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# A Preliminary Investigation of the Comparative Expectations of Parents of Children with Autism and Chairpersons in the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) and/or Committee on Special Education (CSE) Process

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# A Preliminary Investigation of the Comparative Expectations of Parents of Children with Autism and Chairpersons in the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) and/or Committee on Special Education (CSE) Process

## **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the underlying beliefs of parents who have children with autism and chairpersons of the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE)/Committee on Special Education (CSE). Specifically, beliefs that promote trust and diminish conflict were of primary interest, as high rates of litigation were well documented with this group of parents in the United States. The theory of defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1999) was the lens used to analyze the dynamic. The themes identified provide insight into the promotion of trust and the reduction of conflict at the CPSE/CSE. The findings revealed two distinctly different expectations within the parent group of participants: parents who expect the worst (n=3), and parents who expect to figure it out (n=9). The chairperson participants reported that most parents, new to the process, expected the worst. Chairpersons (n=9) reported that they were able to form collaborative relationships with most parents. Chairpersons and most parents reported common underlying beliefs that they attributed to the formation of collaborative relationships. This study revealed new insights associated with the underlying beliefs of each group of participants. Most parents in this study reported a lack of conflict and described the chairperson as an ally. It was also found that chairpersons may falsely believe in potential threat at the CPSE/CSE, as chairperson expectations and beliefs were ultimately well aligned with those of most parents. The sharing of underlying beliefs between parents and chairpersons is not uniformly practiced at the CPSE/CSE. These findings are discussed including implications for parents, parent advocates, chairpersons, and future research.

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A Preliminary Investigation of the Comparative Expectations of Parents of Children with  
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and/or Committee on Special Education (CSE) Process

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Ed. D. in Executive Leadership

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my late grandmother, Adele Baier. She was born to a generation with limited opportunities for women and was only able to attain an eighth-grade education. I've been inspired by her strength and grateful outlook as she faced numerous challenges during her long life.

I also wish to acknowledge my immediate and extended family who believed in me and supported me during this pursuit. My husband Paul Boehm exhibited unending patience with the time commitment this required. My persistence came from my father, Thomas Francis Xavier Ganley III. He has always inspired me to stretch myself and reach high goals. I am hopeful that my example of lifelong learning and achievement will serve to inspire my son Tommy LeRoy and my stepdaughter, Emily Boehm. They both have far more potential than they believe! I am also grateful for the support of my dear friends Cindy Chandler, Diane Hanna and Samantha Brody. They each helped with proofreading and provided ongoing encouragement.

Many thanks are extended to my committee: Dr. Jason Berman and Dr. Caroline Critchlow. They stretched me and supported me through many challenges completing this research and writing milestone. Their intellect and guidance helped me to become a better scholar. I appreciate their contributions very much.

Finally, let it be known that this journey has been unforgettable and life-changing. Thanks, *Cohort 11 from Heaven* for all that you added to the experience!

## **Biographical Sketch**

Kimberly A. Ganley is a leader with a career spanning over three decades within public education. A graduate of SUNY Geneseo in 1985 and Nazareth College in 1989, she began her career as a Speech-Language Pathologist in the early intervention, home-based setting working with children with disabilities. During her career, she has supported children and families across preK-21 settings within the Rochester City School District and surrounding suburban districts.

Upon completion of her School District Administration certification at SUNY Brockport in 1999, Kimberly assumed leadership roles focusing on school improvement, which included response-to-intervention models, inclusive education and assistive technology. She served as Director of Special Education Programs and Services in the Webster Central School District for 16 years before retirement. Kimberly was the recipient of several professional awards at the local and state level. During the completion of her doctoral degree, she was inducted into the Kappa Delta Pi honor society for academic excellence.

Upon completion of her doctorate, Kimberly plans to engage in consulting, teaching, additional research and publishing. Kimberly continues to be committed to a systems viewpoint of public education within a social justice lens that also supports the continuous learning of families and professionals.

## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the underlying beliefs of parents who have children with autism and chairpersons of the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE)/Committee on Special Education (CSE). Specifically, beliefs that promote trust and diminish conflict were of primary interest, as high rates of litigation were well documented with this group of parents in the United States. The theory of defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1999) was the lens used to analyze the dynamic.

The themes identified provide insight into the promotion of trust and the reduction of conflict at the CPSE/CSE. The findings revealed two distinctly different expectations within the parent group of participants: *parents who expect the worst* ( $n=3$ ), and *parents who expect to figure it out* ( $n=9$ ). The chairperson participants reported that most parents, new to the process, expected the worst. Chairpersons ( $n=9$ ) reported that they were able to form collaborative relationships with most parents. Chairpersons and most parents reported common underlying beliefs that they attributed to the formation of collaborative relationships.

This study revealed new insights associated with the underlying beliefs of each group of participants. Most parents in this study reported a lack of conflict and described the chairperson as an ally. It was also found that chairpersons may falsely believe in potential threat at the CPSE/CSE, as chairperson expectations and beliefs were ultimately well aligned with those of most parents. The sharing of underlying beliefs between parents and chairpersons is not uniformly practiced at the CPSE/CSE. These findings are

discussed including implications for parents, parent advocates, chairpersons, and future research.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Children with disabilities were afforded the right to be educated in public schools with the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) in 1974. Today, federal law is commonly known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Despite numerous updates to regulations to improve procedural entitlements, discrepancies have existed between what was envisioned for students with disabilities and what was actualized (Hill & Hill, 2012; Hill & Kearley, 2013; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014). The most concerning findings within empirical research have included the financial and programmatic costs of litigation in special education (Mandlawitz, 2002).

Furthermore, research has revealed, parents of children on the autism spectrum are the most dissatisfied and most likely to engage in litigation. In the United States today, the rising incidence of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) has had far-reaching implications. In 2010 the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that for children aged 8, the incidence of autism was one in 68. The increased incidence coupled with increased engagement in litigation has been a concern to educators and families (Hill & Hill, 2012; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014).

To examine the factors associated with litigation, consideration of the federal regulatory language was necessary. The Part 300 education regulations associated with IDEA include procedural detail regarding how children are identified with an educational disability. These regulations were reauthorized with revisions in 1990, 1997, and 2005.

The regulations detail procedural safeguards that stipulate the rights of parents which ensure their children have access to public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Specific timelines are included for the assessment of students by a multidisciplinary educational team. The result is an initial referral and meeting of the Committee on Special Education (CSE) or the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) as per IDEA (CFR §300.4). The communication between parents of children with autism and the CPSE/CSE chairperson and the dynamic during these meetings was the context of this study.

It should be noted that there are different parameters in the federal regulations that govern the two types of committees. The CPSE meets regarding preschool children between the ages of 3 and 5. After the age of 5, the CSE is responsible for students through age 21. The preschool committee is designated to include required members that include a chairperson, preschool teacher, the parent(s) and evaluation team. When this committee meets, they reach consensus on whether the child is considered a preschooler with a disability according to the current assessments. The school-aged committee includes the chairperson, school psychologist, general education teacher, special education teacher, the parent(s), and any other professionals knowledgeable about the child's educational needs. During the first meeting of the CSE, the decision of eligibility is made according to the definition of one of 13 possible federally established categories. In either situation, for preschool or school-aged committee meetings, eligibility is the first benchmark in the process. It is important to note that children who qualified for services at the CPSE do not automatically qualify for services when they enter kindergarten. Children need to be re-evaluated for eligibility by the CSE when they reach the age of 5.

As members of the CPSE/CSE, parents are referred to as equal partners contributing to the process. Parents may also invite persons they determined to have “knowledge or special expertise to be a member of the committee on special education” on their children’s behalf (8 NYCRR; Part 200). Once the committee has met and concluded that the child met the definition of “educationally disabled,” goals, programs, and services are detailed on an Individual Education Program (IEP) document. The IEP is a legally binding, written document that must be reviewed and updated by the committee at least annually to ensure that sufficient educational progress is being made by the student. Goals are revised, and programs and services are adjusted as necessary to support positive outcomes. While these regulations and procedural safeguards appear logical and straightforward, the interpretations by individuals involved in the process have varied. Members of the committee may have entered the process with different expectations of the outcomes. If expectations were not met, conflict might have arisen. When conflict does occur, and if consensus was not reached, mediation and an impartial hearing are identified as the means of resolution. Mediation is not legally binding, so it is common for members of the committee to move straight to an impartial hearing.

Ultimately, researchers have advocated for improved collaborative practices as a means to avoid conflict (Hill & Hill, 2012; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014). A collaborative approach has been identified as preferential to the current advocacy approach embraced by some families. The research has revealed that advocacy approaches while seemingly logical to embrace, have resulted in “us versus them” scenarios and conflict with school systems. Also, the families most likely to adopt advocacy approaches are typically of high socioeconomic status. These parents have

focused their efforts on becoming knowledgeable of IDEA procedures, documents, and parental rights. The parents who have used this approach have tried to leverage their newly developed knowledge to “fight” for their children’s rights. It has been noted by Hill and Hill (2012) that when school CSEs emphasize documents, this has led to the development of distrust in parents which then has led to conflict. It has also been suggested that leadership has the greatest impact on the school climate and trusting partnerships which are needed in this culture of rising conflict (Francis et al., 2016). Considering high degrees of litigation, advocacy by parents with less than satisfactory results, and a need for higher levels of trust, a study of the CSE process through a different lens was needed.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a need to uncover the premises, inferences, and conclusions held by both parents and chairpersons associated with the CPSE/CSE process that promote defensive reasoning and discourage effective dialogue necessary to avoid the escalation of conflict.

### **Theoretical Rationale**

Argyris (1999) established a complex theory of action which explained why leaders and organizations engage in behaviors that are different from their beliefs. This theory has been applied to examine the dynamic at the CSE meeting. For example, the CSE chairperson may have espoused a desire to engage in collaboration or consensus decision-making with parents yet has engaged in *defensive reasoning* with parents. The chairperson and/or parent may engage in *defensive routines* as protection from pain and threat. Argyris (1999) explained that when individuals engage in defense routines, they focus on winning their argument and are not able to engage in productive dialogue.

Productive dialogue requires that participants balance advocacy for their beliefs with an inquiry about the other participant's beliefs.

Peter Senge further applied action science to organizational growth and leadership originally established by Argyris. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Senge asserted that internal dialogue contributes to conflict. Conflict occurs because there is more than one way to look at a complex issue (Senge, 2006, p. 172). Furthermore, Senge asserted, "When addressing complex issues all we ever have are assumptions, never truths" (2006, p. 174). Subsequently, he emphasized the importance of reflection to uncover and test mental models (Senge, 2006, p. 176). Another premise of action science is the concept of *leaps of abstraction*. Leaps of abstraction occur when the mind moves from direct observation to generalization without testing. Senge states, "Eventually, assumptions become a fact which leads to further generalizations. As individuals, we act on this generalization as facts" (Senge, 2006, p. 178). By identifying and acknowledging assumptions, individuals may be able to move their conversations forward more productively (Senge, 2006, p. 183). These tenets of action theory may be what has occurred during the conflict at the CSE meetings. It is possible that untested assumptions have resulted in expectations that could not be met.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research is to study the expectations that both parents of children with autism and CSE chairpersons have of the CSE process. Of specific interest are the premises, inferences, and conclusions that they each have kept private since theoretically this promotes defensive routines, undermines trust formation and potentially fuels the emergence of conflict.

## **Research Questions**

1. What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?
2. What premises, inferences, and conclusions do chairpersons hold regarding the parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?
3. Do parents communicate and chairpersons report that they have shared their beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

To analyze the transcripts of parents for premises, inferences, and conclusions, it was essential to define the nuances between the terms premise, inference and conclusion further. The following definitions were adopted: Premises were defined as assumptions where “beliefs are taken for granted” (Elder & Paul, 2016, p. 47). Inferences were defined as “a step in the mind, by which something is concluded to be true based on something else being true or appearing to be true” (Elder & Paul, 2016, p. 51). Conclusions were defined as “judgments or decisions reached by reasoning” (Elder & Paul, 2016, p. 46). It was necessary for analysis to consider these definitions.

## **Potential Significance of the Study**

While IDEA was intended to provide benefit for children with disabilities, the CSE process has been rife with conflict and litigation. The financial cost, as well as damaged relationships that resulted from litigation, have posed a significant threat to the culture of collaboration in schools across the United States. Insight on possible solutions could prove valuable to parents and district leaders. Through the identification and

examination of existing expectations insight leading to more effective collaboration may be gained. Currently, the preparation of CPSE/CSE chairpersons typically focuses on the laws, regulations and operational details associated with managing the CPSE/CSE meeting. The insight gained from this study may reveal other discrete skill development worth fostering during professional preparation, specific to the CPSE/CSE process. This study may also provide new findings that contribute to the body of research.

### **Definition of Terms**

It should be noted that the CPSE/CSE process is governed by regulatory language. The regulations are passed from IDEA at the federal level to state education departments across the nation. At the state level, federal regulations are interpreted and re-coded into state regulation and policy. The benefits provided for students with disabilities vary by state. Procedures and format of the IEP also vary by state. This means that public comments made about programs and services at the national level may be misleading, since each state may enact regulation differently. To further complicate interpretation there are definitions within the medical field which is a separate lens outside the educational milieu. To study this topic, familiarity with definitions across the medical and educational settings is necessary.

Medically and in brief, a *child with autism spectrum disorder* (ASD) is diagnosed based on the following characteristics:

A) Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history.

1) Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity

2) Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction

3) Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships;

B) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history

1) Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech

2) Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns or verbal-nonverbal behavior

3) Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus

4) Hyper- or hypo-activity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment

C) Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period.

D) Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning.

E) These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability or global developmental delay (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Educationally, a *student with an educational disability* is a child evaluated in accordance with Sec. 300.304 through 300.311 of federal regulation with autism being defined as,

A developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, *which*

*adversely affects a child's educational performance.* Other characteristics often associated with autism are:

Engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements,

Resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and

Unusual responses to sensory experiences (20 U.S.C. 1401(3); 1401(30).

School districts are responsible for providing services to support eligible students with autism beginning at age 3 and continuing through age 21. Regulations require that the IEP be developed within the CPSE or CSE process and be approved by the local education agency/district and the board of education. The approved IEP must provide the student with an educational benefit in the least restrictive environment (LRE).

*Least restrictive environment (LRE)* means that placement of students with disabilities in special classes, separate schools or other removal from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that even with the use of supplementary aids and services, education cannot be satisfactorily achieved. The placement of an individual student with a disability in the least restrictive environment shall:

1. Provide the special education needed by the student;
2. Provide for education of the student to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the student with other students who do not have disabilities; and
3. Be as close as possible to the student's home (8 NYCRR; Part 200.1 (cc).

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction and Purpose**

When the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142), was passed in 1974, autism was not yet recognized either medically or educationally. The criteria for a medical diagnosis of *autism* or a disability label of *autism* came later. The federal law spawned federal regulations which then required each state to ensure a process for the provision of programs and services for students with “physical and mental handicaps.” Much like *Brown v. Board of Education* 347 US 483 (1954) established that “separate is not equal” for students of color, PL 94-142 established that “separate is not equal” for students with disabilities. By the 2009–2010 school year, 6.5 million students with disabilities (SWDs) aged 3 to 21 received special education services in the United States. This group represented 13% of the total public-school enrollment. Despite access to public education resources, SWDs demonstrated considerable performance gaps compared with their non-disabled peers (Harr-Robins et al., n.d.). Professionals in education, therefore, strove to identify research-based interventions most likely to result in positive educational outcomes for students. It has been asserted that education professionals who collaborate to develop the Individual Education Program (IEP) need to focus on the delivery of services that lead to improved educational performance. A common concern was that once parents and professionals became ensnarled in legal

battles, the professional and financial resources needed to address student performance became diluted.

The federal law has been reauthorized numerous times since 1974. It was last reauthorized in 2004 and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). IDEA requires local education agencies (LEA), or districts, to provide access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). The law provides a process for children age 3 until graduation, or age 21, to be identified as having an educational disability. When a disability is identified, an individual education program (IEP) is developed which is designed to ensure the provision of programs and services “reasonably calculated to provide some educational benefit” (Board of Educ. v. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176, 1982). Each of the preceding terms has been subject to differing interpretation by families, educational advocates, school district leadership and attorneys in litigation. Furthermore, litigation has increased on behalf of students with autism (Hill & Hill, 2012; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014).

Decades of studies have explored the discrepancies between what was envisioned for students with disabilities and what has been actualized. Research has captured the scope of litigation, the primary focus of such litigation, and its negative outcomes (Hill & Hill, 2012; Hill & Kearley, 2013; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014). In this chapter, the research reviewed focused on four major themes: (a) What has been learned from the litigation arising from conflict, and what predicts conflict (Brown, Ouellette-Kuntz, Hunter & Kelley, 2010; Burke & Goldman, 2015; Burke & Sandman, 2015; Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron & Hughes, 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Zeitlin

& Curcic, 2013); (b) Why parents have come to mistrust education professionals (Angell, Stoner & Shelden 2009; Francis et al., 2016; Stoner et al., 2005); (c) How parent advocacy resulted in unintended consequences, including further conflict (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Hess, Molina & Kozleski, 2006; Tincani, 2007; Trainor, 2010); (d) What research has suggested regarding school cultures that promote trust (Angell et al., 2009; Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Francis et al., 2016; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Stoner et al., 2005; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). Apparent gaps in the research were identified that supported the need for this study.

### **Outcomes of Litigation**

Conflict regarding children with autism has been captured, analyzed and empirically studied with legal rulings throughout the past 30 years. One such study noted that during the 1980s and 1990s a large body of case law had developed related to the provision of special education and related services to young children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). This study suggested an alignment with increasing ASD prevalence and challenges to meet the educational programming needs of students. It was also found that in 40% of the cases studied, conflict emerged during the transition from early intervention to the preschool system at three-years-old. The researcher speculated that the loss of a family-focused intervention program to a school-focused program fueled the conflict (Mandlawitz, 2002).

Hill and Hill (2012) examined the damage done as a result of litigation. They found a single court case ruled in favor of a family resulted in district reimbursement for attorney fees, services and court costs totaling over \$348,000. They also noted, that while

financial costs could be extreme, so were the emotional costs. As Hill and Hill (2012) explored the impact of litigation, other researchers identified methods for improving current practices (Hill & Hill, 2012; Hill & Kearley, 2013; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014). Hill and Hill (2012) concluded that while parents had exercised due process rights, the outcomes had not been favorable for families overall. Regardless, parents continued to enact due-process to challenge school districts when they were not satisfied with the outcomes of the CPSE/CSE.

A mismatch between parent expectations of the CPSE/CSE and regulatory intent emerged within case law. Mandlawitz (2002) analyzed court cases from 30 states and numerous local school districts. Substantive and procedural issues were found. They identified programmatic challenges described as “competition regarding methodologies.” This meant that families and districts engaged in disputes regarding the selection of appropriate intervention methodologies. Those methodologies may not have had empirical research to support efficacy. Regardless, they found frequent occurrences where parents advocated for a specific approach to be identified on the IEP. Due process decisions were not routinely ruled in their favor. Also, when families specifically advocated for applied behavioral analysis (ABA), their petitions were denied, since ABA providers were not certified teachers. Additional discrepancies between the expectations of parents and IDEA provisions were found.

Further analysis was applied by Mandlawitz (2002) to a cross-section of 15 court cases. Mandlawitz determined that eligibility for special education or related services was never questioned in these cases. However, what was necessary to provide “educational benefit” was in dispute. It was also typical for the setting of services (whether home or

school) to be in dispute. The determination of “least restrictive environment” was commonly disputed in case law. Furthermore, courts ruled that the cost of services could not be a primary decision-making factor. The ruling did not preclude school districts from considering reasonable budget constraints. The examination of legal decisions found that districts needed to provide an “appropriate,” not necessarily “optimal” education. These findings became re-emphasized within additional studies of court cases by subsequent researchers (Hill & Hill, 2012; White, 2014).

Researchers continued to analyze case law litigated between 2004-2009 (Hill & Hill, 2012; White, 2014). While analyzing a heterogeneous data sample from 2007-2009, Hill and Hill (2012) found an overall increase in litigation with the subgroup of children with ASD. Furthermore, they found that school districts prevailed within the samples they studied. The researchers noted that while parents believed they might win by engaging their due process rights, they more often lost valuable time and financial resources.

Analysis revealed that some cases did find in favor of parents. The cases that favored parents related to IEP content and implementation (Hill & Hill, 2012). Examples include: (a) lack of measurable goals and objectives, and (b) lack of clearly outlined accommodations resulting in the inconsistent implementation of programs. Lapses in service were also found. These researchers asserted that lapses should have been explained to parents, with a provision of compensatory services provided. Had these practices been embraced, perhaps parent expectations may have been satisfied.

Additional legal outcomes were identified in favor of districts. The favorable rulings pertained primarily to procedural details. The procedures found to be acceptable

included: (a) parental participation, (b) least restrictive environment, (c) evaluation processes, (d) IEP development, and (e) qualifications of personnel. Additional substantive findings in favor of school districts resulted from complaints regarding (a) insufficient progress, (b) functional behavior assessment and behavioral intervention planning, (d) hours of ABA, and (e) student behavior. Only three areas of concern were found in favor of parents by the courts which included: (a) failure to provide IEP services, (b) failure to provide transition planning, and (c) lack of extended school year service (Hill & Hill, 2012). The findings of White (2014) were similar. Given that so many of these cases found that the rights of children were adequately protected, a lack of parental trust was not easily explained.

Despite the numerous court rulings in favor of school districts, researchers did not recommend that parents refrain from litigation. However, Mandlawitz (2002) viewed due process and litigation as the “last resort.” Even though districts often prevail, Hill and Hill (2012), questioned, “Who really wins?” They concluded that districts needed to do more to prevent the development of distrust in parents. They advocated for a basic level of common understanding between parents and schools. They recommended better and more frequent staff training, with an emphasis on building capacity to support evidence-based practices. They concluded by advocating for improved collaborative practices (Hill & Hill, 2012; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014).

Some researchers focused on improving the CPSE/CSE process through amendments to the current law (IDEA). Burke and Sandman (2015) mobilized parents to provide testimony to Congress during reauthorization of IDEA. Burke and Sandman (2015) pursued amendments by capturing the voices of 49 parents to advocate for

improvements to IDEA. This group of parents pushed for Congress to expand programmatic provisions that had been frequently sought by parents of children with autism. These provisions had also been the subject of litigation in prior years. The most notable aspiration of parents was to include applied behavioral analysis (ABA) as a related service allowed on an IEP. They believed that if ABA were specifically listed in IDEA, parents might have less difficulty receiving such services, and subsequently, fewer due process hearings may occur.

The financial impact of due process on parents was studied further by Burke and Goldman (2015). Like other researchers, they were concerned about the financial cost of due process on families of children with autism. Burke and Goldman (2015) collected a sample of 507 parents from 47 of the 50 states and identified factors that predicted the enactment of procedural safeguards. They found statistically significant findings associated with enactment of procedural safeguards with regard to the following factors: (a) families with weaker partnerships as measured by The Family-Professional Partnership Scale, (b) families who advocated more frequently, (c) families of older children, (d) families of children who spend only 0-20% of their time in the regular education setting, (e) families of children with internalizing behaviors, and (f) families with incomes above \$100,000 (Burke & Goldman, 2015). Conversely, no significant difference was found regarding marital status, race, parent education, or parent gender.

Additional implications outside of family income were found by Burke and Godman (2015). Additional concerns were attributed to (a) eroded trust, (b) lack of inclusive opportunities, (c) lack of family-centeredness, and (d) higher levels of parenting stress. Parents of older children were more likely to cite a lack of family centeredness. In

addition, parents with children who had internalizing behaviors experienced higher levels of stress. Burke and Goldman (2015) suggested that these subsets of families should be the focus of school professionals seeking to improve trust. The improvement of trust is an interest of this dissertation study. To examine the formation of trust, it became useful also to examine the research pertaining to the emergence of conflict.

### **Emergence of Conflict**

In the extreme, conflict has resulted in due process and litigation. According to White (2014) for families who have a child with ASD, the conflict has sometimes arisen due to inconsistencies in diagnostic criteria that existed among evaluators across community settings. Furthermore, the eligibility criteria for special education services has differed from the diagnostic criteria in clinics. Effective methodologies have been the subject of philosophical debate (White, 2014). Lake and Billingsley (2000, p. 241) suggested that this conflict was unavoidable. While suggesting it was inevitable, they also asserted, how “conflict is handled” matters. To begin this contextual examination of conflict and how it is managed, examination of Lake and Billingsley’s (2000) work proved beneficial. Their research resulted in a preliminary theory which would be cited by other researchers in the years to follow. The subsequent pool of research focused more closely on some of the factors that Lake and Billingsley first described.

To understand factors that escalated the conflict, and understand how the conflict was perceived, Lake and Billingsley (2000), studied the perspectives of parents of children with disabilities, school administrators, and mediators. The participants they studied included 22 parents, 16 school officials and six mediators ( $n=44$ ). The parents were solicited through a mailing to 438 parents in the state of Massachusetts who had

rejected their children's IEP and filed an appeal with the Bureau of Special Education Appeals between 1995-1997. Through an interview process, eight factors that escalate or de-escalate conflict were identified. Those factors include: (a) knowledge, (b) service delivery, (c) valuation, (d) reciprocal power, (e) constraints, (f) communication, (g) trust, and (h) discrepant views of the child or child's needs. This model attempted to explain the conflict cycle involving parents and districts. At the center of the model was the concept of *discrepant views of the child or child's needs*. While this model was most precisely illustrated by Lake and Billingsley (2000), many of these same factors have since been identified by other researchers (Brown, Ouellette-Kuntz, Hunter & Kelly, 2010; Burke & Goldman, 2015; Burke & Sandman, 2015; Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron & Hughes, 2008; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). What Lake and Billingsley (2000) emphasized was that each of the eight factors in their model was not mutually exclusive. They explained that the factors might occur simultaneously and result in either escalation or de-escalation of conflict. They described an interactive and dynamic nature of factors. The published study included verbatim quotes from parents, mediators, and school administrators. Verbatim responses from parents were captured for each of the eight factors identified in the study. There were multiple perspectives on this complex dynamic. The origin of *discrepant views of the child* was speculated without clear resolution. Largely there have been differing opinions about what contributed to trust or mistrust with research participants.

Lake and Billingsley (2000) identified the most significant predictor of conflict. Of all parent participants interviewed, 90% identified *discrepant views of the child* as the initiating or escalating factor of conflict with schools (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Parent

participants believed their children were not viewed as individuals with unique strengths and abilities. They also reported concern that school professionals focused on a deficit model, which was not the preferred lens of parents. Zeitlin and Curcic (2013) also attributed *discrepant views* as a predictor of conflict. Zeitlin and Curcic (2013) found that ambiguous laws and their interpretation contributed to the conflict.

Further analysis by Lake and Billingsley (2000) revealed additional factors that fueled conflict according to mediators, parents and school administrators. Special education mediators asserted that a *lack of problem-solving knowledge* and *lack of communication strategies* among school officials escalated the conflict with parents. Parents reported an *imbalance of knowledge* and voiced frustration that everyone else knows the rules, while they do not. They reported they were unaware of their lack of knowledge until faced with conflict for the first time. A single school official suggested that schools should take responsibility to provide knowledge to parents “or else they will seek it elsewhere” (Lake & Billingsley, 2000, p. 245). The sources of information parents utilized to understand the rules of the CPSE/CSE better were not always reliable. It was proposed that providing accurate information to parents should be a priority for districts. Furthermore, it was suggested that perhaps knowing the rules would diminish suspicion and enhance trust, allowing parents to be clearer about the perceived needs of their children.

Unfulfilled needs were a concern also cited by Brown et al., (2010). They referred to this concern as “unmet needs.” This research sought to better conceptualize a theoretical framework specific to the unmet needs of school-aged children with autism. The study aimed to predict perceived unmet need by parents considering both child and

parent factors. The model utilized measures of the child's functional independence. They suggested that it was conceivable that parents of children on both extremes of the spectrum would report high levels of unmet need, yet for different reasons. To illustrate examples, they suggested that parents of children with high levels of independence were likely to advocate for support to engage in recreational activities with typical peers. This support may not have been viewed as a need by school professionals. Meanwhile, parents of children with poor adaptive skills or extreme behaviors may have had needs that simply could not be met or resulted in long waiting lists for service.

In addition to unfulfilled needs, parents reported frustration due to *unfulfilled promises of services not delivered*. This was specifically cited in 50% of cases of children in transition from preschool to kindergarten (Janus et al., 2008). *A lack of program options* was scrutinized by parents, school personnel, and mediators. Parents described insufficient answers to their questions about services as well as a lack of program options as contributors to conflict. Mediators believed the continuous assessment of student needs and advanced planning for service delivery were needed. It was suggested that school planning begin early and that parents have a part in program planning.

Furthermore, in Lake and Billingsley's research (2000) mediators suggested that the administration listen carefully to the parents' specific service requests to understand their underlying needs and interests. The perception that the administration needs to listen more carefully was not new in the research review. How this parent perception developed was not precisely identified or explained.

Some perceptions were common among multiple stakeholders. One factor acknowledged by all three groups interviewed were *financial factors* (Lake & Billingsley,

2000). These financial factors contributed to conflict. What arose from this conflict was the realization that parents of children with mild disabilities viewed students with severe disabilities as a drain on the system. Conversely, parents of children with severe disabilities believed that children with mild disabilities were over-identified which limited the resources available where they were most needed. Another division among parents pitted general education against special education in competition for resources.

Both parents and administration have cited the *need to be valued* by the other (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Parents described condescending approaches by the school administration. They reported feeling devalued and judged (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2013). Meanwhile, school administrators believed parents withheld pertinent information and were not always truthful. Lake and Billingsley (2000) explained that when parents failed to share their feelings openly and honestly, it made things more difficult. They waited until they had reached their breaking point before bringing concerns to the administration. At times, the administration did not know there was a concern until the parent abruptly appeared with an advocate. This implied that communication between parties was weak.

Communication during the meeting process was explored in the literature. Communication with school or lack of communication was a problem according to parents. The problem arose from the time parents transition their children from the CPSE during preschool to the CSE entering kindergarten. Parents with communication concerns attributed the shift from the CPSE to the CSE as a barrier. They described it as a shift away from family-focused approaches of preschool to ineffective communication at school age. The shift identified was not well explained to allow the readers of research to

understand how to address this better. They noted that weak communication led to increased stress on the family (Janus et al., 2008). Parents cited reduced frequency of communication, lack of communication or follow-up, misunderstandings and timing of clarifying attempts as factors that escalate the conflict. Parents desired frequent communication from school professionals. However, they found that when a conflict was present, parents and school personnel distanced themselves and avoided communication. Lake and Billingsley (2000) found that while participating in CSE meetings, parents were often intimidated by large numbers of meeting participants. Parents reported they did not feel comfortable sharing their feelings in these large groups. Parents also report they did not feel heard by the school. Parents reported they first felt listened to when a mediator, a third party, was facilitating meetings as a result of a due process complaint. Not feeling heard until this point in the process suggested a fractured relationship with the school. This ineffective pattern of communication appeared to fuel conflict and the expectation that conflict would continue with each interaction.

The formation of parent beliefs and expectations were studied by several researchers. Zeitlin and Curcic (2013) specifically studied distrust. They said, “Parents hate CSE meetings because they believe the system is meant to keep their children down, rather than be a benefit. There is so much distrust and feelings that the school will do things to their children without any collaboration.” Zeitlin and Curcic (2013, p. 379). They also found that information parents gained online and through social media had fueled the diminishing trust with school. They suggested that parents actively sought support wherever they could find it. What parents found on social media was not always

accurate. It appeared that parents might trust online support more than the support provided by schools.

Lake and Billingsley (2000) captured the parent voice more fully than the professionals they surveyed. They described parents as feeling unable to advocate for their children without proper knowledge. They asserted that parents needed more knowledge about organizations, disabilities, and the legal aspects of the CSE. They also needed skill development in conflict management. Lake and Billingsley (2000, p. 249) noted through the perspective of a mediator that parents used power to get what they wanted and did so “at any cost”. It was the cost of conflict that concerned several researchers. A closer examination of the use of advocacy during conflict was warranted in this literature review.

### **Advocacy and Conflict**

Within the research, it appeared that the term advocacy had become associated with implied intention. In the literature, it has been synonymous with the term *fight*. Within the qualitative research conducted by Zeitlin and Curcic (2013) parents described themselves as *feeling small and powerless*. They saw themselves as invisible and as an obstacle in the school’s process. They felt the need to become experts in disability, so they had some power in decision-making. Participant quotes described, “parents and teachers as natural enemies,” and “parents advised to be ready for a fight.”

The use of power during conflict was examined by Lake and Billingsley (2000). They defined the concept of *reciprocal power*. Participants in their research asserted that both parents and schools used power to resolve the conflict. Participants described power struggles, with high levels of resistance where “tenacity won out” (p. 248). Parents,

schools, and mediators all agreed that power struggles resulted in a human toll, which made everyone miserable (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

It was suggested that to achieve greater parity in the CSE process; parents could either obtain a professional advocate or prepare themselves to advocate. It was not clear within the research findings if advocacy helped parents meet their goals during a conflict. A variety of perspectives were captured in the literature regarding the nature and efficacy of parent advocacy (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Hess et al., 2006; Tincani, 2007; Trainor, 2010). Within the research, advocacy has taken different forms. Defining advocacy proved beneficial to the current study.

The term parent *advocacy* was not found in IDEA rather the term parent *participation* was used. In the research conducted by Trainor (2010), advocacy was defined as “the act of speaking on behalf of another person or group of people to help address their preferences, strengths, and needs” (p. 35). Ideally, according to Trainor (2010), teachers and other school personnel also advocated on behalf of students with disabilities. Supportive factors such as positive relationships with individual teachers contributed to parent confidence and willingness to advocate (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Hess et al., 2006). Not all parents who participated in empirical research engaged in advocacy. A dichotomy was described between passive compliance with educational decisions and learning to become an advocate for one’s child. Some parents described advocacy as providing a sense of empowerment. Researchers meanwhile found that advocacy took many different forms from formal to informal (Hess et al., 2006; Trainor 2010). One other investigation of school practices and parent advocacy was conducted by Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013). This qualitative study concluded that “parents’

desires are not inherently adversarial” (p. 695). Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013) asserted that parents needed to understand that schools often do have the best interest of children in mind. The dominance of professionalized and medicalized discourse with efficiency as a priority has interfered with opportunities for collaboration. The study shed light on the experiences of parents in the CSE process and concluded with recommendations for fundamental change and an improved collaborative process (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). They suggested specifically that more research focus on: “Identifying positive school practices that would be useful for proactive change” (p. 696). Improvement in practices would need to focus on improving trust within the relationships formed between parents and school leadership. A specific focus on the facilitators of the CPSE/CSE discussion was emphasized within the recommendations. Exploring the formation of trust within prior research became the next focus.

### **Trust Formation**

The review of research suggested that trust formation was desirable in relationships at school. School leaders valued parent trust. Parents emphasized the importance of trust. Furthermore, parents described their need for trusting relationships so that they may tolerate periodic, negative events with their children’s school (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). Trust was facilitated when professionals were nonjudgmental, attempted to understand parent struggles and focused on student success (Angell et al., 2009). Findings suggested that parents can give schools the benefit of the doubt with minor incidents when trust was intact. However, when trust was broken, parents lacked confidence in school personnel, even when good faith efforts were extended. Parents interviewed by Lake and Billingsley (2000) remembered their own turning point, the

point when they were no longer willing to risk further disappointment. At that point, they were ready to resort to mediation or due process hearings.

Suggestions were made by Lake and Billingsley (2000) to maintain collaboration in the face of adversity. Suggestions included: (a) paying attention to the whole child, (b) providing opportunities for parents to describe their children and their dreams for their children, and (c) focusing on relationships. They concluded that educators who developed strong reciprocal relationships with children and parents and those who used good communication skills established a foundation for a productive relationship. Then, when educators maintained conciliatory attitudes and utilized sound problem-solving strategies, they built confidence in families that problems could be resolved.

Some researchers focused on trust exclusively within their studies. Francis et al., (2016) theorized that a positive school culture promoted trust. A culture that promoted a sense of belonging among all stakeholders was specifically described as supporting trusting family-professional partnerships. This was evident when all school personnel from the principal to the bus driver assisted parents in some way (Angell et al., 2009). The participants in that qualitative study were unique since they included both parents of children with and without disabilities. All parent voices passionately described a sense of belonging to a community. Five themes emerged in the focus group discussions at five elementary schools and one middle school representing various geographic regions of the country. The themes included: (a) school culture of inclusion, (b) positive administrative leadership, (c) positive partnerships, (d) opportunities for family involvement, and (e) positive outcomes.

It was speculated that it is not the dynamic during the CSE meeting alone that built trust; it was the day-to-day administrative leadership of a school that built trust. The leadership resided in the principal. Principals were the one person who set the tone for a child's education (Angell et al., 2009). Among leadership examples cited by parents in the literature, the importance of school principals was particularly evident (Francis et al., 2016). Principals' desirable actions, attitudes, and other characteristics were described as enthusiastic and caring, welcoming, approachable, available and responsive to all families. Parents placed a high value on principals greeting students by name and informally interacting with them as families. Principals welcoming behavior was cited as putting parents at ease and having a positive impact on teacher behavior and morale. When problems arose, a conflict could be avoided by swift and effective responses to family concerns (Francis et al., 2016). This type of responsive administrator was also identified as enhancing trust by other researchers (Angell et al., 2009; Stoner et al., 2005). Direct involvement in day-to-day student issues facilitated trusting family-professional relationships according to Francis et al., (2016). High expectations for all students and sharing those expectations with families inspired family engagement.

Barriers to trust formation were also identified in prior research. Francis et al., (2016) noted that barriers could be magnified in inclusive settings when teachers were unprepared to teach students with disabilities. However, the parents in this study did not have that experience. A *culture of inclusion* was associated with descriptors such as "seamless" culture of "acceptance" and "diversity," which created a "welcoming" and "supportive" school. It was described as important that staff maintained the mindset and attitude that "everybody's valued" (Francis et al., 2016, p. 284). Inclusive practices

prevented parents of children with disabilities from feeling alone or unappreciated. All students, with and without disabilities, felt they were valued members of the community. One parent described having a student who was (academically) behind yet still wanting to go to school: “I think that’s huge” (Francis et al., 2016, p. 285). In addition to a school culture of inclusion, positive administrative leadership, attributes of positive partnerships, opportunities for family involvement, and positive outcomes for all students were found to be important for trusting partnerships according to parents (Francis et al., 2016). Finally, Angell et al., (2009) found that school climate was either a strong facilitator of trust or led to distrust. Climate was seen as the responsibility of the principal. The studies supported the commonly accepted belief that leadership groomed the climate in schools.

Examination of effective communication was also a theme repeated within this body of research on parent-professional partnerships. It was imperative to understand the elements or attributes found to be associated with effective communication. Some parents reported that their preferred mode of communication was oral, followed by written. Body language that suggests genuine caring was also important (Francis et al., 2016). Authentic caring was also found to be demonstrated by teachers when they spoke of students as people first, and their disabilities did not define them (Angell et al., 2009). Parents expected communication to be frequent and informal. When regular communication was established parents did not expect surprises (Angell et al., 2009; Francis et al., 2016). In the end, multiple studies found mothers of children with disabilities desired more information than other parents because their children’s renditions were not complete (Angell et al., 2009; Stoner et al., 2005). Consequently, communication was found to be a prime facilitator of trust.

Respect was an important attribute captured within the research on communication. Parents voiced a need to feel their contributions were valued. They saw this demonstrated through the actions and communication by educators. Parents saw respect demonstrated when they were treated as equal partners and when educators truly listened and acted upon what they heard parents say. Professionals who demonstrated empathy, sensitivity, compassion, and kindness helped them build trusting relationships (Francis et al., 2016). Each one of these attributes was worth noting for this study.

In addition, “professional commitment” built trust with parents. Parents referred to examples of teachers who went “above and beyond” what was expected of them because “It is not just a job to them” (Francis et al., 2016). Conversely, parental trust was reduced when “education professionals do no more than what they are pressured to do” (Stoner et al., 2005, p. 46). Altogether it was found that experiences with individual education professionals could have a lasting impact, leading to continued distrust even when conditions improved.

Finally, parents trusted educators when they perceived them to be professionally competent (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2016; Stoner, & Angell, 2006). The professionals they often described “made teaching look easy.” They proficiently addressed individual needs of students, were willing to learn new techniques and were proactive (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2016; Stoner, & Angell, 2006). Mothers of children in inclusive settings expected and trusted teachers regardless of whether they were general or special educators, but they must have demonstrated knowledge and flexibility. When knowledge and flexibility were judged as lacking trust eroded (Angell et al., 2009). Trust of educators was identified as conditional. Stoner et

al., (2005) found that when parents possessed eroded trust, they placed a higher value on the teachers who “have a heart to teach” (p. 46). This finding was powerful yet difficult to measure. This finding brought the focus of inquiry to parent involvement.

It was found that trusting partnerships were fostered in schools when meaningful opportunities for family involvement were present. Two types of involvement opportunities were described in the literature (Francis et al., 2016).

1. Parents involved in leadership roles were described as empowered. Leadership could include input to policies, programs, systems or other issues independently, with other families, and/or alongside educators. Involvement could occur in classrooms, at the school, or district level. Parent leaders who participated in this type of leadership were also actively recruiting other parents to participate in school activities or volunteering (Francis et al., 2016).
2. Parents may have volunteered to support the day-to-day activities of the school. In this role, they supported successful functioning by assisting teachers in the classroom, contacting other parents and inviting them to help, and answering new parent’s questions. Participants were noted to enjoy these activities universally. These activities created feelings of community, pride, and excitement in their schools.

Student outcomes were found to be essential measures for parents in public schools. Parents as stakeholders sought evidence that all demographic groups achieved positive outcomes academically and socially within an increasingly diverse student population. Francis et al., (2016) found many parents had noticed that inclusive practices increased acceptance of diversity at their schools. Some parents who did not have

children with disabilities admitted they were surprised and relieved that their children's education was not impeded but instead benefited from having students with disabilities included. Parents of students with disabilities noted considerable improvements in their children's academics, social skills, and behavior which they attributed to inclusive education. The most significant benefit noted by these parents was the acceptance of their children by typical peers. Collective positive outcomes of inclusive practices emerged as a factor influencing trusting family-professional partnerships.

Behaviors that facilitated collaborative partnerships with schools were examined by researchers at the University of Kansas. They developed a professional self-assessment tool: Dimensions of Family and Professional Partnerships (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). The tool was developed from qualitative research with 33 separate focus groups of parents, service providers, and administrators. Six broad themes were identified: communication, commitment, equality, skills, trust, and respect. Furthermore, each theme was expanded to capture indicators of that trait.

The results of this research led to a comparative analysis of parents and professionals. Strong agreement was found between parents and professionals about what constituted positive professional behavior. The potential value of the scale included comparison across factors including types of service, ages, and severity levels relative to the importance of and satisfaction of the parents' partnership with professionals. It also provided potential value with program evaluations. The items on the scale were cited as valuable points of discussion between groups of professionals and family members (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). The self-assessment tool was noted to provide a foundation

for future research on how school systems could proactively prepare for improved collaborative practices with families.

To achieve a quality partnership, trust has been identified as an essential factor. While organizational trust in the private sector has been studied for some time, the study of trust development within public schools was relatively recent. Diminished trust of public schools by the general public has become a significant point of concern (Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2000). Trust has been recognized as essential to school reform in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Parents have seen principals as critical to fostering, maintaining, and exemplifying trust in their children's schools (DiPaola, & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Sheldon, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). Additional research concluded that trust was a major factor within the relationship between parents of children with disabilities and the professionals at school (Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Stoner et al. 2005). Sheldon et al., (2010) initiated a collective case study of mothers of children with disabilities. Strong themes emerged in this study related to the principals' influence on parent trust. A trusting relationship was found to have the potential to minimize conflict and lead to a resolution. Principals were found to have the primary responsibility for fostering trust with all families.

Having recognized the significant role of principals, Sheldon et al. (2010) sought to determine just how that influence occurred. Through semi-structured interviews of 16 mothers of children with various disabilities, principal attributes and principal actions were found to be instrumental. The principal attributes identified were of both a personal and professional nature. Sheldon et al., (2010) described personal attributes, as: approachable and being authentically caring. Principals who took the time to listen and

conveyed an accepting attitude garnered trust. In addition to principal accessibility, knowledge of disabilities was valued by mothers. Even when principals did not initially demonstrate knowledge of the child's disability, the desire to learn was important to these parents. Mothers also noted that the rest of the staff took cues from the principal.

In addition to principal attributes, principal actions were identified as important to these mothers. A lack of action was also notable (Sheldon et al., 2010). Mothers focused on the principal's encouragement of teacher involvement with parents and attendance at CSE meetings. Principal participation in the meetings at higher grades, like middle school, was especially important for trust. It was reported as a problem if the first time a principal attended the CSE meetings was when the relationship was contentious. When principals took a personal interest in a mother's child, those mothers noted that it is was appreciated and recognized.

### **Conclusions and the Need for this Research**

From a methodological standpoint, the studies of parent conflict in special education have been mostly qualitative and situated within the transformative worldview (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2018). The qualitative studies were rich with participant quotes to illustrate viewpoints within themes. The research also included quantifiable data when it became evident.

A distinct group of research articles, also qualitative, focused on the outcomes of case law. The decisions of the courts represented conflicts across the country through the legal entitlement lens. These studies all utilized documents to analyze the problems associated with litigation between parents and school districts. The data provided a valuable context for why there is a problem that needs to be studied. The authors of these

studies successfully summarized categorical outcomes of litigation and described significant patterns leading to additional research questions (Hill & Hill, 2012; Hill & Kearley, 2013; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014).

Of the remaining studies selected for this review, two utilized quantitative methods. The research of Burke and Goldman (2015) identified factors associated with the likelihood that parents would enact procedural safeguards. They found no significant demographic differences in the sample concerning marital status, race, parent education level or the role of the respondent (p. 1349).

The second quantitative study (Summers et al., 2005) led to the development of a self-assessment tool based upon the qualitative research of Blue-Banning et al. (2004). The tool synthesized the perceptions of parents, service providers, and administrators about the specific behaviors and attitudes perceived as necessary for effective partnerships. It should be noted that the overall relevancy of this study is not the validity of the tool itself, but the relevancy of the factors that have been identified and proven to predict effective family-school relationships.

The research reviewed repeatedly emphasized that relationships were important to partnerships and avoidance of litigation. What parents define as specific indicators of strong relationships were identified as a priority for future research (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Burke et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2016; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; White, 2014). Trust arose as a significant need within the relationship, from the perspectives of both parents and leaders. While some parents reported how they developed trust, it was typically cited to be an outgrowth of relationships with teachers and principals.

Prior research did not specifically address how trust or conflict emerged with the CSE or CPSE chairperson who facilitated the meeting. Furthermore, the interviews within the research captured the perceptions of parents when expectations were not met. This suggested that parents had preconceived expectations. Hill and Hill (2012) identified parents of children with autism as more likely than other parents to engage in litigation. These findings suggested a need for closer examination of the dynamic between parents of children with autism and the chairperson during the CPSE/CSE meeting.

### **Chapter Summary**

Upon a comprehensive review of the research related to parent concerns, and conflict within the CSE process, parents of children on the autism spectrum arose as the most dissatisfied and most likely to engage in litigation. The nature of the conflict was well described in the narrative of qualitative studies. The gaps and needs for future research were abundant. Each study reviewed resulted in recommendations for future research. The most compelling needs for research seem to be related to decreasing the potential for conflict at CPSE/CSE. The following chapter describes in detail the research design used to understand the dynamic.



## **Chapter 3: Research Design**

### **Introduction**

Parents of children with autism spectrum disorders have reported many challenges educating their children. The challenges parents reported were associated with conflict at the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) and/or the Committee on Special Education (CSE) meeting. Escalation of conflict has resulted in litigation between parents and school district administration. Studies of case law concluded that the parents most likely to be dissatisfied were those who have a child with autism. Concerns regarding the financial impact and strained relationships have been well documented in prior research. Recommendations for future research have emphasized the need to improve parent-professional relationships and reduce conflict.

Within this chapter, the details of the study design are explained. Alignment of the problem statement, research questions, participant selection, and research tools are justified. The context of the research is detailed with a description of the participants. Methods for data analysis describe how a deeper understanding of the problem was approached.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There was a need to uncover the premises, inferences, and conclusions held by both parents and chairpersons associated with the CPSE/CSE process that promoted

defensive reasoning and discouraged effective dialogue necessary to avoid the escalation of conflict.

This problem as defined arose from the research reviewed in Chapter 2. The research reviewed included analysis of court cases and qualitative interviews of CPSE/CSE participants, including parents, service providers, and administrators. Factors believed to be catalysts of conflict were identified. The specific outcomes repeatedly cited suggested that positive relationships between parents and school personnel are fundamental to avoiding conflict and building trust. Multiple studies spanning the last 15 years identified descriptors of trusting relationships to include: respect, empathy, sensitivity, compassion, kindness, commitment, competence, flexibility, knowledgeable, approachable, accepting, and so forth (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Francis et al., 2016; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Stoner & Angell, 2006). . Theoretically, trust in the school personnel, including the CPSE/CSE chairperson should support true dialogue even when conflicting viewpoints exist if defensive routines are avoided. Argyris (1999) would assert that to avoid defense routines one must test the other's premises, inferences, and conclusions.

This study was designed to answer three research questions.

### **Research Questions**

1. What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

2. What premises, inferences, and conclusions do chairpersons hold regarding the parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?
3. Do parents communicate and/or chairpersons report that they have shared their beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

### **Research Context**

The context of this research focused on the dynamic between parents of children on the autism spectrum and the chairpersons of the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) meeting or the Committee on Special Education (CSE) meeting. In either case, these meetings involved parents, teachers and service providers, engaged together in a planning process to improve the development and learning of the child in the educational setting. The chairperson facilitated the discussions at these meetings, held at least annually. The discourse that took place at these meetings most likely referenced documents from both educational evaluators and the medical community. The resulting decisions explicitly related to the education of the child and are governed by regulations established by the New York State Education Department.

To address the questions under study, the researcher recruited parents of children with autism and CPSE/CSE chairpersons for individual interviews. The participants were recruited from 10 school districts from the eastern Monroe County suburbs, also known as Monroe One BOCES component districts. The employment setting of the researcher was excluded.

Monroe County is situated within the Greater Rochester region of New York State and holds specialized resources and expertise associated with the University of

Rochester, Levine Autism Clinic. The Levine Clinic is one of thirteen diagnostic and clinical service agencies within the Autism Speaks Treatment Network in the nation. Autism Speaks is a national non-profit organization that focuses on research and advocacy for people with autism. Autism Speaks established best-practices clinics in North America. There are only 11 such clinics in the United States and two in Canada. With expertise so close, parents in the Greater Rochester region may have higher levels of autism awareness than other parts of the state or country.

The 10 Monroe One BOCES component districts not including Webster, enroll roughly 38,000 students. As of the 2016-17 school year, the New York State Education Department reported that Monroe County averaged 14% of students identified as having an educational disability. This study included participants from within five of the nine, Monroe One BOCES districts excluding the Webster School District. These districts identified up to 6,100 students with disabilities (SWD) in total. This study focused on parents of children with autism. Therefore their children were a subset of the 6,100 SWD population and came from fewer than that many families. Based upon the incidence of autism of one in every 68 children (CDC, 2010) approximately 559 students with autism may have attended public schools within these districts during the study period. They could be receiving services provided through the CSE or CPSE.

Local Boards of Education approve annually those employees permitted to chair the CPSE/CSE committees and subcommittees. Multiple personnel are typically approved to facilitate meetings and make recommendations to the district board of education. The approved list of chairpersons is made public annually by each board of education.

## **Research Participants**

Purposeful sampling was utilized for both participant groups. This method allowed a close examination of the experience essential to the problem being studied. This strategy was also known to provide a thick description of the problem under study (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Before soliciting participants, the superintendents of all eligible school districts were contacted about the study. Letters of introduction were sent requesting their districts participation (see Appendix A). Five school district superintendents provided signed permission.

Participants for each of the two groups: Parents of children with autism and chairpersons, were solicited following consent by the superintendents. Chairpersons were contacted via email with a letter of introduction requesting their participation (see Appendix B). Parents were recruited through community organizations to avoid being associated with any school district initiative. Parent methods of recruitment included: e-mail invitation, website advertising, and flyers made available at the organization's physical locations. Parent participants were also asked to invite additional parents to interview. Parents completed an online screening questionnaire, before final selection to participate (see Appendix C). Parents who met all criteria for participation were contacted via telephone or email to schedule his/her interview. The letter of introduction (see Appendix B) was sent via email to each parent with a confirmation of the interview time and location.

A purposeful sample of parents was recruited. Parents were eligible to participate if they met all the following criteria: a) parents had a child between the age of 3-21 with a

medical diagnosis of ASD, b) the child had an IEP, and c) the parent had experience attending CPSE/CSE meetings at least annually.

Representation of parent participants was established according to district size. Twelve parents were recruited. At the onset of parent recruitment, responses from the two largest districts were rapid. As a result, volunteers from the two largest districts were turned away. One district did not have parents represented, and another was under-represented. Multiple unsuccessful attempts were made by the parent organizations to recruit additional participants. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric pseudonym. The prefix P was assigned to parents and numbers were assigned 1-12 in order of the participant recruitment (see Table 3.1). All parent participants began meeting with their school district CPSE while their children were in preschool. They were now all participating in the CSE. Several parents had experience in other districts.

Table 3.1

*Districts, Student Enrollment and Participants*

District	Total student enrollment 2016-2017	Parent Participants	Chairperson Participants
A	5,820	P1, P3, P4	C4, C8, C9
B	3,559	*	C5, C6
C	1,110	P7	C7
D	6,158	P6, P8, P9, P10, P11	C1, C3
E	3,767	P2, P5, P12	C2

Note. \*indicates no participants

The second purposeful sample included nine chairpersons of the CPSE or CSE. Three chairpersons exclusively facilitated CPSE meetings. Six chairpersons were

responsible for CSE meetings. In terms of experience, these participants had accrued approximately 5-12 years of experience facilitating the CPSE or CSE meetings. Each participant was assigned an alphanumeric pseudonym. The prefix C was assigned to chairpersons and numbers were assigned 1-9 in order of the participant recruitment (see Table 3.1).

### **Instruments Used in Data Collection**

Within qualitative studies, the researcher is considered an instrument of the research. The researcher brings his/her own world view and all data collected passes through his/her lens (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2018; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). This study was designed and implemented by a doctoral student in Executive Leadership from St. John Fisher College, with special education and administration experience exceeding 30 years in public education. More specifically, the researcher worked with children and parents across settings and age levels. This included home settings, preschool and school-aged settings from birth to age 21 in the role of a speech-language pathologist. The researcher had experience providing training regarding CSE and CPSE eligibility and process to chairpersons and parents across New York State. The researcher served as a CPSE/CSE Chairperson at the central office level within her district. These professional experiences provided the researcher with the unique ability to engage in meaningful inquiry and reflection with both groups of participants.

All interviews were conducted between November 9, 2018, and January 8, 2019. The site of parent interviews was most often in the family home, with three interviews held in public library meeting rooms. All participant time preferences were honored from 8:00 a.m. through 8:00 p.m. including weekends. All chairpersons met during their

typical workday at their office location. Upon convening at the designated sites, introductions were made, and the informed consent was explained and obtained, in writing, from each participant (see Appendix D). Upon completion of parent interviews, each participant received a \$20 gift card.

Following receipt of signed consent, participants were asked to complete a brief seven-item survey. The survey utilized a five-point Likert scale which served as a focus for the subsequent interview (see Appendix E and F). The survey itself was designed to develop a consistent method of focusing on the context of the interview discussion. Once the survey was completed, it was reviewed, and the interview began. The introduction to the interview protocol was read verbatim from the appropriate interview guide. The item-by-item interview guide was used to align each survey question with a follow-up interview question (see Appendix G and H). The researcher referenced the participant's survey responses and utilized the interview guide to explore the beliefs each participant held concerning each choice. The entire interview process lasted approximately 30 – 45 minutes in total.

Interviews were digitally audio-recorded on two separate devices: an iPhone with Rev software and a digital recorder. The Rev digital recordings were securely transferred to the transcription service. The verbatim transcripts were exported to an Excel spreadsheet for manipulation and analysis. Each transcript was compared to the audio for accuracy. During and immediately following interviews, field notes were recorded to capture relevant observations. All notes, verbatim transcripts, digital recordings, and spreadsheets have been kept secure through password protection, encryption and locked storage by the researcher. Participants, as well as any other persons noted in their

responses, were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity during all stages of data analysis and reporting.

### **Data Analysis**

Methods associated with grounded theory research were chosen. The researcher aimed to collect preliminary data that could potentially lead to an emergent theory that explains the escalation of conflict at the CPSE/CSE meeting. According to Charmaz (2014), these methods can utilize data collected from concrete events and descriptions to provide theoretical insight and possibilities.

The data analysis began with the line-by-line coding of verbatim transcripts (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2016). The utilization of an Excel spreadsheet allowed for comparative analysis of all data collected. Each transcript was saved as a separate sheet within the Excel notebook. The first column of the spreadsheet identified the speaker role of either interviewer or participant. The line-by-line verbatim transcriptions constituted the second column with the sheet. The third column referenced the question number (Q1-Q7). The fourth column indicated the Likert rating chosen for that question. The ratings were used to sort the interview data allowing multiple comparisons during data analysis. Each additional column of the spreadsheet captured the in vivo and focused codes. Throughout the analysis process, audio files and text transcriptions were reviewed repeatedly and constantly compared.

The first phase of coding was an in vivo method. With this approach, codes were assigned to the data as they arose from the actual words used by parents and chairpersons (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2016). In addition, as codes were assigned, coding memos were entered in a code sheet within the database to explain the meaning captured within

each code. The next step of coding included two phases of focused coding and then axial coding to capture categories and themes.

During focused coding, the words of participants were analyzed for the appearance of assumptions, inferences, and conclusions. Premises were defined as assumptions where “beliefs are taken for granted” (Elder & Paul, 2016, p. 47). Inferences were defined as “a step in the mind, by which something is concluded to be true based on something else being true or appearing to be true” (Elder & Paul, 2016, p 51). Conclusions were defined as “judgments or decisions reached by reasoning” (Elder & Paul, 2016, p 46). The second phase of focused coding analyzed the verbatim responses for words that implied advocacy, inquiry or a balance of both. The final phase of axial coding resulted in categories and themes to identify underlying beliefs about the CPSE/CSE process. This analysis process was ongoing and immediately followed each new interview. Audio recordings were reviewed two or three times each to confirm emerging meaning and to compare coding. This process was applied separately to chairperson interviews, and then the parent interviews.

Once individual transcripts from both groups were coded and themed, they were compared for similarities and differences as they relate to the research questions and the participants' agreement or disagreement. Specifically, the data were examined to uncover similar and divergent viewpoints by participant groups related to expressed beliefs about their expectations of the CPSE/CSE process. The viewpoints expressed as beliefs became themes. An important aspect of the analysis utilized a lens of *defensive reasoning*, by examining transcripts for premises, inferences, and conclusions. Responses that contained evidence of *advocacy* and *inquiry* were closely examined during analysis.

## **Summary**

Purposeful sampling was utilized to recruit participants from school districts within the eastern Monroe County suburbs of New York State to participate in this study. The context of this research focused on the dynamic between parents of children with autism and the chairperson of the CPSE/CSE meeting. Utilizing a qualitative design, the premises, inferences, and conclusions held by participants within both groups were examined. The underlying beliefs of participants were identified using In-Vivo, focused coding, and axial coding methods. Utilizing a theoretical lens of defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1999) transcripts were analyzed. The results of the data analysis are explained in Chapter 4.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

This study arose from the concern that conflict during the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) or Committee on Special Education (CSE) meeting can escalate and result in costly litigation. The outcomes of litigation, the emergence of conflict, the nature of advocacy and the formation of trust related to these meetings have been researched. Prior studies focused largely on the parent perspective. The focus of this study was the expectations held by parents of children with autism and chairpersons when they participate in the CSE. More specifically the premises, inferences, and conclusions underlying those expectations were studied. Theoretically, the premises, inferences, and conclusions kept private during conflict promote defensive routines, undermine trust formation and fuel further conflict (Argyris, 1999). Ultimately determining if participants shared their underlying beliefs was an aim.

Participants were recruited from five suburban school districts from eastern Monroe County within greater Rochester. One-on-one, face-to-face meetings were held with each participant. Each meeting aimed to explore the premises, inferences, and conclusions of each participant. At the start of each meeting, a seven-item survey was administered (see Appendices F and H). The primary purpose of the survey tool was to elicit a response as a starting point for further discussion about the beliefs of each

participant. Each meeting commenced utilizing the semi-structured interview script (see Appendices G and I).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Parents were assigned pseudonyms with the prefix P and the number corresponding to the order in which they were interviewed (P1-P12). Chairpersons were assigned pseudonyms with the prefix C and the number corresponding to the order in which they were interviewed (C1-C10). Themes for each group were identified following in vivo coding and focused coding methods of individual responses.

Within this chapter, the data analysis and findings are organized in two ways. First relevant participant demographic data is displayed to build a complete context for the data analysis. Then, the findings are addressed according to the following research questions.

1. What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?
2. What premises, inferences, and conclusions do chairpersons hold regarding the parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?
3. Do parents communicate and/or chairpersons report that they have shared their beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

### **Participant Data**

Five school district superintendents provided permission for their CPSE/CSE chairpersons to participate. Subsequently, chairpersons from each district consented and participated. However, the recruitment of parents resulted in the representation of just

four of those districts. The remaining parent participants were represented relative to the size of their district. Some variability in size between the districts was noted. During interviews, some parents and chairpersons inferred the small size of their districts was a factor. Those comments appeared to be relative to larger suburban districts that did not participate in this study. The demographic factors are displayed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

*Participant Representation by Group*

District	Total Student Enrollment 2016-2017	Parent Participants		Chairperson Participants
		Group 1: Expect the Worst	Group 2: Expect to Figure it Out	
A	5,820	P1	P3, P4	C4, C8, C9
B	3,559	*	*	C5, C6
C	1,110	*	P7	C7
D	6,158	P6	P8, P9, P10, P11	C1, C3
E	3,767	P5	P2, P12	C2

Note. \*Indicates no participants

The study was designed to compare one parent group to one chairperson group. However, interview analysis resulted in two distinctly different viewpoints within the parent group. One parent subgroup portrayed the process as highly contentious. This group was identified as the *Expect the Worst* Parent Group. The other parent group described the process more favorably and had formed working relationships with their chairpersons. The second group was identified as the *Expect to Figure it Out* Parent Group. Further analysis revealed that parents from both groups were represented across

the districts that participated. The representation of parent participants is displayed within Table 4.1.

It also appeared that time or timing in the CPSE/CSE process mattered. Within the *Expect the Worst* Parent Group were two parents who had transitioned from preschool to the CSE just one-to-three years prior. While there were outliers within the *Expect to Figure it Out* Parent Group, most had been engaged in the CPSE and CSE process for at least five years. Several parents had participated for as many as thirteen to fifteen years.

The chairpersons reported approximately six-to-twelve years of experience in the role. Three chaired the CPSE, and the remaining six chaired CSE meetings. Most of the chairpersons had chaired CSE meetings in other districts before their current assignment. They had all participated as service providers at CSE before becoming chairpersons.

### **Research Question 1 Results**

The first research question asked, “What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?” The interview transcript analysis resulted in two distinctly different themes. The different themes are detailed by Parent Group 1 and Parent Group 2. The nature of each theme is explained as follows.

**Group 1: Expect the Worst Parent Group.** This subgroup of three parents described a contentious relationship. They entered the process with heightened mistrust. They each thought they needed to be prepared for *the worst* at each CSE meeting. They expected to be “cheated” in some way. They were threatened by the presumption that the chairperson role was to protect district resources. Altogether they were skeptical that the chairperson truly understood the needs of their children. They did not expect to receive

benefit from the CSE without a “fight” for their children’s rights. They began this “fight” at the initial CSE. They expected to “fight” at each meeting in the future.

One parent described the first CSE meeting as, “It was basically a bomb dropped.” Another parent said she was “kind of caught off guard about a few things.” She concluded, “I just don't have trust. I feel like I need to be on my game all the time.” They implied that they had learned to “fight” from the first negative experience. One parent said she must be prepared to make a “stronger case.” She needed to be prepared to say “no” and to demand more time and resources at her meetings.

To prepare for meetings, these parents gathered support from outside the school system. They sought out support from other parents or professionals who were sympathetic to how they described their situation. As a result, it appeared that their concerns were reinforced. The nature of these parent concerns arose from four primary underlying beliefs: presumed a hidden agenda, presumed a broken relationship, presumed they’ve been cheated, concluded they would need to keep fighting. The underlying tone of their explanations communicated, “It’s not fair.” The expectations of this group included beliefs that formed subthemes. These beliefs were further analyzed.

***Presumed a hidden agenda.*** This theme arose as parents explained additional reasons to mistrust. They questioned the underlying agenda the chairperson held. They did not believe their children’s best interest was the priority. One parent listed two presumptions about the chairperson’s priorities. First, “I think it's more of that personnel allocation.” Next, she explained her belief that there is a limit to the percentage of students who can be classified with a disability. She believed that her son was targeted for declassification to reduce the numbers. Another parent asserted her presumption quite

succinctly and sarcastically, “I just don't trust necessarily her [chairperson] intentions and her agenda.” This parent was highly suspect of an ulterior motive. She believed that the chairperson used numerous excuses including limited resources, budgets, time and the needs of other students. These parents did not believe the chairperson’s agenda prioritized “what is best” for their children. Based on this presumption, these parents concluded they would need to “fight” at the CSE meeting.

***Presumed broken relationships.*** This subgroup of parents described dysfunctional or broken relationships with the chairperson. These parents lacked trust in the process attributed to the chairperson. They did not believe explanations given by the chairperson. They inferred that they did not believe that these relationships would improve. The words used to describe the nature of their relationships were vivid. The words “love-hate” were used by one parent. She continued, “I used to joke around that she [chairperson] has my face on a dart board.” There was evidence of blame when this parent said, “The relationship is at least unbalanced. I see I'm being proactive, and she's [chairperson] being reactive. And I feel like it should be just a little bit or at least more balanced.” These parents described being “pacified.” They believed they had been viewed as an “annoyance.”

The one parent who reported a difficult middle school year with her son did not share details about her son’s elementary school experience. It appeared, however, that the relationship with her chairperson was already on “rocky ground” when her son entered middle school. She reported the following: “I don’t have a relationship with the chairperson. I don’t even know the chairperson’s name.” An even greater concern was communicated during her interview. She said, “There's a big disconnect in the areas of

concern, and that's not just the chair, that's the whole team.” This “disconnect” was defined as *discrepant views of her son's needs*. It seemed that the parent, chairperson, and team did not hold a common view of the child's needs. It also seemed that all the relationships were fractured, not just the relationship with the chairperson.

These parents described relationships with the chairperson as already broken. They implied they had nothing more to lose. They seemed to believe they had more to gain from engaging in a fight at the CSE.

***Presumed they've been cheated.*** This parent group continued to build a case for their need to fight. The concern they communicated was a lack of expected results. There was resentment in their tones. One parent said, “I feel like they definitely cheated him on that last year.” These parents reported that they presumed that they were all being cheated.

The way they felt cheated was embodied in different ways. One parent inferred the chairperson might have taken advantage of her family situation as an immigrant. “Maybe an American family who grew up in the system, they may have better results to fight.” Another parent expressed anger about her effort. “It's just frustrating, because I'm a capable, educated, resourceful parent, but it makes me mad because I shouldn't have to be.” Altogether, these parents presumed it was common for parents to be cheated of their rights by the chairperson. This was yet another justification to take a fighting stance.

***Concluded they would need to keep fighting – It's not fair.*** The underlying beliefs of this subgroup all resulted in the conclusion that the CSE process required a fight. They described the system as unfair to parents. They concluded they would continue fighting for the services they were entitled to for their children. They expressed

anger and frustration. One parent said it this way, “I feel like I have to do all my research beforehand so I can counter what she [chairperson] tells me to actually get at the real truth.” Another parent believed, “It’s not fair” she has to work so hard. Yet another said, “We learned not to back down.”

This small group of parents seemed to have concluded differently than most parents interviewed. The remaining parents seemed to have better relationships with their chairpersons and expected that together they would *figure it out*. The results of the analysis of these parent transcripts are detailed in the following pages.

**Group 2: Expect to Figure it Out Parent Group.** This group of parents held the majority voice. The parent expectation to *figure it out* appeared to arise from underlying beliefs identified during interviews. The underlying beliefs also seemed to form a foundation of trust. Altogether these parents expressed many beliefs that seemed to support the development of collaborative relationships with their chairpersons and teams.

*Presumed some parents “want the moon.”* Most of these parents understood there was a vocal group of dissatisfied parents. They saw themselves as different. The perception that other parents are unhappy was addressed head-on by one parent. She said, “I’m probably gonna [*sic*] skew the results, but whatever. I’m happy.” During these nine interviews, many participants described how their approaches differed from the other parents. They seemed to believe they had more realistic expectations of the process overall.

An involved parent participating in the CSE for over fifteen years said this, “Some parents, not me, *want the moon*. Sure, and so then the Chair tries to paint a more realistic picture, which I completely agree needs to happen.” As interviews continued,

each parent captured in some way the premise that other parents *want the moon*. They implied that this was not an effective approach.

I think sometimes the attitude a parent comes in with can be troublesome to the process as well because then they're not as open to suggestions or differences or to argue effectively for their [*sic*] child. That they're doing it more out of emotion than out of what is actually needed.

These parents inferred that there are better approaches during a meeting. One parent seemed to suggest she may have figured out this phenomenon. "It's just the conversations that we have. I don't know: Maybe it's just because I'm asking for the right things. I have never tried to reach beyond what I feel like my daughter needs."

Regardless of what other parents might want, these parents seemed confident that they only asked for what was needed. They asked for nothing more. By embracing what they felt were realistic expectations, these parents believed they were more effectively engaging with the chairperson. They implied that once engaged with the chairperson they could develop a productive relationship. These parents presumed a beneficial relationship with the CSE and the chairperson. These parents also presumed the chairperson knew their children and their children's needs. These two presumptions led to a series of beneficial conclusions. First, the presumption that the chairperson knows their children were analyzed further.

***Presumed the chairperson knows the child.*** These parents presumed the chairperson *knew* their children. This presumption seemed to arise when parents observed how their children's unique needs were captured in the IEP. This understanding of their

children seemed to evolve from the dialogue during the meeting. Also, these parents observed how the chairperson interacted outside of meetings.

The dynamic was described this way, “They've never really suggested anything that seems out of place because they know him.” Furthermore, this parent added, “That makes me feel confident that they're not just saying something to say something.”

Another parent described her child as “in good hands” with the chairperson.

Parents reported seeing the chairperson interact with her child during meetings and at school events. Trust and credibility were associated with the chairperson because of these interactions. This kind of association also made them feel more comfortable at the CSE meetings.

Central to this dynamic was communication. The transcripts revealed parents valued the communication they established with the chairperson. They believed they had benefited from open lines of communication. Further analysis of this “open communication” follows.

***Concluded that they could expect open communication.*** This group of parents described a free flow of communication and action on the part of the chairperson. This communication frequently occurred outside of the CSE meeting. Open communication took many forms. Communication was described as prompt and proactive.

One parent said, “When things come up, I don't wait to have a meeting, I'll send an email to whoever [*sic*] I need to talk to or ask a question to [*sic*].” This type of interaction occurred with the teacher, therapists, and chairperson. Another parent said, “The chairperson will ask questions if he doesn't understand. He's very receptive via email or phone calls. He's the first one to call me back if I send out a group email.” These

were just some of the reports of parents that described open communication. This type of open communication between parents and their chairpersons seemed to support a team approach. The belief in a team approach resulted from further analysis.

***Concluded that there will be a team effort.*** The parents in this group described an approach best characterized as teamwork. The chairperson was described as one who facilitated teamwork. The chairperson was reported to include the parent as a valued member of the team. It was implied that each member of the team had his/her own expertise, and they would accomplish more together.

One parent acknowledged, “Every kid with autism is so different, and I think what [the] chairperson does is they rely a lot on the team.” Another emphasized, “They make you feel like you’re part of the team, not just the parent.” A similar impression was shared, “He [chairperson] is very willing to listen to any concerns that I’ve had. He definitely treats me like a member of the team.”

The predominant theme of these parents’ reports illustrated the necessity of teamwork and the valued role of parents. As a result of effective teamwork, it was implied that consensus would be reached. Together teams formed a seemingly accurate view of the *needs of the child*. The next theme supported the conclusion that chairpersons would then support the child’s needs.

***Concluded that the chairpersons will give what is needed.*** Every parent in this group shared an example of how the chairperson provided appropriate levels of services. There were some reports where chairpersons provided more than expected. One parent believed the autism diagnosis resulted in greater benefit. All parents in this group reported that their children’s needs were being met.

One parent used words like “above and beyond.” One parent said, “I have been lucky, 'cause [*sic*] they just kind of give.” Another parent said, “They want him to succeed, so they're [chairperson] giving him everything.”

Reaching a successful outcome seemed to be the perceived justification for generous allocation of services. This reported practice of the chairperson seemed to further the trusting relationship. Although these parents believed they received adequate services through the school district, they reported that not all needs could be met by the CSE. They did not expect all needs could be met by special education. They saw the pervasive needs of their children as being supported through multiple means. These supports are described in the following theme.

***Concluded it's broader than special education.*** These parents acknowledged that to meet the needs of the “whole child,” they needed services and supports beyond those provided by the CSE. They acknowledged that the IEP focused on educational needed. Therefore, they saw limits to what the chairperson could provide. They seemed to accept that without question. They gave examples of community agencies recommended by the chairperson or team. Utilizing community-based resources could be mutually beneficial to success in school. One parent reported, “We've [school team] actually worked together with The Levine Center. We've [school team] had them talk to our care provider there and try to figure out stuff when he was in crisis.”

They also described some supports that were naturally occurring. One parent described the benefit of having enrolled her son in a small school. “I think it's much better than some of the bigger schools, and you get the more individualized attention.”

Another support seemed to be associated with an inclusive culture. “You'd be amazed at what the classmates do. They open their hearts and include the kid. Believe me; they're [classmates] not forced to do it. They're [classmates] not forced to eat at your kid's lunch table.”

Emphasized within this theme was the belief that the chairperson alone could not be the sole source of support. These parents demonstrated empathy for the complexities the chairperson might face meeting the educational needs of their children. The empathy they expressed was also captured in the following theme.

*Inferred empathy for the chairperson's circumstances.* This group of parents expressed their beliefs from multiple perspectives. They considered their individual situations and considered other families. Ultimately, they also acknowledged the difficult circumstances of the chairperson. They noted the stress that resulted from the extreme demands of some parents. They noted time constraints, the volume of work and the variety of student needs as pressures. The chairperson's role was described as a “hard job,” “stressful job” and “hell” by one parent. This parent also said, “I know some parents just go over the top: They hire attorneys, they threaten to sue.” The time constraints placed on chairpersons was described this way, “I feel like people don't have enough time to prepare and I can appreciate that there's probably a lot of paperwork for so many kids, not just mine . . . one of those things that's difficult to remedy.”

One parent empathized with the position of the chairperson and said, “They didn't have to approve that, but they did, and so we have a courtesy, you know, and then if that got out, other families would want it too, and we understand.” She was grateful for the

approval of a service that other parents may not have received. She had empathy for the chairperson due to the perception that a precedent may have been set.

The chairperson's ability to meet the needs of each child while managing the complexities of the job, seemed to put them in high esteem with these parents. However, they also had empathy for other parents. An additional theme arose from their empathy: They inferred they might have been privileged.

*Inferred they may have been privileged.* This group of satisfied parents inferred the CSE process might be unfair to some parents. They communicated empathy for parents who had fewer resources. This was associated with the belief that they might be privileged. Having a college education, easy access to community resources, and financial stability were all reported as a privilege. They explained how certain they were that other parents were at a disadvantage without these assets.

Although satisfied with her current district and chairperson, one parent recalled what it was like in her previous district. She explained,

We're [both parents] very vocal. We have a high level of privileges with white skin. We come from a really educated background. So, if we're getting jerked around, and lied to, and feel horrible about this process, there's so many more people who either aren't going [to CSE] or giving up. Why is this set up this way?

It was inferred that without some of these resources, other parents are disadvantaged. A parent expressed the idea this way, "So, if you're fragile emotionally, you're fragile mentally, you're fragile financially; those are really points against you."

Within each of the descriptions of benefit, was a concern that not all children have the same advantage. This group repeatedly spoke about how they utilized skills and assets

to reach their goals in the process. Through the process of participation in the CSE, these parents concluded they were learning. They also concluded that learning was part of participating.

**Concluded that learning is part of participating.** Finally, this group of parents seemed to accept their situation and their role. They described how learning had brought them a sense of security as participants in the CSE. Approaching the process ready to learn was reported to benefit their children.

Many parents referred to the preparation needed as *homework*. “I’ve always been one to do my homework, so it’s not like I’m ever feeling, ever felt that I was walking into a room blind.” Once her son reached 15-years-old, he entered the period called *transition*. This parent recalled, “I had to learn a lot of things about it. All over again, it’s like starting from zero almost. I feel like there’s things to learn.” Finally, a parent said, “I feel like you need to be well educated, and I do feel like you need to increase that.”

When these parents spoke about the preparation and learning their tones-of-voice was “matter of fact.” They did not explain this as a burden. These parents seemed to accept that preparation was a necessary responsibility. One parent explained it this way, “I’m just prepared. I don’t know if he expects that. I’m prepared. He’s prepared. We’re prepared.” As a result, they seemed to have the knowledge necessary for productive dialogue with their chairpersons. They seemed to learn together with their team.

### **Summary of Parent Findings**

All parents entered the CPSE or CSE process noting some apprehension and anxiety. However, analysis of parent interviews resulted in two distinctly different

approaches. The different approaches seemed to result in different relationships with their chairpersons as illustrated in Figure 4.1.

First, the two approaches differed in relation to expectations. The minority group of parents *expected the worst*. These parents presumed that chairpersons had a hidden agenda. They presumed they had been cheated of services to which their children were entitled. They did not believe they had a functional relationship with the chairperson. They seemed to believe they had nothing to lose and everything to gain from continuing to “fight” at the CSE. This group of parents seemed firmly entrenched in defensive reasoning.

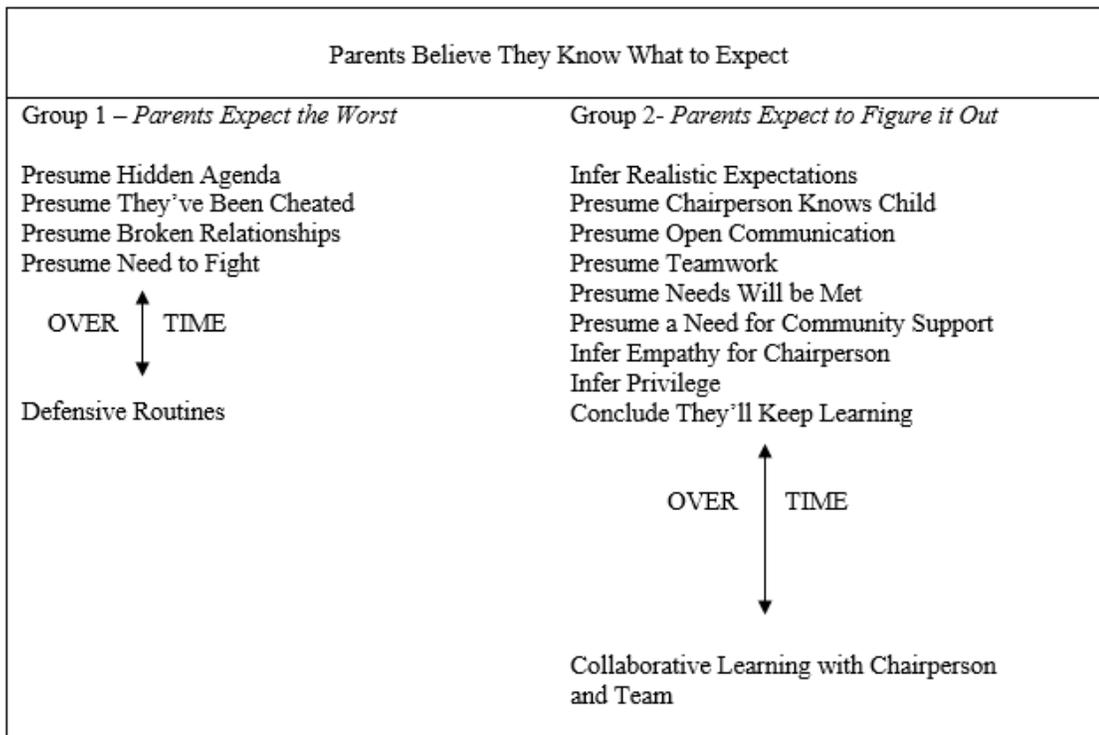


Figure 4.1. Parent beliefs are captured by themes of two distinct groups.

The second subgroup of parents formed a majority voice. This group of parents were generally open-minded and saw multiple perspectives. They expected some discomfort at their first CPSE or CSE, yet they did not hold firmly to any negative presumption about the chairpersons. They acknowledged that some other parents “want the moon.” They saw themselves as having more realistic expectations. These parents believed the chairperson knew their children and understood their children’s needs. They had open communication with their chairpersons and saw themselves as valuable members of the CSE team. They saw their children’s needs being met with adequate and sometimes generous services provided by the chairpersons. They saw value in accessing additional supports outside of the CSE. They demonstrated empathy for the chairperson’s circumstances as well as for parents without privilege. These parents expected to keep learning and making progress. Together with their teams, they would *figure it out*. This group of parents avoided defensive routines. The relationship that was forged seemed to promote collaborative learning.

### **Research Question 2 Results**

The second research question asked, “What premises, inferences, and conclusions do chairpersons hold regarding the parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?” The nine chairpersons interviewed related many common experiences. They explained how they formed collaborative relationships with most parents. However, they also voiced disappointment at the false expectations they frequently encountered with parents who were new to the CPSE/CSE process. The false expectations threatened the formation of trust at the onset of the process. Further analysis revealed four barriers to the establishment of trust. These barriers needed attention which

required a significant investment of time and effort beyond the CPSE or CSE meeting. Chairpersons also identified six underlying beliefs that supported the establishment of trust with most parents.

**Parents often expected the worst.** Chairperson interviews revealed universal concern about negative expectations of parents. They reported the negative expectations often began with the initial meeting. They reported that many parents seemed anxious and fearful. One chairperson said, “I think fear in that, they [parents] won't get what they expect walking in.” They reported they experienced many parents entering with the expectation of a fight and to lose services. Chairpersons observed the emotion and unrealistic expectations were often fueled by preschool providers and medical professionals. Parents had been advised to be “ready for a fight.” They had been advised to say, “I'm gonna call my lawyer. I'm gonna get a note from my pediatrician.” These details formed a theme that parents often *expected the worst*.

Chairpersons described the reality of the situation differently. One chairperson reported, “Ninety-nine percent of the time we are very generous.” They explained that most meetings end favorably. “By the time the meeting is over we're generally in agreement. So, we don't usually end up in an adversarial position.” Chairpersons wanted parents to have more accurate expectations. They also wanted the expectations to be positive.

Chairpersons reported that following the first meeting, parents may still hold some false assumptions that add tension to subsequent meetings. They reported attempts to diffuse tension, correct false assumptions and ultimately prove themselves. They

presumed they needed to prove themselves before they could make progress with most parents. This process was characterized as “barriers.”

During and after the initial meeting chairpersons described a series of “barriers” they needed to navigate before establishing a productive dialogue. They observed two patterns of parent behavior. One pattern resulted in continuing mistrust and conflict. This first pattern occurred when parents held strongly onto misinformation and false assumptions. The alternative pattern led to collaborative learning. Chairpersons reported that most parents did learn, and that resulted in productive dialogue and collaboration.

**Barriers to trust.** Chairpersons identified four barriers to trust that they perceived with most parents. These perceived barriers required their attention to build trust. Chairpersons elaborated about how they thought these barriers evolved.

*Presumed parents want more and think more is better.* It has been common for children with autism to have multiple needs that require therapies and other specialized educational services. Chairpersons reported parental expectations of extremely high frequencies and intensities of services. This belief was also expressed by the majority of parent participants when they said some parents “want the moon.”

Chairpersons described the “more is better” philosophy as detrimental to the child and the process. They implied that some parents seemed to believe that more service would result in a “cure” or “complete normalization.” When parents were strong advocates for more service, it could be a barrier to thoughtful conversation. Several chairpersons believed that over-prescribing services impaired the functioning of children and reduced independence.

The theme of “more is better” was strong. It was common for parents to tell chairpersons that when the physician diagnosed their children with autism, they were told this qualified them for intensive service levels. This expectation was viewed by chairpersons as misinformation provided to parents. The need to correct misinformation was identified as another barrier.

***Concluded parents are misinformed.*** Chairpersons reported that many parents received misinformation from outside sources. This misinformation was said to “set up” families to believe there is a “menu” of services from which they could choose. Chairpersons described how they had to spend time explaining and correcting. This could lead to defensive posturing by all participants.

Misinformation seemed to arise early. It often arose before the transition to kindergarten at age 5. They observed preschool service providers trying to help parents make the transition to CSE. However, the providers were often seen as sources of misinformation.

In addition, the medical community was seen as contributing to the problem. They recounted physicians were telling parents, “Now take this packet to the school district, and they’ll do everything for you.” This created a false parent expectation. It was not that simple. This oversimplification and misinformation led to confusion, disappointment, and mistrust according to chairpersons.

The chairpersons seemed to have empathy for the position of parents. They experienced some parents entering the process prepared and asking questions. However, many parents were not seeking information from the chairperson or district. Chairpersons preferred parents bring their questions about school services to them, not

the medical community. Chairpersons believed that it would result in one less barrier to overcome.

*Presumed they need to prove themselves.* Parents were observed to enter the process misinformed; therefore chairpersons believed they needed to prove themselves. Until they proved themselves, they could not form a collaborative relationship. Chairpersons described this circumstance as difficult and time-consuming. However, they believed it was a necessary barrier to overcome.

Chairpersons needed to convince parents they were “on the same team” and “here to help.” They needed to establish “the district is not their enemy.” They needed to demonstrate to parents they were “here to work with them to learn about their child.”

Chairpersons recognized that their motives were often in question. Some of them had inherited “bad vibes” from the prior administration. Some parents held on to anger from prior negative experiences. Chairpersons found themselves needing to prove they were different and could be trusted. They recognized that they needed parents to listen and be open to new ideas. If chairpersons could engage parents to listen that was the first step in reducing defensive routines.

*Presumed they are expected to diffuse the tension.* Each chairperson reported they regularly sensed tension during meetings. The tension was often present during the first CSE meeting. The tension could reappear during later meetings. This was a “barrier” they might have needed to address several times with a parent. Some of them reported meeting with teams before the CSE meeting to preempt a difficult meeting later. Others reported calling parents after meetings to follow-up about potential concerns.

Chairpersons often felt being open and honest was important to the process. They also recognized that meetings could be intimidating to parents. They needed to ensure that parents were given an ample opportunity to be heard. They said, “You know your child best.” Only then could the parent rest assured that his/her voice was heard.

One chairperson emphasized how tension could arise from misdirected anger. She said, “My goal is to take away all barriers in the way of seeing what the real issue is. [When] you have a child with significant disabilities, it's really easy to blame the school.”

The approaches and underlying beliefs applied by chairpersons seemed to be essential to avoid defensive routines. If defensive routines were prevented or diminished chairpersons could establish a productive dialogue. The transcripts ultimately revealed evidence of collaborative learning with parents.

**Beliefs that support trust.** The remaining themes included beliefs that supported the development of trust and collaboration. The themes described in the chairperson interviews were commonly experienced by all chairpersons interviewed. They also explained that these types of trusting relationships were built over time with most parents.

***Presumed they need to be accessible to parents.*** A common theme found in chairperson transcripts was one of *accessibility*. Accessibility could mean chairpersons were present in classrooms or present at school events. Accessibility could also mean they took phone calls and email directly from parents.

Chairpersons commonly believed that parents of children with autism needed more communication than others. Availability for conversations outside of the CSE meetings was noted as important. Being available for additional team meetings was also identified as a priority. Inferred within this theme was the premise that relationships with

parents would be built as a result of accessibility. The time spent outside the meetings also helped chairpersons learn more about the child. The following theme explains this further.

***Presumed they are expected to know the student firsthand.*** It was inferred during interviews that knowing the student was the first step in the process of developing an IEP. All of those interviewed had some contact with their students. In the smaller districts, the contact was more frequent. For chairpersons who held their positions longer, they had developed firsthand knowledge over an extended period. Chairpersons implied that having firsthand knowledge of the child also helped them to build relationships with the parent.

Within the two largest districts chairpersons admitted they knew many but not every student. They liked being able to have casual conversations with parents, “checking in” on how they are doing. It reinforced the collaborative relationship. This was evident when a parent was reported to say, "You don't know how much that means to me, that you know my daughter, and you saw her in art class."

It was unclear if it was necessary to know the student firsthand, yet it was implied to be a benefit by all chairperson participants. Knowledge of the child could potentially support a common understanding between parent and chairperson. It could be part of developing a supportive relationship. Development of a supportive relationship was explained within the next theme.

***Presumed families need a supportive relationship.*** During the interview process, it became evident that the concept of relationships was a common thread among the themes. Some referred to it as a “partnership.” It was implied that those relationships

could and should be strong and supportive. This chairperson stated that it was a matter of choice. “It really kind of boils down to it's all about the relationship you choose to build.”

The size of the district and tenure of the chairperson both arose as possible contributors to strong relationships. Given an autism diagnosis, a family would likely need support for an entire school career. That made the relationship even more critical to the chairpersons. A veteran chairperson explained it this way. “I'm going to have a 14 or 15-year relationship with some of these families. I've had families where now I have their grandchildren.”

Positive student outcomes were reported from the strength of family relationships. Chairpersons reported, when times were difficult, families could be reassured that they had weathered this before. The strength of the relationship would help the family to persist. In the end, the student outcomes were improved. The relationships developed included a broader team of professionals. This theme was further defined as teamwork.

***Presumed it's top-down when it's really teamwork.*** Chairpersons had observed many parents expecting a “top-down” process at the CSE. To parents, this meant the chairperson had all the power and would make all the decisions. However, chairpersons spoke about the collaborative nature of the meeting and of the work. Chairpersons explained how they expected to work to build the capacity of the entire team. They worked with teachers, the students and parents to be productively engaged in the process.

Chairpersons reported that time pressure might sometimes keep discussion short and leave a parent thinking they don't have opportunities for input. Chairpersons admitted they needed to be careful in those circumstances. They needed to ensure, “We

are all making the decision together.” They needed to allow time for “camaraderie among the committee.”

They explained how they needed to balance the dynamic within the team in many ways. When the student was older and participating in her/his own meetings, they worked to ensure the student had a voice. At that time, they strove to ensure the parent saw the IEP was not written for the parent but written for the student.

During the meeting discussions, chairpersons reported how they influenced the staff to support collaborative teamwork. One chairperson explained how she focused on preparing teachers to support the parent voice during meetings. “We've been working for a long time in letting parents have their voice, listening a lot, not being defensive, really working with my team, and not feeling like they have to defend everything that a parent might say.”

When chairpersons spoke of the team, they emphasized that it included the parent. Chairpersons stressed the importance of supporting the team and facilitating collaborative problem-solving. Also, how they approached the problem-solving may have differed depending upon the unique circumstances of each parent. This was explained in the following theme.

*Inferred each parent is unique with unique skills and philosophies.* During each interview, chairpersons alluded to the unique profile of each child with autism. They also acknowledged how each parent came with unique skills and philosophies. The unique skills and philosophies of each parent needed to be recognized and accommodated. Chairpersons explained how that impacted their approaches.

Chairpersons described some parents as more readily open to collaboration than others. Some parents were well informed while others needed high levels of support to learn and process all the CSE information. They also noted how parents came with different levels of acceptance of the disability. Some parents were still grieving and were angry. The parent might have been at a different place in the grieving process each time they came to the CSE meeting.

Student behavior and discipline were identified as common needs of children with autism. Therefore, chairpersons engaged in discussions associated with parenting philosophy with parents at the CSE. Chairpersons reported that they experienced differences in parenting philosophy. When advising on behavioral approaches, some parents accepted this advice while others rejected it. They acknowledged the need to respect the parent's beliefs and accept the consequences which sometimes resulted in student "meltdowns" while at school.

The unique needs and circumstances of each parent became a pervasive consideration of the chairperson. They concluded it could not merely be viewed as the unique needs of the child. In the end, Chairpersons concurred that all meetings are a compromise. This led to the final theme expressed as their expectations for compromise.

***Concluded compromise was expected.*** The CPSE and CSE decision-making process are defined in regulation as one of consensus. Chairperson participants described expectations of consensus and the role of committee members in detail. They expected all members to provide input and support a common conclusion regarding a plan. They emphasized the plan was time-limited, so meeting participants were assured opportunities to revisit decisions and make adjustments over time. They noted, "Compromise goes a

long way.” Chairperson reports described the necessity of compromise to reach consensus.

Chairpersons reported they frequently made compromises with parents. One chairperson noted, “There are times when I’ve switched my thinking based on information that parents have shared, and the providers have shared.” Another chairperson said the frequency of service was “not something that they’re going to die on.” She would compromise with the parent. Although a parent may presume the decision was entirely the chairperson’s, the chairpersons asserted compromise is always necessary. These chairpersons viewed compromise as essential to supporting an amicable relationship with parents.

### **Summary of Chairperson Findings**

In summary, chairpersons anticipated that parents, new to the process, generally *expect the worst* when they entered the CPSE and CSE meeting. Chairpersons identified “barriers” to building trust with parents. The barriers threatened the development of a trusting relationship with parents. Chairpersons reported how they responded to misinformation and unrealistic expectations. They all reported they believed they needed to prove they were competent and trustworthy. Ultimately, the underlying beliefs and practices of chairpersons supported the establishment of trust with most parents (see Figure 4.2).

The analysis of transcripts suggested the chairpersons had common beliefs and practices. Regardless of those common beliefs and practices, some parents continued to believe they were threatened. In contrast, chairpersons described how many parents had come to see them as allies.

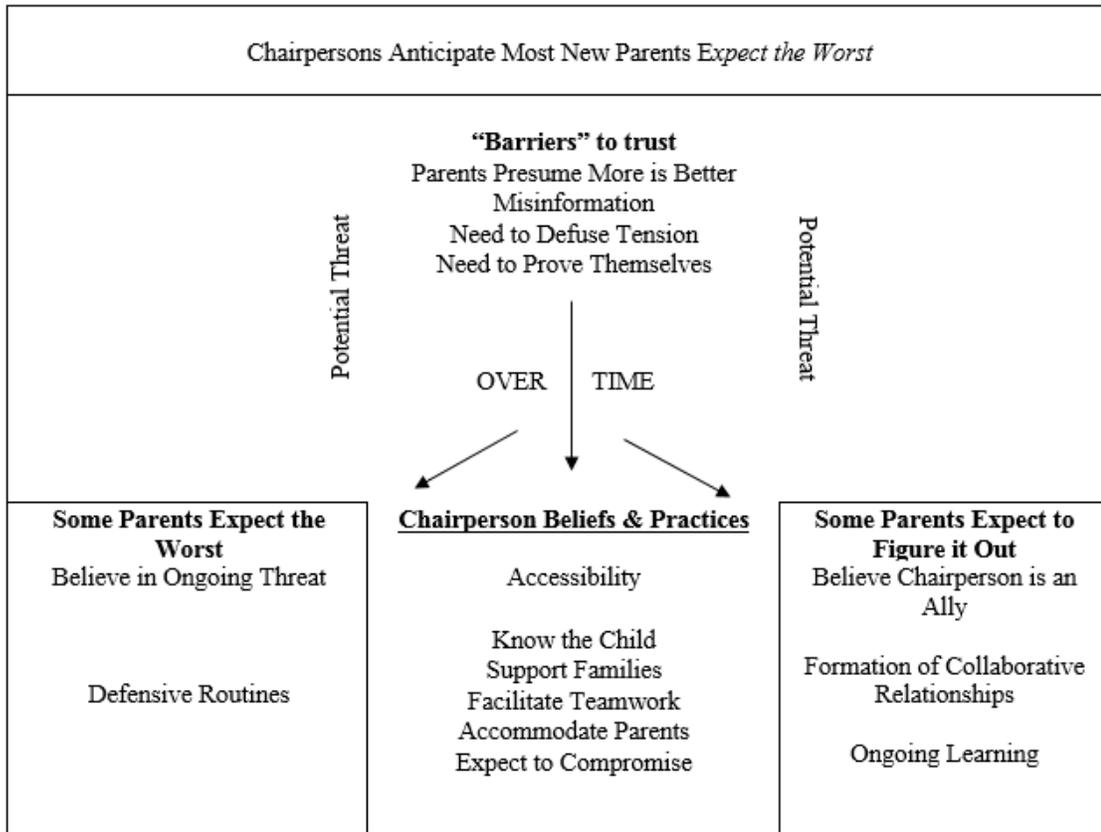


Figure 4.2. Chairperson beliefs are illustrated in relation to the two parent groups described in this study.

When chairpersons were successful proving themselves as trustworthy, they were able to form collaborative relationships with parents. The collaborative relationships they formed required them to be accessible to parents. It required that they have firsthand knowledge of the child. They expected to build supportive relationships with families. They described a teamwork approach that accommodated the unique skills and needs of the parent. In the end, they concluded that compromise was a necessary ingredient in the process. Under the “best case” scenarios, analysis of chairperson transcripts suggested defensive routines were diminished, and collaborative learning had occurred.

When chairpersons were unsuccessful navigating the “barriers” with some parents, they observed continuing mistrust associated with false presumptions. Under

these circumstances, defensive routines seemed to be firmly entrenched. Also, under these circumstances, there was little evidence of learning.

### **Research Question 3 Results**

The final research question asked, “Do parents communicate and/or chairpersons report that they have shared their beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?” To further analyze the transcripts of these participants, a lens of *defensive reasoning* was utilized. According to Argyris (1999) by revealing underlying beliefs rather than holding them private, leaps of abstraction can be avoided. *Leaps of abstraction* occur when a person forms a belief and immediately makes a generalization without testing the validity. It is *leaps of abstraction* that fuel the escalation of conflict according to Argyris (1999). Two subgroups of parents arose from the analysis. Therefore each group was examined separately. The chairperson group was also analyzed for evidence that they made their underlying beliefs known to parents.

**Expected the worst parent group.** The first parent described feeling like a “bomb was dropped.” There was no evidence that she shared her beliefs with the chairperson. Instead, she shared her beliefs with people she knew at the hospital where she worked and in her neighborhood. She placed significant credibility in the opinions of these people outside of the school system. She also appeared to have preconceived ideas and perhaps negative bias arising from her professional role. At the hospital where she worked, she said, “You hear repeatedly and get a sense that school districts are looking at the financial bottom line, not at individual need.” Although this parent advocated for her agenda, she did not report sharing her underlying beliefs with the CSE chairperson. She presumed a lack of goodwill and concluded that there were quotas for special education

classification and budget constraints that drove the decisions of the CSE chairperson. She made several statements that illustrated these beliefs. First, “They don't approach you right off the bat with good will.” Next, she implied it was about budgets. “They try to get by, which I understand, budget cuts and whatnot. That's something that we read in the news.” Then she presumed, “Okay. You're pacifying me, telling me that it's the same things, but it is not the same thing.” She concluded, “It almost seems like the chairperson only cares about the personnel and the resource allocation.” Then finally she presumed, “It's almost like the chairperson saying that this kid needs to be declassified. Figure out a way to make the paperwork together.” The underlying tone of her beliefs was frustration and anger. This had not been shared directly with the chairperson.

The second parent described her “fight” and reported that she did share her beliefs with her chairperson. She described her chairperson as “inappropriate” and “manipulating.” She also described how the chairperson seemed “defensive” and was “unfair.” As they talked together about the ongoing conflict, she emphasized, “It's been a fight every step of the way.” While this parent shared her underlying beliefs, it seemed she had done so to build her position of advocacy and had not engaged in open inquiry free of assumptions. She seemed convinced that she was right. Sharing underlying beliefs in this context did not seem effective to break the defensive routine.

The third parent described one negative year during seventh grade for her son. She had not shared her concerns and underlying beliefs with the chairperson. When she was asked if she shared her concerns, she avoided the thought and continued to characterize the chairperson as “very much business.” She had concluded there was a very defined and narrow role for the chairperson: “The person who is running the

program, or running the meeting rather, and trying to move things along efficiently.”

When this parent was prodded to consider the role differently, she said, “It would be nice if they did seem to have more interest in knowing the child. I think because they have too many kids, and they don't see these kids regularly, and therefore they just don't.” This parent described a defensive relationship. Simultaneously, this parent concluded she had no relationship with the chairperson as she didn't even know her name. “I would say I feel more defensive when they're making suggestions especially if they're looking to pare something down, reduce a service.” In the end, she said, “There's like a big disconnect in the areas of concern, and that's not just the chair, that's the whole team.”

Each of the parents in this subgroup had unique circumstances. However, a common thread was the ineffective sharing of underlying beliefs. Subsequently, the other parent group was examined to determine if a different result would be found.

**They'll figure it out parent group.** This group seemed to have achieved some balance of advocacy and inquiry in their discussions with their chairpersons. Their transcripts were also void of defensiveness. Finding evidence of publicly shared beliefs was expected. The findings, however, were inconclusive.

They discussed how they were able to share their concerns about their children effectively. These parents demonstrated comfort in bringing concerns for their children to the CSE meeting and even directly to the CSE chairperson. They implied that it was part of their advocacy role. They sought out information. When they shared their concerns, it sounded like this, “My husband and I were willing to try [the recommendation] as long as we had the assurance that we could revisit [the decision] if it didn't work out. He [chairperson] was definitely open to our concerns and was willing to revisit if we had to.”

Another parent said, “I could ask them [chairperson] questions, that they're approachable.” She elaborated on this by saying, “They're [chairperson] willing to answer questions about the process, they [chairperson] are willing to meet with you however many times.”

These parents voiced their gratefulness during meetings. As stated earlier, they had beliefs about other parents and how the process should be different in terms of fairness. They did not share these particular beliefs with their chairpersons.

**Chairperson participants.** Chairpersons concluded that parents, who are new to the process, often *expect the worst*. This expectation, combined with misinformation, and subsequent “barriers” were created. These “barriers” were described as barriers to developing trust. During the process of navigating the “barriers,” it would seem most important to share underlying beliefs.

When asked directly if they shared their beliefs with parents, all chairpersons reported that they had, as needed. How frequently they do so was not apparent. When the chairpersons described various circumstances, the explanations included details about the process or justifications for decisions. For example, “I do more talking in preschool meetings than I do in the whole rest of my life put together. I think because of the amount of information that I share.”

One chairperson explained what the conversation might sound like at the CSE meeting.

I always start with the parents. I always start with, you know, "This is your meeting. This is about your son or daughter. ‘What are your expectations?’ And I take them through the process first before we start the meeting. ‘This is what's

going to happen during this meeting.' I usually will ask them questions, or sometimes the parents will say, "We're not comfortable yet." But I always stop if they start talking about things that I know the parents aren't understanding.

Another chairperson told the interviewer she believed a parent's expectation that the district replace the entire health curriculum for her son's class was unrealistic.

The review of transcripts suggested that chairpersons were likely to keep pressing for more disclosure from the parent. The chairpersons themselves did not imply that they should disclose more about their beliefs to the parents. The chairpersons used lists of questions to elicit parent input or beliefs. Overall, it was not possible to conclude from the transcripts, that beliefs were frequently or routinely shared by chairpersons.

### **Summary of Results**

This study examined two participant groups: parents of children with autism, and chairpersons of the CPSE/CSE. Individuals from each group were interviewed to identify their expectations of the CPSE/CSE process. Parents explained they knew what to expect when they entered the CPSE/CSE meeting. Some parents *expected the worst* ( $n=3$ ), while other parents *expected to figure it out* ( $n=9$ ). The chairperson group reported they anticipated parents, new to the process, would usually *expect the worst*.

Further analysis identified the premises, inferences, and conclusions each group held of the other during the meeting process. The underlying beliefs that arose from the analysis supported the expectations held by each group. The underlying beliefs of each Parent Group either lead to continuing distrust or the formation of collaborative relationships with the chairperson. The chairperson group described how they navigated

the initial “barriers” to trust to form collaborative relationships with most parents. The implications of these and other findings are discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### Introduction

Numerous researchers have studied conflict between parents and chairpersons of the Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) or Committee on Special Education (CSE). Analysis of court cases found that parents of children with autism are most likely to engage in litigation (Hill & Hill, 2012; Mandlawitz, 2002; White, 2014). Prior research also explored the reasons parents who engaged in litigation lacked trust in the CPSE/CSE process. The emergence of conflict and the factors that lead to the escalation of conflict have also been examined (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2010; Burke & Goldman, 2015; Burke & Sandman, 2015; Janus et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). The perspective of parents who engaged in litigation associated with the CSE has been well documented in prior research.

This study examined the problem of conflict at the CSE through the lens of *defensive reasoning* (Argyris, 1999). Study results revealed the underlying beliefs of parents of children with autism and chairpersons of the CPSE/CSE. The study found that most parents believe the chairperson is an ally in the CSE process. It was also found that chairpersons may falsely believe in potential threat at the CPSE/CSE, as chairperson expectations and beliefs were ultimately well aligned with those of most parents. Discussing underlying beliefs at the CSE meeting may lead to productive dialogue (Argyris, 1999). However, it was found that participants had not uniformly shared their

underlying beliefs at the CPSE/CSE. The implications of these findings are discussed next.

### **Implication of Findings**

The participants in this study provided valuable examples of how expectations are formed by underlying beliefs. Parents identified two types of underlying beliefs: *expect the worst*, or *expect to figure it out*. The beliefs reported by all participants in this study were consistent with traits and factors other researchers identified as either escalating or descaling conflict (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2010; Burke & Goldman, 2015; Burke & Sandman, 2015; Janus et al., 2008; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014).

The beliefs held by most parents and the chairperson group were consistent with the traits identified as necessary for family-professional partnerships in prior research (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). The beliefs held by the minority group of parents aligned with the factors that escalate conflict according to Lake and Billingsley (2000). The findings are discussed first according to implications for parents, then implications for chairpersons. Finally, the implications of either sharing beliefs or keeping them private are discussed.

**Parent findings.** Most parents in this study reported a lack of conflict and described the chairperson as an ally. This finding was a surprising contrast to prior research. Lake and Billingsley (2000), emphasized that conflict was unavoidable. Prior research findings could fuel an expectation that parent dissatisfaction and litigation is a widespread problem. To better understand this unique finding, it is important to understand how the parents in this study were different from those in prior research.

This study recruited a purposeful sample of parents who had children with autism as prior research found they were most likely to engage in litigation. However, parents were not required to identify the existence or absence of conflict with the CPSE/CSE as a criterion for participation. As a result, the participants in this study may represent a more typical demographic of parents engaged in the CSE process. Therefore, it may be inferred that it is more common for parents to *expect to figure it out* in the CSE process. Conversely, the participants who believed in ongoing threat may typically constitute a smaller proportion of all parents at the CSE. This finding has implications for parent expectations at the CSE.

**Chairperson findings.** Prior research did not explore the expectations and beliefs of chairpersons. The available research captured the voice of parents engaged in litigation. Given that many studies focused on rising conflict, chairpersons could easily believe that conflict was a common occurrence. According to the findings of this study, the actual threat of conflict may be far less than anticipated. This finding has implications for emergent theory and daily practice.

First, chairpersons may falsely believe in potential threat at the CPSE/CSE meeting which could trigger engagement in defensive routines. If chairpersons enter the CPSE/CSE meeting with the knowledge that most parents have positive expectations this may help them to avoid defensive routines. This knowledge may also free them to engage more productively in dialogue with all parents.

Second, chairpersons uniformly reported they believed they were able to meet the needs of children at the CPSE/CSE when they formed a collaborative relationship with parents. The underlying beliefs that chairpersons revealed were also closely aligned with

the underlying beliefs of most parents. In theory, by entering the CPSE/CSE with common beliefs, productive dialogue may be promoted. Productive dialogue according to Argyris (1999) is also essential for complex-problem solving and collaborative learning. These two preliminary findings may form the basis for a new grounded theory.

Finally, the formation of collaborative relationships between parents and chairpersons is desirable. The educational needs of children with autism are known to be complex and variable. If parents and chairpersons can collaborate effectively, they are more likely to be successful in identifying effective programs and services to include in the IEP.

**Sharing of beliefs.** The sharing of underlying beliefs within this context has not been studied before now. This study examined the sharing of beliefs for the potential to inform the practices of the CPSE/CSE meeting. In theory, if participants discussed their underlying beliefs during the CSE, they could be examined for accuracy, which promotes productive dialogue (Argyris, 1999). This study found that chairpersons typically shared their beliefs with parents during the meeting. However, only one parent was found to share her underlying beliefs with the chairperson. This finding suggests a continuing need to improve the conditions that lead to productive dialogue at the CPSE/CSE.

Consideration of how beliefs are shared has implications for practice.

In terms of CPSE/CSE practice, how beliefs are shared during dialogue is critical to the outcome. Ideally, mutual learning can occur when underlying beliefs are shared, and a balance of inquiry and advocacy are achieved during dialogue (Argyris, 1999). In other words, I state my beliefs and then inquire about yours. The results of this study suggest that an imbalance may be present which could hinder this type of dialogue. In

theory, if chairpersons shared their beliefs, but parents did not, it is possible that the parents held the same beliefs and did not feel a need to share. However, this conclusion should not be presumed by the chairperson. If the parents refrained from sharing their beliefs, it could also mean they felt threatened, and the potential for conflict could already be escalating. In either case, careful inquiry with the parent would be necessary to ensure the continuing conversation is based on common understandings, not false presumptions. Therefore, it is important for chairpersons to consistently engage parents to share their underlying beliefs during the CSE.

In summary, study findings also contribute to the scholarly understanding of the topic of conflict at CPSE/CSE. Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2013), concluded in their research that parents' desires are not inherently adversarial and school professionals often have the best interest of children in mind. The findings of this study also suggest that collaborative relationships between parents, chairpersons and the school team can be accomplished.

### **Limitations**

There were inherent limitations to this study that need to be considered. First, this study utilized self-reports by all participants. Therefore some of the analysis required inference about the context and other details. Participants reported what they recalled of events and dynamics during the CSE meeting. Participant reports were as accurate as their recall and perceptions would allow. In addition, the study design did not account for how many meetings each parent participant had participated. Additional data about the participant's experience within the process or the timing of their most recent meetings may have been beneficial to the analysis.

This is a preliminary study which included only 12 parents and nine chairpersons from five school districts. Parent participation included only four of the five districts. In addition, the interviews for this study were coded by the investigator as an independent student researcher. Greater reliability of results could be established with additional coders. In summary, this topic and the preliminary findings warrant further examination.

### **Recommendations**

According to other researchers, the results of a single qualitative study cannot be generalized to other groups. However, findings from this study add to the body of research on this topic. Lessons can be learned based on the identified themes (Creswell, 2014; Creswell, 2018). Recommendations for parents, community agencies, chairpersons, and for future research are made based on the findings of this study.

**Parents.** Parents are encouraged to expect the chairperson to be their ally. Furthermore, parents who approach the CPSE/CSE process as an opportunity for collaborative learning seem to gain the most benefit. Asking questions directly of providers and relying on the district to provide information about educational supports helps to ensure accuracy and avoid misinformation.

**Chairpersons.** Chairpersons reported that most parents embraced a collaborative relationship if supportive practices were applied. However, the potential for conflict with parents increased when they entered the process misinformed. Therefore, chairpersons should take proactive approaches to provide accurate and timely information about the CPSE/CSE processes and services. Chairpersons should be prepared to create the conditions necessary to establish collaborative relationships with parents, especially during the first meetings. This may mean they need to communicate with parents before

the CSE meeting and as a follow-up to meeting discussions. Revealing their underlying beliefs, and balancing inquiry and advocacy can be valuable to the establishment of a productive dialogue with parents.

**Future research.** Recommendations for future research are as follows. First, continuing to explore the CPSE/CSE process in terms of an organizational learning paradigm, may continue to reveal deeper understanding. The work of Senge (2012) applied many of the theoretical constructs of Argyris and Schon to school teams. However, parents as team members have not been closely examined. Results of this type of research could be valuable to CSE/CPSE teams as well as other parent partnerships in schools.

Second, continued research examining the CPSE/CSE dynamic through the lens of *defensive routines* is recommended. Ideally, a design to study *defensive routines* within this context would utilize video-recordings of actual CPSE/CSE meetings. This method would allow for unfiltered analysis of the dynamic. Also, the application of grounded theory methodology could also reveal new insight into this unique context.

Finally, multiple studies have found parents to be misinformed when they enter the CPSE/CSE process. Closer examination of this finding seems warranted. It could be valuable to determine why some parents place more validity on the information they gather from outside sources over that available through the school district. Solutions that ensure parents receive accurate information may be identified.

## **Conclusion**

This qualitative study explored the underlying beliefs of parents who have children with autism and chairpersons of the CPSE/CSE. Specifically, beliefs that

promote trust and diminish conflict were of primary interest, as high rates of litigation were well documented with this group of parents in the United States. The theory of defensive reasoning (Argyris, 1999) was the lens used to analyze the dynamic reported by research participants.

Qualitative methodology was used in this study. The themes identified provide insight into the promotion of trust and the reduction of conflict at the CPSE/CSE. The findings of this study revealed two distinctly different expectations within the parent group of participants: *Parents who Expect the Worst* ( $n=3$ ), and *Parents Who Expect to Figure it Out* ( $n=9$ ). The chairperson participants reported that most parents, new to the process, *expect the worst* when they first enter the CPSE/CSE process. However, chairpersons ( $n=9$ ) reported that they were able to form collaborative relationships with most parents. Chairpersons and most parents reported common underlying beliefs that they attributed to the formation of collaborative relationships.

This study revealed new insights associated with the underlying beliefs of each group of participants. Most parents in this study reported a lack of conflict and described the chairperson as an ally. It was also found that chairpersons may falsely believe in potential threat at the CPSE/CSE, as chairperson expectations and beliefs were ultimately well aligned with those of most parents. The sharing of underlying beliefs between parents and chairpersons is not uniformly practiced at the CPSE/CSE. These findings have implications for parents, parent advocates, chairpersons, and future research.

While parents may enter the CPSE/CSE process with some sense of anxiety about the outcomes, expecting collaboration with the chairperson seems reasonable and likely to promote a collaborative relationship. When parents are uncertain about the process or

what they need to know they need to make inquiries. When parents approach the CPSE/CSE process balancing inquiry with advocacy, they help to diminish conflict.

Agency personnel and medical professionals often provide community-based support to families who have children with autism. These professionals frequently advocate for children with autism at the CPSE/CSE, and they should be aware of the threat of defensive routines. They should also encourage parents to engage in inquiry with the CPSE/CSE chairperson and team during meetings and in preparation. It is essential that parents gather accurate information from within the district and these professionals should help to support that process. Finally, these professionals are encouraged to see themselves as allies of the CPSE/CSE chairperson and district teams. There seems to be more significant potential for collaborative and supportive relationships when a teamwork approach is embraced.

Chairpersons should be assured that most parents *expect to figure it out* with the team at the CPSE/CSE meeting. Therefore, they should not feel threatened by the parent and engage in a balance of inquiry and advocacy as well. Chairpersons should ensure that they are proactive and timely providing parents with the information they need to be active and equal participants in the CPSE/CSE process. Like the prior research, this study revealed that accessibility and open communication are viewed as essential to building a collaborative relationship.

Finally, researchers should explore the CPSE/CSE process in terms of an organizational learning paradigm that includes parents and community members that support them. This type of examination may lead to a deeper understanding of the dynamic impacting families that rely on multiple systems of support. Multiple studies

revealed that parents are often misinformed when they enter the CPSE/CSE. Closer examination seems warranted. It could be valuable to determine why some parents place more validity on the information they gather from outside sources over that available through the school district. This study affirmed that collaborative relationships between parents and CPSE/CSE chairpersons are possible in the CPSE/CSE process.

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## Appendix A

### Official Letter of Introduction

Dear Superintendent,

I am a doctoral candidate in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College (SJFC) in Rochester, New York. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting a study to focus on the CPSE/CSE process as viewed by parents of children on the autism spectrum compared to the viewpoint of CPSE/CSE Chairpersons. For this study, I am interested in soliciting the participation of CPSE and/or CSE Chairpersons from your school district.

In this study, Chairpersons will be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews that will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Their responses will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. As the researcher, I will facilitate discussion and take notes during the session. Confidentiality will be maintained as participants will be identified using a letter-number code. All notes and transcriptions will be locked in the researcher's home and destroyed after five years.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any time without negative consequences. At this time, I am requesting permission to contact the CPSE/CSE Chairperson(s) from your district for potential participation in this study.

Please feel free to contact me, Kimberly Ganley at [REDACTED], if you would like to discuss anything about this study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College will review and approve this research proposal once district consent is received. For any concerns regarding confidentiality, please call Jill Rathbun by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or [irb@sjfc.edu](mailto:irb@sjfc.edu). She will direct your call to a member of the IRB at St. John Fisher College.

Thank you in advance for consideration of my request. I am hopeful you will indicate a willingness to help with this research by consenting for me to contact your Chairperson(s). If you support their potential participation, please complete the enclosed form and return to me in the enclosed envelope. Thank you.

Kimberly Ganley  
Doctoral Student and Researcher St. John Fisher College  
Doctorate in Executive Leadership

I, \_\_\_\_\_, Superintendent of \_\_\_\_\_ School District, have reviewed the letter of introduction explaining the research plan of Kimberly Ganley. I provide consent for my district's participation. Specifically, the CPSE/CSE Chairpersons from my district may be contacted for potential participation in the research being conducted by Kimberly Ganley, Doctoral Candidate at St. John Fisher College, in Executive Leadership.

---

Signature

Date

Return promptly in the enclosed envelope to **Kimberly Ganley, 529 Thomas Ave. Rochester, NY 14617**

## Appendix B

### Official Letter of Introduction

Dear Participant,

I am a doctoral candidate at St. John Fisher College (SJFC) in Rochester, New York. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting a study to focus on the CPSE/CSE process as viewed by parents of children on the autism spectrum compared to the viewpoint of CPSE/CSE Chairpersons. For this study, I am interested in your perspectives.

In this study, you will be asked to participate in one-on-one interviews that will last approximately thirty minutes. Your responses will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. As the researcher, I will facilitate the discussion and take notes during the session.

Confidentiality will be maintained as each participant will be identified using a letter-number code. All notes and transcriptions will be locked in the researcher's home and destroyed after five years.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without negative consequences. If you wish to withdraw at any time during the study, you may simply stop participating.

Please feel free to contact me, Kimberly Ganley at [REDACTED], or my research sponsor, Dr. Jason Berman at [REDACTED] if you would like to discuss anything about this study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed and approved this research proposal. For any concerns regarding confidentiality, please call Jill Rathbun (585) 385-8012 or [irb@sjfc.edu](mailto:irb@sjfc.edu). She will direct your call to a member of the IRB at St. John Fisher College.

Thank you for your willingness to help with this research!

Kimberly Ganley  
Doctoral Candidate  
St. John Fisher College  
Doctorate in Executive Leadership  
Ralph C. Wilson School of Education

## Appendix C

### Family Profile - Screening Questionnaire

(Administered electronically through Qualtrics)

Please complete the following questions to determine your eligibility to participate in this study. All responses are completely confidential.

- 1) Do you have at least one child with a diagnosis of autism? YES NO
- 2) Does your child have an IEP? YES NO  
(If no, they will be thanked for their interest, but will not be eligible to participate. If YES, they continue with questions.)
- 3) Does your child attend a public school or BOCES program in Monroe or a surrounding County? YES NO  
(If no, they will be thanked for their interest, but will not be eligible to participate. If YES, they continue with questions.)
- 4) Do you participate in a CPSE/CSE in a district other than the Rochester City School District or Webster? YES NO  
(If no, they will be thanked for their interest, but will not be eligible to participate. If YES, they continue with questions.)
- 5) How old is your child now?
- 6) How old was your child when they received his/her autism diagnosis?
- 7) How old was your child when they were first approved for services at the CPSE or CSE?
- 8) Do you have more than one child with an autism diagnosis? YES NO  
(If YES, items 2-5 are repeated, if NO item 7 is presented.)

Thank you for your interest in this study. How can you best be reached to schedule an interview regarding your perceptions of the CPSE/CSE process?

Phone:

Email:

## Appendix D

### St. John Fisher College INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study:** A preliminary investigation of expectations of parents of children with autism and CPSE/CSE Chairpersons in the CPSE/CSE process

**Name of Researcher:** Kimberly Ganley, [REDACTED], ([kag05912@sjfc.edu](mailto:kag05912@sjfc.edu))

**Faculty Supervisor:** Dr. Jason Berman, [REDACTED] ([jberman@sjfc.edu](mailto:jberman@sjfc.edu))

**Purpose of Study:** The purpose of this study is to examine the CPSE/CSE process as viewed by parents of children on the autism spectrum compared to the viewpoint of CPSE/CSE Chairpersons.

**Place of study:** The interviews will be held with parents individually at mutually convenient and agreeable, private locations within Monroe County. All CPSE/CSE Chairpersons will have the option of being interviewed at their school or other district location or public location. All participants will be from Monroe County Public School Districts excluding Webster and the Rochester City Schools.

**Length of participation:** The process is expected to include a brief survey and an interview with possible follow-up questions by telephone. The interviews will begin in September 2018 and conclude in November 2018. The interviews are scheduled to be 30-45 minutes in length.

**Risks and benefits:** All participants are expected to experience minimal risk. The probability of and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life. The researcher will not manipulate participants' behavior, and the research will not involve stress to the participant.

As a sign of appreciation for sharing their personal time, parents will receive a \$20 gift card.

**Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:**

All digital audio recordings and transcriptions of interviews will be maintained using a private, locked, and password-protected file and password-protected computer stored securely in the private home of the principal researcher. Electronic files will include assigned identity codes and pseudonyms; they will not include actual names or any information that could personally identify or connect participants to this study. Other materials, including notes or paper files related to data collection and analysis, will be stored securely in unmarked boxes, locked inside a cabinet in the private home of the principal researcher. Only the researcher will have access to electronic or paper records. The digitally recorded audio data will be kept by this researcher for a period of five years following publication of the dissertation. Signed informed consent documents will be kept for five years after publication. All paper records will be cross-cut shredded and

professionally delivered for incineration. Electronic records will be cleared, purged, and destroyed from the hard drive and all devices such that restoring data is not possible.

**Your rights:** As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name (Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Print name (Investigator)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above or the faculty supervisor. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact your personal health care provider or your local crisis hotline.

The Institutional Review Board of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study/or if you feel that your rights as a participant (or the rights of another participant) have been violated or caused you undue distress (physical or emotional distress), please contact Jill Rathbun by phone during normal business hours at (585) 385-8012 or [irb@sjfc.edu](mailto:irb@sjfc.edu). She will contact a supervisory IRB official to assist you.

## Appendix E

### Survey Questions Parent Participants

**Directions:** On a scale of 1 to 5 as follows, rate your beliefs associated with each statement specifically related to your child with autism at the CPSE/CSE meeting. Following completion, you will have an opportunity to tell me more about your thoughts behind your responses.

- 1 – strongly disagree
- 2 - disagree
- 3 – neither agree or disagree
- 4 – agree
- 5 – strongly agree

### PARENT SURVEY

#### Questions

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1) I know what to expect when I go to the CPSE/CSE meeting regarding my child.

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2) The CPSE/CSE Chairperson creates a sense of security during my child's meetings.

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3) The CPSE/CSE Chairperson is considerate of my child's needs.

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4) The CPSE/CSE Chairperson sees my child as an individual with unique strengths and abilities.

---

5) I feel comfortable accepting suggestions made by the CPSE/CSE Chairperson.

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6) The CPSE/CSE Chairperson values my role in the process of developing an IEP for my child.

---

7) I believe the CPSE/CSE Chairperson is professionally capable.

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## Appendix F

### Survey Questions CSE/CPSE Chairperson Participants

**Directions:** On a scale of 1 to 5 as follows, rate your beliefs associated with the statement as it relates to CSE/CPSE meetings you facilitate, specifically when the parent has a child with autism. Following completion, you will have an opportunity to tell me more about your thoughts behind your responses.

**1 – strongly disagree**

**2 - disagree**

**3 – neither agree or disagree**

**4 – agree**

**5 – strongly agree**

### CPSE/CSE CHAIRPERSON SURVEY

#### **Questions**

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1) I believe that parents know what to expect of the process when they attend the CPSE/CSE meeting regarding their child.

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2) I have an influence over the parent's sense of security and comfort participating during the CPSE/CSE meeting.

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3) I can effectively demonstrate that I have considered all the child's needs during the CPSE/CSE meeting.

---

4) I demonstrate awareness that each child has unique strengths and abilities as we discuss the IEP.

---

5) Parents are accepting of the suggestions I make during the CPSE/CSE meeting.

---

6) Parents know that I value their role in the process of developing an IEP for their child.

---

7) I am capable of building consensus during the CPSE/CSE meeting.

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## Appendix G

### One-on-One Interview Format Parent Participants

Prior to the interview, the researcher will say to each participant:

“The purpose of this study is to examine the CPSE/CSE process as viewed by parents of children on the autism spectrum compared to the viewpoint of CPSE/CSE Chairpersons. I will be recording this interview. If you are uncomfortable with recording this interview, please let me know, and the interview will not be recorded. This is a voluntary process, and you do not have to answer any question you do not want to. All responses are anonymous, and your name will never appear in any documentation linking you to this study. I am going to ask you questions now, again if you do not want to answer any question just let me know. Also, if at any time you would like to stop the interview simply let me know.”

The following questions will be asked in relation to participant responses to the survey included in Appendix E.

#### PARENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

<b>Follow-up Interview Questions</b>	<b>Research Question Alignment</b>
<p><b>(In reference to Q1 - I know what to expect when I go to the CPSE/CSE meeting regarding my child.)</b></p> <p>ALL participants will be asked: You said ... (to #1) So, what is it that you expect when you go to the CPSE/CSE meeting? Tell me what has contributed to this expectation. Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this expectation? Tell me more.</p> <p>If response is 1-2, ask: Have you shared these concerns with the CPSE/CSE Chair at any time?</p>	<p>1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the CPSE/CSE Chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?</p> <p>2) Do parents report that they have shared these beliefs or held them private during the CSE meeting?</p>
<p><b>(In reference to Q2 - The CPSE/CSE Chairperson creates a sense of security during my child’s meetings.)</b></p> <p>If response is 1-2</p>	<p>1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the CPSE/CSE Chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?</p>

Tell me what has contributed to this lack of security.  
Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?  
Tell me more.  
Have you shared these concerns with the CPSE/CSE Chair at any time?

---

If response is 3-4:  
What is it about the CPSE/CSE Chair that creates this for you ...What is it?

**(In reference to Q3 - The CSE Chairperson is considerate of my child's needs.)**

If response is 1-2  
Tell me what has contributed to this lack of consideration.  
Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?  
Tell me more.  
Have you shared these concerns with the CPSE/CSE Chair at any time?

If response is 3-4  
What is it about the CPSE/CSE Chair that creates this for you ...What is it?

**(In reference to Q4 - The CPSE/CSE Chairperson sees my child as an individual with unique strengths and abilities.)**

If response is 1-2  
Tell me what has contributed to this perspective.  
Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?  
Tell me more.  
Have you shared these concerns with the CPSE/CSE Chair at any time?

If response is 3-4  
What is it about the CPSE/CSE Chair says or does that communicates this perspective ...What is it?

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2) Do parents report that they have shared these beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the CSE Chairperson associated with the CSE meeting?

2) Do parents report that they have shared these beliefs or held them private during the CSE meeting?

1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the CPSE/CSE Chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

2) Do parents report that they have shared these beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

**(In reference to Q5 - I feel comfortable accepting suggestions made by the CPSE/CSE Chairperson.)**

If response is 1-2

Tell me what has contributed to this lack of comfort.

Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?

Tell me more.

Have you shared these concerns with the CPSE/CSE Chair at any time?

If response is 3-4

What kinds of suggestions have the CPSE/CSE Chair made to you?

---

**(In reference to Q6 - The CPSE/CSE Chairperson values my role in the process of developing an IEP for my child.)**

If response is 1-2

Tell me what has contributed to this perceived lack of value.

Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?

Tell me more.

Have you shared these concerns with the CPSE/CSE Chair at any time?

If response is 3-4

What does the CPSE/CSE Chair do to promote your sense of value?

---

**(In reference to Q7 - I believe the CPSE/CSE Chairperson is professionally capable.)**

If response is 1-2

What have you observed that leads you to question the ability of the CPSE/CSE Chair?

Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?

Tell me more.

Have you shared these concerns with the CPSE/CSE Chair at any time?

---

1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the CPSE/CSE Chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

2) Do parents report that they have shared these beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

---

1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the CPSE/CSE Chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

2) Do parents report that they have shared these beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

---

1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do parents of children on the autism spectrum hold of the CPSE/CSE Chairperson associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

2) Do parents report that they have shared these beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

---

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If response is 3-4  
What traits exemplify the CPSE/CSE  
Chair's capabilities?

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**Closing**

Is there anything you'd like to say to summarize your thoughts before we conclude?  
Thank you so much for sharing. You have shared some interesting perceptions. I  
appreciate your time.

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## Appendix H

### One-on-One Interview Format CPSE/CSE Chairperson Participants

Prior to the interview, the researcher will say to each participant:

“The purpose of this study is to examine the CSE/CPSE process as viewed by parents of children on the autism spectrum compared to the viewpoint of CSE/CPSE Chairpersons. I will be recording this interview. If you are uncomfortable with recording this interview, please let me know, and the interview will not be recorded. This is a voluntary process, and you do not have to answer any question you do not want to. All responses are anonymous, and your name will never appear in any documentation linking you to this study. I am going to ask you questions now, again if you do not want to answer any question just let me know, and I’ll skip that question. Also, if at any time you would like to stop the interview simply let me know.”

The following questions will be asked in relation to participant responses to the survey included in Appendix F.

#### **CPSE/CSE CHAIRPERSON INTERVIEW GUIDE**

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<b>Follow-up Interview Questions</b>	<b>Research Question Alignment</b>
<p><b>(In reference to Q1 - I believe that parents know what to expect of the process when they attend the CPSE/CSE meeting regarding their child.)</b> ALL participants will be asked: You said ...( to #1) So, what is it that you expect when you go to the CPSE/CSE meeting with a parent of a child with autism? Tell me what has contributed to this expectation. Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this expectation? Tell me more.</p> <p>If response is 1-2, ask: Have you shared these concerns with the parent(s) at any time?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do CSE Chairpersons hold regarding the expectations of parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?</li><li>2) Do CSE Chairpersons report that they have shared their beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?</li></ol>
<p><b>(In reference to Q2 - I have an influence over the parent’s sense of security and</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do CPSE/CSE</li></ol>

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**comfort participating during the CPSE/CSE meeting.)**

If response is 1-2  
Tell me what may have contributed to this lack of security.  
Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?  
Tell me more.  
Have you shared these concerns with the parent (or others) at any time?

If response is 3-4:  
What is it about the situation that creates this for you ...What do you think it is?

---

**(In reference to Q3 - I can effectively demonstrate that I have considered all their children's needs during the CPSE/CSE meeting.)**

If response is 1-2  
Tell me what you think inhibits this kind of consideration.  
Can you think of anything else that may influence this?  
Tell me more.  
Have you shared these concerns with anyone/ at any time?

If response is 3-4  
What is it that promotes this for you ...What is it?

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**(In reference to Q4 - I demonstrate awareness that each child has unique strengths and abilities as we discuss the IEP.)**

If response is 1-2  
  
Tell me how what inhibits this practice as you see it.  
Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?  
Tell me more.  
Have you shared these concerns with anyone/ at any time?

If response is 3-4

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Chairpersons hold regarding the expectations of parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

- 2) Do CPSE/CSE Chairpersons report that they have shared their beliefs or held them private during the CPSE/CSE meeting?

- 
- 1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do CPSE/CSE Chairpersons hold regarding the expectations of parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

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- 1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do CPSE/CSE Chairpersons hold regarding the expectations of parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?

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What is it that supports this practice? Why do you believe this is?

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**(In reference to Q5 - Parents are accepting of the suggestions I make during the CPSE/CSE meeting.)**

If response is 1-2

Tell me what may lead to this discomfort from your perspective.

Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?

Tell me more.

Have you shared these concerns with anyone/at any time?

If response is 3-4

What kinds of suggestions have you typically made?

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**(In reference to Q6 - Parents' know that I value their role in the process of developing an IEP for their child.)**

If response is 1-2

Tell me why you believe they may not feel valued?

Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?

Tell me more.

Have you shared these concerns with them/at any time?

If response is 3-4

What have you been able to do to promote a sense of value with these parents?

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**(In reference to Q7 - I am capable of building consensus during the CPSE/CSE meeting.)**

If response is 1-2

In your opinion, What has interfered with your ability to build consensus during meetings?

Can you think of anything else that may have influenced this?

Tell me more.

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- 1) What premises, inferences, and conclusions do CPSE/CSE Chairpersons hold regarding the expectations of parents of children on the autism spectrum associated with the CPSE/CSE meeting?
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Have you shared these concerns with them/at any time?

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If response is 3-4

In your opinion, What allows you to build consensus during these meetings with parents?

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**Closing**

Is there anything you'd like to say to summarize your thoughts before we conclude? Thank you so much for sharing. You have shared some interesting perceptions. I appreciate your time.

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