Barriers to Individualized Education Planning in the Appalachian Region of Ohio

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Abstract

This study examined possible barriers facing intervention specialists in Appalachian Ohio. The participants in this study were intervention specialists throughout the Appalachian region of Ohio. The methodology employed for the study was a 36-item survey that asked participants about perceived barriers to IEP planning with questions ranging from what barriers come between parents and teachers during the IEP process, to parental expectations of the their son/daughter with an IEP in school. Participants reported that teachers new to the Appalachian region generally have a hard time gaining trust the first year due to the close community. Participants reported that parental education may cause difficulties during the IEP process. Participants reported that administrators and general education teachers had low expectations of students with IEPs. This paper also suggests some of the ways teachers can alleviate these perceived barriers.

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Introduction

Collaboration between parents and teachers has been, and will always be an important part of the IEP process. While this may sound like an easy thing to accomplish, such is not always the case. There are several potential barriers that parents and teachers may face when creating or updating a student's IEP such as: communication, education, and expectations to name a few. These barriers may differ from geographical location to geographical location. This research deals with perceived barriers teachers report in the Appalachian region of Ohio. It also explores the impact of the Appalachian culture, the Appalachian English/Dialect: fact or myth, IEP collaboration barriers, and ways to alleviating these barriers.

Review of Literature

The literature reviewed for this research was drawn from the following areas: the Appalachian culture, the Appalachian English/Dialect, IEP collaboration barriers, and ways to alleviating these barriers.

Appalachian Culture

To begin to understanding the Appalachian culture it is important to identify the Appalachian region of the United States. The Appalachian region extends down the Appalachian Mountain range from upper New York to northern Georgia. "Since Appalachia is a large region in the United States with one of the highest percentages of rural population, the historic lifestyle and culture is somewhat preserved in an extensive area" (Martis, 2005, p. 89). However, the Appalachian region is a culmination of many isolated communities due to being so spread out.

The Appalachian people are family and community oriented. "For instance, there is constant mutual aid provided between Appalachian neighbors that are grounded in a firm sense of social equality" (Appalachian Regional Ministry, 2003, p. 1) Even though they a have a firm

sense of social equality, people of the Appalachian culture have deep mistrust of anyone new or a stranger. They are also wary of change and reluctant to accept authority. “Many Appalachians speak two languages- that of the mainstream culture and that of their own- a symptom of the dichotomy between the city and the mountains, between school and home” (Porter, 2001, p. 1). Thus, they made the necessary adaptation in their way of speaking in order to fit in with the world at large while still holding onto their cultural dialectical roots.

Appalachian English/Appalachian Dialect Fact or Myth

The Appalachian language can be divided into two types. The first is Appalachian English, which is the language spoken in Appalachia, which is a combination of languages from the different cultures that settled in the area over the years. This language differs slightly from region to region due to which cultures settled there.

The second type is an Appalachian drawl or the stereotyped language that is common to mainly the poorest residents. Appalachian drawl is typically what people think of when discussing the Appalachian people due to television, internet, and newspaper representations. “One of the most popular examples of capitalizing on this stereotype is the comic strip Snuffy Smith” (Hazen, 2002, p. 50). Other such examples are the televisions shows *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, and *Hee Haw*. These portrayals of Appalachian language and culture gives people the wrong outlook of the Appalachian culture in general.

While the stereotype does portray the Appalachian language in a less understood light, Appalachian English is not the same as mainstream English. There is no unified Appalachian English as the Appalachian Culture is spread out over a vast area with many different communities living separate from each other. There are a several phonological variables that are shared by most, such as mergers, vowel shifts (long and short e, long and short a), and ungliding.

These phonological variables can do not appear in the pronunciation of all words. Studies suggest that if a student hears the word pronounced correctly using mainstream/Standard English, the student will say the word correctly when asked later on (Hazen, 2002). College students from Appalachia have also noted that their grammatical speaking has changed during their time away at school (Hazen, 2002).

College students coming home note their friends and family comment on their changed speech. Some students even have friends that make snide remarks on how the student thinks that he/she is better than they are because of the change in speech. Others have changed so much they have fallen for the stereotyping about where they once lived (Hazen, 2002).

IEP Collaboration Barriers

There are several barriers that can come between parents and teachers working in collaboration on IEPs. Researchers identify different barriers to parent/teacher collaboration on IEPs . Several different barriers apply to the Appalachian culture such as stereotyping due to ignorance, culture, communication, and the mindset that the teachers and administrative staff know what is best for the student (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999; Butera, 2005; Hazen, 2002).

One of the biggest barriers between parents and teachers collaborating on IEPs is stereotyping (Billings, Norman, & Ledford, 1999; Butera, 2005; Hazen, 2002). Both dialectical and cultural stereotypes are the most common. One such case of stereotyping causing a barrier between parents and administrators happened in the case of Cassie, a four year old from West Virginia described by Butera (2005). In this case study, the Brewster Elementary principal's explanation of the school's connection to families like Cassie's can be seen as stereotyping. In

this case study, the principal explains, “These hill people are good folk, salt of the earth. But they're ignorant” (p. 114).

The sad thing in this case, is that the principal of Brewster is not the only person to hold this stereotype. As mentioned in an earlier section, television, internet, and newspaper spread stereotypes about the Appalachian culture throughout the world. These stereotypes can become a barrier between parents and teachers in creating IEPs for their students with special needs.

Stereotyping due to economic and Appalachian background can lead teachers to think that parents do not care about their children because they are not involved with the school, which is not the case. The families really care for their children and would do almost anything for them, as is the case with Cassie.

The Appalachian culture itself is sometimes a barrier. The people from the Appalachian culture do not always trust new people or strangers who can easily cause barriers for teachers new to the area or school as it may keep parents from be open to lines of communication (Marek, 2006). Additionally, new teachers may not understand the culture and fall back on stereotyping about the culture. Misunderstand the culture leads to alienation of the parents’ culture causing the parents to ignore or turn their back on the teacher (Al-Hassan, 2002).

Communication is one of the most common barriers to collaboration between parents and teachers. There are several different ways that communication can become a barrier. One way it can become a barrier is again mentioned in Cassie’s case study (Butera, 2005). Cassie’s teacher describes one form of communication barrier.

> It is hard to find the time to call her and sometimes, when I do, her phone is disconnected. This is during my lunch hour, mind you, so I'm really not pleased. She used to come to school all the time and I'd talk to her then. She's good in that

> way but I have not seen her for a while. I don't know what happened to her but its too bad. I had a chance to tell her before what we were working on. That way she could work on it at home. (Butera, 2005, p. 112)

Another form of communication barrier deals with language differences. “The professional staff's lack of understanding of the student's culture or language may lead parents to feel inferior or inhibited” (Smith, 2001, p. 3). No one wants to feel inferior and the professional jargon or professional terms that teachers use can cause parents to feel inferior. Parents may become less likely to collaborate with teachers on an IEP to avoid feeling inferior.

An additional barrier is the mindset that parents may hold. They may believe that teachers and the administrative staff know what is best for his/her student, which can lead to communication barriers. In Butera’s (2005) case study, Cassie’s mother is quoted as saying she viewed the teacher and administrators as “far more knowledgeable about this than me" (p. 112). This is a mindset that many other parents ascribe to as well.

Ways to Alleviate IEP Barriers

Alleviating the barriers between parents and teachers is not an easy thing to do and there is no one way to go about it. One way to alleviate collaboration barriers in the IEP process that most researchers agree upon is to understand the parents’/students’ culture (Al-Hassan, 2002; Marek, Brock, & Sullivan, 2006; Matuszny, Banda, & Coleman, 2007; Rock, 2000; Smith, 2001). “The first step in cultural understanding is a willingness to open ourselves to new perspectives, new views of the world” (Lynch, 1987, p. 110). Being open to new perspectives will help eliminate stereotypes teachers may have. It will also help new teachers understand why parents might be reluctant to open up due to a culturally-based mistrust of new people and strangers.

Another way to alleviate IEP collaboration barriers is to establish trust. "The teacher must gain the trust of the families and engage them in the education process of their child" (Al-Hassan, 2002, p. 53). One way to gain trust is by involving the parents in what is going on at the school. Their involvement can range from helping out with school parties to volunteering on a day-to-day basis just so the parent and teacher are able to interact and get to know each other better.

Another tactic to alleviate barriers is by using more effective and regular communication such as email, phone calls, and letters home (Al-Hassan, 2002). Many parents living in Appalachia work at jobs that are out of town, so parent/teacher conferences during the daytime are hard to achieve. Phone calls to the parents in the evening may be more effective. Meetings should start off with the student's strengths, since parents may find it difficult to hear about their child's struggles.

Asking parents to provide their input in the IEP process can also help with communication (Matuszny, 2007). Parents are with the student at home and can provide the teacher with different insights into how the programs that have been implemented at school are working. While the teacher provides insight into the student that can be helpful, the parents need not feel like a third wheel in the process, but rather an integral part of the IEP collaboration machine. The more useful parents feel, the more open they will be with the teacher about what is going on at home with the student (Matuszny, 2007). Information from parents can help teachers find new ways to help students that he/she might not have thought of before.

Alleviating barriers is just the first step in promoting parent-teacher collaboration in the IEP process. Teachers need to keep working with parents and not think that everything has been fixed once the initial barriers have been overcome. If the teacher does not continue collaborating

and engaging parents and falls back into old habits, it can send everything that the teacher and parents have been working towards back to square one. The trust between the teacher and the parents may be hard, if not impossible for the teacher to regain, and even then it may never be the same as it was before, providing an on-going uphill battle.

Methods

This study was designed to gather information from intervention specialists working in the Appalachian region of Ohio to obtain their opinions regarding barriers to the IEP process and to see if any barriers pertained solely to the Appalachian region. A survey was the instrument used to gather information from teachers for this research. A survey allows for both demographic data and opinions and perceptions to be collected. Surveys also allow flexibility in that the participants can fill them out at their convenience.

Instrumentation

This survey utilized two sets of questions (See Appendix A for a copy of the survey). The first set of questions dealt with demographic of the participants. The survey asks the participants to identify how many years they had been an intervention specialist and how many years they spent teaching in the Appalachian region of Ohio. They were also asked which grade levels they worked with.

The second set of questions dealt with possible barriers that the intervention specialist perceived and/or experienced in the IEP process. First the survey asked questions that dealt with possible barriers due to being in the Appalachian region of Ohio. Next, the survey asked questions dealing with possible barriers with parents. Finally the survey asked about any perceived barriers with administration and general educations teachers.

Participants

This research project chose a sample from the Appalachian region of Ohio as defined by the Ohio tourism website. For this study, the Appalachian region of Ohio included the following counties: Adams, Athens, Belmont, Brown, Carroll, Clermont, Columbiana, Coshocton, Gallia, Guernsey, Harrison, Highland, Hocking, Holmes, Jackson, Jefferson, Lawrence, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Muskingum, Noble, Perry, Pike, Ross, Scioto, Tuscarawas, Vinton, and Washington.

The population chosen for the survey was intervention specialists working in schools in the Appalachian region of Ohio. The school districts were randomly chosen and only the email addresses of the intervention specialists were kept. The email addresses will be deleted at the completion of the study. Not everyone invited to participate in the survey did so. The invitation to participate which contained a link to the survey was sent via email to 120 intervention specialists. Eleven participants completed the survey resulting in a 9.2% response rate.

Data Collection

The researcher created and launched a survey using Surveymonkey.com. A web link was constructed and sent out by email to the target participants. The email contained information about the research project and stated that by completing the survey, the participant was giving consent to use the data provided. Surveymonkey.com collected the information from the completed surveys and electronically compiled the data. Each participant was given one month to complete the survey. During that time, reminders were sent out every two weeks along with a thank you note to those who completed the survey.

Data Analysis

Once the survey responses were collected, the data was analyzed using the tools available on Surveymonkey.com. Extended responses were read and coded for themes in order to understand why participants responded in the way they did. Differences and similarities in the

participants' responses and their perception of the types of barriers in Appalachian Ohio were determined.

Results

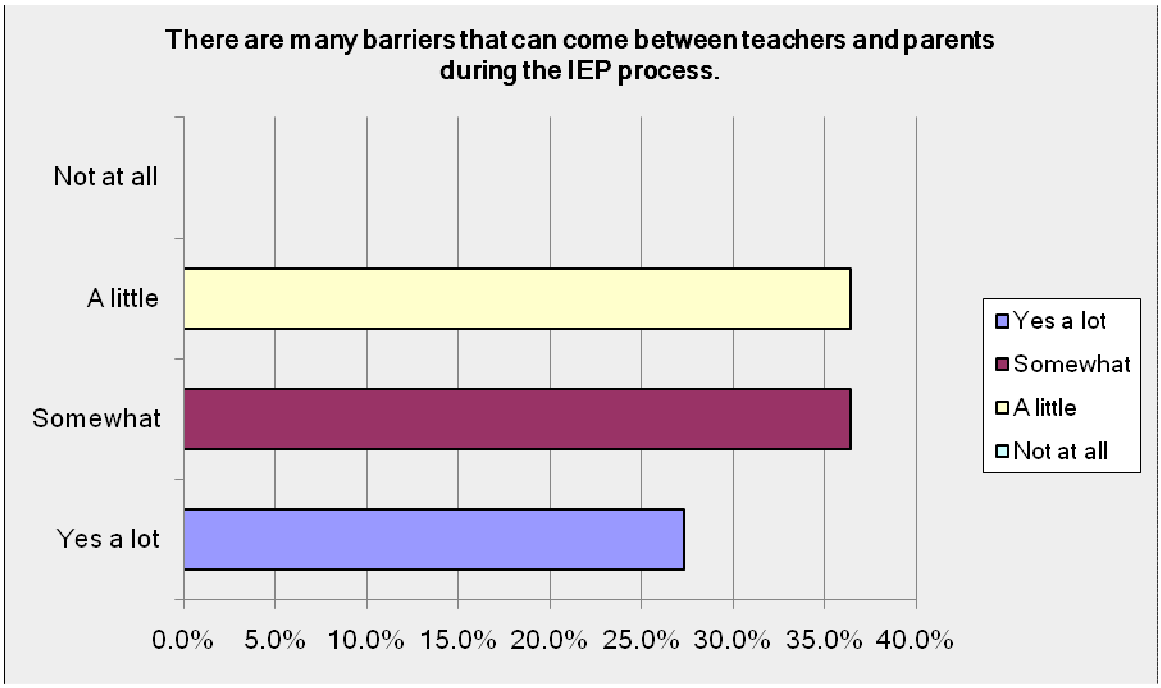
The purpose of this study was to determine whether special education teachers experienced barriers during the IEP process and if any of these barriers were specific to the Appalachian region of Ohio. This section presents findings gathered through a survey completed by 11 intervention specialists in the Appalachian region of Ohio.

Barriers Between Teachers and Parents During the IEP Process

The first question set the stage for the rest of the survey as it was used to determine if the intervention specialists perceived there were any barriers between teachers and parents during the IEP (Individual Education Plan) process. Figure 1 Indicates that 36.4 percent of the 11 participants agreed with this statement a little or somewhat, while only 27. 3 percent agreed there are many barriers that can come between the teachers and parents during the IEP process. There was a 1% margin for error.

Figure 1

Perceived Barriers Between Teachers and Parents in the IEP Process



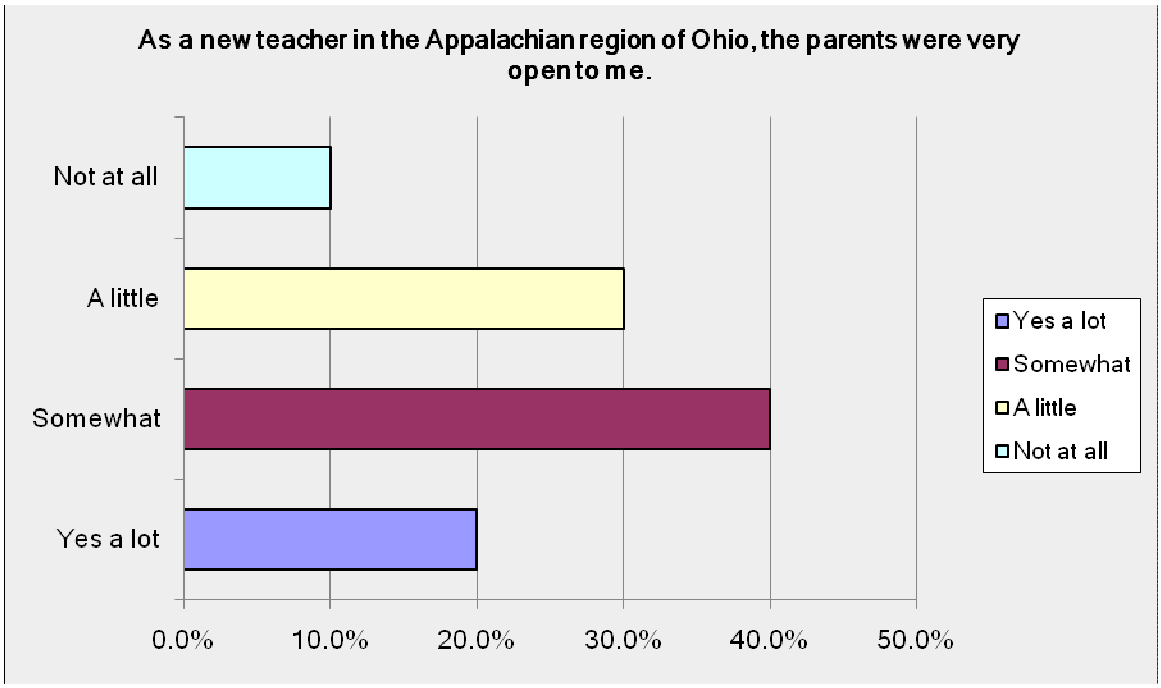
Appalachian Barriers

The survey found that teachers perceived being a new teacher in the Appalachian region as a barrier to the IEP process (See Figure 2). Many of the participants explained that this barrier was due to how close communities are in the region. Teachers also stated that after time, the community eventually becomes more open to the teacher if the teacher is open to them. One participant stated

> *One colleague of mine was asked by a student if he was ever married. The teacher's response was, "Now, that's personal." The students continue to have a jaded view of this teacher because what they considered non-invasive personal information was not given to them. They assumed this teacher was a "snob" and they do not show much respect to this colleague of mine.*

Figure 2

Perceived Openness to New Teachers



Parental Barriers

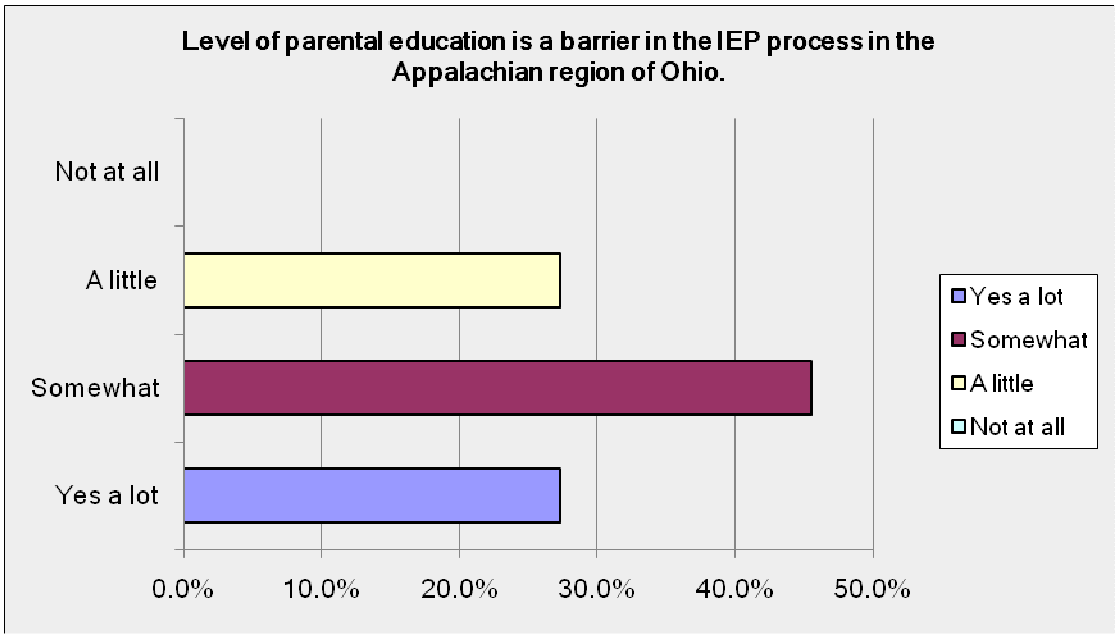
Most of the barriers reported by the survey participants were perceived as parental barriers. These barriers included the level of parental education, ability to understand professional jargon used by teachers, parents' social class, and the parents' thinking that the teacher has all of the answers. All four of these barriers can be linked back to the level of parental education.

Parental education. The level of parental education was perceived as the greatest barrier as 72.8 percent of the participants agreed with it somewhat to a lot (See Figure 3). One participant stated that, "*Parents do not have enough information to understand and comprehend a lot of the IEP*." It was a sentiment that was echoed by the rest of the participants who explained their answers. Participants indicated that since parents have a limited education, professional jargon was above their reach. The level of education also determined the family's social class

and economic condition. Finally, the parental education level leads to parents looking at the teacher as an all knowing being. One participant stated, "*Many parents may think I have all the answers and I wish that were true*."

Figure 3

Perceptions of Parental Education Level as a Barrier



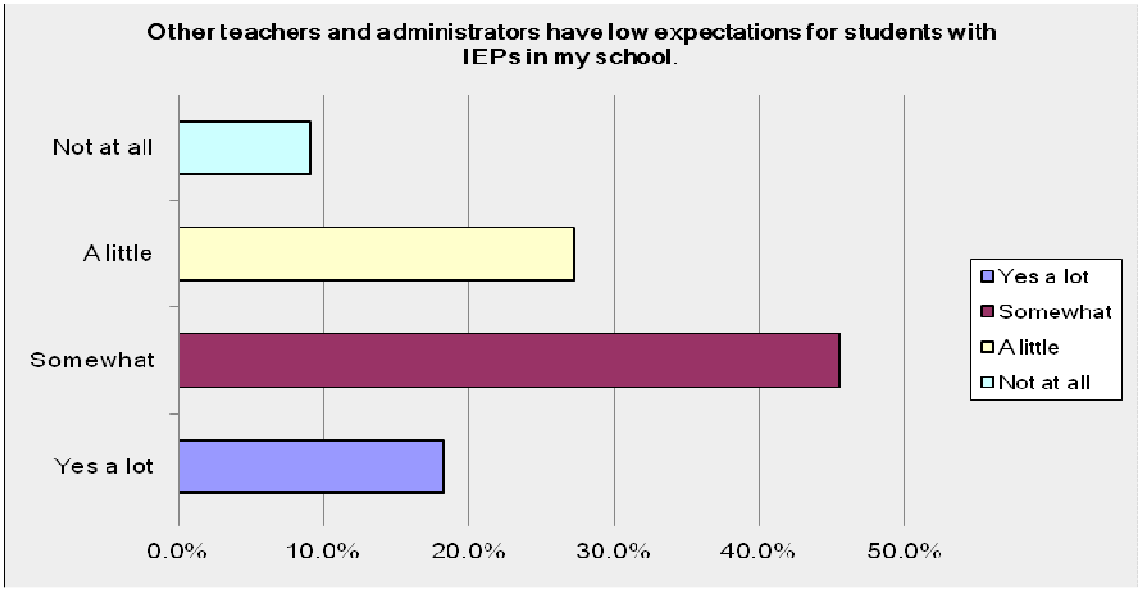
Parental expectations. Another parental barrier that may or may not be related to parents' educational level was teachers perceive parents have low expectations of their son/daughter with an IEP. Over half of the participants somewhat agreed that this is a barrier. A couple of the reasons that participants gave for this to be a barrier are the following: the stereotyping that students with IEPs are flawed in some way and economic disparity.

Administration and General Educations Teachers as Perceived Barriers

Participants also reported barriers dealing with administration and general education teachers. They reported administrators and general education teachers had low expectations of students with IEPs. Figure 4 Indicates that 63.7 percent of the participants either somewhat agreed or agreed a lot that administrator and general education teachers' low expectations were a barrier. Only 9.1 percent did not see this as a barrier at all. One participant's statement that seemed to summarize what most where say was, *"[General education teachers have] the attitude: 'Oh, he/she has an IEP, and will not be able to do much."'*

Figure 4

General Education Teachers and Administrators' Expectations as a Barrier



Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

This study was designed to gather information from intervention specialists working in the Appalachian region of Ohio to obtain their opinions regarding barriers in the IEP process to determine if there are any barriers that were unique to the Appalachian region of Ohio. The findings demonstrated there are many perceived barriers to the IEP process that intervention

specialist have to deal with in the Appalachian region of Ohio. Many of these barriers can possibly be linked back to the parents' educational level.

Most of the participants took the time to explain why they answered each question in a certain way. However, some responses were eliminated as the explanations did not match up to the participants' responses to the survey. This could be due to the participants not understanding what the question was asking or that they did not read the question thoroughly.

According to this study's findings, special education teachers perceived at least five different barriers to the IEP process in the Appalachian Ohio region. Most of these barriers can be connected back to barriers that occur when dealing with parents. Suggestions that an intervention specialist can use to alleviate these barriers include speaking without professional jargon, asking parents for information about their son/daughter, go over each section of the IEP with the parents making sure that they understand what will be happening, and explain to the parents that just because their child has an IEP does not mean that he/she will not be able to succeed in school. In conclusion, this study shows that while intervention specialists in Appalachian Ohio do face many barriers in the IEP process, the only barrier that may have been Appalachian specific was being a new teacher.

Limitations and Suggestions

While this study may prove beneficial to intervention specialist new to teaching in the Appalachian region of Ohio, it still has its limitations. One limitation was the limited number of responses to the survey. The survey link was sent out to 120 intervention specialist and only 11 teachers completed the survey.

It is the suggestion of this researcher that this study be conducted in other regions of Ohio and the results compared. This way it can be determined if the perceived barriers identified in the Appalachian region of Ohio are common to other regions of Ohio as well.

It is this researcher's opinion that identifying what types of barriers teachers perceive as affecting the IEP process can lead us one step closer to solving these barriers. Comparing the barriers to the IEP process in different parts of Ohio can lead to a greater understanding of what can be done to alleviate those barriers. One example of one such barrier is communication during the IEP process. In one region of Ohio but not in another, researchers could do a follow up study to determine why communication is not a barrier and if there is a way for that same principle to be used to alleviate the barrier. Overcoming barriers in the IEP process may just be as easy as facilitating communication between intervention specialists from one region with an intervention specialist from another if one region. This sharing allows intervention specialists to share insights if one has found a way to alleviate a barrier that is occurring in another region of the state.

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Appendix A

1. How many years you been working as an intervention specialist?

2. How many years have you taught in the Appalachian region of the United States?

3. Did you grow up in the Appalachian region of the United States?

4. What grade level(s) do you teach? (check all that apply)

   Pre-school

   Elementary

   Middle/Junior High

   High School

5. There are many barriers that can come between teachers and parents during the IEP process.

   - Yes a lot
   - Somewhat
   - A little
   - Not at all

6. If you believe there are barriers, please explain what those barriers are.

7. What (if any) barriers have you experienced in the IEP process?

8. I do not let stereotypes effect how I treat parents of students in the Appalachian region of Ohio.

   - Yes a lot
   - Somewhat
   - A little
   - Not at all

9. Please explain your answer to question #8.

10. The Appalachian dialect/language is not a barrier in the IEP process.

- Yes a lot
- Somewhat
- A little
- Not at all

11. Please explain your answer to question #10

12. As a new teacher in the Appalachian region of Ohio, the parents were very open to me.

- Yes a lot
- Somewhat
- A little
- Not at all

13. Please explain your answer to question #12

14. Parents think that I have all of the answers because I am a teacher.

- Yes a lot
- Somewhat
- A little
- Not at all

15. Please explain your answer to question #14

16. Social class is a barrier in the IEP process in the Appalachian region of Ohio.

- Yes a lot
- Somewhat
- A little
- Not at all

17. Please explain your answer to question #16

18. Local culture is a barrier in the IEP process in the Appalachian region of Ohio.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

19. Please explain your answer to question #18

20. Level of parental education is a barrier in the IEP process in the Appalachian region of Ohio.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

21. Please explain your answer to question #20

22. Communication between parents and teachers is a barrier in the IEP process in the Appalachian region of Ohio.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

23. Please explain your answer to question #22

24. Lack of understanding in how the school system works is a barrier in the IEP process in the Appalachian region of Ohio.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat

- A little
- Not at all

25. Please explain your answer to question #24

26. I believe that parents that **do not** attend IEP meetings really DO care about their son/daughter's education.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

27. Please explain your answer to question #26
28. Parents think that I have all of the answers because I am a teacher.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

29. Please explain your answer to question #28

30. Other teachers and administrators have low expectations for students with IEPs in my school.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

31. Please explain your answer to question #30

32. Other teachers and administrators in my school offer to help when dealing with IEPs.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little

- Not at all

33. Please explain your answer to question #34
34. Other teachers and administrators have low expectations for students with IEPs in my school.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

35. Please explain your answer to question #34

36. The stereotypes of the Appalachian region of Ohio held by other teachers and administrators in my school do not affect how I treat parents of students with disabilities in my school.

    - Yes a lot
    - Somewhat
    - A little
    - Not at all

37. Please explain your answer to question #36