

EVALUATING THE ROLE OF FAMILY INVOLVEMENT AND THE IMPACT OF  
PARENTAL ADVOCACY ON SUCCESS OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL  
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By

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## DEDICATION

To my wonderful parents Willie and Peggie Watson, I thank God for the discipline and love that you provided to me and my siblings. To my daddy, thank you for your labor of love, you are a true example of what hard work and dedication looks like. I love you more than words can express. Thank you for teaching me that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me and that no matter what I would overcome. I am proud to call you daddy. This was a hard process and you pushed me to do better and go further no matter what I faced. I have developed a strong work ethic because of your leadership. You also taught me that hard work would always pay off. Daddy, I hope that I have made you proud! To my mom, you are a phenomenal women, wife and mother, no matter what you always made sure that you took care of your children. Mom, because of your leadership, love and compassion I know the meaning of true love. I'm a better women, wife and mother because of you! I love you both very much! To my siblings Aaron and Daron, I love you very much, thank you for everything you do for me always. To my sisters in law Latoya and Maenylie I love you both. To my nieces and nephews, auntie loves you so much. A special thank you to my grandparents, aunts and uncles. To my father, and father in law, Robert and Terry, thank you for all your love and support during this process. You stepped up to ensure that I had what I needed to stay the course. To my husband Anthony, thank you for your support and love. To my three beautiful daughters Raina, Riley and Reagan I love you more than life itself. I wanted to show you all that anything is possible! This doctorate is for you. Finally, I am here and thankful for all that this experience has taught me.

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## **PREFACE**

While building the school-parent interaction platform, the school leadership needs keep in mind that the cultural perspective influences the relationship among parents, school, and the community. The schools should develop and implement comprehensive, longitudinal individualized programs in collaboration with the parents. Such programs should reflect the impact of student's academic and social abilities, attitudes, interests and the values. Involvement of the parents in setting the instructional goals and monitoring the progress of the students with disability will play a significant role in promoting the success of these students.

# **Evaluating the Role of Family Involvement and the Impact of Parental Advocacy on Success of Elementary School Students with Disabilities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This case study analyzes the impact that parental advocacy has on the academic success on students with a disability attending an urban elementary school and the factors that enable or inhibit parental advocacy.

The Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2004) (IDEA) established the legal guidelines for the protection of students with disabilities, including outlining the legal rights of the parent. The examination of parental involvement as it relates to resources, advocacy, knowledge and experience will frame this case study. The researcher conducted a complete and detailed analysis to display the impact parental involvement has on students with a disability within the urban elementary settings (K-6). The case study identified teachers' and school leaders' perspective of parental involvement within the urban community, parental aspect of advocacy and support from the school system, and parental knowledge of special education. The researcher examined both school and parental perception and the impact their views and beliefs have on the academic success of students with special need in elementary school.

This case study analysis will explore the various components that relate to parental advocacy for children with a disability. For many parents advocating for their children is never the question, the difficulty faced by parents is how do they advocate for their child successfully without feeling overwhelmed, defeated, unsupported and frustrated while enduring the process.

Parents are formally introduced to the world of special education once their child has been clinically diagnosed with a disability (IDEA, 2004). IDEA mandates the inclusion of parents in their children's special education process; specifically, that the parents be an equal participant in developing the programming for their child's special education services. Various supports and structures have been created to promote healthy parental engagement between home and school. However, despite these supports, a disconnect remains. Federal initiatives, such as Goal 2000: IDEA and the No Child Left behind Act of 2001(2001) promote parental engagement. However, these mandates have not resulted in a true partnership between home and school. For example, IDEA mandates require the participation of parents in the special education decision making process; however, parents feel their input is not well received by the school-based team (Munn-Joseph& Gavin-Evans, 2008).

The IDEA has aided in promoting increased parental involvement to ensure that parents have a voice in their child's education. However, as described, such mandates fall short in ensuring successful parental advocacy. Parental knowledge, apathy, and school and parental engagement are components that result successful parental advocacy as examined in this study. Within the urban elementary school setting, a positive collaboration between parents and the school results in the increased academic success of students with a disability.

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# **CHAPTER I:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Introduction**

Family involvement in schooling is considered a crucial key to children's academic success (Epstein, 2010). Policymakers, educators, and researchers agree that family-school partnerships enhance children's educational experiences (Stefanski, Valli and Jacobson, 2016; Epstein, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005). Essentially, research recognizes parental involvement as an important factor that impacts the quality of a child's education. According to Epstein, who created a framework which outlines key components of parental involvement, parental involvement includes: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the school community. While these components lay the groundwork for successful parental involvement, an understanding of what increases or impedes parental involvement, also referred to as parental advocacy, is continuing to evolve.

To positively impact the academic success of a child with disabilities through parental advocacy, parents must first be equipped with knowledge of the special education process and their rights, as well as, possess the communication and collaboration skills necessary to advocate effectively for those rights (Black and Baker, 2011) Research supports that parents of children with disabilities in urban communities often experience feelings of inadequacy or discomfort pertaining to their involvement in their children's educational development. This is due to the challenging time that school officials and parents have identifying their roles and responsibilities as it relates to the educational wellbeing of the students (Hwang, Liu, Chen and Huang, 2015). Previous research documented that best practices for collaboration involve an enlightened awareness of all stakeholders and their roles (i.e., students, parents, teacher, and administrators)

(Duquette, Fullerton, Order, and Roberston-Grewal, 2011). These researchers have also acknowledged the difficulty in developing collaborative parent-school relationships, and have indicated that effective collaboration relationships are nurtured over time. This is especially true when the student involved is identified as a student with a disability that requires special education services in order to successfully access the general education curriculum.

Often, the parents' first experience with special education services occurs when their child is identified as a student with a suspected disability. Pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) (IDEA) guidelines and standards, this identification is when the special education process begins for the family. The world of special education, as dictated by federal law, is often foreign to parents. The terminology, guidelines and rules derived from the IDEA are often separate from those of the general education world (Hess, Molina and Kozleski, 2006). In addition to having to understand the meaning of their child's diagnosis and reassess their expectations for their newly-diagnosed child, they simultaneously and immediately have to begin advocating for their child. (Abdul-Abil and Farmer 2006). Understanding the hardship of parents put in this position, Federal law-makers revised the IDEA to strengthen the roles and responsibilities of parents of students with disabilities in the special education process. It was also revised to "ensure that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities ..." (IDEA, 2004).

Although the IDEA has created procedural structures which protect the educational rights of children with disabilities and their parents, the law provides minimal guidance on how parents, as lay persons, should assert those rights (Jung, 2011). For many parents, advocating for their children with disabilities can be intimidating and at times overwhelming. It is not until

parents receive the professional knowledge about special education that they are able to become successful advocates (McGee and Spencer, 2015).

### **Background of the Problem**

One of the case studies conducted by Besnoy, Swoszowski, Newman, Floyd, Jones and Byrne (2015) showed that parents of children with disabilities wanted the very best for their children. Parents wanted to ensure that their socioeconomic status did not limit the resources their children received to support them in their educational placements. Most parents indicated that the elementary school represented the foundation for their child's educational trajectory. A study conducted by Wright and Taylor (2014) revealed that all the parents struggled to develop advocacy strategies to manage their child's disability diagnosis, especially in elementary school. The significance of their involvement was evident according to Epstein (1987), who found that the parents consistently want to be a part of their child's educational development, but those in lower socioeconomic backgrounds have limited knowledge and resources to properly advocate for their children. Therefore, it is in this area that a two-way communication and home-school collaboration can be an adequate tool to support parents, and ensure they are fully engaged.

Despite the assertion that Federal regulations have not provided clear guidelines on how schools can be monitored to ensure that parent advocacy is encouraged, data in the research still points to parental advocacy as a significant need in order to improve the quality of educational programs and resources for children who have disabilities (Hornby, 2015). Research promotes parental engagement as it pertains to the academic success of students with disabilities; however, the data is not pointing to an increase in school collaboration as it relates to parent advocacy. Furthermore, even with the current understanding of the importance of parental involvement,

schools and parents are not maximizing efforts to collaborate and communicate in order to catapult the academic success of students with disabilities.

### **Need for the Study**

The multidisciplinary team (MDT), also referred to as the school based Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, is required to make a conscious effort to include parents when considering different elements in a student's IEP, including educational setting, related services, intervention strategies, IEP goals and educational outcomes, necessary to implement a free appropriate public education for children with disabilities (Fish, 2008).

Larocque, Kleiman and Darling (2011) discovered that parental involvement is the missing link in the academic success of students with disabilities; nevertheless, Besnoy et al. (2015) have determined that an educational split remains within the special educational field on the value of parental advocacy during the special education process. Unfortunately, a disconnect exists between the expectation of the parent and the obligation of the school-based team on the lengths the school-based team should go in an effort to include parents during decision making processes. Researchers such as Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) have reported an overwhelming amount of frustration expressed by parents, due to the school's conscious efforts to communicate with the parent when seeking solutions regarding their student's difficulties in school; but, the same level of urgency is never duplicated when it is time to collaborate with the parent to come up with a solution about the educational programming for their child.

The relationship between the educational achievement of students with disabilities and parental involvement has yet to be systematically collected and analyzed (Trainor, 2010). Yet, there is a vast wealth of research on the efforts of major legislation, such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the IDEA (2004), to increase effective parental involvement.

NCLB and IDEA provide specific guidelines and terminology as they relate to parental involvement of students with disabilities and educational rights. Researchers acknowledge and support the efforts of Federal regulations and mandates to improve parental involvement as it pertains to their child's educational services by placing emphasis on empowerment and involvement in the decision-making process. However, research further indicates these regulations and mandates are not enough.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given the paucity of knowledge and the empirical research on factors influencing parental involvement among students with disabilities within the urban elementary school setting, this study will investigate the effects of parental advocacy, interaction and involvement in the elementary school and the impact parental advocacy has on the success of students who receives special education services. The importance of parental involvement, connections for increasing students with disabilities' academic success in school, and for strengthening parent and school collaboration efforts has been recognized in the research literature (Nihat and Gurbuzturk, 2013). Much of the focus has been on the relationships between status variables such as income, parent education, and school climate. Although these variables have been found to be good predictors of parental advocacy as they relate to students with disabilities they do not provide a clear understanding of the mechanisms that encourage parents to participate in their children's education, specifically in urban elementary schools (Lam and Kwong, 2014).

### **Significance of the Study**

Parental involvement can impact the academic success of students with disabilities. Successful parental advocacy can aid in minimizing educational deficits that are the result of children's behaviors due to the lack of support by both parents and school leaders (McKenna an

Millen, 2013). Given that parental involvement has the power to influence the success of children with disabilities in school and beyond, IDEA outlines parents' right to be involved in the disabilities decision-making process. IDEA states:

Public agency responsibility-general. Each public agency must take steps to ensure that one or both of the parents of a child with a disability are present at each IEP Team meeting or are afforded the opportunity to participate, including notifying parents of the meeting early enough to ensure that they will have an opportunity to attend; and scheduling the meeting at a mutually agreed on time and place. (p.22).

This case study analysis seeks to ascertain the impact that parental advocacy, also known as parental involvement, has on the success of urban elementary school students with disabilities. Specifically, this study seeks to discover whether parental involvement can be identified as an effective tool to help bridge the academic gaps that occurs because of a child's behavioral difficulties. Several studies have documented that parental involvement is a vehicle for positive academic outcomes for children with disabilities (Suits, 2015). However, they have determined that parent involvement requires more than just showing up; it is about making an active contribution by having their voices be heard even if that requires external support (Phillips, 2008).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This comparative case study analysis uses key concepts from two theoretical perspectives as a framework for understanding the impact of parental involvement/advocacy on children with disabilities: Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory and Vygotsky's (1978) social historical theory. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theoretical approach provides a foundation for better understanding how human development and their experience have a direct impact on the

academic development and success of students, specifically accounting for how parental and educational systems contribute to that success. According to Bronfenbrenner, to understand the developing child, one must examine the different systems to which the child is exposed, including the family and educational systems. The developing child is embedded in a series of nested environments that place human development within an ecological context. Individuals are best understood in the context of their fit within the environment. This model is comprised of four structural levels of analysis: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the macrosystem.

The microsystem refers to the immediate environment of an individual. The immediate environment includes influences by family members, peers, teachers, and caregivers. The microsystem also processes the behaviors and character of the individual, although this is not the main focus in this system. The mesosystem manifests itself through the bonding that takes place between the individual and members of the microsystem. The exosystem represents broader external influences that have major and immediate impact on the interaction between the micro- and macrosystems as well as individual development. These influences include schools, the community, places of worship, local government, and local media. The macrosystem emphasizes the inclusiveness of the larger cultural influences on an individual. This includes, but is not limited to, society-at-large, religious institutions, politics, and government (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Each element in the ecological system is interdependent on the other. For example, if it is the belief of the culture that parents should be solely responsible for raising their children, that culture is less likely to provide resources to help parents. This, in turn, affects the structures in which the parents function. The parents' ability or inability to carry out that responsibility toward their child within the context of the child's microsystem is likewise affected. Therefore, this

theory speaks to the fact that parental involvement can be directly correlated with the academic success of students with disabilities in urban schools.

Under this framework, gender of parent and child, and parent values are important factors in understanding the relationships between parental involvement, parenting styles, and children's classroom motivation. Therefore, how families interact is centrally affected by the larger societal trends, which makes using the ecological theory a sound theoretical framework within the present research.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory highlights the many different contexts in which development proceeds. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural historical theory incorporates these different levels into one overarching concept: culture. Vygotsky's sociocultural historical theory focuses on the dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes, and its strong emphasis on development, co-construction, synthesis, knowledge transformation, and semiotic mediation. More importantly, Vygotsky's theory suggests that a child's development depends on the interactions with the people and the tools that the child's culture provides to help form their own view of the world.

In the education arena, scaffolds are created to support children in the learning processes, especially children with disabilities. The scaffolds are mainly instituted by teachers or guardians with the aim of assisting the child in the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZDP). The ZDP introduced by Vygotsky (1978) describes the distance between the actual development level, as determined by independent problem solving, and the level of potential development, as determined through problem solving, under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. In other words, a student can perform a task (i.e., homework, classwork, school-based assessments) under adult guidance or with peer collaboration that could not be achieved alone.

Thus, the ZDP bridges that gap between what is known and what can be known. Understanding this paradigm gives parents a framework to understanding their primary role as advocate.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

The key terms used throughout this case study analysis are defined below:

1. **Academic competence** - the skills, attitudes, and behaviors of a learner that contribute to academic success in the classroom.
2. **Family Context** - the parenting styles family influences that affect children's achievement.
3. **IDEA** - the term used to describe The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is the federal law that outlines rights and regulations for students with disabilities in the United States who require special education. Under the IDEA, all children with disabilities are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the Least-Restrictive Environment (LRE), and some are entitled to Early Intervention (EI) and Extended School Year (ESY).
4. **IEP** - The Individualized Educational Plan is a plan or program developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services.
5. **Parent** - the biological parent, foster parent, or legal guardian with whom the child lives or the person who is legally responsible under state law for the child and who exercises parental authority in the capacity of a guardian.
6. **Parent involvement** - the extent to which parents participate in communicating with the school in decisions about children's education, learning at home, and parenting values (Epstein, 1987).

7. **Parenting style** - a constellation of attitudes (i.e., authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian) that is communicated to the child and creates an emotional climate or context in which concrete parenting practices are expressed, and in which adolescent development takes place (Baumrind, 1978).
8. **Primary school** - education begins at age 4 and continues until age 11.
9. **Related services** - Related services means transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes speech-language pathology and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services and physical therapy.
10. **Special education services** - Special education services are provided in public schools at no cost to the parents and can include special instruction in the classroom, at home, in hospitals or institutions, or in other settings. This definition of special education comes from the IDEA (2004).
11. **Student with disability(ies)** - A child evaluated in accordance with the IDEA as having a disability, and who, as a result of that disability, needs special education and related services. This term is used interchangeably with 'students with special needs.'
12. **Urban setting** - are located in large central cities. But although these communities are often characterized by high rates of poverty, poverty itself is not unique to urban areas and can be found, in particular, in many schools in the nation's rural areas.
13. **Multidisciplinary Team** - is a group of individuals from multiple disciplines who meet to pursue a common goal, such as evaluating a student for placement in special education or creating an individualized education program (IEP) for a student.

## **Limitations**

University of Southern California Research Guides (2016) defined research limitations as “characteristics of the design or methodology impacted or influenced the interpretation of the findings from research” (p. 9). Limitations are the constraints on generalizability, applications to practice, and/or utility of findings that are the limits to a design of study and/or the method used to establish internal and external validity.

The data collection will be obtained through three case studies that examined and reviewed parental involvement in urban elementary schools, K-6 grade. The three case studies selected provide a different perspective to parental involvement based on the participants.

Stanley’s (2015) studies were based on interviews with parents of children with disabilities; these studies serve as the primary resource of this case analysis. Stanley’s (2015) studies provided data only from interviews of African-American mothers of children with disabilities within an urban/rural school setting. The research stated that the researchers recognized the bias that is associated with this study, as they presented only one sample group of a certain socioeconomic status. According to Creswell (2014), it is recommended that, when conducting a qualitative study, the researcher should consider using more than one sampling source. However, the in-person interview data collection methodology provided the researcher and the interviewee the opportunity to connect one-on-one, providing the researcher the opportunity to observe the interviewee as s/he responds, which provides a human connection element that can only be experienced during an interview.

According to McCloskey (2010), participants perceived various degrees of success in advocating for their child with disabilities. Parents’ perceptions of success are relative to the extent of their knowledge of the advocacy process, as well as their knowledge of special

education in general.

In addition to the sample size limits, this research is also limited to case study analyses, which utilizes and analyzes previous research in order to resolve the research question. The research question in this case study analysis is the relevant impact parental involvement has on the academic successes of urban elementary students with disabilities elementary school.

### **Delimitations**

1. Urban elementary school consists of Kindergarten-sixth grade. However, the age range of the sample was restricted to students in the educational system.
2. Students from non-urban, private, and single sex schools will be excluded. This study only will include students from co-educational public elementary schools.

### **Summary**

As discussed above, the research conducted on the issue of parental involvement and public policy support the idea that parental involvement increases the academic success of children with disabilities. This case study will analyze three of the studies conducted on this issue. The next chapter will provide an overview of the published literature regarding the impact that parental involvement and advocacy has on the academic success of elementary school (k-6 grades) students with disabilities needs and the factors that enable or inhibit parents to be involved in their child's education.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the research conducted on the issue of parental involvement and public policy supports the idea that parental involvement increases the academic success of children with disabilities. This chapter provides an overview of the published literature regarding the impact that parental involvement and advocacy has on the academic success of elementary school (k-6 grades) students with disabilities and the factors that enable or inhibit parents to be involved in their child's education. First, the historical context for parental involvement is explored through an overview of the federal laws addressing the education of children with disabilities in the public-school system. Next, the chapter discusses the academic research regarding parental involvement theory. Finally, this chapter reviews literature regarding factors that affect parental involvement in public education. Specifically, this section will look at findings related to (1) state and local school district implementation of federal mandates, (2) parental knowledge of special education, (3) parent/IEP team relationship, and (4) parent/school relationship. As discussed throughout this chapter, while parental involvement and advocacy have come a long way, there is still much work to be done in this area.

#### **Historical Overview of Federal Law**

The evolution of federal legislation regarding the education of students with disabilities provides context for how parent involvement and advocacy developed in the American education system. Prior to the passage of federal legislation, parents of children with disabilities had very few options as a means to educate their children. The options were home schooling, expensive

private schools and residential programs. Good special education programs were rare and difficult to access; thus, special education programs were not available to most children with disabilities. (Wright, 2010). However, over time “parents formed advocacy groups to help bring the educational needs of children with disabilities to the public eye” (SpecialEd News, 2017, p. 26). While these advocacy groups began to change the way children with disabilities were viewed, many, if not most, disabled children, were still largely excluded from public schooling.

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court issued its landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education* declaring segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Emboldened by the Court’s declaration that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal”, parents of children with disabilities began to bring law suits against their children’s school districts arguing that exclusion of children with disabilities from the public-school system amounted to disability discrimination.

The United States Congress took note of these law suits and public outcry, and addressed the issue of educating children with disabilities for the first time in 1966 when it amended the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The Amendment established a grant program to assist states in the “initiation, expansion, and improvement of programs and projects ... for the education of handicapped children” (p. 50) In 1970, that grant program was removed from the ESEA and replaced by the Education of the Handicapped Act (P.L. 91-230) (EHA). Similar to the 1966 amendment to ESEA, the EHA established a grant program aimed at stimulating the states to develop educational programs and resources for individuals with disabilities. While the passage of the amendment and subsequent EHA were important first steps, neither program included any specific mandates on the use of the funds provided by the grants.

Consequently, neither program resulted in a significant improvement to the public education of children with disabilities.

During the early 1970s, two federal court cases were litigated that had a great impact on the education of children with disabilities: *Pennsylvania Assn. for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972). In both cases, the courts made the finding that children with disabilities should have equal access to education as their nondisabled peers. Although there was still no federal mandate that created equal access to public education for students with disabilities, some children began going to public school as a result of these decisions.

Subsequent to the PARC and Mills cases, Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This Act prevented the discrimination of qualified individuals on the basis of their disability. Specifically, Section 504 of the Act requires that students with disabilities have equal access to education. This legislation was passed without a lot of attention and, as a result, many school districts did not realize that the law applied to them. However, around the same time, Congress introduced separate legislation regarding the equal access of children with disabilities to public education. This legislation included many safeguards for qualified children. The legislation eventually led to the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-142) (EAHCA). With the passage of the EAHCA, Congress demonstrated its intention that all children with disabilities would “have a right to education and to establish a process by which state and local educational agencies may be held accountable for providing educational services for all handicapped children”. The EAHCA contained specific mandates for state and local educational agencies and included an accountability system to enforce those

mandates. As a result of this Act, the educational opportunities of children with disabilities in the public-school system increased significantly.

Congress has amended and renamed the EAHCA several times since 1975. With each reauthorization, the accountability system ensuring that educational agencies provide services to children with disabilities has strengthened, including the rights of parents to be involved in their children's special education process. In fact, when reauthorizing the most recent special education legislation, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA), Congress noted,

Almost 30 years of research and experience has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by ... strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home .... (IDEA, 2004, p. 3).

Since the initial law was passed in 1975, it has included specific mandates which describe the role of parents in designing and implementing special educational goals and outlines the collaboration between parents and school professionals (Brandon, 2007). The law has always required that school districts include parents throughout the special education process, including the development of the Individual Education Program (IEP). The 1997 Act included a mandate that schools report progress to parents of children with disabilities as frequently as they report to parents of non-disabled children. The IDEA also requires school districts to provide parents with prior written notice of any action or inaction it proposes to take or not take on behalf of a student with disabilities. As evidenced by these legal requirements, parental involvement in the education of children with disabilities is considered a critical component of the federal law.

## **Parental Involvement Theory**

Parental advocacy and parental involvement, while interrelated, are not necessarily one and the same. Parental advocacy refers to the act of speaking and acting on behalf of a child. Parental involvement refers to the amount of participation the parent has in a child's schooling and life. When discussing parental advocacy in the area of special education, it is important to examine the role of parental involvement. Parents must be involved in order to have the data, experience and knowledge to effectively advocate for their children (Wright, Wright and Connor, 2009, p. 25).

Parental involvement in a student's education is a major component of primary and secondary school reforms (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011) and in early childhood educational programming (Wong, 2015). The term "parent involvement" can include several different forms of parental participation in education within the home and school setting (Epstein 1986). For example, parent involvement can refer to attending school functions, responding to school obligations, such as parent-teacher conferences, monitoring homework, providing encouragement, ensuring that the child has and uses appropriate study time and space, modeling desired educationally based behavior (i.e., reading with children), tutoring one's children and advocating for one's child with disabilities in school.

Epstein (1987) published one of the leading theories on parental involvement. While Epstein's Parental Involvement Theory did not specifically look at or consider children with disabilities, it is a particularly useful framework through which to examine parental involvement and its impact on students, including students with disabilities.

Epstein (2000) identified six actions that have an impact on the academic success of children: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision

making, and (6) collaboration with the community. *Parenting* “refers to a parent’s ability to raise a child in the home and more broadly within a community” (Epstein, 2000, p.1). *Communicating* is a term that indicates the effectiveness of the interactions between school and home as related to the student’s educational programming. *Volunteering* “regards how parents support their children’s education by offering their time-based support to the school” (Epstein, 2000, p.2) Epstein considered *learning at home* “to be about the setting parents provide in the home...it includes monitoring homework, encouragement, and modeling and/or teaching behaviors parents would like to see translated to the school setting” (Epstein, 2000, p. 3). The idea of *decision making* regarded whether and how parents are included in decisions about their children in the school setting; an ideal decision-making process would enable parents to feel as if they are an integral part of educational development. *Collaboration*, finally, “addressed identifying community-based resources and services that help to strengthen the school’s programming, family practices, and student learning and development within the community setting” (Epstein, 2000, p.13).

Epstein’s (1987) Parental Involvement Theory provides a framework that gives parents clearly defined roles in assisting their children in school, as well as activities that should take place at home to support what takes place at school. It also sets out concrete steps for parents to carry out those roles. This theory presents parental involvement as a collaborative function with the school and school staff and is therefore valuable to the development of effective and positive interactions between parents and the school. Using this parental involvement framework, parents would necessarily become advocates for their children.

With regard to the children with disabilities, parental involvement is essential in effective advocacy for special education and related services. Parents must interact with the

school in order to obtain information about their child's current functioning and programming. The more data parents have on their child's levels of academic, social-emotional and adaptive functioning, the more equipped they are to request and advocate for appropriate services (Banerjee, Harrell and Johnson, 2011).

Black & Barker (2011) argue that advocacy requires something more than solely the involvement with the school; it requires intent and responsibility. Black & Barker suggest that parents must make an active decision to develop a "working knowledge of their child's disability as it relates to special education services" (p. 14). Additionally, parents cannot passively leave educational decisions and programming up to schools, they "must assume primary responsibility for their child academic development, success and growth" (p. 14).

Burke (2013) suggests that attendance at IEP meetings is not sufficient for effective advocacy. Parents must be involved with the school in other ways, as well. For example, if a parent regularly attends Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings, the parent would have a better understanding of what is going on at the school and what is required to ensure their child with disabilities has equal access to school programming. By attending other school functions, a parent will have their voice heard in multiple environments, which will result in more opportunities and therefore, more academic success for their child.

Ultimately, researchers who have studied parental involvement and advocacy have come to the conclusion that parents are more effective advocates when they interact with their child's school and interact with school personnel in a collaborative way.

### **Factors Affecting Parental Advocacy**

Clearly, the research and public policy support parental involvement and advocacy as a means of improving the academic success of children with disabilities. However, there are a

number of factors that impact parental advocacy for parents of disabilities children, including state and local school district implementation of federal legal requirements, parental knowledge, the parent/IEP team relationship and the parent/school relationship. This section reviews some of the published material exploring those factors.

### **State and Local School District Implementation**

As required under the IDEA (2004), parents have a say in the educational decisions the school makes about their children. At every point of the special education process, the law grants specific rights and protections to parents, called procedural safeguards. For example, as discussed above, the school must include the parent in all multidisciplinary and IEP meetings, provide prior written notice of all actions it proposes to take or not take on behalf of a student with a disability and regularly report to parents on the progress the student is making on his or her IEP.

Beyond these procedural safeguards, or perhaps as a means to ensure that parents are encouraged to take advantage of those rights, school districts are required to engage in activities that promote parental involvement. As part of the accountability system under the IDEA, states are required to annually report to the U.S. Department of Education on an indicator related to parental involvement (Elbaum, Blatz, and Rodriguez, 2014). As this federal reporting requirement indicates, state and local school districts are held accountable for ensuring that they promote effective parental involvement. Despite this accountability requirement, OSEP reported in 2013 that approximately one third of parents of children receiving special education services continue to report that schools are not facilitating parental involvement in a way that will improve the quality of service for students with disabilities.

Partly as a means to increase scores on this indicator, in recent years, many states have instituted increasingly restrictive requirements on school districts in order to increase active parent participation, including requirements that parents have ample time to review documents related to their child's individualized education program (IEP) prior to meetings or decision making (IDEA, 2004). Although for decades the parents have been invited to participate in their child's IEP meeting, they have not always been given the opportunity to review and understand the documentation prior to that meeting. Parents complain that this limited their ability to meaningfully participate in the meeting itself (Chen and Gregory, 2011). Now, federal regulations have mandated that schools must provide parents copies of all documents, including the draft IEP, any educational testing, and other pertinent information that pertains to the meeting prior to the meeting so that parents can effectively engage during the IEP meeting (IDEA, 2004). Generally, states dictate the timeline.

Although these implementation requirements have helped to increase parental involvement by ensuring that parents have a seat at the table and are provided with the necessary documentation to participate in discussions, as discussed below, these requirements do not, in and of themselves, result in effective parental advocacy.

### **Parental Knowledge**

Findings demonstrate that part of the problem when it comes to lack of parental advocacy is the lack of parental knowledge surrounding special education. This problem is two-fold. First, parents lack the ability to fully engage when they do not understand the implications of their child's disability, what options (legally and educationally) are available to their child, or how to describe what they believe their child needs to be successful. Second, parents become

intimidated by professionals who hold that knowledge and become less likely to speak up to, or against, such professionals.

Parents' lack of knowledge regarding the special education process, policies, and terminology can make it difficult for parents to establish and maintain an affective advocacy roll (Larocque, Kleiman and Darling, 2011). It is hard to advocate effectively when a parent does not fully understand the implications of their child's disability, or the modifications and accommodations available. Similarly, because the terminology and acronyms used in the special education field are often foreign to parents, they are at a loss to fully understand what is being discussed at IEP meetings. Although most everyone agrees that students are best served when all key stakeholders, including parents, are knowledgeable of federal laws regarding students with disabilities and well-versed in state regulation governing parental roles and responsibility, regrettably, parents are rarely ever provided this information in a comprehensive way. While school officials receive significant training to learn and understand the process of educating students with disabilities, the same is not true for the parents of students with disabilities. This often leads to a communication gap between parent and school officials and leaves parents at a disadvantage when it comes to parental advocacy (Burke, 2013).

While parents generally desire a collaborative relationship with their child's school, because they lack knowledge of special education, they often feel intimidated by school professionals who have that knowledge (Larocque, Kleiman and Darling, 2011). Parents with limited knowledge are less likely to speak up in meetings, question what the school representatives and other professionals say, or stand-up for their child when they disagree with school team members. Similarly, school professionals may be less likely to solicit information from such parents or take into account a parent's concerns or suggestions when making decisions

about the child's educational programming. As a result, a parent's limited knowledge of special education leads to a lack of communication between the parent and school regarding what is needed for the child with a disability and their educational process and outcome (Erdener, 2016).

### **Parent/IEP Team Relationship**

Parental dissatisfaction with special education services appears to be a nationwide problem (Kozleski, Engelbrecht, Hess, Swart, Eloff and Oswald, 2008). Parent perceptions of the special education process are often formed by the parent's interactions with the IEP team. When parents have positive perceptions of the process, they are less likely to utilize the IDEA's due process mechanism and are, therefore, more likely to positively impact their child's education through parental advocacy. Clearly, the relationship between the parent and the IEP team is another factor that impacts parental advocacy (Ruffin-Adams and Wilson 2012).

Under the IDEA (2004), when parents disagree with a decision made by a school district regarding the child's educational program, the parent may file a lawsuit (called a due process complaint) before an administrative law judge. Typically, due process complaints are filed when parents are left out of the decision making and, therefore, have a negative relationship with the rest of the IEP team (Mueller and Piantoni, 2013). As a result, rather than partnering to ensure the greatest outcome for the child, the IEP team and parent are at odds with each other and the educational decision making is left up to the administrative law judge.

Studies have found that by treating parents as partners during IEP meetings and in other interactions, educators create fewer adversarial and intimidating experiences for parents (Fish, 2008). As a result, parents are more likely to participate in their child's program development and generally have a better perception of the special education process.

Fish (2006) conducted a study regarding the parent perceptions of the special education process. The participants included 51 parents, the majority of whom were white and from middle to upper middle-class socioeconomic families. The students were being serviced primarily in resource classes or in self-contained classroom settings. The areas of concern studied included: (a) IEP meeting experiences, (b) Parents' knowledge of the IEP process and special education law, and (c) IEP meeting outcomes and relationship between staff and parents. The study demonstrated that, when educators forged a positive relationship with parents during the IEP process, parents were more likely to participate and therefore have higher levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the process.

In a separate study, Trainor (2010) researched two school districts that experienced system-wide changes to address the issue of parental dissatisfaction in the school setting. One of the districts was located in an urban area and served 403 special education students. Researchers found 3 common factors impacting parent satisfaction: (1) availability of leadership knowledgeable about the special education progress, (2) administrations that adhered to special education laws and regulations, and (3) whether or not parents were viewed by the school-based IEP team members as an important part of the multidisciplinary team. These findings were similar to those found in the majority of studies on parental dissatisfaction and parental advocacy for parents in the urban school setting (Yell, Katsiyannis, Ennis & Losinski, 2013).

When contrasted with the results from Fish's (2006) study, the data show that Caucasian parents were more likely to be satisfied with the special education process than African American parents. Potential reasons for this outcome are explored more fully in the next section, but regardless, this observation is significant for parental advocacy. As noted above, when the parent/IEP team relationship is negative, parents are less likely to participate in the IEP process.

It appeared that African American parents with children in the urban setting felt slighted regarding their ability to actively advocate for their child with a disability. Thus, these studies demonstrate that lower-income, African American students are negatively impacted by a lack of parental advocacy at a larger rate than Caucasian, higher income peers – essentially adding to an already present achievement gap. To remedy these issues, the studies suggested that the school districts must consider the following: employee leadership that has a working knowledge of the special education process, facilitate healthy and cohesive partnerships (school and home), updated educational practices and resources, and strengthened teacher, parental and community supports.

### **Parent/School Relationship**

A study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey for the 2012 National Household Education Surveys Program demonstrated that attending IEP meetings or events related to the special education process is the leading form of parent participation in schools, followed by school fundraising activities. Clearly, while the parent's relationship with the IEP team often shapes the parent's perceptions about the special education process, the parent's relationship with the school as a whole is also important. A parent that feels comfortable and welcomed at the child's school is much more likely to be involved with school. When a parent feels respected and becomes involved, that parent will be in a much better position to advocate for their children.

Unfortunately, research demonstrates that school personnel often lack an awareness of the issues facing their families. Furthermore, school personnel often view too little or too much involvement by parents negatively. As a result, the parent/school relationship is often fraught

with tensions inhibiting parental involvement and advocacy. This is particularly evident in urban environments where the majority of students come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The NCES surveyed teachers and parents in 2014 on perceptions of the impact of parental involvement on students with disabilities. Two-thirds of surveyed teachers believed that students with disabilities would perform better in school if the parents were more involved in the child's education, and 72 percent of surveyed parents of children with disabilities indicated that children of uninvolved parents sometimes "fall through the cracks" in schools (Haren and Fiedler, 2008). Clearly, there is agreement among parents and educators that getting parents involved in the education of their children with disabilities is important to the academic success of those children. However, the fact remains that parental involvement continues to be a nationwide problem, particularly in urban areas.

Research on the profile and academic performance of students with disabilities found that students with disabilities were likely to come from families of low socioeconomic status and families whose parents were not well educated (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008; Marples, 2014) noted that students with disabilities from families of a higher socioeconomic status attain higher achievements than of students from lower socioeconomic status. The disparity between students with disabilities in the urban school setting and students from higher socioeconomic areas has a ripple effect on African American children with disabilities. Essentially, Brandon and Brown (2007) found that, because African American parents with lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to advocate for their children with disabilities, those children were not as successful, which resulted in those children, when they became parents, not being parental advocates for their children. Essentially, the results of parent noninvolvement can affect urban families for generations (Brandon and Brown, 2007).

One of the contributing factors to this problem may be a lack of cultural awareness on the part of school personnel. The community expects schools to accommodate and understand their families' values and cultural beliefs (Prins and Toso, 2008); however, this is not always the case. In one study which looked at African American parents of children with disabilities, the parents expressed frustration with the lack of experience the school system's personnel seemed to have regarding the social, cultural, and economic differences between themselves and the urban school families they served (Colombo, 2006). When teachers do not understand ethnic or socioeconomic differences, a teacher may judge a parent unfavorably, leading to a negative interaction between the parent and that teacher (Brandon and Brown, 2007). This interaction may color the parent's entire perception of the school and leave the parent feeling very disconnected from their child's education. The result is that the parent is less likely to interact with the school in the future and less likely to advocate in the special education process (Carr, 2011).

Parent involvement initiatives are methods school districts and schools employ to get parents more involved in school and, therefore, in the education of their children with disabilities where parental involvement initiatives took cultural belief and values into consideration, the initiatives were much more successful (Aslan, 2016).

Another issue inhibiting parental involvement is the school environment in which too little or too much parental involvement is viewed negatively. Generally, parents do not want to be disengaged from their child's education, but other factors can limit the extent of parent involvement. There are a number of reasons why parents may refrain from involvement with the school. Literature demonstrates that, particularly in urban areas where families were from a lower socioeconomic background, a number of barriers can inhibit parental involvement, including an experience of fear and lack of support from school officials and staff, including

exclusionary practices at school (Anderson, Minke and Author, 2007), a lack of cultural and social capital (Colombo, 2006), work, child care responsibilities, and parents' educational limitations (Fishman and Nickerson, (2015). Unfortunately, educators commonly interpret parents' limited involvement at school as a lack of ability, interest, or concern for their child's educational wellbeing.

Additionally, as noted earlier in this chapter, parents of the students with disabilities often lack knowledge regarding special education or the special education process. Such parents may disagree with a recommendation, but, because of lack of knowledge, they are unaware that they are able to ask questions, give push back or offer suggested solutions or alternative methods.

On the other side, studies demonstrate that in some school environments, too much involvement or advocacy is viewed negatively. In those cases, educators tend to believe that the parent lacks the expertise to make suggestions, or decisions regarding educational services, and, therefore, parents were viewed as a nuisance when they vocalized their dissatisfaction with how their children with disabilities were educated, treated and supported (Hess, Molina and Kozleski, 2006). Studies also demonstrate that educators often accuse parents of asking or advocating for more than what the educators or school district believe is required for the student to succeed (Allred, 2015). Such circumstances create adversarial rather than collaborative relationships. They also result in the parent becoming uncomfortable offering their input or disagreeing with educators and school leaders' educational recommendations, or the relationship between the school and parent completely breaks down, leading to a due process complaint.

Essentially, as Flores de Apodaca, Gentling, Steinhaus and Rosenberg (2015) point out, there is a discrepancy in some school environments, in that educators and school leaders want

involved parents – but, particularly when it comes to making educational and service decisions of children with disabilities, they do not want the parents involved too much.

Regardless of culture, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, parents of children with disabilities commonly report a perceived lack of respect by educators and other school staff members. Mueller and Piantoni (2013) conducted a survey of the parents of students with disabilities. The survey revealed that 64 percent of the parents reported that they did not feel respected by teachers and other school staff members, and that teachers and other school staff did not consider parents a valuable asset to the special-education team. Further, the parents reported that 26 out of 42 teachers and staff often blamed the parents for their child’s academic problems. Not only did this negatively impact the parent/school relationship, it also had negative consequences for the children, resulting in loss of self-esteem.

In the same study (Mueller and Piantoni, 2013), parents indicated that teachers did not see a difference between “parent involvement” and “controversy”. Often when parents actively participated in discussions or tried to advocate for their child with disabilities, the teachers viewed that involvement as adversarial. The parents reported that this led to their children being unfairly treated or labeled. Over time, these experiences led the parents to believe that school personnel had no intentions of creating a collaborative partnership with the parent, or that school personnel even shared the parents’ goal of seeing their child succeed academically.

While parental involvement and advocacy are seen by all stakeholders as important tools in the academic success of children with disabilities, there appears to be a disconnect between theory and practice. Although schools are required by law to include parents in the special education process, often other factors prevent the parents from becoming fully engaged. This is particularly apparent in urban school settings, where parental noninvolvement has impacted the

academic development of students with disabilities (Hornby and Lafaele, 2011). In the urban school setting, parents' lack of knowledge about special education and the special education process, coupled with education and time limitations, cultural differences and other barriers lead to a lack of positive communications with the school. These circumstances tend to foster a limited ability of parents to advocate for their children within the school setting (Elbaum, 2014).

To remedy these issues, research demonstrates that schools need to increase awareness of parent perspectives and expectations. Additionally, schools should adopt policies that allow for coordination of resources to address the issues that may prevent their parents from becoming more involved, for example, educating parents on the process, or holding meetings and events at different times of day. Implementation of parental involvement initiatives that take into account the unique circumstances of families in the school community would make the school environment more welcoming for parents. And, in turn, parents would be more likely to be involved in their child's education, thus enhancing the academic success of their children with disabilities (Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez, 2015).

## **Summary**

As discussed above, the literature and research in the area of parental involvement and advocacy demonstrate a connection between parental advocacy and the academic success of students with disabilities. However, despite this connection, obtaining meaningful parental involvement and advocacy remains a nationwide problem, particularly among low income families and families residing in urban areas. The next chapter will review and analyze three case studies with the purpose of examining the impact that parental advocacy/involvement has on the success of urban and rural areas elementary school students with disabilities. Specifically, the

chapter will look at the factors that impede or foster parental advocacy for parents of children with disabilities.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will review and analyze three case studies with the purpose of examining the impact that parental advocacy/involvement has on the success of urban and rural elementary school students with disabilities, kindergarten through sixth grade. This review and analysis will include identifying methodologies employed in the studies, populations studied, research questions posed by the studies' authors, and findings of the researchers. More specifically, the chapter will look at the factors that impede or foster parental advocacy for parents of children with disabilities. Analyzing these three studies will provide insight on the barriers that parents encounter when becoming involved academically and advocating for their children with disabilities in the public-school system. This review will discuss factors that increase parental involvement and advocacy, thereby benefiting the academic outcome of the children with disabilities

Parents and school officials have found parental involvement is a critical component in the academic well-being and success of children with disabilities. When parents are heavily involved in the special education process, including determining special education hours and environment and related services, students achieve greater academic success. Further, when parents and school district staff are able to work together amicably, generally, the outcome for the student is even greater. Researchers Epstein (1987), Joseph (2008), Wright and Taylor (2014) and Stanley (2015) have analyzed the impact that parental involvement has on the success of students with disabilities, specifically parental advocacy. The researchers have determined that parental involvement and advocacy have a positive impact on the development and academic

success of children with disabilities. However, there are a number of factors that can affect the degree of parental involvement and advocacy. Specifically, these factors include: (1) parents' knowledge of special education, (2) socioeconomic status, and (3) school environment.

All three case studies explore certain factors that impact parents' effectiveness in advocating for their children with disabilities (Creswell 2008).

Case study one, "Urban Parents Advocating for their Child with Special Needs" (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008) examines the barriers often present for families who live in urban settings. Specifically, the study looks at socioeconomic status and the family's level of engagement with the school, and its relationship to the parents' knowledge of the special education process. The researchers who conducted this study examined the specific barriers to advocacy and parental involvement for parents in urban areas. Barriers included negative relationship with the school and/or school staff, financial difficulties resulting from raising children with disabilities, mental and physical health problems, coping mechanisms and community and school support for children with disabilities

Case study two, "Advocacy by Parents of Young Children with Special Needs: Activities, Processes, and Perceived Effectiveness" (Wright and Taylor, 2014) is unique in that the study looked at parental advocacy from the parent-participants' perspective. Specifically, the researches gathered data on how the parents viewed their advocacy experiences and effectiveness. The researchers who conducted this study focused on young children (birth through 6 years old). As such, this case study highlights the importance of early intervention for children with disabilities and the important role that parents play in ensuring students, at a very young age, receive the appropriate resources.

Case study three, “Advocacy efforts of African-American Mothers of Children with Special needs” (Lynn and Stanley, 2015) looked at the involvement of African American, low income mothers of children with disabilities More specifically, the study considered how the mothers’ profile effected the way the school engaged with the parents.

This chapter presents an in-depth description of each case, including the methodology used for each study and the significance of the results. These case studies will be used to provide recommendations to enhance the involvement of parents of children with disabilities in the academic lives of their children. The goal is to create a framework that schools can use to encourage parental involvement and collaboration to foster greater academic success for children with disabilities.

### **Case Study 1**

#### **“Urban Parents Advocating for their Child with Special Needs”**

**(Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008)**

#### **Research Design**

This study (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008) was conducted by two researchers who used a qualitative research method. The method included semi-structured interviews of eight families. However, three of the eight families were specifically highlighted in the case. The interviews were recorded by the researchers. The researchers did not indicate the specific questions asked during the interviews.

#### **Study Participants**

All eight families participating in the study had at least one child with a disability attending public elementary school in an urban area. All families were familiar with the special education process, including the referral process, educational testing, and the determination of

appropriate special education and related services. All participating families were African American and qualified as low income (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008).

### **Data Collection**

Prior to the interviews, the researchers conducted observations over an eight-month period at the children's school of attendance. They observed the school setting, in general, as well as how the school staff interacted with the children with disabilities and their families. In addition, the researchers conducted interviews with the children's teachers, school administrators and other school staff. Once the school observations concluded, the researchers began recruiting families to participate in the study. The researchers sent prospective parents (identified by the school as meeting the researcher's requirements) a letter inviting them to participate in the interviews. Once parents responded and agreed to participate, the researchers contacted the parents by phone to explain the purpose of the study. All interviews with the parents were conducted via phone. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted 45 minutes to one hour. Although eight families participated in the study, the majority were not able to participate fully due to time conflicts. Accordingly, the researchers focused on the three families that were able to participate fully and, therefore, provided the most data. The following information was collected from each parent-participant: gender of the interviewee, name, income, employment status, marital status, and child's special education identification (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008).

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected from the interviews provided information on African American, low income parents' involvement with the school and in the special education process, as well as the extent to which the parents were able to, or did, advocate for their child with disabilities. The

data collected indicated common concerns and barriers that such families' experience while trying to advocate for their children. Data analysis was ongoing during the observation and interview process. To ensure that biases were not present, the researchers compared interview transcripts to find common themes. Transcripts were read line-by-line by the researcher who did not perform the interview to confirm a consistent understanding. The researchers conducted two reviews of the interview transcripts to substantiate the common themes (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008).

The researchers did not provide information regarding the coding or collection of the data beyond what is previously stated.

### **Findings' Significance**

This study examined the experience of African American, low income parents in advocating for their children with special needs in a public, urban elementary school. (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008). This study not only highlighted the importance of, and need for, greater levels of parental advocacy among this population, but also the importance of allocating resources aimed at enabling and encouraging parental advocacy. This study was significant in that it demonstrated that parents among this population wanted to become active and effective advocates for their children, but certain barriers prevented them from doing so. Some of the barriers identified included a feeling of discomfort with school personnel – the parents reported feeling that the school did not want to fully engage them or listen to what they had to say. Additional barriers included level of education obtained and time conflicts. Ultimately, parents reported a feeling of disconnect from their children's school. This study will assist in developing an understanding of the factors related to effective parental advocacy.

## **Findings**

The finding of this study revealed that parents of children with disabilities have a desire to support their children and to be involved in the academic decision-making process. The study further emphasizes the important role of school officials in ensuring that families are supported in their endeavors to advocate for their children with disabilities. Specifically, the study emphasizes that school officials should take the parents seriously despite their socioeconomic status (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008).

### **Case Study 2**

#### **“Advocacy by Parents of Young Children with Special Needs”**

**(Wright and Taylor, 2014)**

## **Research Design**

The researchers (Wright and Taylor, 2014) used a quantitative method to examine the advocacy of parents of young children with disabilities. The study focused on parents’ perceived effectiveness of their parental advocacy across different settings. The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the settings in which parents advocate for their young children?
2. What are their levels of perceived effectiveness in different settings?
3. Are there basic processes related to advocacy across different settings and if so what are these processes?

## **Study Participants**

The study included data from 38 states and six countries. Over 400 parents were surveyed via Survey monkey.com. Participants were solicited via Facebook groups set-up for the parents of children with disabilities. Parents within the Facebook groups were encouraged to share the

link with other parents. All parent-participants had children with disabilities between the ages of birth through 18 years. However, the researchers reported on a subset of 76 parents who had children between the ages of birth through six years. Participants' socioeconomic status, ethnicity, age and gender were varied (Wright and Taylor, 2014).

Based on the survey responses, 79 percent of the participants were African-American, 15 percent were Latino American and less than one percent were Asian American or multiethnic. Five percent of participants declined to state their race or ethnicity. Ninety-five percent of participants were female and 91 percent were married or in a domestic relationship. Thirty-two percent of participants reported an income of \$50,000 to \$74,900, 27 percent reported an income of less than \$50,000, and more than 40 percent had an income greater than \$74,999. The data indicated that the majority of participants were employed full-time (Wright and Taylor, 2014).

### **Data Collection**

This quantitative study was conducted through an online survey using the surveymonkey.com platform. An invitation for the survey was sent to various Facebook groups consisting of parents of children with disabilities. Once parents confirmed their participation, the researchers sent a link to the survey. The survey consisted of 18 questions regarding parental involvement and advocacy from the perspective of the parent. The survey was intended to take no more than 20 minutes to complete. The researchers decided to use a brief survey to sustain the attention of the parents and to ensure the parents answered the questions accurately (Wright and Taylor, 2014).

The questions focused specifically on the setting in which parents advocated for their children, the types of issues the parents advocated for, and asked the parents to rate their effectiveness in advocating in different settings. The survey consisted primarily of close-ended

questions. For example, one of the questions was “In which settings have you advocated for your child?” (Wright and Taylor, 2014, p. 132). The survey then provided specific answers from which the participant could choose. The parents were provided with a definition of ‘effective parental advocacy’ to ensure a consistent understanding of the terminology.

Once all surveys were completed, the results were reviewed. The researchers compared answers from the survey of the subset of 76 parents. In reporting on the data, the researchers used direct quotations from the surveys. Minor edits to the quotations were made for clarification or to correct typographical errors. However, the content was not changed. The following categories were created to organize the results: “setting, schools, medical rehabilitative/social services, community, social media, political and other settings” (Wright and Taylor, 2014).

The researchers found a commonality among parents regarding what the parents believed they needed to effectively advocate in a way that resulted in academic success for their child. Parent’s shared the following during their interview “I have learned to not take NO for an answer”, “I feel exhausted and upset that sometimes I have to work very hard and jump through hoops to get my daughter what she needs” (Wright and Taylor, 2014, p. 40). A common difficulty shared by many of the parents was that, despite not intending to do so, when advocating for their child, parents found themselves in an adversarial position that pitted them against the school.

### **Data Analysis**

First the researchers analyzed the data to determine if the questioned used in the survey were sufficient to produce accurate results. To ensure the validity, reliability and accuracy of interpretation, the researchers analyzed the data provided through the survey by using a qualitative framework. The researchers developed a team of coding personnel to assist with a

peer debriefing which took place between author and co-authors. During the coding analysis, the researchers separately developed categories to analyze their data. The researchers then shared their findings collectively, determining common categorical themes. Information related to coding was shared amongst the research team through phone conferences and electronic mail (Weiss, Lopez and Rosenberg, 2011). After the survey results were in, the researchers held a discussion group during which the data were further broken down by race. Many of the participants felt that they did not receive the same quality of services or level of attention as Caucasian parents (Wright and Taylor, 2014).

### **Findings' Significance**

This study examined the experiences of parents of young children with disabilities in advocating for their children across various settings including school, medical, social and political settings. Specifically, the study considered the perceived effectiveness by the parents of their advocacy. This case study is significant in that it examined parental advocacy across numerous settings and provided data to support how perceptions of effective parental advocacy are related to parental knowledge of special education and existence of appropriate parental supports. Furthermore, the research revealed that effective parental advocacy has a direct impact on services that children receive (Wright and Taylor, 2014).

Another significant aspect of this study is the finding that parental advocacy has small scale and large-scale impacts. On a smaller scale, parental advocacy results in appropriate services and educational equality being delivered to a specific child. On a larger scale, parental advocacy can impact legislation and funding, and improve public awareness of the educational issues that children with disabilities face. This study will further assist research in supporting parental advocacy as it relates to children with disabilities.

### **Case Study 3**

#### **“Advocacy Efforts of African American Mothers of Children with Special Needs”**

**(Lynn and Stanley, 2015)**

#### **Research Design**

The researchers (Lynn and Stanley, 2015) conducted a qualitative study to determine the factors that lead low-income, African American mothers to effectively advocate for their children with disabilities. The researchers provided two sample questions: (1) “Describe your child who receives special education services?” and (2) “How does their disabilities affect their education?” (Lynn and Stanley, 2015, p.32).

#### **Study Participants**

The participants consisted of a sample of 12 low-income, African American mothers of children with varied disabilities, ages 7-21 years. The participants resided in rural areas. The participants’ education level, age, marital and employment status varied. The participants’ children were all enrolled in special education programs, including self-contained classrooms, inclusion inside the general education classroom, and services outside the general education classroom (Lynn and Stanley, 2015).

#### **Data Collection**

The researcher created a semi-structured interview protocol. The researcher conducted two interviews with each participant. The first interview explored the participant’s experience with special education, including the participant’s working knowledge of special education, related services, special education programming, and disability law and policy. The researcher also surveyed their skill base as it related to navigating the special education process. The second

interview focused on the mother's level of participation in their child's school-based activities, including social groups, formal and informal networking, and participation in academic and special education meetings. The researchers obtained consent from each of the participants prior to the interviews. The interviews were recorded (Lynn and Stanley, 2015).

The first round of interviews included 15 questions. The researcher used open-ended questions to encourage unrestricted responses (Creswell, 2008). The second round of interviews included seven open-ended questions. While conducting the interviews, the researchers used sub-questions when necessary for clarity or to obtain additional information (Creswell, 2008). The interviews lasted for no more than one hour and 50 minutes. The researcher did not indicate if a pilot was conducted to look at the validity of the study questions (Lynn and Stanley, 2015).

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers used Moustakas's (1994) method, which is an analysis method using inferential statistics, to analyze the data. The method was used to assist with understanding the mothers' experiences. Following Moustakas's (1994) method, the researchers horizontalized the data to compare the effects of different conditions (tangible reinforcements, social reinforcements, and control group) and develop common themes. The researcher then categorized all the information into themes. Once themes were created, the researchers removed repetitive/redundant statements found throughout the interviews. This was done to identify what common themes mothers in rural areas experienced in their efforts to advocate for their children. Finally, the researchers synthesized the text by structuring its descriptive model to address the advocacy experience of the mothers interviewed during the study. They found significant similarities among the mothers' experiences (Lynn and Stanley, 2015).

## **Findings' Significance**

The researchers specifically reviewed the different ways parents advocate (for example, participation in meetings, requesting specific services, etc.). The study examined several factors of parental advocacy, including parent communication with the school, the school's communication with the parent, and the school environment. The participants overwhelmingly reported that lack of effective communication was a major factor inhibiting effective advocacy. The researcher also examined the barriers that prevented the mothers from becoming involved in their children's academics. The data demonstrated that low-income parents experience a number of barriers that impede their ability to effectively advocate for their children, including lack of knowledge, lack of education level, lack of employment, disability, lack of transportation, and lack of other resources (for example, no access to computers and/or internet). Particularly, for this group of parents, because they were in a rural area, these barriers seemed to heighten the parents' disconnect from the school. Unlike parents in urban areas, the school building itself was often too far to walk to, and other resources, like libraries or computers, were harder to access. The parents expressed that they felt that the school personnel understood the barriers to involvement that the parents faced, but failed to do anything to help them overcome the barriers, and in fact held it against them (Lynn and Stanley, 2015).

The researcher discussed the necessity of studies such as this one in achieving educational equality for all students with disabilities, regardless of socioeconomic status or other factors (Copper, 2009). The information in this study provides recommendations for how to increase parental involvement and advocacy. The recommendations include: (1) to understand the needs of the parents; (2) the need for the parents to be heard; (3) parents building a

relationship between home and school; and (4) providing parents with educational resources regarding special education. These results will help advance public policy and awareness for the education of children with disabilities (Lynn and Stanley, 2015).

## **Summary**

Research has demonstrated the undeniable link between parental advocacy and the academic success of children with disabilities. The studies (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans, 2008; authors, Wright and Taylor, 2014; and Lynn and Stanley, 2015) discussed in this paper are critical because they provide additional information on the necessity of parental involvement/advocacy at a young age, the barriers that keep parents from becoming involved and advocating for their children, and the supports that facilitate effective parental involvement. Each of the three studies discussed above plays an important role in determining what actions or inactions can lead to, or prevent, effective parental involvement. Furthermore, each study provided a different perspective on parental advocacy issues for African American parents in both urban and rural areas. These studies provide a framework by which practitioners can identify the supports and resources necessary to encourage parents to become involved in the academic lives of their children with disabilities.

The researchers (Stanley, 2015; Wright and Taylor, 2014; Munn-Joseph and Gavins-Evans, 2008) who conducted each of the three studies provided a precise description of each study, including the research design, a description of the participants, how data were collected and analyzed, and the results. This chapter reviewed each of these elements for all studies. This information is helpful so that others can build upon these studies to further public knowledge and policy making regarding parental advocacy for children with disabilities.

Parents whose children receive special education service are looking for adequate resources and supports to over-come, time, childcare and other barriers, while creating a collaborative school environment that encourages parent involvement results in increased parental advocacy and better academic outcomes for children with disabilities Furthermore, the studies indicated that the earlier that parents become involved in a child with disabilities academic services, the more successful the child will be.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS**

#### **Introduction of Comparative Analysis**

The purpose of this comparative case study analysis was to analyze how each of the three case studies reviewed defines and presents the impact that parental involvement and advocacy have on the academic success of k-6<sup>th</sup> grade level children from low socioeconomic status families. Additionally, although not all the studies focused on African American families, throughout the studies, several African American parents of children with disabilities were interviewed about their perceived parental involvement and participation in the IEP process at their children's' schools. This analysis focuses primarily on African American families with low socioeconomic status.

Parental involvement and advocacy in special education is federally mandated and is a critical part of the IDEA which emphasizes the role of parents in designing and implementing the special educational goals for their children in collaboration with school professionals (Brandon et al., 2010; Zions et al., 2003). Each of the three studies selected for review looked at parental involvement in the process outlined by the IDEA from a unique standpoint. However, all three studies stressed that parental involvement and advocacy improves the quality of education and success of the children with disabilities. This chapter provides a thorough comparative analysis identifying common themes, outcomes, and findings of the three cases.

The first study reviewed was conducted by Munn-Joseph and Gavin -Evans (2008) titled, "Urban Parents Advocating for Their Children With Special Needs". The study highlighted the various challenges urban parents face when trying to advocate for the educational wellbeing of their child with a disability within the school. Specifically, it uncovered the challenges that

parents in the urban setting face seeking information about the special education process and the specific services their child was receiving. Although the researchers found that the parents who participated in the study were interested in achieving the best education possible for their child, they were often viewed by school personnel as “Hard to reach” (p. 378), and therefore unlikely to get involved in their child’s education affairs.

While Munn-Joseph and Gavin -Evans (2008) focused their study on urban families in the Midwest with elementary age children, the authors of the second study, Wright and Taylor (2014) focused on parents of younger children, age birth to 6. The study titled, “Advocacy by Parents of Young Children with Special Needs” revealed the importance of parental advocacy in obtaining early intervention services and resources to ensure the child was prepared adequately for further education (p. 180). This study is unique compared to the other two studies reviewed in that the parents who participated were aware that early intervention was critical to the development of their child with special needs and appeared more aware of the availability of appropriate resources as opposed to the parents who participated in the other two studies. In this study, the researchers examined the impact of parental advocacy in various settings, including in school, in social settings and in the community.

In the third and final study reviewed, “Advocacy Efforts of African American Mothers of Children with Special Needs”, the authors, Lynn and Stanley (2015), specifically focused on the parental advocacy efforts of African American mothers. This study began by investigating how African American mothers advocate for their child with a disability. The researchers found that the mothers who participated in the study felt a great deal of frustration with the special education process and interactions with school personnel. The mothers reported experiencing a lot of “push back” from the school when trying to advocate for their children. The study looked

at how and to what degree the mothers continued to advocate for their children despite this frustration.

This chapter looked at several key elements of each study, including (1) the research study design, (2) study participants, (3) data collection, and (4) findings. For each of the key elements, a general summary of the aspects of each study is discussed and a cross analysis conducted, identifying common/non-common themes and highlighting different strengths and weaknesses.

### **Research Study Design**

All three cases studies examined the impact that parental involvement and advocacy has on the academic success of the students with a disability; however, the studies differed in design. Both the Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) and the Lynn and Stanley (2015) studies were conducted using a qualitative research method – focusing the majority of data collection on interviews with participants. The researchers, Wright and Taylor (2014) used a quantitative method to gather data, specifically relying on an online survey, using the surveymonkey.com platform. This section reviews how each study was designed, summarizing the methods and instruments used for data collection, and compares and contrasts the research methods to identify strengths, weaknesses and common themes.

#### **Case Study One**

Urban Parents Advocating for their Child with Special Needs. Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) applied a qualitative, longitudinal research method. The researchers structured their data collection using semi-structured interviews with parents and observations. First, the researchers conducted observations of selected students in their urban school setting. The researchers wanted to observe the interaction of staff with the students and their families. Once

the observation phase was completed, the researchers conducted the interviews using semi-structured interview protocols with a non-experimental design. The researchers were interested in learning about the parents' opportunities for advocacy and the parents' perceptions of those opportunities and feelings of success.

The study included 8 families. The 8 families were contacted after they filled out an interest form regarding their willingness to participate in an interview to share their experience regarding their parental advocacy efforts. Two interviews were conducted with the parents in each family. The interviews were recorded and conducted by both the authors via phone. The researchers did not provide information regarding the coding or collection of the data beyond what was previously stated. Data analysis was ongoing during the observation and interview process. Data collection lasted for about 8 months.

### **Case Study Two**

Advocacy by Parents of Young Children with Special Needs. Wright and Taylor (2014) conducted a quantitative, descriptive, non-experimental, longitudinal, single-subject case study. All data collection was conducted through an online study. Parents of children with a disability from 38 states participated in the survey. The goal of the survey was to authenticate parents' perceived effectiveness of their parental advocacy across different settings. The researchers compared data both before and after all surveys were completed. The researchers reviewed the surveys with the purpose of finding common themes. Next, the researchers provided the results of the study to the parent-participants. Finally, the data were reviewed to correct typographical errors, but content was not altered.

### **Case Study Three**

Advocacy Efforts of African American Mothers of Children with Special Needs. Lynn and Stanley (2015) conducted a qualitative, non-experimental study. Data collection was structured around interviews. The researchers then used the Moustaka's (1994) method, an analysis method using inferential statistics, to analyze the data. Interviews were conducted with 12 participants – all African American mothers of children with a disability. The mothers' level of experience with special education, marital status, socio-economic and educational background varied. Each participant was interviewed twice. The interviews were aimed at understanding the participant's experience with special education and knowledge of special education, related services, special education programming, and disability law and policy, as well as the mother's perceived effectiveness during advocacy. The extent of time during which the study was performed was not indicated during the study.

### **Cross-Analysis of Study Design**

Two of the studies used a qualitative research method; the third study used a quantitative research method. Creswell (2014) defines quantitative studies as studies that have various variables that can be measured. These variables are usually measured through data collection instruments. Creswell (2014) outlined the qualitative studies as an “approach for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p.4). Either method used brings together a “worldview or assumptions about research, a specific design, and research method” (p. 21). Typically, the research problem or phenomenon being studied influences the type of study. In comparing the three selected studies, it is evident that although a study can be qualitative or quantitative, many approaches can be utilized and there can be strengths and weaknesses in either approach or design.

The qualitative study conducted by Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) took place over an 8-month period and was non-experimental in design. The study conducted by Wright and Taylor (2014) was also a non-experimental and a longitudinal study. The strength in these study designs was the detail of the information provided and obtained during the interviews. During these interviews, the researchers openly worked with the participants to build a cohesive working relationship. The study conducted by Lynn and Stanley (2015) was the only qualitative study. The duration of the study is not indicated; the study only describes that participants were contacted and the study was conducted. The researchers in this study also interacted with the participants via phone for follow-up interviews.

The study design employed by Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) yielded strong results, not only through the detailed interviews with the parents, but also in the observations of the interactions between the school staff, and students and the parents. The researchers used the two different data collection approaches to triangulate the data. This process was conducted by using multiple data sources in order to add to the effectiveness of a study (Creswell, 2014).

The strength of the study conducted by Wright and Taylor (2014) was that it ensured the reliability and validity of the analysis by assessing inter-rater reliability of the team's coding work and peer debriefing. Creswell (2014) observed that using additional staff to check the survey helped to ensure the validity of the findings by asking all members to review the survey for accuracy.

All three case studies had one or the other weakness. The weakness in the study design of Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) and Lynn and Stanley (2015) was that these studies depended mostly on interviews as a key foundation of their data. The weakness shared by all three studies was that they were non-experimental in design. Accordingly, the researchers could

not form a conclusion regarding how parental involvement and advocacy impact the parent-school relationship. Additionally, internal validity would also be debatable due to the types of instruments used to conduct all of the studies.

The two studies that were qualitative in nature can also be perceived as a weakness as the findings cannot be universally compared to other studies. Consistency in qualitative studies is also questionable in that the researchers are unable to ensure participants' state of mind while partaking in the survey, or how they approached or understood various questions (Munn-Joseph and Gavin- Evan, 2008; Wright and Taylor, 2014; Lynn and Stanley, 2015). Finally, since all three studies were non-experimental in design, it is unclear what variables led to the results. For example, it is difficult for the researchers to determine with certainty that their findings were a result of the school-based team's lack of parental support when trying to advocate. In order to overcome this weakness, it may be advisable to collect data through multiple instruments.

### **Common Theme in Study Design**

A common theme in the research design was that all the three studies Munn- Joseph and Gavin-Evans (2008) found that parents considered it necessary to advocate for their child but found that schools made it difficult by not providing a platform to do it effectively. Most parents understood the importance of their advocacy and how it directly impacted their children with a disability academic success. Wright and Taylor (2014) examined how parental advocacy was perceived in various settings. Finally, Lynn and Stanley's (2015) study specifically viewed the types of advocacy African American mothers have to employ their involvement due to their educational and financial status. All the researchers had put in sufficient time to conduct their study in order to answer the research questions effectively.

## **Study Participants**

Participants play a major role in every research study (Creswell, 2014). Through participants we can experience “learning and meaning about the problem or issue” at hand (p. 186). There are a number of factors to consider when determining or analyzing a study’s participants. For example, it is important to consider the number of participants included in a study. The number of participants must be suitable to the type of study and consistent with the goals and objectives of the study. According to Creswell (2014), in experimental studies, researchers use data analysis to identify the appropriate size of their groups (p. 169). Typically, qualitative studies facilitate a smaller number of participants than in a quantitative study. When considering the number of participants in a qualitative study, Mason (2010) noted that there is usually a point where the information becomes repetitive or does not uncover any new information, negating the need for further participants. This section summarizes the study participants in each study.

### **Case Study One: Urban Parents Advocating for their Child with Special Needs.**

Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evan (2008) used a specific method to select parents of children with a disability to participate in their study. First, the parents had to have a child with a disability in elementary school who was currently receiving special education services through the school. Second, the parents had to be willing to discuss their efforts and experiences when trying to advocate for their children with special needs. Lastly, the participants had to be willing to take part in a phone interview for at least an hour.

Ultimately, a total of 8 parents living in an urban area in the Midwest with elementary-age children diagnosed with specific learning disability, autism, intellectual disability, ADHD,

developmental delay, and language-based disorders agreed to participate in the study. Each of the 8 parents indicated that it was difficult for them to get their children diagnosed.

In addition to the interview, the researchers conducted observations of school staffs' interaction with the children and the families in the schools. However, the researchers did not interview the school staff. Once the data collection was complete, the researchers shared their findings with the parents and the school administration.

**Case Study Two: Advocacy by Parents of Young Children with Special Needs.**

Wright and Taylor (2014) conducted their study across 38 states and six countries using a survey of parents who had children with disabilities, ranging in age from birth to 18. The children's disabilities varied. The researchers indicated that 79 percent of the participants were African-American, 15 percent were Latino-American, and less than one percent were Asian-American or multiethnic. Five percent of the participants declined to state their race or ethnicity. Ninety-five percent of the participants were female and 91 percent were married or in a domestic relationship. Thirty-two percent of the participants reported an income of \$50,000 to \$74,900, 27 percent reported an income of less than \$50,000, and more than 40 percent had an income greater than \$74,999. The participants in the study revealed that they found it difficult to advocate for their child with a disability for various reasons, including the lack of support from school officials, time, resources, education, and frustration and fear of not knowing how to advocate. All parents indicated that they wanted a positive platform through which they could effectively advocate for their child. All parents wanted to ensure the success of their child in school and in the community.

**Case Study Three:** Advocacy Efforts of African American Mothers of Children with Special Needs.

Lynn and Stanley (2015) obtained their subjects by conducting a two-part interview. The first interview uncovered the participants' experience as it relates to special education and its process, special education school based program, disability categories, and policy and law regarding special education. The second phase of interviews focused on the mothers' level of involvement and advocacy within the school and community as it relates to special education. The selection process of participants was not noted in the study. However, the study included 12 African American mothers. 4 of the mothers were unemployed and 2 of the mothers were disabled.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative studies rely on multiple data sources to ensure a wide range of perspectives and input (Creswell, 2014). Data from sources can be collected through multiple types of instruments or processes, including, but not limited to, observation, interviews, articles and documents. Comparatively, in quantitative studies, researchers categorize the instruments being utilized to collect their numerical data. This section summarizes the data collection process used by the three highlighted studies, as well as compares and contrasts the methods used.

**Case Study One:** Urban Parents Advocating for their Child with Special Needs.

Munn-Joseph and Gavin (2008) used two types of data collection methods: observation and interviews. The interview process included conducting two semi-structured interviews for each participant. The goals of the interview process were to gather information structured around three main questions. First, the researchers wanted to examine how parents advocate for their child with a disability in the school setting. Second, the researchers were interested in what

supports parents needed from school officials in order to advocate successfully. Finally, the researchers wanted to determine what resources parents needed to advocate effectively.

The first interview lasted 45 minutes to one hour and focused on collecting personal information and background from the participants. The researchers (Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evan, 2008) formed questions around parental advocacy. During this interview, the researchers collected information including job status, educational background, number of children in special education, and knowledge of the special education process. The researchers did not indicate the number of transcripts produced by the first round of interviews.

The second interview lasted 1 to 2 hours. The researchers (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evan, 2008) noted that the increase in length could be contributed to an increase in the parents' comfort level with the researchers and the process. During the second round of interviews, the questions were more focused on the parents' advocacy experiences in the school setting, any hurdles experienced by the parents in trying to advocate, and the effectiveness of their advocacy as determined by the academic successes of their child with a disability. Of particular interest, parents were asked to state what advocacy supports, if any, were provided to them, and to share if the supports helped them to effectively advocate for their child.

### **Case Study Two: Advocacy by Parents of Young Children with Special Needs.**

Wright and Taylor (2014) examined advocacy of parents of young children with disabilities. The researchers in this study used a survey as the only method of data collection. In their reports the researchers described the process used to develop the survey questions and extensive processes used to validate and analyze the data collected through the surveys.

The surveys were developed around three basic questions: "(1) What are the settings in which parents advocate for their young children? (2) What are the parents' levels of perceived

effectiveness in different settings? (3) Are there basic processes related to advocacy across different settings and if so what are these processes?” (Wright and Taylor, 2014, p. 5).

After the survey results were collected, the researchers (Wright and Taylor, 2014) conducted phone interviews in order to gather further information on the effectiveness of parental advocacy from the parent’s perspective across various settings. The study settings focused on home, school and the community. During the interview the researchers gained a better understanding of how parents perceived their advocacy efforts across various settings.

The data collected through the phone interviews focused on the following questions: (1) Parents’ opportunities to advocate for appropriate services for their child with a disability, (2) the settings in which advocacy happened, and (3) the feedback received by the parents when advocating for their child. After the data was collected through the phone interviews, the information received was coded into separate categories. The categories included age of the child, disability, knowledge of special education and employment status (Wright and Taylor 2014).

To ensure the accuracy of the information presented during coding, the authors (Wright and Taylor 2014) reviewed each other’s work. This review process took place through phone conferences and electronic mail. In addition to the validity process, the researchers and the data team participated in a group discussion to enable them to further simplify the results, specifically looking for common themes in the data. The researchers then used the data to develop strategic plans addressing common themes that parents could use and follow to make their advocacy more effective. Once finalized, the study results and plans were presented to the participants.

**Case Study Three:** Advocacy Efforts of African American Mothers of Children with Special Needs.

Lynn and Stanley (2015) used two questions to guide their data collection: (1) describe your child who receives special education services?" and (2) How does their disabilities affect their education?" The researchers obtained consent from 12 parents to conduct a two-part interview. The first interview included 15 open-ended questions. The second interview consisted of 8 open-ended questions. The researchers applied the information that spoke to the similarities among the mothers and their experience with advocating for their children with a disability.

### **Common Theme in Data Collection**

All three studies (i.e., Munn- Joseph and Gavin-Evan, 2008; Wright and Taylor, 2014; and Lynn and Stanley, 2015) effectively used data collection methods that fit the specific type of study they were conducting. Whether the questions were posed through an interview or on a survey, the questions were specifically crafted to guide the data collection. The data collection process helped the researchers obtain information that provided a more in-depth knowledge regarding parental advocacy and involvement of parents of children with a disability. All of the studies used multiple sources of data, which ensured that different perspectives were captured. Each study identified its own type of findings regarding parental advocacy and involvement.

### **Findings**

The Association for Qualitative Research (2015) defines "findings" as an outcome that a study finds, reveals, or indicates. It is the conclusion drawn as a result of conducting a study. This section discusses the findings of the three highlighted studies and compares and contrasts the findings.

## **Case Study One**

Urban Parents Advocating for their Child with Special Needs. The findings of the study by Munn-Joseph and Gavin Evan (2008) indicated that two types of advocacy platforms are required to ensure that parents' voices were heard: school and community. Parents consistently spoke about the importance of effectively advocating for their child's needs. They discussed the importance of communicating with the school officials, staff and related service providers. The parent indicated that they wanted communication without push-back. They also stated the importance of school creating a welcoming venue for the parents to share their concerns. The implication was that this would ensure that all parties were working collaboratively to ensure the success of a child with a disability.

Parents also discussed negative experiences in advocating for their child in the school setting, such as push-back indicating the school staff viewed the parents as a threat or inconvenience (Munn-Joseph and Gavin Evan 2008). These negative experiences caused an adversarial relationship between the parents and the school officials and led to a breakdown in positive communication (Abdul-Abil and Farmer, 2006). Within the study, parents expressed their frustration at the limited opportunities or platforms provided by the school to advocate for their child. They also expressed frustration regarding the perceived lack of support from the teachers and the administrators. For example, parents described sometimes receiving no responses even after taking their concerns to even the teacher and/or administrators multiple times. Ultimately, Munn- Joseph and Gavin-Evan (2008) found that the parents of children with disabilities have a strong desire to support their child and to play an active role through involvement and advocacy as it relates to the decision-making process. However, to parents often struggled to communicate positively and effectively with the school staff.

## **Case Study Two**

**Advocacy by Parents of Young Children with Special Needs.** When evaluating parental advocacy among parents of young children with special needs, Wright and Taylor (2014) found that the parents wanted more resources to help them in their efforts. Resources included workshops, opportunities for school-home partnerships, and classroom engagement opportunities. Parents indicated an understanding that their advocacy efforts could only yield successful results through true partnership with the schools. Flores de Apodaca (2015) points out that there is often an inconsistency in some school environments, in that the educators and the school leaders want to involve the parents, but, particularly when it comes to making educational and service decisions for children with disabilities, they do not want the parents involved too much.

The researchers (Wright and Taylor, 2014) noted that the parental involvement and advocacy within their study increased once the parents were provided the necessary tools to ensure that their voices were being heard and listened to by the school staff. Participants expressed their frustration regarding the obstacles they faced when trying to advocate and get involved with their child's education. Some obstacles parents reported included a lack of communication from the school, lack of support from the school and a lack of resources for the parents. The researchers noted that the parents were more consistently involved when they felt the part of the process.

## **Case Study Three**

**Advocacy Efforts of African American Mothers of Children with Special Needs.** Lynn and Stanley (2015) found that the African American mothers faced significant barriers in their parental advocacy efforts. The mothers indicated that involvement in their child's special

education process often became overwhelming due to their lack of knowledge regarding the process. The researchers discovered the 83% of the parents indicated difficulties with advocating for their child without negative push-back from the school staff. Another finding suggested that mothers felt that they had to take on a more combative persona to be taken seriously. Likewise, if a parent questions the school team or makes suggestions for their child, the school team often views them as combative.

### **Common Findings and Analysis**

Each of the studies (i.e., Munn- Joseph and Gavin-Evan, 2008; Wright and Taylor, 2014; and Lynn and Stanley, 2015) examined the impact that parental involvement and advocacy has on the academic success of children with a disability, and the barriers to effective advocacy. The research findings indicated that parents are aware that their involvement in their child's education and special education will impact their child's academic success. This highlights the importance of providing useful resources to parents to help ensure that they are effective in their advocacy efforts. The findings from each of these studies are interrelated and useful to understanding the importance of the parental advocacy and parental involvement in the school setting, which impacts the academic achievement for students with a disability.

The first study conducted by Munn-Joseph and Gavin-Evan (2008) validated that the parental involvement and advocacy on the elementary level is a critical component of the success of children with disabilities. Wright and Taylor (2014) discussed the importance of advocacy of parents with young children with a disability to ensure they are activity engaged and prompting early intervention. The study conducted by Lynn and Stanley (2015) specifically looked at parental advocacy and involvement that will render the needed results parents were seeking for their children with disabilities.

All three case studies provided evidence of the different components of parental advocacy and involvement for children with disabilities. The studies presented information from parents’ perspective, the school’s perspective, and the barriers to effective advocacy in multiple environments. All of the studies indicated that the parents understand the importance of their advocacy to ensuring that their child is successful in school. Further, all of the studies suggested that often negative interactions with school staff can be a barrier to effective advocacy. The studies suggested a need for more support and the resources for the parents. The studies also advocated a need for the methods to ensure that the interactions between the parents and the school are collaborative in nature. With additional supports and a positive/collaborative school-parent relationship, parents would have more success advocating, resulting in more successful outcomes for their children with a disability.

**Comparative summary of the three selected case studies:**

Categories	CASE I (Munn-Joseph &Gavin- Evans 2008)	CASE II (Wright & Taylor, 2014)	CASE III (Lynn & Stanly 2015)
Purpose of the Study	This study was conducted by 2 researchers who used a qualitative research method. The method included semi-structured interviews of 8 families.	The researchers used a quantitative method to examine the advocacy of parents of young children with disabilities. The study focused on parents’ perceived effectiveness	The researchers conducted a qualitative study to determine the factors that lead low-income, African American mothers to effectively advocate for

		of their parental advocacy across different settings.	their children with disabilities.
Data Collection	Researchers conducted observations over an 8-month period at the children’s school of attendance. They observed the school setting in general, as well as how the school staff interacted with the children with special needs and their families.	Online survey	The researcher conducted two interviews of each participant. The first interview explored the participant’s experience with special education, including the participant’s working knowledge of special education, related services, special education programming, and disability law and policy.
Findings	The finding of this study revolved that parents of children with special needs have a desire to	This study examined the experiences of parents of young children with disabilities in	The finding of this study specifically reviewed the different ways parents advocate

	<p>support their children and to be involved in the academic decision making process.</p>	<p>advocating for their children across various settings including school, medical, social and political settings.</p>	<p>(for example, participation in meetings, requesting specific services, etc.).</p>
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**Summary**

Research has demonstrated the undeniable link between parental advocacy and the academic success of children with disabilities. The studies discussed in this paper are critical because they provide additional information on the necessity of parental involvement/advocacy at a young age, the barriers that keep parents from becoming involved and advocating for their children, and the support that facilitate effective parental involvement. Each of the 3 case studies provided an insight to determine which actions can be helpful in promoting effective parental involvement. Furthermore, each study provided a different perspective on parental advocacy issues for African American parents in both urban and rural areas. These studies provide a framework by which practitioners can identify the supports and resources necessary to encourage parents to become involved in the academic lives of their children with special needs.

The researchers who conducted each of the 3 studies provided a precise description of each study, including the research design, a description of the participants, how data were collected and analyzed, and the results. This chapter reviewed each of these elements for all 3 studies. This information is helpful so that others can build upon these studies to further public knowledge and policy making regarding parental advocacy for children with special needs.

Ultimately, the studies (Munn-joseph & Gavin-Evans 2008; Wright & Taylor 2014; and Lynn & Stanly 2015) found that providing parents with knowledge of special education, adequate resources and supports to overcome time, childcare and other barriers, and creating a collaborative school environment that encourages parent involvement results in increased parental advocacy and better academic outcomes for children with special needs. Furthermore, the studies indicated that the earlier the parents become involved in a child with disabilities' academic services, the more successful the child will be.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study analysis was to examine the impact that parental advocacy and involvement has on the academic success of students with a disability in the urban school setting, grades k-6. The results of each case study Munn-joseph & Gavin-Evans 2008, Wright & Taylor 2014 and Lynn & Stanly 2015 analyzed presented a different perspective of parental advocacy; examining various aspects of parental advocacy among various settings and various family profiles. Each of these findings assisted to develop suggestions and recommendations for how to increase parental advocacy and involvement.

Several studies have recognized that parental advocacy and involvement helps to improve the academic success of student with a disability and learning outcomes for all students generally (Council for Exceptional Children, 2002). Researchers such as Epstein (2010) have found that parental involvement is an important part of creating a collaborative and positive learning experience and encourages a healthy partnership between schools, students with disabilities and their parents.

Parental involvement and advocacy has proven to be instrumental in the development of special education programming. Specifically, it has been shown to aid in the successful implementation of special education intervention and services for students with a disability. Based on the findings of the case studies, the researchers hypothesize that if parents are provided with a full range of supports, they will be much more likely to become involved in their child's education and special education process, thereby increasing the success of their child with a disability. Such supports include a school culture which welcomes parental input, provides

resources and knowledge of best practices, cultural awareness, and maintaining connections between the school, home and community. These types of supports will help to create a cohesive approach to the special education process.

Implementing a partnership between home and school is critical in the academic development of a student with a disability. In order for a partnership to be successful, it requires total buy-in and commitment of not only the parents, but also of the school officials. It is important for the school-based team to serve as a resource to parents as it relates to information that would assist with understanding the special education process. The school-based team can support parental efforts by providing open communication, collaboration and resources. The result is that all stakeholders get on the same page and speak the same common language as they promote the academic success of students with a disability.

Brandon and Brown, (2007) found that parental advocacy and involvement is an important variable in the academic success of students with a disability. In analyzing this finding, it is helpful to consider Epstein (2014) – a study which identified the importance of parental involvement in the academic success of all students. Epstein describes a framework through which one can explore the role of parental involvement in a child’s educational process. Epstein’s framework provides a useful starting point for exploring the impact of parental involvement and advocacy on children with a disability. Studies conducted by Anderson (2007), Black et al. (2011), and Epstein et al. (2000) established that parental support in the form of advocacy and involvement was a major component that influenced the academic success of children with a disability. Wright and Taylor (2014) found that effective parental advocacy and involvement resulted in better services and academic success for children with a disability. Likewise, parents whose advocacy and involvement were viewed by schools as positive show a

greater level of academic success (Wright & Taylor, 2014). The literature also describes that when parents and schools work collaboratively, children with a disability have increased academic success (McGee & Spencer, 2015, McKenna & Millen, 2013).

The literature states that supportive parents are essential to creating a productive learning environment for children with a disability. A study conducted by Ruffin-Admas and Wilson (2012) demonstrated that parents who are actively involved with their children's school were more successful in getting their children academic supports than parents that were not as engaged in the special education process.

Despite all of the research demonstrating a connection between parental involvement and advocacy and a child's academic success, getting and keeping parents engaged in the special education process continues to be difficult for schools. As such, encouraging positive parental advocacy and involvement is an ongoing task. It requires a greater awareness on the part of schools of the positive impact that parent involvement in the school setting has on the academic success of children with a disability. Once schools truly develop this understanding, school officials, staff and parents can begin to create a positive school culture that is welcoming to parental input in the special education process.

Three selected case studies were analyzed and the findings were compared to understand the role parental involvement and advocacy has in supporting the academic success of children with disabilities, and some of the variables that lead to successful parental advocacy. The findings within the three case studies Munn-joseph & Gavin-Evans 2008, Wright & Taylor 2014 and Lynn & Stanly 2015 provided suggestions and recommendations for increasing parental involvement and advocacy that are discussed within this chapter and supported by scholarly research. One of the goals of this research was to add the scholarly research to aid in filling the

gap that currently exists between the knowledge that parental involvement and advocacy are important for understanding how to actually encourage parents to get involved in their children's special education process. Specifically, there remains a large gap of information in how to encourage the involvement of urban parents of children with a disability (Weiss and Rosenberg, 2011).

### **Proposed Solutions**

This investigator specifically reviewed and examined the current literature pertaining to parental involvement and advocacy of parents of children with a disability in urban settings, grades k-6<sup>th</sup>. The findings of the three studies Munn-joseph & Gavin-Evans 2008, Wright & Taylor 2014 and Lynn & Stanly 2015 analyzed suggested that urban parents of children with a disability need to become more involved and better advocates for their children's education development and the special education process. Parental involvement should be encouraged within the school setting and never viewed as negative. This can be done by creating a culture that welcomes and utilizes the key elements of parental involvement and advocacy to capitalize on academic success for children with a disability. With the proper supports in place, parents and schools can then begin establishing a collaborative partnership that support the needs of the students to ensure special education services are being implemented with fidelity.

The data collected by the researchers in the three selected case studies (Munn-joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008; Wright & Taylor, 2014; and Lynn & Stanly, 2015) indicate that parental involvement in the special education process aids the special education team in making decisions about the child's services because of the unique perspective of the parents. The parents may have insight into the history of the child's diagnosis, services and responses to interventions attempted at home, in the community and in previous educational environments. The information and input

provided by the parents that the school-based team may not otherwise have, improves the overall quality of the services received by the child. This, in turn, will improve the academic success of children with a disability. Finally, the data collected indicates that collaboration between parents and schools was a best practice that created the best results for students; thus confirming the benefit that parental advocacy and involvement has on the academic success of children with a disability.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the specific findings of each of the three case studies Munn-joseph & Gavin-Evans 2008, Wright & Taylor 2014 and Lynn & Stanly 2015 analyzed regarding parental involvement and advocacy, the importance of partnership between the parents and school as supported by the research, and recommendations for future research.

### **Parent Involvement & Advocacy**

According to Federal law, parents have a right to make educational decisions for their children. The IDEA (2004) specifically mandates parental involvement in programmatic decisions about a child's special education and related services and at every point of the special education process. Further, the law grants specific rights and protections to the parents, called procedural safeguards. The IDEA aims to ensure that the parents and school function as a team. To foster this collaborative approach to decision-making, it is imperative that schools develop systems to ensure that the parents are provided special education resources and supports to enable the parents to be an active participant in the educational process of their child with a disability. As Burke (2013) described, when the school and parents have a shared vision, the special education process is more collaborative and results in better outcomes for the child.

The findings in the study conducted by Lynn and Taylor (2015) exposed many of the same common themes discovered by other researchers regarding the link between parental

advocacy and academic success of children with a disability and the importance of collaboration between the school and the parents. Lynn and Taylor (2015) found that providing parents with training regarding special education and the special education process was a critical, and often a missing resource that would lead to increased parental involvement and successful parental advocacy. Such training would provide parents with an understanding of the special education process, making them feel more comfortable interacting with the school and developing the parent's understanding of the supports and services available, therefore, ultimately helping parents advocate more effectively for the services their children with a disability need.

The other benefit of parent-training is that it would help transform schools' views of the parents. Rather than viewing the parents as unknowledgeable or ill-informed, because parents would have a base level of knowledge about special education and the process, school staff would view parents more as partners in the special education process. Furthermore, such training would enable the parents and school to more effectively communicate regarding a child's educational needs. Wright and Taylor (2014) indicated that creating a collaborative school-home partnership would lead to a school culture in which all stakeholders are more sensitive to, and aware of, the issues that families and students are facing.

In order to ensure that parents receive the training that research suggests is critical to parental involvement in special education, the special education process should include a separate parent-training program. The training program or "Parent University" would support the parents, as well-as the school-based team as they seek to collaborate effectively and navigate the special education process together. Parent University would give parents an understanding of their child's disability prior to the child entering a classroom or the parent attending an IEP meeting. This is critical because parents often feel overwhelmed about the process and find it

challenging to fully engage in the process when they do not have a working knowledge of special education. In addition to a Parent University, schools must present effective collaboration opportunities, which are defined as formal or informal opportunities for parents and school-based teams to discuss issues and share suggestions and ideas. Schools that make a conscious effort to involve the parents formally and informally will find that an organic cohesive relationship will begin to develop. The Parent University would support continuous knowledge development regarding special education matters in addition to promoting approaches for effective collaboration with the school-based team and the community, all of which are critical to the academic success of children with a disability. With the support of Parent University, parental advocacy and involvement can become a part of a positive school culture.

### **Partnership**

Partnership refers to a positive and collaborative relationship between the parents and the school, including the general education teacher, special education teacher and other school staff. When a partnership is in place, it permits the teachers and school-based team to work collaboratively and cooperatively with the parents to identify interventions and strategies that may best support the child. The partnership benefits both parents and schools. It enables a parent to get their voice heard and ensures the parent is actively involved in decision making regarding their child. It benefits teachers as it enables them to receive feedback from a parent regarding a child's academic and social and emotional needs, ultimately leading to better planning. Positive parent-school partnership, therefore, result in more academic success for children with a disability (Prins and Toso, 2008).

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Data have demonstrated that parental involvement and advocacy can have a direct result on the services that a child with a disability is provided in school. However, data also demonstrate that rates of parental involvement are low, and too often parents face many hurdles to effective advocacy. Based on the research of parental advocacy and involvement of parents of children with disabilities in conjunction with the findings in the three case studies analyzed, this investigator suggests that parental involvement and advocacy on behalf of children with a disability is more likely to happen and be successful when parents are provided a full continuum of opportunities to be involved, such as, a parent-teacher association or volunteer opportunities at the school. Research suggests that when parents are engaged in the school environment they are more likely to be involved and advocate for their child (Wrights 2001).

While the research suggests that a parent education program, like the Parent University, would be a very useful support that would lead to greater rates of parental involvement and effective parental advocacy, further research is necessary to determine what it will take to initiate such programs and ensure such programs are successful. For example, there is a lack of information into the amount of time, space, and financial resources it would take to start and maintain a Parent University.

Additionally, research should examine other types of supports that would get and keep parents involved and advocating. Once there is a better understanding of what families need to feel more prepared to advocate, it could be helpful to understand what supports, activities and/or interventions will foster a collaborative relationship between families and school staff and officials. There is a gap in information regarding the impact that collaborative efforts have on the success of children with a disability.

Additional recommendations for further research includes examining at what age or school level parental advocacy has the most impact on a child with a disability's academic success. For example, does parent involvement/advocacy in elementary school impact a child's performance once the child reaches middle and high school? Similarly, research is necessary to examine if identified eligible for special education services early, children with a disability are better able to close educational gaps than children who are not identified until later in their educational career. Finally, research needs to be conducted related to the effects of educator's perceptions and expectations of children with a disability on a child's academic success. The additional research suggested above would help policy makers and educators to better understand what must be implemented to ensure the best academic outcomes for children with a disability.

### **Final Thoughts**

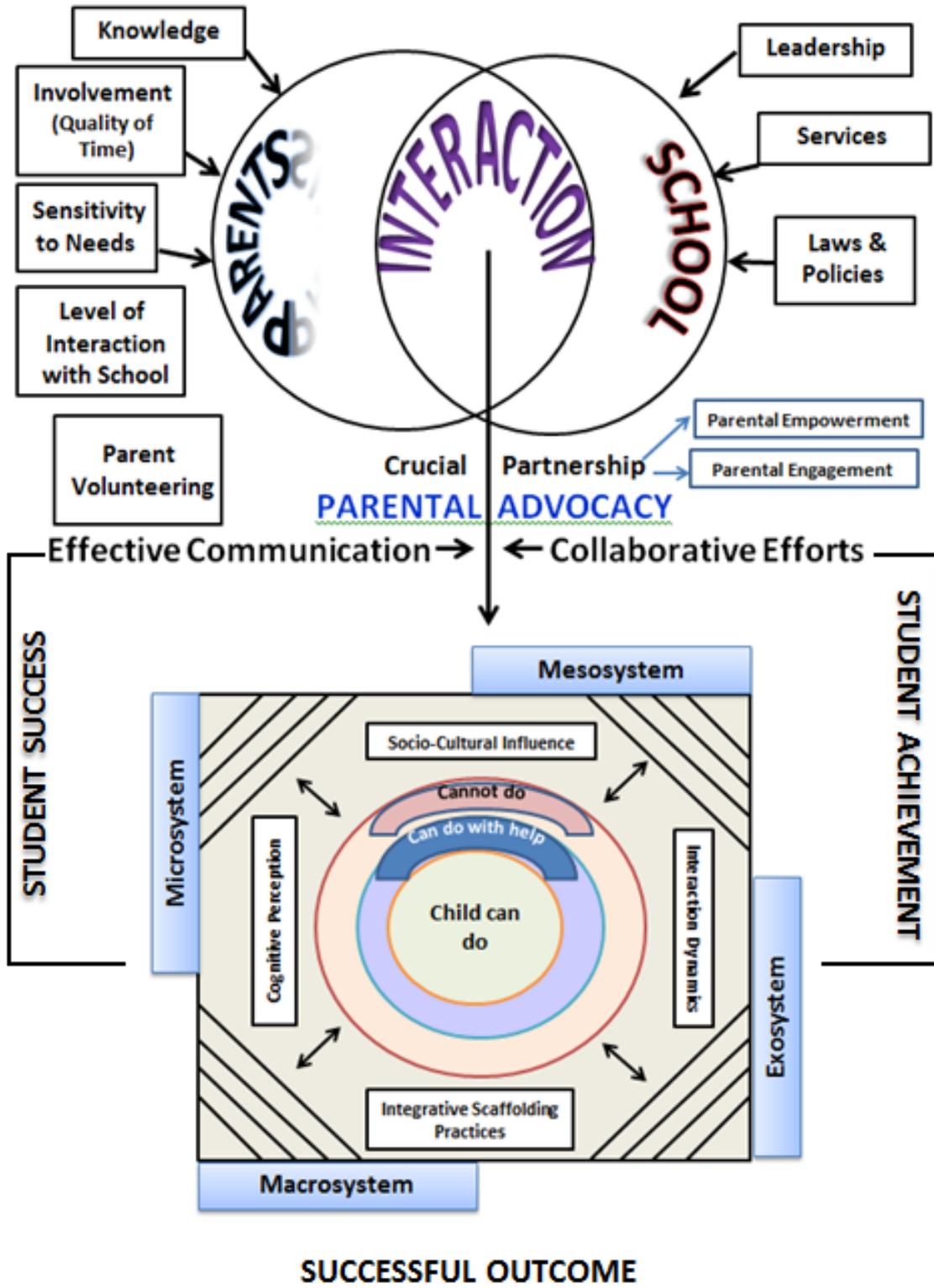
It is imperative that parents have a working knowledge of the special education process. The school team should encourage parents to be active participants in discussions and decisions about their child's education and services. As a former special education teacher, current special education director, and most importantly, a parent of a child with a disability, the investigator understands how important knowledge and understanding of the special education process, law and policy is for a parent when it comes to advocating for a child with a disability. In the past few years, the investigator has observed a change at several school districts regarding the accountability policies being implemented to ensure collaboration between schools and parents takes place. Previously, parents were not provided much of an opportunity to be involved in the special education process. Now, the policy dictates that parents be provided more opportunity to become actively engaged. For example, many school districts require that parents be provided with documents related to their child's educational programming prior to meeting with the IEP

team, allowing the parents to review and be prepared to discuss the documents at the meeting. Although changes in policy can be a slow and arduous process, the increase in policies related to the positive collaboration between school and home is critical to the academic success of children with a disability. Parental advocacy and involvement affords children the opportunities to obtain the necessary services to encourage growth and academic achievement beyond their disability. When home and school make an effort to collaborate, it has a positive impact on the child's academic success, the climate of the classroom, and ultimately the school.

### **Conclusions**

The three studies analyzed and examined the impact that parental advocacy and involvement has on the academic success of children with a disability in elementary schools located in an urban area or school district with a high rate of families from a low socioeconomic background. While conducting the case study analysis, this researcher's objective was to determine if parental advocacy and involvement has a direct correlation to the academic success of children with a disability. The investigator also specifically looked at several aspects of parental involvement, including collaboration between the parent and school, the parent's knowledge of special education and, support for parents from the local school. The researchers within the studies were able to identify challenges that urban and/or low socioeconomic parents face when trying to advocate effectively for their child. Challenges include lack of knowledge, lack of support, and fear of retaliation if the parent spoke out against or disagreed with the school-based team. These challenges limited the parents' involvement with the school and affected the parent's ability to advocate effectively.

## A MODEL OF PARENTAL ADVOCACY



This investigator has had first-hand experience as it relates to advocating for children with disabilities. First, the investigator currently holds the position of director of special education services. This affords the investigator an opportunity to help educate and advocate for programming and services for children with disabilities. Additionally, the investigator is also the parent of a child with the disability. Finally, because the investigator has thorough understanding of the importance of advocacy and experience of serving families of children with a disability, this investigator has created a nonprofit organization focused on ensuring that the parents are equipped to advocate on behalf of their children and become partners with the school in the child's educational development. This investigator has also designed a model Parent University that will aid the parents of children with a disability to gain a working knowledge of the special education process through seminars, workshops and classes. The Parent University will help parents become more successful advocates for their children with a disability. The investigator has observed that there appears to be a disconnect between policymakers and practitioners. It is critical that policy makers at the local, state and federal levels hold an open dialogue with school officials and the parents when developing and implementing special education law and regulations. In order for all children with special needs to be academically successful, all stakeholders must collaborate effectively. Ensuring that parents feel like partners in the process is an essential step in reaching that goal.

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