is difficult to isolate the impact of support and advocacy groups on advisory committees. The value for parents in belonging to mutual support groups is not merely in the information sharing that occurs, but also in the high levels of cohesion

that result from belonging to such groups. For the parents of children with disabilities, such groups offer many coping mechanisms. Advocacy groups tend to be more formalized in their support of parents. The main function of such groups is to help the people who know the child best to become the primary advocates for that child, to the extent that the parents are willing and able to do so.

One key difference about special education law is that parental involvement is a required component of the educational planning process. Parents have rights, but they also have responsibilities to become their child's primary advocates. With such an advocacy role prescribed, as the parents begin to explore what their child needs from the school system, a broader kind of advocacy follows for many. From this advocacy base, a parental advisory group can begin to function. However, one huge problem for advisory committees is that most parents are unable or unwilling to make the leap from advocating for their own child to advising the school system on what would be best for most children. To make matters worse, parents often feel uncomfortable in the schools and school systems tend to do little to increase parental comfort levels. However, even when the schools systems do make efforts in this regard (as with the instances cited in Diamond, 1994), the resulting involvement from parents does not improve noticeably.

The conflict at the root of low incidents of parental involvement in schools is broad. Schools tend to be academically and year-to-year focused while the parents tend toward life-skills development and long-range advocacy for their children. Especially in special education, resolving this conflict begins with school and home

connections that start well before the child is enrolled and continue through that child's training for specific employment. The need to invite community "outsiders" to the school and home dyad was cited by several authors. Doing so makes the issue resolution more than a school's concern, or even a school system's.

The review of literature supports the need to gather further information related to the impact of groups such as the special education PAC on a school systems' program delivery. Parental perspectives are incorporated by survey in many instances, but interviews with parent participants in the schools are rare. Especially needed is a deeper understanding of parent members' perceptions about the difference such PAC's make, not so much in the life of the school as in their own lives.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter describes the research design and how specific elements of that design were used in this study. This chapter also describes the participants and process used to choose them, as well as the justification for this process. The data collection procedures section of this chapter describes the method and process used to gather and record information. In this chapter, the process used to analyze data, as well as the measures taken to ensure trustworthiness, are also explained. In this study, a mixed methods approach is used to research special education parents' perceptions about how successfully the special education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) has been meeting its three main goals:

- to meet special education students' needs at the parent-to-teacher level
- to improve program delivery across the school system
- to act as a school system/community liaison.

Research Design Used

This is a mixed methods case study. It used participant interviews that combine both phenomenological and guided interviewing techniques as the primary qualitative components. While acknowledging that we can know what we have experienced (Phillips & Burbules, 2000), phenomenology makes no positivistic, absolute claims about what is true, or even reasonable. Moran and Mooney (2002)

characterized phenomenology as a way of seeing rather than as a set of doctrines; it is the unprejudiced, descriptive study of whatever appears to consciousness in the way it appears. Merleau-Ponty (1942/2002) contended that complex human behaviors could not be explained by rigid stimulus/response mechanisms, but could be understood through phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenological methods offer a way of describing a set of behaviors too complex for distilled experimentation, the essential structures of pure consciousness (Moran, 2002). Although phenomena as individually experienced are researched, phenomenological research is not reductionist in nature (Merleau-Ponty), but holistic. Since perceptual possibilities can be endless even for an individual participant's experience, Moustakas (1994) noted that complete evidence of a phenomenon's existence is too much for which to strive. He suggested instead that we work toward "adequate evidence" (p. 94).

Merriam (1998) described a case study as an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit" (p. xiii). Parent-member perceptions about the special education PAC's initial efforts in the Rush County School System define this case study. Maxwell (1996) noted that a single case study is appropriate when the case is unique. What is unique about the Rush County Special Education PAC is that it was still in its early stages during the investigation.

After the second full year of special education PAC activities (that is, in the summer and fall of 2005), I conducted and recorded nine phenomenological, guided interviews with charter member parents who remain active members of the PAC.

("Charter" and "active" are further described in the "Participants" section of this chapter.) A quantitative component was employed to help verify the results, making this research QUAL + quan after the model described by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) and Creswell (2005). The all-capitalized "QUAL" indicates that qualitative research is dominant and the lowercase "quan" indicates that the quantitative aspects are less dominant. Transcripts of individual interviews were the primary raw data source. These verbal accounts of the members' experiences are as close as we can come to the true raw data for this phenomenological study, namely the members' actual, lived experiences. Secondary data were drawn from the results of the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) Parent Surveys for Rush County from 2002 to 2005, the year before the special education PAC was created until after its second full year in service.

The "+" in the mixed methods equation above indicates that the two types of data are simultaneously gathered and analyzed, rather than sequentially (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). These surveys have been done in the spring of each year since 2002, so this less dominant data collection could be more accurately described as concurrent with the primary data collection interviews. The CIMP statistics were used to enhance primarily qualitative research. Though the data were gathered concurrently, all data collected were analyzed simultaneously. (See the "Data Analysis Procedures" section at the end of this chapter). Figure 3, the design map for this research, graphically depicts how qualitative and quantitative components go into this research to bolster the data collection by simultaneous triangulation and, thereby, strengthen the analysis.

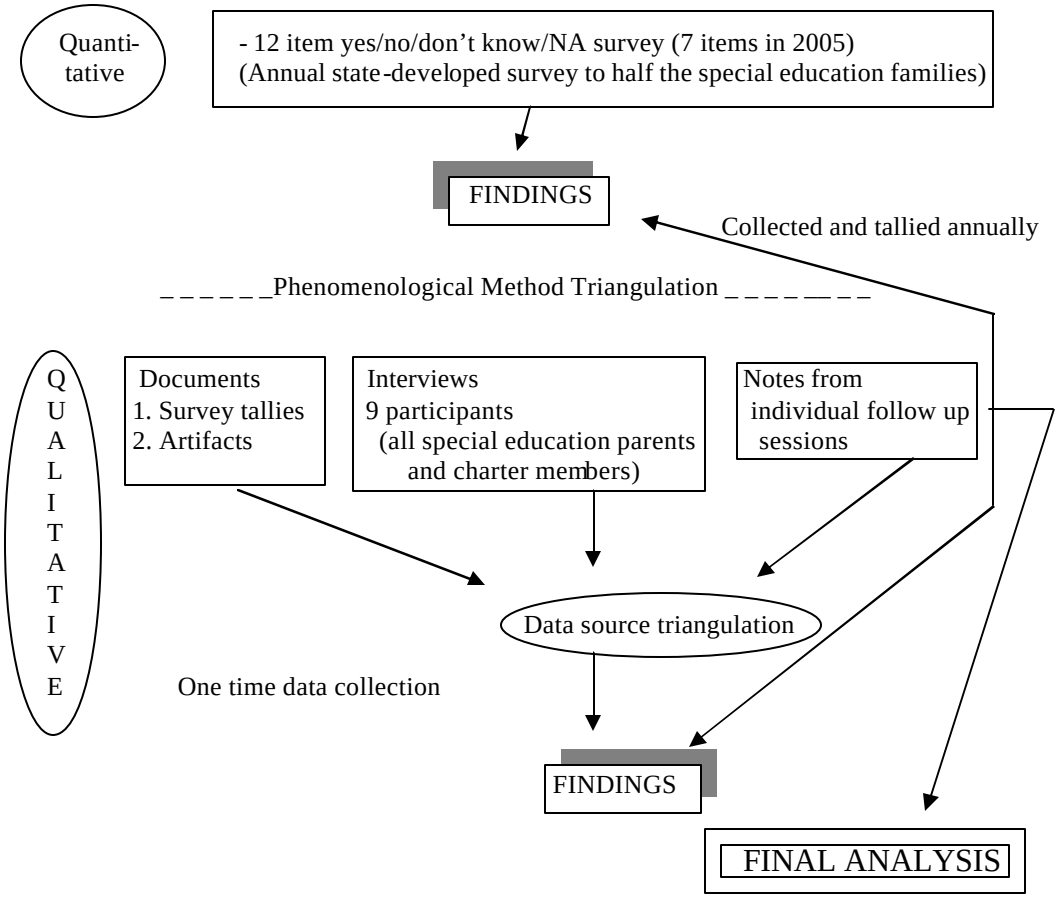

Figure 3. Research Design Map

Assumptions and Rationale for a Mixed Methods Study

Ontological and epistemological assumptions are based in this being a primarily phenomenological research project. Reality depends on what is true for each participant. In phenomenological research, the knower is fused to what is known. Brantlinger et al. (2005) indicated that phenomenological qualitative research "studies the meanings people make of their lived experiences" (p. 197). The researcher works to be detached from the experience being researched, favoring interpretations that are grounded in the participants' descriptions and eschewing analyses that stray from the experiences as described. The primarily phenomenological approach to this mixed methods research is a smooth fit for a special education topic. Brantlinger et al. claimed that "by focusing on participants' personal meanings, qualitative research 'gives voice' to people who have been historically silenced or marginalized" (p. 199).

In grounded research, the researcher often begins with a point of view that provides a direction for approaching empirical instances (Blumer, 1969). The grounding assumption for this research was that although special education has political and pragmatic roles to fill in public education, it suffers identity diffusion from being compartmented school to school. The identification of parents with their child's school (rather than with the special education program) and the power sharing arrangements worked out by the special education director and school principals present many obstacles to overcome to meet the needs of special education students at this direct teacher-to-student (and parent) level. How well the special education PAC

overcomes these obstacles will determine how much of an impact the organization can have as a school system/community liaison.

The interviews in this research addressed the participants' perceptions about the special education department meeting special education students' needs at the parent-to-teacher level, improving program delivery, and acting as a school system/community liaison, the experience of special education parental involvement by the PAC's charter members. The change in responses to the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Program (CIMP) parent surveys addressed the PAC's success with these same three goals from a larger sample of Rush County special education parents. Despite the limited utility of the CIMP survey (as described in the first chapter), using a multi-year span to track changes—coupled with qualitative data from parent interviews—revealed how the parents feel the special education department is doing at attaining the PAC's three main goals. This was the main assumption for the research described. A secondary assumption was that phenomenological, guided interviews with the PAC charter member parents was the most appropriate method for identifying their experience of parental involvement in special education.

The Phenomenological Framework

Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003)—the father of phenomenological psychology—asserted that phenomenology provides its own foundation, with "the world as primary embodiment of rationality" (p. xxiii). Actually, phenomenology as a movement started with the philosophy of Edmund Husserl in nineteenth century Europe, and

evolved in the early twentieth century through the work of Heidegger and existentialism of Kierkegaard (Merleau-Ponty). Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) explained that the phenomenological approach is "grounded in the philosophical traditions of existentialism and phenomenology and employs dialogue as its major method of inquiry" (p. vii). Senge (1990) indicated that the word "dialog" comes from the two Greek words "dia" and "logos," which translate as "a flow of meaning" (p. xiii). Gadamer (1976) added that the meaning of "logos" in the original Greek is closer to reasoning or thinking, although he admits the "primary meaning of this word is language" (p. 59). Dialog in phenomenology means second-person accounts aimed at meaning making as individuals describe a phenomenon. Gadamer (1977) and Thomas and Pollio (2002) emphasized the importance of hermeneutics in phenomenology, specifically, the need for creating meaning for what is not understood initially. This is not the third-person philosophy constructed around strangers or even the first-person psychology at work with the solitary client. It gets at realizations made, perhaps for the first time, in the conversation as it unfolds (Pollio et al.). The experience of an event is "rendered in experience-near terms that can be understood by others not in the original encounter" (Pollio et al., p. 29). All knowledge is constructed in and from this social discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) because, as Gadamer observed, "speaking does not belong in the sphere of the 'I" but in the sphere of the 'We' " (p. 65).

It is assumed that the centrally relevant issues resonate from one interview to the next. A common ground should be discovered without being coerced, and the

figure/ground relationship of what pushes to the front or recedes to the background is thereby clarified. For phenomenology, the four grounds are corporeality, temporality, relationality, and spatiality (Van Manen, 1990). To put these more simply: self, time, others, and the world (respectively). The themes discovered appear as figures against one or more of these grounds (H. R. Pollio, unpublished lecture notes, October 5, 2004). Merleau-Ponty (1942/2002) emphasized that the figure and ground taken together constitute "a whole which has a meaning" and allows for "intellectual analysis" (p. 224). This holistic view matters because the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. This is where phenomenology and Gestalt psychology merge. Where they diverge is that in phenomenology, although the commonality of themes is important to capture, retaining the uniqueness of individual experience is equally important.

Lived Experience

Phenomenological research focuses on the shared experiences of the participants and how participants individually interpret these experiences (Merriam, 1998; Moran, 2002; Patton, 2002). Such a study seeks to interpret everyday experiences, emphasizing the perspectives of the participants, with initial data generated from reflections on personal experience (Campbell-Evans, 1992; Creswell, 1998; Van Manen, 1990). In phenomenological research, the researcher is intimately connected to the phenomenon being studied and seeks to uncover the essence of the phenomenon based on descriptions provided by those living the experience (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996; Merriam, 1998; Van Manen, 1990). As Giorgi (1985) points out,

phenomenology supplies a method for doing research on human phenomena as lived experience.

"Reality"

Silver (1983) defined empirical theory as a "unique way of perceiving reality . . . a thought system that reaches beyond superficial experience to reveal a deeper dynamic" (p. 4). The observer's point of view is examined or applied through an intimate level of observations and interactions in a specific social setting. Wertz (1986) added that reality is never one truth, but a blend of perceptions that gradually get clearer for us. This temporal view of reality is a logical follow up to Husserl's idea (as cited in Stewart, 1970) that the present always includes the immediate past and the immediate future. We may drop faulty evidence in favor of stronger interpretations later, but all perspectives matter at some point and continue doing so. Just as the present is really a continuous series of interconnected temporalities, reality is continuous and not a point frozen in time. Initially, Husserl understood phenomenology as descriptive psychology (Moran, 2002). He expounded on the 1870s work of Brentano, who distinguished between mental and physical phenomena (Brentano, 1874/1997). Brentano attempted to clarify an "exact science" that would arrive at some truth by merging what is found by experimentation with what is known from personal experience (Moran, 2002). Husserl's tactic was to use the individual's words themselves. He viewed phenomenology as akin to mathematics and science, with the eidetic insights supplying the corollary to scientific precision. Even numbers and shapes, after all, are based in ideas. However, the words can get in the way and

oversimplify complex emotions. Also, it is difficult to separate individual reality from individual judgments.

In her explanation of how individuals experience reality, Silver (1983) acknowledged our difficulty in just experiencing "raw sensations" (p. 4), accustomed as we are to naming and interpreting events. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003) admitted that it is difficult to get at direct perception—the world of actions/reactions, that precedes knowledge—noting that even with geography we are rarely dropped into the middle of nowhere without a preset idea of what is a forest, a prairie, or a river. "Language intervenes at every stage of recognition by providing possible meanings for what is in fact seen" (p. 151). Fisher (as cited in Merleau-Ponty 1942/2002)—the English translator of Merleau-Ponty's first book—highlighted the intrusion of the words themselves, calling phenomenology "a philosophy of language" (p. ix).

Understanding can exist in preperception, but language intrudes when we have to explain what exactly we understand (Dilthey, as cited in Moran, 2002). Phenomenology attempts to describe the meaning of everyday experiences as they are experienced, prereflectively and even preverbally (Van Manen, 1990). When an idea is shared, it goes from a preperception to a perception, from a sensation to an act of intellect, making it possible for us to communicate a unique experience from a shared world of existence in which the experience is rediscovered together (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). This is possible because of the "finitude" (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 329) of time as past experience. Husserl saw memories as the nexus between lived experiences and the temporal break between these events having happened and being

recreated in our heads when called to mind for later conversations. Consider how when we relay an event that made us angry or sad, we actually (both mentally and physiologically) become angry or sad during the retelling. Van Manen (1990) explained this as the difference between recalling the event and reliving it. Even so, most people are capable of separating what they remember from what they imagine. The ability of humans to freely imagine how they wish some or all of an event had gone instead of how it actually did complicates our ability to purely relive an experience. However, neither Merleau-Ponty nor Heidegger went as far as Husserl did in holding that the experience could be described independently of the one who experienced it, or even of the world in which the event occurred. Our individual experiences are limited to the place we are and the body we have.

Phenomenological researchers reject the notion that experience can be isolated from the person. Although deductive theory works in the world of mathematics and logic, it does not hold up in the world of relationships and experiences. Merriam (1998) noted that the qualitative investigator, as primary instrument of data collection and analysis, "assumes an inductive stance" (p. 17) in striving to derive meaning from the data. Brantlinger et al. (2005) acknowledged the inductive process in qualitative research, the "reasoning from specific to general" (p. 196). However, these authors held that qualitative research can be deductive also. They offered as an example of qualitative research that reasons from general to specific instances in which the researcher might have an idea about how a certain life event plays out for people. He then recruits participants known to have gone through the experience, examining

individual cases "to document what was conjectured" (p. 197). Wertz (1986) did not agree that phenomenological research is deductive, but observed that it is not truly inductive, either. He described it as "eidetic," noting that although the researcher does derive meaning from the data holistically, this meaning discovery is never a one-time epiphany. It is generated piecemeal after many fresh looks at the data. Meaning is always context-related; there can be no "meaning-in-itself" (Wertz, p. 198). Interview data are context and phenomenon dependent and researchers must work from the words themselves to discover the insights therein.

Phenomenological Grounding

The phenomenological method is philosophically and existentially grounded. It is similar to, but not the same as grounded theory. What is unique about grounded theory is that it is "usually 'substantive' rather than formal or 'grand' theory" (Merriam, 1998, p. 17). By "substantive," Merriam means that the theory's referent is an everyday-world situation; this is how the theory is "grounded." According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 17), phenomenological or interpretive research uses a "loosely structured" grounded approach to understand important distinctions and patterns in members' meanings. Both grounded theory and phenomenology use interviewing rather than observation to collect data (Moustakas, 1994). Where phenomenology diverges from grounded theory is that grounded theory's aim is to arrive at a general theory with a specific, practical application. Phenomenological research's aim is to describe the participants' experience of an event so that others might understand it as the participants do (Brantlinger et al., 2005). The conceptual

framework and important research questions become clear gradually (Miles & Huberman).

The approach may be loosely structured, but the phenomenological investigation itself is carefully structured. Van Manen (1990) admitted that being explicit about what are the essences of phenomena is the most difficult task. Thomas and Pollio (2002) call phenomenology's four grounds the "major existential grounds of human existence" (p. 4).

Bracketing

The phenomenological approach also requires that researchers set aside what they know about the phenomenon under investigation and enter instead into the life-world of the interviewee (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). This is why Merleau-Ponty called phenomenology a "transcendental philosophy" that places in abeyance any assertions that arise, "the better to understand them" (p. vii). Giorgi (1985) noted that this method works with naïve descriptions of personal experiences from everyday life, which is as close as we can get to someone else's actual experience. Becker (1992) added that phenomenologists have to believe that their participants are living their lives the best way they can. Kvale (1996) noted that while the phenomenological approach necessitates the same rich, thick descriptions required of all qualitative work, the themes the interviewer presents must also be "presuppositionless" (p. 33) as what is relevant from the interviewee's life world is uncovered. Merleau-Ponty added a caution in this regard: the interviewer must avoid the "illusion of the proofreader" (p. 23); that is, limit himself to the words themselves without interpolation or conjecture.

Merleau-Ponty also admitted the difficulty in doing this. Especially when the interviewer is seeing what he thinks he knows, the temptation to fill in the gaps—to project—is great. Even so, as is true with historical events and our analysis of them, the experience itself is so married to the one who lived it that the two cannot be thought of in isolation.

A Whole Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

Phenomenology led to Gestalt psychology (Pollio et al., 1997) in which the individual "meaning units" are not interpreted in isolation but as parts of the whole phenomenon (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 35). That is, the researcher must take care to select significant segments that fit the whole experience and are not limited to only certain elements. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003) described phenomenology as the "study of essences" (p. vii). For Merleau-Ponty, however, these essences had no abstractions about them, only real-world, time-and-place contexts. He goes so far as to reject science, noting that perception is not a science of the world, nor even deliberate support of a position. Pollio et al. added, however, that the purpose of phenomenological research "is not to replace scientific observation with humanistic analysis but to provide an additional perspective on significant human questions" (p. vii). Perception "is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them" (Merleau-Ponty, p. xi). The whole phenomenon can be reflected upon and understood only after the fact of its existence is made clear. That we experience the world from our own point of view is inescapable. This is what Giorgi (1985) meant when he pointed out that the psychology underlying phenomenology makes it a

"human science" rather than a natural science (p. viii). Van Manen (1990) described a human science as one of personal engagement. It looks not prospectively or even introspectively, but retrospectively at what goes on in the natural situations of everyday life. The researcher seeks to answer not only what the lived experience is like, but also what is the significance of this experience.

Phenomenological Validity

Walcott's (1990a) alignment of the "validity" used in testing and measurement with the "understanding" (pp. 144-146) he is proposing for qualitative research gets at this phenomenological perspective. It is a better fit for the "credibility" and "transferability" that Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) see as the qualitative corollaries to quantitative research's internal and external validity (respectively). In educational and psychological testing, credibility aligns with "content validity" (Gall et al., 1996) and transferability aligns with "construct validity" (Messick, 1975, pp. 955-957). However, for Walcott the trouble with qualitative results is that there is "no single, 'correct' interpretation, nothing scientific to measure that tells us anything important" (p. 144). In a different source, Walcott (1990b) pointed out the danger of having as data only "solid ('thick,' whatever that is) description" (p. 29). Walcott's fear was that many researchers might tend to overanalyze as a way of promoting a theory or theories they have already rather than limiting themselves to ones more closely derived from the data analysis. Wolcott's (1990a) point was that it is not one clear bit of knowledge that we are trying to discover with qualitative work, but a broader understanding of the subject of the research. This holistic approach suits

phenomenology well. Phenomenological "validity" concerns balancing the methodological concerns (the appropriateness and rigorousness of the methods) with experiential concerns (that is, are the descriptions plausible and illuminating? (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 43). Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 11) equate this kind of validity with "sturdiness," plausibility, and "confirmability." Anfara et al. describe confirmability as the qualitative counterpart to objectivity in quantitative research.

For Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003), thick, rich narrative is necessary because the point is to describe, not to explain. He called phenomenological psychology a "science which is essentially descriptive" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 67). Gaining a clear, comprehensive description of someone's experience is the goal of phenomenological interviewing (Pollio et al., 1997). The interviewer strives for a full description of how the participants experienced the phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). Therefore, Merleau-Ponty promotes always asking the next "What- ?" question in the belief that a clear "what" can be even more useful than the more abstract "Why- ?" To put it more plainly, since everyone's world-view is unique, each reality has to be well described before it can be fully understood by another person. To illustrate his preference for showing rather than telling, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003) turns to the visual arts: "When I see the bright green of one of Cezanne's vases, it does not make me *think* of pottery, it presents it to me" (pp. 384-385). With this research, I attempted the thick, rich description by a thorough use of participants' quotes, to render the experience in their own words.

Participants

The Rush County School System serves a rural southeastern United States county with a 2000 census population of 71,170 (estimated over 77,000 by 2004, according to the U.S. Census website at http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/, retrieved May 7, 2006). The county seat has about 10,000 residents; four other towns have about 5,000 each. Two of these get large temporary populations because they are tourist destinations. Despite a growth rate of 39% (nearly 20,000 permanent residents) during the 1990s, much of Rush County's 600 square miles remains private farm land. Some schools, especially the elementary ones, have been described as being "in the middle of nowhere" or "thirty miles from anywhere" by county teachers and parents.

The 2000 census indicates 97.3 % "white persons" in the county. This is only slightly less true now due to a recent increase in minorities, especially Hispanics and Asians. Even so, the county remains about 96% Caucasian. Among the school population of just over 15,000, 13,700 are in the public school system. There are no public city (or other non-county) school systems within the county, so private school and college enrollments account for the difference between these two totals. The special education population is just over 2,000 students.

Background on the Quantitative Participants

The CIMP survey was distributed annually to at least half of the special education families. The Rush County Special Education count is 2,045 students from 3 to 21 years old as of January 26, 2006. Almost 700 of these are receiving speech and language services (one or two hours per week usually) added on to their primary

general education curriculum. More than 600 students have identified learning disabilities and receive anywhere from 2 to 15 hours of special education help in their classrooms or by pull-out resource room time. The nearly 700 students remaining are those diagnosed with severe disabilities such as autism, deaf-blindness, emotional disturbance, mental retardation, orthopedic impairments, or multiple disabilities. These students receive special education services from 20 to 35 hours per week.

These more than 2,000 students' families are the pool from which Rush County selects its random sample each year. The state asked the school systems to survey at least half of the families of students receiving special education services. Rush County typically distributes about 800 to 1000 surveys and gets back about half of those distributed.

A letter was sent to the director of schools (superintendent) describing the general purpose of the study and how data will be collected and used. This letter was to request permission to conduct this study in this school system (Appendix C).

Background on the Qualitative Participants

The special education PAC has 35 members. This individually counts the seven parent couples who both signed up. Of the remaining 21 members, 15 are mothers of special education students currently enrolled in Rush County Schools. Two are special education fathers and three are grandmothers who are the primary guardians of the school-aged child with disabilities. One is a retired special education teacher who also currently serves as educational surrogate parent for many special education students who are wards of the state. Four are current school system

employees and another is a former teaching assistant in Rush County Special Education. Two members (Participants 5 and 7) were teaching assistants when interviewed and are now special education teachers in Rush County. A member not interviewed is a primary school secretary. I am the fourth. I have included myself in these numbers (Participant 6, a PAC member and employee of the school system), but not my current or previous supervisor. (A new special education director took the job in December 2005.) The special education director attends most PAC functions. However, since one of the primary functions of the committee is to advise the person in this position on issues from the parents' perspective, the director obviously cannot be a part of the PAC.

Thirteen disabling conditions are represented by the membership's children and the range of functionality their children have is wide. The special education PAC has some members whose children are in intellectually gifted programs and others whose children require one-to-one assistance to complete basic life skills. These members have students in 14 of the county's 24 schools. Most schools are represented only once, a few twice. However, seven of the members—two couples and three mother-only members—have a special education child in the same kindergarten to eighth grade elementary school. However, only three of these seven have been to more than one PAC activity. The intermediate and middle grades (third to fifth grade and sixth to eighth, respectively) have the most representation. Only six of the members have students in high school and only three PAC parents have children in the primary grades (kindergarten through second grade). Five of the families have

children in general education and another three have had children graduate with regular diplomas.

The nine interviewed include seven women and two men. All but two are parents of children with disabilities. The range of the disabilities for the children of these nine about matches the range for the PAC membership itself, if not for Rush County Special Education as a whole. One participant is the grandmother to a child with mild disabilities. Another is a surrogate special education parent, who has represented students with a range of disabilities, though emotional disorders are most common for her charges. Five of the nine have children with moderate disabilities. Three of the nine have children with severe disabilities. The severe end of the continuum is overrepresented, since only about ten percent of the county's special education students are in self-contained placements for the entire school day.

Odom et al. (2005) played off of Berliner's (2002) contention that although education research is not like research in the "hard sciences," it is a "hard-to-do science" (Berliner, p. 18). Odom et al. called special education research "hardest of the hardest-to-do science" because of its complexity and the variability of the participants (p. 139). Six of the nine participants grew up elsewhere and moved to Rush County as adults. This two-thirds rate is atypical for most Rush County parents. It is common for children to attend the same schools their parents attended, and sometimes even have the same teacher. (See Table 1 for more detailed information on the participants interviewed).

Table 1: Detailed Background Information on the Participants Interviewed

Num -ber*	Times Quoted	Background Information
1	21	The divorced mother of a high school student who has received special education services in a resource room for most of his career. She also has a daughter in regular education who just started high school.
2	14	The mother of a 15-year-old girl with multiple disabilities. The couple also has a son now out of school, a 17-year old girl at the same school as the child with disabilities, and a younger girl. None of these are or were special education students.
3	20	The grandmother of single mother of three. The daughter and her three children live with the participant and her husband. The two older children attend a K-8 elementary school and the youngest attends the county's early childhood center. One of the two at the elementary school has speech delays and a health impairment. The youngest was suspected of having developmental delays, but did not quality for special education services after a year in the early childhood center.
4	22	The mother of a 17-year-old boy with some verbal ability, but limited social skills. The student demonstrates some unusual fixations and savant memorization skills. He started school in a private Montessori placement, then continued his public education in a regular kindergarten. He gradually moved from resource to CDC placements over the course of his career. The couple has a girl 8 years older than their son. She was in general education all through school.
5	21	The mother of an only child, a 14-year old eighth grader with mild learning disabilities and attention deficits. The participant has been a substitute teacher since her son started primary school. More recently, she became a fulltime teaching assistant, and is now a CDC teacher.
6	15	This is me. See "Role of the Researcher" later in this chapter for more.
7	16	The mother of a 14-year-old girl who has been in CDC placements her whole school career. The girl has learning delays, but is very verbal. The participant also has a boy slightly younger in general education. The children had just moved from one school to another in Rush County when I interviewed her.
8	14	The father of a 16-year-old boy with limited verbal ability and social skills. The son has always been in CDC placements for most of his schooling. Both the father and mother were teaching assistants at the time of this interview, though the father is now a special education teacher in Rush county and the mother stays at home with the boy, who is receiving homebound services this school year. The couple has a girl a little older than the special education student and she has always been in general education.
9	8	Although not the parent of a child with disabilities, this woman is a retired teacher with 34 years of experience, 30 of those in special education. Since 1998, she has been a surrogate parent to wards of the state at IEP meetings.

*These numbers were assigned by the order in which the participants were first quoted.

As a group, the special education PAC members that I asked for interviews—those who joined the first year and have attended at least two PAC functions—have children in seven of the county's schools and have had experience with four other schools earlier in their children's education. One is the retired teacher and surrogate parent mentioned earlier. All are Caucasian and most would describe themselves as lower middle class. Among the nine interviewed, one other participant and I were the only two men. Eleven distinct special education-qualifying conditions are represented among the children of the participants, with five of the children having dual diagnoses.

Background on the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee

The invitation to establish the special education PAC was made in October 2002, with one-page applications sent home through the special education consultants and lead teachers (and also published on the parents' link of the county's special education website). Twenty-eight parents signed up between October 2002 and the first meeting in February 2003. The special education director asked the special education lead teachers help him select 10 to 15 parents who would best keep the system-wide improvement goals in mind and not turn the PAC into "a forum for people to complain" (Rush County Special Education Director, personal communication, October 15, 2002). Prior to implementation of the PAC, he had been receiving only three kinds of input from parents: specific complaints from some, a general "everything is fine" from some, and silence from the majority.

Although the special education director asked for 10 to 15, the lead teachers were supportive of all parents who were interested. Rightly assuming that not all who

expressed an interest would be active in the committee, the special education director asked me to contact all applicants for the organizational meeting. Seven more parents have joined the PAC since the initial request for applicants, bringing the total membership as of February 2006 to 35. However, only 11 of the charter members (12 including me) and 6 others who joined during the second year have attended more than one special education PAC function.

The Role of the Researcher

I am both an outsider and very much an insider in this study. Anyone can listen to my accent and know I am (as I frequently hear) "not from around here." The group has no officers or subcommittee chairs yet, so I am the one who schedules meetings and invites everyone, calls for agenda items, takes attendance, records and publishes the minutes, and manages the information flow. Also, since my two children are in special education in Rush County schools and I have worked as a special education teacher and administrator in the county since 2000, the special education PAC members largely overlook that I am a not a Tennessee native.

The biases I bring to this research are many. As a non-native, I am ever the outsider looking in. As a result, there was a danger that I might interpret the participants comments based on my background rather than theirs. However, my wife is a native East Tennessean and I have lived here since 1992. Even so, the more real danger was that since I control much of the special education PAC agenda and was the sole researcher for this effort, the potential was great to intentionally or unintentionally manipulate the workings of one to the benefit or detriment of the other. There was

also the danger that the parents interviewed told me what they thought I wanted to hear rather than expressing how they feel the system is doing, similar to the "good subject effect" Orne observed in his hypnosis experiments of the 1950s (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997, p. 66). How I guarded against these possibilities is discussed in the next section, but it is necessary to add here Wertz's (1986) observation that the role of the phenomenological researcher is only to present the problem, set the area of interest for the participants, not to dictate what it means for them. To put Wertz's point another way, living through an experience defines it better than researching it ever could.

As mentioned, both of my children are special education students in the county, so I do not have the general education parent's contrasting view that I am assuming exists. However, my children have been special education students in four other school systems prior to enrolling in Rush County, a perspective much broader than that of many Rush County parents. Also, being a special education parent counterbalanced my job as special education administrator, putting me in the best position to carry out the research at hand and to make use of the findings and recommendations that resulted.

Limiting Researcher Bias

Realizing both my outsider role as a non-East Tennessee native and my insider role as a Rush County Schools employee, I guarded against researcher bias in several ways. The two main ways researcher bias could have imposed itself on the research are in the participants telling me what they thought I wanted to hear during the data

collection phase and in me filtering out what I did not want to acknowledge during data analysis.

The first step in guarding against both kinds of researcher bias was including myself as the first person interviewed (in the bracketing interview). For the bracketing interview, a friend skilled in phenomenological interviewing techniques (a fellow member of The University of Tennessee's Phenomenology Group) gave me the same initial prompt that I later used for each participant: "Thinking about your dealings with the school system in the years since the special education PAC was formed, please tell me about the experiences that stand out for you."

Husserl (as cited in Polkinghorne, 1989) called on researchers to set aside what they think they know in order to arrive at a more perfect truth. Husserl's contention was that we could move from the realm of what we believe to the realm of an *a priori* truth (Stewart, 1970). How this has worked out in the century since Husserl's work is that the experience is taken as true as described by each participant. There can be no overall truth, independent of the participants' descriptions.

H. R. Pollio (unpublished lecture notes, 2004) observed that the main point of the bracketing interview is to "discipline our prejudice." Obviously, we cannot remove our prejudgments and in Gadamer's (1977) opinion, we should not want to. Our prejudices do not blind us to the truth, but are the starting point in the journey to personal understanding. Perhaps this is why Hawthorne's (1988) view of bracketing is not more widely accepted. He equated bracketing in phenomenology with the controlling for confounding variables methodologies in the natural sciences. More

widely accepted is Ihde's (1986) notion of epoché, which "requires that looking precede judgment and that judgment of what is 'real' or 'most real' be suspended until all the evidence (or at least sufficient evidence) is in" (p. 36). Patton (2002) added "epoché is an ongoing analytical process, rather than a single, fixed event" (p. 485).

Doing my bracketing interview was a calculated decision, made to acknowledge my own presuppositions about the impact and effectiveness of the PAC. This will focus the research on the experience of those who are involved in it solely because they are the parents of special needs children. Where necessary, I probed, asking the parents to support their replies with illustrative instances, which is appropriate to the phenomenological method's focus on describing the "what" without trying to scale or quantify it with a "why." This approach also served to lessen any tendency of the participants to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear, the "good subject effect" mentioned previously (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997, p. 66). Yin (2003) mentioned that investigator bias can be responsible for the interviewer overlooking a rival explanation due to his own "reactivity" in the data collection phase, also called the "experimenter effect" (p. 113). Fielding and Fielding (1986) suggested that using the participants' own discourse as it directly answers the research questions is the best way to avoid these reactivity problems and the related problems of "reflexivity," in which the researcher's conclusions go beyond what can be reasonably culled from the raw data (p. 67).

One problem with the phenomenological method of inquiry is that the researcher depends on a conversation with the participant, yet has to maintain a

"nonjudgmental responsiveness" that is often not realistic in typical social conversation (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 33). When a participant has just described a poignant life episode, a mere "I see," could be seen not as a neutral reply, but as a shallow or even cold one, especially in a dialog that is already heavily one sided. However, participants knew that we were meeting to explore their experience, not mine, and did not expect an even give-and-take to the conversation.

To further limit introducing my own biases into this research, I used several methods suggested from various groups to whom I had presented the research work in progress. The many specific contributions of the Phenomenology Group are discussed in Chapters 4 through 8. I presented to my doctoral cohort several times and used many of their suggestions, specifically in constructing an interview protocol that was thorough without leading the participants. When I was having difficulty getting the last few participants to interview, I used a suggestion from a doctoral committee member that I offer to meet the participant in a public place, a neutral setting. I also used a couple methodological suggestions offered following my presentation at the university's first Graduate Student Colloquium (March 4, 2005). These had to do with distinguishing the purposes of the special education parent advisory committee from the purposes for the research and considering parental involvement research as a purpose of each. The role of parental involvement in this research began to gain prominence for me after the Graduate Student Colloquium.

I also presented the work in progress at the 26th Annual David L. Clark National Graduate Student Research Seminar in Educational Administration and

Policy (prior to the American Educational Research Association's conference in April, 2005). This is a weekend seminar (sponsored annually by the University Council for Educational Administration) during which approximately 40 educational administration doctoral students get to present their research in progress to several university professors and receive detailed inputs for improving the final dissertation. One specific suggestion offered there to help me guard against my own influence on the research was to have my peer examiners/debriefers observe some or all of the interviews as they were conducted. Finally, I presented at the University Council for Educational Administration's annual conference in November 2005, where mine was added to a paper discussion on parental involvement. Between the Clark Seminar and this conference, parental involvement in education was becoming integral to the research. Still, I had not considered it a focal point, but considered parent/school interaction as the primary focus. That is, the families' involvement in the school was not the essence for me; the home-school communication was essential.

I used three peers not connected with the special education PAC to check the work in a general sense for dependability (peer examination) and be the first ones to reflect on the findings of the study (peer debriefing) (Anfara et al., 2002). Using three peer debriefers who had seen all of the raw data helped me avoid any intentional or unintentional filtering out of data the interviews have in common. Finally, I presented select interview transcripts to the university's Phenomenology Group for thematic coding support and synthesis. This is a group of mostly masters and doctoral candidates from various disciplines, led by two professors with years of experience in

phenomenological research. It meets weekly on campus to read and discuss interview transcripts.

The bracketing called for in phenomenological research (Creswell, 2003; Thomas & Pollio, 2002) also helped limit the interference of my own experience on my analysis of the data collected from study participants. A researcher tends to enter the environment to be studied with certain ideas and knowledge that affect his or her perceptions of the society or individuals being studied. Phenomenology requires that these notions be set aside, or "bracketed," the better to get at what the participants know. Kvale (1996) called this a use of "deliberate naïveté as [an] expression of phenomenological reduction" (p. 55).

Because I conducted, transcribed, and coded the interview responses myself, the counterbalance my peers provided and the added distance that phenomenology required was crucial. Even so, in addition to the "constant comparative method" of highlighting linking data among participant interviews throughout the data collection process (Merriam, 1998, p. 159), I double-checked my coding as I went by doing the qualitative data analysis before and after doing the quantitative. After I had worked the parent survey numbers, I coded the interview content anew weeks later, ignoring the labels I used earlier. In previous research (Romanczuk, 1998), I kept both coded and uncoded data sets. When I had occasion to return to a comment, I would ask myself what code I would give it, then check to see if that was the label I assigned. Fink (2003b) recommended a similar time-delayed recoding in her section on establishing reliability.

While analyzing the transcripts for this research, I employed the same kind of blind second looks I used in the earlier study (Romanczuk, 1998) as another way of checking on the reliability of what was going into the grounds and themes. Additionally, I had regular dissertation progress meetings of my doctoral cohort and weekly meetings of the university's Phenomenology Group to help with thematic coding. Also, as is customary for the phenomenological method (H. R. Pollio, 2004, unpublished Phenomenology Group notes), a theme was not be used unless it occurred in all interviews. Part of my reason for putting this restriction on the thematic development was found in Van Manen's (1990) position that themes do not have to be exhaustive, but they do have to allow for systematic investigation. Phenomenological research must describe the overall structure of the experience.

In addition to the interviews, I have supporting documentation (artifacts from the life of the special education PAC, such as meeting agendas and minutes and electronic mails from subcommittee workers) and Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) Parent Survey results on which I based my analysis. Although I could have been selective in what I decided to save or include as an artifact, the CIMP survey was not designed by me. The Tennessee Department of Education's research purposes for using the resulting data and mine are not the same although the two do overlap; we were both trying to gauge the direction in which parent satisfaction with special education services were moving, especially program delivery and school system communication with parents.

Data Collection Procedures

Primary data were collected from responses to guided phenomenological interviews. After the individual interviews, I recorded observational notes. These notes were made in addition to my field log kept throughout the data collection and analysis process. The notes and log are also in addition to any archival documents or artifacts (created during the life of the PAC) selected to support the analysis. Results of a previously established set of survey questions (the CIMP Parent Survey, Appendix B) were used to support the interview data.

Interviews, surveys, and archival support were selected based on what Yin (2003) described as the strengths of each. Interviews can be focused on the topic and insightful; surveys can add quantification to the analysis; documentation and artifacts are stable and unobtrusive and can supply insight into the technical operations being investigated (Yin). I had to guard against the weaknesses of each so that the three provided solid support for the findings. (See the "Establishing Trustworthiness/Methods for Verification" section for more).

The individual interviews are described in greater detail on the pages following. I also provide specifics about the use of observational notes and a field log, archives and artifacts, and the parent survey results.

Interviews

Data were collected from participants using phenomenological interviews. Interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because they have the advantage of adaptability, which makes it possible to obtain information that may not

be revealed using other methods (Gall et al., 1996). The interview method was phenomenological, starting with a bracketing interview to confront my biases and presuppositions (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The bracketing interview started with my answer to the same request I made of the participants: "Thinking about your dealings with the school system in the years since the special education PAC was formed, please tell me about the experiences that stand out for you." This was to acknowledge my own experience of the phenomenon being researched—namely, special education parent dealings with the school system—and open me to alternative experiences.

To enhance data collection, I interviewed a participant who joined the PAC too late to be considered as a study participant. I used my bracketing interview and this initial interview to refine questioning techniques, sequencing, wording, and open-endedness (Patton, 2002). I also used these two interviews to work at making interviewees comfortable participants if not "co-researchers," rather than mere experimental subjects (Giorgi, 1985; Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 4). Additionally, I had a general order in which I wanted to interview the participants, although this was open to adjustment based on scheduling convenience. Among the 11 active charter members (in addition to me), there are a few I could talk with easily right from the start and a few I have trouble keeping a conversation going with even after three years of knowing them.

The sampling strategy was nonprobabilistic (Fink, 2003c; Merriam, 1998) and the selection, purposeful (Creswell, 2005; Patton, 2002; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The sampling was nonprobabilistic because of the case study nature of the work and

because participation was voluntary. Not only were all nine participants Rush County parents of special education students, but I also intended to use all agreeing to interviews, even if saturation occurred before I talked with all who agreed to be interviewed. As long as they joined the special education PAC during its first year (February 2003 through January 2004) and attended at least two of the first nine special education PAC functions (the total offered during the PAC's first year), they were asked to participate in the study. This resulted in nine interviews. After my bracketing interview, I interviewed a Rush County Schools employee who is also a special education parent. He joined the PAC during its second year in operation. This interview helped me sharpen and strengthen the written and guided interview protocols (Appendices D and E). I employed alphanumeric coding for promoting confidentiality based on the demographic data collected at the start of each interview (Appendix D).

In phenomenology, the interview begins with few "prespecified questions," allowing the remaining queries to stem from the dialog as it unfolds (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 30). In this way, centrally relevant issues, those that surface repeatedly in the conversation, are allowed to present themselves naturally. Additional questions are of the form "What were you aware of when this was happening?" or "How did you feel when that happened?" (Pollio et al., p. 30). "Why?" questions are avoided during the interview to keep the dialog focused on descriptive experience rather than on theoretical abstractions (Pollio et al.). Simons (as cited in Bretano, 1874/1997) observed that many researchers resist including a participant's feelings and emotions as data, since these are not acts of will. However, it is precisely because feelings are

involuntary that they matter in phenomenology. Also, I sometimes had to prompt for clarification of ambiguous descriptions by summarizing what I thought was just said, then offering the participant the chance to add more information.

I started with a "grand tour" (Merriam, 1998) question in which the participant described their foremost experience with the school or school system. After the participant talked through this opening experience, we continued the interview as a phenomenological dialog. I fully expected that in the course of each conversation the answers to the questions listed in Appendix E would arise. However, if they did not, I parted temporarily from the phenomenological style to a more structured interview format. I sometimes switched to the interview guide approach (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002) to get at the issues that directly address the reasons the PAC was formed and the research questions under investigation. I used a detailed protocol that combined both interview guide and semistructured questioning techniques (Appendix E) if I needed to add more structure to elicit answers to the research questions. Patton insisted that the interview guide approach is sufficient to ensure the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed while allowing the interviewer to probe for the subject's individual illuminations. Moustakas took it a step further, saying that the researcher may develop a series of questions in advance, but that these could be altered or not used at all. Moustakas advocated use of an interview guide only when the participant's story is not fully tapping the qualitative meaning of the core experience; that is, if they are going tangentially off course. The interview guide approach allows the interview to be "a conversation" (Kvale, 1996, pp. 124-125;

Patton, p. 343). These are the guide topics areas that align with the more semistructured interview protocol (Appendix E):

- Parents' decision to join the PAC
- Parents' comfort level with the school system
- Parents' experience of school system staff providing for their child's educational needs
- Communication among the special education families and the school system
- Parents' perceptions about the benefits and drawbacks of belonging to the PAC
- Parents' perceptions about the role of the special education PAC in the next few years.

For those times I had to revert to using the full semi-structured interview protocol, Table 2 describes the kind of question each query is, based on the types described by Maxwell (1996), McMillan and Schumacher (2001), Merriam (1998), and Patton (2002). It was McMillan and Schumacher who combined experience with behavior, but this combination fuses nicely in phenomenological work. Phenomenology rejects the idea that a person's experience is subjective while their behavior during that experience is objective (Valle & Halling, 1989, p. 4). Phenomenology replaces this mind/body split with a holistic view of human beings. How I used the semistructured protocol was to repeat for the participants what I thought I heard them saying, to give them a chance to either concur or add clarification.

Table 2: Interview Question Analysis

Type of question	Interview protocol Number	Comments
Grand Tour	1, 2	the overall, umbrella question
Background/ Demographic	Written replies	the unique, descriptive information on the respondent
Temporal Frame:		the "tense" of the questions being asked
Past	1, 2a, 3d, 3e, 4, 6	
Present	2b, 3a, 3b, 5, 7	
Future	3c, 8, 10	
Hypothetical	3c, 8	asks what the respondent might do: "What if. . .?" "Suppose. . ."
Knowledge	Written replies 5a, 5b, 9	just the facts on the topic being discussed
Ideal Position	3c	asks the person to describe the perfect situation
Opinion/Value	2b, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	asks what respondents think or tries to elicit what is important to them
Experience/ Behavior	1, 3, 4, 6, 7 written replies	asks respondent to describe how an event or time period went
Sensory	2b, 3b, 5, 6b	asks participant to describe what they see, hear, taste, smell, touch
Feeling	1, 3b, 4, 7	Taps into an emotional response

The protocol was critiqued by fellow researchers to help ensure that the right questions were being asked. Their suggestions and revisions have been worked into the interview protocol. Although I did not include the types "Devil's Advocate" (challenge to the respondent to consider an opposing view) and "Interpretive" (when interviewers present what they think they are hearing and ask for clarification) (Merriam, 1998, p. 77), I used both types in probing questions during the interviewing phase of the research, to clarify initial responses. I also added "How did that make you feel?" as a follow-up question very useful to phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) observed that empirical research emphasizes descriptions of feelings, making the researcher a co-experiencer. Since phenomenology attempts to get at conscious awareness (memory, perception, imagination), another often used probe is "Tell me about a time when—" or "Give me an example of –" (Valle & Halling, 1989, p. 45).

Obviously, phenomenological interviewing relies heavily on active listening to get the participant to clarify certain revelations and openly reflect on others. The interviewer has to attend to the words themselves and not get distracted by thinking ahead or pondering something that was said earlier in the conversation. Rapport was established through providing a brief overview of the purpose of the interview and clarifying any questions participants had about it before formal data collection began. I started the meeting by asking them to provide demographic information in writing (a short questionnaire, Appendix D) and to read and sign the required study participation documentation (Appendix F) as I set up for the conversation to follow. Afterward,

interviewees were asked to make any additional comments that might add to the information gathered.

Individual interviews were structured around the special education PAC charter members' experience of special education parental involvement. These interviews addressed the goals for the committee (meeting special education students' needs at the teacher-to-parent level, improving program delivery, and acting as a school system/community liaison). I avoided yes/no type answers by prompting with open-ended questions to elicit members' opinions, feelings, and experiences (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

I often added "How did that make you feel?" as a follow-up question. Since phenomenology attempts to get at precise awareness (memory, perception, imagination), another often used probe is "Tell me about a time when—" or "What was it like for you?" (Polkinghorne, p. 46). I transcribed each interview, remaining as true to the audiotaped version as possible. Then these transcripts were used to discover the general description of each experience holistically, and also to unpack individual "meaning units" (Giorgi, 1985, p. 10) and recurring themes consistent with the ones Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003) indicated: the world (place or space), body/self, others, and time.

I expected to hear similar comments from the various participants very early in the interviewing cycle. Merriam (1998) described "saturation" (p. 64) as the point at which all or most of what the researchers are hearing from new participants is what they have already heard from earlier participants. If I had not reached this saturation

level with the first nine interviews (or did not have as many parents volunteer for individual interviews as I expected to), I had planned to open the interviewing to members who have been active in the committee, but who joined during the second year of the group's operation (February 2004 through January 2005). This could have added up to seven more parents from whom to collect information. As it worked out, I stopped at 9 interviews, nearly 12 hours of audio data, yielding 250 pages of transcript text, or more than 6,100 lines.

Observational Notes/Field Log

In addition to the one-on-one dialogs being audiotaped and transcribed, I kept pertinent observational notes (made immediately after each interview) to have a written record of the participant's nonverbal responses (a nod of the head or a laugh, for example) and to describe the setting and time span of each interview. I also did this to document unintended nonverbal communication, such as the participant looking down or away, or struggling for words. Merriam (1998) called this "observer commentary" (p. 106). The rationale for keeping such interview-detail notes is based on Berger and Luckmann's (1966) observation that the "typifications of social interactions become progressively anonymous the farther away they are from the face-to-face situation" (p. 31). Therefore, presenting information that surrounded the conversation gives those reading about it much later a fuller sense of the interview as it happened.

Merriam (1998) also advocated the use of a "field work journal—an introspective record of the experience . . . in the field" (p. 110). McMillan and

Schumacher (2001) recommended that the observer's comments be clear about which remarks are "descriptive data" and which are "evolving interpretations" (p. 465). I also used the field log to document issues needing resolution as they occurred to me. This purpose of the field log is to document what Kvale (1996) called "continual checking of the information obtained" (p. 237). By this he meant attending to validation concerns all along, especially during data collection, rather than waiting until the data analysis phase.

Archives and Artifacts

Archival documents and artifacts also contributed an aspect to data collection. Patton (2002) noted that such documentation can "provide a behind-the-scenes look at program processes and how they came into being" (p. 294). McMillan and Schumacher (2001) highlighted the use of artifacts as a supplementary technique to help interpret, elaborate on, or corroborate data obtained from the participants. Data created during the life of the special education PAC that supported the research questions or interview findings were incorporated into the overall data analysis. Items such as special education PAC website page views, meeting minutes, supporting documentation of issues covered, electronic mailings, and other evidence supportive of the findings were used. These supporting documents were not difficult to gather, though I did need to sanitize a few (to maintain participant confidentiality) before using them whole or quoting parts of them.

Surveys

I used reply rates to certain questions from an annually conducted "Parent Survey" that the State of Tennessee Department of Special Education had devised (Appendix B). The survey has twelve closed-ended items, most of which require only yes or no answers. Early each spring, the county sends out the surveys (through the special education teachers) to half of the special education families in the system with a suggested date by which parents should complete and return them. I tracked the change in the overall number of parents responding to this voluntary survey and also tracked the fluctuation in the total yes to no ratio of responses for those questions directly related to the goals of the special education PAC. In Chapter 8, these changes are presented in tabular format. Parts of these results are also discussed in relation to each theme in turn in Chapters 4 through 7.

Table 3 lists both the research questions and the special education PAC goals, then points out what literature review author aligned with each. Table 3 also highlights the links among the research questions, the three goals, the parent survey questions, and the interview protocol. Anfara et al. (2002) recommended such a table as a method of linking the research questions to the data sources. Although Table 3 indicates links with all twelve parent survey questions, the discussion and analysis concentrated on only those most closely aligned with the research questions and goals of the special education PAC, namely numbers 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10 the 2002-2004 version and questions 1 to 5 of the 2005 version of the parent's survey (Appendix B).

Table 3: Alignment of Data Sources with the Research Questions and Goals

2 Research questions and 3 SpEd PAC goals	Literature review reference*	Parent survey, 02-04	Int. Pro-tocol	Topic addressed in the Literature Review
What are the members' perceptions about how their membership in the special education PAC has affected program delivery for them, their children, other families, and the school system/county in general?	Solomon et al. (27) Urbain & Lakin (28) Harry (36, 56) Diamond (44); League & Ford (44) Allen & Hudd; Epstein (30-35) Diamond; Griffith (54-57) Lommerin; O'Harra; McKerrow (49-53) National PTA (26); Stoecklin (30)	4 8 10 12	1 4 6 7	Parent group "cohesion" Harry on parents as outsiders at school meetings Two sources on parent comfort level Various authors on parental involvement Advocacy to improve experience
What change has occurred in parents'/guardians' opinions about school system special education services in general, their child's access to these programs in particular, and how well informed the school system keeps them?	Koroloff & Freisen (28) Harry; National PTA (36); Summers (37) Epstein et al. (37) Urbain & Lakin (40) Lommerin; Griffith (54) Harry; Kelker; McKerrow (53-55) Chavkin (55); Lawrence-Lightfoot (52)	3 4 5 6 8 9 11 12	2 3 4 5 8	Group membership's impact on information sharing Home-school (2-way) communication Improvements in parents' comfort level at school Schools' comfort in dealing with parents
To meet special education students' needs at the teacher-to-parent level	Redding & Sheley; Stoecklin (34-35) Turnbull & Leonard (39) Harry (36); Moles (46); Urbain & Lakin (39) Diamond; O'Harra (42) O'Harra (57); Lucky & Gavilan (60); Raabe (60)	1 7 11	4 5	Federal laws as individual rights IEP individualized Parent roles vs. school roles Early, cooperative conflict resolution
To improve program delivery across the school system	Lucky & Gavilan (41) Diamond; Epstein; Griffith (49-53) Allen & Hudd (47-48) Capper (27); McKerrow (43)	2 4 8 10	3 6	Comparing IEP plan to services rendered Parental involvement for success, Advisory success stories Rural delivery problems
To act as a school system/community liaison	Solomon et al. (24) Stoecklin (30) Raabe (27) Gestwicki (37) Raabe (30)	1	3 6	Value of parents becoming active Information sharing Parents as primary facilitators

*Note. Literature review page (in parentheses) is not the source's page number, but that in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Procedures to Protect Human Subjects

Prior to granting approval to start any university-related research, The University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board (IRB) requires that the principal investigator (and the faculty study coordinator for student-directed research) fully describe the project and explicitly state what safeguards are in place to protect human research subjects. Studies that are minimally invasive—such as this one, which involved only adults and required only interviews with each subject and some demographic information—may apply for expedited rather than full IRB approval. Even the expedited approval process requires that the researcher describe how participants will be recruited (or how the study is advertised) and where data collection will occur. It also requires a statement of how the protocol is to be explained to the participants, how they will be protected from any risks associated with participation in the study, and how their consent to participate is documented. The IRB's informed consent elements for survey research were incorporated into the 2005 version of the Parent Survey (the top of the third page of Appendix B), but were not used for the version distributed between 2002 and 2004. The IRB process also required stating expected benefits to the participant or to society, and a weighing of the potential risks against the benefits to be realized.

Among the 11 people (in addition to me) who have been special education Parent Advisory Committee members since the first meeting in February 2003 and have attended at least one other PAC function that first year, I asked each of the 11 individually if they would be interested in participating in the study and presented

them with the Project Information Sheet (the first two pages of Appendix F). I was interviewed first. Then I interviewed only those eight others who agreed to participate and they signed an Informed Consent Form prior to participation. (A blank Informed Consent Form is in Appendix F, following the Project Information Sheet).

Risks to Participants

The phenomenological interviewing techniques used ask about the participants' experience with special education during their involvement with the PAC. These phenomenological interviews have the potential to call to mind painful or at least uncomfortable revelations for the participants.

Some interview transcripts were read by The University of Tennessee's Phenomenology Group and all were read by the three peer examiners/debriefers. Additionally, two of the three peers looked in on certain interviews in progress (to assess interviewer bias), and so may know the identities of certain participants. There remains a risk that someone reading the transcript (or someone who knows a participant and is reading the dissertation some time from now) may recognize the participant's identity from a direct quote used. But this risk is minimal.

The survey component of the research had no risks attached. The survey has on it individual and school-level identifiers. Adding their name was clearly labeled as optional and only necessary if they wanted to receive a follow-up call. Special education teachers and consultants see these individual replies while collecting them, but only the compiled data are published.

Protections for Participants Against the Risks Involved in This Research

To guard against the discomfort inherent in sharing this always private, sometimes ineffable information, all interviews were conducted one-to-one. Interview transcripts had formal nouns stripped from them. This added a level of identity protection, even for those participants who the peer examiners saw being interviewed. Also, the three peer examiners/debriefers and the Phenomenology Group members signed a confidentiality agreement to discuss the content of the interview only during meeting sessions while I am present to collect data. (See Appendix G for the Phenomenology Group's agreement text).

I encoded participants' identifying information and used only this coding for any parts of their interviews included in this write up. Any documentation that linked the numeric coding with the identities of the participants was stored in a locked filing cabinet on the third floor of Claxton Addition and destroyed after the data collection cycle. Even so, some readers (especially other PAC members) may be able to surmise the identity of a participant whose views they know and recognize in print. This cannot be guarded against. Participants were promised confidentiality, not anonymity.

Subjects were allowed decline to answer a specific question and could have withdrawn from the research at any time. Since this study does not involve Phase I and Phase II clinical trials, the safety monitoring policies prescribed by the National Institutes of Health did not apply. As principal investigator, I was the only one who compiled the survey data. I conducted and transcribed the interview dialogs alone as well.

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis began with the initial gathering and organizing of the data. Information from all sources was used in generating the analysis of research findings. The constant comparative method was used as a continual process of comparing data within and across categories. Van Manen (1990) observed that understanding comes during, after, in, and by the writing process. Writing may abstract our experience of the world, but it makes our understanding of that experience more concrete. From this researcher's perspective, sorting out the jumble of ambiguities occurred during the writing process.

The comparison and revision of categories were repeated as new data were added, until categories were saturated and the most significant categories identified (Creswell, 1998; Gall et al., 1996). The Ethnograph (version 5.08) software program was used to manage, explore, and search the data. I used the Ethnograph software program to assist in the development of a category system while allowing exploration of possible relationships between categories.

A coding scheme was developed and altered according to the information gathered and findings uncovered. After working through the bracketing interview and the interview of a noncharter member, I added a few categories to the Ethnograph code book based on what I was hearing. These were not prescribed by the interview protocol but presented possibilities for links from one interview to the next. Such information as background on their child and how special education parenting differs from general education parenting were among the last added to the Ethnograph code

book. It was not until later in the data analysis that I began flagging instances of the participants telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. After the second interview, I added instances of metaphor use to the Ethnograph code book because of the recognition in phenomenology that metaphors can be a way of expressing intractable rationales and ineffable reasons. How these meaning units were grouped and categorized into the themes is discussed in greater detail in Chapters 4 through 7.

That themes can be discovered is consistent with the phenomenological approach. Van Manen (1990, p. 87) held that "themes are intransitive," not an object to find, but an aspect to uncover. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2003) pointed out that all things available to our consciousness were already there prior to our awareness, and gave the example of a dinner plate to support this notion. That is, if we observe the geometric shape of a circle in the plate, it is because our consciousness already put the circle there. Merleau-Ponty's example is echoed by Wertz's (1985) contention that interviewers are constantly judging the significance of participants' statements, even before they as researchers have reflected on the interview content. How else could researchers know what is relevant before they have even figured out what exactly it is that they are trying to find? Boyatzis (1998) described this as the difference between "manifest and latent levels of thematic analysis" (p. 28). Codes and themes do not magically appear, but lay awaiting discovery. In her phenomenological study, Henderson (1992) called this "releasing meanings" (p. 89). I worked toward a code mapping as described by Anfara et al. (2002), in which I had the first iteration codes, or meaning units (to use the phenomenological term) to apply with the Ethnograph

software. Following this, a second layer—pattern variables—incorporated the first layer and tied in phenomenological grounds. The third level laid out the themes and tied all coding and patterns to the overall research questions. Boyatzis (1998) and Creswell (2005) described this iterative approach of going from detailed data to specific themes as inductive data analysis.

H. R. Pollio (unpublished lecture notes, 2004) highlighted the power of metaphors in phenomenological interviews. When participants resort to the use of metaphors, they are talking in images in an attempt verbalize an experience too complex for easy explanation. Demonstrative anecdotes from the participant's past can serve a similar purpose, working as what Van Manen (1990) called "a concrete counterweight to abstract theoretical thought" (p. 119.) The use of metaphors and small stories given in response to questions asked not only help us to make interpretive sense of the phenomenon, but also these two kinds of participant replies can demonstrate a deeper wisdom, insight, and truth (Van Manen).

Similarly, shifting pronoun use in the course of the interview can be telling. Van Manen (1990) held that phenomenology makes "my" experience "our" experience, so a participant's heavy use of both "I" and "we" should not be surprising. Shifting verb tenses is also revealing. Recollecting dialog keeps it present because it remains present for the participant.

Constas' Model

In an attempt to make this qualitative analysis "a public event" (Constas, 1992, p. 253), I added a documentational table to Chapter 8. Constas specified three

"components of categorization" to include: origination, verification, and nomination. For Constas, "origination" (p. 257) answers where the authority for component creation resides. "Verification" (p. 259) describes the strategies used to support the creation and application of categories to the research, while "nomination" (p. 260) specifies the origins of the labels used. For both the origination and nomination, these are the five subcategories applied as origins: the participants, the program, the investigation, the literature reviewed (or the researcher's analysis), and interpretation of the data collected.

"Verification" (Constas, 1992, p. 259) has its own six subcategories, all related to justifying how the components of categorization were applied:

1. external (outside experts)
2. rational (through logic or reason)
3. referential (based on existing research)
4. empirical (based on full coverage, that is how exhaustive and mutually exclusive are the categories)
5. technical (using language borrowed from quantitative analysis)
6. participative (if the participants had opportunities to view the data, possibly modifying the results).

Giorgi (1985) pointed out that verification is not all there is to scientific practice; "nobody just verifies" (p. 14). A complete understanding of the total activity should result from the research process. To put it another way, discovery equals understanding plus verification.

In addition to these components of categorization, Constas (1992) added a second domain: "temporal designation" (p. 261). This answers when during the data collection process a thematic category was created. *A priori*, before, would be for categories identified prior to any data collection, mainly during the literature review and problem definition. An *a posteriori* designation is used for any categories not evident until after the data have been collected. Iterative designations are for categories repeatedly supported wholly or in part during data collection.

Qualitative Research Quality Indicators

Brantlinger et al. (2005) offered several "quality indicators" for qualitative research (p. 202). Odom et al. (2005) indicated that "quality indicators are the feature of research that represents rigorous application of methodology to questions of interest" (p. 141). Brantlinger et al. identified several quality indicators within four areas: interview studies, observation studies, document analysis, and data analysis. Since no observations were done for this research, only the other three applied. I attended to the components of each both as a final method of synthesizing the data and as a way of affirming the quality of the research.

Under "Interview Studies" (p. 202), Brantlinger et al. (2005) list these indicators:

- Appropriate participants are selected.
- Interview questions are clearly worded, not leading, and sufficient.
- Adequate mechanisms are used to record and transcribe interviews.
- Participants are represented sensitively and fairly.

- Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.

In the summary analysis of the findings (Chapter 8), I describe how this research incorporated Brantlinger et al.'s indicators of quality.

Under "Data Analysis" (p. 202), Brantlinger et al. (2005) list these quality indicators:

- Results are sorted and coded in a systematic and meaningful way.
- Sufficient rationale is provided for what was (or was not) included in the final report.
- Documentation of methods used to establish trustworthiness and credibility are clear.
- Reflection about the researcher's personal perspective is provided.
- Conclusions are substantiated by sufficient quotations from participants, field notes, and evidence of documents inspected.
- Connections are made with related research.

I coded using the Ethnograph 5.08 software and began the coding process after the second interview. I also coded for phenomenological themes, then worked to synthesize the resulting findings. More details about this are included in the summary analysis (Chapter 8).

Under "Document Analysis" (p. 202), Brantlinger et al. (2005) list these indicators:

- Meaningful documents are found and their relevance is established.
- Documents are sufficiently described and cited.

- Documents are obtained and stored with care.
- Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality of private documents.

In the summary analyses of the findings (Chapter 8), I describe how this research incorporated Brantlinger et al.'s indicators of quality related to creating, using, and storing the interview transcripts and the archival documents.

Establishing Trustworthiness/Methods for Verification

Trustworthiness was addressed in this study through several methods. Credibility was enhanced through simultaneous data triangulation, member checking, and peer examination (Merriam, 1998). Transferability or generalization was addressed through the use of thick, rich description (Gall et al., 1996) of the life events in context.

Wertz (1986) noted that experimental reliability is not so different from the meaning of "reliability" in everyday usage (p. 181). To speak of how dependable, trustworthy, and resistant to adversity someone or something seems to be is to talk about reliability. Gall et al. (1996) clarified the difference between reliability and validity by defining the former as the extent to which a measure is free of error and the latter as the appropriateness, usefulness, or "soundness" of a study's findings (p. 533). Anfara et al. (2002) aligned the quantitative term "reliability" with the qualitative term "dependability" (p. 30). Thomas and Pollio (2002) described reliability as the consistency of the research findings and wrote that validity gets at how well researchers matched what they intended to investigate to what they did investigate.

Although validity is discussed more thoroughly for this research, it is obviously as important to clarify how accurate the measures themselves are as it is to insure that the appropriate measures are being taken. "But identical replication, the hallmark of laboratory and survey research, is not possible or desirable in dialogic research" (Thomas & Pollio, p. 39). Messick explained this apparent disregard for replication by noting that the researcher brings "construct meaning" to the experiment and the respondents bring "perceived meaning" (p. 962). While a different interviewer and new participants are unlikely to replicate previous research exactly, the overall impact, themes, and possibly even meaning units will coincide for similar studies. Each researcher uses interview responses to clarify the articulated experience, insight, and awareness—the essence—of specific life events (Thomas & Pollio).

Reliability in phenomenological research is rooted in the same themes being linked in study after study to the four grounds of self/body, others/relationships, time, and place or space (Pollio, unpublished lecture notes, 2004). This is where the accuracy and consistency are worked into the research. The thematic links to each are discussed in Chapters 4 through 7.

Triangulation of the three data types collected is the main method of strengthening findings derived from the data (Yin [2003] on "multiple sources of evidence," pp. 97-99). Triangulation is a method to establish credibility that uses multiple forms of data to support findings and to help eliminate researcher bias (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Gall et al., 1996). The data are used to corroborate evidence from different sources about a particular theme or perspective (Creswell, 1998).

Anfara et al. (2002) noted that triangulation is a strategy employed to improve the credibility, dependability, and "confirmability" of the research (p. 30). Triangulation of documents with interviews, replies within and among interviews, and peer examiners' comments were used. Interviewee responses compared with all special education parents' replies to four years of CIMP surveys added another triangulation point (Figure 4, a graphical depiction of the triangulation methods employed).

Yin (2003) warned that interviews have to be carefully constructed to guard against bias. He also noted another problem with interviews is that they count on participant recall. The ability of the phenomenological interview to address the two research questions and the special education director's three reasons for establishing a special education PAC were pretested and fine-tuned with both my bracketing interview and the interview of a non-charter member of the PAC before the formal interview cycle began. In addition, the interview guide topics and the full semistructured interview protocol (Appendix E) were incorporated into the interviews as needed to ensure that these conversations related to the goals of the PAC and captured direct answers to the research questions.

Yin (2003) also noted that the researcher can selectively cull documents and artifacts, and may not have access to some supporting documentation. Although I had access to any and all supporting documentation, I guarded against Yin's caution in two ways: first, the documents/artifacts did not drive the analysis, but supported it and remained secondary to the interviews as sources of data. Secondly, the archive search was the last thematic development step taken. The four themes had already taken

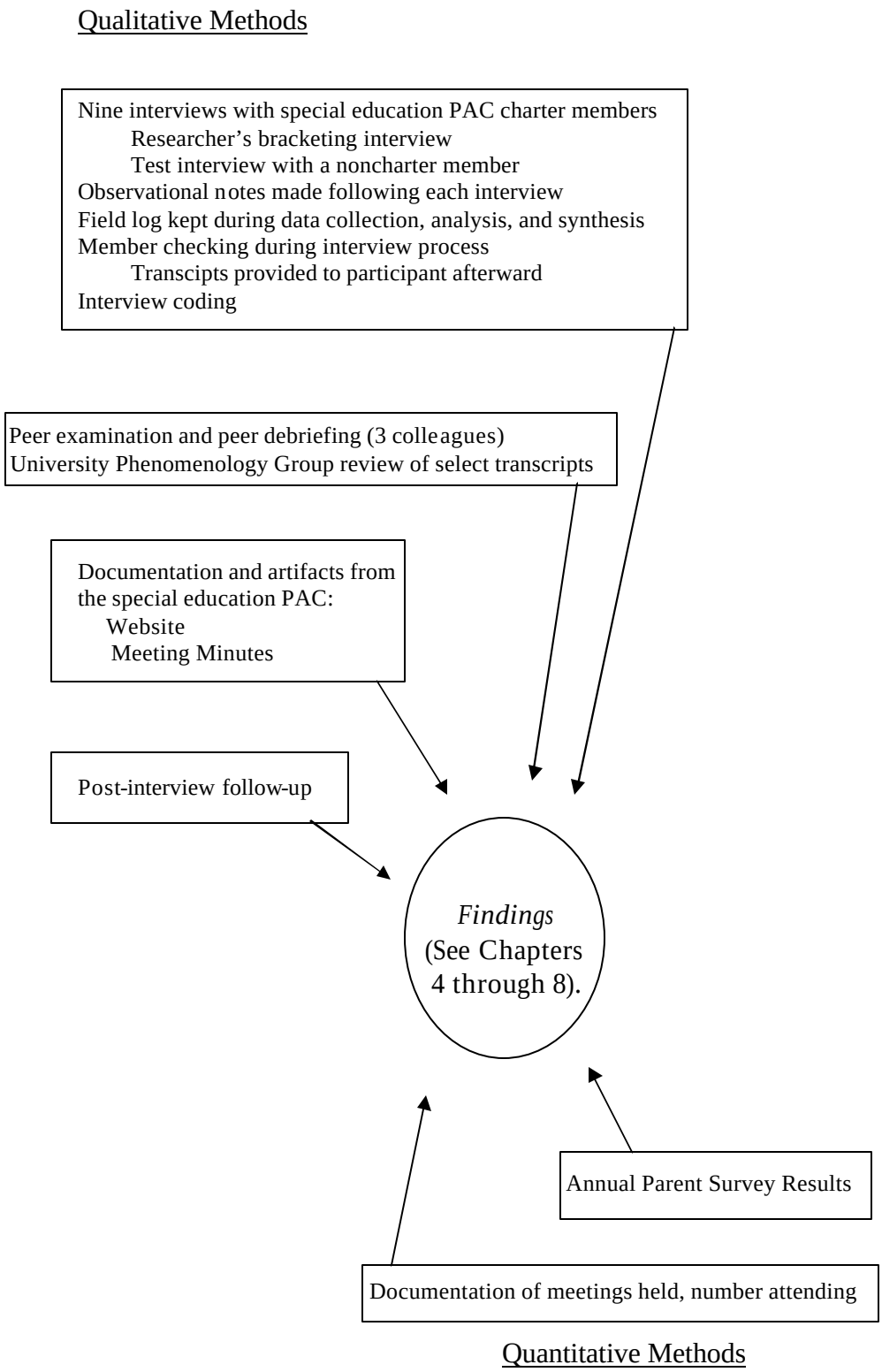

Figure 4. Triangulation Methods Employed

shape by then and no archival documentation expanded or negated them. The primary use of the PAC's artifacts was to bolster convergence by supporting the participants' words, my interview observations, and field notes.

Since the findings/analysis chapters rely heavily on use of participant language and verbatim accounts (as recommended by McMillan & Schumacher, 2001), member checking was used as another method to ensure credibility. Member checking is the process in which findings are verified with participants from whom the data were originally gathered so that they may confirm the accuracy and completeness of the findings reported (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998). It also gives participants an opportunity to add information by having transcripts and analysis of these interviews provided to each participant for their reaction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Brantlinger et al. (2005) distinguished between "first level" and "second level" member checks (p. 201). Using the former, the researcher takes the transcriptions to participants for clarification prior to analysis. Second level member checking occurs after the researcher's analysis and is used to validate the conclusions drawn. In this study, both kinds of member checking occurred. I provided interviewees with their written transcripts before analysis and gave them each the first draft of the analysis chapters. Member checking was useful to this research in particular since I did not grow up in East Tennessee and do not live in Rush County, and so may not be familiar with the idioms used or local rationales for the way things are done.

The Phenomenology Group at The University of Tennessee read the bracketing interview and four others, further enhancing the trustworthiness of the data analysis.

This group has three or four professors who lead discussions, but is mainly composed of masters and doctoral candidates from various disciplines. It meets weekly on campus to read and discuss interview transcripts. Van Manen (1990) called the use of such research groups a good, formal way of gathering interpretive insights. In addition to this review group, I used three peers not connected with the special education PAC to check the work in a general sense for dependability. I needed to know before I worked with it how reliable the data are for this interview sample and to be vigilant about keeping my own outsider misunderstandings out of the mix. Therefore, peer examination was used during data collection to guard against researcher bias during data analysis (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). The three peers are the principal of the early childhood school in Rush County, the assistant special education director (who became director in December 2005), and a special education teacher who formerly worked in Rush County. All are life-long East Tennessee residents and two were born in Rush County. I asked the three to read all interview transcripts and checked my assumptions against theirs. In addition, two of the three visually and intermittently checked on certain interviews in progress to help me guard against leading the participant by inadvertent nonverbal cueing. The three also read the preliminary analyses and thematic development.

Transferability and generalizability concern the possibility of applying findings of the study to other sites, groups, settings, or situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This is the qualitative researcher's external validity, since it describes how applicable present findings and analyses are to other situations. How well a procedure would

transfer and how generally applicable findings may be for another population are determinations that must be made by those who desire to apply the findings. Therefore, I supplied thick description to assist in these determinations. Thick description is a richly detailed report that reproduces situations and their context as much as possible (Gall et al., 1996). Thomas and Pollio (2002) asserted that the generalizability of phenomenological research is evidenced by the structure of the shared experience being rigorously described and synthesized rather than by analyzing the characteristics of the group having the experience. Van Manen (1990) cautioned that generalizations about human experiences are troublesome because we instinctively focus on each individual's unique experience while the meaning units all of the participants share are what help us to describe and understand the phenomenon. They also let us generalize the experience. Wertz (1985) described this generalization process as "nomothetic" (p. 198). The researcher progresses from raw data to meaning units—then from overall themes for one participant to common themes for all—and finally, to a general sense of the whole phenomenon being investigated.

Summary

This chapter described the proposed mixed methods, phenomenological research design of this study. A general description of Rush County and its school system was included in this chapter. The chapter also included more detail on special education in Rush County and the survey participants used in this study. A thorough description of the individual interview process was also given. Interview participants were defined as special education parents who were charter members of the school

system's special education PAC and remained active in it. Methods used for data gathering and efforts to address trustworthiness were presented in detail.

How data were gathered from interviews, observational notes, a researcher's field log, PAC archives, and annual surveys was also fully described. Data verification methods such as member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group inputs were detailed. The plan for data analysis using the Ethnograph software program, phenomenological methods, the constant comparative method, Constas' (1992) components of categorization, and Brantlinger et al.'s (2005) qualitative research quality indicators was also described in detail. Why the results may transferable to other special education departments—despite this being a single-school system's case study—was also addressed in this chapter.

CHAPTER 4

MIXED METHODS DEVELOPMENT AND VERIFICATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEME ONE: "IT'S ALL ABOUT THE KIDS"

Chapter Introduction

This chapter opens with a description of the overall layout of the research analysis. The analyses start with this chapter, but continue through Chapter 8. The primary data for the qualitative component came from the responses of nine members of the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC). This chapter includes a description of the phenomenological ground of "self" and a table describing the four themes and their associated grounds. How theme one—"it's all about the kids"—was developed using the interviews, observational notes and a field log, PAC archives, and quantitative data from an annual survey is discussed in detail. How selection of this theme was verified through member checking, peer examination and debriefing, and support from The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group is also addressed.

Overview of the Analyses Chapters

Chapters 4 through 8 are the analyses chapters. Chapters 4 through 7 address the major patterns in the data. The patterns discovered led to the four phenomenological themes. The layout of Chapters 4 through 7 is identical, with each theme labeled by a direct quote from a participant and supported by several

participants' quotes. Starting each theme's analysis with many quotes gives a full sense of the personality of each participant. This fuller sense, combined with Table 3 (in Chapter 3) to reference, allows readers a better way of distinguishing the participants throughout the thematic development and overall analyses (Chapters 4 through 8).

Breaking out the themes by chapter is contraindicated in phenomenological research, since all themes together supply a holistic understanding of the experience. However, each theme required its own chapter because of the many data points and methods of developing and verifying each theme that were incorporated into this mixed methods research. After the interview discussion related to each theme, how the interviewer's observational notes and field log addressed the theme is detailed. Discussion of how PAC archival documents and quantitative data from annual surveys further contributed to thematic development closes out the thematic analyses of each theme in turn. The annual surveys are distributed to a larger population of Rush County special education families than the interview sample because the latter population was limited to PAC charter members. The thematic development sections of Chapters 4 through 7 each close with support for establishing that theme, as pulled from the quantitative data collected. The quantitative aspects are discussed last to emphasize that these are secondary to the qualitative components of the research. The quantitative component added a broader support for developing the theme than was available through use of the interview transcripts, researcher notes, field log, and PAC archives.

Discussion of thematic verification methods follows the analysis of thematic development methods for each of the four themes in turn. Chapters 4 through 7 include explanations of how member checking, peer examination and debriefing, and notes from Phenomenology Group meetings further enhanced the credibility and dependability of the themes developed.

The last of the analyses chapters, Chapter 8, integrates the thematic analysis discussed in Chapters 4 through 7. Chapter 8 also addresses a few findings not discussed earlier. Two such areas covered in Chapter 8 are the use of metaphors (the power of which is integral to phenomenology) and the impact of pronoun shifting during the interviews (for example, a participant switching from "you have to . . ." to "we have to . . ." in the course of an interview). Chapter 8 is also where the constant comparative method, Constas' (1992) components of categorization, and Brantlinger et al.'s (2005) qualitative research quality indicators—three data analysis procedures promised in Chapter 3—are linked to the four themes described in Chapters 4 through 7. Chapter 8 also provides a broader analysis of the phenomenological findings, field note and artifact findings, and the quantitative component of the research. Most of the tables used to depict the results of this research are in Chapter 8.

Ground of "Self"

In this research, only the grounds of "self" and "others" were evident. Table 4 provides a tabular depiction of the themes discussed in this and the next three chapters (Chapters 5 through 7).

Table 4: Themes, Grounds, and Their Descriptions

Chap-ter	Theme	Phenomeno-logical Ground	Description
4	"It's all about the kids"	Self/Others	A focus on the parent as primary advocate
5	"Our own little group"	Self/Others	Special education as distinct from regular education
6	"One person can't get it done"	Self/Others	Instances of getting help from others, or trying to
7	"Get them involved and then we'll make them care"	Self/Others	The range of special education parental involvement in the school and school system

The phenomenological ground of "self" is all but hidden behind the support of the child. It is not the typical "me," "my," "I" self statements. Instead, the ground of self manifested itself in the parent's support of the child, which is how the ground incorporated both "self" and "others."

Ground of "Others"

The ground of "others" concerns how we define ourselves by relationships (mother, friend, etc.) and how we consider ourselves the same as (or different from) others. If social constructs are society's way of imposing order on a chaotic world (H. R. Pollio, unpublished lecture notes, October 19, 2004), then those we carry with us either temporarily or permanently help us arrive at our own reality, our way of being in the world.

The figure discovered against this ground of "self/others" is "it's all about the kids." This quote was taken from Participant 4 talking not about her own role, but that

of the principal supporting all of the school's students. However, removed from that context, it captures the essence of the parental self behind the child.

Thematic Development of "It's All About the Kids"

Support for theme one is described first in multiple participants' interview quotes. How I used my research log/field notes and the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) archives is also discussed in detail. Quantitative support for the thematic development follows the archival support. These various methods of analyzing thematic development were initially addressed in appropriate sections of the methods chapter, Chapter 3. Support from the participants' own words was discussed in the "Interviews" section of "Data Collection Procedures." Also discussed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section was support from the observational notes, field log, and PAC archives. How I intended to tie in quantitative links to the themes was first addressed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section of Chapter 3, under "Surveys."

Thematic Development from the Interviews

Table 1 (in Chapter 3) provides a useful ready reference while reading through the participants' quotes. It contains a single paragraph description of each participant.

There was little awareness of the self as body, or of the self as self, for that matter. The primary awareness of self that the participants exhibited was as the caretaker of and primary advocate for their child or children with disabilities. It truly is all about their children.

The following observation came from Participant 1, the mother of a high school student who had great special education support at his K-8 school but foundered during his early months at the larger high school. These hard times for her son coincided with her first few months as a PAC member. The mother has had to take his cause to the school and school system so much so that she observed:

> I'm a little afraid I made the impression that I'm not somebody you want to mess with. And that's not really the case. (Participant 1)

When I summarized Participant 2's comments as saying the parents were there to get information for themselves, she corrected me this way:

> Participant 2: No, it's for their kids. . . . Because some of them have Down Syndrome; some of them have cerebral palsy; some of them have ADHD; some of them have just stuttering. There are all different kinds. Nobody has a set type. They're all different and they all need different information. And we're all there, and the parents are there for the kids. They're not there for them.
>
> Interviewer: They are not there for themselves?
>
> Participant 2: Right. They're there for the kids. They're there for information that they can get to help them to help their child. And then, they meet new people. . . . It's a group as a whole. Then they become friends. Then you've got a, not individual parents, but a whole body. It has a, I mean, I can listen to what others have to say, but once you become friends with everybody,

> it's like we're tighter knit. It's like a family. And you get all the information together to help your family.

Participant 2 is the mother of a high school student with both physical and cognitive disabilities, but the sentiment was typical, as the participants' need to help their child overrode any self-evident needs. Participant 4 is the mother of a student with autism. He fixates on odd details in conversations with others and will often spontaneously recall these details months later when he meets that person again. His mother succinctly described her reason for getting involved this way:

> I want to be involved in it because I want to do what is in the best interests of my child. . . . If I had to drive Ben to school, I would drive Ben to school. If I had to move to be near the school, I would do that, too. You would do whatever you have to do for the well-being of your child, right? (Participant 4)

Participants 1 and 7 echoed this same sentiment:

> Being a part of the special ed committee is just being able to get to know the people that are available to help you if you need help. . . . What to do if you're not getting treated right; who to talk to. . . . I'm not really wanting to change anything. But, I mean, [what we get at the PAC meetings] is good information to have, to know, especially when you have to ask for something. (Participant 1)

> I was basically wanting to advocate for my child in special ed because a lot of times they don't have a voice. (Participant 7)

This theme is evident in the ways that each parent discussed their role as primary advocate for their child with disabilities, such as this reason for joining the special education PAC, given by Participant 8 (one of only two fathers interviewed):

> I'd been meaning to [join] for a while. I've been wanting to get more involved, but . . . dealing with our son, he can always make you self-centered and so focused on one thing that you're not helping anyone else. (Participant 8)

In addition to curbing the primary caregiver's sense of being alone in rearing a child with disabilities, Participant 3 tied the PAC's mission back to child advocacy:

> I'm all for education. I call for them learning as much as they can learn. But I don't think we can lose sight of the fact that they are children. And I don't think we should mind-boggle them. . . .
>
> There needs to be a time when they can still be that child, and not be forced to grow up, and be an adult. That's going to come fast enough. They are going to be there before we know it. And I think somewhere along the line, they need a little bit of a balance. I guess maybe a better balance, where they can do that. So that they will have some nice memories too, and not just, "Oh, I went to school and all I did was work. All we did was work. " (Participant 3)

The only participant who is not the parent or grandparent of a disabled child (Participant 9), gave a slightly different reason for joining. She taught special education for 30 years and her reason for joining is consistent with the "self" being manifested in support of the child.

> Why waste all my education and experience? This was something I could do. So I got in on the surrogate parenting and I thought this was just probably an extension of surrogate parenting. (Participant 9)

Participant 8, the father of a teen who has spent most of his school years in self-contained classroom placements and is now receiving homebound services, even tied this support of the child to the role of the PAC:

> I like how this [parent advisory committee] is. This is the whole concept of the child and what we could do with the child that's in need that could make their life a little bit better. (Participant 8)

Participant 4, the mother of the young man with unusual memory skills and social interactions, added as a rationale for the PAC that it could support members without the means to support themselves.

> I have the resources that a lot of the people don't here. . . . I can't even imagine what it must be like to be a poor person and have to deal with the transportation, and the special care. (Participant 4)

Participant 5 added to this an advocacy role for the parents similar to that mentioned above by Participant 7, speaking as the child's voice. What is doubly interesting about the way Participant 5 finishes this thought is that she is now a special education teacher in Rush County. When she said it, she was a teaching assistant.

> It wasn't just the other side of the desk; it was our side, too. We were actually able to put in our own input, or further our own education by bringing in topics that we were concerned about as a parent. . . . Sometimes teachers don't see things like parents see them for their special ed, special needs children. (Participant 5)

Participant 5, the mother of an only child with attention deficits, recalled the only time she ever had to go to the principal and not the teacher to solve a problem. The teacher had commented about the recent change in the boy's medication loud enough for everyone in the classroom to hear.

> This teacher really scarred Taylor. I mean, he didn't want to have nothing to do with her anymore. . . . Sometimes people can really hurt your feelings and hurt your pride, and you don't forget it. (Participant 5)

Also aligned with "it's all about the kids" is the difficulty these parents have reconciling special education with general education. It concerned attempts to fit it, but in most cases addressed not fitting in with the general school population. The

parents made some curious distinctions between their special education child and general education students.

> Like inclusion being the way to go, like we should get all the special ed kids into general ed classes as much as possible, it's hard to support that wholeheartedly when you think that it's not right for all special ed children. It's a nice thought, but . . . it's amazing that things go right as often as they do. . . . I guess that makes me a bad choice [for this committee]. Because I think special ed is the way things are and general ed is not. (Participant 6)

> Regular education doesn't know quite how to accept and blend in with special education, in some situations. There are lots of regular parent/teacher organizations that never do apply to special education. And I thought it would be a great idea if we . . . could focus just on special education. . . .
>
> Sometimes special ed parents and sometimes special ed kids get labeled. . . . [People] think just because they are a special ed student, that they have parents that don't care. . . . "He's special ed. The parents just let him do what he wants to do." (Participant 5)

Participant 5 is a Rush County special education teacher now. She talked in this way about getting the staff to deal with her son directly:

> [The school psychologist] addressed him then, saying, "Now are you going to try your best? Are you going to work this summer?" . . . I wanted him to hear,

> let him hear it right from their mouths. What he needed to do and what they expected from him. (Participant 5)

Participant 5 asked the school psychologist to explain to her son what his desire to switch from resource room to consultation-only special education services would entail. This was the end of seventh grade for her son, planning for his last year of middle school:

> I felt like [being on special education consultation] would probably give him the security blanket, knowing if he gets in the classroom and it's over his head, or he starts to panic, he knows he can go back to his [special education] teacher and say, "Hey, I don't understand what she's talking about." (Participant 5)

Participant 1 did not get this kind of flexibility and individual attention from all of her son's high school teachers.

> [One teacher] even asked him in class, "What are you, stupid?". . . A lot of that mentality from the teachers is tough to deal with, I think, especially when you're trying your best and it's all your capable of. . . .
>
> If other kids hear the teacher call a resource kid "stupid," guess what? They're labeled "stupid" for the rest of their time in school. And I don't think there's enough compassion there for kids that can't help the way they are. (Participant 1)

Perhaps the most curious comments came from parents who have a special education child and also have a typically developing child or children at the same school.

> I think it should be what to have for what the individual child is able to do. You know? Not how much time they spend in the regular classroom, or whatever. Laurie wouldn't do good in a normal seventh grade. There's just no way. There might be some kids that would benefit from mostly regular, or going out there and then resource. They can get around the school. (Participant 7)

> Troublemakers who can't make it in the regular school system are shoved into [the resource classroom] not because that's where they need to be, but because that's the only place for them. . . .
>
> You wouldn't know that [my son] had a problem in the world. He just seems like a normal kid, teenager. And people see that, and they think he's just lazy or something, instead of acknowledging that he's got some serious learning issues. They think he's just being lazy, or goofing off or whatever, and don't want to work with him too much. But that seems to be changing, hopefully it will be in time for him. (Participant 1)

The structure of formal public education is such that the focus is only ever on the student in context (for example, as a fourth grader at a certain school). Indeed,

most special education students and nearly all general education students progress through the grades with very little school system or even school-level continuity from one year to the next. So parents should not be surprised at a school or school system's inability to consider the whole child. Perhaps they are not surprised, only disappointed. Parents, after all, know their children better than anyone else does and can be easily frustrated when their input into a situation with their child is not considered, valued, or even requested.

The importance of how comfortable parents are at the school and how comfortable school staff are in dealing with the parents is not directly addressed too frequently in the interviews. The underlying impact of these mutual comfort levels, however, resonates throughout the home-school communication and parental involvement issues that are frequently addressed in the interviews.

Instances of positive help from the child's teacher were more numerous, fortunately. Participants 4 and 2 described the following innovative arrangements.

> They've niched him out a little world there, you know? . . . He's happy to be where he has found his comfort zone. . . . And his comfort zone is not going to be in a classroom of, in a regular classroom. It's just not. So? So what? (Participant 4)

Participant 2 described the unique arrangement she has with the school staff to let her know how her daughter is getting along in the classroom:

> Her sister-in-law [also a student at the same high school the special education student attends] is allowed to come in the room any time. And, in fact, she always checks on Jessica. So, I feel very comfortable with that. She's allowed to go in there unannounced, and be an extension of us. (Participant 2)

Getting parental input on special education issues was a role planned for the PAC from the outset, as Participant 6 described during first interview. (The issues hierarchy is one of the items included in Appendix H, the PAC archival documents).

> Early on I was communicating with all the parents who said they were interested. And I'd say, "Well, what issues are on your mind?" We had about ten or twelve issues. Then I said, "Okay, which ones are the most important?" (Participant 6)

One of the reasons the PAC started from the members concerns was to get the group working toward realistic future possibilities for their children.

> I'm sure the parents are concerned about transition out into the community, and holding a job, if any are even available for them. (Participant 9)

> Parents never . . . leave behind this idea that the child is going to go to high school and go to college and get married, and they'll have grandkids. Well,

> you've got to back off of that and live the life you have in front of you. (Participant 6)

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was the retired special education teacher (the only participant who is not a special education parent or grandparent), who contrasted the parent's and the teacher's differing perspectives the best:

> There're just a lot of things we need to do to help the parents. Teachers think they have it rough, but they don't have them twenty-four hours a day. (Participant 9)

Although the research specifically addressed the participants' experience with the school system during the first years of the special education PAC, every participant told a fuller story of their child in context. Reactions to the initial diagnosis and early school experiences of their children were common for every participant.

> She had to have open-heart surgery when she was three and a half months old, whenever I first started thinking something was wrong with her. At first, we tried thinking like nothing was wrong. I tried to convince myself that I was overprotective because she was never away from me. (Participant 7)

The labor and delivery stories were generally the source of the participant ruling out their possible drug use as a causal factor of their child's disability. Only

Participant 2 acknowledged being confronted with this possibility regularly from others trying to find an easy answer for why her daughter has the disabilities she does.

> When they see Jessica, the first thing out of anybody's mouth is, "Well, what kind of drugs were you on?" . . . And I'm like, "Okay, what's wrong with not doing anything? I didn't do anything!" Yeah, I've informed a lot of people that just because you have a handicapped child does not mean you were on drugs. (Participant 2)

However, Participants 1 and 5 each recalled their own attempts to understand their child's learning disabilities from this perspective.

> Everything, nutrition and everything, during the pregnancy. I was scared to death so I was being picture perfect. Normal delivery. Took my vitamins, the whole nine yards. So there's really no reason, you know, where the developmental problem came from. (Participant 1)

> What could I have done differently? I didn't smoke. I didn't do drugs. You know, I worked. I'm not lazy. But gosh, you know, it's just one of those things that happen. (Participant 5)

Even "typical teen" anecdotes were common:

> He kind of lost his motivation to even go to school. And I think that's part of his age, too. . . . But truthfully speaking, I've raised a normal teenager already.

> Except for worrying about his future—which, I worry about hers, too—but except for worrying about, "Will he be okay when I'm gone?" I'd rather have him as a teenager any time. . . . He's not nearly as demanding as his sister was. He wants what he wants. They all need to be them. It's kind of hard to do that when you're living in the normal world. But you got to raise them for that, too. (Participant 4)

> When he knows somebody's expecting him to do it, he does much better. If he thinks he's going to let somebody down if he makes a bad grade, as opposed to just having somebody there not caring. (Participant 1)

Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log

Presenting information that surrounded the conversation gives those reading about it much later a fuller sense of the interview as it happened. A field work journal does the same for the interviewer in relation to the research as a whole. For more background on the utility and value of a researcher keeping interview notes and a field log, see the section of Chapter 4 titled, "Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log."

I started keeping such a journal even before this research project started. I started field logging as early as the special education director's call for a PAC in October of 2002. One note that stands out as supportive of theme one was one of my earliest notes (December, 2002): "Is Rush County rural? What are my cultural assumptions?" Having grown up in one of the most crowded cities in the United

States, my instinct is to label as "rural" any place that has greenery and does not have houses connected to each other all the way down the street. However, with only 70,000 people in 600 square miles, Rush County should fit anybody's definition of "rural." The more difficult question is the second one. As an urban Northerner transplant, how can I trust my cultural impressions about a Southern rural school system? Fortunately for me, the answer was by using the other culture to which I and all but two of the participants belong: parents of special needs children. There are two participants who are not special needs parents. One PAC member is not the birth parent of a special needs child, but has been an educational surrogate parent since 1998 and is a retired special educator. The other is the woman whose three grandchildren live with her, two of whom were in special education. Looking at the participants' "it's all about the kids" language through this lens, I could be more comfortable that I was capturing both the parent as primary advocate aspect and the aspect highlighting the endlessness of the job. Both of these issues transcend place, dominate this theme, and mitigate any biases or misunderstandings my Northern, urban background may introduce.

The notes accompanying the interview set also helped me noticed that the participants' sense of individualizing education for the student came through in topics such as resistance to inclusion. Although having the special education student be educated with nondisabled peers as much as possible has been United States law since the 1970s, those participants with more severely disabled children were firm in their beliefs that inclusive public education is not right for all children, and certainly not for

their children. Since this is my experience as a special education parent, I took note of the parents' levels of support for and experience of including students with disabilities in general education classes. The participants with children who have higher cognitive functioning tended to be more positive in both their support of inclusive special education and their experience of it.

Thematic Development from Parent Advisory Committee Archives

Archival documents and artifacts also contributed an aspect to data collection. Patton (2002) noted that such documentation can "provide a behind-the-scenes look at program processes and how they came into being" (p. 294). McMillan and Schumacher (2001) highlighted the use of artifacts as a supplementary technique to help interpret, elaborate on, or corroborate data obtained from the participants. Data created during the life of the special education PAC that supported the research questions or interview transcripts were incorporated into the overall data analysis. Items such as special education PAC website page views, meeting minutes, supporting documentation of issues covered, electronic mailings, and other evidence supportive of the findings were used. These supporting documents were not difficult to gather, though I did need to sanitize a few (to maintain participant confidentiality) before using them whole or quoting parts of them in support of this theme.

The focus on the child while supporting the parents is evident in the first two sentences of the mission statement (the first page of Appendix H):

> The mission of the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee is to work toward the understanding, support, and appropriate

> education of all children with special needs in our community. The committee does this by . . . providing a network of support for parents, including access to relevant information, training, and emotional support.

The final mission statement bullet—concerning staying current on special education public policy issues and responding as necessary—also incorporates this first theme.

Several items from the sample meeting minutes at the end of Appendix H align with both the mission statement bullets and theme: "it's all about the kids." One example is the updates on both the "No Child Left Behind" and "Individuals with Disabilities Education" Acts that I gave the membership following my return from a state-wide special education legal conference. At this same PAC meeting, the membership also received access to Pennsylvania's Parent Information Network website and news of an upcoming local meeting on long-term care for children who will not be able to live on their own as adults. An update on Tennessee's comprehensive assessment alternative for special education students was also discussed at this meeting. I also distributed the website for the PAC online group and explained to the membership the benefits of this electronic message and file sharing mechanism.

Quantitative Data Links to Theme One

The Continuous Improvement Monitoring Program (CIMP) included a parent survey component. Developed by the State of Tennessee Department of Education to address special education issues of interest to the federal Office of Special Education Programs, the survey was distributed annually from 2002 through 2005 to at least half

of the special education families in each public school system. In 2006, the Cyclical Performance Review replaced the CIMP. The parent survey expanded and the State Department of Education asked the school systems to begin surveying *all* special education families. However, this research uses only the survey results from the four CIMP years.

The Rush County Special Education count is 2,045 students from 3 to 21 years old as of January 26, 2006. Almost 700 of these are receiving speech and language services (one or two hours per week usually) added on to their primarily general education curriculum. More than 600 students have identified learning disabilities and receive anywhere from 2 to 15 hours of special education help in their classrooms or by pull-out resource room time. The nearly 700 students remaining are those diagnosed with severe disabilities such as autism, deaf-blindness, emotional disturbance, mental retardation, orthopedic impairments, or multiple disabilities. These students receive special education services from 20 to 35 hours per week.

These more than 2,000 students' families are the pool from which Rush County selected its random sample each year. Since the state asked the school systems to survey at least half of the families of students receiving special education services, Rush County typically distributed about 800 to 1000 surveys. The school system typically received replies from about half of those distributed.

Questions from the surveys related to theme one are number 7 on the one used from 2002 through 2004 and number 1 on the Parent Survey for 2004-2005 (Appendix B). Question 7 from the former survey was "Are you actively involved in making

education-related decisions for your child's education?" In spring of the 2001-2002 school year, with 498 families replying (and only "yes" or "no" alternatives offered), there were 489 "yes" answers, 7 "no," and 2 left blank for number 7. At the end of the 2002-2003 school year, 80 fewer families completed surveys. With 418 returned, 398 answered "yes" to question 7, "no" was selected 11 times, and respondents left this question blank on the other 9 surveys. At the end of the 2003-2004 school year, 283 special education families returned surveys. "Yes" was chosen 272 times for question 7 that year, "no" was selected 6 times, and 5 families left the question blank. Question number 1 from the 2004-2005 survey was worded, "Are you involved in determining appropriate services for your children?" In the spring of that school year, 500 special education families returned surveys. For question 1, 469 replied "always," 25 selected "sometimes," 5 circled "never," and one respondent did not reply to this question.

What this adds to the "it's all about the kids" theme is self-reporting by a majority of the special education families in Rush County that they are actively involved in educational decision making for their children with special needs. The affirmative percentages come out to more than 98% for school year 2001-2002, more than 95% for 2002-2003, over 96% for 2003-2004, and for the similarly worded question on the 2004-2005, the "always" percentage was almost 94%. Granted this is self-reporting and the respondent was the one to define "actively involved" and "involved." Also, only about a quarter of the total number of the special education families returned these annual surveys. However, with affirmative percentages well

over 90% each year, this question related to parental advocacy was among the most consistently positive results.

Verification of Theme One: "It's All About the Kids"

Methods used to verify the theme, as detailed in this chapter, include member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. These three were first addressed in Chapter 3 as methods of establishing trustworthiness and verification. Peer examination/debriefing and support from the Phenomenology Group were further discussed in the "Limiting Researcher Bias" section of Chapter 3.

For those who may be more familiar with quantitative analysis, credibility is the qualitative correlative of internal validity in quantitative work (Anfara et al., 2002). Similarly, the dependability of qualitative work is correlated to the reliability of quantitative research (Anfara et al.). The following section details the researcher's efforts to verify the credibility of the theme by getting feedback from the participants on what was captured in their interviews. Following these member-checking details are two sections on how the dependability of the themes was addressed by peer examination and peer debriefing, then by discussions with The University of Tennessee's Phenomenology Group as the themes were developed.

Thematic Credibility from Member Checking

Member checking is testing the data, categories, interpretations, and conclusions with those from whom the data were originally collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba called it "the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). If the very people living the experiences the researcher is

attempting to capture say, “yes, that is it exactly,” this adds a solid layer of validity to the findings. Maxwell (1996) affirmed it as “the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning . . . and the perspective” (p. 94).

Like the constant comparative method, member checks occur continuously. At various points during each interview, I had to restate what I heard the participant saying, to get them to let me know I had it right or correct me right then. After the interviews I sent each participant a copy of the complete transcript for their review and comments. I also sent each participant the first draft of the findings and analysis, then called them to get their comments.

Member checking supported the “it’s all about the kids” thematic development in the following ways. All participants expressed in some way that the situation for their children was improving. Even for the few members who expressed concern over their children’s pending transition from school to work life, the belief held that things are better now than they used to be. In the very first interview, my bracketing interview, I said the members “want to see positive change for their causes and concerns. And see that things are moving in a positive direction.” This sense of optimism permeated the interview set, even in the face of some very grim past and present realities.

On a more prosaic level, much of the member checking of this first theme concerned the differences the school interactions entailed because the participants’ own children were the topic of discussion. For example, even as she made an issue of the teacher exposing her son’s medication use, Participant 5 acknowledged that

this would not bother some students, those who themselves say, " 'I need my medicine. I didn't take my medicine yet!' right in front of the whole class." Participant 3 highlighted how much she has learned personally through formal and informal PAC information sharing.

In final phone conversations with the participants, after I had given them time to read not just their transcripts but also my first drafts of this research, I asked each if my analysis captured the essence of their experience. All agreed it had, even Participant 9 (the surrogate special education parent), who admitted that her experience is very different from that of the rest of the PAC membership. Participant 8 (the father who used to be a teaching assistant and is now a special education teacher in Rush County) even said the words that are music to the phenomenological researcher's ears when he offered that as he was reading the draft, he kept saying to himself: "That's it. That's it!"

Thematic Dependability from Peer Examination and Debriefing

I used three peers not connected with the special education PAC to check the work in a general sense for dependability (peer examination) and be the first ones to reflect on the findings of the study (peer debriefing) (Anfara et al., 2002). Using three peer debriefers who have seen all of the raw data helped me avoid any intentional or unintentional filtering out of linking data from the various sources. Additionally, it gave me chances to test the themes in progress and revise interview strategies with later participants. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested these two advantages of peer debriefing, and added that it could clear the researcher's "mind of emotions and

feelings that may be clouding good judgment or preventing emergence of sensible next steps" (p. 308). I enlisted three educators, all East Tennessee natives, early in the research and had each read all nine interviews. Additionally, two of the three peers looked in on several of the interviews in progress.

The peer examiners/debriefers supported the development of this theme in these ways. The theme resonated with one peer's own experience of having to become the primary advocate for her own two children with disabilities, mainly because, like these participants, she observed "the parent has to stand up for their child because nobody else will" (peer's personal communication, April 9, 2006). This peer quote paraphrases O'Harra's (1991) line from the "Parent/School Special Education Advocacy" section of the literature review: "If we don't advocate for our children, no one else is likely to" (p. 4). Another peer, who has 31 years as a special education teacher and administrator, found that this theme matched her experience of the parent perspective. She observed that especially in this post-World Wide Web decade, parental advocacy has grown stronger as parents are better armed to demand the services they read about, ones that appear to help students with disabilities similar to those of their children. In their minds parents realize that the teacher has to serve the needs of a classroom full of students. But in their hearts, the parents want the teacher's full focus on the child that is their own focus.

The parents' need to have the teacher focus on the participants' sons or daughters matched the experience of the third peer examiner/debriefer as well. She has no special needs children of her own and had limited special education experience

prior to becoming principal of the early childhood center, but echoed the same parental viewpoint that the teacher should focus on the individual child's needs, saying all parents want formal education to be about their own children. Her recent experience confirms that the majority of families appreciate the efforts of regular education teachers who refer the children for evaluation.

All three peers highlighted the disparity between the members wanting to get their own child's issues resolved and wanting to belong to a body intended to settle county-wide special education issues. One of the three peer debriefers speculated that perhaps the PAC members want information about county-wide issues but when it comes to issue resolution, they want to limit the discussion to issues pertinent to their own children or their child's school.

Thematic Dependability from the Phenomenology Group

From August 2004 through June 2006, I participated in a group that met on campus weekly to discuss transcripts from the phenomenological perspective. This is a group of mostly masters and doctoral candidates from various disciplines, led by two professors with years of experience in phenomenological research. The phenomenological method is philosophically and existentially grounded. It is similar to, but not the same as grounded theory. What is unique about grounded theory is that it is "usually 'substantive' rather than formal or 'grand' theory" (Merriam, 1998, p. 17). By "substantive," Merriam means that the theory's referent is an everyday-world situation; this is how the theory is "grounded." According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 17), phenomenological or interpretive research uses a "loosely structured"

grounded approach to understand important distinctions and patterns in members' meanings. Both grounded theory and phenomenology use interviewing rather than observation to collect data (Moustakas, 1994). Where phenomenology diverges from grounded theory is that grounded theory's aim is to arrive at a general theory with a specific, practical application.

Phenomenological research's aim is to describe the participants' experience of an event so that others might understand it as the participants do (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Phenomenology employs a figure/ground relationship in which one or more of four grounds occur and relevant themes are discovered as figures against the ground. The Phenomenology Group discussed five of the nine interview transcripts, with each discussion lasting approximately two hours. I audiotaped these discussions as the group worked at unpacking the essential meaning of each transcript. Following are pertinent observations related to the theme of "it's all about the kids."

It was in a Phenomenology Group session that the realization that all parents are going to give background on their children whether it is directly asked for or not. The group had already looked at a few of the transcripts and noticed that various prompts precipitated the participant's telling their child's story, especial the early years, the diagnosis and follow-up. The Phenomenology Group attributed this to the participant's need for me to understand the whole child, their son or daughter in-context. After this Phenomenology Group session, I went back to the transcripts to code for "background on the child" and "seeing the whole child." Much later I realized that the latter was the Ethnograph parent category to the former's code tag.

It was Phenomenology Group attendees who pointed out that even when I made the incident general, the member often turned it specific. One instance of this was when Participant 2 was talking about the troubles she was having with the school's office about documenting her daughter's attendance. When I commented, "It sounds like they have problems with truancy at the high school," Participant 2 replied, "Not in Jessica's case. I told them at the office, 'It's not like she can roll herself down the middle of Main Street. Somebody has to push her!' "

Some of the Phenomenology Group discussions keyed in on the reality that the teacher has to have an even attachment to all children in class; the parent obviously does not. Even so, parents want to know that the teachers care about their children individually. This same sentiment was voiced by one of the peer debriefers in the previous section of this chapter.

The Phenomenology Group also addressed the recurring concern over transitions, especially the transition to life and the progression of time. Concern for the future loomed as the only negative in transcripts that were otherwise entirely positive. The impression exists that there is a gap in knowing what is available and getting help once the special education child ages out of school. Especially for the parents of teens, the prospect of their child living with them forever is real.

Even so, the Phenomenology Group all but scolded me for pushing the advisory and community liaison roles of the PAC on the participants and pointed out the many instances of the members resisting an advisory role, or seeing it as getting what they need for their own children, more advocacy than advisory. I had to

acknowledge that most members became involved in the PAC to help their own children. Even so, the parents as the primary advocates for their children are a natural bridge between the school system and the community. The main difference between the participants and parents who prefer not to get involved in school issues is that these parents enjoy being the bridge.

Summary of Phenomenological Theme One

How theme one developed was first detailed in the participants' interview quotes. Direct quotes from the participants highlighted the parents as primary advocates for their children with disabilities. Many instances of the parents supplying background information on their children also fit this first theme. Their quotes depicted the participants as people ready and willing to share the lessons they have learned.

How I used my research log/field notes and the PAC archives during thematic development was also discussed in detail, beginning with my cultural assumptions as an urban Northern transplant to the rural East Tennessee foothills. The interview annotations helped me realize that these participants take to heart individualized public special education for their children. The PAC archival links to this theme focus on how the PAC mission has been playing out in the PAC members' day-to-day information sharing.

Quantitative data links to the theme, in the form of annual parent survey results, were also described in detail. This discussion centered on replies to the one

survey question that asked the parents whether they were involved in making educational placement and goal decisions for their children.

I elaborated on methods used to verify “it’s all about the kids” as a theme, including member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. Through member checks, all participants reaffirmed that their children’s educational situations seemed to be improving in the years since the PAC was formed. The participants also focused on the personalized, individualized education of their own children during these member checks. As for the peer examination and debriefing, this theme reminded the three peer debriefers of their own efforts as parent advocates for their children and attempts in their work lives to personalize each child’s education for the teachers with whom they work. Phenomenology Group members were the first to point out the many interview instances of the participants giving background on their children. The Phenomenology Group had a slightly different view of the parents individualizing special education, though. They pointed out many instances in the transcripts wherein although I prompted in a general way, the participants always gave replies that were specific to their children. In the Phenomenology Group sessions, I came to realize that the PAC membership was not fully embracing (or in some cases even sharing) the special education director’s vision of the advocacy role for the group. They had personalized and individualized this as well.

CHAPTER 5

MIXED METHODS DEVELOPMENT AND VERIFICATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEME TWO: "OUR OWN LITTLE GROUP"

Chapter Introduction

Theme two, "our own little group," is another figure standing out against the ground of "self/others." This chapter describes in detail how the theme was developed by multiple data collection methods, including interviews, observational notes and a field log, PAC archives, and quantitative data from an annual survey. How selection of this theme was verified through member checking, peer examination and debriefing, and support from The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group is also addressed.

Thematic Development of "Our Own Little Group"

Support for theme two is described first in multiple participants' interview quotes. How I used my research log/field notes and the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) archives is also discussed in detail. Quantitative support for the thematic development follows the archival support. These various methods of analyzing thematic development were initially addressed in appropriate sections of the methods chapter, Chapter 3. Support from the participants' own words was discussed in the "Interviews" section of "Data Collection Procedures." Also discussed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section were support from the

observational notes, field log, and PAC archives. How I intended to tie in quantitative links to the themes was first addressed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section of Chapter 3, under "Surveys."

Thematic Development from the Interviews

The "our own little group" theme was discovered in the parents' focus on special education as distinct from general education. Table 1 (in Chapter 3) provides a useful ready reference while reading through the participants' quotes. It contains a single paragraph description of each participant.

> You got to get on with life. You got to get on with other things, so you don't make it your vocation to be researching all the time. That is, if you're not in special education. . . .
>
> I'm dealing with the reality of his disorder much more than I had to deal with it five or ten years ago because the future is now. And so, the things that I could postpone dealing with I can't postpone anymore. I mean, he's pretty much, academically, this is it. This is where he is; this is as far as he's going to go.
>
> You just can't let it become a personal thing with you. You have to deal with the practical side of life. Now, will my child ever fit the academic mold? No way! . . . When he was younger and they gave tests, like an IQ test, I would think, "Oh my God, that's low!" But now I want to put all that stuff in perspective. . . .

> Ben was mainstreamed from the time he was in kindergarten. But as the years have gone by, through middle school, he started to feel more comfortable in the resource classes. And then, some of the resource classes as you get into high school are inappropriate. . . .
>
> Well, what am I going to do? Have my child sit in a normal History class with all normal kids? Take up space? Start to get so antsy that his behavior deteriorates? And let him be the subject of ridicule? That's stupid! Just to hold onto that "I want him mainstreamed." That's not in his best interests. (Participant 4)

Both Participant 4 and Participant 8 have sons with autism who were born after daughters not diagnosed with any disorders. There are many similarities in their stories concerning how different it is advocating for a special needs child in contrast with a general education child.

> [Walking into the school building with your parents] is something that a regular ed student would just not do because of embarrassment. But we have to walk him in and pick him up, so we get to communicate daily, twice a day, with our son's school.
>
> That's something we just don't have with our daughter. . . . I mean, we've been involved . . . we've been supportive of her and she doesn't mind. Some things she doesn't want us part of, because, "It's a teenage thing and

> none of the parents will be here. So I don't want my parents being here." She'll inform us of that. (Participant 8)

In discussing how being on the PAC has impacted their interactions with the school and school system, the participants' responses demonstrate how the decision to join the PAC has not only fulfilled a personal need, but has also filled a gap in on-going school-to-parent connections:

> I think [being on the PAC has] been beneficial to [my son] Brian because, if nothing else, it's given me courage to do the things I need to do. (Participant 1)

> It's been great! If I have a complaint, [school staff] go over it right there. But they also know that if they don't, then I blow up. I don't take no stuff from nobody anymore. (Participant 2)

The parents broadened the query about help from the school system to include instances of encouragement or ideas to try that they have gotten from other parents. What stood out most in this regard was that although the participants knew before the PAC was formed about the differences between their children and general education students, what they came to realize were the differences and similarities between their children and those of other PAC members. While the participants did assent to the need for the PAC as a vehicle to help them improve collaboration with established

school system and community agencies, the one-to-one connections with other parents were the main draw of the PAC for the members interviewed.

> I can identify better with other people who have children in the same situation here. (Participant 7)

> There's thinking, "You need to get real." There is no magic wand here, but there is also, they're putting up that fight against the school system that, you know, [my wife] and I say, "Should we have fought for this or that?" "Is this something ridiculous that they're asking for, or are these reasonable requests?" It crosses your mind. (Participant 6)

> To know what other parents are doing and dealing with. Um, I think that's probably been the biggest plus. You know, to get ideas. "Oh! I didn't know I could do that!" . . . It's been beneficial . . . knowing that there are other parents that struggle and get frustrated just like you do. (Participant 1)

> You don't have to feel like, "My child is the only one doing this. I need help." If you've got twenty people that feel the same way, then it's something that may need to be addressed. (Participant 8)

> And the parents of a normal child, usually there is a grandparent who will take the kids. Whereas these children, especially if they are teenagers and they are acting out, the grandparents can't handle them. (Participant 9)

> There was a lot that I found good about . . . being in there with other parents, seeing that I'm not the only one that's having problems. . . . I'm not the only one that has to go home and sit right beside her child [saying], "No, you have to do your homework."
>
> Other people I've known, they say to their children nothing other than, "Okay, go to your room and do your homework." That would be great! (Participant 5)

Participant 5 acknowledged the support group function built into the PAC as an ongoing method of connecting one-to-one with parents in similar situations. This was an item all participants commented on in their interviews.

> There are things I didn't know about, that I found out through the parents, and then you all discussing it, too. . . . The topics that you would bring up, different topics at each meeting that you would go over and explain. And that was real informative, to all of us. (Participant 5)

Participant 4 also tied her early PAC experiences to the search for help for her son:

> When things happen . . . then you're like, "Okay, is this an autism issue? Is this a teen issue? What is this?" You start looking around for help. . . . When he was little . . . I felt like I was in a wilderness and trying to find a path. . . .
>
> [The parent advisory committee] helps you connect, not just with the school system, but with the other parents. That's a positive thing. . . . I think a lot of parents come there thinking that there's going to be more specific discussion of their particular problem, more like a support group. (Participant 4)

Participant 5, who was just finishing her course work to become a special education teacher at the time of the interview, described her own focus on special education this way:

> Two years ago, I didn't know there was a special ed diploma and a regular ed diploma. And I didn't know that they could take different routes. I'm still learning. I guess I'll always continue to learn. (Participant 5)

In addition to the PAC's information dissemination role, Participant 5 also highlighted its support function:

> I always felt like we were kind of left out . . . without having a support group. . . . If you go to the PTO of the school and bring up issues, it's just, you know. The other parents don't want to hear it. They don't even understand it. So, now we've got our own little group.

> When you get with regular parents, you're kind of an outcast. Where if you have your own organization, for just special ed, I think it just works out better. Like I said, there's no lost time. You just focus on the issues in special education. (Participant 5)

The range of reasons for becoming a member of the PAC addressed how the members responded when school staff directly asked them to become involved in the newly forming PAC. Most acknowledged that they were specifically recruited because they are not "typical" special education parents in that they were already deeply involved in the life of their child's school. Participant 8 (the father who went from being a teaching assistant to first year special education teacher during this research) addressed this shortcoming directly:

> What would be ideal is that the people on the committee are a sample of the whole special ed community, from here and there, from all parts of the county. From minor, little disabilities to major disabilities, you know?
>
> Interviewer: That's the ideal.
>
> Participant 8: If we all had them all with just one particular thing, it would just be all focused on one thing. And so, and including educators in that, slash parents, that would— We could sit back and also say, "*You know, that's not exactly how things work*." Nothing bad, but we've run up against that with a couple people.
>
> Interviewer: Hmmmn, yeah.

> Participant 8: Who say, well, parents say, "*Well the child's teacher isn't doing this*."

Participant 9 delivered one of the more curious and confused admissions to belonging to "our own little group." She is a retired special education teacher and has worked as an evaluator of student teachers. She has been a Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteer in addition to her work as surrogate parent.

> I'm having a hard time. I've been a part of so many things, and I'm getting it confused with all of these other special education activities I've been involved in. Where do you divide the line? (Participant 9)

That the PAC membership as it is now constituted is not a representative sample of special education parents in the county was not a major discovery. The dominant response to asking about why each member joined the PAC was less a rationale than a relief that the PAC now exists. All agreed it satisfied both personal and school system needs. Replies focused more on the group's lack of numbers in the overall membership and lack of member participation. Every participant also mentioned that mutually convenient meeting times are always difficult to settle.

> There're no negatives. It's all positive. . . . I mean, it's all positive as far as *I'm* concerned. There doesn't seem to be time *to have* a meeting. . . . Sometimes, just when I'm really turned onto the notion of, "Oh, I got to come the next time," because we really got on a subject that intrigued me, or something, and

> maybe we'll continue it next time. Up! I can't make it that day! But that's the way it goes. (Participant 4)

Several participants acknowledged both the difficulty of getting together and the value of making this effort:

> You offer a lot and I like being there, to really meet with people who can actually hear from us. (Participant 7)

> Drawbacks of being involved? There really haven't—(*pauses*). The time issue. I really, I guess that would be the hardest thing. . . . Not necessarily where it's the times that you've set up, but sometimes, my personal times. (Participant 8)

> It's a group now, and you're not feeling out there, just left by yourself. You don't feel left alone. (Participant 2)

> You don't feel alone. You feel like you can come together and if you need to say something, you can say it. (Participant 3)

Participant 8: The SpEd director really communicates well, and you try to bring things up that are important and that may have an impact on any child in special education.

Interviewer: Which ones? What are you thinking about, specifically?

Participant 8: Oh, what do I mean specifically? (laughs) Well, the last one I was here for, we were talking about the impacts of testing. And I think you did a good job of explaining [statewide alternative testing].

How the parent fits into the county-wide support system (other than as support for other PAC members) remained unclear. Some participants highlighted the need for clarification of their role in the PAC.

From the parents' side, what are we supposed to be doing? Just bringing you our concerns? . . . I get knowledge when I go to the advisory board. . . . I wonder if, the advisory board, what it wants from the parents. . . .

Presumably . . . the school system thought a certain parent or type of parent had some ideas that could be imparted to the system, and help you all do your job better, too. I guess that's what that's all about. (Participant 4)

Because he's going to high school, I'm less involved in the day-to-day stuff, but the parent advisory helps me be connected where I would have no connection, probably, or very little connection. (Participant 4)

> [The PAC] is still in the fact-finding mode. And until you put it that way, it hadn't occurred to me that that would probably be a turn off to a lot of people. . . .
>
> It's better to be communicating with the parents early on, than waiting until there's a problem. That's one of our main reasons for being, is to settle things before they become problems. (Participant 6)

Other than this "fact-finding mode" comment, the closest any participant came to a negative opinion about the PAC were these two comments:

> My opinion is that a lot of, that sometimes we get bogged down in the minutiae of the administrative stuff. And parents don't quite always relate, you know what I'm saying? (Participant 4)

> I'd have thought we'd be better known outside the group itself, and at least known in the county's special ed community, which we're not really, yet. Let alone the rest of the county education community. (Participant 6)

Participant 3 also agreed the PAC was taking longer than expected to take hold in the county, but was more optimistic about its future than Participant 6 appeared to be.

> Participant 3: I think the more we can put that name out in front of them, somehow it's going to click.

Interviewer: They'll make that connection?

Participant 3: Make the connection. Make the connection. So, that's my, that's my story (*laughs*). I hope I've been some help. . . . I really do. But like I said, I have been truly guilty and would be the first to admit it, and tell anybody, of not knowing, not knowing and not appreciating what was right here. Really. Right under my face and eyes. And nobody telling me about it.

Interviewer: You're right. It doesn't need to be a best-kept secret.

Participant 3: It doesn't. It really doesn't. It needs to be out there. Spread the word.

Interviewer: So we should all be special ed messiahs? Voices in the wilderness?

Participant 3: Absolutely. Absolutely. You are correct.

All participants acknowledged that the PAC has too few active members to get things done. Even so, the overall tone of optimism that the group would grow and thrive overshadowed the minimal frustration and disappointment some expressed over the group's inability to attract interest and attention. Even among the disappointed, however, there was a commitment to endure and a belief in the need for the group.

Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log

Presenting information that surrounded the conversation gives those reading about it much later a fuller sense of the interview as it happened. A field work journal does the same for the interviewer in relation to the research as a whole. For more

background on the utility and value of a researcher keeping interview notes and a field log, see the section of Chapter 4 titled, “Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log.”

The earliest field note supportive of the “our own little group” theme was from January, 2003. It occurred to me during one of the regularly scheduled special education lead teacher/consulting teacher meetings how they show more allegiance to and alignment with their assigned schools than they do to countywide special education. This may be understandable from a classroom special education teacher assigned to a specific school. However, special education consultants are usually teachers with a lot of special education experience and some are responsible for several schools. Special education consultants help teachers in their assigned schools with administrative requirements and sometimes with creating or modifying classroom materials for special education students. They also set up parent meetings as needed. In schools with no consulting teacher assigned, the senior special education teacher—the lead special education teacher—serves in this capacity. What I did not realize in early 2003 was that this sense of belonging to and fitting in at the school was not true for special education parents. Only one went as far saying she felt like an “outcast,” but that concept was echoed by all participants in the relief they expressed over finally having a group to belong to that shares the same focus they do.

This was a theme I had been anticipating because as far back as our oldest child starting school, my wife and I noticed we felt better connected with special education parent support groups than we did with school-level parent organizations. I

was thinking about that while making notes on one of my interview protocol copies and trying to visualize a triangular graphic for school, parents, and special education interaction. Underneath these draft triangles I wrote about parent teacher organizations, "a network that isn't helpful isn't a network." Although special education families have a lot of the same needs that all school families do, they have many more uncommon needs.

In my bracketing interview, I was trying to sort out why the PAC has more than 30 members, but less than 10 ever came to the meetings. Mine was the first interview and at that time all I could say about it was the PAC as developed was not what they signed up for, or they felt coerced to sign up, or they had changed their minds about being a part of it. Much later, I wrote in next to this part of my transcript, "or they wanted the info only." That phrase was the germination of my notion of "shadow members." Later in my bracketing interview, I mentioned that I would call these people prior to meetings or to ask them about being on a subcommittee and they never wanted to participate, but neither did they want to be taken off the special education PAC membership list. It took the rest of my interviews with the active members of the PAC for me to realize the shadow members are involved for information getting, not information creation or sharing.

Thematic Development from Parent Advisory Committee Archives

Archival documents and artifacts also contributed an aspect to data collection. Items such as special education PAC website page views, meeting minutes, electronic mailings, and other evidence supportive the themes were used. For more detailed

background on the use of archival documents, see the section of Chapter 4 titled, "Thematic Development from Parent Advisory Committee Archives."

Even before the PAC met for the first time, I was contacting the designated members to ask them about the issues that mattered to them. The 11 issues listed on the "Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee Activity Priorities" table were the result of these conversations. This document is included just after the sample electronic mailings in Appendix H. The 11 items not only give a snapshot of what was important to the group at the outset, but they also show what makes a special education parent group so different from a general education parent group. Granted transitions from school to school and considering alternative activities for the summer months are both general education concerns as well. However, general education parents do not have to concern themselves with Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings or ensuring that their child is included in school-wide activities.

Another archival support for this theme had to do with IEP meetings. In the sample meeting minutes, the call went out for volunteers to attend IEP meetings with other parents, especially those of the newly diagnosed students who would be receiving special education services for the first time. Since that first request, three PAC members have volunteered to serve in this capacity.

Quantitative Data Links to Theme Two

The State of Tennessee's Department of Special Education's Continuous Improvement Monitoring Program (CIMP) included a parent survey component that was also used for the quantitative component of this research. For more information

on the CIMP survey and how it was implemented annually in Rush County, see the beginning of the section of Chapter 4 titled, "Quantitative Data Links to Theme One."

Questions from the surveys related to theme two are numbers 5 and 10 on the one used from 2002 through 2004 and number 5 on the Parent Survey for 2004-2005 (Appendix B). Question 5 from the earlier survey was worded, "Are you informed of your child's progress at least as often as parents of general education students are?" In spring of the 2001-2002 school year, with 498 families replying (and only "yes" or "no" alternatives offered), there were 462 "yes" answers, 13 "no" responses, and 23 left unanswered. After the 2001-2002 school year, "don't know" was added as a third option for question 5. For the 2002-2003 school year, Rush County received 418 surveys from special education families. That time there were 389 "yes" replies, 14 families chose "no," 8 selected "don't know," and the remaining 7 left the question blank. In 2003-2004, with 283 surveys returned, 259 families answered "yes" to Question 5. Six families selected "no," 11 chose "don't know," and 7 families did not answer. For the survey at the end of the 2004-2005 school year, this question was worded "Does the school send a progress report, related to your child's IEP goals and objectives, as often as report cards are issued to all students?" With 500 families responding, 468 chose "yes," 16 selected "sometimes," 7 chose "never," and 9 did not answer.

On the earlier survey, question 10 was worded, "Are the educational facilities (classrooms, work areas, etc.) provided for your child's educational program comparable to those provided for non-disabled students?" In the spring of 2002, 442

families replied “yes,” 29 chose “no,” and 27 left the question blank. After the 2001-2002 school year, “don’t know” was added as a third option for question 10. For the 2002-2003 school year, with 418 surveys returned, 319 families chose “yes,” 12 replied “no,” 38 selected “don’t know,” 3 wrote in “not applicable,” and 46 families left the question blank. For the 2003-2004 school year, with 283 surveys returned, 194 chose “yes,” 16 replied “no,” 59 selected “don’t know,” and the remaining 14 did not answer this question. The Tennessee Department of Education opted not to repeat question 10 on the 2004-2005 survey.

What this adds to the “our own little group” theme is self-reporting by a majority of the broader special education families in Rush County that they are being kept informed of their children’s educational progress at least as frequently as are the parents of general education students. The affirmative percentages come out to almost 93% for school year 2001-2002, just over 93% for 2002-2003, better than 91% for 2003-2004, and for the similar (but more specifically worded) question on the 2004-2005, the “yes” percentage was almost 96%. It is important to note that this was self-reported data and the respondents may not know how often general education parents receive updates. Also, only about a quarter of all of the special education families returned these annual surveys. However, with affirmative percentages well over 90% each year, this question related to special education parents being kept abreast of their children’s progress as often as are general education parents are showed consistently positive results.

The earlier survey also asked about whether special education facilities are comparable to those used by general education students. These results were not encouraging. In fact the percentages had been headed in a negative direction in Rush County before Tennessee discontinued the question. The "yes" responses were almost 89% for 2001-2002, almost 76% for 2002-2003, and nearly 68% for 2003-2004. This question highlighted problems of the special education functions being both substandard and isolated compared to the rest of the school's facilities for three of the system's schools.

Verification of Theme Two: "Our Own Little Group"

Methods used to verify the theme, as detailed in this chapter, include member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. The following section details the researcher's efforts to verify the credibility of the theme by getting feedback from the participants on what was captured in their interviews. Following these member-checking details are two sections on how the dependability of the themes was addressed by peer examination and peer debriefing, then by discussions with The University of Tennessee's Phenomenology Group as the themes were developed.

Thematic Credibility from Member Checking

Member checking is testing the data, categories, interpretations and conclusions with those from whom the data were originally collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the interviews I sent each participant a copy of the complete

transcript for their review and comments. I also sent each participant the first draft of the findings and analysis, then called them to get their comments.

Member checking supported this theme's development in the following ways. I was gratified to learn that all participants could not only recognize themselves in the direct quotes and in the Table 1 paragraphs, but also that no one had any objections to how I characterized them or their experience. Many could make out with certainty only a few of the other participants, which is understandable since the meetings tend to be a different group of about five people each gathering. Some had it easier than others in this regard. For example, Participant 8 was the only father participating (other than I), but even he admitted that he read the draft more for how it all came together than for trying to figure out the identity of each participant. Only Participant 9 (the retired special education teacher and surrogate special education parent) said she could match up most of the participants with their true identities. This is not surprising either, since as early as the Phenomenology Group discussion of her transcript, the value that Participant 9 placed on social connections was highlighted.

One bad side of the PAC being "our own little group" was revealed in member checking with the very participant from whom this quote came. Participant 5—the former teaching assistant currently a first year special education teacher—pointed out that even now the PAC is still "a big secret" in Rush County, even from people with teenaged special needs children. Participant 3—the only grandmother participant in the study—echoed this same lament: "Too many people still don't know about it, or treat it like special education isn't their problem."

One other follow-up comment from Participant 5 highlighted the need to keep the parents new to special education informed of the jargon. She mentioned a friend of hers at an IEP meeting impatiently waiting through "LD," "ADHD," and "MR" for initials that she would know the meaning of, "like maybe 'WD 40'."

Thematic Dependability from Peer Examination and Debriefing

I used three peers not connected with the special education PAC to check the work in a general sense for dependability (peer examination) and be the first ones to reflect on the findings of the study (peer debriefing) (Anfara et al., 2002). I enlisted three educators, all East Tennessee natives, early in the research and had each read all nine interviews. Additionally, two of the three peers looked in on several of the interviews in progress.

The peer examiners/debriefers supported the development of this theme in several ways. For the peer who is the mother of two children with autism (in addition to being a special education teacher in a neighboring county), this theme and the parents' stories reminded her of a couple of her own stories about her children not fitting in with general-education based school processes. One occurred when she arrived with her daughter the first week of school and, seeing the flow of students headed toward the gymnasium to await the first bell, started to take her daughter in that direction. The principal stopped her, saying that she would have to wait with her daughter until the comprehensive developmental classroom opened. Another related anecdote from her own experience was when she and her husband joined their son's middle school parent teacher organization. At first, things looked promising as they

became leads for a special education subcommittee. However, it became clear quickly that not only the other PTO parents, but also the principal, wanted this subcommittee to exist in name only.

The experience of the peer examiner/debriefer who is now a special education director echoed my observation from the literature review that although more information is available now, the parents' need for information has increased even more. She also observed that the Internet has made it easier and more possible for parents to share information as they find sites and articles that another PAC member could use.

Thematic Dependability from the Phenomenology Group

The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group discussed five of the nine interview transcripts, with each discussion lasting approximately two hours. I audiotaped these discussions as the group worked at unpacking the essential meaning of each transcript. Following are pertinent observations related to the theme "our own little group."

The Phenomenology Group pointed out something the PAC had in common with many groups: the early enthusiasm, then rapid decline in interest that is typical of group dynamics. During my bracketing interview, the discussion centered on whether the PAC was meeting its intended goal and I was being unreasonable in wanting it to do more. They pointed out my belief that the group does not need a directive leader, but added that it does not need an uncertain one either. While I am visionary enough to share the special education director's goals for the group, I am not charismatic

enough to move bureaucratic mountains. I am democratic enough, though, to realize that the members' goals for the group may not align perfectly with mine or the special education director's. Special education administration is there to support teachers and students, but to support parents only indirectly. The PAC exists to support parent and students, but supports schools only indirectly.

The Phenomenology Group also got into several discussions across the five interviews dealing with the PAC serving as a buffer between all schools and all special education parents. It was never clear whether the participants were a representative group of all families, or of only the marginalized families. It was in Phenomenology Group sessions that the distinctions among the participants and "regular" or "normal" parents were highlighted. However, the Phenomenology Group also noted that while disability issues dominated the transcripts, more general child rearing issue also surfaced repeatedly, and less abstract issues concerning the need for educational support were also recurring.

That the people connections—the social side—were a valid reason for belonging was also discovered in Phenomenology Group discussions. This was often cited as a benefit of the meetings, even as the participants discussed the tougher issues of when were the best times to meet and what was the ideal size for meeting attendance. The focus of the social side is on knowing what is going on, without all the bureaucracy and background information. Information getting is the goal. Most members joined for this personal reason, but the participants who stay involved also want to share information and have an impact beyond their own families. In this

sense, parental support is both a reward for and byproduct of parental involvement and advocacy. As one Phenomenology Group member noted: "Sounds like it's not a support group, but it's not a nonsupport group, either" (personal communication, June 7, 2005).

This "getting help versus being independent" idea surfaced in Phenomenology Group discussions in regard to both the participants and their children with disabilities. At the very least, a group is needed to generate ideas and energy because a small group does not have diversity of ideas or county representation. Participants highlighting this function of the group talked about both the PAC as an open forum and as a group that could focus on just special education. Individual schools' parent groups cannot do this, obviously, but neither can system-wide groups other than those aligned with the special education department.

Summary of Phenomenological Theme Two

How theme two developed was first detailed in the participants' interview quotes. The main interview link to "our own little group" was in the participants identifying with other special education parents, and sharing information. Related to this was the members' general acceptance that being a special needs parent is a very different route from that taken by general education students' parents. Not fitting in with general education was common to the theme, even for the parents who have both special education and general education students.

The PAC as an open forum and connection to parents going through similar experiences were the two main benefits emphasized during the interviews. The open-

forum aspect of the group—feeling and being free to air any and all concerns—has the kind of instant appeal that is not there when considering working to solve these issues or being an intermediary between the schools and the community. The social side, that is the people connections, was also offered as a benefit of belonging.

Using personal connections and the school system hierarchy as a way getting things done was viewed as a method of last resort for most, not a benefit. The participants showed a lot of insight into the politics of public education and the bureaucratic model of getting things done. Of course, saying the participants have insight into the politics is not the same as saying they subscribed to bureaucracy as a way of getting things done. Even the kind of politics that does get things done quickly was not viewed favorably. The dual realities that who you know and to whom you are related matter in Rush County received tacit acknowledgement from all participants. Still, most viewed school system politics as a barrier, noting that what gets done for their child is despite the bureaucracy, definitely not because of it.

How I used my research log/field notes and the PAC archives during thematic development was also discussed in detail in this chapter. The notion of "shadow members" (those who want to receive information updates but otherwise are not involved in the PAC) started as a field log entry. That special education is a countywide service but special education teachers are school aligned also came from a log entry. That this goes for parents too, somewhat, came out in the observational notes. That is, I highlighted from what the parents were telling me instances of them fitting in (or not) at the individual school level. Two archival documents closely relate

to the “our own little group” theme. The activity priorities (in Appendix H) came from the very first PAC meeting. A set of later meeting minutes called for PAC members to accompany the parents of newly diagnosed students to the early IEP meetings.

Quantitative data links to the theme, in the form of annual parent survey results, were also described in detail. Two survey questions related to this theme. The first concerned whether the schools updated the parents on their children’s progress as often as the parents of general education students receive progress reports. The second question focused on how comparable special education facilities at each school were to the facilities that are not special-education specific. The “yes” percentages were about 90% each year for the first question, but 60 to 80% for the facilities question.

I elaborated on methods used to verify “our own little group” as a theme, including member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. I used the member checking in part to see if the participants could identify themselves but not the other participants. The confidentiality promised was apparently achieved since all could follow their own quotes but only two could name any of the other participants. Another result of the member checking was that several participants took the opportunity to tell me the PAC is still too little known around the county. The peer debriefers highlighted the special education parents as outsiders at school functions and also addressed the need for the PAC to filter for special needs families the growing amounts of information available on various disabilities. The Phenomenology Group focused on the PAC’s group dynamics, that is the early

enthusiasm and rapid decline in interest that tends to happen with many organizations. However, the Phenomenology Group also pointed out the value of social connections for special education families. The Phenomenology Group also noticed the need for both the participants and their children with disabilities to balance their need to get help with their desire to become more independent.

CHAPTER 6

MIXED METHODS DEVELOPMENT AND VERIFICATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEME THREE: "ONE PERSON CAN'T GET IT DONE"

Chapter Introduction

Theme three, "one person can't get it done," is the third figure standing out against the ground of "self/others." This chapter describes in detail how the theme was developed by multiple data collection methods, including interviews, observational notes and a field log, PAC archives, and quantitative data from an annual survey. How selection of this theme was verified through member checking, peer examination and debriefing, and support from The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group is also addressed.

Thematic Development of "One Person Can't Get It Done"

Support for theme three is described first in multiple participants' interview quotes. How I used my research log/field notes and the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) archives is also discussed in detail. Quantitative support for the thematic development follows the archival support. These various methods of analyzing thematic development were initially addressed in appropriate sections of the methods chapter, Chapter 3. Support from the participants' own words was discussed in the "Interviews" section of "Data Collection Procedures." Also discussed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section were support from the

observational notes, field log, and PAC archives. How I intended to tie in quantitative links to the themes was first addressed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section of Chapter 3, under "Surveys."

Thematic Development from the Interviews

This theme covers the participants' discussions about getting help (and in some cases, being hindered) from other sources. The primary source of help is other parents in similar situations. After other special education parents, the child's teacher is the main source of help (or obstacle to getting help). Following the teacher is the principal and the rest of the school staff. Following these are the special education department and the rest of the system-wide school staff.

The information sharing among the group members and being free to air any and all concerns has the kind of instant appeal that is not there when considering working to solve these issues or being an intermediary between the schools and the community. This drawback-related initial coding concerned the range of support the school system provides, both in special education and outside the realm of special education. While some parents mentioned support from other Central Office entities, school system support in this research dealt mostly with county-wide special education support.

How closely the level of parent involvement corresponds with how well the students' needs are met is another recurring finding that resonates across the interviews. Replies to queries about how well the school was meeting their child's needs were the most polarized, with parents either accentuating the positive or

recalling the negative. In either case, however, every parent emphasized the point that their communication with the school system starts with their child's teacher.

Least helpful to the parents interviewed were the range of community-wide service agencies that are not part of the school system. However, all would aver with the PAC's stated mission (Appendix H) of "collaborating with the parent teacher organizations, school system personnel, and other community organizations." Table 1 (in Chapter 3) provides a useful ready reference while reading through the participants' quotes. It contains a single paragraph description of each participant.

> You have to have a committee to at least get something going because one person can't get it done. (Participant 1)

> Participant 3: I think, to learn things at this level on the committee, and then I really thought we would take them back to the school and somehow, you know, talk about it, maybe develop something that we thought was needed in our schools. Something like that. And I don't, well, I know I didn't accomplish that. And I think that's what I got from when we first started. That we should come here and learn, and see how we could help and be of assistance to what was going on in our particular area.
>
> Interviewer: Okay, so not so much countywide as what's happening at the specific school level?

> Participant 3: Yeah. Yeah! And then, probably branching out after that, I think.

Although the group was commissioned as an advisory committee, interaction among peers who have special-needs children in common has become a valid mission. The PAC very quickly went from not having an established network at all, to becoming an effective network among the PAC membership. However, being a liaison between the school and other special needs parents has not happened yet, nor has the group's stated goal of being a school-to-community liaison. Even so, the participants were still hopeful of being and getting "the ones that help get things done" (Participant 6). While no one said what the right size for the group should be, all acknowledged that the current active membership is too small.

> People tend to go to these meetings during a crisis. You reach out when you are having a problem. . . . [But] that knowledge ought to be for all parents, not just the parents that can come [to PAC meetings]. (Participant 4)

Communication topics in the interviews included distributing information about the PAC and dialog between the school or school system and the parents and between the school system and the community. How little clout the PAC has as a less-than-representative group of families at the school system's margins was not verbalized in quite this way, but clear in the following ways that it was addressed:

> Communication's been the real bugger. Trying to get the word out, and trying to get some help. If you said, "Hey, you know Rush County has a Special Ed Parent Advisory Committee?" Just guessing, I'm sure eight out of ten people would be surprised by that even after two years. (Participant 6)

> Not just being school related, but parent-focused and community focused. . . . The types of conversation that are varied and carried on during the parent advisory committee meetings, it's not just for us anymore. We try to incorporate everybody.
>
> The information needs to be out there so that these people, or any person, can understand that if I'm not here, there is somebody who is going to be able to care for [my daughter]. I think that this is what the group is for, is to get information out to the general public, the world. Anybody who cares about children. (Participant 2)

All participants looked to the teacher as the primary source of information on how their child is doing at school and talk with the principal rarely or never. While the teacher has to have an even attachment to all children in class, the parent obviously does not. Even so, all described the lasting impact a good teacher has had while working one-to-one with their disabled child. A few even cautiously, almost apologetically, worded their efforts to approach the teachers with concerns that could be taken negatively. Most did not mention one-to-one dealings with school

administrators at all and of those who did, only one participant held negative views of the school's principal.

The range of support provided by teachers was from bad to good. The parent of the student in high school level resource (Participant 1) commented on how the modifications to her son's study material are not as good as they were in elementary school.

> It just didn't seem like the modifications were in the areas that would have been beneficial. It was like, yeah it was modified, but it was fill in the blanks . . . busy work. (Participant 1)

Participant 7 is one of the only participants who have had their child change schools over the course of their time on the PAC. Fortunately for her it was a good move. But in this quote she recalled how it was for her and her daughter at the last school.

> I didn't like the program [at my daughter's previous school] because they had such a variety in the group that it was really hard to meet each child's needs. . . . I don't think they were really doing anything with them because it was just babysitting. . . .
>
> They told me one day I wasn't welcome to come back. I told them, "I know my rights. I can come anytime I want to!" . . . [My daughter] was acting differently and I knew something was going on. I'm going to find out why she loves everybody in the world, but she hates these people. (Participant 7)

The participants described many instances of educating the educators on specific disabilities, clarifying why their child is not like the rest. Participant 1's perspective on teachers at her son's high school was that they were comfortable dealing with the bright students, but did not know what to do with students who have learning disabilities.

> [A] lot of the teachers are so used to dealing with higher level students, they have no clue how to teach somebody that might be a little more challenging. (Participant 1)

However, most of this participant's exasperation had to do with teachers who decided early in their dealings with her son that he is not worth the extra effort it takes to teach him in a way necessary for him to learn the material.

> I felt like she was just writing him off. . . . Don't shuffle kids off, or write them off. Just do the job that you're hired to do. (Participant 1)

Participant 3 spoke of wearing out her welcome in her daughter's classroom. Here she was talking about her daughter's previous classroom, the one where the staff were doing little more than "babysitting."

> [The teacher] didn't like you to stay long. She gave you that feeling like, 'Okay, you can leave now.' She didn't actually say that, but "You know, you can go on home if you want to." (Participant 7)

The only grandmother participant (Participant 3) was talking about her granddaughter's early childhood special education setting in the following quote:

> Every time I have been [to the school], everybody seems so calm. They're not rattled. They're not frazzled. And it's not like hustle bustle. It's like they have time for each individual child and that's what I like about it. (Participant 3)

Instances of the teacher knowing just what kind and level of help was necessary for the individual child were not as frequent, but the three examples following were worth highlighting:

> I've always had good connections, good feelings, good working conditions. . . . Good communication with all the teachers. . . . [My son] feels like he's really close to [his teachers], so that made a difference for him when he did need help. They would ask him questions and I could depend on them to follow up and help him out. I've always had great teachers for Taylor. They've always been good, every one of them. Super. Couldn't ask for better. (Participant 5)

Participant 8's son is mostly nonverbal and prone to unexpected, sometimes violent, outbursts. He couched the teacher's help in these terms:

> For a couple years, our son's teacher did a really great job about saying, "I think Ned can do this and we're going to try . . . to push him to get to the next

> level." Him being pushed and having some motivation, but yet not be pushed so much that he loses it. (Participant 8)

Participant 1 contrasted her son's current (high school) special education teacher with the one he had for most of elementary school, who was now tutoring him one-to-one for help with high school content area exit examinations.

> She's amazing with him. She knows just the right buttons to push with him, and how hard to push him, to keep him challenged. And he wants to do good for her. (Participant 1)

All but two participants had nearly all good things to say about their children's schools. No one, however, has reached the comfort level described by Participant 3 (the only grandparent participant).

> I always have felt very comfortable. I've always been accepted very well. And that's a good feeling. I love that! I love that. And I love it when you go and people call you by your name, you know? "How are you?" That type of thing. Well, just sort of a family-type situation. (Participant 3)

The interviews covered a range of help provided by school staff other than the teacher. Reactions to the level of help received from school employees, especially the principal, were as extreme as reactions to help (and hindrances) from the teachers. However, the frequency of one-to-one connections between the student and teacher is

much greater than it is for the rest of the school's staff, including the principal. I will start with the only two who spoke favorably of the principal. Six of the other seven participants were neutral about the principal's help. Typical comments included:

> The principal has always said, "If you need to talk, communicate, just let me know. . . . Even if it's using the phone. We could do this at night or on the weekend." And so, he's made it known to us that he's willing and able to be there, to communicate. (Participant 8 talking about his son's alternative school principal)

> I fell in love with Mary [the principal of the early childhood setting] the moment I met her. She is just that type of person, and will go to any length to help you however she can. . . .
>
> You're surrounded by it here [at the preschool]. It's the kids. It's children. When they got that [attitude] at the top, and then in the classroom, kids get a good start. We just need to fill in the blanks and do whatever we can to help them with the extra maybe issues or matters that need to be done. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 spoke in a similarly favorable manner about the principal of her grandsons' elementary school:

> She has a genuine desire to do the very best she can, however she can, to see that those children benefit. . . . Her heart is in the right place. It's all about the kids. (Participant 3)

Only Participant 1 exhibited overtly negative feelings about the high school principal. The resource classroom placement she mentioned is for higher-functioning special education students.

> [The principal] is strictly focused on the top ten percent, the honor students. . . . A lot of the teachers are so used to dealing with higher level students, that they have no clue how to teach somebody that might be a little more challenging. . . .
>
> To be a good school you've got to be a well-rounded school. But, I think it comes from the administration, the type of school it's going to be. I think if the administration acknowledged that resource needed more attention, then resource would have more attention. . . .
>
> I was on the steering committee for the accreditation process, and the steering committee report said that the school did a good job with below average kids. And I disagreed with that. (Participant 1)

She went as far as expressing a concern that her advocacy for her son might adversely impact her nondisabled daughter's chances for involvement at the school.

In the interviews with the remaining six participants, the principal's role was inconsequential (if it was mentioned at all). However, the school-wide support for special education (or lack of support for it) does come, as Participant 1 indicated, "from the administration." The information circulated and school-wide activities available happen how the principal wants them to happen.

> I don't know with all these laws now, how far they can go in what they say. [But] I like to know what they're doing. . . . What the average day is. (Participant 3)

The school staff's comfort in dealing with the parents also surfaced often in the interviews. The distinctions were evident from the participants who were both special education parents and special education staff members.

> Even before my wife and I got into special education, we were more realistic about what the school system could do, or goals that show progress, compared to a lot of parents. You get the impression that they want you to cure their child, like 'Poof!' . . . If I could do that, I'd start with my two, you know? (Participant 6)

> I subbed for a lot of different teachers, a bunch of them. I stayed pretty busy. They all know me over there [at my son's first school]. (Participant 5)

The comfort level of those participants who spend a lot of volunteer hours at their children's schools also contrasted with their perception of the comfort level of parents who do not visit the school often. Participant 4 volunteered to attend Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings with the parents of newly diagnosed students because of her own experience early in the IEP development process.

> [T]his has not been my experience, but I've heard this from parent after parent. And [the special education director] has talked about this many times: about how intimidating those early . . . meetings are. You show up, and if you're lucky, you're husband can attend, and there's like, thirteen people. And they've all had time to collaborate. And they have an agenda. And you're just, you know, you feel so lost in that environment.
>
> That happened to me a couple of times. I didn't feel lost because I'm the kind of person that, I always have a Plan B. And if . . . the Rush County School System didn't do it for my kid, I'd yank him out and take him someplace else. So I'm going to a meeting with that thought in my mind. (Participant 4)

Participant 4 also mentioned that IEP meetings are not only comfortable now, but also that they are not intimidating mainly because she is realistic about her son's skill levels and what he can do.

In discussing both her comfort level with the school staff and theirs with her, Participant 2 pointed out the difference between the first time her daughter was hospitalized as a high school student and the classroom reaction to similar

hospitalizations when her daughter was in elementary school. The high school teacher and her daughter's attendant not only visited the hospital, but stayed for three hours, watched the girl while her mother got to shower, and brought with them hand-made cards from every student in her new classroom. As the mother (Participant 2) observed, "she had like five surgeries while [in elementary school] and they didn't do anything. No 'wish you'd get well.' No 'missed you'."

What the PAC is accomplishing countywide is not as directly stated. Information sharing for the families of those involved rather than them having a local school impact became the actual mission of the PAC in its first three years.

> I'd like us to get all the way through some, one or two clear accomplishments to have behind us, to say, "This is what we've done; this is what we intend to do." It's harder to get in on the ground floor than it is to join something that you already know is successful and enduring. (Participant 6)

> But at least you can sit down and feel like you can talk with [the special education director]. A lot of times, you get results, but sometimes it's still a mess. (Participant 7)

> I wanted her to go [on class outings], but I couldn't get it taken care of on my own. We tried! So then, I brought it to the committee, and then you, and then the Director. And now she went for the last two years. (Participant 2)

These were the school system-wide issues that surfaced, those outside the realm of special education, but indicative of communication problems that are common within the special education department as well.

> At [the last school], it was all geared toward normal kids. . . . It was all stuff for normal kids to do. The selling things. I hate when they sell things. . . . Who are we going to sell to? I'm not going to let him go door to door. That's too dangerous to do! (Participant 7)

> You have to register them for kindergarten even though they're already in school? It didn't make any sense to me. . . . They come and take your child away from you. They don't talk to you or anything. Just take them and start testing them. . . .
>
> I was really wanting her to go to that lower kindergarten, the developmental kindergarten. Well, they informed me there wasn't one that year. And then I found out later on that there was. So, I didn't really feel like I was listened to, or anything else. (Participant 7)

Participant 7 did mention, however, that her daughter is included in the life of the school much better at her current school than she was at the last Rush County school.

> She gets notes in her bag for the sock hop and stuff like that. . . . She seems to be pretty well kept up on most of the other things [going on around the middle

school]. The kids seem to interact really well with her, the regular kids. . . . They seem to actually like the special ed kids. They don't have a stigma, like "So and so is retarded," or whatever. But the other thing is I never had Mason and Laurie in the same school before. And I was afraid he would be picked on for having a sister in special ed. But they went that first week, with three or four kids fighting over who's going to walk her to the school bus.

Interviewer: Was it that way at Nestor [her daughter's previous, kindergarten through eighth grade school]?

Participant 7: At Nestor I think they were more guarded all the time. They didn't, I mean they went to lunch, but everything else, I don't really think they really felt like they were really part of anything else. Even if they were with other classes, I never got the feeling they were really a part of those classes.

Interviewer: You mean isolated?

Participant 7: I mean like, the choir. Laurie wasn't invited to sing in the choir, or asked to be pulled out for anything, any of the stuff. I never got to the bottom of why.

Participant 4's earlier experience with Rush County Schools was as unsatisfactory as Participant 7's initial experience.

> I know he could have started [school] at three, but there was somebody at the primary school where I used to live, that totally derailed me and said, "Oh, the system can't do anything for him." (Participant 4)

Participant 2 described a neighbor's ignorance that schooling is required for special education students, just as it is for general education students:

> [A couple we know] were really surprised that we didn't keep [our daughter] at home. So I asked, "Why would I keep her home?" "Well, we were told you couldn't send them to school." Send "them." That really upset me. (Participant 2)

Despite the issues quoted above, the sense among the participants is that Rush's County's system-wide special education problems are not great in number or difficult to correct. Participant 4 summed up this underlying sense of optimism.

> Overall, our system is more involved. There're some teachers out there, or maybe a principal or two some place, that don't have special needs kids on the top priority. But overall, I think we get more care and support out of our school system than any place else.
>
> I don't think that you have a lot of confrontation at all. Certainly, you all don't; you all are not hostile. I mean, I know you deal with hostile parents, but I bet less than a lot of places. (Participant 4)

The school-to-work transition is an obvious issue of concern for the parents with teenage children. Participant 7 voiced similar frustration with the preschool to kindergarten transition. However, Participant 3 pointed out that the toddler to preschool transition appeared to be working as it should.

> Obviously, the word is spreading. You're getting known. And more kids are getting help. That's wonderful. Getting assistance instead of waiting till that last minute, when they are supposed to go into kindergarten. (Participant 3)

The school's connections with community agencies was characterized as a weak structure that counts on the personalities of the individual communicants more so than on any formal system of information flow. However, this is true for general education as well. There is no guaranteed school-to-work pipeline in society, so this maybe too much to expect of either the school system or the community. Expecting the PAC to succeed at this so early in its own life-cycle is obviously too much to expect. A range of replies concerned the community support available to special needs families. These replies focus on the parents' efforts to get their children ready to take their place in the world. The parents' collective hope is that their children's place will be one of making a contribution rather than one of always being dependent on others.

Wonder, or almost dread, over what the post-school future holds for their special needs children was another constant across the interview set. The dread increases for the parents of high school students. One even mentioned the trouble her

son is having passing the end-of-course testing required in certain subjects in order to receive a regular high school diploma. Even for the parents of children not yet at that high school-to-life transition, there is high-level bargaining going on in the need to do well in school now as a way of having a better future. Related to this is wondering if the PAC is working to make things better for the students.

> I'm sitting here thinking, "God, I've only got two more years [until my son graduates] and I'll lose my entire support system." That's the way it feels. . . .
>
> We really do need to know what's possible. You know, transition for us older parents now, and with the older kids, it's like, "Okay, here it is. Now what are we going to do?" (Participant 4)

> To go in [to an employment office], and not be able to get a job because you don't have a regular high school diploma is a little deflating. (Participant 1)

Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log

Presenting information that surrounded the conversation gives those reading about it much later a fuller sense of the interview as it happened. A field work journal does the same for the interviewer in relation to the research as a whole. For more background on the utility and value of a researcher keeping interview notes and a field log, see the section of Chapter 4 titled, "Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log."

Notes that stand out as supportive of this theme include this admittedly negative viewpoint from July 25, 2003: "Parents and teachers mix like oil and water." That was all I wrote in the log for that day, so I cannot recall the context causing me to take such a dim view. Considering that it was the month I first wrote the "methods" chapter, perhaps I was considering both methods that would work and those that would not. But I think the disconnection I was seeing had less to do with roles than with assumptions about what the school system can do for the child with disabilities. Only Participant 3, the grandmother, had a child in the process of being diagnosed. All participants had been living with the disability and working with this or other school systems for several years, and so were not expecting miraculous cures from classroom interventions.

I included a note in the margin of Participant 1's transcript questioning if the special education teacher saw her as an informal ally *against* the school system. This was next to a story she relayed about how a new teacher was being harassed by the students. When the participant asked if her son was one of the ones doing the harassing, the teacher said that he was not, but that the environment was not good for his ability to learn. The participant's take on the situation was that the teacher wanted the participant to make a complaint to the school—"on the QT, you know"—so that it would be coming from a parent rather than another teacher.

In a similar vein, my notes in the margin of Participant 4's interview centered on her several indications that parents do not need to know about school system bureaucracy and should be shielded from the purely administrative components of how

issues get resolved. I have been an administrator in various organizations over the past thirty years, yet I have to repeatedly remind myself that this side of policy execution is not as fascinating to most people as it is to me.

This was not the only unique aspect of my interview. The view of me as both insider and outsider was not shared by any other participant. My observational notes from the bracketing interview and the interviews of the two participants who were teaching assistants (and are now special education teachers in Rush County) indicated that both of them were more equivocal about having such a dual role. Participant 5 did talk about her time as a substitute and teaching assistant as a way of knowing what is going on in the school, but said nothing about becoming a special education teacher. Both Participant 8 and his wife were teaching assistants when I interviewed him and (like Participant 5) he is a special education teacher in Rush County now. Even so, all he had to say about the "foot in both camps" notion mentioned in my interview was this:

> Truth to be told, we wouldn't be involved, as much involved as we are, if we weren't in the educational field right now. I'm not saying we wouldn't be; I don't know. You know, it may be just at the local school level, it may not be broad based, through the county. So, knowing what we know now, why shouldn't we participate? (Participant 8)

This difference may stem from Participants 5 and 8 being more distinct about when they are working as school employees and when they are serving as parents. As the years progress, I see my own life and work as becoming increasingly more integrated

and my ability and need to compartment it decreasing. Special education is in everything. In this I am not unique, but such mixing of all life activities was expressed by Participant 9's "where do you divide the line?" and less so with Participant 4's idea that the school is her "entire support system."

Thematic Development from Parent Advisory Committee Archives

Archival documents and artifacts also contributed an aspect to data collection. Items such as special education PAC website page views, meeting minutes, electronic mailings, and other evidence supportive the themes were used. For more detailed background on the use of archival documents, see the section of Chapter 4 titled, "Thematic Development from Parent Advisory Committee Archives."

The second and third bullet of the PAC's mission statement (Appendix H) directly relate to the "one person can't get it done" theme:

- Encouraging an atmosphere of open communication, understanding and mutual respect among all students, parents, school system employees, and the community at large.
- Collaborating with the parent teacher organizations, school system personnel, and other community organizations towards the betterment of education in Rush County.

The latter, especially, gets at the need for not only several people but several groups to work together. The former broadens the PAC's interactions not just within the group itself, but with all who have a stake in improving education service delivery in the county. When the PAC drafted the mission statement, I did not take much note of the

fact that the second bullet above says “the betterment of education in Rush County,” not “special education.” From the outset the group was obviously thinking broadly and ambitiously.

Another archival document included is Participant 4’s reply to my electronic mail about canceling a meeting (the fourth page of Appendix H). Her reply addresses the need to educate the educators on autism and preparing students for independent living. Although specifically addressing teacher training, the electronic mail reply hints at the range of support systems necessary both within the school system and outside of it.

The sample meeting minutes (Appendix H) open with an explanation of a change in special education bus departure times from the schools. In both what necessitated this change and the follow-up to it, the special education director’s explanation detailed the integration of schools’ schedules and people impacted. What is not said in the minutes was that a special education parent in a neighboring county successfully sued the school system over the special education day being shorter than the school day for general education students. Rush County had been using the same practice as its neighbor, moving out the special education buses prior to the regular school bus departures. In the aftermath of correcting this, the special education director, many school principals, and several regular and special education bus drivers reworked the transportations schedules to end this practice. Avoiding a similar lawsuit was one motivation, but this really served more to give Rush County’s special

education department a good opportunity to do right for the special education families. Providing equal access to public education was the real driver for this change.

The two "ongoing items" from the sample minutes (Appendix H) also highlight the community-wide interaction needed to get things done. The transition and before/after school childcare subcommittees of the PAC keep seeing their tasks grow larger rather than seeing them get closer and closer to becoming reality. These PAC members are making slow progress for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that bureaucracy and consensus building are always complex and time consuming.

Quantitative Data Links to Theme Three

The State of Tennessee's Department of Special Education's Continuous Improvement Monitoring Program (CIMP) included a parent survey component that was also used for the quantitative component of this research. For more information on the CIMP survey and how it was implemented annually in Rush County, see the beginning of the section of Chapter 4 titled, "Quantitative Data Links to Theme One."

Questions from the surveys related to theme three are number 1 on the one used from 2002 through 2004 and number 2 on the Parent Survey for 2004-2005 (Appendix B). Question 1 from the earlier survey was worded, "Are you aware of activities in your school system to find and evaluate children who are suspected of having disabilities?" In spring of the 2001-2002 school year, with 498 families replying (and only "yes" or "no" alternatives offered), there were 444 "yes" answers, 44 "no" responses, and 10 left unanswered. For the 2002-2003 school year, Rush County received 418 surveys from special education families. That time there were

365 “yes” replies, 40 families chose “no,” and the remaining 13 left the question blank. In 2003-2004, with 283 surveys returned, 243 families answered “yes” to Question 1. Thirty-six families selected “no,” and 4 families did not answer. For the survey at the end of the 2004-2005 school year, the Tennessee Department of Education decided not to ask parents the question about efforts to find and evaluate children who may need special education services.

On the 2004-2005 survey, question number 2 asked: “Are you informed of opportunities to participate in advisory panels, committees, the local self-assessment process, or other related activities in your child’s school or in countywide special education?” With 500 surveys returned, 358 selected “always,” 50 replied “sometimes,” 80 chose “never,” and the remaining 12 did not answer. On the earlier survey, the Tennessee Department of Education did not ask the parents whether they are informed of opportunities to participate, but did ask them about their own efforts in these kinds of school participation (see “Quantitative Data Links to Theme Four” in Chapter 7).

What these survey tallies add to the “one person can’t get it done” theme is self-reporting by a majority of the broader special education families in Rush County that they are somewhat aware of the county’s efforts to find and evaluate children suspected of having disabilities. The affirmative percentages come out to just over 89% for school year 2001-2002, just over 87% for 2002-2003, and almost 86% for 2003-2004. If the self reported results are that low, the county very likely has troubles in getting the word out about the special education services available. State monitors

agreed and Rush County has been working on Child Find Program enhancements within the community. In the past few years, the school system has added advertising in supermarkets and coin-operated laundries, in addition to the pediatricians' offices and day care centers to which they have long been distributing introductory pamphlets.

The survey used for the CIMP's final year (2004-2005) also asked the parents whether they were informed (by school personnel) of opportunities for them to participate in advisory panels, committees, or the self-assessment at their children's schools. These results are not impressively positive, either, with only 71% of the respondents choosing "always." Unlike the similar question in the next chapter, this question asked the parents only if they were informed of opportunities to be involved, not if they were involved in the school system. Considering that modest objective, it is easy to understand why the school-to-community links are as frustratingly lacking as the participants described them.

Verification of Theme Three: "One Person Can't Get It Done"

Methods used to verify the theme, as detailed in this chapter, include member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. The following section details the researcher's efforts to verify the credibility of the theme by getting feedback from the participants on what was captured in their interviews. Following these member-checking details are two sections on how the dependability of the themes was addressed by peer examination and peer debriefing, then by discussions with The University of Tennessee's Phenomenology Group as the themes were developed.

Thematic Credibility from Member Checking

Member checking is testing the data, categories, interpretations and conclusions with those from whom the data were originally collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the interviews I sent each participant a copy of the complete transcript for their review and comments. I also sent each participant the first draft of the findings and analysis, then called them to get their comments.

Member checking supported this theme's development in the following ways. All participants said their school connections start with their child's current teacher. The teacher's role is primary for the parents, above that of all other school staff. Participant 5 said at one point that all of her son's teachers had been great and that she could not ask for better, but later said she had to go to the principal about a teacher who mentioned her son's medication use in front of the whole class. When I presented this apparent contradiction to her, she clarified by saying that the teacher in question had not been her son's teacher for very long and that even four or five years later it is still a sore subject with her son. "Yeah," she admitted, "I should have said 'except for one . . .'."

An unusual phenomenon that occurred during the final member checking was that a few parents took the opportunity to acknowledge that their own involvement in their child's education had declined in recent months. Participant 4 observed that she knows Ben's transition from high school needs attention, but that her job is keeping her so over-occupied that she is counting on his teacher to know what Ben needs and trusts the teacher to meet these needs.

Three other participants observed that the PAC is still not known, even among special education parents. They had specific suggestions about what the PAC should be doing to direct people to the county's special education website and advertise the services available to families with children who qualify for these services. Two activities that resulted from these suggestions were adding a recurring "parent perspective" feature column to the county's quarterly special education newsletter—with several articles written by PAC members—and sending home information on the PAC with the students' final grade reports.

Thematic Dependability from Peer Examination and Debriefing

I used three peers not connected with the special education PAC to check the work in a general sense for dependability (peer examination) and be the first ones to reflect on the findings of the study (peer debriefing) (Anfara et al., 2002). I enlisted three educators, all East Tennessee natives, early in the research and had each read all nine interviews. Additionally, two of the three peers looked in on several of the interviews in progress.

The peer examiners/debriefers supported the selection of this theme in these ways. The one who is both mother of and teacher to students in comprehensive developmental classrooms reaffirmed the belief that surfaced in my bracketing interview, that I am a parent first and teacher second. That is not to say special education parents cannot make good special education teachers. I have seen this peer debriefer use interventions that may not occur to university-schooled special education

teachers, such as wearing the same bracelet every day so that one of her students who is blind would know right away who was taking her by the hand.

The peer examiner/debriefer who is now special education director pointed out the difference between this resurrection of the special education PAC and its incarnation in Rush County from the mid 1970s to the early 1980s. The main differences are in the access to information that parents have now, and the access to services that both enable learning despite the disability and require that this learning be done in a setting as close as possible to what is done for all public education students.

Thematic Dependability from the Phenomenology Group

The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group discussed five of the nine interview transcripts, with each discussion lasting approximately two hours. I audiotaped these discussions as the group worked at unpacking the essential meaning of each transcript. Following are pertinent observations related to the theme "one person can't get it done."

Beyond the friction between the bureaucracy and getting things done observed in my bracketing interview, the Phenomenology Group unpacked a recurrence of the notion in all five of the interviews read that the group has too few people to get things done. The members' emphasis on lack of numbers stems from a lack of belief that a few people accomplish the agenda that the PAC mission entails (Appendix H). While it is true that there is power in numbers and that a group could do more than each of us can individually accomplish, the distinct personalities of the participants also matter. These parents are not involved merely for social purposes, but because they are (to use

Participant 9's phrase) "more willing than the average person" to devote time and effort to special education issues. The active members are also those more willing to work within the system, not against it.

Not only are they adaptable, but also they see good teachers as being the same way. The participants also see teachers as a source of information and get impatient with a lack of information or conflicting information from the school. The problem of disjunction surfaced in Phenomenology Group discussions, as the vision of what each member wants for their own child causes friction with trying to meet the needs of all special education students. For the participants, this disjunction centered on their sense of community and wanting to be ready for the future versus keeping the dialog in the present and resolving their own child's educational issues.

Summary of Phenomenological Theme Three

How theme three developed was first detailed in the participants' interview quotes. The wide range in the parents' perceptions about how the school system is providing for their children's needs stands out as a key finding. That the parent would start with the teacher is intuitively obvious. The good and not-so good aspects of home-school communication were part of each interview. The bright side centered on the personal connection some teachers have had with the children of special education PAC members and how these teachers were able to use this specialized knowledge to motivate the student. The negative side focused on the school's inability or outright failure to provide the education these parents were expecting for their children.

A subgroup of this home-school communication topic was discovered as the participants talked about how their special needs children were included in the academic and social life of the school. But most participants noted that the PAC as a school-to-community liaison has not yet happened. This is going to matter more and more, as the students get closer to the transition from school to work. Overall, the communication links between the parent and others weakened the further those others were from direct involvement with the disabled child.

The level of parental involvement in the school had an apparently positive correlation with how fully the families' educational needs were met by the school system. This was not measured quantitatively, but was apparent in the related correlation between how comfortable the parents admitted to being at the school and how comfortable school staff members were in dealing with the participants' families.

Teacher connections are mostly positive from the parents' perspective, and always present. Links between the parents and other school staff are not as consistently in place (or as consistently positive). Connections with community agencies depended on the personalities of the individual communicants more so than on any formal system of information flow from the community to the schools and to the parents.

How I used my research log/field notes and the PAC archives during thematic development was also discussed in detail. A log entry noted that one big difference about special education school involvement was that special education parents can be involved countywide for a long time. Observation notes focused on the related point

that the participants tended to be realistic about how much the schools could do for them and how quickly. Other interview observations highlighted the teacher as ally. A few observational notes flagged comments that a perception of special education bureaucracy was unappealing to PAC participants. I also made note during the interviews of other Rush County employees that they seem better able than I am to separate their work special education lives from their home special education lives. The PAC archives on theme three once again brought me back to the mission statement (Appendix H), specifically its call for open communication, mutual respect, and a community liaison role for the PAC. The minutes that address the change in the special education bus departure times and how this change had to be worked out with various school and community agencies were evidence in action that "one person can't get it done."

Quantitative data links to the theme, in the form of annual parent survey results, were also described in detail. The question about their awareness of the county's child find efforts—that is finding, identifying, and serving special education students—received only an 80% "yes" reply rate from the parents. The other survey question that fits this theme concerned parents' opportunities to participate in school advisory panels. This question received an even less impressive 70% "yes" reply rate over the four years of the survey.

I elaborated on methods used to verify "one person can't get it done" as a theme, including member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. Member checking confirmed that school connections always start

(and often end) with the teacher. The participants also lobbied for more publicity to improve PAC involvement numbers. The peer debriefers highlighted the participants' parental awareness of the appropriate settings and services available to special education students. The Phenomenology Group focused on the participants' impressions that there are too few members to get things done. They pointed out that despite this, those interviewed already showed a social and working commitment to the PAC.

CHAPTER 7

MIXED METHODS DEVELOPMENT AND VERIFICATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEME FOUR: "GET THEM INVOLVED AND THEN WE'LL MAKE THEM CARE"

Chapter Introduction

Theme four, "get them involved and then we'll make them care," is the final figure standing out against the ground of "self/others." This chapter describes in detail how the theme was developed by multiple data collection methods, including interviews, observational notes and a field log, PAC archives, and quantitative data from an annual survey. How selection of this theme was verified through member checking, peer examination and debriefing, and support from The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group is also addressed.

Thematic Development of "Get Them Involved and Then We'll Make Them Care"

Support for theme one is described first in multiple participants' interview quotes. How I used my research log/field notes and the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) archives is also discussed in detail. Quantitative support for the thematic development follows the archival support. These various methods of analyzing thematic development were initially addressed in appropriate sections of the methods chapter, Chapter 3. Support from the participants' own words was discussed in the "Interviews" section of "Data Collection Procedures." Also discussed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section were support from the

observational notes, field log, and PAC archives. How I intended to tie in quantitative links to the themes was first addressed in the "Data Collection Procedures" section of Chapter 3, under "Surveys."

Thematic Development from the Interviews

This theme covered the participants' discussions about the range of parental involvement in the school and school system. It is clear from the transcripts that the participants view parental involvement and parental caring as the same. This range of parental involvement concerns the need to get more special education parents working through the PAC, how parents are too busy these days for this kind of volunteer work, and how the participants are not typical of most special education parents. Table 1 (in Chapter 3) provides a useful ready reference while reading through participant quotes. It contains a single paragraph description of each participant.

In the following quote, from Participant 3, the part I edited out was my suggestion to her that being involved and caring are two distinct issues. As one can deduce from the rest of her quote, she did not agree with me on this. In fact, none of the participants would.

> I don't know the answer to what we have to do to get them involved, to make them care. To care. . . . Let's get them involved, and then we'll make them care. (Participant 3)

Participant 7's perspective is at once less optimistic and more grim:

> There're a lot of parents that either don't have the time to care, or are just so glad to get rid of their kids for the day. (Participant 7)

Curiously, it was the only member who is not a special education parent who made this observation:

> I think special ed parents are more interested in their children than regular ed. Some of them don't seem to care at all. (Participant 9)

Before this research, I thought if parents were involved in their child's school life, then they surely cared about the children and school system. However, I am not willing to believe that all of the parents who are not involved in their child's school life do not care. The following quote from my interview shows my willingness to assume those parents not involved in the school system have cogent reasons:

> Some special education families pull into themselves, and don't want to get involved, or assume it won't make a difference, or whatever. But we've got this nucleus to start from, to build from. (Participant 6)

An idea closely related to the larger topic of mutual comfort levels was the expression of some level of nostalgia for the way the home-school dyad used to be. The only grandmother participant talked about when her 30-year-old daughter was in school in these terms:

> I can't remember not being involved somehow [when my daughter was in elementary school]. And I recall then that there were a lot of others like me, that did that. . . . I cannot think of a day when I was not at her elementary school doing something. I became Copy Queen in the library. . . . Things in the classroom. (Participant 3)

That parental involvement in the school is not what it used to be and that parents' comfort levels at school have suffered as a result was found during the literature review and in some but not all of the participant interviews. Participants 3 and 6 observed that the school program (a show or sporting event) in which their child participates is the only school function that parents come to see. Of course, day work and two-parent incomes have a lot to do with this, but as Participants 3 and 6 both mentioned, many parents never stay around the school long enough to get comfortable there. Some authors blamed this on the schools not doing much to make the parents comfortable (National Parent Teacher Association, 2000). Participant 3 observed that even when the parents are specifically invited to the school (for an open house, grade card conference night, or entertainment featuring their child), they want to leave as soon as they can.

> They bring the child because the child is involved. As soon as that's over, boom, out the door. And they're like, "Thanks a lot. Thirty minutes, gone!" (Participant 3)

Despite my contention as researcher that noninvolvement does not necessarily equal not caring, I am not as magnanimous (as Participant 6) with those parents who claim to be too busy to be involved in their child's school.

> With parents of special needs to begin with and both parents working, there isn't a lot of time. I can identify with that. . . . Sometimes with a few people I've even said, "Do you want to drop off?" And it's like, "No, no, I want to stay in it." "I want to stay in it, but I don't want to do anything." They're not saying that. No one has out and out said, "This isn't what I signed up for. Never mind. Just take me off the list."
>
> With special needs kids, you make time to do the things you want to do and you have a built-in excuse for the things you don't. . . .
>
> They just want the answers handed to them without being in on and working for them. That's part of it. That's my little corner of resentment. (Participant 6)

Regardless of whether the parents' reasons for staying away from school volunteer work are compelling, Participant 2 gets at the more prosaic reasons that such help is needed:

> I just wish more people would show up. I don't know how we could get that to happen, but I think more would get done . . . with more people. (Participant 2)

That said, only the retired PAC member held a favorable view of the passage of time.

> I've got more time basically than most of them have. Because some of them have the responsibility of a child and his different activities, and maybe even another job. At the time I took this on, I didn't have a job, so I could come and go at any time, basically. (Participant 9)

Even the stay-at-home grandmother (Participant 3) made this metaphorical observation:

> I just think everything is hustle and bustle. You know, they have kids in school, and they have sports and the dances afterward. And they're on a continual roll and might not be so prone as to sitting on a committee, trying to find out what's going on in a particular area. That would be down on the list instead of a priority. . . .
>
> It's not like you can pull out a magic wand, and wave it for example over [the school] and Bingo! You get these long lines of volunteers. (Participant 3)

She offered this observation as to the high level of commitment that she equates with parental involvement:

> You never go back to when they are five, or when they're ten and [in school]. Why not make the most of it? You know, sort of go through it with them. That's what, I love that! (Participant 3)

In Participant 3's own case, no magic wand was needed:

> I look forward to [getting the school's newsletter]. If I don't have it by a certain day, I want to know where it is because I want to know extra, what's going on. I fill in my calendar with dates that they have in there of things that are upcoming. But I wonder how many people don't even look at that thing. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 was also the most optimistic about the PAC's long term prognosis:

> I think it'll probably grow. . . . More people getting involved. More people finding out about it . . . as more people are concerned about their children's education. . . . More parents will come around. (Participant 3)

While none of the other participants expressed this level of optimism, all held similar positive views about the type of parental involvement drawn to the PAC.

> In high school [where's there's no Parent/Teacher Organization], you are giving up a certain connection and this helps you stay connected. I think in a better way, really; in a less close way. With PTO boards, you're involved in

> every little nut and bolt that's going on in the school. You know, you probably don't need that as your children are getting older; you need to let them have their time, pull away a little bit and—. But I still want to know what's going on. (Participant 4)

Participant 1 noticed this evolution in her relationship with her son's special education teacher as the parent became more involved in his education and the school in general:

> Now the special ed teacher will call me if she's got a problem that she thinks the principal isn't giving enough attention to. (Participant 1)

Participant 8 briefly discussed how school-related topics sometimes go in the autism support group he and another PAC member started in Rush County.

> [With parents who] are not members of the PAC, my first response is saying, "Hey, have you talked?" And the biggest thing, what's going on, is they haven't talked. They just like to talk *about* things, but not talk *to* people. (Participant 8)

Although early efforts have gotten the PAC some committed members, all acknowledged that the recruiting is far from over:

> I'd like to see more involvement from people, more ideas from people. What they think needs to be changed. (Participant 5)

> I see it getting better, if we can get bigger and better results. More people, bigger crowds. Better responses. . . . If we could get people to come, and keep the interests going, and then bring in more people, for variety, and keep the numbers coming. We need to get the parents of the newly diagnosed and those that have been diagnosed [for a while]. . . .
>
> [Advertising] maybe with their progress reports or something. Send [something] in there introducing, "We're going to have this" or something, end of the year. You know, just be sure that just the special ed students get it. Their special ed teacher could slip it in their folders, with their grade cards, at the end of the year, and kind of introduce it, or something. Let them know more. (Participant 5)

> I'd like to find the people who I haven't yet, who would be the good ones to get things done. . . . We had a lot of people coming, but then it just kind of dwindled down to where it was the same people. (Participant 6)

Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log

Presenting information that surrounded the conversation gives those reading about it much later a fuller sense of the interview as it happened. A field work journal does the same for the interviewer in relation to the research as a whole. For more background on the utility and value of a researcher keeping interview notes and a field

log, see the section of Chapter 4 titled, “Thematic Development from Observational Notes and the Field Log.”

Notes that stand out as supportive of this theme include this marginal note following Participant 3’s interview “If ‘go through it [school] with them’ is one extreme of parental involvement, are the parents we never see or hear from the other?” When I wrote this, I had not yet worked out my notion of shadow members to describe those parents who want an official affiliation only for information they can get. Like Participant 3, I was still seeing parental involvement as all or nothing. I had not yet discovered the spectrum that is parental involvement, nor even admitted to myself that parental involvement was a focus of this research.

Thematic Development from Parent Advisory Committee Archives

Archival documents and artifacts also contributed an aspect to data collection. Items such as special education PAC website page views, meeting minutes, electronic mailings, and other evidence supportive the themes were used. For more detailed background on the use of archival documents, see the section of Chapter 4 titled, “Thematic Development from Parent Advisory Committee Archives.”

Both my first electronic mailing to the potential PAC members and a later one giving the planned meeting times for the school year emphasized the need to “get them involved” and hopefully “make them care.” Setting the meeting dates well in advance was calculated to give the membership the chance to plan their involvement. This list of meetings and their minutes are posted under the “Parent” link of the county’s special education website. I have used this early notification practice from the start

and have also used early electronic mailings to build individual meeting agendas and the PAC's long-term agenda.

The special education director's electronic mailing to the special education consultants and lead teachers (the first one under "Other Electronic Mailings" in Appendix H) underscored the need for parental involvement in special education activities as well. The director was very specific about the parents he wanted, those who would get involved and recommend improvements to special education practices.

Quantitative Data Links to Theme Four

The State of Tennessee's Department of Special Education's Continuous Improvement Monitoring Program (CIMP) included a parent survey component that was also used for the quantitative component of this research. For more information on the CIMP survey and how it was implemented annually in Rush County, see the beginning of the section of Chapter 4 titled, "Quantitative Data Links to Theme One."

Questions from the surveys related to theme four are numbers 4 and 8 on the one used from 2002 through 2004 and numbers 3 and 4 on the Parent Survey for 2004-2005 (Appendix B).

Question 4 from the earlier survey was a three part question:

4a. Have you participated in program improvement activities such as parent-teacher nights, school open houses, school or county sponsored training sessions?

4b. If yes, was this a positive, useful experience?

4c. Did the results match needs you identified for yourself or your child(ren) with disabilities?

In spring of the 2001-2002 school year, with 498 families replying (and only "yes" or "no" alternatives offered), there were 207 "yes" answers, 252 "no" responses, and 39 left unanswered for question 4a. For question 4b that first year, there were 201 "yes" answers and 31 "no" responses, with 266 leaving question 4b unanswered. For question 4c, there were 230 "yes" answers, 34 "no" responses, and 34 left question 4c unanswered in the spring of 2002. After the 2001-2002 school year, "don't know" was added as a third option for questions 4a and 4c. Rush County also added "not applicable" for questions 4b and 4c. For the 2002-2003 school year, Rush County received 418 surveys from special education families. That time there were 265 "yes" replies, 128 families chose "no," 13 selected "don't know," 1 wrote in "not applicable," and the remaining 11 left blank question 4a. For question 4b in 2002-2003, there were 249 "yes" replies, 13 families chose "no," 7 wrote in "don't know," 63 chose "not applicable," and the remaining 86 left blank question 4b. For question 4c in 2002-2003, there were 229 "yes" replies, 14 families chose "no," 32 selected "don't know," 66 chose "not applicable," and the remaining 77 left blank question 4c. For the 2003-2004 school year, Rush County received 283 surveys from special education families. That time there were 180 "yes" replies, 89 families chose "no," 10 selected "don't know," 1 wrote in "not applicable," and the other 3 left blank question 4a. For question 4b in 2003-2004, there were 161 "yes" replies, 9 families chose "no," 50 chose "not applicable," and the remaining 63 left blank question 4b. For question

4c in 2003-2004, there were 141 “yes” replies, 8 families chose “no,” 35 selected “don’t know,” 48 chose “not applicable,” and the remaining 51 left blank question 4c.

Question 8 on the earlier survey was worded, “Have you participated in the school’s local self-assessment process, advisory panel, steering committee, etc.?” At the end of the 2001-2002 school year, with 498 surveys returned, 169 families replied “yes” and 275 answered “no.” The remaining 54 did not answer question 8. Since so many did not answer, after the first school year, “don’t know” was added as an option. For the 2002-2003 school year, with 418 survey results, 121 answered “yes,” 204 answered “no,” 77 selected “don’t know,” and 16 left blank question 8. At the end of the 2003-2004 school year, special education families in Rush County returned 283 surveys. That year 78 selected “yes,” 149 selected “no,” 51 checked “don’t know,” and the remaining 5 left blank question 8.

For the survey at the end of the 2004-2005 school year, the former question 8 aligned with the new question 3 and was reworded slightly: “Have you participated on a school system advisory panel, a committee, and/or the local self-assessment process or other advisory type activities in your child’s school?” With 500 families responding, 138 circled “always,” 33 selected “sometimes,” 279 chose “never,” and 50 did not answer.

Question 4 on the 2004-2005 survey aligned with question 4c of the earlier survey and was worded, “Has participation in training activities at your child’s school helped meet your needs as a parent of a child with a disability?” In the spring of 2005,

with 500 families responding, 298 circled “always,” 40 selected “sometimes,” 104 chose “never,” and 58 did not answer.

What this adds to the “get them involved and then we’ll make them care” theme is self-reporting by a majority of the broader special education families in Rush County of their involvement in school and county educational activities. For the “have you participated in program improvement” question (4a), the affirmative percentages come out to almost 42% for school year 2001-2002, and a more respectable 63% for both 2002-2003 and again in 2003-2004. For the “have you participated in program improvement, local self-assessment” question (number 8), only 34% of the families answered “yes” for the 2001-2002 school year. This dropped to 29% for 2002-2003, and dropped slightly again (to less than 28%) by the end of 2003-2004. Question 8 of the former survey became question number 3 on the 2004-2005 survey and the affirmative percentage stayed less than 28%, possibly 34% if the “sometimes” answers are counted with the “always” replies. Many of the parents wrote in that they would like to be more involved in the school and they know about the opportunities to do so, however, both parents work Monday to Friday day work, or have many other commitments. Even so, this is self-reporting and any single instance of involvement would have counted as involvement. Also, we heard from only those motivated enough to actually complete the survey and send it back. It was only about a quarter of all of the special education families that returned these annual surveys. Therefore positive rates in the twenties and thirties reaffirm the interview participants’ contention that the PAC needs more involvement and that it is not going to be easy to acquire.

Verification of Theme Four: "Get Them Involved and Then We'll Make Them Care"

Methods used to verify the theme, as detailed in this chapter, include member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. The following section details the researcher's efforts to verify the credibility of the theme by getting feedback from the participants on what was captured in their interviews. Following these member-checking details are two sections on how the dependability of the themes was addressed by peer examination and peer debriefing, then by discussions with The University of Tennessee's Phenomenology Group as the themes were developed.

Thematic Credibility from Member Checking

Member checking is testing the data, categories, interpretations and conclusions with those from whom the data were originally collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After the interviews I sent each participant a copy of the complete transcript for their review and comments. I also sent each participant the first draft of the findings and analysis, then called them to get their comments.

Member checking supported this theme's development in the following ways. Even the participant whose comment became the label for this theme (Participant 3) showed a good sense of the limits the law imposes on parental involvement. Specifically, there are student privacy issues that the school has to address as it shares information with parents and the public. But laws also impact parental visits to the school and classroom and how much they are allowed to know and find out about the other students in the class. While the participants understood the legal limits the

teacher and school have to operate within, they also acknowledged that working through those issues was the school's problem, not theirs. Parents want to know what is going on day-to-day in their child's classroom and should have some level of freedom to see for themselves what goes on at school. Participant 3 highlighted that even after more than three years, the PAC still lacks the participation to resolve this and other action items.

Participant 5 pointed out that even in 2006, the PAC is still "a big secret" in Rush County, even from families who have had a special needs child in school for several years. She emphasized that the current methods of getting out the word do not seem to be working, and that we need more and different ways of publicizing what the PAC does and for whom.

An unusual phenomenon that occurred during the final member checking was that several parents took the opportunity to acknowledge that their own involvement in the PAC had dropped off in recent months. Two blamed job and other life events competing for their time and attention, but it made me wonder if I was subjecting them to the same "guilt and blame" that I mentioned in the section titled that way in the Chapter 2 review of literature. I wrote then: "if parents prefer to be only minimally involved in the life of the school or school system, no one else knows their reasons or should fault them." Even so, parents often report these professional judgments as an added stressor (Summers et al., 2005). Interestingly, one of the parents who verbalized this guilt is the same one whose comment—"I feel like they're judging me"—was the germination of this dissertation. As one of the first PAC meetings was

breaking up, Participant 7 made this claim while telling me how uncomfortable she feels around the staff at her daughter's school. At the time, I replied only, "They are. And you should be judging them, too." Four years later, however, I see that the research has circled back to its starting point.

Thematic Dependability from Peer Examination and Debriefing

I used three peers not connected with the special education PAC to check the work in a general sense for dependability (peer examination) and be the first ones to reflect on the findings of the study (peer debriefing) (Anfara et al., 2002). I enlisted three educators, all East Tennessee natives, early in the research and had each read all nine interviews. Additionally, two of the three peers looked in on several of the interviews in progress.

The peer examiners/debriefers supported the selection of this theme in these ways. The principal of the early childhood center noted that it takes everyone to ensure a quality education. She gets regular support from the parents and the community not only for equipment purchases for the school or for "Parent Outreach Program (POP) Nights," but also for the recurring full-day screening sessions that are part of the county's Child Find program for early identification of children who may need special education services. POP Nights are quarterly informational sessions during which the parents are served popcorn and soda pop while listening to guest speakers or visiting with their child's teacher.

The peer debriefer who is now special education director affirmed my comment that special education countywide tends to be in one-to-one interactions with

parents. She noted that in all of her long-term connections with the same families, the mostly positive (and only sometimes negative) reactions match her experience of special education parental involvement in Rush County.

Thematic Dependability from the Phenomenology Group

The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group discussed five of the nine interview transcripts, with each discussion lasting approximately two hours. I audiotaped these discussions as the group worked at unpacking the essential meaning of each transcript. Following are pertinent observations related to the theme of "get them involved, and then we'll make them care."

It was a Phenomenology Group member who first suggested that being a special education parent was the grounding experience. Until then, my thinking was that being a member of the special education PAC was the grounding experience. This broadened view of what was the essential experience also broadened the phenomenon of parental involvement to encompass not only the differences among special education parents and general education parents, but also the differences among special education parents who become involved in the school system and those who do not. Like Participant 3, the grandmother who viewed parental involvement and parental caring as the same, because I have always been involved in both my own schooling and that of my children, I have trouble understanding parents who prefer not to be involved with schooling. Even so, I do not go as far as Participant 3 does in defining parental involvement as going through school *with* the children (as she did with both her daughter and now the grandchildren). However, my "little corner of

resentment" is that the uninvolved parents expect to reap what those involved have sown. Parental involvement in schools, like a lot of group work, tends to be a few working for the benefit of many. Although there is a personal benefit to parental inputs dealing with school improvement, I am not the only participant to express some disdain for the uninvolved. A recurring theme in the interview with Participant 4—the mother of the teen with unusual fixations and limited social skills—was that if she can make the effort to be proactive, any parent can. Granted involvement with the school system is not appealing to many parents and is not for every parent. It was Participant 9, the retired special education teacher and surrogate parent, who pointed out that the PAC's mission is to help the students by helping their parents. Granted, too, that these are hectic modern times. However, it has always been true that if something is important to you, you make the effort and find the time to do it.

The Phenomenology Group members pointed out during the discussions about Participant 5's interview that she is both criticizing and envying parents of regular education students. Participant 5 is the mother of the student who went from special education resource room services to consultant-only services and she is now a special education teacher in a primary school comprehensive development classroom. She came very close to doing the very thing she was accusing the "regular" parents and teachers of doing: labeling people as bad or good before knowing their full story. That said, getting the uninvolved special education parents to care as we do—not as they do, but as they should—has become a rallying point for the core members in

these early years of the PAC. The “reasonable” things we could be doing, like fact-finding, childcare, and transition work, cannot happen without more involvement.

Summary of Phenomenological Theme Four

How theme four developed was first detailed in the participants’ interview quotes. That every participant but me equated participation with caring was the overall finding most pertinent. The negative impact busy modern times have had on parental volunteerism at school was addressed also. One participant favorably contrasted countywide special education involvement as a better fit for her than getting into the details of how a school runs that building-level parent-teacher organizations tend toward. Recruiting for the PAC resurfaced in interview comments on this theme as well.

How I used my research log/field notes and the PAC archives during thematic development was also discussed in detail. My interview observation notes concern levels of parental involvement, which led to the field log idea of parental involvement as a spectrum that may or may not correlate to caring. Archival records document the efforts to promote involvement. Scheduling the meetings well in advance and posting the schedule (and later, the minutes) on the World Wide Web were decisions related to both greater involvement and greater convenience. This chapter also referenced the special education director’s first electronic mail to the consulting teachers (copied in Appendix H) on improving parental involvement and starting a PAC.

Quantitative data links to the theme, in the form of annual parent survey results, were also described in detail. The parents replied to questions about their

involvement in school self-assessment panels and advisory boards. The “yes” reply percentages to these questions were some of the lowest each year, usually about 30%.

I elaborated on methods used to verify “get them involved and then we’ll make them care” as a theme, including member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and Phenomenology Group discussions. Through member checking, the participants acknowledged the privacy concerns surrounding parental involvement in the schools. Only one parent had addressed this in the interviews themselves. The other member-check concern was the belief that current PAC recruiting efforts are not working.

Peer debriefers acknowledged that schools count on parent volunteers. They also affirmed the mostly positive and mostly one-to-one interactions of parents and school staffs as consistent with their experience in Rush County. The Phenomenology Group was the first to suggest that being a special education parent was the grounding experience in this research, not being a PAC member, as I had been thinking. The essence of the experience is that special education parental involvement is more different from than similar to general education parental involvement.

CHAPTER 8

SUMMARY ANALYSES OF ALL FINDINGS

Chapter Introduction

This chapter includes the interpretation of data collected by both qualitative and quantitative means. The quantitative component was derived from an annual survey that the Rush County Special Education Department administers every spring to approximately half of the families of special education students. The primary data for the qualitative component came from the responses of nine members of the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC). These interviews were analyzed phenomenologically and by use of the constant comparative method. Observational notes and artifact findings were also incorporated into the overall qualitative findings.

Major findings are described by themes discovered as figures against two of the four grounds of phenomenology. The four are body/self, relationships/others, time, and the world, though only the first two were evident in this research. The use of metaphor and exposition of feelings as two interview elements to watch for in phenomenology are also discussed. All findings are discussed in terms of the two questions driving this research:

1. What are the special education PAC members' perceptions about how their membership in the special education PAC affected program

delivery for them, their children, other families, and the school system/county in general?

2. Compared to before the PAC was implemented in February 2003, what changes have occurred in parents'/guardians' experience with the school system's special education services, their child's access to these programs, the degree to which the school system personnel keep them informed, and their own use of this information?

Qualitative Analyses

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the primary qualitative data came from interviews with nine special education PAC members. This section starts with a phenomenological description of the four themes and adds to this analysis a look at the participants' metaphor use and their shifting use of pronouns. Overall interview observational notes and artifact findings are then addressed, followed by analysis using the constant comparative method for each theme in turn. How Constas' (1992) components of categorization and Brantlinger et al.'s (2005) qualitative research quality indicators were used to assure the thoroughness of this research is described just before the synthesis of this qualitative analysis section.

Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenology employs a figure/ground relationship in which one or more of four grounds occur and relevant themes are discovered as figures against that ground. Table 4 at the beginning of Chapter 4 lists and described all four themes and their phenomenological grounds.

The first theme—"it's all about the kids" (Chapter 4)—concerned the parent's attempts to work through their child's disabilities and find answers independently. It also concerned their drive to offer their disabled child some level of independence for adult life.

Theme two covered all instances of the parents not only identifying with and focusing on special education, but also their many examples of how it is distinct from general education. "Our own little group" (Chapter 5) highlighted the participants as a group of like-minded individuals unlike the parents of "regular" or "normal" students in various, fundamental ways.

It is only after they came to realize that they and their children would always depend on the help of others that the "one person can't get it done" theme (Chapter 6) came into consideration. Getting help from others—or trying to—is the focus of theme three. Curiously, this theme centered on both the parents' isolation and their attempts at information gathering and goal setting for their children with disabilities.

The range of special education parental involvement in the school system is what theme four addressed (Chapter 7). Negative views were reserved mainly for those parents who do not get involved in their child's schooling. Since the participants have always been the kind of people who get involved, they could not understand why parents would choose to not be involved. One participant's reaction when I suggested that caring and involvement are separate and distinct became the heading of this fourth and final theme: "get them involved and then we'll make them care."

Table 5 is my version of the code mapping hierarchy mentioned under "Data Analysis Procedures" in Chapter 3. As described by Anfara et al. (2002), such a depiction in table format provides a snapshot of the progression from raw data, through initial codes, to pattern variables. How these pattern variables contribute to meaning units, and how these meaning units are grouped into themes is more clearly understood from this tabular depiction. For example, an initial code was labeled "no good time to meet." This related to the pattern variable concerning drawbacks to the PAC specifically and parental involvement in the schools in general. This pattern variable then linked to the meaning unit that parental involvement is not like it used to be. This aligned with the theme of volunteering found in Epstein's (1994, 2003) work and theme four of this research, "get them involved and then we'll make them care." How the themes align with the data set were applied to the research questions is also clarified by such a hierarchical arrangement. In the case of the "no good time to meet" initial code mentioned, its alignment with research question one and application to the "parental involvement" aspects of the data set become clearer through this vertical depiction in Table 5.

Table 5 should be thought of as a depiction of the progression described in Chapters 4 through 8. Chapters 4 through 7 detail the major themes. Chapter 8 summarizes this thematic discovery. Table 5 is most clearly understood if read from the bottom upward, how it was developed chronologically. However, the Gestalt snapshot of the interconnectivity is best understood when looking at Table 5 from the top downward.

Table 5: Code Mapping Hierarchy Linking Raw Data to the Research Questions and Themes Discovered

Research Questions			
1. SpEd PAC members' perceptions of the impact on program delivery		2. Changes in access to programs and information	
Third Iteration: Application to Data Set			
Parent Advisory Committee Members' Experience of Parental Involvement with the School System			
Themes Discovered During the Research			
"get them involved and . . . make them care" (a range of parent involvement)	"it's all about the kids" (parent as primary advocate)	"our own little group" (focus on special education)	"one person can't get it done" (getting help from others)
Themes (aligned with Epstein's Framework)			
1A. Volunteering	1B. Community Liaison	2A. Getting/Giving Information	2B. Getting/Giving Input
Meaning Units			
Parental involvement is not like it used to be	Help or harm corresponds to proximity	Not alone	Special Education placements for one, laws for all
No strength in small numbers	Courage to do what is needed Future dread	Good information	Advise, advocate, and support intertwine
Second Iteration: Pattern Variables			
1A1. Parents' comfort levels	1B1. Mutual comfort levels	2A1. Communication flow	2B1. Providing for needs
1A2. Drawbacks of involvement	1B2. Benefits to belonging	2A2. Different from general education	2B2. Parents included in the system
First Iteration: Initial Codes/Surface Content Analysis (from Researcher, Phenomenology Group, and Peer Examiners/Debriefers)			
1a1. Parents comfort with school system	1b1. Expectations met?	2a1. Staff to parent communication	2b1. Staff providing for student's needs
	1b2. School/school system's comfort when dealing with parents	2a2. School system to parent communication	2b2. System providing for the student's needs
	1b3. PAC as a representative sample?	2a3. Parent to parent communication	
1a2. No good time to meet	1b4. PAC as open forum	2a4. Parent to teacher communication	2b3. How included child is in the life of the school?
1a3. Too few to get things done	1b5. PAC for issue resolution work	2a5. Parent to school system communication	
1a4. Busy modern times	1b6. Future directions for the PAC		
1a5. Support group	1b7. Advocate for their own child	2a6. Not being alone	
	1b8. A life beyond school	2a7. PAC to community links	2b4. Advisory role
Raw Data (from Individual Interview Transcripts, Surveys, Observational and Field Notes, Archives, and Artifacts)			

Metaphor Use

This item is a carry over from the previous, phenomenological results section. The view in phenomenology is that a person resorts to the use of metaphors when more literal wording cannot stretch far enough to satisfy the complexity of what they are attempting to say. This is the reason I used the Ethnograph software to flag instances of metaphor use. Many of the instances of metaphor use are of the typology pervasive in everyday conversion, especially adult conversations about dealing with children. These are some examples: "putting out fires," "she's got her hands full;" "you don't have enough eyes in your head;" "coming down the road is. . .;" "we open the door for anybody;" and "left out there on a limb."

I want to acknowledge these instances but focus on the more powerful metaphoric use; namely, as a way of expressing the ineffable, those emotions that cannot be said any other way. For example, two participants invoked a "magic wand" metaphor, one suggesting a magic wand being waved over the school to encourage parental involvement (Participant 3) and the other to indicate that parents expecting a miracle cure for life-long disabilities are being unrealistic (Participant 6). Participant 3 (the only grandmother of a child with disabilities) was the one who said she "was a child longer" than today's children are allowed to be, blaming the acceleration of maturity on the competition statewide assessments require. She also used the "copy queen" metaphor when contrasting how parental involvement used to be with how it is now. Participant 3 also described her grandsons' principal as "a good *thing*."

Three participants used the metaphor of a “comforter blanket”/”security blanket” to describe the school’s attempts to help their children fit in. One of these was Participant 1, the only one to use the idea of “shuffling kids off” or “writing them off.” Her “sometimes you just get buried and you have to dig out” image was one Participant 7 described differently: “a lot of parents either don’t have the time to care, or are just so glad to get rid of their kids for the day.”

Participant 4, the mother who uttered the “in a wilderness and trying to find a path” metaphor to describe her early search for information on autism, also mentioned that her son’s current teacher “niched him out a little world” in the classroom. Participant 5 was talking about her role in finding special education information for her family and likened it to birds flying in formation: “I’m the lead duck.”

The participants could have tried to express these ideas in more straightforward and less colorful ways, but the impact would have suffered along with the imagery. What could convey the mystery and desperation as well as invoking a “magic wand?” Similarly, not paying attention to students’ progress does not describe this phenomenon nearly as well as “shuffling them off.” Even the sentence about schools’ attempts to help special education students fit in does not approach the power and aptness of the “security blanket” metaphor.

Pronoun Shifting

Like metaphor use, tracking how pronouns are used is a specifically phenomenological analytic method. A curious finding related to the grounds of “self” and “others” discovered during the data collection was the ever-changing use of “we,”

"I," and "you" pronouns when the PAC was the referent. Also surprising was that the use "us" and "them" to highlight a dichotomy between special and general education was not as prevalent as I would have expected. Although I am a school system employee, it was surprising to me that some participants used "you" (to me) to mean not only the PAC, or even the Special Education Department, but the school system as a whole. I should not be surprised to hear that participants consider me in this context, but I do not think of myself this way. During my bracketing interview, I was asked, "Are you more a parent in your perspective?" I replied "I am. I am. I'm always the parent, yeah, absolutely. 'Teacher' is, is something I put on. I have to remember to do that" (Participant 6).

Van Manen (1990) held that phenomenology makes "my" experience "our" experience, so a participant's heavy use of both "I" and "we" should not be surprising. Moran (2000) explained this shifting pronoun usage in part by saying that "the intersubjective nature of our experience always grounds it on the subjective" (p. 178). That is, before the event can be shared, it has to be personally experienced. This can cause disjunction for the participants as the vision of what they want for their own special-needs children (their ultimate goal) does not align with their efforts to meet the needs of all special education children (the PAC's goal).

This disjunction was audibly present in each participant's shifting use of pronouns. This use of "us"/use of "you" dichotomy was present in all interviews to varying degrees. Most often, "they" referred to the other PAC parents. Less often, the referent was the individual school's staff or the parents of general education students.

For example, “If you go to the PTO of the school and bring up issues . . . the other parents don’t want to hear it. They don’t even understand it” (Participant 5). Most often, the special education view was discussed in cooperative “we” phrases or couched in the more abstract “you.” For example, “You can’t hang on to that belief that he’ll be in regular classes” (Participant 4). There was also a temporal component when the PAC was the antecedent or referent. If the participants were discussing a present or past event, the PAC was “it.” However, future tense references to the group were always about what “we” needed to do next. This coincided with the overall positive view the participants expressed for the PAC’s future, despite the initial slow going and small membership.

Observational Notes and Artifact Findings

Specific field note/artifact support was discussed in Chapters 4 through 7. This section covers the field note and artifact findings more broadly. I kept observational notes over the span of my interview data collection. What stands out from these notes is the conversational give and take that each dialog became. Although each talk started with me running the interview, in every case the dialog progressed into a smoothly flowing conversation, just as Kvale (1996) and Patton (2002) indicated it should. In a couple of instances, the participants became the interviewer for brief stretches to ask me about topics important to them. There were few choppy patches in any conversation. One case was when a participant was describing the only time she had to go around the teacher and talk to the principal to solve a problem. Another was when a participant was talking about how there was nothing in her son’s delivery and

infancy that would explain his disability. She followed by mentioning why she suspects her former husband of precipitating shaken baby syndrome.

From my observational notes I could also explain the imbalance of times quoted for each participant that I noted in Table 1. Using each participant equally would have been almost 17 quotes each (to arrive at 151 quotes from 9 participants). Four participants were used 20 or more times and 5 participants were quoted 16 or fewer times. Participant 4 was quoted 22 times. This is the one I used the most, even though five interviews were longer in duration than Participant 4's 62 minutes. (See Table 6).

Participant 1 had the longest interview, 81 minutes, and was quoted 21 times. Participant 5 had the second longest interview (75 minutes) and I used her words verbatim 21 times. I talked with Participant 3 for 69 minutes and quoted her 20 times. My interview with Participant 2 was 68 minutes, but I quoted her only 14 times. However, Participant 2's and Participant 7's interviews were the only two conducted in public places and we were interrupted several times during both. Participant 7's interview lasted 43 minutes and I used 16 of her quotes. Participant 9 was directly cited the least, only 8 times. However, her interview also lasted only 43 minutes and was the second one I conducted. The main limit on the utility of Participant 9's interview was that it did not nicely fit the parental involvement structure since she serves as a surrogate parent representative for special education students but is not the mother of one.

Table 6: Participant Quotes Used and Interview Transcript Lengths

			Transcript Length	
Participant Number	Number of Times Quoted	Difference from Quote Average	Lines	Minutes
1	21	+4	923	81
2	14	-3	698	68
3	20	+3	713	69
4	22	+5	766	62
5	21	+4	1,046	75
6	15	-2	577	67
7	16	-1	543	43
8	14	-3	356	31
9	8	-9	494	43

Participant 5's interview was second longest (75 minutes) and I quoted her 21 times. I had worked some with her and Participant 8 in their role as teaching assistants, but this was after the PAC had already formed. In fact, Participant 8 did not officially join the PAC until its second year and he was to be my practice interview because I knew him as a teaching assistant and because I got to know him when I was his son's CDC teacher during the 2000-2001 school year. His was the shortest interview, at just over 30 minutes, but I quoted him 14 times. I decided to treat his interview like the rest for two reasons. That he was the only other father interviewed was the main reason. Also, my phenomenology professor rejected the idea of not actually using the interview: "there is no practice in phenomenology, only good interviews and bad interviews" (H. R. Pollio, personal communication, April 2005). I decided to use 15 of the quotes from my own (Participant 6) interview, which was 67 minutes long. I noticed early on I was resisting using my own replies until I realized that being biased against them could be more unproductive than a bias in favor of my

own words. Even so, in many cases when others captured the same idea, I let their words convey the meaning.

As mentioned, quoting each participant an equal number of times would have worked out to about 17 quotes from each. Most of the difference between this mean and the actual number of quotes from each participant had more to do with the lengths of their interviews (in time and words) than a bias on my part. Participants 1, 4, and 5 were quoted far more than average mainly because their interviews were the longest and had the most raw data. Participant 9 was used far less than average because as a surrogate special education parent, her situations were very different from the others. The remaining interviews were cited in numbers fairly close to the average number of times expected for the total numbers of participants and total amount of direct quotes used. All nine participants supported the four themes. Any bias I introduced was in extracting quotes that I could use to help me most clearly explain specifically how each theme was supported.

Instances of laughter occurred often in my bracketing interview, so I decided to note these instances during other participants' interviews. Most frequently (especially in my interview) these instances followed some sardonic remark. However, there were a few cases of nervous laughter during the interviews. These and instances of inappropriate laughter were more telling than those that followed attempts at humor. For example, Participant 4 laughed briefly after she made the comment that her son with autism would never "fit the academic mold." Participant 5 laughed nervously as she wondered aloud what she could have done differently during pregnancy that might

have resulted in a child without a learning disability: "I didn't smoke! I didn't do drugs!" One of the times Participant 7 laughed was when she was talking about being able to talk with the special education director more easily now through the PAC, but admitting that sometimes the situation was "still a mess." Participant 2 laughed dismissively when she and I were talking about a teacher who left Rush County. I said, "I don't remember where she went," to which Participant 2 replied: "She went back to where she came from. She didn't want to change [my daughter's diapers] ever. That was the worst!"

In addition to the observational notes, PAC archives also bolstered the thematic development. The special education parent advisory committee artifacts selected for inclusion in this research are in Appendix H. The first is the mission statement of the PAC. Following it are a copy of the first electronic mailing I sent to prospective members and copies of three other electronic mailings, an "activity priorities" listing created during the early meetings, the PAC schedule of meeting dates, and the attendance/minutes recorded during a typical meeting.

What these added to the analysis was a sense of the PAC's origin, brief history, and activity. But more than this, it supported the issues the participants held as important. Looking at just the electronic mailings and the meeting minutes, these issues are reinforced:

- the importance of information getting
- the knowledge of what is happening with those in similar life situations

- the realization that the PAC does not have enough active members yet to get done the activities on its ambitious agenda.

Appendix H offers a small peek at the artifacts, but I was hesitant to use more than this brief sample since I wanted to honor the confidentiality I promised the participants.

Analysis Using the Constant Comparative Method

Use of the constant comparative method was first addressed in Chapter 3 as a way of limiting researcher bias. However, this method was more fully discussed in the "Data Analysis Procedures" section of Chapter 3. Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed the constant comparative method of data analysis as a way of operationalizing grounded theory. Although phenomenological grounding is not the same as grounded theory, the constant comparative method of data analysis throughout the data gathering process works to strengthen the findings for both approaches to research. The constant comparative strategy is to take an incident that arises in an interview or is taken from other documents, then compare it to other instances in the same data set or another data set to decide whether or not it should be coded in the same way (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Lincoln and Guba added that the researcher may start from her or his own "tacit knowledge" of what "feels right" (p. 340), but is also constantly recalibrating based on new information and field notes. Ihde's (1986) notion of epoché in phenomenology, that is, suspending judgment until all of the evidence has been collected, is a different method of getting to the same end. With both epoché and constant comparison, the researcher is aware that what is found is shaped by the path to that finding. In neither case does a finding magically appear

out of nowhere. I favored the constant comparison over epoché because I wanted to stay aware of what I knew at various times along the way. However, Idhe's epoché was a good reminder to separate my researcher's evolving judgments about the findings with the impact new information had on the old. Epoché appears to counter the constant comparative method, but in practice the two dovetail well. Comparisons are constantly made within and among concepts, and hypothetical connections made, until a grounding theory can be applied. Glaser and Strauss were limiting their application to the field of sociology as means of predicting human behaviors (Lincoln & Guba). Even so, Merriam observed that, "[b]ecause the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research, the constant comparative method of data analysis has been adopted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory" (p. 159). Where phenomenology diverges from grounded theory is that grounded theory's aim is to arrive at a general theory with a specific, practical application. Phenomenological research's aim is to describe the participants' experience of an event so that others might understand it as do the participants (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

The constant comparative method supported theme one in the following ways. Watching the participants check their child's experience against that of all children, especially for those in the teen years, was an interesting thread to follow. The parents' awareness that not all behaviors stem from the disability was the most enjoyable aspect of this theme to see unfolding.

Another aspect of this theme that was revealed piecemeal through the constant comparative method was the individualized education special education students receive. Individualized special education is required by law for those students who qualify for special services. However, instances of the staff going beyond the legal requirements are what was addressed here. Recall Participant 3's observation that the early childhood center's staff members "have time for each individual child." This and the admission from both Participant 1 and Participant 5 that their sons work better for teachers who care how they are doing demonstrate that effective special education is always one-on-one.

Indeed, my early notion of the PAC as an issue-resolution organization (and one voiced by the special education director when calling for a PAC) gradually faded nearly to disappearing by using the constant comparative method during the interviews. There were some instances of parents fighting the system to acquire services for their children, but far fewer than I was expecting to hear. Participant 9 was the first person I interviewed. During her closing comments, Participant 9 said, "There're just a lot of things we need to do to help the parents." Most of the rest of her interview was about helping the special education students more than their families were, so this perspective surprised me a little and I began to watch for it in the remaining interviews. The view of the PAC as a support mechanism grew as its role as an issue resolving body became increasingly more marginalized. This would not be true everywhere, obviously, but perhaps the role of a PAC in an open and caring school system is more aligned to parental support than to issue resolution.

The constant comparative method supported theme two in the following ways. From the start, I had down "benefit" (that is, the benefit in belonging to the special education PAC) as an Ethnograph code because it was a question specifically addressed in the interview protocol. I later added "open forum" as an Ethnograph code because many participants addressed one value of the PAC for them was that they could bring up anything that came to mind. It did not occur to me until after all the interviews were completed that the "benefit" tag was what Ethnograph terms "a parent code" to the "open forum" label. Although I had done the constant comparison one interview to the next while treating these as distinct branches of my Ethnograph code "family tree," once it occurred to me that they were on the same branch, it made sense to go back through the transcripts and align them this way.

Participant 5, the mother of an only-child who has moved from a resource placement to special education consultation only, uttered the line, "regular education doesn't know quite how to accept and blend in with special education." Although her context was that special education at the building level tends to be in an isolated location (where the rest of the school can ignore it), her turn of which group has to blend in with the other struck me as soon as I heard it as a reversal of what many would expect to hear. Therefore, I was watching for this line of thinking from the other participants. In truth, I was the only participant who came close during my bracketing interview in which I spoke of my own reality in which general education is unusual and special education is the norm. The closest any other participant came to expressing the opinion that general education should accept and blend with special

education was Participant 3's lament that there was not more school-wide information publicized about the various special education classrooms' activities. However, the reversed inclusive education Participant 5 espoused should not be surprising given her context. Not only is she the mother of an only-child, special education student, but also she is now a special education teacher in a self-contained, comprehensive development classroom.

The constant comparative method supported theme three in the following ways. What I began to hear early and then often was that connections with the other parents in the group where definitely a draw to being involved in the PAC. However, I specifically said to a parent, "The first thing you said was the relationships matter. What stands out for you in the connections with other parents?" She replied that the connections that matter are with both the other parents and the school system. Her view was that we were tweaking smaller problems because the two sides in Rush County do not have the big issues to work through that some school systems do.

My own bracketing interview contained many references to me in my roles as special education parent and special education administrator being able to "see it from both sides," living in "both worlds." However, along with this observation came the realization that such a connection is and is not good for the special education PAC mainly because seeing an issue from both sides is not the same as settling the issue. When it came to interviewing the two teaching assistants who became teachers and the retired special education teacher (Participants 5, 8, and 9), I was watching for the same kind of conflict. However, where my conflict had more to do with viewing issues

from two sides and whether or not this makes me a good choice for PAC administrator, theirs was in distinguishing between special education teachers who can work it like a job and parents who never get that kind of separation. In comparisons across the interviews, this dichotomy played itself out in both the "comfort levels" questions of the protocol (Appendix E) and thoughts that became the "one person can't get it done" theme.

Several participants proffered the idea that the PAC could become a valuable information source for not only the members, but also other parents and teachers. This idea began with the participants' view that the parent is the best source of information on the disability as manifested by their child and the follow-up to that—the reality that they have had to teach one teacher after the next about their child's likes, dislikes, ways of learning, and ways of getting along in the world. Related to this were the parents' efforts to get the teacher and others not to assume how their child was going to be based on how students with the same kind of disability are supposed to be, or even by how their children have been for other teachers earlier in their children's school careers.

Another constant comparative element started with Participant 4's interview, specifically her feelings of being "lost" in school system interactions and alone by contrast to the educational planning team's professional composition:

> How intimidating those early . . . meetings are. You show up, and if you're lucky, you're husband can attend. And there's like, thirteen people. And

> they've all had time to collaborate. And they have an agenda. And you're just, you know, you feel so lost in that environment. (Participant 4)

Fortunately, her sense that the other members of the IEP team have an agenda separate from the parents' was taken up by only two other participants. In fact, later in her own interview, Participant 4 clarified that she was talking about only the first few IEP meetings and that her meetings now with her son's teacher and the IEP team are fully collaborative and go much more smoothly than she recalled the first few meetings flowing. However, the feelings of being lost and alone in the early years of the special education journey, of needing school system help and not being sure you can count on it, did thread through all of the participant dialogs.

Another constant comparative thread I followed through the interviews was the members' desire to take what they are finding out about special education at the system level and be able to apply it at a school level. Although the PAC's mission statement (Appendix H) was developed at the first meeting in February 2003, it did not specifically state that the participants should be taking what they learn and applying it at their child's school. However, most members did take this on as a PAC goal and specifically tied it to the need to get more parents involved in the group.

The constant comparative method supported theme four in the following ways. I knew as soon as she uttered it that Participant 3's, "get them involved and then we'll make them care" was going to be a direct quote in the final write up. Of course, I did not know it would become a thematic label. Not surprisingly, this is the same

participant who considered parental (or in her case, grandparental) involvement as going through the day-to-day schooling experience with the children. It was not until later—when looking specifically at the themes—that I decided to make this a thematic label. The main reason for doing so was the participants' view that involvement in the school is a logical manifestation of caring. Participant 3 was the sixth participant interviewed, and since it had not occurred to me yet that describing the level of parental involvement was going to be a codable area, I had to go back to the first five interviews to see what they had said about it. Then with the final three interviews, I listened as Participant 3's view of parental involvement held up as the most extreme of all.

Constant Comparative Analysis Summary

Across all four themes, the constant comparative method supported some of the more curious and interesting details about each finding. For "it's all about the kids," I tracked the participants comparing and contrasting their special needs children's development against the children's nondisabled peers. From applying the constant comparative method of analysis to the full data set (not just the interviews), the individualization of special education was made manifest.

It was gratifying to me not so much in my researcher role, but in my role as the PAC coordinator, to track the participants regard for the PAC as an "open forum" in support of theme two, "our own little group." But most of the constant comparison relative to this theme had to do with the dichotomy between the special needs life and the "regular" lives of the nondisabled.

The constant comparative analysis related to theme three, “one person can’t get it done,” focused on the perspective at the root of the two relationships that matter most (after the parent/child relationship, of course). The most crucial relationships revealed were the PAC members with each other and each member with their child’s teacher. Acknowledgement that teachers can treat special education as a job rather than a way of life is not what separates them from special needs parents. The more interesting separation to track was what distinguished the good teachers from the not so good. It is probably the same elements that separate the good parents from the not so good, namely an ability to connect with children individually wherever the children are in their development and give them the support they need to make the next steps in their journey.

The more mundane constant comparative thread related to theme three was the realization that the PAC needs more membership and involvement to accomplish its stated mission (Appendix H). This finding carried over to theme four as well. Constant comparative analysis of “get them involved and then we’ll make them care focused on both the range of parental involvement and how closely participants linked the spectrum of such involvement with a related spectrum of caring.

Thematic Analysis Based on Constas’ Model

Constas (1992) offered, as part of making qualitative analysis “a public event” (p. 253), the inclusion of a documentational table in the research findings. He specified three “components of categorization” to include: origination, verification, and nomination. For Constas, “origination” (p. 257) answers where the authority for

component creation resides. "Verification" (p. 259) describes the strategies used to support the creation and application of categories to the research, while "nomination" (p. 260) specifies the origins of the labels used. All three components add to the defensibility of the themes found by supplying both a time line and an "audit trail" for the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 319).

Constas' (1992) did not believe that the "meaningfulness of a study resided "in the data" nor that categories simply "emerge" (p. 254). His point was that "categories are created, and meanings are attributed by researchers who . . . embrace a particular configuration of analytical preferences" (p. 254). Constas held that although these preferences are not always made known, they could be and should be. For both the origination and nomination, these are the five subcategories Constas applied as origins: the participants, the program, the investigation, the literature reviewed (or the researcher's analysis), and interpretation of the data collected.

In addition to these components of categorization, Constas (1992) added a second domain: "temporal designation" (p. 261). This answers when during the data collection process a thematic category was created. *A priori*, before, would be for categories identified prior to any data collection, mainly during the literature review and problem definition. An *a posteriori* designation is used for any categories not evident until after the data have been collected. Iterative designations are for categories repeatedly supported wholly or in part during data collection. Table 7 is a grid of which categories were identified as belonging to each of the three components.

Table 7: Origination, Verification, and Nomination of Identified Themes and When in the Research Process They Were Identified

Component of Categorization	Temporal Designation		
	A priori	*A posteriori*	Iterative
Origination	Authority for creating the category came from:		
Participants	1	4	2, 3
Programs	3, 4	2	
Investigation		4	1, 2, 3
Literature	1	4	2, 3
Interpretation		2, 4	1, 3
Verification	Justification for the given category came from:		
Rational	3	1, 4	2
Referential	2, 3	4	1
External	2, 4		
Empirical		4	1, 2, 3
Technical			
Participative		1, 3	4
Nomination	Category was given its label through:		
Participants		1	2, 3, 4
Programs	2, 3, 4		
Investigation		3, 4	1, 2
Literature	3	2	1, 4
Interpretation	1, 4	2	3
Category Label Key:			
1	"it's all about the kids"		
2	"our own little group"		
3	"one person can't get it done"		
4	"get them involved and . . . make them care"		

Constas, M. A. (1992). Qualitative analysis as a public event: The documentation of category development procedures. *American Educational Research Journal, 29*(2), 262.

It also indicates when during the data collection process these themes became distinct and clear.

For all four themes, I used labels taken from comments made by the qualitative participants during the interviews. This is why the "iterative" column of Table 7 is the fullest for the "nomination" category. School system parental involvement programs and statewide monitoring also contributed to labeling the themes, which explains why the *a priori* designations for nomination make it the second most full column. The only category name I was anticipating due to the literature review was the idea that it takes a group to make changes happen: "one person can't get it done." The full meanings of the first theme ("it's all about the kids") and the fourth (equating parental involvement with caring) were discovered bit by bit as the research progressed. Theme two, "our own little group," was not named until after all the interviews were completed and the idea that special education parents' needs are unique became clear. After the interviews, instances of this phenomenon that I had read before in the literature review stood out in a way they had not earlier.

The literature review done in Chapter 2 and the interpretation from Chapter 4 through Chapter 8 supported the creation of all four thematic categories. The first theme, dealing with the parent as primary advocate for their disabled child, became evident in the literature and from the participants both during the interview process and even before the interviewing started, through their work on the special education PAC. The second theme, the PAC coming into its own identity, originated both during the interview process (from the participants, investigation, and literature components)

and afterward (for the programs and interpretation components). The origins of the third theme ("one person can't get it done") were derived all during the research, except for the programmatic component. That is, the PAC was created in part as an acknowledgement that no one person can work through alone the problems that surface in public school special education. Theme four, "get them involved and then we'll make them care," had the same kind of programmatic *a priori* origins. However, the remainder of the components for theme four was applied after the fact. This can be attributed mostly to this theme being the biggest surprise finding for me as both researcher and special education parent. Elsewhere in this research, I expounded on the implications of equating parental involvement with caring for the special education PAC participants.

"Verification" (Constas, 1992, p. 259) has its own six subcategories, all related to justifying how the components of categorization were applied:

1. external (outside experts)
2. rational (through logic or reason)
3. referential (based on existing research)
4. empirical (based on full coverage, that is how exhaustive and mutually exclusive are the categories)
5. technical (using language borrowed from quantitative analysis)
6. participative (if the participants had opportunities to view the data, possibly modifying the results).

Since the quantitative components of this research were added to support the more dominant qualitative components, none of the thematic categories were justified using language from the quantitative analysis (the "technical" component of verification). Theme one, "it's all about the kids," was verified empirically and referentially, with a plethora of support from both the literature review and interviews. After the data collection, this theme was further verified rationally, with an internal logic that became clear as each participant's discussions of finding help for their child contributed more fully to the theme. Theme two, "our own little group," was verified *a priori* through the parental involvement literature, the few sources that discuss special education PACs specifically, and by the peer examiners/debriefers for this research. Theme three, "one person can't get it done," has mainly *a priori* support from the rational and referential verification components. However, it was also verified during the course of the participant interviews. The parental involvement literature in general verified use of the fourth theme, "get them involved and then we'll make them care." This theme was also verified *a posteriori* by reason, family/school/community interaction literature, and member checking.

This research confirmed the utility of Constas' (1992) model for creating, justifying, and labeling the themes. It also supported specifying when in the research process the themes were created, justified, and named. Constas' work helped to make public the many layers involved in categorization during the thematic discovery process. Depicting this thematic development in table format (Table 7), added a level

of clarity for both the reader and for any researchers who may be interested in conducting similar studies.

Analysis Based on Qualitative Research Quality Indicators

Brantlinger et al. (2005) offered several "quality indicators" for qualitative research (p. 202). Odom et al. (2005) indicated that "quality indicators are the feature of research that represents rigorous application of methodology to questions of interest" (p. 141). Brantlinger et al. identified several quality indicators within four areas: interview studies, observation studies, document analysis, and data analysis. Since no observations were done for this research, only the other three apply. I want to attend to the components of each both as a final method of synthesizing the data and as a way of affirming the quality of the research just completed.

Under "Interview Studies" (p. 202), Brantlinger et al. (2005) list these indicators:

- Appropriate participants are selected.
- Interview questions are clearly worded, not leading, and sufficient.
- Adequate mechanisms are used to record and transcribe interviews
- Participants are represented sensitively and fairly.
- Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality.

The participants used were purposefully selected from a sample that included all Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) members who joined during the first year and have been to at least two PAC activities by the time they were interviewed. Only four of the participants that fit these parameters declined to be

interviewed. The interview protocol (Appendix E) was developed with input not only from my dissertation committee, but also from members of my doctoral cohort and attendees at the Clark Graduate Student Seminar. The questions were deliberately open-ended. I also used the stems of each question in Appendix E as an "interview guide" rather than adhere precisely to the scripted questions. For example, question 4, "How well is the school providing for your child's educational needs?" could be all I would have to ask one participant, while with another I might have had to use the 4a, 4b, and 4c questions detailed on the protocol. Usually, though, I did not have to ask this question at all, since the participant addressed it elsewhere in our conversation. Also, I started with the opening phenomenological question concerning what PAC experiences stood out for the participant, then added the interview guide only for the areas left unanswered.

Under "Data Analysis" (p. 202), Brantlinger et al. (2005) list these quality indicators:

- Results are sorted and coded in a systematic and meaningful way.
- Sufficient rationale is provided for what was (or was not) included in the final report.
- Documentation of methods used to establish trustworthiness and credibility are clear.
- Reflection about the researcher's personal perspective is provided.
- Conclusions are substantiated by sufficient quotations from participants, field notes, and evidence of documents inspected.

- Connections are made with related research.

I coded using the Ethnograph 5.08 software and began the coding process after the second interview, as described in the previous chapter. I also coded for phenomenological themes, then worked to synthesize the resulting findings. I used 151 direct quotes from the participants to substantiate the conclusions as representative of their individual experiences and indicative of a collective essence of the experience of special education parental involvement with the school system.

Other than as Participant 6, I did not reflect on my "personal perspective" on relevant issues in the previous chapters and tried not to during other's interviews. I thought it might be too obtrusive. However, I will add now my personal positions on what counts as a minimum standard for parental involvement in special education: namely, attending their child's annual Individual Education Plan meeting.

I do not go as far as most of the participants interviewed. Six of the nine participants held that not being at least minimally involved in the school life of their child means the parent does not care. Had I not become a special education teacher, I might have believed the same. However, the parents never heard from very often have valid, compelling, or at least sound reasons for leaving school business to the schools. I wrote in the literature review that if parents choose to be only minimally involved in their children's education or the life of the school, no one else knows their reasons or should fault them. What we do know is that parents who do not use their time, talents, and efforts to the best of their ability for the benefit of their children are rare. We can

assume, but we do not know the daily reality of what goes on in any family but our own.

Under “Document Analysis” (p. 202), Brantlinger et al. (2005) list these indicators:

- Meaningful documents are found and their relevance is established.
- Documents are sufficiently described and cited.
- Documents are obtained and stored with care.
- Sound measures are used to ensure confidentiality of private documents.

A concern during the research was how much to tell my three peer examiners and how to get interview transcripts to them privately. I conducted all but my own interview and was the only transcriber, so these were not confidentiality issues. The Phenomenology Group did not have Table 1 to help them keep straight the various participants, but did have my verbal background given at the start of each group transcript analysis session. I was not too concerned about the Phenomenology Group’s possible confidentiality violations since my work environment and my university environment rarely overlap. However, the three peer examiners/debriefers are current or former coworkers in Rush County. Also, I wanted them to know more than I told the Phenomenology Group so that they could point out issues I might be ignoring based on their own familiarity with the participants. As with my decision to add Table 1 to this research, I decided that the benefit outweighed the risks, so I worked as discreetly as I could (for example, relaying the transcripts to them in person

rather than by electronic mail or interoffice distribution) and counted on the peer examiners' discretion to help me maintain confidentiality.

Concerning the artifacts (Appendix H), I chose which ones to include based on what would give a full, accurate, and representative sample of the PAC's work, involvement levels, and brief history. I was also interested in choosing artifacts that would illuminate the themes by either supporting them or directly conflicting with them. Sanitizing actual artifacts—especially the electronic mailings and meeting minutes—for inclusion as an appendix to this research was more involved than I expected it to be. For this reason, I had to exclude from Appendix H a sample of the Special Education Department's quarterly newsletter and the recruiting letter/application from the special education director to Rush County parents. Even so, I hope what is included at Appendix H is useful, if somewhat choppy.

Qualitative Synthesis

Having explored the results of individual components of this research, I want to now synthesize the impact of external inputs on the qualitative data analysis. Qualitative data came from the interviews, observational notes and field log, and artifacts from the special education PAC (meeting notes, agenda items, attendance records, and other documentation). Along with the survey results, these qualitative data were used to develop the phenomenological themes. However, the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the four themes were verified by member checking, peer examination/debriefing, and transcript analysis from The University of Tennessee Phenomenology Group.

My only general disappointment with the member checking was that the participants were too willing to defer to my overall analysis. After I synthesized all of their comments and showed them the analysis, none of the participants found fault with any of it. They were even comfortable with how I had characterized them in Table 1. Even the peer debriefers found only a few minor issues that needed further clarification in the analyses chapters. The four major themes did not stir any dissent either. In fact, these were unanimously upheld by all participants, peer debriefers, and members of the Phenomenology Group. Rather than reassuring me, being so widely accepted made me anxious initially. Late in the analysis, I remarked to one of the peer debriefers: "Everything I read or hear now is falling under one of the four themes. I feel like I have a phenomenological hammer and the nails are everywhere." She assured me this was not the case, rather that everything works with the four themes because the right themes were developed.

Quantitative Analysis

Following are the quantitative findings addressed alone. Where the Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process (CIMP) survey questions closely matched an individual theme, these were addressed in the "Quantitative Data Links to the Theme" sections of Chapters 4 through 7. This section treats the quantitative findings in full, especially the change in both return rates and parental opinions about special education programs available and their participation in such programs. The section includes tabular summaries in addition to a verbal summary of how the shifts in these reply rates support the qualitative components of this research.

The CIMP Parent Survey was not developed for this research. It was a state-developed monitoring instrument used from 2001 through 2005 to gauge parental satisfaction with school system special education programs. This survey was distributed each spring to approximately half of all of the Rush County families of children receiving special education services, beginning with the 2001-2002 school year. The surveys were sometimes distributed at Individual Education Plan (IEP) meetings but most often they were distributed and returned through the students themselves.

A trend observed based on the quantitative data was that the number of parents answering "no" has been decreasing each year for the questions about whether they are involved in school or school system program improvement and assessment. However, the number of parents answering "yes" has not been steadily increasing. Even for the fourth year of the survey, these questions about parental involvement (numbers 3 and 4, third page of Appendix B), were the only ones which tallied triple-digit "never" responses from Rush County's special education parents. However, the survey did not address why they are not involved. Less than one in ten of the surveys over the past four school years had parental comments added to address this issue. The most common reply was that both parents work during the school day. The next two most frequently supplied answers were that they did not know about such opportunities to be involved in the school or school system, or that they had not been invited to be involved. In any case, this supported the PAC member parents' contention that not enough parents are involved in the PAC to help it get projects going.

Some of the questions dovetail well with the research questions investigated and the interview questions asked in the process of conducting this study. I tracked the change in the overall number of parents responding to this voluntary survey and also tracked the fluctuation in the total yes to no ratio of responses for those questions directly related to the goals of the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC), specifically questions number 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 10 of the 2002 to 2004 version and numbers 1 to 5 of the 2005 version.

Question 1 of the 2002 through 2004 version asked about parental awareness of school system's efforts to identify and evaluate students suspected of having disabilities. Number 4 was a three-part question that asked the parents if they have participated in school-level or county-wide training or open-house kinds of activities. If they had, the follow up questions asked if the activities were useful and met the parents' needs. Question 5 asked the special education parents if they are kept as informed of their child's academic progress as are the parents of general education students. Question 7 asked if they are active in making educational decisions for their children. Number 8 asked the parents if they have participated in school-level assessment teams or advisory panels. Question 10 asked them if the special education facilities at their children's schools are comparable to those of the whole student population.

Table 8 lists the tally of parent responses to these questions for the first three years of survey distribution. The responses tended to be overwhelmingly positive, with a few notable exceptions. During the 2001-2002 school year, "yes" or "no" were

Table 8: Parent Responses to Select CIMP Survey Questions from Three Past School Years

School Year	2001-2002		2002-2003				2003-2004			
Survey Question Number^ (Change)	498 Surveys		418 Surveys (- 80)				283 Surveys (- 135)			
	Yes	No	Yes	No	DK*	NA+	Yes	No	DK*	NA+
1	444	44	365	40	0	0	243	36	0	0
4A	207	252	265	128	13	1	180	89	10	1
4B	201	31	249	13	7	63	161	9	0	50
4C	230	34	229	14	32	66	141	8	35	48
5	462	13	389	14	8	0	259	6	11	0
7	489	7	398	11	0	0	272	6	0	0
8	169	275	121	204	77	0	78	149	51	0
10	442	29	319	12	38	3	194	16	59	0
Percentage of Total Responses	79	21	76	14	6	4	72	15	8	5
Change in Yes:No Ratio			-3%	-7%			-4%	+1%		

^See the first two pages of Appendix B for the full question.
*DK = Don't Know +NA = Not Applicable

the only alternatives. For the next two school years, “don’t know” and “not applicable” were added options. Even so, “don’t know” was used somewhat heavily only for questions 8 and 10, the ones that asked if the parent had participated in the school’s self-assessment and the question concerning special education facilities being comparable to general education facilities.

The only two survey questions with triple-digit negative responses were number 8 (the parental participation in the school’s self-assessment question) and number 4a, which asked about participating in the school’s “program improvement activities.” On the bright side, the number of parents answering “no” to each of these two questions decreased each year. Although this is a step in a good direction, it could be a very modest step. For example, a parent going from no participation with the school the entire year to attendance at only one parent/teacher night would have to change their answer from “no” to “yes.”

In acknowledging the shortcomings of the survey, state monitors changed it drastically for the 2004-2005 school year. Not only was the number of questions reduced by half, but also the alternatives changed to “always/sometimes” or “never” (the third page of Appendix B). In practice in Rush County, parents treated these as three options for answers rather than two. There was a blank beside “always/sometimes,” but most parents circled either “always” or “sometimes” to more accurately reflect their opinion. Therefore, I tallied three distinct answers accordingly (Table 9). This shortened survey fit on one side of a page, even with room for optional parent comments. An added benefit that I

Table 9: Parent Responses to Select CIMP Survey Questions from the 2004-2005 School Year

500 Surveys Returned (+ 217 over 2003-2004)			
Survey Question Number^	Always	Sometimes	Never
1	469	25	5
2	358	50	80
3	138	33	279
4	298	40	104
5	468	16	7
Percentage Of Total Responses	78 (+6% from previous year's "Yes" rate)	6	16 (+1% from previous year's "No" rate)

^See the third page of Appendix B for the full question.

attributed to the 7-question survey is that the reduced "look" of it resulted in the highest response rate for any of the four years. Five hundred were returned, slightly more than the county got back for even the first year (2001-2002) and almost double the response of the previous school year (2003-2004). Again for this survey, the results were overwhelmingly positive, with only questions 3 and 4 getting a "never" answer more than 100 times. Question 3 mirrored question 8 from the previous survey, asking about parental participation in self-assessment. Question 4 mirrored the 4a-c of the first survey, asking about parental participation in training sessions at the school. The other three questions from the short survey that match the goals of this research concern parental involvement in determining appropriate educational services for their child, being "informed of opportunities to

participate in advisory panels," and whether the school sends them updates on their child's progress as often as general education students' report cards are sent home.

The numbers of parents who did not answer a particular question is something that I did not give much thought to while doing the year-to-year tallies. At that time, I was more inclined to just assume the question was confusing for the parent or did not apply to them. However, after analyzing the qualitative components of this research, certain gaps in replies now hint at larger concerns for Rush County Special Education. For example, question 5 of the 2001 through 2004 survey: "Are you informed of your child's progress at least as often as parents of general education students are?" had 462 (out of 498) "yes" answers, 13 "no" replies, and 23 left unanswered for school year 2001-2002. After that year, "don't know" was added as a third option. Even so, those who chose "don't know" or left the question blank never came close to the 23 out of 498 from first year. In 2002-2003, with 80 fewer surveys returned, the percentage answering "yes" or "no" stayed about 93% and 3.5% respectively (389 "yes" and 14 "no" of 418 replies). However, 8 selected "don't know," and only 7 left the question blank. This 15 of 418 compared to the 23 of 498 from the previous year represents a drop from 4.6% to 3.6% of the total answers split between these two options. In this case, the drop in the numbers left blank (or the extra added clarity that "don't know" allowed), helped the survey tally. The next school year (2003-2004), with only 283 surveys returned, the "yes" rate dropped slightly to 91.5% for this question. However, the "no" response rate also dropped, 6 of 283, or about 2%.

However, there were 11 “don’t know” responses this time, and 7 families that left the question blank. This more than 6% is a noticeable climb from the previous two years. In 2004-2005, when “always” replaced “yes” and “never” replaced “no,” the positive response rate was back to more than 93% for this question (468 of 500 surveys). Only about 1.4% chose “never.” The 23 who either circled “sometimes” or skipped the question brings this response back to the 4.6% it was the first year.

Question 10 was used only the first three years and not repeated on the 2004-2005 survey. The question had to do with special education facilities being comparable to those the general school population uses. It was one that many families elected not to answer. At the end of 2001-2002, 89% answered “yes” (442 of 498), almost 6% chose “no” (29 of 442), but more than 5% (27 of 498) did not answer. The next school year (2002-2003), the percentage of “yes” answers dropped to 76% (319 of 418). At the same time, the “no” response dropped from 29 to 12, or 6% to less than 3%. However, this time 9% (38 of 418) selected the newly offered “don’t know” option and even more than this (46 of 418, or 11%) left the question blank. Either the parents truly did not know about the facilities comparison or did not understand the question. For the final year this question was asked (2003-2004), the “yes” rate declined even more, to 69% (194 or 283). At the same time, the “no” rate increased to more than 5% (16 of 283). This time 59 selected “don’t know” (a troubling 21%), but only 14 (or about 5%) left the question unanswered.

Question 4 on the earlier survey, had a low response rate, so a high “not applicable” rate should be expected for the follow-up parts of the question having to

do with parental participation in school or countywide programs. However, the response rate for question 4b improved inexplicably after the 2001-2002 school year. Question 4b was "If yes [you were involved in a school program improvement activity], was this a positive, useful experience?" That first year, 266 of 498 (53%) left the question unanswered. Only 86 families (21%) left question 4b blank at the end of 2003 and 86 (or 30%) in 2003-2004. Again, having a "not applicable" option helped to clarify the question.

Quantitative Analysis Summary

For all of their faults and limitations, the CIMP survey results from 2002 through 2005 give a considerably clear overall picture of how Rush County special education families felt about the special education services their children were receiving, the places they received these services, and their own involvement with their children's schools. The gradual decline in surveys returned (except for the year it was only 7 questions and fit one side of a page) mirrored the gradual decline in PAC member participation in meetings and subcommittee activities. We were hearing from only the one-fifth to one-quarter of the special education families (those who returned the surveys), but the bright side of these statistics cannot be overlooked. Every year, consistently more than 70% of the replies were "yes"/ "always." The only year the "no"/ "never" replies were greater than 20% was the first year, when no "don't know" or "not applicable" options were offered.

Just as I had chosen the comments accompanying Table 3 prior to discovering the themes, I selected which survey questions were appropriate for this research prior

to thematic analysis. It was based on only how well a particular question aligned with the three PAC goals, the two research questions, and the ten questions in the interview protocol. Even so, looking at the full surveys (Appendix B) following thematic analysis, I would definitely select the same ones again and possibly even describe their analysis just as I already had in the quantitative sections of Chapters 4 through 7.

Summary

This chapter covered the overall findings and analyses of the research. The methods were mixed, and both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were described. The chapter started with a summary phenomenological analysis of the four themes discovered. Theme one ("it's all about the kids") highlighted the participants' need to work through their children's disabilities, find answers independently, and gain some level of independence for their children's post-school life. Theme two, "our own little group," focused on the distinctions between the special education life and that of general education families. Theme three worked as a sort of follow-up to theme one. It was only after the participants realized they would depend on the help of others to get what their children with disabilities needed that they were open to the reality of theme three, "one person can't get it done." The range of special education parental involvement was the focus of theme four, "get them involved and then we'll make them care." Analysis of this theme also concerned distinguishing what counted as parental involvement and if such involvement equaled caring. Table 5, the code mapping hierarchy, depicted the progression this research took—from raw data to pattern variables, to meaning units—to arrive at the themes discovered.

Phenomenological results not covered elsewhere—such as metaphor use and pronoun shifting—were analyzed in this chapter. The “magic wand” of parental involvement and the “wilderness . . . path” that is the journey to solutions for their children with disabilities stand out as metaphors that capture the participants’ experience. It was not the “we”/”they” of special education versus general education that stood out in the pronoun use analysis, but that of the participant and the school system. This view of the sides and my own awkward place in both as school system employee and parent of two children with disabilities was discussed in this section.

This chapter also included a broad look at both the observational note findings and artifact support that is not limited to one theme. The observational note analysis mentioned how the interviews went conversationally, but focused on attempts to balance the use of participant quotes in the final research. The three main contributions of the PAC archives to this research were also addressed in this chapter. These are a realization of the PAC membership’s need for information, the members’ growing knowledge of what is happening with those in situations similar to theirs, and the reality that the PAC does not yet have the level of participation it needs to work through an agenda that is only now becoming clear.

This chapter also described how the constant comparative method of data analysis was applied. How this dovetails with Ihde’s (1986) phenomenological notion of epoché is addressed in this section, which concentrated on how various data points for each of the four themes in turn were developed as new information impacted the old. For theme one, for example, in the interviews I noticed as one participant after

the next described tracking the progress of their children with disabilities against the age and grade milestones of each child's typically developing peers. That special education (as possibly all effective education) is individualized was also a constant comparative analysis detail revealed through theme one. For theme two, the "open forum" benefit of belonging to the PAC and how special education and general education actually fit together in practice in Rush County were the two elements that stood out through constant comparative analysis. The school view versus the families' view of special education was important to the constant comparative analysis of theme three. However, the primacy of the individual teacher's role and the absence of any community liaison links were the main two elements discovered during the constant comparative analysis of "one person can't get it done." Links between parental involvement in the school and how this related to a perceived level of parental caring was the main constant comparative thread for the final theme. How my own blind spot concerning this involvement-equals-caring link had me backtracking through the data set was also discussed in this section.

The themes were analyzed using Constas' (1992) components of categorization. Constas' model was used to highlight when in the research each theme was created, named, and justified. That some aspects of thematic development come as early as the literature review while others are not clarified until the well after all data have been collected is as important to Constas' components of categorization as is the idea that documenting where and how these components are created, labeled, and justified matters. What I found most interesting through applying Constas' model to

this research was that the only theme I was anticipating as early as the literature review was what became theme three, “one person can’t get it done.” The other three themes did not surprise me, but neither were they obvious to me from the start. Since Constas’ point is that qualitative researchers need to make public the many layers involved in thematic development, his model provided a framework for doing so that worked well for this research. Like the constant comparative analysis, Contas’ model helped me track what I found out as well as when and how I knew it.

Brantlinger et al.’s (2005) qualitative research quality indicators were also used to look at how the participants were selected and depicted, how documentation was found and incorporated, and how the data were secured and analyzed. In this section, I described the process of developing my interview protocol (Appendix E) and deciding how best to use it. Among the coding issues, Brantlinger et al. also call for the researchers to reflect on their personal perspectives. I used this opportunity to explore what counts as parental involvement. The confidentiality issues surrounding how much to tell the peer examiners/debriefers were key points to settle. I knew early that I wanted to use peers who were East Tennessee natives and knew Rush County, but I did not want them to know more than they needed about the participants. Balancing the verification support I needed against the confidentiality I promised participants was a personal struggle acknowledged by Brantlinger et al.’s third set of indicators.

The quantitative results focused on the overall percentages of special education parents’ satisfaction with the school system in specific areas. This chapter is the only place in which the quantitative data are laid out in table form. What stood out from

the survey tables are the overall positive view of the parents' responses and the erratic survey return rates despite the survey distribution occurring in the same way each year. Only questions 4a and 8 (from the 2002 to 2004 survey, Appendix B) tallied "no" replies that were noticeable. Both concern the parents' participation in school improvement activities. That the shortened form of the survey that was used in 2005 had the best return rate was also noted in this overall quantitative summary. Also addressed in this section were the shortcomings of the survey instruments used and the impact of survey questions left unanswered. The impact of my earlier decisions about which survey questions to include in this research is covered in the quantitative summary section. Having to decide which questions complemented the qualitative components before I had started the qualitative research was calculated based on the two research questions and the three goals for the PAC, the same guide from which the interview protocol and literature review were designed.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter Introduction

This final chapter includes outcomes of the study and their relationship to current literature, theory, and practice. In addition to these connections, this chapter addresses any deviations from research in the area of special education parental involvement. That is, the chapter addresses what I found in relation to what I expected to find and what I was surprised to find. Based on how the first few years of the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (PAC) have gone, the chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and recommendations for special education practice at the county, state, and federal levels.

Outcomes and Implications of the Study

This section ties the results of this research to issues from the literature addressed in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 covered the differences among parent information, support, and advocacy groups. It also addressed special education law, parental rights and responsibilities, and the levels of parental involvement in schools. In addition to outcomes based on the literature review, this section covered other, unexpected outcomes.

Reasons for the Special Education PAC Versus the Need for It

Schorr (1997) summed up successful community/school programs by saying they are comprehensive, flexible, and persevering; they keep the children in the

context of their families, have a long-term "preventive orientation" and a clear mission (p. 12). They evolve over time. Successful programs encourage "strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect" (Schorr, p. 12). The purpose of the special education PAC is to become such a program for Rush County. Knowing what is available and getting help for their own child is the function of the group for most participants. This explains why the participants are not fully embracing the advisory role of the PAC. They are being advocates, but only for their own children rather than all of the county's special needs children. Reconciling their support for countywide special education initiatives with their roles as individual advocates for their children's best interests is a constant internal struggle. However, the group's support of individual families does not conflict with the PAC's advisory function for the special education director. The role of the meetings for participants is as much about getting with similar others as it is about getting information. In this way, peer parent support became at least a byproduct of parental involvement, if not a reward for it. These became the PAC membership's goals for the PAC.

Recall that the director's three goals for the PAC were to:

- Improve program delivery across the school system
- Meet student needs at the parent-to-teacher level
- Have the special education PAC work as a school system/community liaison.

It was not until I was nearly through the interviews when it occurred to me that rather than precluding the group from becoming an advocacy and support group (as well as an advisory group), these three goals encourage it. The support, advisory, and

advocacy functions cannot be isolated. After conducting six of the interviews, I looked again at the special education directors' goals for the PAC and realized that they encompass all three functions. Meeting the students' needs at the parent, teacher, student, or school level is support as much as is "leaning on each other" (Participant 7).

Learning from each other, which Participant 7 also mentioned elsewhere in her interview, fits both support and advisory functions. However, the goal of improving program delivery is why the group's name specifically uses the word "advisory." That said, the way the advisory function is playing out in Rush County is that the special education staff and families are changing together to the state and federal revisions in special education law and practice. The third goal—for the PAC to act as school system/community liaison—is more advocacy than advisory. The participants do not want, anymore than the special education director does, for the PAC to be the best-kept secret in the county.

Looking back at the mission statement (the first page of Appendix H) after completing data collection, it is clearer how the PAC has become an advisory, advocacy, and support hybrid. Most of the reason that the PAC cannot limit itself to the role of advising the director—even though this started as the primary need for creating the group and is its nominal function—is that this reason for creating it does not align with the needs of those who comprise the PAC. To start the PAC was a business decision the director made unilaterally. Even as the director voiced that need, my mind was already focusing on the community liaison/intermediary role of the

PAC. This was not a focus I was conscious of at that time, but became clear to me only after the Phenomenology Group suggested it while reading my bracketing interview. The main reason the PAC has kept going since its inception, however, is to have a social link for information sharing. This is the primary role of the PAC from the participants' perspective. This may sound like a support group, but that function cannot be isolated from its advisory and advocacy functions. It is clear from the participant interviews that information giving and getting are not all that they are expecting from the PAC. For special education to be done correctly both requires and incorporates all three advisory, advocacy, and support functions.

Parental Rights and Responsibilities

State and federal special education laws were the first school laws that required parental involvement. Even now, special education and Title I laws are the only two school laws with parental involvement spelled out. Title I concerns federal funding for schools in low-income areas. With the requirements in IDEIA 2004 about to codified into federal law (expected in August 2006), the increased parental involvement aspects—such as the parent's prior knowledge and approval of who will be absent from an IEP meeting—will be prescribed even further. How these rights and responsibilities play out in practice should be interesting to track. Turnbull and Leonard (1981) suggested that even while reporting low levels of parental involvement in the educational planning process, parents tend to report high levels of satisfaction with the education their disabled children receive.

Judging from the vast majority of affirmative answers on Rush County's parent surveys over the past four years, and the very few incidents of friction with the school system that a few participants reported, what was true for Turnbull and Leonard's population sample 25 years ago remains true for Rush County special education today. Even Participant 8, a former teaching assistant and now a first-year special education teacher, said, "We have, I guess, stayed away and not tried to interfere with the education part. We want the educators to do their jobs, you know?" Although parental involvement is a legal requirement in special education, the parents are the ones who determine the depth of their individual involvement in the educational planning of their child and—with few exceptions—the school system is obliged to work with whatever level of involvement the parents offer.

Levels of Parental Involvement

There were four charter members of the special education PAC who declined to be interviewed. In addition to these four, there were approximately 20 others who joined in the first year, but were not active in the PAC and were not considered for interviewing. Some of these members attended one meeting; most I have yet to meet face to face. In trying to cajole members into attending meetings, I started to feel like I was living the same obstacles I cited from Diamond (1994) and McKerrow (1996) in Chapter 2. When I could not make our second annual picnic happen in the summer of 2004, I lived through the same troubles Diamond related in trying to finalize the pizza fundraiser and ice cream social.

A question puzzled me early in the life of the PAC: why would anyone join a group and then not bother with it? The answer came to me indirectly from the interviews conducted for this research. These shadow members are in it for the information they get, not to spark any initiatives or work on any issues of common interest to the group. To be frank, my first reaction to this realization was disappointment. After all, I was the participant wanting to find "the ones that help get things done." It took a long while for me to realize that the "access to relevant information" goal of the PAC mission (the first page of Appendix H) is just as worthwhile as the other three. Prior to the interviews, I kept contacting the full membership by mail, electronic mail, and telephone about upcoming meetings and other opportunities to do PAC activities (with the thought that I would either get them involved or ask if they want to be removed from the membership list). Many did not want to be more involved, but neither did they want to be removed from the membership list. Because of my evolving realization that some members are in the PAC only to get information, I edited the contact list to literally "gray out" those I started to call "shadow members." Contacting only the "black ink" membership has not significantly changed the meeting attendance counts or numbers involved in subcommittees.

There were several positive outcomes from my realization of the parents' strong need for information. The first (in chronological order) was to have Rush County's Special Education Department begin inviting parents to the four after-school, in-service training sessions that the Department hosts each school year. These had

been intended for school staff, but training in such topics as inclusion, aspects of specific disabilities, and how to handle children's challenging behaviors is as useful and necessary for parents as this training is for teachers and paraprofessionals.

The next positive outcome was that I created in the special education materials center a section of shelves containing books and tapes specifically for parental borrowing. Doing so has begun to reap a two-fold benefit in Rush County. The obvious benefit is that as the collection grows, the special education parents' library will meet parents' information needs at no extra cost to the families. Turnbull and Leonard (1981) claimed it is the schools' task to meet the parents' information needs. What was true in 1981 remains true today. Special education parents' information needs fall into two categories:

1. legal updates and current events
2. aspects of the specific disability their child has and current research on this specific disability.

With titles such as Powers' *Children with Autism: A Parents' Guide, The Physicians' Desk Reference Family Guide*, and the Wrights' *From Emotions to Advocacy: The Special Education Survival Guide*, this section of the special education materials library meets the parents' information need as it provides another benefit to them and Rush County.

The other benefit to having a parents' area in the materials center stems from those sections of the literature review stating that parents do not become more involved in schools because they are uncomfortable being at their children's schools

(Diamond, 1994; Griffith, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Lommerin, 2000). The National Parent Teacher Association (2000) recommended setting aside a place in the school for parents to use. The materials library is not in a school, but in the special education department's system-wide offices. Only one parent has donated as yet and only three have borrowed items. Even so, as parents begin to borrow (and donate) resources, they can gain both a level of comfort (and sense of ownership) as they satisfy their need for special education topical information.

Another recent attempt by Rush County Special Education to satisfy the parents' information need was adding to the quarterly newsletter a recurring "Parents' Perspective" column. To date, these columns have been written by me and address issues from PAC meetings so that all special education parents can get the news. I have asked Participant 4 to write about the process of getting legal guardianship of her soon-to-be, eighteen-year-old autistic son. Participant 3 has agreed to write a column about her granddaughter going from needing special education services to no longer qualifying for them.

The in-service training invitations to parents, their use of the special education materials center, and their contributions to the newsletter are all recent developments in Rush County Special Education. The variety of information becoming available to keep parents informed offers a range of parental involvement levels, from passive recipient to active creator and disseminator of special-education related information.

Addressing the Phenomenon of Special Education Parents' Involvement

This mixed method study relied heavily on applied phenomenological research, intended to improve practice by revealing the essence of a human experience from the perspective of the ones living it (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). The focus in phenomenology is on understanding the experience, not interpreting it (Moustakas, 1994). To those not familiar with phenomenology, this may seem the same, or at best a subtle difference. However, the difference is huge during the interview process and is manifested mostly in what is not said rather than what is. There were a few examples that stood out for me among the nine interviews, but the clearest one was during Participant 1's interview when she was relaying what might have caused her son's disability:

> He cried a lot the first couple of days and my aunt walked in and said that my husband . . . was . . . shaking him. So, of course, I never knew it until years later, after we'd been divorced for three or four years. But that's the only thing I can think of where—(*pauses*).
>
> (Participant 1)

The pause was at least ten seconds during which I only looked at her thinking, "Did she just accuse her ex-husband of causing shaken baby syndrome?" And she returned my eye contact, no doubt thinking, "Yes, and that's all I am going to say about it. Let's change the subject." Another example of understanding superseding interpretation was when Participant 9 (the retired special education teacher and educational surrogate

parent) was talking about what made her quit working as a court appointed special advocate volunteer:

> Participant 9: Well, I really got disgusted, as I said, about going to the other counties.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah.
>
> Participant 9: And then the parents, they didn't do what you wanted them to. They'd end up leaving their children, and going to Massachusetts, and not coming back for Christmas or the child's birthday. I couldn't take that. *You just left a child!*
>
> Interviewer: Hmmn.
>
> Participant 9: It happened the day we got him out of foster care and put him in the care of a cousin. I guess the mother just assumed that the cousin would take care of the child, so I'm not so sure we made the best decision. Maybe the mother would have been more involved if we had left the child in foster care. Because now she was not afraid of losing the child.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. It's hard to know the right thing to do.

To put this understanding versus interpreting distinction another way: one has to understand to interpret but does not have to interpret once understanding is achieved.

In a similar vein, I thought the phenomenon I was researching was special education parents' perceptions of the initial efforts of Rush County's PAC, with the PAC as the case study. But more than a year into the research I finally understood that the phenomenon at the root of the interviews was actually the broader one of special

education parental involvement in the schools, with the Rush County School System's Department of Special Education as the case study.

Related to what was suggested about needing more members so that the PAC could effectively work on the issues identified (such as transition and before/after school special education child care), the thought occurred to me that who is not present at the PAC meetings matters as much as who is. This has been true in the pragmatic sense, as the PAC has only about five members at a typical meeting. What is different about the PAC from other parent groups in my experience is that it is not always the same 5 people at any given meeting, but an ever-varying subset of about the same 15 members. The different attendees precipitate a variety of dialog and interests that shift from meeting to meeting. However, even the larger number of aggregate regular attendees (15) fails to adequately represent what all of Rush County's special education parents believe the Special Education Department's priorities should be. This countywide silence mirrors the "epistemological silence" Van Manen (1990, p. 113) wrote of as occurring in phenomenological interviews. He described the silence during the interview as what is left unsaid causes an ineffable, reflective response from both the participant and the interviewer. Both reach an understanding so powerful that expressing it in any words could only minimize that understanding. Van Manen distinguished between this and "ontological silence" (p. 114), which occurs when both the speaker and listener are speechless in the face of a truth so real and personal it goes beyond the words of the speaker. In addition to the two just discussed (with Participants 1 and 9), there were only a few more of these moments across the nine

interviews. In one sense, both types of silence that Van Manen (1990) highlighted simply bring us back to the argument that reality is personal and subjective, not communal and objective. The silence most detrimental to the PAC is the absolute silence of the majority of special education parents at the countywide level.

I know at least anecdotally that parents are communicating with their children's teachers, and sometimes with other staff at the school, but across the system special education administrators can only guess what the parents think, know, and want. In my case, I can fool myself into thinking I know because I am a special education parent, but this does not help much considering how atypical a special education parent I am. By "atypical" I mean because I am a special education teacher and administrator in addition to being a special education parent. But my special education and parental involvement differences go beyond even these superficial realities. I consider myself atypical because I am always looking for disabilities in all children. I was the participant who said, "It's amazing that things [during pregnancy, labor and delivery] go right as often as they do."

Addressing the Two Research Questions

The questions guiding this research were derived from the special education director's goals for the committee and focus on the self-described influence the parents have on special education program delivery at the personal, school, and district levels. The three goals were for the PAC to improve special education program delivery across the school system, meet each student's needs at the parent-to-teacher level, and have the PAC work as a school system/community liaison. The many concerns

packaged in the three goals are addressed directly and indirectly within these two research questions:

1. What are the special education PAC members' perceptions about how their membership in the special education PAC affected program delivery for them, their children, other families, and the school system/county in general?
2. Compared to before the PAC was implemented in February 2003, what changes have occurred in parents'/guardians' experience with the school system's special education services, their child's access to these programs, the degree to which the school system personnel keep them informed, and their own use of this information?

Table 3 (under the "Data Collection Procedures" in Chapter 3) gave a tabular alignment of these two questions and three goals with the literature review findings from Chapter 2 and survey and interview protocol questions. I wrote the final "Topic addressed in the Literature Review" column of Table 3 before I had done even the first interview. Revisiting the Table 3 comments now, the issues raised by them resonate throughout the interview quotes used. Parents as outsiders at school, the importance of making the school a comfortable environment for parents, parental involvement, formalized and informal information sharing channels, the impact of school laws, and the parent as the primary advocate for their child all surfaced in each interview. With the interviews completed, clearly the links to the three goals of the PAC and two questions guiding this research strongly support the contention that the two questions

incorporate the three goals. This should not be surprising since the interview protocol was developed to align with the two research questions and the two research questions were developed as a way of investigating how the three goals for the PAC were being met during the group's first few years in service.

The special education PAC members interviewed perceive that their membership in the PAC has not necessarily improved or hampered program delivery for their children with disabilities. Instead, the change had more to do with what they now know about the range of services available to them at various placements around the school system. This knowledge came from getting to know the other members of the PAC and having a forum to exchange advice, information, and stories.

The parent survey results, while indicating an overwhelmingly positive response from Rush County's special education parents, do point to trouble with getting parents to participate in school and system-wide programs and assessment. A few respondents to the surveys said that they would like to be more involved in school functions, but other commitments interfere. However, just as many stated that they did not know of any such opportunities to be involved at the school or school system level. The same is true for the interview participants. Although a few of those interviewed relay stories about how the school or school system is more responsive to them now, the overall tone is that special education services were always mostly positive in Rush County. Even the information dissemination from the county was viewed as good by most, although no amount of effort to communicate (on the school's part) appears to be too much for the participants. Where the participants lay

the most blame is on those parents not involved in the schools. These findings are bolstered by the interview data, in which the participants all mention a lack of involvement from others, or what could be done if only the PAC had more people. All interview participants mentioned getting the word out and recruiting more members as the immediate needs of the PAC, before it can move on to the programmatic improvements at the root of these two research questions.

Other Outcomes and Their Impact on the Research

This section describes impacts on the research from events I would not have expected to have an influence. The order in which I conducted the interviews (and what I learned from the interviews I did not get to do) cast a long shadow over the outcomes. In this section I also discuss why I remained the primary interviewer despite the risks inherent in researching in my employer's school system. I also reiterate what I discussed in Chapter 3 about how I tried to minimize these risks.

The order in which I did the interviews highlighted the mundane scheduling problems that have plagued the PAC since its second meeting. I started with the members I thought would agree to be interviewed without hesitation, saving the ones I thought might be harder to convince until later. My main reason for doing it this way was to gain confidence and comfort conducting the interviews before I tried to speak with people less willing to talk. I did not get to work out this ideal order in practice due to the availability of the participants. Scheduling and completing these nine interviews and their follow-up was an object lesson in why it is so difficult to get the PAC to meet.

There were some potential participants who declined to talk with me. However, those who were interviewed did not go to any extremes to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. The idea that participants may tell me what they think I want to hear on specific topics rather than saying what they actually believe did not occur to me at the outset. However, after several external reviewers of the proposed research presented me with this potential obstacle, I decided to code in Ethnograph for three particular manifestations of it. Attendees at The University of Tennessee's first graduate student colloquium (March 2005) suspected that participants may not want to tell the person who manages the special education parent advisory committee that the PAC is not meeting their needs. Attendees noted that the participants might in fact go the other way, to highlight the good I am doing for the PAC.

The same concern resurfaced a month later. In April of 2005, I presented the work in progress at the Clark Seminar. Attendees added to the telling-me-what-I-wanted-to-hear aspect the idea that parents may not want to cast themselves in a less than favorable light in front of someone who is both a special education parent and a school administrator.

I could add to this from my own perspective that these participants have become friends over the past three years, so they might be inclined to see the good and gloss over the bad in PAC interactions. For all of these reasons, I decided to flag instances of what I thought might be the participants telling me something other than their genuine thoughts for any of these three possible reasons:

- To project themselves more favorably than they might have been during the actual experience,
- To inflate the value of my role as SpEd PAC coordinator, and
- To soften delivering any potential bad news to me about how they think the PAC is doing.

I asked the peer examiners to look for these instances as well. Although the potential was great for participants to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear either to frame themselves in a more favorable light or to spare my feelings, early in conducting the participant interviews I realized my fears of Orne's "good subject effect" (as cited in Rosnow & Rosenthal, 1997, p. 66) were unfounded. I mentioned in the previous chapter that the amount of concurrence I received from the participants during member checking of the themes surprised me. However, my fear that the participants would want to spare my feeling by not being totally frank with me was unfounded during the interview process. The participants did after all criticize the bureaucracy, administrative detail, and lack of publicity that surround PAC meetings. It was true for the final analysis, however, that the participants were more willing to defer to my judgment than they were during the interviews.

Four charter members active in the PAC declined to be interviewed no matter what I said or tried. Still, I learned much from the members who chose not to be interviewed. In telephone conversations and electronic mail exchanges with them, their reasons for declining to talk to me on the record ranged from disbelief that what they thought mattered, through unwillingness to spend the extra time, to subtle

mistrust of my intentions for both this research and the parent advisory committee itself. I expected the first two reasons, but not the third. While it may be true that mistrust of an interviewer's uses of the research is a common reason potential participants decide against being interviewed, mistrust of my intentions for the PAC's future had not occurred to me since I belong to the group. It would be less perplexing to me if the mistrust stemmed from my role as Rush County employee rather than my researcher role. Viewing the unwillingness to participate from that perspective is not a viewpoint that would have occurred to me at the outset. From my perspective, I was a special needs parent long before my employment with Rush County and will be one long after my work there is over.

The Relationship of this Research to Theory, Literature, and Practice

In an attempt to explain the implications of this research for educational administration, I want to first revisit Epstein's (1994, 2003) framework for home-school-community interaction, then suggest an alternative that combines this and Gestwicki's (2004) work. Following this, I add some suggestions for educating the educators.

Revisiting Epstein's (1994, 2003) types of parent involvement as a framework for home-school-community interaction, we see that only one of the six does not apply to the PAC member's experience (namely, creating conditions in the homes that are conducive to learning, the parenting step). Of the remaining five, three could be used as I worded them earlier:

1. Learning at home (information and ideas for families to consider and use)
2. Volunteering (recruiting and organizing parental help in the schools)
3. Developing effective two-way, or even three-way, communication.

The remaining two partially fit this research if reworded for the parallels to be clearer. Epstein's "collaborating with the community by both the parents and the schools together" (p. 366) was what the PAC calls its "community liaison" role. Including parents in "school decisions" and developing "parent leaders" (p. 366) are manifested by the PAC members in their need to get information and sometimes give information. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) observed that underlying this framework is the belief that "the family, school, and community all function internally and interact externally to have an impact on student learning and development" (p. 250).

Figure 5 combines Gestwicki's (2004) New Model of Parent Involvement (Figure 2) and Epstein's (1994, 2003) framework for school, family, and community interaction. Like Gestwicki's model, the child/student is central. However, the parent is a far closer source of support to the child than is the teacher. This is one of two problems with Gestwicki's model. The other point of contention with Gestwicki's circles is that they stop at the child, parent, and teacher (the three "protagonists," p. 153). Epstein's (1994) work to account for the rest of the community's influence on the child is not considered. Unlike my target-like graphic, Epstein (1994) used a Venn diagram to show how the school, community, and home are interconnected in

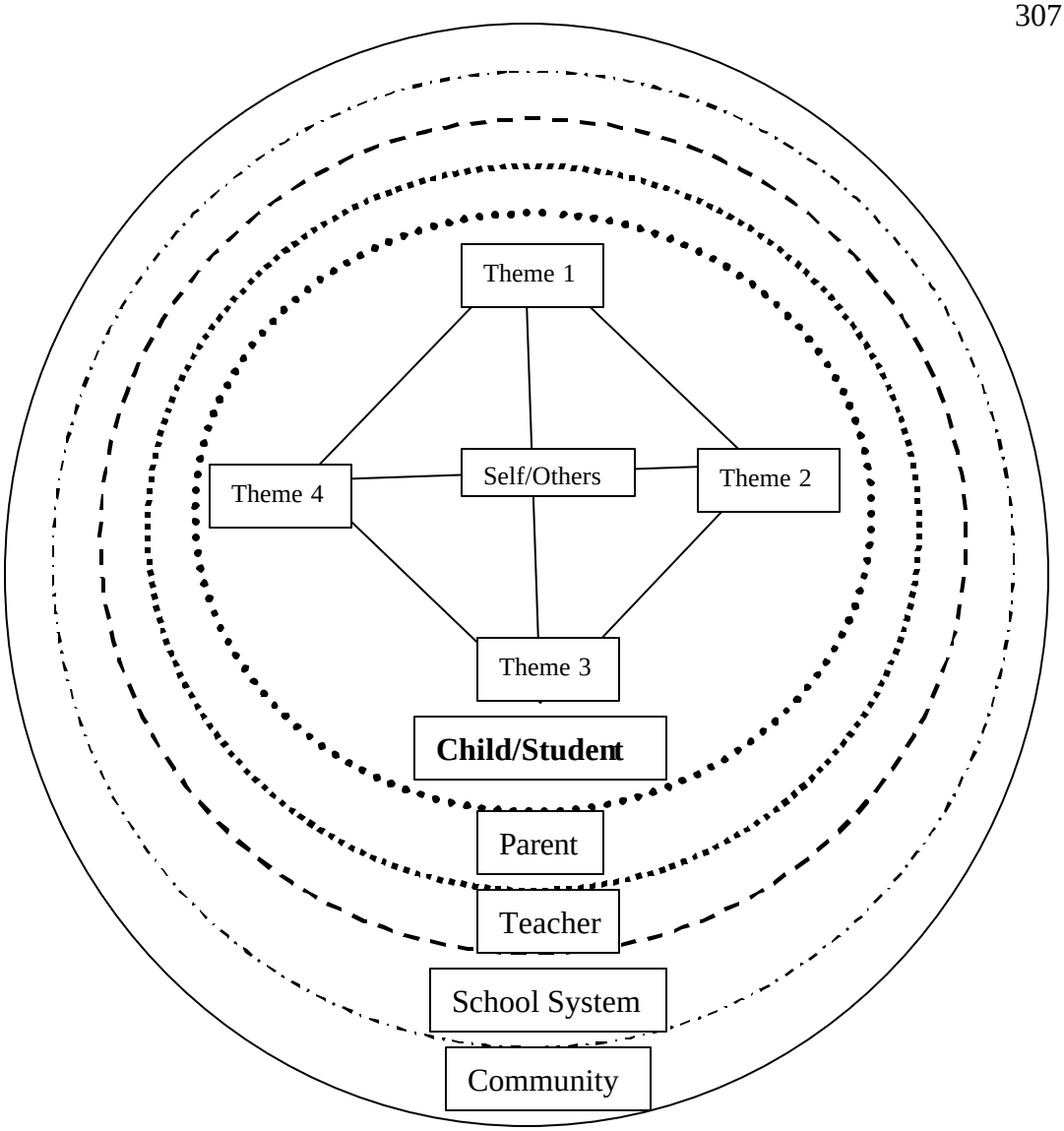

Figure 5. Model of Support Special Education Students Receive from Others

the world at large, these she called “overlapping spheres of influence” (p. 41). This same thought is captured by the self/others ground in the center and the four themes being central to all levels of help the child receives. The reality the participants of this study experienced is that help from all of these others does matter, but their impact attenuates as their distance from the child increases.

Figure 5 is my own construction, to depict both the array of help available to the child and the relative strength of influence each source of help exhibits. All borders but “community” are dashed to indicated the free flow of these influences. That the circles’ borders gradually decrease in thickness symbolizes the decreasing levels of help from others the farther they are away from the child being helped. Some would take issue with the absence of relatives other than the parents and the positioning of the teacher where these other relatives and family friends would be (most likely). My counter-argument to both is that relatives are not often helpful. I coded the transcripts for help from relatives at the outset, but found only three instances. Even these were more closely aligned to other themes. In fairness, my interview protocol did not address help from family members, so it is more than a little disingenuous to conclude that because the participants did not bring up this aspect, then the relatives must not be a factor.

Although I did record many instances of teachers not being helpful, the instances of them helping the child are far greater in number and in the recollection of the participants. That said, it is true that the teachers who are friends of the family and

take a personal interest in the individual student are far more helpful than teachers who are just doing their jobs.

As with the relatives, some may also object to my mixing together all other-than-teacher school support under "school system." Prior to the interviews, I was making a distinction between the school's principal (and other school-building-level employees, such as the secretary, nurse, etc.) and county-wide support personnel (such as Central Office employees and those in roles like mine, special education administrator). However, with a few exceptions for the principal, the participants did not make those distinctions. From the parent's perspective, it was basically the teacher or teaching assistant working one-to-one with their child, then everyone else in the school system. In fact, all participants spoke directly or indirectly about educating the educators on specific disabilities. Special education teachers and administrators tend to think in generalities about traits of autism, cerebral palsy, and other disabilities. It makes some sense, then, for the parents to individualize for the educators the disability's impact on their own children, especially early in the teacher's work with that student.

Participants also discussed needing help from the school to work out a future for their disabled child. This concern for the future was more pronounced among the parents of lower-functioning children, but even Participants 4, 7, and 9, who have the most cognitively advanced special education students in this study, expressed a dependence on the school system to get their child ready for life.

Turnbull and Leonard (1981) noted that parental interaction is absent from most teacher and school psychologist preparation programs. I would add principal preparation, too, and hold that it is still true in 2006 and that this research makes a strong case for adding the parent to all three of these preparation programs. Especially when the student cannot speak for himself or herself, this two-way communication flow between the parent and the school is even more necessary. In recent years, community relations have been added to principal preparation programs. This is a good step toward the three-way communication Epstein et al. (2002) advocate, but only a first step.

Recommendations for Future Research

I have three recommendations for continuing the research started here. The main one is to add the perspectives excluded, specifically, teachers, school administrators, parents of adults with disabilities (or preschoolers just being diagnosed), and the students themselves. A follow-up or longitudinal study of the Rush County Special Education PAC, to check on what Solomon et al. (2001) called its "cohesion" over time, is an interesting and obvious recommendation. The final research recommendation could be just as interesting: tracking outcomes for students related to their parents' involvement with the school system. This is not an obvious follow-up study, but should be when considering the focus on school system accountability concomitant with recent federal education laws in the United States.

Under the delimitations in Chapter 1, I excluded teachers and school administrators from this study, saying that their perspectives are uniquely different

from the parental perspective and would have to be the focus of additional research. Although there is some body of research on parental involvement in schooling from the professional's perspective, not much of this is special-education focused. Since in my discussion of the second theme I suggested that even Rush County's special education consultants and lead special education teachers are more school-focused than special-education focused, they would be a great place to start for expanding this impact-of-the-PAC research to administrators and teachers. Therefore, proposing that avenue of study is my first recommendation. A similar protocol, but directed at school building level special education administrators, would add much to the topic of special education parental involvement in schools.

I also mentioned in the delimitations that I was purposely leaving out the parents of other than school-aged children with disabilities. Except where the participants told their own birth to three-year old stories, this age group was not included. I also left out the parents of adults with disabilities (many of whom continue to live with their parents indefinitely). The focus on community agencies that work with the families would take on a greater significance in both the toddlers with disabilities and adults with disabilities research. Because public school special education does not begin until three years of age, families of children with birth defects or disabilities discovered early often feel their way through the maze of agencies in place to resolve this birth to three-year-old gap. Again, except where the participants brought up the transition from school to life work, I left out the experience

of adults working with the government agencies that replace the schools during the transition process at the other end of formal public schooling.

This research concerns a school system's special education PAC, so the toddler and adult advisory, advocacy, and support issues are outside its scope. However, I left out a group not addressed in Chapter 1's "delimitations" section: the students themselves. My focus was on the parent as primary advocate for their child and advisor to the school system. Even so, when they can present their own experience it is always unique and sometimes profound. Therefore, it troubled me to exclude students from this study. However, many of those with disabilities that impact communication cannot adequately speak of their own viewpoint, so this perspective can be taken up only by knowledgeable others, primarily their parents.

What I am recommending is a longitudinal follow-up study of Rush County's Special Education PAC, one that would track its cohesion over time and (hopefully) its growth in both membership and influence. More importantly, such a study would describe the adult lives of these difficult to include children.

I also want to recommend a quantitative study linking special education parental involvement and outcomes for families and children. Epstein (2005) observed "there are too few studies and too little understanding of the effects of theoretically linked involvement activities and outcomes" (p. xi). She mentioned not only academic outcomes, but also social and emotional ones. These kinds of studies were only possible recently in special education, as the first generation of students who have had special education services required by law their entire school career

began moving into their adult living and working arrangements in the 1990s. For this reason a quantitative follow-up to this mostly qualitative research should be both timely and illuminating.

Recommendations for County, State, and Federal Special Education and Public Education

I have three primary recommendations for how this research could be applied in public school systems. Also added to this section are several other recommendations for special education PAC administration, based on how the results of this research are already being used in Rush County.

1. Establish a special education PAC or attend to the one already established.
2. Plan long-range with PAC activities.
3. Share information with parents in ways they prefer to receive communications.

The interview components of this research were phenomenologically based, albeit a mixed methods hybrid of pure phenomenology. In such studies, the researcher cannot stand apart from the research—indeed, I was one of the participants—but this does not mean disinterested readers cannot adapt the research and its findings for their own use. Therefore, my foremost recommendation for any school system that does not yet have a special education parent advisory committee is to start one. Doing so reaps information sharing benefits almost immediately. If these benefits can help the

group grow, the advisory and community influence possibilities that take a little longer to develop will be allowed to take root.

The first recommendation is the most obvious one, based on the literature review (and it may have been intuitively obvious even without a review of literature). Even so, it appears to run counter to trends in the United States (especially since the passage of IDEA ’97) to be more inclusive with special education services. However, the PAC is a voluntary service, even though parental involvement in special education is a legal requirement. My recommendation for having a special education-specific PAC is precisely because of the way in which the laws are being interpreted as calling for special education to blend into regular education. What the special education laws actually call for is a free and appropriate public education for all students in the least-restrictive environment that will allow an educational benefit. As Participants 4, 6, and 7 pointed out, the general education classroom is not the right environment for their children.

Principals and parent/teacher groups know the general education view. What special education parents and teachers know is not so easily gleaned. Therefore, a group is needed to make recommendations from the special education family’s perspective. A system with a small special education population may have its information, advocacy, and even advisory needs met through belonging to a system-wide PAC with some special education representation. For systems with thousands of special education students, however, establishing and using a special education PAC is worth the added focus and effort.

Recommendation two was not obvious to me before the literature review, but definitely was after I reviewed the literature. Especially in the research by Diamond (1994), Gestwicki (2004), Lucky and Gavilan (1987), McKerrow (1996), and Urbain and Lakin (1985), there is much evidence that working through the issues and bureaucracy attendant to special education administration takes longer than anyone plans for it to take. One lesson learned from Rush County's experience is that school systems should assume it will take years, not months, for their PAC to grow and should never stop recruiting members and publicizing the PAC. Based on the recommendation of two PAC members, the Rush County Special Education Department sent home with each final IEP goals update of the 2005-2006 school year a PAC recruiting letter from the special education director and an application to join the PAC. But these recruiting efforts need to be multi-media, not just words on the page or screen. Many parents prefer telephonic dialog and face-to-face, two-way communication. The best asset school systems have is one committed parent talking to others. This is another lesson learned the hard way for Rush County. The activities that I announced to the membership by telephone were always better attended than those publicized by electronic or paper mail alone (though it has always been me doing the announcing). The special education department or (better still) current PAC members need to communicate with parents in ways that the parents prefer to find the variety of members who can help the group advance to achieving the higher-level functions beyond first-tier information sharing.

This second recommendation follows the first and is borrowed from Epstein (2003). As one of her "action team" items for sustaining school, family, and community partnerships, Epstein recommended that the group "develop a three-year plan" (p. 367). Rush County's PAC did not do this and the oversight was mostly my own. I was so fixed on avoiding "having officers and the parliamentary stuff" that the group immediately (if not intentionally) jumped to information dissemination as the main goal, almost to the exclusion of all others. The person interviewing me put this omission kindly, but I was more glib about it: "If you don't know where you're going, how can you know if you're getting there?" Epstein's reasons for out-year planning tend toward this pragmatism: set short and longer-range goals so that the group can plan to assign people, details, costs, and evaluation methods to them.

My final recommendation for how public education can use these results focuses on the information sharing aspects of this research. This one was not obvious before the literature review, or even very clearly necessary after I had compiled the review of the literature. Despite what was written in the sections of Chapter 2 titled "Differences Among Parent Information, Support, and Advocacy Groups" and "Parental Information/Mutual Support Groups"—and the work of Solomon et al. (2001)—the need for information sharing among special education parents became real for me only after three years with the PAC. It is exemplified in how Furger (2006) operationalized Epstein's (1994, 2003) framework. Furger called it "five ways to boost parental involvement" (p. 49). Unfortunately, most of the five depend on Internet access at home, which even in 2006 is not yet a reasonable expectation for

most counties and certainly not the rural ones. Furger's solution to this is the (even less probable) last of the five ways: "distribute laptops for students and families" (p. 50). In Rush County Special Education, not even all of the teachers have desktop computers and only a few staff members who serve several schools have notebook computers. Considering this, I cannot see the county supplying laptop computers to students and families in the foreseeable future. However, the remainder of Furger's "boost" to parental involvement is more realistic and commonplace.

- Give every teacher and administrator an email address.
- Develop or enhance class and school Web pages.
- Distribute electronic newsletters.
- Provide online access to student data.

Of these four, only the first is completed in Rush County. While most of the schools have homepages, only a handful of schools keep them current. As a result, they are not counted on as a source of information yet. While only three of the PAC members do not have electronic mail addresses, less than half have Internet access at home. It is likely even a smaller percentage than that for families countywide. As a result, the school system does not offer access to student data, or even classroom newsletters, online.

Admittedly, this can be done the low-technology, paper-based way, or by telephone, but even these methods are not used enough. Communication between schools and families is always tougher than it should be. I was glad to use this research as a justification for having a solid hour to talk with each participant. In the

months since the interviewing ended, I have called just to chat because I do not want my parent conversations to be all PAC administration or committee work. Since the researched started, I have also used the annual survey replies to follow up with individual parent's concerns, and possibly recruit new PAC members through this issue resolution process. But on the whole, the prekindergarten through twelfth grade education process as it has been done for the past two centuries in the United States—sending the children back and forth to school—does not lend itself well to communication between the families and the schools. With the addition of busing, the teacher and the parent could go the entire school year without ever seeing each other. Communicating sensitive, student records-related information under such conditions is laden with legal considerations stemming from families' rights to privacy. Even so, the effective two-way communication that both Furger (2006) and the National Parent Teacher Association (2000) described is a worthwhile goal. Aside from one PAC picnic and a little time before and after each meeting, there is very little time built into the process for the critical work of getting to know each other personally. We have to know people first before we can know how typical or atypical are their interests and viewpoints. When the community at large is factored into this knowledge base, getting to the three-way communication Epstein et al. (2002) advocated is an even tougher journey. But it is certainly a trip worth taking.

Conclusion

In this closing chapter, outcomes of the study were discussed. These outcomes related to the reasons for the PAC, the need for it, parental rights, and other outcomes.

The realization that the PAC members are not fully embracing the special education director's advisory role for the group, but broadening it to one that includes support and advocacy, evolved from the development of all four themes. The PAC meetings are as much about sharing information (support and advocacy functions) as they are about advising the director on what the county's special education families need. The weak links between the school system and the community pointed to a need for the PAC to assume a community liaison role, which is also an advocacy function. The reason these advocacy, advisory, and support functions underlie discussions of all four themes is that these three function for the group encompass the special education families' views of what they need from each other, the school system, and the community. Even though the director was emphasizing the advisory function when he commissioned the PAC, the three reasons for having a special education PAC were written into the PAC mission (Appendix H) from the start.

Describing a range of parental involvement was another outcome that touched on all four themes, though mostly the fourth ("get them involved and then we'll make them care"). From those special education parents the school rarely sees or hears from, through those charter members of the PAC who declined to be interviewed, to my recently discovered PAC "shadow" membership, the spectra of parental involvement in the schools depend on many factors over which the school system has some (but not much) control. Rather than focus on what the special education department could not control, in the early stages of acting on this research Rush County Special Education has decided to accentuate the positive. Specific efforts on

the county's part to meet the special education families' strong information needs were described in this chapter: the parent library, a parents' perspective column in the quarterly special education newsletter, and opening up training previously aimed at special education teachers to parents (and to general education teachers) are a few examples. I began this research under the assumption that I was investigating special education parents' perceptions about the initial efforts of the newly organized PAC. It was not until more than a year into the research that I came to realize the phenomenon at the root of this study was broader. It was about special education parental involvement in the schools. The noninvolvement matters as much as the involvement, just as what is not on the PAC agenda matters as much as what is, and just as who does not come to the meetings matters as much as who does.

The discussion in this chapter concerning why the participants telling me what I want to hear was not a huge issue relates to this point. It is not that the participants emphasized the positive, or even that they went to great lengths to spare my feelings. They did not. However, the special education parents who are telling me what I do not want to hear are the ones I never get to see. I am thinking more about the survey results than the qualitative ones, but the range of noninvolvement applies to both. I wrote in this chapter about ontological and epistemological silences. I also wrote about how atypical I am as both a special education teacher and father. I am thinking now that listening to these silences has made me this way.

The outcomes were then related back to the two research questions that triggered the study. What was interesting about looking back at these after the

analyses were the links in the last column of Table 3 (in Chapter 3). How the topics addressed in the literature review (Chapter 2) aligned with the four themes was like finishing up a jigsaw puzzle. The person working the puzzle always knows that the pieces should all fit together, but is still always a bit surprised and relieved when they actually do.

Following the parental involvement discussion, I wrote about the relationship of this research to literature and practice. This relationship stems from the distinctions among Epstein's (1994, 2003) Venn diagram of the home-school-community interaction, Gestwicki's (2004) new model of parental involvement (Figure 2) and my support from others "bull's eye" graphic (Figure 5). What creates the problems in practice are the imbalances in the spheres of influence. It is not a parent and teacher balancing act as Gestwicki asserts, nor a home-school-community breakdown in support. The reality of support for the student is that those closest to the child provide the most support; those who are not a part of the families' day-to-day lives do not. Changing this proximity dynamic is the biggest challenge to home-school-community partnerships.

The chapter closed with recommendations for further study and several recommendations to public schooling for implementing and sustaining local special education parent advisory committees. The research recommendations generally concern tying in those left out of this research: the teachers, school administrators, community agencies, and families with adults or babies with disabilities. I also recommended a longitudinal follow-up with Rush County's special education PAC, to

track its cohesion over time. I would also second the study Epstein (2005) suggested, one that links parental involvement with measurable outcomes for families and children.

The main recommendations for school systems are to start a special education PAC if they have not already and to think long-term with the PAC. Realize that it may serve more of a parental information sharing function than an advisory function, especially in the PAC's (and the parents') early years. School-specific parent groups have members whose children attend the school for a very limited span of years (about 11 to 14 years old for middle school students, for example). However, many of those with disabilities attend school from 3 to 22 years of age. Even those with mild disabilities—such as a child receiving speech services who is otherwise a general education student—attend public schools for about 15 years, if they start at age 3.

Therefore, special education parental advisory, advocacy, and support functions have to be long-term as well. Also, because disabilities tend to be life-long, the school system needs to foster the kind of special education parental involvement that will give parents the time and tools so that the parents will have the willingness and knowledge to help work out ways of transitioning students to post-secondary training or job placements. A well-functioning special education PAC can be the ideal vehicle for such home-school-community interaction.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Acronyms and Abbreviations Used

CDC	Comprehensive Developmental Classroom
CIMP	Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IDEIA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (this Act is abbreviated IDEA 2004 in some sources)
IEP	Individual Education Program (or Plan)
IRB	Institutional Review Board
LDAA	Learning Disabilities Association of America
LEA	Local Educational Agency (the school system's administration)
NPIN	National Parent Information Network
OSEP	(U.S. Department of Education) Office of Special Education Programs
PIN	Parent Information Network
Pub. L. No.	Public Law Number, followed by the session of the United States Congress and the numerical order in which the law was passed that session
PAC	Parent Advisory Committee
PACER	Parent Advocacy Coalition for Education Rights
PALS	Parents Are Liaisons in Schools

Note: For the reader's convenience, these acronyms are spelled out the first time they are used in each chapter.

Appendix B
Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process
Parents Survey

School _____ Date _____
Age of your child _____ Primary Disability _____

Number of years your child has received special education _____
Note: Your replies to this survey will provide information on the Special Education services provided by your school system. Thank you for your assistance.

1. Are you aware of activities in your school system to find and evaluate children who are suspected of having disabilities? (GS, pg. 1)
   Yes ð No ð

2. **Parents of 3, 4, or 5 Year Olds:** If your child received early intervention services between birth and age 2, were you involved in transition planning (from home to school) in the 90 days before your child's 3rd birthday? (ECT, pg. 14)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

3. **Parents of 3, 4, or 5 Year Olds:** Did your child receive special education and related services (Speech, Occupational Therapy, etc.) by his or her third birthday? (ECT, pg. 15)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

4a. Have you participated in program improvement activities such as parent-teacher nights, school open houses, school or county sponsored training sessions? (PI, pg. 19)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

4b. If yes, was this a positive, useful experience? (PI, pg. 19)
   Yes ð No ð Not Applicable ð

4c. Did the results match needs you identified for yourself or your child(ren) with disabilities? (PI, pg. 20)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð Not Applicable ð

5. Are you informed of your child's progress at least as often as parents of general education students are? (PI, pg. 21)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

6. Are you informed of your rights and responsibilities (verbally or in writing, that is a "rights brochure") annually? (PI pg. 22)
   Yes ð No ð

7. Are you actively involved in making education-related decisions for your child's education?
   Yes ð No ð (PI, pg. 23)

8. Have you participated in the school's local self-assessment process, advisory panel, steering committee, etc.? (PI, pg. 24)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

9. Is the need for Extended School Year (ESY) Services (to work on IEP goals over the summer or during school breaks) discussed at IEP meetings? (FLRE, pg. 29)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

10. Are the educational facilities (classrooms, work areas, etc.) provided for your child's educational program comparable to those provided for non-disabled students?(FLRE, pg. 34)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

11. If your child is 14 or older have they participated in transition planning or in their Individual Education Plan meeting? (ST, pg. 47)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

12. Is the possible need for *special* transportation for your child (such as a less crowded bus or one with a lift) discussed at least annually at IEP team meetings?(FLRE, pg. 33; ECT pg. 15)
   Yes ð No ð Don't Know ð

Thank you for completing this survey. This is the second year the Special Education Department has collected this information from parents. Last year we sent out 1,284 surveys and 498 parents returned them. This is how the replies broke out last school year:

#	Yes	No		#	Yes	No		#	Yes	No		#	Yes	No
1	444	44		4a	207	252		5	462	13		9	241	224
2	71	39		4b	201	31		6	494	4		10	442	29
3	40	77		4c	230	34		7	489	7		11	92	75
								8	169	275		12	61	387

If you completed one last year, you'll notice that we added a "don't know" option and tried to reword some of the items that many parents left blank. More importantly, we've already started changing our operation based on what you told us, especially about what information sessions we put together for parents and the scheduling of these events. Also, we're offering other opportunities for parents to be in advisory roles, such as the newly formed SpEd Parent Advisory Committee. Many parents wanted Extended School Year clarification, which we've given to the teachers and put on the SpEd website (http://www.slc.----.org/). We also realized based on last year's survey results that we have to do better at emphasizing transition planning for Special Education students in our high schools. We're working on it!

Thanks again for providing your input here, and for your support of Special Education all year.

Dr. ---------, Rush County Director of Special Education

PARENT SURVEY 2004-2005

PARENTS: Your replies to this survey will contribute to overall information about the special education services provided by your school system to help us improve these services. It should take only a few minutes to complete and is voluntary. Not completing the survey will not impact the services your child or family receives. You do not have to add contact information unless you would like an individual reply. A summary of the responses by school will be published, but not individual answers. Thank you for your assistance.

Your Child's Primary Disability _____ **Child's Age** _____

School _____ **Number of Years Receiving Special Ed Services** ___

1. Are you involved in determining appropriate services for your children? (PI-23)
   _____ Always / Sometimes _____ Never

2. Are you informed of opportunities to participate in advisory panels, committees, the local self-assessment process, or other related activities in your child's school or in countywide special education? (PI- 24)
   _____ Always / Sometimes _____ Never

3. Have you participated on a school system advisory panel, a committee, and/or the local self-assessment process or other advisory type activities in your child's school? (PI-19)
   _____ Always / Sometimes _____Never

4. Has participation in training activities at your child's school helped meet your needs as a parent of a child with a disability? (PI-20)
   _____ Always / Sometimes _____Never

5. Does the school send a progress report, related to your child's IEP goals and objectives, as often as report cards are issued to all students? (PI-21)
   _____ Always / Sometimes _____ Never

6. Is a "Rights" brochure or pamphlet given and explained at each IEP-team meeting (unless you decline the pamphlet and explanation)? (PI-22)
   ____ Always / Sometimes _____ Never

7. Does your child attend classes and other school activities--other than special education classes--during the school day? (FLRE-34)
   _____ Always / Sometimes _____ Never

Comments:

_____

_____

Name/Phone Number (only if you would like to be contacted): _____

Appendix C

Letter to the Superintendent

Dear Dr. ----------

As part of the requirements toward completion of a Doctor of Education degree in Educational Administration at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, I am planning to complete a phenomenological research study of the perceived effectiveness of the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee in [Rush] County. I plan to gather my information through interviews with those parents who have been members from the start of the committee (early 2003), resulting in approximately nine to twelve participant interviews. I will also use the replies to annual Continuous Improvement Monitoring Process surveys from the parents of special education students in the county.

This letter is to request your permission to solicit participants and use the data mentioned. The participants and their children's schools will not be named in the dissertation. An alias for the school system will be used as well. As the driving force behind the latest incarnation of the SpEd PAC, I want to be clear in this study that it is not what the Director of Special Education or I think about the group's impact that matters. The experience of the parents involved defines the committee's effectiveness.

As a special education administrator, teacher, and parent, I see the resulting information helping to improve not only school system/parent communication, but also equitable delivery of special education services at the building level.

I am also hoping that what is useful in this system can be applied to other school systems. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at (*phone number*).

Thank You, Jeff Romanczuk

cc: Director of Special Education

Appendix D

Demographics Questionnaire to Participants:

1. Your connection with special education:

   1a. How old is your child (or how old are your children) in special education?

   1b. Do you have any children not in special education?

   1c. How many years has the child been receiving special education services?

2. Has all of their schooling been in this school system? ___ Yes ___ No

3. If your children have had some school years outside the county:

   3a. Where else have they gone to school?

   3b. Did they receive special education services? ___ Yes ___ No

4. If you are not the parent of a special education student, please explain a little about your connection to special education.

5. These four replies are all optional, but if you would like me to follow up with you after the interview, please include them:

   5a. Name _____

   5b. Address _____

   _____

   5c. E-mail Address _____

   5d. Phone Number _____

Appendix E

Interview Protocol

1. Thinking about your time on the special education parent advisory committee (SpEd PAC), what experiences stand out for you?

2. What made you join the SpEd PAC?

    2a. What were your initial expectations?

    2b. Describe how well these expectations are being met.

3. Parents' comfort level:

    3a. How have your own dealings with your child's school changed since you've been on the SpEd PAC?

    3b. How comfortable or welcome do you feel at the school and how has this changed since your child started there?

    3c. What should be done to improve the situation when a parent and the school system disagree on how best to meet the needs of a special education student?

    3d. Have you or has anyone you know had to do this?

    3e. If so, how did it work out?

4. How well is the school providing for your child's educational needs?

    4a. Please tell me an example of how the principal or the special education director are providing for your child's needs.

    4b. Give me the first example that comes to mind of how the teacher is providing for your child's needs.

    4c. Can you describe any examples of how well the teaching assistants provide for your child's needs?

5. Communication:

    5a. Is your family kept as informed of school-related activities as the nonSpEd families are?

5b. Are you getting the same information on activities that the nonSpEd families get? Give me an example.

5c. How satisfied are you with how well your family is included in the life of the school?

6. How has your family benefited from involvement in the SpEd PAC?

6a. Any benefits for other families you know?

6b. Any benefits for the teachers/school/school system?

7. If there have been any drawbacks to your being a member of the SpEd PAC, what are they?

8. How do you see the role of the SpEd PAC changing in the next few years?

9. Do you have any final questions, comments, or observations?

10. May I follow up with you and have you review your transcribed answers?

Appendix F

PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Implementation of a Special Education Parent Advisory Committee:

A Mixed Methods Investigation into the Members' Experience of Parental Involvement with the School System

My dissertation study is about how the parents of special education students interact with their child's school and school system. It is a chance for you to describe experiences you have had with your child's educators.

The purpose of my investigation is to describe the experience of parents as they use the special education resources in the school system.

The method I will use is one of conducting and analyzing interviews with people who have had this experience. This research design is phenomenological so there is no attempt to test any hypotheses or a particular theory. No type of evaluation is involved either. My objective is to obtain a rich, experiential description of the phenomenon from the perspective of those who have had or are having this experience.

If you agree to participate, I will interview you at a time and a location convenient for you. The interview will take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. I would be asking you to tell about an experience or two that you have had in dealing with your child's school or the school system. Later I would follow up with a shorter interview (about 30-minutes) to discuss what I have learned from

our first conversation and to see if you agree or not. I will also ask if you have anything to add to the summary description of your experience.

During the interview, I will ask you to talk about only the experiences you feel comfortable discussing. You should feel free to disclose as much or as little as you want. You can end the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time. Accepting or declining this invitation to participate in the research will not impact in any way your child's special education program or your continued participation in the SpEd PAC. The interview will be audiotaped so that I may review and transcribe it for my research. However, the information I obtain and your personal identity will be held in confidence. Tapes and transcripts will be letter/number coded and any comments that identify you will be deleted or altered (creating different names for your children or using made up names for the schools mentioned, for examples).

If you would like to volunteer for this study or would like more information before deciding, please contact me at the address or telephone number listed below. Thank you for your time and interest.

Jeff Romanczuk

1348 Hillvale Rd.

Louisville, TN 37777

(865) 748-7711

lukate@chartertn.net

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The interview you will be taking part in today will serve as data for my doctoral dissertation, *Implementation of a Special Education Parent Advisory Committee: A Mixed Methods Investigation into the Members' Experience of Parental Involvement with the School System*.

The purpose of my dissertation study is to gain a better understanding of the parents' experience of the special education services provided in our school system. I am interested in learning about how the special education department is doing from your perspective and from your experience.

If you agree to participate in this research study, our interview should take about an hour. I will be asking you to describe one or two specific interactions with the special education staff with as much detail as you are willing to share. Later I will schedule a follow-up discussion with you to tell you what I have learned and to see if you agree or not. You can also add to my summary description then. This second meeting will take about a half hour to a full hour. If you are interested, you will be one of approximately ten participants in this study, all members of the Special Education Parent Advisory Committee.

Since your participation in this research involves only these confidential interviews between you and me, there should be no risk or discomfort on your part. The benefits you may receive are the chance to talk about your experience and my sharing of the research outcome with you.

Participant's initials: _____

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may end the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty and without loss of the rights and benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

The information you share and your personal identity will be held in the strictest confidence at all times. The interview will be audiotaped so that I may review and transcribe it for analysis. The tapes and the transcripts will be coded with a letter/number known only to me. That will protect your identity. The data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet on the third floor of Claxton Addition, University of Tennessee, Knoxville campus. The transcriptions will not include names or other information that might compromise confidentiality. You may review the tapes and transcripts to clarify or make deletions if you wish.

The only people who will be allowed to see the transcripts of the interview are members of my dissertation committee and members of a research group at who are graduate students in education, psychology, nursing, or counseling. No interview data will be published in my dissertation or anywhere else without your review and consent.

Participant's initials: _____

Any findings that result from this research could improve special education program delivery and school to home communication for our county and for other school systems. They may also give you a new awareness of your own experiences with your child's special education program and school personnel. There is no other payment for participating, or any costs to you other than the time investment.

If you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this study or the procedures used, you may contact me or Dr. Anfara, my doctoral committee chairman, at the addresses listed below. You can also contact the University of Tennessee's Research Compliance Services directly at (865) 974-3466. Please sign a statement of your willingness to participate if you choose.

Jeffrey B. Romanczuk
1348 Hillvale Road
Louisville, TN 37777
(865) 748-7711
lukate@chartertn.net

Dr. Vincent A. Anfara, Jr.
A321 Claxton Complex
Knoxville, TN 37996-3430
(865) 974-4985
vanfara@utk.edu

Participant's initials: _____

STATEMENT OF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH

I understand that this research is being conducted by Jeffrey B. Romanczuk and Vincent A. Anfara, Jr., of the Department of Theory and Practice in Teacher Education at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I have read (or had read to me) the description of the research study as outlined above. The investigator has explained the study to me and has answers all questions I have at this time. I understand the purpose of the project and that I am being asked to participate in an interview which will be audiotaped and transcribed. The potential risks and benefits were discussed.

I freely volunteer to participate in this study. I understand that I do not have to take part in this study and that my refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of the rights to which I am entitled. I further understand that my consent may be withdrawn at any time with no penalty and that I may discontinue my participation in this research.

_____ _____

Signature of Research Participant Date

_____ _____

Signature of Person Conducting Interview Date

Again thank you for being a participant in this research project.

Feel free to contact me if you have any questions now or in the future.

Appendix G

PHENOMENOLOGY GROUP AGREEMENT

As a member of the Phenomenology Group I agree to discuss the transcript being read today only during the time allowed for its discussion while the group is in session. I will not discuss the details of the transcript outside of the group nor will I reveal what I know about the identities of the individuals involved in the study to those who are not members of the Phenomenology Group.

Date _____

/signatures/

Appendix H

MISSION STATEMENT OF THE RUSH COUNTY SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The mission of the Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee is to work toward the understanding, support, and appropriate education of all children with special needs in our community.

The committee does this by:

- Providing a network of support for parents, including access to relevant information, training, and emotional support.
- Encouraging an atmosphere of open communication, understanding and mutual respect among all students, parents, school system employees, and the community at large.
- Collaborating with the parent teacher organizations, school system personnel, and other community organizations towards the betterment of education in Rush County.
- Staying current on public policy issues that impact education in Rush County and Tennessee and responding as necessary.

Drafted 2-26-03

FIRST ELECTRONIC MAIL SENT TO THOSE INTERESTED

To: SpEd PAC

From: Jeff Romanczuk

Subject: First Meeting of the Rush County SpEd PAC, Feb 26, 1:30 pm or 3:30 pm

You are receiving this e-mail because you expressed an interested in participating in the newly formed Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SpEd PAC). I'm Jeff Romanczuk, SpEd teacher, administrator, and parent. At least in the early stages of the SpEd PAC, I'll be coordinating our meetings and maybe other activities for the group and for the SpEd Director.

I'll call you in a few days to check your contact information and preferences. But I also want to find out from you what issues you think are the ones we should concentrate on or tackle first.

Please go to the homepage of the Rush County SpEd website or the Concord, Massachusetts, SpEd PAC Site (http://www.concordspedpac.org/). This one was awarded best SpEd PAC site and it may give you some more ideas.

Since most people were okay with meeting during the day rather than at night, we are offering an early afternoon or end of the workday meeting for this first gathering. We'll decide the best meeting time, how often and where to meet, other administrative stuff, and more important details when we get together. I'll be calling soon and I look forward to meeting you on the 26th!

OTHER ELECTRONIC MAILINGS

From: Special Education Director
Subject: Parent Advisory Committee
To: SpEd Leads/Consulting Teachers

Colleagues, one thing we need to do to improve our program and reduce the amount of tension is to directly involve parents in our program. Please make copies of these two forms [applications to join the special education Parent Advisory Committee attached to the electronic mailing, one in English and a Spanish translation] and send them home to parents. If you have no Hispanic kids, keep that one for future reference, because one day you will have them.

Think about the parents who would be active, who would be collaborative and when the forms are returned help me select the ones who would be most helpful in improving our program. This is NOT a forum for people to complain. It is a forum for people to offer suggestions for improving the delivery of services to children with disabilities.

Thanks for all you do each and every day to improve this program and our efforts to assist children with disabilities. You are the cornerstone of any success we have.
/signed/

From: Jeff Romanczuk
Subject: SpEd Parent Advisory Committee Meetings for 2003-2004

Many of the parents who couldn't make meetings during the day have asked about alternating the days and times a bit, so here is what I came up with for next school year. Please block out what times you can and plan to attend. All will be at the usual place unless you hear otherwise later.

Fri	Jul	11	6 pm
Fri	Aug	22	11 am
Tue	Sep	23	2 pm
Mo	Nov	10	5:30pm
Thu	Dec	18	11 am
We	Jan	21	2 pm
Thu	Feb	26	11 am
Mo	Mar	22	5:30pm
Mo	May	3	2 pm

July 11 is the barbecue mentioned last meeting

P. S. I will get out a summary of the May 1 meeting soon. Apologies for its lateness.

Jeff Romanczuk

Re: Canceling the January 25 Meeting?

Jeff,

I don't think it is urgent and cannot wait until 3/10, but I am somewhat concerned that the system is not addressing the unique needs of our autistic students. I cannot speak for all, however, the higher functioning autistics need some specialized attention especially in the area of social skills and preparation for independent living. I have always gotten great cooperation from the teachers. I just think it's a lack of knowledge, which is understandable considering what little was known until very recently. I'd like to have more discussion about teacher training and autistic spectrum disorders.

See you March 10th unless I hear otherwise.

/signed/

RUSH COUNTY SPECIAL EDUCATION PARENT ADVISORY COMMITTEE
ACTIVITY PRIORITIES

Please look through the following list of activities and rank order how much importance the PAC should give to each. The activity you consider most important and that we should work on first, you would rank #1. Those that are less important or can wait until later would get the higher numbers. You can also write in (and include in the order) suggested activities that did not come up at the initial meeting. The last item we should get to would be numbered "11," unless you do include your own. Thanks!

Rank	*Activity*	
	A	Adding more certainty to transition activities following high school completion
	B	Combined parent/teacher training sessions on special education topics
	C	County-wide special education advocacy; that is, members getting information to other parents in their area
	D	Developing summer activity alternatives for special education students
	E	Fostering diversity awareness
	F	Grant writing
	G	Improving parents' comfort level during school visits, especially for IEP meetings
	H	Making/evaluating special education program-wide improvement recommendations
	I	Our students' involvement in general school activities
	J	Presenting a committee on legal issues or issues involving other agencies
	K	Promoting continuity of information to new teachers of a child from year to year

LIST OF MEETINGS SCHEDULED

- Nineteenth SpEd PAC Meeting, May 1, 2006
- Eighteenth SpEd PAC Meeting, March 9, 2006, SpEd Department
- Seventeenth SpEd PAC Meeting, October 27, 2005
- Sixteenth SpEd PAC Meeting, May 2, 2005
- Fifteenth SpEd PAC Meeting, March 10, 2005
- Fifteenth SpEd PAC Meeting, January 25, 2005 (canceled)
- Fourteenth SpEd PAC Meeting, December 13, 2004
- Thirteenth SpEd PAC Meeting, October 14, 2004
- Twelfth SpEd PAC Meeting, September 8, 2004
- Eleventh SpEd PAC Meeting, May 24, 2004
- Tenth SpEd PAC Meeting, March 22, 2004
- Tenth SpEd PAC Meeting, February 26, 2004 (snowed out)
- Ninth SpEd PAC Meeting, January 21, 2004
- Eighth SpEd PAC Meeting, December 18, 2003
- Seventh SpEd PAC Meeting, November 10, 2003
- Sixth SpEd PAC Meeting, September 23, 2003
- Fifth SpEd PAC Meeting, August 22, 2003
- Fourth SpEd PAC Meeting, July 18, 2003 (Picnic, no minutes)
- Third SpEd PAC Meeting, May 1, 2003
- Second SpEd PAC Meeting, March 18, 2003
- First SpEd PAC Meeting, February 26, 2003

The meetings underlined above are those for which minutes were published.

SAMPLE MEETING MINUTES

The Rush County Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (RC SpEd PAC) held its fourteenth meeting on December 13, 2004. Seven members attended.

New Topics

In November, the Special Education Department reworked the times the department's buses could leave their schools. -------- talked about the requirement to have the SpEd students' school day length more closely match the general education students' hours of instruction. This has resulted in some longer bus travel times and other scheduling traumas that we are still adjusting.

Jeff Romanczuk attended the Tennessee Association for Supervisors of Special Education (TASSE) annual conference from December 6-8. The Wrights (of Wrightslaw fame) were there and it was interesting to have parent advocates among all the schools' lawyers. Pam Wright's talk was on the last day and except for the following links that she shared, the rest of her content was disappointing in many ways.

- The IDEA reauthorization 2004 (IDEA 04) requirements for SpEd teachers
- The NCLB "breathing room" allowed for SpEd teachers
- NCLB highlights for teachers; the link also has a highlights for parents site

All Jeff got out of Joe Fisher's (State Assistant Commissioner for Ed, and chief of SpEd) intro to the conference was the following link, which covers recommendations for Closing the Achievement Gap between general education and special education students. (It's a Word document.)

Melinda Baird talked about the changes from IDEA 97 to IDEA 04. Among these she noted that "school health services" is now "school nurse services." Melinda also mentioned the wording that basically states school systems can use up to 15% of their early intervention SpEd funds (Part B) for early intervention having to do with trying to stop GenEd students from needing SpEd services. She also pointed out that although the timeline for initial evaluation will change to 60 days in July 2005, it will be 60 calendar days, which is about the same as the 40 school days it is under the current reauthorization. This should matter only when the 60 days are spread over spans when school is not in session.

Chuck Cagle is a lawyer who represents many school systems, including Rush County. Chuck also talked about what will change with the most recent IDEA reauthorizaton:

- IDEA 04 sets a 2-year statute of limitations on actions schools and parents (or students over 18) can litigate over. This means a complaint can't be filed more than two years after the

individual or agency knew about "or should have known about" the incident in question.

- "John Doe" complaints can no longer be filed. This means the school system has to know the name of the student about whom they are being sued, even for homeless children.

- Parents will have to be offered a written copy of their rights only once a year, not at every meeting or change of educational plan. They can be referred to the state's or system's link to the parental rights in lieu of receiving the rights on paper (if they say they have Web access and agree to this). Chuck's advice was to always include in the conference summary how the parent rep received their rights or if they declined to receive them.

Jeff added the Pennsylvania Parent Education Network site to the advocacy set of sites on our parents' page. PEN has a lot of good information and offers pamphlets free of charge.

---------- mentioned the Autism Coach site. It sells training software, especially for students with communication disorders. "Socialize with Me" was the specific program she is considering.

Jeff mentioned that the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program's (TCAP) Academic Skills Assessment (ASA) alternative is offering an alternative writing assessment this year for the first time. (Last year, even those doing the TCAP Alt ASA during TCAP week had to do the regular Writing Assessment if they were in 5th, 8th, or 11th grade.) As a result, the TCAP Alt addendum used at IEP meetings has changed a little (on page 2).

Ongoing Items

Jeff gave ---------- another transition resource for review, one from the Pennsylvania Parent Education Network site mentioned above. --------- and ----- will check at the four high schools to see both what good programs are in place already and what programs could be better. They will make recommendations to the SpEd director about what to keep, add, or change and later get into middle to high school transition issues. ---------- has the lead on this transition subcommittee and will decide the pace and direction of its activities.

--------- suggested we start an after-school childcare specifically for the special education students. We have some information on how a few counties close by are doing it, but we need to work out the level of need/interest county wide to figure out at what schools to locate this childcare and what needs might be unique to Rush County. We intend to offer tutoring and enrichment activities during these hours and there will be a charge for this service. Jeff and ---------- will meet soon to plan how to make it happen. Anyone else interested contact Jeff by e-mail or phone.

Jeff asked for volunteers to serve as individual education planning meeting parent advocates. We're thinking that, especially for the parents of newly diagnosed students, it might be good if they had an experienced parent to talk to ahead of time

about what will happen at the IEP meeting. This advocate could also attend the IEP meeting and provide whatever assistance the parent might need (from finding the meeting location to translating SpEd jargon). -------- is the only volunteer right now. Anyone else interested should contact Jeff by e-mail or phone. These parent advocates don't have to be SpEd PAC members, but they do have to be (or have been) parents of Rush County Special Education students. Jeff will pass along to the SpEd Consulting and Lead Teachers the names of those parents interested in helping.

The East Tennessee Regional Division of Mental Retardation Services had an evening meeting on November 3 in Knoxville, covering short- and long-term care issues for those of us with children who aren't likely to be able to live on their own. Jeff will post the date/time/place of their next meeting, or you can call 865-------- for information.

Jeff started an online Yahoo! Group for the SpEd PAC. If you aren't already signed up for it, when you go to the link, the first button you'll have to click on is the "Join this group!" one. If you are already a Yahoo! member, your current log on will work. If not, you'll need to sign up for your own ID and password, which isn't too tedious. We have only five signed up so far. Once we get a few more members, we can use this online group for messages to all, file and picture sharing, polls, meeting notifications, and live chat.

Next Meeting

January 25, 11 am at ----------.

VITA

Jeffrey Brian Romanczuk was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He graduated from the Northeast Catholic High School for Boys in Philadelphia and received his Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education from The Pennsylvania State University. He later added a Master of Science in Information Sciences and an Education Specialist (Special Education concentration area), both graduate degrees earned at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Working experience has included six years as a special education teacher and administrator, two years of teaching high school English, seven years as an officer in the United States Air Force, and seven years as a research associate/training project manager with the Oak Ridge Associated Universities.

Jeff is a member of the Council for Exceptional Children, the Tennessee Association of Administrators in Special Education, and the Project Management Institute. He is a life member of both the Autism Society of America and the Air Force Association. His work has been published in the Philadelphia Inquirer's *Today* magazine, *New Voices in American Poetry*, *Records Management Quarterly*, and *Educational Considerations*.

He is married to the former Cathy Jean Webb, of Maryville, Tennessee. They have two children, Luke and Kate.