

**Investigating the Use of Restorative Justice Circle Process in
Individualized Education Plan Meetings**

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Parent satisfaction with Individualized Education Plan meetings varies widely. To improve parent satisfaction, the literature recommends improving parent involvement. Restorative justice circle process seeks to accomplish this by emphasizing the value of individuals. Though circle process has been used in education, to my knowledge, it has not been used with parent-teacher conferences. During this study, restorative justice circle process was implemented in an IEP meeting and data was gathered before, during and after this meeting through semi-structured interviews. The focus of this research was parental perspective relating to this new approach to school-parent collaboration. It was determined that circle process allowed the creation of a space where relationship bonds were strengthened, power sharing occurred, and true collaboration was possible between parents and school staff.

Keywords: restorative justice, circle process, Individualized Education Plan meetings, parent satisfaction, special education

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Chapter 1 Introduction

I flourished in the public education system. I was fortunate to possess the strengths which are valued in grade school academia: persistence, patience and compliance. I loved to learn, and without much effort I consistently exceeded the teacher's expectations for my grade level. My older sisters were not quite so fortunate. Compliance was difficult for my eldest sister and patience faltered for the other. I recall my Mother coming home from a parent-teacher meeting with her head hung low; resolved to get the girls to do better next term. As an adult, my mother confessed to me that she attended every school meeting for my sisters "out of guilt" during their time in primary, elementary, and junior high school. There is a family story about my parents storming into our school to talk to a teacher who had physically restrained my sister due to non-compliance. Another family tale tells of a meeting where a teacher wanted my sister promoted to grade eight while my Mother felt she needed to be held back. Though both my parents had dropped out of school before receiving a high school diploma, neither wanted their children to do the same. My mother valued education and held fierce beliefs about how students should learn. Since I have inherited my mother's ruthless nature and lack of tact I can imagine how she would have behaved in parent teacher meetings; being the teacher in these meetings would not have been enjoyable.

As an adult, I decided to pursue a career in education. In my new role as a teacher, I listened to my sisters with new appreciation about the school meetings they attended for their children. My eldest sister talked about her two boys who struggled with compliance, the other shared stories about her daughter who had been diagnosed with a learning disability. They both attended countless parent-

teacher meetings as well as meetings regarding suspensions and curriculum. They complained about not being heard in these meetings, about being bullied and outnumbered. As time went on, they expressed a desire to avoid these meetings. They did not want to attend the meeting without a support person or when they would be otherwise unprepared to fight. As an insider in the education system, these confessions troubled me. I could picture myself in the role as my niece's and nephew's teacher. I could not believe that these teachers and school staff had anything but good intentions. As a teacher myself, I knew my colleagues and I dreaded these meetings just as much as my sisters did. Before meetings, teachers would speculate about how poor news would be received by parents. They worried about how parents would behave and whether parents would be willing to hear what had to be said regarding their child.

When I set out to find a subject I was passionate about for my thesis, the parent-school relationship persisted to disquiet my thoughts. At this juncture, I was learning how to parent a child with special needs. As such, I came to fully understand the difference parent advocacy can make in a child's education. While researching school success expectations for children with special needs I came upon a statistic that shocked me- a child's socioeconomic status (SES) is the largest factor in determining whether he or she will succeed academically. Not the child's ability or any other specific attributes, their SES (Caro, 2009). I could not quite shake the injustice of this statistic. I felt more comfortable believing the commonly held opinion about education which is akin to the American dream; students with the potential for professional careers would be able to achieve them regardless of their background. Accepting that their SES could be so limiting despite access to

equal public education left me pondering the alternate life my daughter would experience if I were living below the poverty line. I was fortunate enough to be able to pay for private therapy to supplement the meager public therapy provided by our government. I was educated enough to advocate for my daughter to secure additional supports in kindergarten and grade one when the school did not think they were necessary. Experiencing the inadequacy of the public service first hand left me haunted by the social class oppression. I could picture a child with the same difficulties as my daughter sitting quietly in a class falling further between the cracks each day. This cognizance crystalized into a resolve to complete research in education that involved parents, especially parents of children with special needs. This naturally led me to Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings.

When contemplating IEP meetings I was positioned to see the conflict from both sides. I understood the frustration of teachers who worried about being assigned additional tasks to manage without additional time or resources. I understood the frustration of parents awaiting the apt education promised to their child. Both parties regarded the IEP meetings as stressful. While attending these meetings as a teacher, the emotions the parents felt were often palpable. Unfortunately, in my experience, the concern the parents expressed for their child's future was rarely engaged with by the IEP team. I was a new teacher learning the ropes so I sat quietly as a bystander in many meetings where school staff redirected parents to the functionality of the IEP when they attempted to discuss their fears. In my view, the teacher's care for the child was always evident, however their primary focus was the practicality of educating that specific child with special needs. They were not prepared to take on a discussion involving anything

other than how the child would be able to sit amongst their peers while growing academically. After all, a teacher's primary objective is curriculum. With twenty-five or thirty diverse children in each class there is little time left for anything else. When I considered how to make this situation better, I felt helpless. The current policy for IEP creation involves collaboration between school staff and parents. However, I could not envision both parties being able to truly collaborate because they seemed so far apart. Through serendipity I enrolled in an education course entitled Restorative Justice in Education: Promises and Challenges, ED 6936. As I began to learn about the theory and practical applications of rj, I knew I had found a possible solution to the problem that had plagued me.

1.1 The Problem

As someone who succeeded in the current system, it is easy to accept it as infallible; it is easy to believe that those the system does not serve should adjust to fit within its confines. However, this would require me to support a system that alienates my family and as such, I have been unable to do so. It is my belief that there is a better way to conduct meetings than the structure that is currently in place. Our education model has been shifting to inclusion which encourages collaboration among invested parties. Because of this, it seems that the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings required for inclusive education would be a great opportunity to work on the collaborative relationship between parents and school staff. Just as our school system is evolving to be better poised to deliver an inclusive education, I believe our school communication must evolve. The interactions parents have with school staff during meetings must be redeveloped to encourage a truly collaborative relationship.

Throughout the literature there is evidence that the current IEP process is inadequate as it does not result in genuine engagement for all parents (Spann, Kohler and Soenkesen, 2003; Underwood, 2010). The need to encourage parental involvement at school is highlighted by the benefits associated with it. "Research demonstrates that greater involvement of parents of students with disabilities is associated with better student outcomes of many kinds, including better school engagement, academic performance, social adjustment, and independence" (Wagner, 2012, p 153.).

The need to reassess the current IEP process is also evident when we look at the large number of due process hearings relating to issues concerning IEPs in the United States. These issues have given rise to the Centre for Appropriate Dispute Resolution in Special Education (CADRE). The existence of CADRE in and of itself points to the need for alternatives to the current IEP process. In Canada the process is similar. Our education system moves reactively to treat the symptoms of deep relational issues through mediation. Parents in Newfoundland and Labrador who disagree with a decision made by school staff are directed to follow the chain of command through the educational system which begins with the teacher and moves upward. For those parents who are unable to resolve their disputes via this route, they move on to the human rights commission.

1.2 A Way Forward

As a means of dealing with the financial burden of due process in Canada and the United States, studies have researched methods of creating peace between schools and parents during IEP meetings. Recommendations for improved parental relations during IEP meetings include a variety of suggestions which focus on proactively dealing with conflict. Cooper-Martin (2014) suggests that greater emphasis be focused during the IEP meeting on what parents should do if they disagree with a decision. Miles-Bonart (2002) recommends that “the environment, both physical and emotional, must be reasonably comfortable and conducive to decision-making” (p. 183). He calls for schools to provide specific training to make that happen. Fish (2006) suggests making the “meetings more democratic so that parents feel they are equal contributors; being open to parental input regarding placement, discipline, and instruction; being friendly; valuing and listening to parental input; being flexible and more willing to adjust to student needs; and, educating parents about the IEP process” (p. 63).

An article by Mueller (2015) focuses specifically on resolving conflict between parents and school districts. She indicates two conflict prevention and resolution practices for IEP meetings: Stakeholder training and IEP facilitation. Stakeholder training provides IEP team members (parents and special services school staff) with the opportunity to improve their skills in trust building, negotiation, sensitivity training, multicultural education, special education law, and conflict resolution. These skills are expected to allow productive and peaceful IEP meetings to ensue. IEP facilitation involves bringing in a third party who is decidedly neutral and can help the school and parents develop an IEP without conflict.

It is my belief that the most accessible and effective method for conflict resolution and prevention in education is through the use of restorative justice (rj). The central tenets of restorative justice involve accepting that all people are inherently worthy and that humans are relational beings (Vaandering, 2014). A goal of rj is "to replace punitive, managerial structures of schooling with those that emphasize the building and repairing of relationships" (Vaandering, 2014). This relational approach to IEP meetings would, in effect, take the place of the bulk of the stakeholder training that Mueller outlines. By implementing rj in an IEP meeting, all members would be actively engaged in a trust building exercise, they would also experience conflict resolution and sensitivity training through the tenants of restorative justice and the expectations of circle process.

Using rj in an IEP meeting would provide the space for parents to voice their opinion if they disagreed with a decision. By its nature, rj encourages all members to share in circle and to accept various points of view. The climate in a rj circle is an accepting one where all members are expected to listen to differing opinions without judgement. This would address the issue reported by Cooper-Martin regarding parents' inability to express their disagreement.

In restorative justice each voice is seen as significant. Though one person may help move the meeting forward towards its objective, contributions from everyone are actively encouraged. This fits in nicely with the recommendation by Fish (2006) to create a democratic meeting that allows parents to be valued equally and listened to.

The suggestions by Miles-Bonart (2002) to create an environment that is emotionally comfortable and conducive to decision making points directly to rj. By agreeing to circle process, IEP team members would be expected to accept that all members are valuable. Members would be requested to listen openly to others while refraining from judgment. The meeting would start with a check-in where each member would be asked to contribute to the circle by way of a non-threatening question. This creates an environment where members are made to feel emotionally comfortable and humanizes the group for each other.

If the recommendations provided in the literature for how to improve the parental experience with IEP meetings are to be trusted, implementing rj in an IEP meeting will improve the experience for parents. Though approximately half of the parents who partake in IEP meetings report feeling satisfied with the current state of their meetings (Fish, 2008), there may be room for improvement for these individuals as well. As we are all products of an education system that has traditionally not been inclusive, it is difficult to envision an inclusive approach to an IEP meeting. Before I discovered rj I could not conceive of a different approach. I felt trapped in the customary structured interactions of a meeting which follows the rules of a hierarchy. The concept of equal participation required a paradigm shift which took much reflection on my part. Thus, when parents report being satisfied with the current setup, it does not mean they prefer the status quo, it may just indicate that they are unable to conjure up a more acceptable alternative. As such, it is important to investigate how parents respond to this new approach. Thus, my research seeks to answer "How is parent satisfaction and involvement affected when a restorative justice circle process is employed in an IEP meeting?"

1.3 The Particulars

My research was conducted using a narrative case study which was informed by critical theory and relational theory. I recruited a parent to partake in a restorative IEP meeting involving the use of rj circle process. I interviewed this volunteer before and after the restorative meeting to understand his perspective on the new approach. Afterwards I transcribed and coded the data from these interviews and the restorative meeting to find themes.

To ensure a common understanding of what I report in this thesis it is important to have a shared understanding of terminology used throughout. Thus, I will define the following: 1. Restorative Justice, 2. Individualized Education Plan (IEP), 3. IEP team and 4. IEP meeting.

As I briefly discussed above, restorative justice is a way of being that prioritizes the inherent value of every person. It is not simply an approach, it is a philosophy that informs all the actions that you take. As Vaandering (2011) describes, "rj acknowledges justice as honouring the inherent worth of all and is enacted through relationship" (p. 34). In this way, when we use rj, we are restoring people to their rightful place as a full human being. We do this through our relational interactions with them in order to uphold primary justice- "justice where humans are respected as subjects that are nurtured and set free through respectful relationship" (Vaandering, 2011, p. 26). Thus, when using rj in an IEP meeting, everyone in attendance would be valued as an equal contributor. Priority would be given to the relationships being forged between the people present, not to the product they would be creating.

In 2009, as a part of the inclusive schooling initiative, students in the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD) with special needs were incorporated into the same classroom as their typically developing peers. In these inclusive classrooms, children with special needs expect to be delivered appropriate and quality programming. To allow this programming, students with special needs who require alternate curriculum are placed on an Individual Education Plan (IEP). According to the Handbook for Parents of Children with Exceptionalities published on the government of Newfoundland and Labrador's webpage in 2015, an IEP is defined as a "document that records and tracks the educational supports and services provided to a student" (p. 13). These supports and services vary widely depending on the specific needs of the child.

A group of invested individuals come together to form the IEP team. This group includes the parents, the classroom/subject teacher and other invested school staff members which may include guidance counsellors, administrators, educational psychologists, instructional resource teachers, speech language pathologist and others. The student may also be involved depending on age and developmental level.

This team "meets at least annually, or as needed, to make programming decisions which are based on the student's strengths and needs, and assessment results" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2015, p. 3). The main goal of this team is to create the IEP during their IEP meetings through discussion and collaboration. With this common understanding of terminology, I will begin our journey.

Chapter 2 Conceptual Framework

2.1 Finding a Lens

The genesis of my interest in restructuring IEP meetings arose from my understanding of critical theory. As I began thinking about special education, I was using a critical lens. By this I mean I began with "... the premise that men and women are essentially unfree and inhabit a world rife with contradictions and asymmetries of power and privilege" (McLaren, 2007, p. 61). I was focused on "how social relationships are distorted and manipulated by relations of power and privilege" (McLaren, 2007, p 64).

In reflecting upon my experiences as a teacher, I began to feel unease with the unspoken asymmetrical allocation of power that exists when parents and school staff come together. This called for a more thorough understanding of power. I drew my understanding of power from the work of Neo-Weberian sociologist Michael Mann. He explains that power "usually manifests as a capacity 'to organize and control people, materials, and territories'" (Hall & Schroeder, 2006, p. 74). His definition of power does not allow us to conceive it as free-floating; "we are never tempted to treat it merely as an abstraction, somehow existing inherently in the 'system', or in the 'logic' of social form" (Hall & Schroeder, 2006, p. 22). Weber outlined three sources of power in our society: Economic, ideological and political. Mann added a fourth source of power by extracting military power from the political source.

Military power receives compliance using physical force. In our schools today, the use of military power is not common. As Madan (2014) writes "Schools might

have little physical violence, but that was not the same as saying that they had no exercise of power. Indeed, the bureaucratic model of the school had an immensely concentrated application of power" (p. 96). Schools can reasonably make use of economic, ideological and political power. According to Laursen (2006), "The power sources behind the educational system and behind the role of education in the labour market are primarily political and economic" (p. 276). In the every day life of an educator, however, ideological power is the common currency. It is what is used to "make learning seem reasonable to the students" (Laursen, 2006, p. 276). It is the power that spurs energetic children to sit still for hours at a time. It is the power that emboldens children to solve algebraic equations without any comprehension of it's long term use. It is the power that encourages parents to let educators make decisions for their child's education. Laursen (2006) highlights that this power is anonymous in educational matters. According to Mann's theory of power, "ideological power flows from a deep-seated human desire to understand the nature of 'the world' and how one should act in it, and to belong to a community which shares and enacts these understandings" (Hall & Schroeder, 2006, p.104). Though I was unaware of it, this is the power that I wielded in my school. It was unnamed. It was referred to indirectly as "classroom management". It created an uneven playing field for those trying to enter a relationship with teachers.

The more I understood and reflected, the more this power imbalance became clear. It was worrisome to me that the teachers (myself included) and the parents were themselves unknowingly complicit in this act of oppression. I was a classroom teacher who taught junior and senior high school in a K-12 school in a small

community in the Northwest Territories (NWT). The roles of oppressed and oppressor are especially significant here due to the history of residential schooling which continues to affect many people who reside in the Northwest Territories. The more I learned about critical theory, the more the veil was lifted, and I began to see the reality of the hegemonic structure of our schooling institutions. When I reflected upon the relationships I had with students and fellow teachers while I taught in the NWT, I began to feel uncomfortable. I realized that without intending to, by way of the power bestowed through the schooling institution, I oppressed my students. I knew that there were students who could not measure up to the academic standards set by the government. In my time as a teacher I witnessed students who fell through the cracks of the system in two different ways. There were those who were unable to withstand the injustice of our institution and rarely attended school. When they did attend, they were deemed troublemakers. The others retained their eagerness to attend school and please the teacher despite their inability to achieve academic success. Though these two groups would not earn a diploma and fell through the cracks academically, they continued to be an important part of the community. I was surprised to learn of the success of one such absentee student for whom I had low expectations. With my new lens of critical theory, I could now understand what Freire meant by: "The oppressed are not "marginals", are not men living "outside" society. They have always been "inside"- inside the structure which made them "beings for others" (Freire, 1968, p. 54). As an outsider coming into this small community ready to dispense my academic knowledge, I was acting as a cog in the wheel of oppression. I was an important piece of the puzzle which trapped many students and forced them to feel

inferior. Along with the realization of oppression thriving in plain sight and my role in it, came the belief that unmasking inequity was a worthy cause. However, as a pragmatic person, the most important focus for me became finding a feasible solution to balancing this inequity.

To transform the current schooling structure and the unequal power dynamic that exists we must look at how parents live in relation to school staff. Our current approach to education in Canada is individualistic. Students and teachers are bound in their roles as oppressed and oppressor by the restrictions placed upon them from numerous government regulations. Teachers are expected to create a competition which “does not bring about equal success and equal status, but only fairness of the rules that regulate” (Zdenko, 2016, p. 20). Priority is placed on determining how individuals are different, not how they are the same, which highlights our focus on meritocracy in the school system and accepts the hegemonic structures in place. We want to believe that those who succeed in the education system and in their careers, earned their place. We justify the results of the educational competition by placing faith in the equality of opportunity in our schools. Zdenko (2016) defined equality of opportunity in our society as the situation where “there are winners and losers, and where it looks like the winners have earned their success and the losers their defeat, as both have had an equal chance to win” (p. 20). However, this blind acceptance of the fairness of schooling flies in the face of evidence to the contrary. It has been widely studied that “educational inequalities can be neither eliminated nor significantly reduced by levelling the material status of schools or by increasing the investment in schools” (Zdenko, 2016, p. 12). To allow genuine equality of opportunity in our schools we must move beyond the individualistic approach to

schooling which binds the oppressed and oppressors in their role. We must consider that "authentic reflection considers neither abstract man [sic] nor the world without men, but men in their relations with the world" (Freire, 1968, p. 57). This led me to relational theory.

Relational theory, like critical theory is concerned with power imbalance. Relational theory focuses on how this imbalance exists in relationships with others and suggests that only through repair of dysfunctional relationships can equality be achieved. The value of relations with others is the crux of relational theory: "Relational theorists recognize that not only do human beings enter into and live in a range of relationships that influence and shape the course of their lives directly or through socialization, but that relationship and connection with others is essential to the existence of the self" (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015, p. 7)

Within a schooling context, many people, parents included, feel powerless. Despite all the welcome banners and smiling faces of the staff, the building and everything it represents forces some into a position of "beings for others" (Freire, 1968, p. 61). When we accept that "the mere removal of constraints or a mere relaxation of controls will not ensure the emergence of free and creative human beings" (Greene, 2006, p 95), we accept that we must develop an explicit path to equality. Freire explains that "The solution is not to integrate them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (Freire, 1968, p. 61). To restructure our schools such that the value of educators and parents is equal, we must restructure the ways in which educators and parents relate.

Relational theory and critical theory work together harmoniously. Llewellyn (2012) asserts that relational theory can be used to make oppression visible: "A relational lens also reveals that injustice may be produced by a specific identifiable act of wrongdoing or it might mark existing relationships or patterns of relationships without any single traceable cause" (p. 97). It is the patterns of relationships between parents and school staff that are of concern to me. Kogge (2012) explains that "a person's opportunities are limited by oppressive relationships at the level of both the personal and the institutional in ways that determine the resources one gets, the perception of what one deserves or is capable of, and the power that one has to make changes" (p. 72). We make proclamations of inclusion and equality within our country, our province, and our schools, yet oppressive relationships exist that restrict the agency of our people.

How might we begin to bring justice to the history of imbalance that has occurred between those who know (the educators) and those who do not (the parents)? We can look to what Habermas calls emancipatory knowledge. Emancipatory knowledge "aims at creating the conditions under which irrationality, domination and oppression can be overcome and transformed through deliberative, collective action" (McLaren, 2007, p. 64). It is my belief that this deliberative action can be represented by encouraging open discussion between parents and school staff. As Llewellyn (2012) describes, "Equality in relational terms can only be understood and achieved through attention to the relationships in and through which selves exist and is fundamentally concerned with the nature of such relationships" (p. 92).

Llewellyn and Llewellyn (2015) offer insight into the value of equality between relationships. They explain that “The experiences, needs, and perspectives of all learners, including educators, matter and are central, not in contrast to or in competition with each other, but in relation to one another” (p. 12). If relationships are valued above required regulations when educators and parents meet, parents will begin to feel they are worthy as human beings and thus are not subjects living to meet the needs of others. Creating relational equality “requires attention to particular contexts, to the people involved, and to what will be required to ensure respect, care/concern, and dignity in the relations between and among people” (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015, p. 10-11). Thus, creating relational equality can not be achieved simply. The dynamics must be shifted through deliberate action.

The reality of changing the relationships between parents and educators requires a concerted effort by both parties. Kogge (2012) explains that “A relational approach to equality has us examine the details of concrete kinds of relationships and the shaping of them through particular social practices and in specific contexts” (p. 72). In light of this, it is my premise that an IEP meeting is the ideal social practice to forge relational equality.

Changing existing relationships is not an easy journey which can be undertaken without a map. These relationships expand beyond the parent and educator, to the relationship a parent has with the larger concept of schooling. As such, the use of a researched practice with specific guidelines is required to ensure the nuances of relational equality are permitted. Care must be taken to create an environment that allows vulnerability which is generally not visible in an ordinary IEP meeting. The circle process used in restorative justice can provide this map.

The practice of restorative justice fits well with the relational theory lens which I intend to use. Llewellyn (2012) explains that “the equality of respect, concern and dignity” (p. 294) is the criteria for just relationships and is the objective of justice understood relationally. Restorative justice “challenges the logic of silos” (Llewellyn, 2012, p. 292) which are so prevalent in institutions in our society. Thus, the use of restorative justice in an IEP meeting has the potential for breaking down some of the barriers which tend to keep educators and parents from genuinely connecting.

The tendency during an IEP meeting is to focus on the requirements without opening up to one another in a personal way. This limits the space available for discussion. However, with a restorative approach, it is insufficient to “focus narrowly on an issue without attention to its causes, contexts, and implications” (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015, p. 16). Thus, with the use of restorative justice process during an IEP meeting, making a collective decision would require in depth thought from the team about why they have made a specific decision and what that will mean for the parties involved. Restorative justice would provide the opportunity for the team to make decisions holistically. It would encourage real input from parents and educators alike.

My conceptual framework allowed me to view through the lenses of critical theory and relational theory and see the value of the tenets of restorative justice. In the following chapter I will review the literature on parent satisfaction with IEP meetings and the recommendations for IEP meetings. I will then outline how restorative justice may align with these recommendations.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, I discovered many studies which reported dissatisfaction with the current approach to IEP meetings in the United States and Canada. Interestingly, this dissatisfaction is not evenly distributed among groups, rather a bias exists in our system whereby the disadvantaged groups of society are less likely to feel satisfied with the IEP meetings they attend. In the review that follows I discuss this bias and the recommendations for improving satisfaction. These recommendations include using a specific course of action that permits collaborative partnerships between home and school. I then outline how *rj* is a course of action which allows this. By examining parent and school staff interactions through the relationship window (Vaandering, 2013) I explain how these two groups can interact *with* each other rather than doing things *to* or *for* each other within the context of an IEP meeting.

3.1 Parent Satisfaction and Involvement in the Process

According to the literature, many parents are not satisfied with the collaboration that occurs in IEP meetings. This has been represented in various ways, by various studies. Recently, Cavendish and Connor (2018) found that “the majority of students and parents report barriers to meaningful involvement in IEP planning” (p. 39). LaBarbera (2017) found that “44% of caregivers agreed that their teachers take the needs of the family into consideration when planning interventions for their children” (p. 44) which leaves over half of parents feeling otherwise. Cavendish, Connor and Rediker (2017) reported that parents found IEP

meetings to be “inauthentic, blameful of mothers in particular, and ultimately alienating” (p. 229).

In a Canadian study, Underwood (2010) reported that “Very few of the parents were asked to contribute information on the IEP or in any other planning activity. The IEP was used as a tool for the school to inform parents, not the other way around” (p. 27). In 2006, an Individualized Student Support Plan (ISSP) commission for Newfoundland and Labrador was formed (ISSP has since been replaced by IEP). They were tasked with reviewing the special education process and making recommendations for improvement. The commission reported that parents feel they must “face a team of professionals, alone and isolated in their role” (Langdon & Somerton, 2007, p. 47) when attending meetings for their children with special needs. This issue of disconnection was not addressed when the NLESD revamped its services. Meetings continue to be held using the same guidelines.

Currently in the NLESD there is an appeal system whereby parents who disagree with a decision made by an educator attempt to resolve their dispute through mediation. The steps of mediation begin with the teacher and move upwards in rank ending with an executive committee. When these attempts to mediate internally do not resolve the dispute, parents then have the option to move to external resolution through the Human Rights Commission of Newfoundland and Labrador. The executive director of the Commission confirmed that there are currently five outstanding complaints against schools and/or school boards (C. Majid, personal communication, April 6, 2018). These five cases represent parents who have had the time, education and motivation to attend several internal

mediation meetings. They represent a section of society with the ability to invest their resources into a search for educational justice. There are surely many other parents without the luxury or resources to do so, who are unable to move beyond internal mediation. This is indicative of the many parents in Newfoundland and Labrador who want their voices heard.

Parents have reported various aspects of dissatisfaction with the current approach including “difficulties in acquiring services and information about those services, failure to accept parents as full team members, and unsatisfactory quality of school programming and teachers” (Mueller, Singer and Draper, 2008, p. 193). Underwood’s Canadian study in 2010 used a mixed methods approach to create a holistic picture of parent involvement and engagement with IEP meetings. She found that satisfaction levels with IEP meeting involvement varied widely among parents researched: “Eighteen [out of 31] of the parents in the study reported that they were very or somewhat satisfied with their involvement in developing the IEP for their child. The remaining thirteen parents were either neutral or not satisfied with their involvement in IEP development” (p. 28). The same range of satisfaction was mirrored in the interviews conducted in her study; some parents reported being actively involved while others reported being passive recipients in the IEP development. This highlights the need to look closer at the data. Why is there such a range of satisfaction? Who is dissatisfied with the current state of IEP meetings?

According to several studies, reported satisfaction levels are not evenly distributed across various groups; rather specific groups are prone to dissatisfaction. Muller, Singer and Draper (2008) report that “there is a particular concern over parents who come from nonmainstream cultures” (p. 194). Hornby

and LaFaele (2011) explain that "In general, minorities are less involved, less represented and less informed, and are less likely to have access to resources, as well as more likely to have problems associated with language, transport, communication and child care" (p. 41). Wagner et al. (2012) reported a positive correlation between the reported satisfaction with IEP meeting involvement and education level of the head of household. They also found lower rates of participation and satisfaction for parents of non-Caucasian students. Fishman and Nickerson (2014) reported that "parents from higher SES are more likely to participate at school regardless of the other motivational variables" (p. 533).

According to several studies (Wagner et al., 2012; Fishman & Nickerson, 2014; Mueller, Singer & Draper, 2008; Hornby & LaFaele, 2011; Underwood, 2010) there is a clear satisfaction bias regarding IEP meetings. Many parents are not poised to fully participate in these meetings as they currently exist. Due to a disadvantage stemming from race, ethnicity, social class and gender some parents are unable to forge strong relationships with school staff; "for working-class families, home-school relationships are about separateness, whereas for middle-class families they are about interconnectedness" (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Failure to connect leaves parents trapped in their roles without the ability to advocate peacefully.

According to Defur (2012), the current approach to IEP meetings "promotes passive involvement by family members" (p. 63) and "sets up an unequal power distribution, which contradicts the notion of equal participation in the process" (p. 63). As a result, many parents have no faith in the system. Parents told Mueller, Singer and Draper (2008) that "trust was lost because they did not feel listened to

or honored as educational partners” (p. 206). When parents are dissatisfied with the provided educational services and feel unable to effect change within their existing relationship, what options do they have? They may try to escape the situation. Underwood (2010) found that when parents experienced a problem at their child’s school, their solution was to change schools. Alternatively, they have the option to become adversaries with school staff. Hornby and LaFaele (2011) reported, “school relationships are typically much more adversarial, and about rights and power” (p. 47).

When dissatisfied parents communicate their displeasure during school meetings, tension may mount. In the United States many such dissatisfied parents have turned to legal action and thus birthed a mediation process for special education disputes. This growing need for improved communication and stronger relationships between parents and school staff can be seen in Canada as well. In November 2012 the Moore case in British Columbia (Moore v British Columbia) illustrated the importance of the school-parent dynamic. In this case, Jeffrey Moore was left without the support services he required due to funding cuts. The Supreme Court of Canada found evidence of discrimination by the school district. This ruling puts the onus on the service provider to overcome barriers to educational success which may be present. The ruling points to the need for schools to overcome relationship barriers with parents to allow all students with special needs access to education.

The fight or flight response unveils that many parents are unable to navigate the power dynamics at play in traditional IEP meetings in order to be genuinely included in the decision-making process. School staff possess power stemming from

their education level, their status as an insider in the school, and potentially as a member of a privileged class of race, ethnicity, or gender. This power imbalance must be addressed as it drives a wedge between the parties involved. Blue-Banning (2004) describes “the disparity of power and authority in the relationship between parents and professionals as a major challenge to successful partnerships” (p. 169). This highlights the need to revamp the current IEP process to be truly inclusive of all.

3.2 Recommendations for Improvements

How can this situation be rectified? The recommendation from various sources includes more parent involvement. Goldman and Burke (2017) reported that parent involvement and parent-school collaboration are “considered vital in establishing effective educational programs” (p. 98). From a bureaucratic standpoint, this has been in place for decades. Parents are invited to IEP meetings where they are expected to sign an IEP document as partners of the program planning team. According to the Handbook for Parents of Students with Exceptionalities published by the government of Newfoundland and Labrador in 2015, “parents are a vital part of a program planning team” (p. 3). They have been identified as a required piece of the special needs puzzle. Attending the IEP meetings is the first level of being involved, however as it is legally required, it is not indicative of the parent’s desire or ability to be a part of the process. Mandated attendance may breed discontent and widen the gulf between those with power and those without. Since these parents are not truly invited- they are summoned- they are positioned to accept inequality. This hegemonic inequitable terrain requires us

to reflect deeper to understand how to encourage more authentic collaboration between school staff and parents.

Bacon and Causton-Theoharis (2004) recommend the “opening of dialogic communication, where meaning is generated between participants instead of relying on the transmission of the dominant discourse to be accepted by the parent” (p. 684). However, dialogue is not accomplished without effort. LaBarbera (2017) explains that “Collaborative partnerships that provide a welcoming school climate and include specific opportunities to participate were critical to facilitating effective partnerships with families in several studies” (p. 38). Creating a welcoming school climate and providing the opportunities that LaBarbera recommends requires a specific course of action. Mueller, Singer and Draper (2008) concur that schools must move away “from reactive to proactive measures when dealing with conflict in the field of special education” (p. 224).

One prevalent suggestion in the current literature for resolving unease during IEP meetings is implementing student-led IEP meetings or using an IEP facilitator. Madigan & Schroth-Cavataio (2011) suggest that school principals facilitate IEP meetings and pre-IEP meetings to foster relationship building among the team. They propose role playing in mock IEP meetings for the team to promote positive communication, practice conflict resolution and reduce misunderstandings. CADRE (2004) recommends a “skilled and capable facilitator” (p. 1) who acts as a liaison to help the parents and school staff agree upon the IEP document.

Mueller (2009) reiterates the need for an IEP facilitator. She looks at the issue pragmatically; due to the length of time students are in the school system, it

is likely that conflicts will arise many times, thus it is logical to invest in a practice that will allow effective resolution in the long run. Mueller realizes that reactionary interventions following conflicts which arise after IEP meetings are costly and ineffective. In their stead she suggests “preventive strategies such as parent-professional partnerships, peer mediation, and ongoing staff development [which] are effective in encouraging cooperative school community cultures” (Mueller, 2009, p. 242).

In looking closely at the rj principals and practices it is possible to see how it parallels these recommendations for IEP facilitation and preventative strategies. Incorporating restorative justice (rj) into an IEP meeting would involve a circle facilitator and would provide a proactive approach to relations. It would allow those involved to possibly avoid conflict since it focuses on building healthy relationships. The central tenets of restorative justice involve accepting that all people are inherently worthy and that humans are relational beings (Vaandering, 2014). This aligns with Blue-Banning’s (2004) findings regarding home-school collaborations for children with exceptionalities: “The results of this study underscore the point that common sense and ordinary human decency are at the heart of positive partnerships between families and professionals serving children with disabilities” (p. 181). Llewellyn (2012) defines rj as a way of being whereby one must alter his or her interactions with others to create relationships which allow justice between the parties. Justice in an IEP meeting would mean all invested parties would have an equal voice and be engaged in the decision-making process.

3.3 Restorative Justice in Schools

Restorative justice (rj) offers a way of looking at the world whereby wrongdoing is a “violation of people and of interpersonal relationships” (Zehr, 2002, p. 19). This idea has its roots in criminal justice but has interdisciplinary implications that reach far beyond the judicial system. In the past decade rj has been embraced by many educators struggling to cope with the increasing demands of their classrooms. The procedures and policies in our schools today have created a system that does not allow equal access to education. Inequity is visible in several ways including the graduation rates and post-secondary success of students with special needs. Numerous studies have shed light upon the inequity in our society and have led to the creation of programs aimed at rectifying this issue. In the United States for instance, the Head Start Program provides early childhood education intended to create a more level playing field for the children entering the school system at the Kindergarten level. These programs allow us to accept the competitive nature of the education system to determine who is worthy of earning valuable employment.

Equal opportunity in education is a complex issue. As Zdenko (2016) explains, equal opportunity in our society “where people are never equally gifted, as they have not all had the same luck in the natural lottery – [is where] everyone is equally entitled to use all of their talents. In this case, it is no longer about a chance, but justice” (p. 15). At best, our current school system is used to determine the members who have had the best luck in the natural lottery with regards to their talents. At worst, it promotes those members who are at an advantage due to their circumstances and thus allows the status quo of privileged

groups to continue. Neither of these options allows justice to prevail in schools. To allow true equality of opportunity in education, the system must change. If we wish to allow each student the prospect of using all their talents, they must be offered the opportunity to engage in the process of inquiry. Today students with less luck in the natural lottery are often relegated to the lower end of the bell curve as determined by standardized testing. They are deemed less fully human and are not given the same chance to engage in inquiry. They are at the mercy of a system that has been constructed to maintain the status quo and to keep them from entering the dialogue. They are unable to disrupt the predetermined path that their education will take. Friere (1968) says that "Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence" (p.73). It thus follows that our school system is inflicting violence on those students who have less natural talent or supports with which to succeed academically. To interrupt this systemic violence, we must address the harm that has been done and work at creating an education system that allows equality, that allows each member to use all their talents. This can be accomplished through the use of rj.

On the surface, our current school system appears to be upholding egalitarian ideals. According to Canadian law, students are not permitted to be discriminated against based on their race, social class, ethnicity, gender, or ability. Students are expected to have access to equal education. With regards to ability level, this philosophy of equality has manifested itself as the inclusive schooling initiative. The inclusive school movement has been implemented throughout Canada with superficial success. It is commonplace for students with varying learning difficulties to be situated within classrooms alongside their typically

developing peers. However, the true purpose of inclusion is not concerned with the equality of location, but rather with the equality of obtaining a meaningful education. Reindal (2010) explains that a wider notion of inclusivity is one in which all members are participating in something valuable and where all members have a stake. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador states that the "vision of inclusive education is to enhance the development of value, respect and support for the learning and development of all students, as well as the relationships between all members of the school community" (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2018). To bring this vision to fruition and move beyond physical inclusion to successful academic and social inclusion, we must create a relational environment where all students have a voice. This can be accomplished using rj both in classrooms to connect with the curriculum and on the playground to address and prevent issues of wrongdoing.

A goal of rj is "to replace punitive, managerial structures of schooling with those that emphasize the building and repairing of relationships" (Vaandering, 2014). This is a large goal which has implications for all facets of the school system. Much of the literature discusses the value of a whole school approach. However, because of its roots in criminal justice, many limit rj and only use it as a response to wrongdoing. Those who see rj as a way of being believe it should inform all the interactions which occur within a school.

Restorative justice education has been embraced by many schools as a reaction to wrongdoing, as a means of connecting with the curriculum and as a means of teaching the social skills that may proactively reduce the instances of wrongdoing. However, the acceptance and use of rj is varied. Some teachers see rj

as another tool in the toolbox and therefore implement it sporadically. Others, as Vaandering (2013) points out, may attempt a whole-hearted implementation, yet fail to see the inconsistency in falling back on punitive measures when they are displeased with the behaviour of their students. In order to reduce these inconsistencies, Vaandering (2013) suggests teachers align their beliefs by consistently treating others as people to be honored, not as objects to be acted upon.

Sackney and Mitchell (2013) explain that our education system is not a managed system, rather it is a living system. As a living system, there is an imperative that the individual parts that constitute our system are living in harmony with the whole. Each part of the schooling experience exists in relation to the others. As Sackney and Mitchell (2013) express it: "The pattern integrity of the whole grows from and is sustained by the organizing features that govern how the parts of the system connect and interact, and wholes and parts cannot be understood except in relation to one another" (p.6). If we accept the relational underpinnings at the heart of rj, we must accept rj as a philosophy, not a technique. When rj is used as a way of being it must permeate the entirety of our education system. This includes the way we encourage students to access the curriculum, how we deal with wrongdoing as well as how we interact with staff and parents.

3.4 The Relationship Window

Upon accepting the paradigm shift required for educating through rj, the way we interact with students, parents, administrators and others is immediately

impacted. Embracing restorative justice means re-evaluating all interpersonal interactions. It requires close scrutiny of all relationships to ensure actions and beliefs are aligned. This can be accomplished by using the relationship window to determine what type of relationship we are permitting. The type of relationship we are engaged in with another may vary from one interaction to the next. The work of aligning actions with beliefs is an ongoing process which requires constant attention.

As outlined by Vaandering (2012), the relationship window allows our interactions to be analysed and categorised. Our social exchanges will fall within four quadrants: to, for, not and with. When we identify others as capable and loveable, we are able to be in a relationship *with* them, as opposed to a relationship *to or for* them.

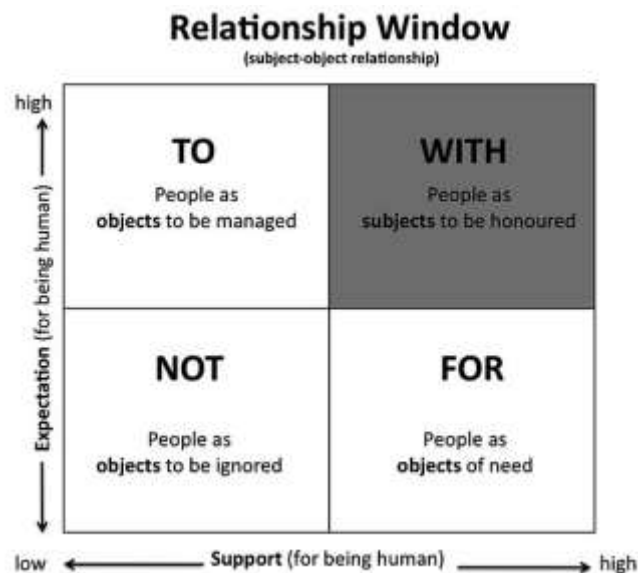


Figure 3.1 The relationship window as described by Vaandering (2013).

A relationship *with* someone requires that we hold them accountable to their actions as well as offer them support for moving beyond the issue as needed. A relationship *to* someone means one treats others as objects to be managed. A relationship *for* someone relegates people as objects of need. Treating people as objects to be ignored is considered a *not* relationship. Proponents of *rj* believe that we should work *with* people as subjects to be honoured. Mirsky (2011) explains that "human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* or *for* them" (p. 46). To have any of the other three relationships is to hold all parties back from being fully human.

Throughout the literature on IEP meetings, there are various depictions of the four relationships. In the relationship *to* quadrant people are treated as a machine, someone capable of accomplishing tasks, but not valued otherwise. This is the dynamic that is present when parents feel they are only invited to attend IEP meetings to sign papers (Cheatham, Hart, Malian & McDonald, 2012), to provide information about their child (Prunty, 2011) or to ensure legal rights have been met (Andreasson, Asp-Onsjö & Isaksson, 2013). When the members of the IEP team take turns presenting data without inviting discussion from other members of the team, they are participating in a relationship *to* the team members. These interactions are regarded as undesirable for IEP meetings in the literature.

In contrast to the social discipline window put forth by McCold and Wachtel (2003), the relationship window does not assume an authority figure. As such the interactions can be analysed from the perspective of teacher to student or vice versa as well as any other combination of relationships which exist within varying

levels of perceived power imbalance. Thus, being situated in a relationship in the *to* quadrant is not specific to the teacher-parent dynamic.

Educators may also treat each other as capable without providing support. Stroggilos & Xanthacou (2006) report that classroom teachers and other health professionals often hope they are working on the same goals, but they do not make time to ensure that is the case. Parents may also display actions that situate them in a *to* relationship with the IEP team. They report exerting power to obtain what they want from the team (Mueller, 2009). This is generally expressed as a desire to seek legal aid to secure a desired placement for the student. A *to* relationship results in tension for all participants. Teachers worry that parents have unrealistic expectations and thus feel anxious when facilitating an IEP meeting (Prunty, 2011). This is an uncomfortable exchange for all involved.

A major issue that is continuously reported in the literature on IEP meetings is the token involvement of parents and students (Martin et al, 2006b; Hawbaker, 2007; Prunty, 2011; Mueller, 2009; Weishaar, 2010). Inviting parents and students into an IEP meeting without encouraging or accepting their input establishes a *for* relationship. This tokenism can be depicted on a continuum from unintentional to deliberate. Unintended tokenism stems from issues of institutional power imbalance and must be addressed directly. These imbalances may be expressed as parents believing a suggested placement is a directive or a parent's failure to contribute to the discussion in equal length (Ruppar & Gaffney). In both cases the parent is relegated to becoming an object of need- something to be cared for. Having the special education director input the decisions into the IEP document adds to this *for* relationship. Though this may seem innocuous to the special education teacher, it

actually represents a great deal of control which is never afforded to the parent or student. If instead the parent were to write the document, there would be a shift. They would likely feel more ownership of the IEP document and become more invested in their role on the IEP team. It could be even more valuable to have a student write the IEP goals when possible. This could give the student a sense of ownership over the document which could in turn increase the student's desire to accomplish the goals within.

Perhaps less common is the other end of the continuum where teachers act intentionally deceptive; Andreasson et al (2013) report that "some dialogues hide the facts that staff are pursuing a specific line of argument and that their aim is to persuade the parents and pupil to agree with the teachers' problem description and proposed measures." A *for* relationship may result in parents and students who feel that it is best if important decisions are made for them (Hawbaker, 2007). Another characteristic of a *for* relationship is viewing a child with special needs from a deficit perspective (Mueller, 2009; Weishaar, 2010). This relationship allows one to see students as lovable, but ultimately incapable.

When we neglect or reject others, we are not engaging in a relationship with them. This is the *not* quadrant. For educators, this is typified by the precreation of IEP goals (Cheatham et al., 2012; Reiman, Beck, Coppola & Engiles, 2010; Weishaar, 2010), the use of complex jargon (Prunty, 2011; Rupper & Gaffney, 2011; Reiman et al., 2010) and the failure to ask questions or engage with the parent or student (Martin et al, 2006b). This lack of a relationship may also be expressed when the facilitator uses the topics of the IEP to begin and end discussion as opposed to valuing the expressions of the team members and using

agreed upon turn taking before moving on (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). In this way, the IEP may be viewed as more important than the person it was written for.

When a parent utilizes a *not* relationship with the IEP team they refrain from sharing ideas during the meeting (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). They may feel it is a waste of their time and that the team does not really understand how to educate their child so they disengage and do the bare minimum as required by law.

It is only when we are in a relationship *with* others that we see them as human. In this type of relationship, we have high expectations of what others can accomplish and we offer them all the support they need to accomplish their goals. This is the only relationship that allows what best practices call for in IEP meetings: active participation of all members (Prunty, 2011), finding a balance between parent, teacher and student goals (Mueller, 2009), treating others with respect (Fish, 2008), being viewed as a partner (Mueller, 2009), involving pupils and allowing self-monitoring.

3.5 The Practicality of Implementation

Reiman et al. (2010) report that IEP meetings should be democratic, parents should be equal contributors and educators should be concerned with being friendly and flexible. This vision can be realized when an IEP team works together within the framework of restorative justice. When planning learning via *rj*, educators honour the value of others and “shift from social control to social engagement” (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012, p. 145).

Cremin et al (2012) explain that in schools today the focus on individual responsibility disguises the discriminatory policies that are practiced. They explain

that the wellbeing of individuals is “inextricably connected with community cohesion, social policy for human flourishing, participation and deliberative democracy” (p. 426-427). Samuelson (2018) defines this democracy as “a process of social cooperation with the aim of communicatively reaching a collective decision about “what to do,” rather than a competitive process in which fixed preferences battle against each other” (p. 2). Deliberative democracy is precisely what can occur when people come together to create an IEP using rj circle process. When we work *with* parents and students with special needs in an IEP meeting, we are taking a step away from individualism. If we take a collective outlook on education, we see that the equal education of all students is all of our responsibility. We can work together to find a consensus on the best course of action. In this position we can view parents as a support for mutual academic and behavioural goals rather than the source of the school’s problems as recommended by Cheatham et al. (2012).

Prunty (2011) reports that though schools recognize the value of parent involvement they frequently find it difficult to obtain. Getting uninterested parents engaged in the IEP process may seem insurmountable; however, “Proactive circles build community. Proactive circles provide opportunities... to share feelings, ideas, and experiences to build trust and mutual understanding. In a circle, as in a restorative conference, everyone has a chance to speak” (Mirsky, 2011, p.48). Using rj in an IEP meeting is one way to institute a proactive circle that seeks to resolve the potential for wrongdoing which may be done by way of teachers or other educational staff making decisions *for* the student and parent, rather than *with* the student and parent.

Teachers report that the conflict they experience in IEP meetings causes them stress and can be destructive to the relationships with the parents on the IEP team. Conflict is inevitable when people come together to discuss charged issues, However, when groups are working in a collaborative respectful environment they learn to resolve conflict in a healthy manner. When a group partakes in open discussion, they can examine where discrepant views originate to narrow the gap together (Mueller, 2009). Using the circle process recommended in rj allows participants to create a safe community and foster relationships with one another.

Parents, teachers and students report a variety of reasons for conflict during IEP meetings. However, the root cause is frequently one of power imbalance. In traditional meetings, students and parents are at a power deficit. Though they will be the ones most affected by the decisions being made, they often feel unable or unwelcome to engage meaningfully in the meetings. Ruppap and Gaffney (2011) recommend that an IEP team establish formal expectations and procedures to allow the opinions of all members to be expressed. Parents want to be seen as a partner in the parent-school relationship (Mueller, 2009), creating an environment where their opinions are frequently requested and used to make meaningful additions to the IEP will help share power with members of the team. Mueller (2009) explains simply that “power struggles can be decreased if educators focus on relationships...In these relationships, parents feel valued and respected, and conflicts are more easily addressed” (p. 249).

Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2014) provide a guide for IEP meetings using rj in their book entitled *Circle Forward*. They recommend an IEP meeting facilitated by any member of the IEP team using circle technique. This involves the team

members sitting in a circle and each member taking a turn contributing to a question posed by the circle facilitator. The facilitator would pose a check-in question designed as an ice breaker activity followed by questions that would allow each team member to contribute to the IEP document and conclude with a checkout question to round out the meeting. A simple check-in questions could be: "What is something you came across recently that gave you hope or inspiration?". This would be followed by answering questions which allow the required pieces of the IEP document to be created. This would include questions such as "please share a strength of the student". Once all the requirements of the IEP document have been met by the questions posed and answers shared, each member could answer a question such as: "would you like to share one word that describes how you felt about this meeting?". This would allow opportunity for equal participation in the meeting and equal ownership of the IEP which is created.

Though some of the literature recommends an external facilitator, allowing a member of the IEP team to facilitate has benefits. Mueller's argument for the longevity of a unified IEP team demonstrates the necessity of an internal facilitator who will be truly invested in the accord of the IEP team and thus more motivated to create long term agreement. For the nuances of a deliberative democracy to be upheld in an IEP meeting, the skill of the facilitator is paramount. The IEP team in the NLESD often includes a guidance counsellor who would have the most experience and education regarding facilitation. As such, this would be the ideal staff member to learn to facilitate an IEP meeting.

To encourage all members to share during the meeting and to overcome some of the feelings of inequity which may be present due to power imbalance,

Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2014) recommend the use of a talking piece. They explain that encouraging the parents to bring an object that represents the child will draw attention to the true focus of the meeting- the child.

To address the power imbalance related to knowledge, it is recommended that the meeting facilitator provide parents with a copy of possible IEP objectives beforehand (Reiman et al., 2010). This gives parents the same opportunity as teachers to offer meaningful contributions about these objectives. This is not to be confused with a pre-created IEP. As mentioned above, a pre-created IEP does not contribute to the feeling of equal partnership. Parents report feeling an expectation to agree or disagree with the pre-created IEP rather than an ability to contribute to the creation of it (Weishaar, 2010). Another power equalizing technique for IEP meetings is to have members of the team share roles (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). When using the circle process outlined by Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2014), members of the team can circulate duties. When this is implemented as an IEP meeting, the role of note taker could circulate among all members of the team to encourage a feeling of equality.

Another recommendation for an IEP meeting is to begin the meeting by asking each participant to make a positive statement about the student's strengths or abilities (Weishaar, 2010). This can be accomplished as the first round of the circle along with introductions. As the final round of the circle, or check-out, Boyes-Watson and Pranis (2014) suggest asking "How do you feel about circle today" (p. 251). This is not the type of question normally asked in an IEP meeting but Mirsky (2011) explains its importance: "Affective statements humanize the person who makes them and immediately change the dynamic between the people involved,

improving relationships in a school community” (p. 47). Humanising the school staff is a valuable endeavor. Affective statements involve sharing personal thoughts with the intent to explain how their actions affected the other person involved. When there has been friction between school and home the onus is on the school to offer a welcoming environment for the parents. Using affective statements in a rj circle during an IEP meeting is one way to accomplish this.

As discussed above, the literature recommends several ways to improve IEP meetings. The undercurrent of all the suggestions is to allow genuine collaboration between the school and parents, to create a safe space for parents where they know they are welcome, where their advice is wanted and where they can make a difference. The specific suggestion commonly advised is the use of IEP facilitation. Rj circle process provides the structure as well as the “way of being”. It makes use of facilitation and can be easily integrated into an IEP meeting while continuing to accomplish the goals required.

Some limitations of restorative justice have been noted by Lyubansky and Shpungin (2015) and must be addressed. They share their fears that rj could be used to continue the unfair treatment of the disenfranchised as our previous methods of collaboration have in the education system. This fear is based upon the power imbalance created by the facilitator who generally hold power drawn from their age, education or title. In order to combat this, Lyubansky and Shpungin explain that the facilitator must have cultural competence. This means facilitators do not take a colour-blind stance to racial differences or otherwise attempt to ignore differences. Instead, they should recognize the inherent differences present in the individuals involved. As well, facilitators must work to create procedural

fairness whereby the facilitator provides treatment of the members that “is fair and transparent” (Lyubansky & Shpungin, 2015, p. 16). This can be accomplished by ensuring facilitators are properly educated about rj as a holistic approach.

Even when there is no history of conflict between the parents and school, an IEP meeting is an emotional experience. Every parent is concerned about their child’s future. What drives parents to attend school meetings is the hope that education can be used to chart the best course for that future. It is not surprising that during meetings of such magnitude, tensions can rise. It seems in the best interest of all involved to be proactively prepared for unease during such meetings. Rj circle process will do just that. It can be used to help build healthy relationships for all involved parties including between people who have very different perspectives and those with previous conflicts. In a rj circle, the parents and school staff will be given the space to be in a relationship *with* one another rather than in a relationship where they do things *to* or *for* one another.

Chapter 4 Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the current satisfaction and involvement levels of parents who attend IEP meetings. In particular, I was studying how satisfaction and involvement would be affected when a restorative justice approach was used in an IEP meeting. I accomplished this by recruiting a parent volunteer who had attended several traditional IEP meetings in the past. He was interviewed using a semi-structured interview before and after partaking in a restorative IEP meeting using restorative justice circle process. During these interviews I asked the parent several questions to understand his perspective on IEP meetings. It was my hope that with the help of the rj framework questions, he would be able to share his thoughts and feelings openly.

The restorative framework questions were developed to allow involved parties the ability to process an incident of conflict. They encourage "empathy, accountability, expression of feelings and thoughts, and problem solving" (White, 2012). These questions allow those who have experienced wrongdoing to begin to reflect upon what happened. It gives them the opportunity to understand their place in the incident and determine what they need in order to move beyond the wrongdoing. These question included: What happened?, What were/are you thinking and feeling? What has been the hardest part for you?, Who has been impacted?, and what do you need in order to move forward?. I used these questions as a starting off point and asked follow-up questions to clarify and delve deeper into certain topics based upon the responses provided.

My study uses qualitative research methods. It makes use of qualitative methods allowing open ended questions which gives respondents the opportunity to

fully convey their feelings regarding this complex social situation. The feelings that parents have regarding an IEP meeting are constantly evolving and often illusive because they are connected to relationships. How parents relate to those present at the IEP meeting affects how the meetings are perceived. Members of the IEP team can include school staff, board staff and medical professionals. It is common for an IEP meeting to include pediatricians, educational psychologists, as well as applied behavior analysis (ABA) therapists and other specialists.

The feelings that a parent has in relation to the an IEP meeting are also intertwined with their relationship to schooling in general. Their experience in the school system as a student or potentially as an employee may guide their expectations and influence their judgement. They may be inclined to interpret the quality of the IEP meeting with a certain bias based on their life experiences with school. The various connections the parent has with people at the IEP meetings and with the institution may obscure the feelings the parent has toward IEP meetings themselves. It is thus crucial to ask questions which move beyond these barriers; questions that delve into why parents like or dislike aspects of meetings they have experienced in the past. This may be accomplished with qualitative research since it does not restrict the participant to answering questions in binary as is commonly seen in yes or no type surveys. Instead the participant can expound upon their feelings in the realm that exists in between satisfied and unsatisfied. It provides the space for participants to explore the feelings they have regarding IEP meetings which they may not otherwise take the time to explore. By sharing their stories with me they may discover themselves more fully and share these discoveries. Quantitative research does not allow the same depth of knowledge to emerge.

4.1 Design

With my lens of critical and relational theories, I was seeking to uncover issues with the status quo. Because of this, a case study is the best form for my research to take. Shank (2005) explains that a case study asks: "What can we learn from a given individual that leads us toward seeing the world in different terms?" (p.53). This case study will delve into the personal feelings of the parent of a student with special educational needs. It will turn "away from the typical to the unique" (Shank, 2005, pg 53).

I am using narrative inquiry to make sense of the data collected for this research. Through a narrative approach I will be able to uncover more authentic feelings of the participants regarding IEP meetings. I expect that parents reporting on the quality of their IEP meetings through a survey may be unable to express the depth of their reality within the confines of a form. Through narrative inquiry, participants are not dissected and represented in pieces. Through narrative study, researchers work to keep a "sense of the experiential whole" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989. P. 4). By looking at my participant as a whole, I will be better poised to understand the complexity of their opinions toward IEP meetings.

For this study I invited parents of children with special needs to tell me their stories regarding IEP meetings. For convenience I worked with a school located in St. John's because this required minimal commute time. The schools I reached out to were all within the NLESD. I chose to contact these schools as possible partners because I am familiar with the district's approach to IEP meetings and the various policies surrounding special education. As the focus of my study was on the

satisfaction level and involvement of parents in IEP meetings I did not attempt to gather data from the school staff involved in the IEP meeting in this research. However, I needed to recruit a member of the IEP team with an understanding of, and a commitment to, the tenets of restorative justice to collaborate with in this research.

In order to find a suitable collaborator for my study I contacted the administrators at schools known to have an interest in restorative justice. I invited them to conduct a restorative IEP meeting using a restorative circle. This led me to a guidance counsellor with knowledge of restorative justice in education who was interested in working with me to gather data for my research. My intention was to facilitate the restorative IEP meeting myself. I was concerned that it would be difficult for a guidance counsellor or other member of the IEP team to facilitate the meeting while adhering to the rj guidelines. Unfortunately, the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research did not approve my application due to fear that my presence would place undue stress on the parent. As such, I was not present for the IEP meeting. It was convenient that the guidance counsellor I had recruited was well versed in rj. He had attended several professional development sessions on rj and circle process. This gave him the ability to restructure the IEP meeting to work within the guidelines of the rj philosophy and all the nuances that allow power sharing within circle process. He was able to facilitate the restorative IEP meeting and uphold the rj guidelines with ease.

The focus of my research was on the parents of children in grade six to ten. I chose this age group because based on my experience teaching and attending IEP meetings in the public-school system, it seemed most appropriate for my research.

Parents of children in this range have significant experience with IEP meetings to draw upon but are still motivated to help make improvements to the system since they will likely continue to work within it for many years. Since the guidance counsellor I had recruited was positioned in a primary/elementary school, my parent recruitment pool was limited to one grade level. Letters of information were distributed to all parents of children in grade six currently using an IEP. It was my hope that two or three of these parents would volunteer to attend a restorative IEP meeting. Unfortunately, only one parent contacted me to become involved. This is likely due to the small population of the recruiting pool. Though I would have preferred a second participant, my results were not intended to be generalized to a larger population. Instead, my case study provided detailed insight of into how this restorative meeting was perceived by one participant. With my focused data, I was able to delve further into the complexities of the social situations that my participant experienced than I would have with more participants. My research here created a guide for how further research could be conducted with more participants to obtain further understanding regarding its generalizability.

My participant is the father of two children, both of whom require an IEP. As such, he has attended several IEP meetings over the past decade. The restorative IEP meeting was conducted for his sixth-grade son. The parent has a background in education and was employed as a teacher in the past. During his interviews he shared that he has a bachelor's and master's degree in education. He spoke English as a first language and was not a member of any visible minority.

The guidance counsellor was well known to my parent participant. He had been responsible for overseeing the traditional IEP meetings that my participant had

attended for the past six years. This familiarity between the parent and facilitator was helpful because it allowed the participant to focus on the differences between the two approaches rather than getting to know a new facilitator. Having the same facilitator take different approaches to the same type of meeting provided the best avenue for the parent to compare the two approaches directly.

The remainder of the IEP team were not interviewed although they participated fully in the circle process. The IEP team in place for this student included the administrator, the guidance counselor, the classroom teacher and the instructional resource teacher (IRT). However, the IRT was unable to attend the restorative IEP meeting due to another commitment.

For the restorative IEP meeting the facilitator (guidance counsellor) was responsible for creating space for all to be heard. He was not involved in the decision-making process of the meeting. Before the IEP team engaged in the restorative IEP meeting, each member of the team met with the guidance counsellor to learn how the restorative circle process works. The guidance counsellor outlined the guidelines of an rj circle and determined that all members were comfortable working with these guidelines. The guidelines were printed for the members to read and read aloud. They were:

- We all have contributions to make
- We all have the right to speak and be heard
- We have the right as well to listen and to wonder
- We have the right to pass when the talking piece comes around
- We all have the right to be respected as members of the group.

In order to move on to the restorative IEP meeting, all team members were required to understand and agree to the guidelines. After their opportunity to ask questions and seek clarifications about rj guidelines, they were ready to engage in a restorative IEP meeting.

The expectation of all members to be equally contributing members of the IEP team was stated explicitly by the facilitator. Time was provided for each team member to contribute to the IEP document and comment on their hopes and concerns for the implementation of the document. There was space for all members of the team to hear one another, yet also accomplish the requirements for the meeting. The classroom teacher acted as the co-facilitator whereby she read the student's strengths and needs aloud to the team. These were taken from the previous IEP document that the team had created in previous school year.

To build rapport with the parent participant, I met with him twice informally prior to the first interview. We talked briefly about parenthood, education, and restorative justice. He was knowledgeable about what my research would involve and was interested in the prospect of a new approach. To understand the parent's thoughts and feelings surrounding this restorative IEP meeting I used a semi-structured interview.

During the first interview I began by inviting the participant to share what he would like me to know about the IEP meetings he had experienced in the past. He was offered the space to share answer(s) to the questions "What emotions come to mind when you think of IEP meetings you have experienced?". After these questions I used follow up questions to delve into these experiences with the use of

the restorative framework questions “what happened? What were/are you thinking? What were/are you feeling? What has been the hardest thing for you? Who has been impacted? What do you need in order to move forward?”. It was my hope that through sharing these stories, he would be better able to express his desires, hopes and frustrations. He had a lot of stories he wanted to share. He had taken the time to think through his history with IEP meetings before the interview and had brought along a notebook with topics he wanted to remember to discuss.

During the second interview after the restorative IEP meeting the parent was asked restorative questions as they related to the new meeting approach. Specifically, he was asked to share what happened at the circle meeting and what his feelings during and after the meeting were. He was also invited to make recommendations for improvement and to compare it to the traditional method for IEP meetings. Though I offered my participant the opportunity to write a journal to share additional stories or to express how telling his stories made him feel, he did not choose to do so.

I collected audio recordings of both interviews as well the IEP meeting. The recordings were captured through a digital recorder and transcribed using pseudonyms to identify participants. I also made field notes after each interview regarding my impressions of the environment and the body language of the participant.

4.2 Data Analysis

In analyzing the collected data, I began by restorying. Creswell (2009) defines this process as providing a “chronological sequence and a causal link among

ideas" (p. 509). Since my theoretical framework is critical and relational theory, I looked to find causal links that related to social disadvantage and power dynamics in relationships. This aligns with Polkinghorne's (2007) definition of data analysis for narrative research. He explains that analysis should draw "out implications in the text...revealing the impact of the social and cultural setting on people's lives" (p. 483). These implications in my data were discovered through the use of coding.

I coded the data and sought to find themes among the stories that were told. Polkinghorne (2007) states that the purpose of interpreting narrative data is to "deepen the reader's understanding of the meaning conveyed in a story" (p. 483). Thus, I was looking for themes that would allow readers to grasp the complex social milieu of an IEP meeting and how that impacted the parent. I searched for themes to organically emerge that would answer the question "How is parent satisfaction and involvement affected when a restorative justice circle process is employed in an IEP meeting?". Throughout this process I attempted to look through a critical and relational theory lens. I read and reread the transcripts while creating and recreating codes that felt valuable until I had a manageable number of codes that told the whole of the story.

4.3 Validation-trustworthiness

The validity of a narrative inquiry lies in the resonance of the feeling it conveys to its reader. It is more important that the meanings felt by the events are represented accurately than the details of the events (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 479). Because there is such nuance in social communication, those present during the same social situation will report a different experience which is difficult to

comprehend factually. Thus, it was important for me to focus not on what was being said explicitly in the stories, but rather the meaning that was attached. This is where the use of the restorative questions “what were/are you thinking” and “what were/are you feeling” helped the participant delve deep into the meaning of the events described.

For my research to be valid I ensured transparency with regards to my data interpretation approach. Polkinghorne (2007) says that “narrative researchers need to spell out their understandings of the nature of their collected evidence” (p. 479). In order for readers to make an informed judgment of validity. To do this I kept a journal of my metacognition throughout the study and included my thought process as a journey with my interpretation. Ultimately, the validity of my narrative inquiry came down to conveying to readers that the feelings expressed by the participants were accurately understood and represented, that I presented a clear explanation based upon the evidence that was collected.

Chapter 5 Findings

I transcribed the interviews and the restorative IEP meeting myself, and as such I became intimately involved with the data. This process was rather time consuming but allowed me to understand what my participant had shared in a new light. The glacial speed of transcribing allowed me to process what was unfolding before me anew while also allowing me to focus on overlooked minutia. With coding I was able to uncover five themes in my data: Mood, power, control, relationship perception and goals. These themes did not emerge easily. As this is my first attempt at coding qualitative data I had a few false starts and paths that lead me to reassess my original codes which I will explain in this chapter.

The first theme, mood, outlines the overall tone of the interviews and restorative meeting. The theme of power explains how my participant recognized and worked within the injustice in the system and how this injustice was affected by the use of circle process. The issue of power imbalance continues in the third theme, control, where the participant shared how he attempted to create justice within the existing system. Then I go on to share how the use of circle process allows justice between the members of the IEP team. In the theme on relationship perception I discuss how the participant viewed his relationship with the members of the team before, during and after the restorative IEP meeting. Finally, I delve into the goals of IEP meetings. This theme outlines what gets accomplished in standard IEP meetings and meetings which make use of rj circle process.

5.1 The Mood

After social gatherings people walk away with an impression of how the event made them feel. We often attribute a mood to describe this feeling to others. We might share with others that a party was lively or calm or that our class was rowdy or subdued. There are various factors we must take into consideration to decide upon this label and they are subjective. Generally, when we witness the coming together of people with disparate opinions there is a tension felt which has an affect upon the overall mood. Those who have attended formal meetings where members are trying to negotiate a collaborative solution with various viewpoints are aware of the tension. The mood of a social event is felt, but it can be difficult to relate what precipitated this feeling to those absent from the event.

There was a distinct atmosphere during the interviews with my participant and the restorative IEP meeting. When I journaled about these experiences I frequently felt the need to capture the mood. I was left with an impression of frustration, hope and excitement respectively. This is summarised in Table 5.1 below. While I worked through the data I began coding the first interview and found many excerpts which I labelled dissatisfaction. As I progressed to the IEP meeting and the second interview I was only able to make use of this code a few times which led me to reassess, and ultimately discard the code. Instead of completely eliminating the quotes I had coded as dissatisfaction, I looked at the term "dissatisfaction" as a part of a whole. Dissatisfaction became representative of a code that could fit within the mood category. Once this new umbrella was opened several other codes coalesced into this theme including apathy, frustration, optimism, excitement, and approval.

Mood	
Interview before the restorative IEP meeting	<u>Frustration</u> "I feel like I have nothing to lose"
During the restorative IEP meeting	<u>Excitement</u> "I'm excited"
Interview after the restorative IEP meeting	<u>Hope</u> "I think if you had that kind of meeting at the beginning of the year with every parent...it might go a long way towards a better school year"

Table 5.1 – The tone of the first interview, restorative IEP meeting and second interview along with quotes from the parent participant.

In the interview that occurred before the restorative IEP meeting, the parent made several statements which were indicative of mood. He devalued the importance of the meetings by sharing that they were "of no special importance" and that they were "necessary, but not important". His dissatisfaction with the current arrangement was conveyed frequently throughout the first interview. He told me that the problem with the meetings is that "they are too much" and that the teachers are "woefully unprepared to deal with the complexities" of the inclusive schooling model. He was concerned that the school staff attended IEP meetings out of obligation; that they did not have a genuine interest in educating his child. This is expressed unequivocally in the statement "everyone doesn't want to be there really" and again later imbedded in a story about teachers who debate the fulfillment of their teaching profession. He addresses teachers who lament their difficulties in educating children with special needs by saying "So then, leave!". He expresses that teachers who find it difficult to teach in an inclusive setting should quit. He maintains that their job dissatisfaction "isn't the fault of the parents, isn't the fault of the kid, isn't the fault of the board, isn't the fault of inclusion."

My participant also spoke in ways that displayed his desire to protect the special needs community from the school. This is heard when he expresses concern

that a “special needs kid becomes a poster child for how hard it is to be a teacher”. He worried that children with special needs were being used as “a bargaining chip in the labour negotiations.” Also, he shared that this “devastated” parents of children with special needs. Together these remarks create an other, those who do not care about special needs children.

Collectively, the devaluing of IEP meetings, the poor evaluation of educators’ abilities and desire to teach children with special needs as well as the othering expressed created an overall mood which I entitled frustration. His complaints seem to highlight a serious frustration with the current system. This frustration relates to the IEP meetings and beyond.

During the IEP meeting the parent’s mood was more fluid. At the beginning of the meeting, during the check-in round, he shared that his day was filled with highs and lows. He tells the teachers that he has “been really frustrated”. After hearing testimonials of the student’s progress from the three staff members he states, “I don’t share the optimism you guys do, I don’t think.” After more discussion ensues he exclaims “I’m really glad...it is good to hear this.” His mood at the beginning of the meeting was similar to his initial interview, but it shifted as the meeting progressed. He expressed some fears and concerns and the school staff heard and responded to them.

On the other hand, the school staff- the guidance counsellor, classroom teacher and principal were upbeat from the outset of the meeting. Their shared optimism for the student’s future was evident for the duration of the meeting. The classroom teacher said directly that she was “optimistic” about the student’s

progress. The care for the student with respect to his education, and as a person in general, was not veiled during this interaction. The classroom teacher said the student “knew that I genuinely liked him as a person and we have a good rapport”. Similarly, when discussing the fact that the student would be moving to a new school the guidance counsellor stated that “I’m going to be sad to see him go.”

With the parent’s mood taking an upturn throughout the course of the meeting and rest of the team members expressing encouraging statements about the student, the overall mood of the meeting was positive. The talk that centered around the student’s ability and their expectations of success in the years to come showed the enthusiasm of the participants. In fact, the team members all laughed together at a joke at the very end of the meeting. Spirits of all who participated in this meeting seemed high. All these factors led me to categorize the mood of the meeting as “excited”.

When interviewing the parent after the meeting, the excitement I heard during the IEP meeting was tempered. It had transformed into hope for a new method for parents to become partners in their child’s education. He expressed his approval of the new approach using a few different statements: “it was good”, “the procedure went really well” and “I quite enjoyed the whole concept”. He also showed that this approach was beyond what a parent would conceive of as an everyday occurrence when he expressed that “a circle meeting is a luxury”. His expectations for an IEP meeting, even one which he knew would be using a new approach, were surpassed.

As he reflected on the meeting, he shared that his expectations were not in line with what he experienced. He thought the meeting would be more policy driven when in fact "it wasn't, it was like a 'this is your life.'" When describing the new approach, he told me that "everyone was eager to...everyone had an answer, everyone was pretty eager to say stuff about what was going on." This is a definite departure from his earlier interview where "everyone didn't want to be there." He was appreciative of the chance to have been a part of the meeting using rj and said he was "fortunate that he had the opportunity." This appreciation may stem from his understanding of how the current meetings are run and his past frustration with attending them. He said "in the meeting prior to it, it was 'here is his strengths, here is his weaknesses, how has he improved on this, how has he improved on that, how has he not improved on that.' It was very, almost quantitative you know."

He was hopeful about rj circle approach being utilized in future IEP meetings. He suggested schools use this approach at the beginning of the year because it "might go a long way towards a better school year." His positive statements about the meeting and his recommendation to use a circle to proactively resolve conflicts between members of the IEP meeting made the tone of the second interview one of hope.

5.2 Power- Recognizing the Injustice

I used a critical lens at the outset of my data analysis. I was looking for information that related to issues of power imbalance at work in the current system as well as how the new approach affected this dynamic. I first used the code "us vs

them” to signify quotations relating to this theme. However, as I worked through the data I realized that many of these passages were related more specifically to the relationship that the parent is engaged in with the members of the IEP team while others were concerned with the issue of power sharing. As such, I split the codes between these two themes: power and relationship perspective. As these represent my two theoretical frameworks, it seemed appropriate that I have a theme for each.

Once I settled on “power” as a theme I realized how large a concept it truly was. There were many statements made that had an undercurrent of oppression associated with them. To account for the volume of data which I had originally allocated to the power theme I decided to split the theme into two. One which would deal with the participants awareness of the imbalance, and one that would address how he attempted to deal with the imbalance. The latter I will refer to as the control theme.

During the first interview, before the restorative IEP meeting, the participant made statements which indicated he was aware of the social injustice in our society. He matter-of-factly stated that unequal education levels between parents and school staff can act as a barrier to the creation of a productive relationship in IEP meetings. This barrier he labelled intimidation. He said “I’ve got a masters degree so I didn’t feel intimidated, but I could certainly see how someone would feel intimidated.” The subject of education and credentials came up a few times throughout our dialogue. He noted that in IEP meetings “you don’t need everyone there” because “it risks, kind of, pushing the parents out” when they “make sure all the advanced degrees get there.”

Though he claimed not to feel intimidated due to his education, some of the stories that he shared during the interviews contradict this claim. This injustice is evident in the parent's stories when he acknowledges that he ameliorated his actions to ensure he remained in favour with those in power. He relates an instance where he felt "blindsided" during a meeting by information that he thought could have been relayed earlier. Instead of being open during the meeting and sharing his frustration, he felt he had to keep his opinion to himself. He says, "you are there in front of these ten people and you can't say 'well didn't we just talk about this two weeks ago?' You can't be negative because then you just poison the whole well."

He shares that he is reluctant to criticize the school system and those who operate it. He will only do so when he deems it absolutely necessary. In one story he tells of a time when he took a stand during a school meeting. The school staff were encouraging him to send his son for testing which he did not want to do. He said he was "pushed and pushed on it" and "finally had to say 'alright, this is why I don't want to do this test.'" Generally, it seems he would prefer to keep the peace despite harbouring feelings of discontent. If power were distributed equally, one member of a team would not feel the need to accept injustice to keep the peace. This sheds light on the many facets of power imbalance which are not confined merely to education level. The imbalance can be felt in the power people have over others due to their position and ability to affect changes upon the powerless.

His reluctance to oppose the school staff is reiterated in another story he shares about standing up to an employee working within the NLESD. The parent confesses that he uses caution when standing his ground on issues related to

special education because “chances are I’m going to run into this person again over the years. So, I’ve got to be a bit careful.” These stories illustrate the power that educational professionals hold over parents in the context of an IEP meeting.

A restorative approach which makes use of circle process was constructed to create a space for all, a space where people with various perspectives could meet and begin the long journey of seeing through one another’s eyes. During the restorative IEP meeting, the facilitator, in this case the guidance counsellor, shared the guidelines for the circle. He began by stating that “we are all valued worthy members of the group.” This is a meaningful statement because although it may seem innocent to some, to others it is the fairness they have been searching for. Oppressed people may feel unhappy in their position, but unsure why. Becoming aware of power imbalance is the first step to upending the system that allows it to continue (Friere, 1968).

The guidance counsellor also stated to the group “You have the right to be heard. Meaning that when you are speaking, whoever is holding the talking piece, that we will listen actively to that person.” This guideline gives every circle member equal power to contribute during the meeting. The plainness of this rule is intended to reassure the members that the idea of justice is not a platitude. That in this meeting, for this one social encounter, everyone has an expectation to respect the opinions of others despite their own opinion. When this expectation has been said aloud the members of the circle will often hold each other and themselves accountable to the guideline without the need for a facilitator to intervene. This was evident in the restorative meeting one or two occasions when the parent and

classroom teacher began to interrupt the speaker but then stopped and waited for their turn.

A power sharing dynamic is created with these guidelines which is difficult to construct without a specific plan to do so. When using a rj circle in an IEP meeting the value attributed to common hierarchies in education can be minimized. Members address issues from their own understanding using their own language. Lacking the language to understand and thus contribute to discussion in IEP meetings is an issue of power imbalance which must be rectified if equity is to be achieved. The parent shares his knowledge of this issue in his second interview when he says that the "language of the more technical meetings is the language of the school and the board, and sometimes the university, and that is not the language the parent necessarily speaks."

During the interview after the restorative IEP meeting my parent participant shared that he wished his spouse could have attended the meeting because she "often feels talked down to or ignored or talked over and just the format of the meeting didn't allow for it." Feeling ignored or talked down to are obvious signs of power imbalance.

Another sign of power imbalance is evident in the overvaluing of the opinion of specialists. In the traditional approach to IEP meetings pediatricians or educational psychologists who attend meetings are looked upon as authority figures. Even when they have little interaction with the child, their recommendations often trump those of the parent and school staff who work with the child on a day to day basis. These specialists have specific knowledge that is

valuable to adjusting the educational expectations and evaluations of children with special needs, but their perspectives are not more valuable than the insights of the other team members who know the children in a different way. This message is sometimes lost. Sometimes finding a consensus can be mired in credentials.

The parent in this study recognizes that this power differential exists. After experiencing a new approach to IEP meetings using rj circle process, he ponders about how these specialists would fit into such a meeting. He wonders, "if you had specialists from the board who come in, who don't really know the kid, who only know the kid as an evaluation. I think they would have...I'm not sure what place they would find in something like that...in a meeting like that... I don't know where they would find a spot to fit in." The belief that a specialist may find it difficult to fit into an IEP meeting indicates there was a shift in power. Through using an rj approach the members were focused more on talking without jargon, without the need of an educational authority. They were sharing intimate stories on a personal level which would be difficult for a stranger to become a part of.

A summary of the key ideas in this theme can be seen below in Table 5.2. The theme on power focused on uncovering and accepting the existence of a power imbalance in the existing system. The parent's attempt to conform to perceived expectations, the value of credentials and the challenge of technical jargon all shed light on the need for an approach which affords parents the opportunity to contribute on an equal playing field. I will address this in the next theme on control.

Power	
Interview before the restorative IEP meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parent attempts to conform to perceived expectations - Parent is aware of the credential hierarchy within the system - Parent works within the given system by making use of specialists and educational knowledge
During the restorative IEP meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitator goes over the circle guidelines which gives every member of the IEP team equal power to contribute
Interview after the restorative IEP meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New expectations mean "everyone is obligated to listen" to the parent - Parent questions how the specialists would fit into the new meeting approach

Table 5.2: Awareness of Oppression

5.3 Control- Creating Justice

This section will deal with how my participant attempted to find control in the traditional meetings and how he was afforded control in the new approach. Many who are oppressed fail to recognize the oppression. Once they begin to see the cage to which they have been confined, they may accept or fight against being controlled. Friere (1968) addresses the difficulty of overcoming oppression when he says "This, then is the greatest humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well" (p. 28). Battling the system of injustice is a monumental task that is often too difficult to take on as an individual. Instead the individual may find outlets that afford them control amid the injustice.

In the interview before the restorative meeting the parent indicated a few strategies he uses to gain power in the existing system. He used experts, statistics and withholding participation as a means of gaining control. In the past he tried to combat the issue of power imbalance which radiates from credentials by bringing

his own professionals to IEP meetings. He shared that he has “been pretty good at mobilizing [his] people.” He ensured his child’s pediatrician could be present at past IEP meetings as an authority. He says, “It is kind of like, if that is how you organize things, then I am going to bring in someone more powerful.” Because he has a background in education, he has used his knowledge to help level the playing field. He confidently declared that when he attends meetings, he “knows what he is talking about.” In reference to how he relates to fellow educators he says “you want stats, here are some stats, you know, because I can talk the talk.”

He shares that he attempts to deemphasize the meetings by “being there all the time so they are not such a big deal.” Another strategy he makes use of to help “protect” himself during IEP meetings is to withhold his opinion until he has heard everyone else’s: “now what I do is I wait and get everyone else’s view first, make some notes and then I go...but it is like-I’ll talk when I want to talk.” This tactic indicates the desire for an equal relationship to exist in these meetings. The parent is using his limited power to attempt to balance the injustice as best he can.

During the restorative IEP meeting the parent was specifically endowed the power to speak when he felt ready. A talking piece was used whereby the person holding it would be the speaker, while the other members engaged in active listening to the speaker. When a question was posed the facilitator of the circle allowed any member to speak first which gave the parent the power to decide how he would contribute. When the guidance counsellor proclaimed, “so, who would like to start?” the participant was not put upon to share his feelings first, but if he had the desire to contribute first, he would have been able to.

As well, all members of the circle were specifically given the choice to refrain from participating when they did not want to share. This is a form of control that some may desire, especially if they are concerned that they do not understand the topic at hand. This was made clear during the meeting with the following statement from the guidance counsellor: "When the talking piece comes around the circle, you have the right to pass." This guideline gave each member control over how they wished to contribute during the meeting.

The questions posed throughout the meeting allowed room for the participants to control the direction of the conversation. The guidance counsellor loosely structured the meeting to ensure the strengths and needs were discussed. However, there was plenty of room for members to bring nagging issues to foreground. In the meeting there are several instances when the parent does not directly address the question that has been posed, yet he contributes to the meeting in a valuable way. He had issues that seemed to be plaguing him and he used the flexibility of the meeting to address these issues. For instance, in response to the guidance counsellor's question "What are you thinking right now about his progress this year?" the parent responded with a discussion about their struggles with medication last year, their difficulties with a previous teacher, the student's reluctance to join extra curriculars due to his dislike for school, the parent's concern that the student is being socially promoted and his concern for how the student will deal with the rotary system in junior high next year. The parent utilizes the openness of the meeting to unburden his mind from the many concerns he harbours for his son based on past experiences and his worry that he is unable to solve the complex problems that lie ahead. In a traditional meeting the parent is

encouraged not to deviate from the agenda. Since the agenda is created by the school staff, this strips the parent of the power to introduce topics that are of concern to them. Without the ability to change the course of conversation, engaging in a real dialogue is inaccessible. In the words of Friere (1968), "Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication, there can be no true education" (p. 82).

Control	
Attempts made by the parent to gain power in the traditional system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bringing pediatricians and other experts to IEP meetings - Making references to statistics - Deemphasizing IEP meetings by being at the school frequently - Withholding participation at meetings
Power granted to the parent in the restorative meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Able to speak whenever he felt ready - Given the choice to refrain from contributing in the circle - Open ended questions which allowed parent to direct the conversation

Table 5.3: Methods of controlling the IEP meeting with the traditional approach and rj circle process approach from the parent's perspective.

In reflecting upon the IEP meeting using the circle process, the parent was pleased. He shared that "the staff were very quick to answer which was great for me because it gave me a chance to sit back and think about it a bit more and process it a bit more." He felt that the new approach created a level playing field because the discussion was less focused on jargon. He said, "we all have that language to say I like this, I don't like that."

Perhaps the biggest compliment given to the new approach is the recognition that it creates an environment where the members are engaged in a real discourse.

The traditional approach to IEP meetings has relied on the prior creation of IEP goals by the school staff as a time saving measure. This is a major complaint in the literature (Cheatham et al., 2012; Reiman et al., 2010; Weishaar, 2010).

Presenting a pre-created IEP to parents and having them approve or reject the goals does not allow for the creation of a collaborative document. If there were no issues of power imbalance this precreation would be less problematic. However, in the current setup parents may feel powerless to speak the truth and reject such documents. Expecting a team member who feels disadvantaged to refuse ideas suggested by those in power is unreasonable. When comparing the traditional approach to the circle approach the participant stated that "usually with the other meetings it is like here are some ideas, do we agree or not agree...[in the circle meeting] it got to the point where kind of as we were rolling in the meeting where people were like 'oh, give me the thing, I want to talk, give me the thing.'" This shows that all members were contributing to the discussion rather than approving what was put forward by the school staff, a definitive sign of more equitable power throughout the group. A method that allows equity of power is creating the IEP document together.

After experiencing both approaches to IEP meetings, the parent compared the two and made several remarks that indicated the presence of power sharing in the circle approach. He said that during the restorative meeting "Everyone has an equal input" and that "the rest of the staff is obligated to listen to [the parent]." When asked to reflect upon how the use of circle in IEP meetings would impact parents, the participant felt that it would create more justice between the members of the IEP team. He said "it would knock down some of the hierarchies of even how

people sit...I think it is just, kind of, the subtle structures that are important and I think the circle effaces that, which is, I think, its point. There is no head of the circle. And I think what is good about the talking piece is that it lets people finish their idea and everyone respects that.”

The parent’s desire to have control within IEP meetings was also evident when he analyzed the new approach. His suggestion to improve the restorative IEP meeting was to have been better prepared for the meeting. He would have liked to have known what questions the guidance counsellor was planning to ask before the meeting. He said being given the questions would have given him “a bit more of an idea of the nature of the meeting because it was a bit different than what I was expecting.” His desire to have this knowledge shows his eagerness to balance the power between all members of the IEP team.

The theme of control focused on the parent’s search for justice in the traditional approach, the ways in which it can exist in the new approach and the participant’s perception of the power sharing that occurred. In the first interview he shared how he attempted to gain equal power as a member of the team using experts and statistics. By using circle guidelines, power was offered to the parent whereby members of the IEP team had control over whether they would share their opinions, when they would share them and what they would share.

Finally, I addressed the parent’s response to the power distribution that existed during the circle. During the second interview the parent expressed many positive statements about the new approach. He reported that the new approach would allow a dialogue to emerge between the members of the circle when he said

that during the traditional approach “the members were confirming or denying” whereas in the new approach they were “generating new ideas and new strategies”. Creating something new does not come easily. As Friere (1968) states, “knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 58). It is “with each other” that we will now turn our attention. The themes on power and control sprung from my critical theory lens while the next theme is born of my relational theory lens.

5.4 Relationship Perception

In relational theory as described by Llewellyn and Downie (2012) we accept that “the human self is constituted *in and through* relationship with others. We define ourselves *in* relationship to others and *through* relationship with others” (p. 4). When using the lens of relational theory, we see that the satisfaction and involvement my participant reported is connected to his relationship with the team members and other school staff that he has encountered in the past. Relational theory “compels us to take the fact of relationship, of connectedness, as our starting assumption. As such, relationality must inform the ideas, principles and conceptions that shape our interactions and social life” (Llewellyn and Downie, 2012, p. 90).

Using relationship as a starting point for our understanding of the world resonated with me while I was coding my data. It seemed that the bulk of my data could fit within a category entitled relationship. I had many codes which referred to how my participant related to the school staff and the education system. During the

first interview these codes were: Us versus them, authority, defense, outsider, and liability. During the meeting and the follow up interview the relational codes I used were appreciation, support, care and confiding.

The data I collected during the interview before the restorative IEP meeting contained statements about how my participant perceived his relationship with school staff. The following quotes demonstrate his belief that he was an outsider in relation to the rest of the team: "I often feel that sometimes there is a bit of a pre-plan going on and you feel a bit ganged up on", "I was blindsided by someone else on staff" and "I felt a bit set up." He also worried about how his behaviour affected the relationship with the staff. "I'm not sure...if they see me as a bit of an adversary". He shared a story where the actions of a staff member offended him. He felt he deserved more respect than had been afforded to him. In his words: "I just felt that was really careless for someone to say that. It felt a bit pressurized."

As an educator and parent, my participant was able to take two perspectives. At times he expressed concern for being an outsider, yet at other times he was able to access insider knowledge, and to understand why teachers had taken certain actions. He reported frustration that he "would never get an email back because they are committed to not having a paper trail" while at the same time reporting that he is "pro-teacher."

During the restorative IEP meeting there were several statements made by each member of the team expressing care and appreciation. The parent told the classroom teacher that his son was "lucky" to have been in her class and that "he liked [her] class because [she] did fun stuff." The classroom teacher illustrated her

level of care multiple times. She described the student as “quite a kind and compassionate person.” The guidance counsellor showed how invested he was in the child’s progress when he stated that “it is really nice to see him take some steps forward” and that he feels a bit of regret that he “could have done something...a little bit more” to help the student over the course of time they worked together.

Throughout the interview the parent allowed himself to be vulnerable. He expressed that he felt “a bit embarrassed about” how his son treated another person at the school. He also shared a story about his son’s activities outside of the school and lamented that the school staff were unable to see him in this way- “it is too bad some of you can’t see him in his other world.” The departure from outsider to confidant is representative of the “shift from social control to social engagement” that Morrison and Vaandering (2012, p. 145) discussed. Participating in the rj circle process allowed the parent to have interactions that led the members to being engaged in a relationship *with* one another as outlined in the relationship window. The window describes four types of relationships, *for*, *to*, *with* and *not*. See the literature review on page 28 for more details about the relationship window. It is only in a relationship *with* one another that liberation from oppression is possible.

When reflecting upon the meeting, the parent had only positive comments to report about how he related to the team members. Following the restorative IEP meeting he was left with the feeling that the IEP team members were “all big supporters of [his son].” In response to the question “what were you feeling during the meeting” he reported feeling surprised at the level of concern that the staff have for his son: “these staff members really care about my son and they know him

quite well which is reassuring and maybe a bit surprising.” The care that was expressed during the meeting highlighted the interconnectedness of the team members. It allowed the space for the school staff and parent to “build a better bond.”

Relationship Perception	
Quotes made by the parent before the restorative IEP meeting during the first interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “you feel a bit ganged up on” - “I was blindsided by someone else on staff” - “[I] would never get an email back because they are committed to not having a paper trail”
Quotes made by the school staff during the restorative IEP meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “it is really nice to see him [the student] take some steps forward” - “There is always a little bit of regret that you could have done something...a little bit more”
Quotes made by the parent after the restorative IEP meeting during the second interview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “these staff members really care about my son and they know him quite well which is reassuring and maybe a bit surprising”

Table 5.4: The evolving view of the relationship between the parent and school staff

5.5 Goals

As discussed in the theme on relationships, one of the goals that was accomplished using rj circle process was building a bond between the parent and school staff. While combing through the data I was troubled by the concept of what gets accomplished during an IEP meeting. I began to look at this theme from the parent’s perspective. Here I will discuss how the parent viewed the accomplishments of the two approaches.

For the traditional IEP meeting the parent felt that the meetings were not generally productive. In his first interview prior to the restorative IEP meeting he stated that “I’ve never come out of them feeling ‘wow, we got a lot done there’. I

never do.” He felt that the members present did not contribute any new information to the team: “You might have ten people, all of whom (a lot of them), just have the same thing to say.” Another issue he indicated with the meetings is their use of “templated language” which may miss the mark when trying to represent the child. As Cheatham et al. (2012) explain, “although a “bank” of IEP goals can be a productive place to start the process of identifying student goals (and many school districts provide them), these resources may not be appropriate as goals to meet an individual student’s needs” (p. 52). Relying on “banks” may be a symptom of trying to fit qualitative data into a quantitative instrument. Teachers have forms to fill out and guidelines they use during IEP meetings which requires the selection from a pre-created list as opposed to creating unique documents. This serves to disconnect the team from the child and form a relationship *to* or *for* them as opposed to *with* them. If the meetings are unproductive and fail to reflect the student they are meant to represent, what do they accomplish?

The main goal that my participant indicated for traditional IEP meetings was completing paperwork. He explained that they are a required formality where his participation is reduced to a signature. Yet he felt it was important to attend such meetings because it was through his attendance that his child would be granted access to the special education services required. This detachment is evident when he says: “we might need it, so lets just go to all of these meetings and sign everything that is out in front of me” and “when you are into the second hour of it, you are like, ‘just give me the forms to sign.’”

A goal of rj is “to replace punitive, managerial structures of schooling with those that emphasize the building and repairing of relationships” (Vaandering,

2014). Thus, when we incorporated rj into an IEP meeting we had the expectation that relationship building would be accomplished. This relationship building can be seen in the restorative IEP meeting when the members are given the opportunity to take another members' perspective, when members allow themselves to be vulnerable and when they encourage one another.

During the meeting the parent shares that he does not "see the same progress" as the school staff see because he is only contacted when there is an issue, which he finds frustrating. Allocating the space for the parent to share his feelings gives school staff the opportunity to take the parent's viewpoint into consideration and vice versa. When the classroom teacher addresses her concern for the child's ability to attend to his work in class, the parent explains that he is aware of this difficulty and is also concerned about how to handle the issue. He responds openly with "I recognize that, but I don't know what to do." He is opening the door to allow the staff to make suggestions. He also shares the student's negative experience with medication. This allows the staff to understand why the student is not medicated. This knowledge that was shared allows for more understanding from the school staff and fosters good will toward finding a new solution.

During the meeting the parent shared his fears for his son's educational future. He was surprised that the school staff predicted a promising future for his child. He said, "I guess I'm not as optimistic as you because it upsets me so much." Parents are more emotionally affected by their child's difficulties than educators. The support and optimistic outlook of the classroom teacher acted as an anchor for him to see beyond minor difficulties. During his second interview with me, after the

restorative IEP meeting, the parent shared that he was glad to hear the perspectives of the school staff. He appreciated their opinions since they knew his child in a different context. He shared that he was reassured by their comments since they repeatedly made statements during the meeting that indicated they were confident that the child would find success. The parent was given hope by these statements that the child would “find the things that he is good at...he will get there, he will.”

When reflecting on what was accomplished during the circle the parent indicated that the approach allowed a holistic look at his child that went beyond issues that needed to be resolved: “we were talking about the whole child not just the behaviours or not just what he has done wrong.” He felt that IEP meetings using circle process would develop a feeling that the child “is not just another number, or just a bad kid, or not just a kid who always comes down to the office.” In contrast to the traditional meeting, the parent did not see signing papers as the goal. Perhaps due to his past experience attending IEP meetings he had an expectation that the restorative meeting would remain focused on paperwork. He said he “was under the impression it was going to be policy; ‘this is stuff that has got to be signed as a matter of course for the next step’, but it wasn’t at all. It was, ‘oh we are going to send you some forms to sign later because we have all been through the drill so many times, for so many years.’” This statement shows a shift in how the parent perceives the relationship with the team. When using the new approach, he is no longer in a relationship *for* others where the team members use him for his signature. He is seen as a partner, an insider who knows the drill.

In response to the questions "how do you think the meeting will impact the needs of your child", the parent reported that it would impact him indirectly. He noted that the meeting alleviated his "fear of him going off to a new school." Addressing the fears of a parent are not among the listed tasks that are indicated for an IEP meeting according to the NLESD but doing so builds relationships. The literature recommends maximizing parent involvement in IEP meetings. Building relationships among the IEP team members will allow the involvement to naturally occur. As well, reducing the fears of a parent is an outcome which could have a positive impact on the child. When the parent is assured by the educators that the child is capable, the parent can in turn bestow this confidence to the child. The assurance from those with more experience helps reduce the stress which accompanies any life transition such as changing schools or accepting a diagnosis.

The goals of the circle IEP meeting were perceived by the parent to be less tangible. He shared that "the meeting itself didn't really have any concrete...objectives...we are going to do this for sure or this is going to happen for sure.'" The accomplishment of the restorative IEP meeting was relationship building which is visible in the team members sharing their concern for the child's progress, sharing their fears and supporting one another. The meeting allowed the flexibility for the parent to genuinely engage with the team members on a humanizing level.

Goals	
<u>What is accomplished in traditional IEP meetings:</u>	<u>What is accomplished in rj circle process IEP meetings:</u>
<i>A waste of time: "I've never come out of them feeling 'wow, we got a lot done there', I never do"</i>	<i>Providing the space for parents and school staff to share and be vulnerable: "I recognize that, but I don't know what to do"</i>
<i>Repetition of ideas from various educators: "You might have ten people, all of whom (a lot of them), just have the same thing to say"</i>	<i>Creating a holistic view of the student: "we were talking about the whole child not just the behaviours or not just what he has done wrong"</i>
<i>Misrepresenting the student with the use of "banks" as opposed to creating unique IEP goals</i>	<i>Providing opportunity to discuss concerns: "it alleviates my fear of him going off to a new school"</i>
<i>Signing documents which grants access to the special education services: "we might need it, so lets just go to all of these meetings and sign everything that is out in front of me"</i>	<i>Allowing real connection: The student "is not just another number, or just a bad kid, or not just a kid who always comes down to the office"</i>

Table 5.5: The parent's view of what was accomplished in the two meeting approaches. Quotes included were made by the parent during our interviews before and after the restorative IEP meeting.

5.6 Addressing the Problem

The purpose behind this study was to determine an approach to IEP meetings that would address the oppression that exists in the current system. I was searching for an answer to the question "how is parent satisfaction and involvement affected when a restorative justice circle process is employed in an IEP meeting?". Through the five themes that emerged, mood, power, control, relationship and goals, I found that the rj approach affected the parent's satisfaction and involvement. The mood changed from frustration, to excitement and finally crystalized into hope. This mood indicates improved parent satisfaction. In the power theme I determined that the parent attempted to adjust his behaviour to work within the system when he was a part of traditional meetings, however after being involved in the circle meeting he questioned whether the hierarchies of the

current system should be included. Instead, he felt that the parents would have valuable information. Such a shift is certain to improve the parental involvement. The control theme presented the parent's desire to gain power within the current system and outlined how the new approach afforded him more power. He expresses his satisfaction with the new approach when he states that he wishes his spouse had been present.

The parent's perception of the relationship he had with the IEP team members shifted. Originally, he stated: "I often feel that sometimes there is a bit of a pre-plan going on and you feel a bit ganged up on." As opposed to how he described the restorative meeting: "So, it was a bit of a love-in in a way." This is a resounding improvement regarding the satisfaction level that the parent experienced. Finally, the theme on goals showed that the parent attended the traditional IEP meetings out of obligation to sign documents that ensured his son would receive the accommodations he needed. However, the goal of the circle meeting was to present a holistic picture of his son. To have an opportunity for the IEP team to look at him as more than "just another number, or just a bad kid." Creating the space for humanizing the student at the centre of the IEP will improve the relationship between the parent and the school staff and allow the parent to let down their guard and become willing to share more openly during the meetings. In all, the rj approach to IEP meetings allowed for more involvement of the parent and improved his satisfaction with the IEP team.

Chapter 6 Discussion

The government of Newfoundland and Labrador maintain that parents are “informed and contributing members” (2015, p. 3) of the IEP team. According to the Handbook for Parents of Children with Exceptionalities published in 2015, parents and educators are partners. Parents in Newfoundland and Labrador are expected to sign the IEP document and are thus always invited to the IEP meetings. Do these parents truly feel like partners? Do they feel the current system allows them to contribute to the team in a valuable way? What sort of relationship are the team members engaged in? When attempting to collaborate with parents, school staff may set out with intentions of equality, only to defer to authoritarian tactics when they are challenged. Though many people believe they are invested in the ideals of equality, in practice they find it extremely challenging to relinquish control. When the oppressed use their newly acquired power to act in a way that conflicts with the oppressor’s wishes, the oppressor is inclined to revoke the power balance. According to the research reviewed previously, this results in parents who are unable to contribute to IEP meetings in a meaningful way. (Cavendish and Connor, 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Underwood, 2010; Hornby and LaFaele, 2011). Perhaps even more disturbing is the realization that the current system harbours bias whereby parents from minorities are less likely to be satisfied with their IEP meetings (Wagner et al., 2012; Fishman & Nickerson, 2014; Mueller, Singer & Draper, 2008; Hornby & LaFaele, 2011; Underwood, 2010).

For school staff to rise to the challenge extended by the best practice recommendations in the literature review, they must develop a relationship *with* parents. To do so, schools must move away from the authoritarian, punitive

approach. In its stead, all team members are required to uphold primary justice (see page 9 for further discussion about primary justice); to see each other as inherently worthy, contributing members of the IEP team. Though this may sound like common sense, it is difficult to produce in practice. When those who hold power attempt to create equality it is likely they will fall victim to using their power when they encounter disagreement. Because of this, it is important to be conscious of how we relate to others so that those with power (educators) are best poised to participate in IEP meetings without oppressing those without power (parents).

According to the handbook for parents of children with special needs that is used by the NLESD, the role of parents on the IEP team is to:

- Share in decisions that affect their child's education
- Provide relevant and clear information that could affect the student's learning and behaviour at school
- Advocate on behalf of the student
- Consider the point of view of all team members

These are all achievable when a safe space is created. When a safe space is created, parents will be able to engage in the meeting as desired and become a partner. However, when they feel oppressed by the other members of the team they will be reluctant to attempt sharing in the decision-making process.

When rj circle process is employed in an IEP meeting, the education level or power to control special education accommodations is decentralized in favour of sharing what each member of the circle thinks and feels about the child's education. Members will be able to focus on the child's progress and begin to collaboratively

find the best way forward. According to the relationship window outlined by Vaandering (2012), parents and school staff may relate to one another in four different ways; they can be in a *to*, *for*, *with* or *not* relationship during their interactions. The only one of these four interaction methods which allows primary justice to reign is relating *with* others. If parents are in relationship *with* the members of the IEP team, they will be able to contribute meaningfully and be satisfied with the process.

A *to* relationship on the IEP team is typified by parents who make use of legal avenues or other supposed power to ensure decisions are made in their favour. My participant admitted to engaging in this behaviour. He shared that he invited doctors to IEP meetings to "bring in someone more powerful." School staff exhibit a *to* relationship when they use parents in order to ensure legal requirements are fulfilled, but do not allow an environment where parents can contribute. This type of exchange was evident when the participant applauded the rj circle process because "the rest of the staff is obligated to listen." The staff was not obligated to listen in the traditional approach.

For relationships occur on a continuum of unintentional to deliberate. When teachers engage in *for* relationships they may do so due to viewing the parent from a deficit perspective. They may have the best intentions while they strip the parent of power. Parents may contribute to this issue by believing suggestions are directives due to the power imbalance at play in this social setting. Proof of this type of relationship exists in my data where the participant reported feeling that he was "ganged up on", that he was "pushed and pushed" to make certain decisions and believing that there was "a bit of a pre-plan going on."

There are several examples of the parent and school staff engaging in *to* and *for* relationships as well as many occurrences where these “partners” are *not* relating to one another. They are engaged in a dynamic of neglecting and rejecting one another as described in the *not* quadrant of the relationship window. This is reflected in many statements made by the participant during the first interview where he reported that the meetings “have no real special significance to me” and that “everyone doesn’t want to be there really.” He demonstrated a loss of faith in the system and noted that the language used at the meetings is “not the language the parent necessarily speaks.” If they are not speaking the same language, the communication and resulting relationship is non-existent.

In the restorative IEP meeting using rj circle process, the parent and school staff were able to participate in a *with* relationship because there were built in structures which worked to balance the inherent power imbalance. The guidance counsellor stated that “everyone has equal input” and that all members have the “right to be heard”. Each time a question was posed to the team, he asked “who would like to start?” These guidelines set the stage to allow parents to be supported in their contributions and know that the team expected that they would be able to make valuable contributions. The new approach resulted in the participant discovering that it was “obvious...that they are concerned for my son.” It allowed the opportunity for active participation. When the parent contrasted the two approaches, he reported that the traditional meetings involved “confirming or denying as opposed to generating and new ideas any new strategies.” The parent also pointed out that the new approach permitted parents to use their own language: “we all have the language to say I like this, I don’t like that.” The parent

was able to have a relationship with the team where they could view each other as partners and mutual respect was displayed.

Parents and educators who work with the child are all undoubtedly invested in the progress of the child and are looking for the best route to educate him or her. An IEP meeting where the team members discuss these thoughts and feelings without being interrupted would leave little space for power struggles. By truly listening to each other it would become apparent that each member has the child's best interest at heart.

Being in a relationship *with* another is how we uphold primary justice. In an educational context this means that teachers must have high expectations for their students and the parents they interact with, as well as supporting them as needed to allow these expectations to be met. Currently, the expectations for parents at an IEP meeting may be low depending upon the philosophy of the team members. Many people accept that someone with specified knowledge in the field of education will make more valuable contributions in an IEP meeting than the contribution of a parent. Parents are frequently relegated to token involvement (Martin et al, 2006b; Hawbaker, 2007; Prunty, 2011; Mueller, 2009; Weishaar, 2010) which can be accepted by parents due to the feeling of inferiority stemming from the hierarchy built on credentials. Parents are used to being oppressed and thus often accept their role as subservient when having an exchange with school staff. In fact, the alternative, being respected as an equal team member, can be shocking.

In this study, despite the parent reporting to have used circle process in another context, the reality of the meeting still surprised him. I explained the process to

him and we discussed the guidelines, yet, he still “thought it was going to be more policy, just sign this, sign this.” This illuminates the difficulty we have conceiving an approach that allows room for members to relate with each other. The parent could not actually conceive of a meeting where those in power would relinquish that power to him.

When we consider that the parent in this study, a white male with post secondary education degrees, feels the need to comply with school authority, we can begin to grasp the difficult terrain of an IEP meeting for a parent. Creating relational equity among parents who are less privileged than my participant due to their race, ethnicity, education, or gender will prove a bigger challenge. Such a challenge surely requires a specific approach to IEP meetings which addresses this oppression head on.

When a person is oppressed they may feel comfortable being caged. In his work “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, Friere (1968) explains that “the oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom” (p. 31). The idea of creating a new system whereby power is distributed among members of a team can be alarming, but it is necessary to liberate the oppressed. Friere (1968) encourages those with power to act dialogically because “leaders who do not act dialogically, but insist on imposing their decisions, do not organize the people--they manipulate them. They do not liberate, nor are they liberated: they oppress” (p.179).

Parents and educators alike are conditioned to expect that there is not the time nor the resources to be concerned with genuinely discussing and sharing

stories in IEP meetings. There is an expectation that the team members must rush to the bottom line- fill out forms and sign papers. The bureaucratisation of our school system has determined that we are objects to be moved through its channels; we are not afforded the honour of being human within its current structure. Once we accept the legitimate domination of educational bureaucracy we find it impossible to contemplate an alternative to the authority and hierarchy embedded in the system. To accept an alternative to bureaucracy there must be a change in basic assumptions. If the educators who are in control of the IEP meetings are to act dialogically they must ensure the oppressed are heard. The best way to currently accomplish this that I am aware of is through restorative justice. Using circle process and the specific guidelines that accompany it allow for power sharing and an atmosphere where all members of the circle are valued.

Such a paradigm shift is not accomplished without a concerted effort. Once educators have accepted the values of primary justice and wish to engage in a relationship *with* parents where they are accepted and valued as equal beings, the work begins on creating the support needed. Even when IEP team members have high expectations for the parental contributions, the parents may have difficulty accepting this. They may require significant support to rise to the occasion. Simple statements of fairness do not make that equity come to fruition, though it is the best place to begin. Parents have likely heard in the past that they will have a voice in the IEP meeting. When the power imbalance at play in these meetings is not addressed, these statements are without merit. The oppressed often hear such statements only to realize that the hegemonic underpinnings of our society remain intact. Statements which mistakenly claim equity exists can make injustice obscure.

This perceived equity binds the oppressed in their role since it conceals the power imbalance that continues. The oppressed continue to feel frustrated with the existing system yet are unable to ascertain why. To subvert this system which has taken power away from the parents it is crucially important to ensure we use circles to genuinely create a space where justice exists. This is accomplished by the facilitator who holds each member of the circle accountable to the guidelines. The use of rj circle process is the support needed to allow parents to become engaged in a relationship *with* the IEP team.

Even with the use of this process it is a challenge to remain on the path of rj when working within an established system. I was faced with this difficulty while I completed this research. Upon my follow up interview with the parent I probed to determine “what was accomplished” in the restorative IEP meeting. I subconsciously worried that the meeting was not getting enough done, or more accurately, that those educators in a position of authority would feel that way. Upon reflection I realized I was concerned about how the guidance counsellor felt about the meeting. I was looking for confirmation that the new process was good enough. When I did not get that reassurance, I started to worry that it may not be. Despite my belief that the relationship between the parent and the other IEP team members was valuable in and of itself, I could not shake the feeling that it would not be enough for others. I have read many articles stating the value of the parent-school relationship. I should have been convinced by these researchers that developing a relationship was a meaningful goal, yet I continued to second guess. The current system replicates itself by making it difficult for those inside to question it. Which leads me to question who our current system is serving?

As it stands, our educational system is failing minorities. As Baird (2012) reports "International analyses of student test scores consistently find that everywhere, test scores are closely associated with students' SES" (p. 485). In Canada "8% of test score variation among students can be explained by students' socioeconomic characteristics" (Baird, 2012, 485). This is lower than the 14% international average but is only one piece of injustice in Canada. The youth within the public education system in Canada are also less likely to succeed if they are black or an ethnic minority (Caldas, Bernier & Marceau, 2009). Why does our country allow this inequity to exist? Is it because it allows those who are in power to continue to perpetuate the system? The oppressor's children will be secured a place at the top of the pyramid provided the structure remains intact. All that is required is turning a blind eye to the injustice. Allowing oneself to be oblivious to the hegemonic reign of the wealthy, white, straight males around us means we will never have to face moving to a lower rung on the ladder.

I have lived and succeeded within the bureaucracy of our educational system for my whole life. It is difficult to look at a system that deems you worthy as fallible. It is much more palatable to believe that we have earned our place above those beneath us. However, this is not true. To honor ourselves, we must honor others. We must work to see that our educational system is built on an unjust foundation. We must question the hierarchy that surrounds us in schools. In the words of Friere (1968) "No one can be authentically human while he prevents others from being so" (p. 73). To allow our educational system to perpetuate an achievement gap prevents others from being authentically human. They are

relegated to becoming beings for others; necessary steps on the bottom of the pyramid for the elite to climb upon.

The inherent legitimacy of the hierarchy within our system cannot be extracted without the rest of the structure collapsing. Building anew is unacceptable without first tearing down the existing system. This calls for a revolution: a rebirth of the structure which does not blindly accept the power of a degree or title. Before bureaucracy allowed credentials to provide legitimate power, individuals were given power by earning it from their people. This can be accomplished through building relationships with one another. When educators engage in rj circle process they are creating the space for the parents to realize their commitment and passion for educating. When parents are honored as humans by being in a relationship *with* the school staff they can rise to the challenge of becoming partners in educating their child. To circumvent the destruction of toppling bureaucracy, perhaps it is possible to renovate; perhaps we can piece by piece replace the current model with rj. Through rj, educators can show their students and parents that they care and that they are on a journey together. A journey that creates equal access to education for all.

Chapter 7 Conclusions

Using a case study, I gathered data from a parent who experienced a restorative IEP meeting. In place of the traditional approach to IEP meetings, this meeting made use of restorative justice (rj) circle process. The participant met with the IEP team and with the use of a talking piece and power sharing guidelines, attended a meeting that would have otherwise occurred in a hierarchical fashion. The participant shared his stories with me through two interviews, one before the restorative IEP meeting and one afterward. As well, the restorative IEP meeting was recorded, transcribed and included in data analysis. This research was conducted to answer the question “how is parent satisfaction and involvement affected when a restorative justice circle process is employed in an IEP meeting?”. To answer this question, I made use of coding. Five themes emerged from the data: mood, power, control, relationship perspective and goals. As discussed in the findings chapter and summarized in the tables presented, each of these themes indicated increased parent satisfaction and involvement with the rj circle process approach.

Unfortunately, this research was limited by the number of participants. Due to time restrictions, I was only able to recruit one parent participant. Having one participant allowed for the collection and analysis of rich data and provided me with a deep understanding of his perspective. However, more participants would have provided different insight into the value of using rj circle process in IEP meetings. Though having a second or third participant would not have provided enough data for a generalizable result, it would have acted as comparison for the data I collected and served to enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the findings.

As a result of this research, I recommend the implementation of rj circle process in IEP meetings held at NLESD schools. Though more research is required to understand parent and school staff perspectives on this approach, it is expected to increase parent satisfaction and involvement. The only known drawback of this approach is time restriction. Since parent satisfaction and involvement are factors known to improve student success, using rj circle process is a worthy investment. Schools which intend to implement this approach must ensure that the meeting facilitator has a firm grasp on restorative justice and the nuances of power sharing. Professional development offered through Relationships First NL can provide the knowledge and experience necessary to confidently facilitate circles in an educational context.

The vantage point of my participant was not representative of most parents. His university education and teaching experience gave him insider knowledge and thus power. Despite this advantage, he expressed a desire to withhold his feelings of dissatisfaction during school meetings, to bring in specialists to trump the educators and concern that he was ganged up on. This is especially significant when we attempt to comprehend the perspective of other parents. If my participant felt the weight of the power disadvantage, parents with less may be crushed by the weight of their disadvantage during their IEP meetings. Those without university degrees or from low socioeconomic backgrounds would surely be positioned at a severe power disadvantage during their IEP meetings.

When my sisters attended IEP meetings they felt voiceless due in part to the knowledge gap between themselves and the other IEP team members. They did not speak the language of special education. They did their best to learn along the

journey, often realizing too late that they missed a crucial detail of the discussion. Even when they understood what was being discussed and wanted to contribute, they often lacked the confidence to express themselves among the school staff. During these instances the use of rj circle process in the IEP meetings would have allowed a power shift. It would have allowed the space for them to share their thoughts without fear of judgement and thus open the door to true collaboration. Instead, they felt unheard and frustrated with the process leading to less motivation to contribute in future meetings.

The gap between my sisters and the school staff grew larger with each meeting until my sisters questioned the value of attending these meetings. The current approach to IEP meetings only validated their suspicion that the school staff were not truly interested in their opinions. This approach must be abandoned in favour of an approach which challenges the oppressive culture of the education system. An approach is needed with the lofty goal of welcoming parents to become informed and contributing members of the IEP team as the government of Newfoundland and Labrador claim is currently occurring.

Further research is needed to gain various perspectives into the rj circle process in IEP meetings. It would be valuable to know how rj circle process would be received by parents from low socioeconomic statuses, those whose first language is not English and those from various ethnicities. Finally, as the scope of this work was limited to the parent's perspective, further research must be conducted to determine how school staff satisfaction and involvement levels are affected by rj circle process in IEP meetings.

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INVESTIGATING THE USE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
CIRCLE PROCESS IN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS

Courtney Clarke, Masters Student

Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL

LETTER OF INFORMATION

For the Parent(s) on the Individualized Education Plan Team

My name is Courtney Clarke and I am a Master's student at the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am currently conducting research into the practice of restorative justice in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Meetings. I would like to invite you to participate in this study. This research will explore if IEP meetings can be improved by building a more open and positive relationship between the parents and the school staff. Such a relationship would allow everyone to share their thoughts while others listen and value what is being shared. If you are interested in a new approach to your child's IEP meetings, I ask that you contact me by phone or email using the information at the bottom of this page. Participation is voluntary.

The aims of this study are

- To gain insight into the current satisfaction and involvement levels of parents who attend IEP meetings
- To determine the how satisfaction and involvement is affected when a restorative justice approach is used in an IEP meeting ;

If you agree to participate in this study you will be invited to

- Preconference with an IRT and I for 15 minutes where we will discuss the guidelines for using a restorative justice approach to an IEP meetings with circle process;
- Attend an IEP meeting valuing all voices of the team. This IEP meeting will likely require an hour or two of your time;
- Allow this IEP meeting to be audiotaped for the purpose of studying your satisfaction and involvement in the IEP meeting;
- Dialogue with me regarding your experiences in IEP meetings as well as your reaction to using circle process in a meeting. This will be done through two informal, semi-structured 30 minute interviews that could be longer if we mutually decide to do so;
- You may wish to complete a journal expressing your thoughts on the process or any other information regarding the IEP process, though this is optional.

In circle process the IRT will pose a question or invite members of the circle to share their thoughts about a topic relating to the IEP. The members respond in turn around the circle. Members have the option to pass if they have nothing they wish to share. When using this process the expectations for all members of the circle are the same. All members agree that every person in the circle is valuable and everyone will help make decisions regarding the IEP. Members agree to treat each other with dignity and will not interrupt one another.

The IEP meeting will be audio taped and transcribed into written format. These along with any other information collected will be used for research purposes only. The school's name, your name or information which could identify you will not be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. Actual names will be replaced with pseudonyms in any publications that result from this study. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and will be kept locked for a period of 5 years. After that time, it will be destroyed.

You may develop improved relations with the members of the IEP team and a deeper understanding of their decision making process with regards to your child's IEP. You will have the opportunity to contribute to the creation of your child's IEP in an environment where your thoughts and feelings are valued. This will be possible because all members participating in this study have agreed to the circle process guidelines which specifically state that all members will be listened to and treated with dignity. This study could encourage educational leaders to reassess the current method for conducting IEP meetings as well as indicate the strengths and weaknesses of circle process in IEP meetings.

It is possible that during the interviews or IEP meeting you or another member of the IEP team will feel uncomfortable or become upset. The use of circle process encourages members to share their thoughts and feelings openly without judgment which team members may not be accustomed to. This will likely be overcome within the confines of the circle, however if you or any member becomes emotionally distressed a counsellor will be made available to that individual.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Courtney Clarke: r83clrc@mun.ca or (709) 758-4531.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Sincerely,

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca



INVESTIGATING THE USE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
CIRCLE PROCESS IN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS

Courtney Clarke, Masters Student

Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL

LETTER OF INFORMATION

For the Guidance Counsellor or Instructional Resource Teacher on the Individualized Education Plan Team

My name is Courtney Clarke and I am a Master's student at the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am currently conducting research into the practice of restorative justice in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Meetings and would like to invite you and your school to participate in this study. Participation is voluntary.

The aims of this study are

- To gain insight into the current satisfaction and involvement levels of parents who attend IEP meetings
- To determine the how satisfaction and involvement is affected when a restorative justice approach is used in an IEP meeting ;

If you agree to participate in this study you will be invited to

- Facilitate an IEP meeting using restorative justice circle process. I will support you before and after the meeting to help you value all voices of the team as needed;
- Lead a preconference with all members of the IEP team for 15 minutes before the IEP meeting with my support. You will discuss the guidelines of using a restorative justice approach through circle process;
- Allow the IEP meeting to be audiotaped for the purpose of studying the parents' satisfaction and involvement in the IEP meeting

In circle process the IRT will pose a question or invite members of the circle to share their thoughts about a topic relating to the IEP. The members respond in turn around the circle. Members have the option to pass if they have nothing they wish to share. When using this process the expectations for all members of the circle are the same. All members agree that every person in the circle is valuable and everyone will help make decisions regarding the IEP. Members agree to treat each other with dignity and will not interrupt one another.

The IEP meeting will be audio taped and transcribed into written format. These along with any other information collected will be used for research purposes only. The parents will have the opportunity to review and add to these transcriptions as a part of the study. The school's name, your name or information which could identify you will not be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. Actual names will be replaced with pseudonyms in any publications that result from this study. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and will be kept locked for a period of 5 years. After that time, it will be destroyed.

Possible benefits of this study include improved relations among the members of the IEP team and a closer connection between the school staff and the parents of one or two students. This study could also encourage educational leaders to reassess the current method for conducting IEP meetings as well as indicate the strengths and weaknesses of circle process in IEP meetings.

It is possible that during the IEP meeting a member of the IEP team will feel uncomfortable or become upset. The use of circle process encourages members to share their thoughts and feelings openly without judgment which team members may not be accustomed to. This can usually be overcome within the confines of the circle, however if any member becomes emotionally distressed a counselor will be made available to that individual.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Courtney Clarke: r83clrc@mun.ca or (709) 758-4531.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Sincerely,

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.



INVESTIGATING THE USE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
CIRCLE PROCESS IN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS

Courtney Clarke, Masters Student

Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL

LETTER OF INFORMATION

For members of school staff on the Individualized Education Plan team

My name is Courtney Clarke and I am a Master's student at the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am currently conducting research into the practice of restorative justice in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Meetings. The parents of a child at your school has volunteered to engage in an IEP meeting using a restorative justice approach which will allow all members of the team to have an equal opportunity to voice their concerns and to contribute to the IEP. As a part of this child's IEP team, you will be a part of this meeting approach. You will not be asked to provide feedback. However; it is important that you are aware that this research is being conducted as it will require you to adhere to guidelines during the IEP meeting. Participation is voluntary.

The aims of this study are

- To gain insight into the current satisfaction and involvement levels of parents who attend IEP meetings
- To determine the how satisfaction and involvement is affected when a restorative justice approach is used in an IEP meeting ;

If you agree to participate in this study you will be invited to

- Preconference with an IRT and I for 15 minutes where we will discuss the guidelines for using a restorative justice approach to an IEP meetings with circle process;
- Attend an IEP meeting which values all voices of the team. This will likely require an hour or two of your time;
- Allow the IEP meeting to be audiotaped for the purpose of studying the parents' satisfaction and involvement in the IEP meeting. Your contributions to the meeting may be discussed by the parent but will not be the focus of the study.

In circle process the IRT will pose a question or invite members of the circle to share their thoughts about a topic relating to the IEP. The members respond in turn around the circle. Members have the option to pass if they have nothing they wish to share. When using this process the expectations for all members of the circle are the same. All members agree that every person in the circle is valuable and everyone will help make decisions regarding the IEP. Members agree to treat each other with dignity and will not interrupt one another.

The IEP meeting will be audio taped and transcribed into written format. The parents will have the opportunity to review and add to these transcriptions as a part of the study. These along with any other information collected will be used for research purposes only. The school's name, your name and information which could identify you will not be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. Actual names will be replaced with pseudonyms in any publications that result from this study. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and will be kept locked for a period of 5 years. After that time it will be destroyed.

Possible benefits of this study include improved relations among the members of the IEP team and a closer connection between the school staff and the parents of one or two students. This study could also encourage educational leaders to reassess the current method for conducting IEP meetings as well as indicate the strengths and weaknesses of circle process in IEP meetings.

It is possible that during the IEP meeting you or another member of the IEP team will feel uncomfortable or become upset. The use of circle process encourages members to share their thoughts and feelings openly without judgment which team members may not be accustomed to. This can usually be overcome within the confines of the circle, however if any member becomes emotionally distressed a counselor will be made available to that individual.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Courtney Clarke: r83clrc@mun.ca or (709) 758-4531.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Sincerely,

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861



INVESTIGATING THE USE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
CIRCLE PROCESS IN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS

Courtney Clarke, Masters Student

Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL

LETTER OF INFORMATION

For the participating school

My name is Courtney Clarke and I am a Master's student at the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am currently conducting research into the practice of restorative justice in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Meetings and would like to invite your school to participate in this study. Participation is voluntary.

The aims of this study are

- To gain insight into the current satisfaction and involvement levels of parents who attend IEP meetings
- To determine the how satisfaction and involvement is affected when a restorative justice approach is used in an IEP meeting ;

If you agree to participate in this study as a school you will be invited to

- Allow me to work with an Instructional Resource Teacher (IRT) to prepare him/her to facilitate an IEP meeting using a restorative justice circle process with the permission of the IRT;
- Allow an IRT and I to preconference individually with all members of the IEP team for 15 minutes where we will discuss the guidelines for using a restorative justice approach to IEP meetings using circle process;
- Allow an IEP meeting held at your school to make use of circle process whereby the IRT will value all voices of the team through the use of circle process. With permission of all members of the IEP team, this meeting will be recorded and transcribed.

In circle process the IRT will pose a question or invite members of the circle to share their thoughts about a topic relating to the IEP. The members respond in turn around the circle. Members have the option to pass if they have nothing they wish to share. When using this process the expectations for all members of the circle are the same. All members agree that every person in the circle is valuable and everyone will help make decisions regarding the IEP. Members agree to treat each other with dignity and will not interrupt one another.

The IEP meeting will be audio taped and transcribed into written format. These along with any other information collected will be used for research purposes only. The school's name, your name or information which could identify you will not be used in any publication or presentation of the study results. Actual names will be replaced with pseudonyms in any publications that result from this study. All information collected for the study will be kept confidential and will be kept locked for a period of 5 years. After that time it will be destroyed.

Possible benefits of this study include improved relations among the members of the IEP team and a closer connection between the school staff and the parents of one or two students. This study could also encourage educational leaders to reassess the current method for conducting IEP meetings as well as indicate the strengths and weaknesses of circle process in IEP meetings.

It is possible that during the IEP meeting a member of the IEP team will feel uncomfortable or become upset. The use of circle process encourages members to share their thoughts and feelings openly without judgment which team members may not be accustomed to. This can usually be overcome within the confines of the circle, however if any member becomes emotionally distressed a councilor will be made available to that individual.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Courtney Clarke: r83clrc@mun.ca or (709) 758-4531.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Sincerely,

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.



INVESTIGATING THE USE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
CIRCLE PROCESS IN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS

Courtney Clarke, Masters Student

Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL

Informed Consent Form

Title: Investigating the Use of Restorative Justice with Circle Process in Individualized Education Plan Meetings

Researcher(s): Courtney Clarke, Department of Education, Memorial University, r83clrc@mun.ca, (709)758-4531

Supervisor(s): Dorothy Vaandering, Department of Education, dvaandering@mun.ca, (709) 864-3266

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled *Investigating the Use of Restorative Justice with Circle Process in Individualized Education Plan Meetings*

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Courtney Clarke, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction:

I am a Master's student with the department of education at Memorial University. As part of my Master's thesis I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Dorothy Vaandering.

Purpose of study:

In this study I hope to gain insight into the current satisfaction levels of parents who attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. I wish to determine how satisfaction and involvement in these meetings is affected when a restorative justice approach using circle process is used in place of the current approach.

What you will do in this study:

You will be invited to engage an IEP meeting at your child's school using circle process. This meeting will encourage equal participation from all members of the IEP team and will be facilitated by a guidance counsellor. Prior to the IEP meeting we will meet for a preconference meeting to go over the guidelines of circle process.

Length of time:

The total time commitment for this study will be approximately three hours. The estimated breakdown is as follows: Interviews: 60-120 minutes, Preconference: 10-15 minutes, IEP meeting: 60-120 minutes.

Withdrawal from the study:

At any point during data collection you may withdraw from the study. This means that partway through the preconference, interviews or IEP meeting if you wish to stop, you may do so without any consequences. The data collected after your participation has ended can be removed from this research provided it is requested within one month of the data collection process.

Possible benefits:

You may develop improved relations with the members of the IEP team and a deeper understanding of their decision making process with regards to your child's IEP. You will have the opportunity to contribute to the creation of your child's IEP in a safe environment where your thoughts and feelings are valued. This study could encourage educational leaders to reassess the current method for conducting IEP meetings as well as indicate the strengths and weaknesses of circle process in IEP meetings.

Possible risks:

It is possible that during the interviews or IEP meeting you or another member of the IEP team will become upset. The use of circle process encourages members to share their thoughts and feelings openly without judgment which may make you feel uncomfortable. If you or another member of the IEP team becomes upset, a councilor will be made available to discuss your feelings.

Confidentiality:

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure.

The data from this project will be published; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although I may report direct quotations from our interviews and the IEP meeting, you will be given a pseudonym and all identifying information including the school name will be removed from my report.

After your interview and before the data are included in the final report, you will be able to review the transcript of the IEP meeting and your interviews, and be able to add, change, or delete your information from the transcripts as you see fit.

Although I will safeguard the confidentiality of the IEP meeting to the best of my ability, the nature of a team meeting prevents me from guaranteeing that other members of the team will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the IEP team by not repeating what is said in the meeting to others, and be aware that other members of the team may not respect your confidentiality.

Anonymity:

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance.

Because the participants for this research will engage in a team IEP meeting as well as individual interviews, the members of the team will be known to each other and it is possible that you may be identifiable to the rest of the team on the basis of what you have said.

Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity; and you will not be identified in publications without your explicit permission.

Recording of Data:

Audio recordings will be collected from the interviews and the IEP meeting. I will also make field notes regarding the environment and body language of participants during the interviews and pre-conference meeting. If you complete a journal to share your thoughts with me throughout the process, you may submit them to me as a hardcopy.

Storage of Data:

Audio recordings will be captured through a digital recorder and saved on two separate password protected flash drives. These flash drives will remain in a lockbox in my home. Audio files will be transcribed using my personal computer and saved on both password protected flash drives. All transcriptions and field notes will use pseudonyms to identify participants. Hardcopies of journals collected from participants and field notes will be stored in the aforementioned lockbox. Consent forms

will be stored in a separate lockbox in my home. The data above will be accessible to the researcher and my supervisor.

Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research. After this point all data will be destroyed.

Reporting of Results:

The results of this study will be presented in my Master's thesis. The thesis will be publicly available at the QEII library. Direct quotations and summarized data may be included in this thesis.

Sharing of Results with Participants:

At the conclusion of the research a summary of the results will be provided for all participants in writing and an invitation will be extended to discuss the work in person. Access my thesis will also be available at the QEII library.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact: Courtney Clarke, r83clrc@mun.ca, (709) 758-4531 or Supervising professor Dr. Dorothy Vaandering, dvaandering@mun.ca, (709)864-3266.

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end participation **during** data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be retained by the researcher, unless you indicate otherwise.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw **after** data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the study up to one month after the last day of data collection.

I agree to be audio-recorded

Yes No

I agree to the use of direct quotations

Yes No

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Your signature confirms:

- I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.
- A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Signature of participant

Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date



INVESTIGATING THE USE OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

CIRCLE PROCESS IN INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN MEETINGS

Courtney Clarke, Masters Student

Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL

Informed Consent Form

Title: Investigating the Use of Restorative Justice with Circle Process in Individualized Education Plan Meetings

Researcher(s): Courtney Clarke, Department of Education, Memorial University, r83clrc@mun.ca, (709)758-4531

Supervisor(s): Dorothy Vaandering, Department of Education, dvaandering@mun.ca, (709) 864-3266

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled *Investigating the Use of Restorative Justice with Circle Process in Individualized Education Plan Meetings*

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Courtney Clarke, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction:

I am a Master's student with the department of education at Memorial University. As part of my Master's thesis I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Dorothy Vaandering.

Purpose of study:

In this study I hope to gain insight into the current satisfaction levels of parents who attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. I wish to determine how satisfaction and involvement in these meetings is affected when a restorative justice approach using circle process is used in place of the current approach.

What you will do in this study:

You will be invited to engage an IEP meeting at your school using circle process. This meeting will encourage equal participation from all members of the IEP team and will be facilitated by a guidance counsellor. Prior to the IEP meeting we will meet for a preconference meeting to go over the guidelines of the circle process.

Length of time:

The total time commitment for this study will be approximately two hours. The estimated breakdown is as follows: Pre-conference: 10-15 minutes, IEP meeting: 60-120 minutes.

Withdrawal from the study:

At any point during data collection you may withdraw from the study. This means that partway through the preconference or IEP meeting if you wish to stop, you may do so without any consequences. The data collected after your participation has ended can be removed from this research provided it is requested within one month of the data collection process.

Possible benefits:

You may develop improved relations with the members of the IEP team including the parents involved in the study. This study could encourage educational leaders to reassess the current method for conducting IEP meetings as well as indicate the strengths and weaknesses of circle process in IEP meetings.

Possible risks:

It is possible that during the IEP meeting you or another member of the IEP team will become upset. The use of circle process encourages members to share their thoughts and feelings openly without judgment which may make you feel uncomfortable. If you or another member of the IEP team becomes upset, a counselor will be made available to discuss your feelings.

Confidentiality:

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure.

The data from this project will be published; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although I may report direct quotations from the IEP meeting, you will be given a pseudonym and all identifying information including the school name will be removed from my report.

Although I will safeguard the confidentiality of the IEP meeting to the best of my ability, the nature of a team meeting prevents me from guaranteeing that other members of the team will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the IEP team by not repeating what is said in the meeting to others, and be aware that other members of the team may not respect your confidentiality.

Anonymity:

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance.

Because the participants for this research will engage in a team IEP meeting, the members of the team will be known to each other and it is possible that you may be identifiable to the rest of the team on the basis of what you have said.

Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity; and you will not be identified in publications without your explicit permission.

Recording of Data:

Audio recordings will be collected from the IEP meeting. I will also make field notes regarding the environment and body language of participants during the pre-conference meeting.

Storage of Data:

Audio recordings will be captured through a digital recorder and saved on two separate password protected flash drives. These flash drives will remain in a lockbox in my home. Audio files will be transcribed using my personal computer and saved on both password protected flash drives. All transcriptions and field notes will use pseudonyms to identify participants. Hardcopies of journals collected from participants and field notes will be stored in the aforementioned lockbox. Consent forms will be stored in a separate lockbox in my home. The data above will be accessible to the researcher and my supervisor.

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Reporting of Results:

The results of this study will be presented in my Master's thesis. The thesis will be publically available at the QEII library. Direct quotations and summarized data may be included in this thesis.

Sharing of Results with Participants:

At the conclusion of the research a summary of the results will be provided for all participants in writing and an invitation will be extended to discuss the work in person. Access my thesis will also be available at the QEII library.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact: Courtney Clarke, r83clrc@mun.ca, (709) 758-4531 or Supervising professor Dr. Dorothy Vaandering, dvaandering@mun.ca, (709)864-3266.

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Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end participation **during** data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be retained by the researcher, unless you indicate otherwise.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw **after** data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the study up to one month after the last day of data collection.

I agree to be audio-recorded

Yes No

I agree to the use of direct quotations

Yes No

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Your signature confirms:

- I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.
- A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

Signature of participant

Date

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Guide for using Restorative Justice Circle Process in IEP meetings

Purpose

To provide a space where members of the IEP team have equal opportunity to participate in the creation of the IEP. This will engage full ownership by all team members. The IEP document will reflect the unique needs of the student by honoring all team members as equally worthy contributors.

Before the Circle

- Invite parent(s) to bring a talking piece that represents the child to the meeting.
 - Meet with all members of the IEP team to go over the circle process guidelines.
 - o We all have contributions to make
 - o We all have the right to speak and be heard
 - o We have the right as well to listen and to wonder
 - o We have the right to pass when the talking piece comes around
 - o We all have the right to be respected as members of the group.
- Only continue with circle process if all members of the team agree to these guidelines.
- Determine who will take notes during the meeting for the team (this can be any member of the team. If possible, this task may rotate through the team members to give each member ownership of the document)

Preparation

Arrange everyone in a circle of chairs with no other furniture.

Opening

Open the meeting by welcoming the team and reading a short quote to set the tone. One example is: “The inspiration you seek is already inside you, be silent and listen” Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī

Introduce Rounds

A round is a pass of the talking piece around the circle. The meeting facilitator poses a question and then asks who would like to contribute first. The talking piece then makes its way around the circle until every member who wishes to

contribute has had the opportunity. Remember, it is always okay for a participant to pass.

Check-in Round

- Explain how the talking piece works: Remember to honor the team member who is speaking by listening to their contributions and waiting for the talking piece before talking.
- Ask the parent(s) to explain the talking piece they brought.
- Invite the members to share their name, their relationship to the child and to answer a short question. This question may be “what colour best describes the day you are having today”.

Main Activity: Collaborating to create the IEP

Continue with rounds to create the IEP using questions such as those listed below. Where needed, allow for additional questions which explore various perspectives and concerns until participants reach a consensus about the goals.

- What are (name of child)’s strengths?
- What are (name of child)’s needs?
- What are (name of child)’s areas of improvement since the last IEP meeting?
- What specific goals of the IEP do you feel have been achieved?
- What do you think are appropriate future goals, and where should they fit in the IEP?

Check-out Round

Pose a simple question to conclude the meeting. This question may be “Use one or two words to describe how you feel about our meeting today”

Thank everyone for participating in the circle.

Note. Adapted from C. Boyes-Watson and K. Pranis (2014). *Circle Forward*. (p. 252). Minnesota: Living Justice Press.