



2022

Cultivating Family Empowerment in Schools: The Experiences of Marginalized Families in Special Education

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**Cultivating Family Empowerment in Schools: The Experiences of Marginalized Families in
Special Education**

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Education

Colby College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Waterville, Maine

May 16, 2022

Abstract

The provision of special education services to special needs students is largely upheld by federal and state policies and regulations, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) which ensures that children with disabilities have the opportunity to access a free appropriate public education (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). However, marginalized families of low-income and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to face barriers and challenges to effectively participate in their child's education and secure the necessary and appropriate services for their child. Family Empowerment Centers on Disability (FECs) in California provide a policy solution to assist families navigate the special education system (SPED) and ensure that their child receives the appropriate and necessary resources and services through family empowerment. Family empowerment is a continual and iterative process through which families ultimately take effective action on behalf of their child. Within a social ecological model families, institutions (i.e., FECs), and policy reciprocally influence each other and either create or hinder opportunities for the cultivation of family empowerment. Through online surveys and interviews with an FEC and the families they serve, the current study reveals that FECs create opportunities for families to engage in the family empowerment process and thus, provide an effective policy solution to assist families in navigating the special education and services system and advocating for their children. California Assembly Bill 126 should be passed as it aims to expand and improve upon the work of FECs throughout California.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Lauren Yoshizawa for all of her support and guidance throughout this research project and throughout my undergraduate studies. She has inspired me to take on new perspectives and ways of thinking that I will take with me in my future work. Thank you for believing in me.

I would also like to thank Professor Veronica Romero for her thoughtful and constructive feedback on my writing. Thank you also to fellow Colby College students Maria Minuesa-Sicilia and Oscar Garcia for their help in translating my project materials to reach a diversity of families.

Finally, thank you to the Family Empowerment Center staff and the families who shared their voices and experiences with me. I hope my project was able to portray your stories well and bring more awareness of the need for stronger support systems for children with disabilities and their families.

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Cultivating Family Empowerment in Schools: The Experiences of Marginalized Families in Special Education

Within the history and development of education and schooling in the United States, the provision of special education is relatively recent. Education for individuals with disabilities was only recognized and mandated by the federal government in 1975 through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA serves to protect the rights of children with disabilities to access a free appropriate public education (FAPE) which involves the provision of related resources and services and the parents' right to be full participants in decision-making processes (IDEA, 2004). Despite these mandates, marginalized families of low-income and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to face barriers and challenges to effectively participate in their child's education and secure the necessary and appropriate services for their child. Therefore, IDEA (2004) and state legislations have created and continue to develop parent support programs and organizations to assist families within the special education system (SPED).

Particularly, in California, a network of Family Empowerment Centers (FECs) throughout the state serves to be a resource and support for families in their SPED experience while promoting family empowerment. There are few parent support resources in the U.S that center on "family empowerment," let alone a whole network of organizations that are to embody this concept. In fact, this year, California Assembly Bill 126 proposes to expand the network of FECs by increasing the number of opened centers from 14 to 32 and increasing funding levels to each established center. Therefore, the current study aims to analyze the work of FECs as a policy solution to assist families in navigating the special education system and advocating for their children. However, even with the creation and expansion of parent support organizations, marginalized families of low-income and linguistically diverse backgrounds continue to face barriers and challenges to

effectively participate in their child's education and secure the necessary and appropriate services for their child.

The current research was designed to further understand the challenges that marginalized families experience within the special education system and examine the ways in which Family Empowerment Centers (FECs) address these challenges and the needs of families. The study featured one FEC in Central California and collaborated with the staff to connect to the families the FEC serves. To hear from those directly involved, interviews with FEC staff members and families were conducted and an online survey was distributed to families through email. A mixed method approach was used in attempts to reach and hear from as many families as possible about their experiences with the special education system and FECs.

In this paper, I will first review previous research on particular challenges that families face within the special education system as well as provide a more in-depth review of the policy context around IDEA and FECs. Next, I lay out a social ecological framework for the process of family empowerment that will be used to analyze and understand the role of FECs in families' lives in cultivating family empowerment. After describing the study's data collection methods, I will then describe the findings from the interviews and surveys which speak to the challenges that families face in the special education system, the perceived role of FECs by staff members and families, the kind of relationships that exist between FECs and families, and the institutional challenges that the FEC currently faces. Finally, based on the study's findings, I discuss the implications for theory, practice, and policy for support and resources for families within the special education system.

IDEA and Barriers to Special Education

First signed into federal law in 1975 and reauthorized in 2004, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) ensures that children with disabilities have the opportunity to access a free appropriate public education throughout the United States. The legislation outlines several provisions and regulations that guide how states and public agencies are to provide early intervention, special education, and related services to protect the rights of children with disabilities and the rights of their families (IDEA, 2004). Primarily, children with disabilities must be provided with a free, nondiscriminatory evaluation and an individualized education plan (IEP) that specifies the services and supports to be received by the student to meet their learning needs (Gomez, 2014). The student with a disability and their parents have the right to be full participants and make decisions in these processes. Particularly, creation of the student's IEP is to be a collaborative process between the student's teachers, relevant service personnel, the student with a disability, and the student's parents or guardians (IDEA, 2004).

If conflict arises and parents believe that the child's school or service providers are not meeting the educational needs of their child, IDEA (2004) protects parents' rights to resolve disagreements through due process. Due process provides different options for parents to resolve conflicts. This includes a resolution session with the school or district, mediation without a hearing, and mediation with a hearing. In mediations, a mediator from the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) tries to help both parties reach a binding agreement. If an agreement cannot be reached, there will be a hearing in which an OAH judge specializing in special education law decides the outcome of the case (Lieberman, 2021). Thus, the legislation promotes and protects parents' participation in the provision of special education and related services to their child.

Though IDEA (2004) explicitly details the rights of parents to participate in their child's education and special education processes, understanding these rights and navigating the special

education system can be a difficult and daunting task for families (Gomez, 2014). Through parent participation in decision making processes, parents are to play the role of a collaborator with their child's school and of an advocate to ensure that their child receives the necessary and appropriate resources (Friesen & Huff, 1990). As a result, the delivery of education and resources to the child with special needs is to be equitable (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Parent participation is made possible through opportunities provided by the school, efforts made by school personnel to include parents, and efforts made by parents to be actively involved. For example, through IDEA (2004), schools are required to ensure that caregivers understand the proceedings of an IEP meeting, schedule meeting times that are mutually agreed upon, and center services on the family's needs (Harry, 2008). At the same time, families are expected to engage in such opportunities and be proactive during meetings with the school. However, oftentimes there is a disconnect between the promised provisions to families and how families are expected to act and reality.

Families continue to face barriers and challenges to effectively participate in their child's education and secure the necessary and appropriate services for their child. Particularly, culturally and linguistically diverse families are still largely excluded from decision making processes and thus, their children are less likely to receive services (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Barriers to effective family involvement in the special education system include those that are practical and sociocultural in nature. In this next section, I will discuss the main barriers that low-income families and families with English as a second language (ESL) may face within special education.

Practical Barriers

Practical barriers to family involvement in special education usually pertain to factors that affect effective communication between families and service providers. Allocating time to attend meetings (i.e., IEP meetings) can be especially difficult for low-income parents whose work

schedules may be inflexible, who face challenges in transportation, or who are unable to find or acquire child-care and leave the house (Friesen & Huff, 1990). If schools schedule meetings at inconvenient times for families, it is unlikely that strong, collaborative relationships will form. It can even create miscommunication as the schools may think that the family has no interest to be involved in their child's education, while in reality it is the exact opposite (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Further, not being able to attend certain meetings also means an increased likelihood of missing out on important information about resources and services.

Within the special education system there is a lot of new information for families to take in and comprehend, especially in trying to understand the child's disability and determine what resources they need. Unfortunately, it is not guaranteed that schools or service providers will inform families of the programs and resources available to them or of their child's rights to receive certain services (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Most parents are also unknowledgeable about the policy language and legal jargon that makes up the foundation of special education (Stoner et. al, 2005). In fact, special education documents have become less accessible to parents over time, requiring a reading level much higher than that of the average person which is around a fifth-grade level (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Nagro & Stein, 2014). This creates extreme difficulty in communication and understanding for ESL families. Schools would need to ensure access to an interpreter to facilitate comprehension of the special education processes and documents, but even then, understanding is not guaranteed if the policy language is simply translated (Burke, & Goldman, 2018). Thus, due to legal processes and complex policy language, parents might not fully understand what services are supposed to be provided for their child, what rights they and their child have in requesting services, and cannot hold schools accountable in provision of

services as much as possible. In sum, the opportunity for family participation is often not provided for low-income and ESL families.

Sociocultural Barriers

Sociocultural barriers to special education resources and school-family collaboration include the existing “hierarchy of professional knowledge and status” and underlying cultural assumptions about certain families (Kalyanpur et al., 2000, p. 122). Though there has been a push for treating families as equal collaborators in special education processes, the view of professionals (i.e. school personnel or service providers) to be an authority figure, while families lack the knowledge and ability to make sound decisions, still persists. Many culturally and linguistically diverse families believe that they should not challenge the school and instead defer to the professionals (Burke & Goldman, 2018). School personnel and service providers may also hold this hierarchical perspective and deficit view regarding families. Prejudice is common among school personnel’s interactions with low-income and ESL families with a child with a disability as they hold assumptions that the families are ignorant and simply unable to do certain tasks (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Consequently, families may feel intimidated to speak up or against a professional in an IEP meeting, for example. Especially for families whose first language is not English, schools may view parents as inadequate or lacking in expert knowledge due to a lack of understanding (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). Thus, a remaining power imbalance and deficit view of families can bar parents and schools from working together to ensure the proper services are provided for the child.

Cultural assumptions about families’ subscription to the values of individual rights and self-advocacy efforts found in U.S mainstream culture also impede collaboration and participation in special education processes. Being included in decision-making processes and being an equal

collaborator with the schools and service providers may be an unfamiliar role for low-income and ESL families. Thus, the expectation of parents to be advocates for their children and be actively involved in their education assumes that the individual has the level of assertiveness needed to claim their rights and knowledge of the proper ways to go about doing so (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). When this is not the case, professionals may maintain their deficit views regarding the family and further stifle their supposed partnership. However, the knowledge and skills needed to play the role of a collaborator and advocate are not always readily available to all families, and thus must be acquired (Burke & Goldman, 2018; Kalyanpur et. al, 2000). Still, acquisition of said knowledge and skills is not always guaranteed. Therefore, IDEA's mandate rests on assumptions that families believe in U.S mainstream values of individual rights and self-advocacy efforts and have the tools to engage as an advocate and collaborator in SPED without considering the perspectives of culturally and linguistically diverse families.

The intended goal of the FECs is to help families overcome these barriers and ultimately ensure that their child with a disability has access to the necessary and appropriate resources and services. The FECs are to provide needed information and resources to families, educate families of their rights, and ensure that families are able to effectively participate in their child's education. Through family empowerment (as their name suggests) these centers address practical and sociocultural barriers that keep families from being included in decision-making processes so that they may be able to address their child's needs.

Policy Solutions for Access to Special Education

Recognizing this challenge, IDEA (2004) mandates each states' secretary of education to make at least one funding award to a Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) in the state. In the case of larger states, the secretary is to make awards to multiple PTIs. The purpose of PTIs is

to provide families of children with disabilities, ages birth to 26 and of all disabilities, with training and information that will assist them in meeting their child's developmental and educational needs. Particularly, parents receive information on their rights and responsibilities and training on the development of skills needed to effectively participate in their child's education (IDEA, 2004). The legislation emphasizes assisting underserved families, particularly low-income families and parents whose child may have been inappropriately identified.

As a parent organization, PTIs center on serving the parents and families of children with disabilities. Therefore, the majority of the PTIs board of directors are parents of children with disabilities and are to be representative of the population served, including low-income and ESL families (IDEA, 2004). Furthermore, PTIs are required to assist parents to communicate effectively and work collaboratively with relevant service providers (IDEA, 2004). One of their main aims is to help parents resolve disputes with their child's school, for example, in the most effective way possible by explaining the different avenues for conflict resolution. Particularly, PTIs encourage parents to use alternative methods of dispute resolution, such as mediation, instead of costly litigation (USDOE, 2020).

Similar to PTIs, IDEA (2004) outlines the purpose of Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs). These centers are essentially PTIs that function on a local level. Therefore, CPRCs are termed local parent organizations that provide training and information to underserved parents of children with disabilities. Additionally, the majority of its board of directors are also parents of children with disabilities (ages birth through 26) from the community served. CPRCs are required to work with PTIs in their state to coordinate training and services for families. Across the United States, there are about 100 PTIs and CPRCs in total. California is among the states with the greatest number of PTIs with nine centers located throughout the state. In comparison, New York has 10

PTIs, Florida has seven, Texas has five, and most other states have one or two PTIs (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2021). In addition to the PTIs and CPRCs, California hosts Family Empowerment Centers on Disability that also work to assist families in navigating the special education system and caring for their child with a disability.

Family Empowerment Centers on Disability (FECs) were signed into California Law in 2001, offering families of children with disabilities “access to information, specialized training, and peer-to-peer support in their communities in a linguistically and culturally affirming manner” (FEC, 2021). These centers serve all families of individuals with disabilities aged 3 to 22 regardless of cultural, linguistic, geographical, or socioeconomic barriers. They primarily provide support to families whose children may not have a diagnosis or identified developmental disability, but have an IEP (Gomez, 2014). FECs ensure that individuals with disabilities are provided a free and appropriate public education in accordance with their needs and capabilities, receive the necessary educational support and services, and ensure that families of individuals with disabilities are full participants in their child’s education (FEC, 2021). It is worthy to note here that this part of the law addresses the fact that, at the time the legislation was proposed, California had been cited by the federal government for failing to provide a free and appropriate education to students with disabilities (Novick, 2001). At the time, the California State Department of Education had been underutilizing federal funds granted to them by IDEA (1975) for state level activities, including the provision of services for children and youth with disabilities and for their families. Therefore, to comply with federal law and better serve children with disabilities and their families, FECs provide training and information to underserved families in understanding their child’s disability and developmental and academic needs, promoting positive collaborations between parents and service providers or educational agencies, and supporting parents in advocating for their child.

Overall, these centers are meant to be a resource and support for families to navigate the special education system and make decisions regarding their child's development and education.

There are a few centers and programs across the U.S that bear similarities to California's FECs, using the language of "family empowerment" and focusing on supporting the families of children with disabilities. The Quality Trust Family Empowerment Center in Washington D.C is one run by parents and family members who have experienced the difficulty of navigating the system of special education services and resources (Jones, 2008). The center aims to provide parents and families with easy access to information and resources and community support and networking. Thus, the focus is on supporting the families and giving them the tools they need to act on behalf of their children. Similarly, there is a parent-to-parent organization in Hawaii called the Special Parent Information Network whose purpose is to support and empower parents to make informed choices for their families through access to information and referrals (SPIN Hawaii, n.d). Florida has taken a different approach and offers families who have a child with a disability a voucher to meet the needs of the child. The Family Empowerment Scholarship for Students with Unique Abilities awards scholarship funds to eligible families to provide them educational options. The funds can be used in a variety of ways such as, to pay for tuition and fees at a private school, pay for transportation to a Florida public school that is different from the student's assigned school, or afford learning materials or therapy services (Family Empowerment Scholarship Program, 2021). In a similar fashion to the previous family centers, the program provides the families with resources, in this case in the form of funds, to then take action and make choices for their child with special needs. Although they may be smaller in scale compared to California's state-wide system of FECs, other states do have programs and organizations with a family empowerment

focus. Therefore, a close analysis of California's FECs may provide insight on what family empowerment looks like in other contexts as well.

Currently, there are 14 Family Empowerment Centers in California with the ultimate goal of establishing 32 centers in total, one center for every region in the state. This year, AB126 proposes to expand and improve upon the work of FECs through the construction of centers in regions that currently do not have an FEC, increase of funding levels to each established center, and the implementation of new requirements for data collection and reporting to the California Department of Education (CDE). Thus, research on the work of FECs and their role in the community and in families' lives are especially pertinent as AB126 is yet to be passed. This paper will analyze the work of FECs as a policy solution to assist families in navigating the special education and services system and advocating for their children.

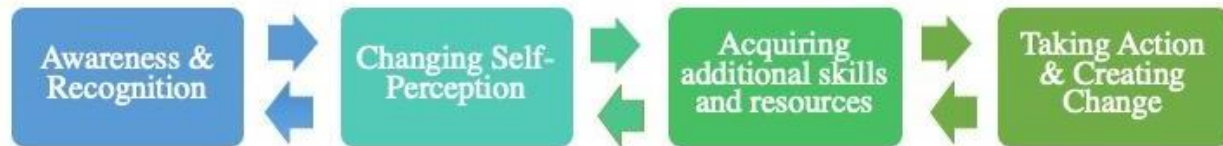
A Social Ecological Framework for the Process of Family Empowerment

The concept of empowerment only emerges in the face of a power struggle and is specifically relevant to those on the side of powerlessness. In the U.S, efforts for empowerment have been traced back to the early 1970s due to a growing realization of, and need to take action against, the political, social, and economic power imbalances that suppress certain individuals' way of life (Cochran, 1987). The concept of empowerment has also been applied to those feeling powerless in the face of controlling institutions who are largely detached from the individual (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977). Therefore, *family* empowerment speaks to the power imbalance between families and the social structures and institutions that influence family life (Cochran, 1991). It promotes families to take control over their lives and accept themselves as valuable and efficacious in their own affairs (Rapport, 1987). Specifically, in this paper I will describe family

empowerment in the context of low-income and English-second-language (ESL) families with a child with a disability.

Figure 1

The Process of Family Empowerment



Empowerment has either been defined as a state of being or as a process. Berger and Neuhaus (1977) imply that empowerment is a state as some individuals may be more empowered than others. However, a majority of the literature posits that there are steps or stages that encompass empowerment as a process, as synthesized in Figure 1 (Cochran, 1991; Dunlap, 2000; Kiefer, 1984). Across the literature, the first stage involves some sort of *awareness and recognition* on behalf of the family. The family may become aware of a conflict or barrier in one's life and recognize that they can overcome it and make change in their lives for the better. For example, families may face barriers to access accurate and unbiased information about their child's disability and access to the necessary and appropriate services (Haren & Fiedler, 2008; McCammon et al., 2018; Rouse, 2012). Empowerment, then, involves the families' recognition of these barriers and a motivation to overcome them.

The second stage of the family empowerment process involves the family's recognition of their own expertise and knowledge about their children and their ability to make sound decisions regarding their child's life (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Cochran & Dean, 1991; Rouse, 2012). Families and parents harness a unique perspective of their child given their extensive knowledge

about the child's character, patterns of behavior, and everyday challenges. Though often dismissed as anecdotal, the family's knowledge about their child is what guides action (Kalyanpur et al., 2000). It is the basis for determining what the child's needs are and how those needs are to be met. Recognition of the family's existing resources leads to a *changing self-perception* and increase in confidence as these valuable sets of skills and knowledge can be used to create change and overcome those identified barriers (Cochran & Dean, 1991; Dunlap, 2000). The family sees that they no longer have to rely on "professionals," such as teachers and service providers, to inform them on what needs to be done for their child. Instead, the family has the ability to exert control over the situation and make decisions on behalf of their child.

The third stage entails families *acquiring additional skills and resources* which further propels the empowerment process. The purpose of this part of the process is to strengthen the family's existing skills and develop additional abilities that will enable them to take further action and create change (Dunlap, 2000). For empowerment in general, these skills include the ability to effectively engage in problem solving and decision-making (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977; Rouse, 2012; Zimmerman, 1990). For family empowerment, specifically, valuable capabilities include the ability to sustain active involvement in their child's school or other important processes (i.e IEP meetings, health evaluations, etc.) and the ability to navigate systems of resources and services for their child and family (Cochran & Dean, 1991; Haren & Fiedler, 2008; McCammon et al., 2018; Thompson et. al, 1997). Additionally, families may also be more motivated to reach out to others for help and thus expand their social networks for additional support and resources (Cochran & Dean, 1991). As a result of building upon and acquiring skills and abilities, the family will have the necessary tools to take action on behalf of their child and may also feel more confident to do so, thus promoting a sense of self-efficacy.

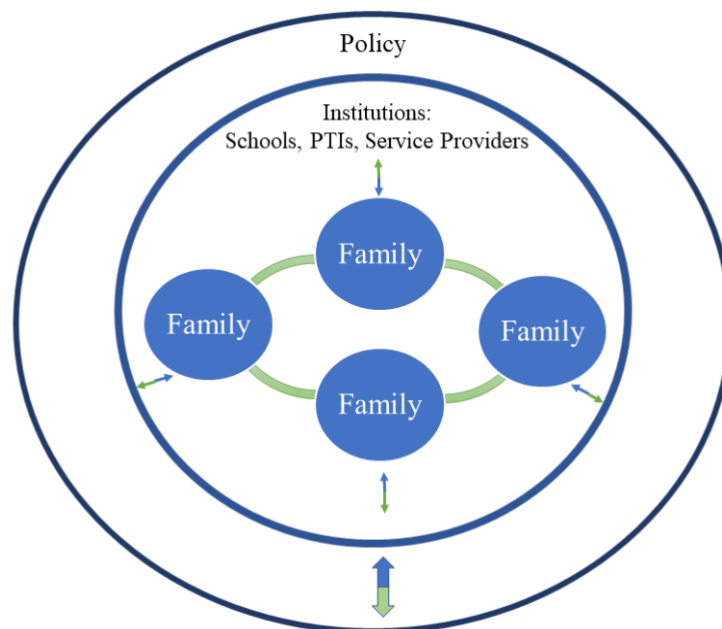
Consequently, the last stage of the process of empowerment involves *taking action and creating change*. Families may move back and forth between this stage and the previous stages as they all reinforce each other. As discussed, acquiring additional skills and resources can enable and encourage families to take action and create change. At the same time, engaging in action for change opens up opportunities for families to gain even more knowledge and skills relevant to their cause. These two stages further promote a changing self-perception as families continue to expand their knowledge and resources and recognize how much they are capable of doing. It is this circular relationship of experience and reflection that allows families to take action, gain new understandings of their situation, and engage in new and more effective action (Kiefer, 1984). Furthermore, successful interactions with the family's environment, such as problem solving with their child's teacher or working with another service provider, can reinforce a sense of self-efficacy and confidence that will further encourage the family to continue an active role (Dunlap, 2000). However, sustaining an active role in working towards change requires determination and commitment on behalf of the family *and* the opportunity to engage in such behaviors on behalf of the environment.

The process of family empowerment, then, also follows a social ecological model. The social ecological model illustrates the dynamic and complex interrelations among individual and environmental factors (see Figure 2). Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner first introduced the ecological systems theory in the context of child development and it has since been adapted and applied to various social fields, including public health, violence prevention, and family empowerment (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015; Baral et. al, 2013; CDC, 2001). Taking an ecological standpoint, one must account for the interaction of the family and the surrounding contextual factors that may influence family empowerment. These contextual factors include family culture,

societal culture, institutions, individuals' social roles in the family and in the community, and social relationships and networks (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015; Dunlap, 2000; Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1990). For example, a family's cultural values may influence how families define stress and how comfortable they are in seeking help (Coleman, Xu, & Arment, 2020). Therefore, the ways in which different families identify their needs and work toward a solution may vary. Additionally, the family is not only a recipient of community resources, but is also a resource to the community (Dunlap, 2000). For example, families with a child with a disability may network and assist each other through the special education system or may work together to change a certain aspect of their children's schools. As a result, environmental factors influence the family unit while the family unit also influences their environment.

Figure 2

The Social Ecological Model in the context of Family Empowerment



Using the social ecological model, we also look at who or what is creating and promoting opportunities for the process of family empowerment to occur. We cannot solely look to the family

to empower themselves and acquire resources and skills to solve systemic issues. While family empowerment works to place more control in the hands of those directly involved and assigns them some responsibility to create solutions, it is not an excuse for existing systems and institutions failing to respond to the needs of communities (Powell, 1990). Thus, the family empowerment process requires the involvement of related individuals, such as other family members, service providers, community organizations, and institutions (Coleman et al., 2020; Dunlap, 2000; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 1990). Each entity is embedded within and reciprocally influences the other.

At the center, *the family* holds its own belief systems and sets of skills, knowledge, and values that influence how they will build social networks and interact with others within the community. Namely, families will interact with a multitude of *institutions* such as schools, local organizations, and service providers. As represented in Figure 2 by the arrows, families may learn of or create new institutions and organizations through their social networks and reciprocally, interacting with these institutions can expand the family's networks. At the same time, through these interactions, institutions may influence families' knowledge, beliefs, and values. For example, in the case of family empowerment, organizations may push for schools to be more open to collaboration with families and provide opportunities for families to be involved in their child's education. The opportunity to participate may influence how families conceptualize their role in their child's education. *The community* encompasses the family, social networks, and institutions altogether. As a community, individuals and organizations may influence public policy to improve some aspect of life through proposed legislation. Conversely, public policy influences how institutions operate and what the interaction between institutions and families may look like. Regarding family empowerment, public policy must work to uphold opportunities for parents to

effectively participate in their child's education and remove any barriers to access of information and needed resources. Therefore, the social ecological model requires the consideration of the interrelationships among the family and their environment and how it influences the process of family empowerment.

When we put these pieces together in a framework, we see FECs' role as a community institution and facilitator of the empowerment process. Within the socioecological model, FECs are an institution that connects families with one another and provides opportunities for families to participate in the community (as indicated by the green lines and arrows in Figure 2). According to the author of AB126, Former State Senator Dede Alpert, FECs were created to give parents of school-aged children with disabilities the opportunity to learn about appropriate educational resources for their child and how to obtain them. Parents are to work collaboratively with school personnel to ensure that their child receives appropriate special education and related services (Novick, 2001). Families' participation in the community occurs through opportunity and engagement in the family empowerment process, which furthers families' sense of self-efficacy and ability to take action. FECs appear to create these opportunities for family participation by providing supportive resources and services to families, and thus are most involved in the last two stages of the family empowerment process—acquiring skills and resources and taking action.

Methods

The current research was designed to understand the challenges that marginalized families may experience within the special education system and examine the ways in which Family Empowerment Centers (FECs) address these challenges and the needs of families. Thus, two main methods of data collection were used: an online survey for families who work with an FEC and interviews with those families and the FEC staff members. The online survey was the primary way

through which data was collected from families, while the interviews were used as a space for families to expand upon their responses to the survey and for me (as the researcher) to ask any clarifying or follow-up questions. I partnered with one of the 14 existing FECs in California to reach out to the families they serve as well as interview their staff members.

Site Context

This study partnered with an FEC located in central California. Recruitment emails were sent to multiple FEC executive directors across California asking for their interest in participating in the study, to which the current FEC was the only one who ultimately agreed to participate. Demographically speaking, the area that surrounds the FEC is majority White with Latinx as the second largest ethnic group. Additionally, a majority of the population has at least a high school diploma, while under half have obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher (U.S Census Bureau, 2021). The FEC currently serves more than 1600 families, one-third of which identify as Spanish-speaking.

Participants

The current study featured five FEC staff members, including the FEC's executive director, and five family participants. All FEC staff members participated in an interview, while all five family participants completed a version of the online survey (N = 3 for English survey; N = 2 for Spanish survey)¹. Two family participants who completed the English survey also participated in an interview with me. All family participants identified themselves as a parent with a child who receives special education related services. Four family participants indicated that English is the primary language spoken at home while one indicated that Spanish is the primary language spoken at home. Additionally, two family participants indicated that the highest level of education in their

¹Due to an adjustment in the survey design made after the surveys were distributed, only 2 participants were presented with the full set of survey questions.

household is a Bachelor's degree, one indicated an Associate's degree, another indicated high school diploma or equivalent, and one indicated some high school.

Data Collection

Online Family Survey

An online survey was created on Qualtrics consisting of 17 questions in total with a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. The survey was organized into five sections that asked about families' experiences in their child's schooling and with the FEC. A section on *Child(ren) and Schools* asked about the experience of the participant's child in school (e.g., their child's grade, any special education related services provided to their child by the school, and any primary concerns with their child's schooling) to examine how families recognized and defined potential challenges, in line with the first stage of the family empowerment process. The next two sections *Families Perspectives on the FEC* (e.g., "What is the purpose of the FEC?") and *Families Experiences with the FEC* (e.g., frequency of contact and use of FEC resources, accessibility, suggestions for improvements) sought to determine the role of FECs in families lives and examine their relationship within the social ecological model. A section on *Empowerment* asked participants to rate their level of confidence on a scale of zero to ten (0 = cannot do at all, 5 = moderately can do, 10 = highly certain can do) in doing a list of tasks (e.g., "Help my child get the educational resources and services they need at school" and "Effectively communicate with my child's teacher") on their own and with the assistance of the FEC. This question was informed by the stages of *changing self-perception* and *taking action* within the family empowerment process. Finally, a section on *Participant Demographics* (e.g., primary language spoken at home, highest level of education completed) was included. A Spanish-translated version of the survey was also made available for family participants.

The online survey link was shared via email through FEC staff members' parent email lists. The email included a brief description of the study, the survey links for both English and Spanish versions, and a recruitment flier attachment. Participants' consent was collected and participants were compensated with a \$5 Target gift card for completing the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were also asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview with me (conducted in English) to receive an additional \$10 Target gift card.

Family Interviews

The interviews provided a space for family participants to expand upon their survey responses and for me to ask follow-up questions. Therefore, the structure of the interview questions mirrored the sections of the online survey. Questions were open-ended and prompted detailed responses (e.g., "Could you describe what your first experience with the special education system was like?" and "In working with the FEC have you noticed any change in how you engage with your child's education?") The interviews were about 30 minutes long and conducted over the phone. Verbal assent from each participant was obtained as well as their permission to record the interview. Interview recordings were then transcribed using an online transcription service for analysis.

FEC Staff Interviews

All of the FEC staff were interviewed, each lasting about 30 minutes to 1 hour via Zoom video call. Questions mirrored those in the family survey and interview, except they sought to hear the staff members' perspectives. Thus, interview questions for FEC staff included "How would you describe the role of the FEC's in families' lives?", "What are some of the most common questions or requests that families come to you with?", and "Do you think the services you provide effectively empower families to participate in their child's education?". Verbal assent from each

staff participant was obtained as well as their permission to record the interview. Interview recordings were then transcribed using an online transcription service for analysis.

Data Analysis

Participants' data were assigned an identifying letter and number—*S* represented an interview with a staff member, *F* represented an interview with a family, and *FS* represented a response on the family survey. Therefore, *S2* represents staff member number two who is the full-time, bilingual staff member. *S4* represents the FEC executive director, *S5* is the part-time, bilingual staff member, and the rest of the staff are part-time members who only work with English-speaking families. Of the family participants, *FS4* and *FS5* completed the Spanish-translated version of the survey. The rest of the family data was collected from English-speaking families.

About two rounds of coding of the interview transcriptions and the survey data occurred to identify the most relevant and essential findings related to the study's research questions. The first read through and round of coding primarily consisted of creating codes based on what emerged from the data itself. The codes created at that point were then reorganized and consolidated into main themes that aligned with both the data and concepts from the literature review. Thus, a second read through of the data and application of codes was necessary for refining the coded excerpts. Based on these excerpts, themes and patterns were identified in the data.

For survey responses that were quantitative in nature (e.g., frequency of using FEC services), the data was summarized and turned into visual charts to identify any trends or patterns in the data in tandem with those found in the coding process.

Limitations

The current COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the availability of the FEC staff members and families to communicate over email, phone, and Zoom; therefore, the study's participant sample was small. Additionally, it was only possible for the family surveys to be distributed online via email which further limited outreach to only those with regular internet access.

Findings

Through the online family surveys and interviews with the FEC staff and families, the study's findings reveal several challenges that families continue to face within the special education system, the purpose of FECs from both staff and family perspectives, the nature of FEC-family relationships, and the ways in which the FEC continues to work with families within the current policy constraints.

Awareness and Recognition of the Challenges Families Face within SPED

The FEC staff recognize that navigating the SPED system can be particularly challenging for families because there are a multitude of resources and services to sieve through. On top of that, there may be a vast amount of information families receive within a single school meeting about their child which can be extremely overwhelming. This may especially be true for families that are still trying to understand their child's disability and how to provide appropriate care for their child. A general lack of knowledge and information about disabilities and available resources and services leaves parents not knowing what to do next or who to contact. As one part-time staff member describes:

There are [...] a lot of families that I speak to, and they just feel completely overwhelmed, like there's just a lot of information. So when I speak to a family for the first time, I try to kind of assess where they're coming from and how much they need. (S5)

Without proper navigation of resources and understanding of relevant information, parents face barriers to knowledge about special education—mainly in regards to parent and child's rights, how

to request for an assessment, start the IEP process, and ensure their child is receiving the appropriate service. One FEC staff member described how most families need help navigating the IEP process:

I would say a big percentage [of concerns] revolves around the IEP process. They're new to the process. They're concerned about a service with an IEP. I would say the majority of the calls are regarding that. [...] There's an issue with the IEP or there's not an issue [and] they just want to make sure that they're getting what they're getting the appropriate service for further their child. (S3)

Interestingly, the FEC executive director focuses not on barriers to knowledge and information specific to special education, but on the bigger issue of social conceptualizations of “disability.”

But people that have these babies born with disabilities that are unprepared. I mean, that's the other piece of the puzzle we live in. A society says babies are born ‘perfect’ and this is what perfect means. You're not that [perfect] if you're different in any way, then you're wrong or bad or something. You know, something so negative, then it really causes a sort of a downfall of people's self-care and well-being and mental health. (S4)

The executive director highlights the fact that, more broadly, there is a lack of public knowledge on individuals with disabilities—what it means to have a disability and how to best care for and support these individuals’ lives. Furthermore, she mentions how a lack of preparedness on the caretaker’s behalf to care for a child with a disability can then negatively affect the caretaker’s well-being. Consequently, the caretaker may not be able to care for their child to the best of their abilities.

Another challenge FEC staff noted was families’ inability or unfamiliarity with questioning professionals and authority. Families may simply follow or agree with what the school personnel or professionals say without expressing their thoughts. This may be attributed to families’ belief that professionals always know what is best for their child, or some may simply not know how to advocate or speak up for their child. One FEC staff member states that this challenge is particularly apparent for the Spanish-speaking families that she works with:

I just feel that, you know, culturally they [Spanish-speaking families], and I include myself too, they're not used to like questioning professionals, you know what I mean? So it's like if a professional tells them, you know, this is what's best for your child, this is what your child needs, they just take it. You know, you're the expert as the professional. So I'm just going to, you know, take it. Even if they see that the child is struggling, you know, sometimes they don't question it because it's the professional telling them that, [that is] what's best for their child. (S2)

Part of this issue is related to parents' lack of confidence to challenge authority and communicate with the school regarding a particular issue or concern. The IEP process, specifically, can be an intimidating task as the parent finds themselves in a room full of professionals. At the same time, the professionals may not consider the parents' thoughts or contributions as important. In an interview, one parent recounts:

She (the participant's daughter) needed to be evaluated by the district to see if she was going to continue with speech therapy, which was not a good... That was not a good experience. I was told that she was borderline passing, but you know. They didn't take in consideration my concern of relapsing into, you know, not catching up to her peers. Because she barely passed it, she was just above it, they dropped her off of the system and she unfortunately had to go back and she was already too far behind when she was in HeadStart. She still needed to continue with those services. (F1)

Additionally, one FEC staff member states:

I hear that a lot from parents when they feel intimidated and it's like [about] an IEP meeting. You know, parents always say, like, I just feel intimidated because, you know, I'm surrounded by all these professionals, and sometimes I feel like whatever I have to say, it's just not really considered, you know? And so if a parent feels that what they have to contribute is not being considered or that [...] it's not important enough, and at some point they're just not going to want to say anything anymore, right? And they're not going to do it. They're not going to want to, you know, keep educating themselves to be the child's advocate if they're not being considered at the meeting. (S2)

Both the parent and the FEC staff recognize an underlying power imbalance between families and professionals in which families' voices are often undervalued or completely disregarded. As illustrated, one aspect of the issue may involve a cultural component of respecting professionalism and figures of authority. At the same time, professionals may completely disregard or quickly dismiss families' expertise and input.

On top of this power imbalance, Spanish-speaking families in particular also experience barriers to communication due to language differences. Though language translators may be present in IEP and school meetings, one FEC staff member explains that a parent's emotions may not fully get across to the professionals.

I feel that [...] the parents sometimes feel like a lot of it (their thoughts and feelings) gets lost in translation because it's not the same thing [as] you expressing what your concerns or worries about your child [are] and [instead] having somebody else, you know, translating because even just the emotion that you have, those emotions can't get translated, you know what I mean? Yeah. So, it's really hard. (S2)

It is worth noting that this staff member points to the importance of families connecting emotionally with the team of special education professionals. Communication, then, not only consists of the linguistic content but also the emotional context of the utterance.

Another challenge that families face within the special education system is a lack of needed resources. FEC staff members state that there are not enough services or personnel (e.g., therapists, speech pathologists, childcare, etc.) to distribute to families given the rapidly increasing population in the area. One staff member describes the area which the FEC serves as being "impacted" (S3).

In reality, there's only so much the one provider at the school can give. The city is growing and growing and the way changes are made, whether it be more services, more supports in this area because a lot of people have to travel outside of [their county] for services; the families need to get together and be more active with the city in their planning and their support. And that's an issue that's happening right now. [...] There's a lot of people from the Bay Area coming down. And there's just not enough services. And, you know, if they don't have the qualified personnel, you're not going to get it in town, right? If there's one speech therapist for two or three schools, that person is already stretched thin. I bring it up because I know that it's an issue and it's going to become more of an issue as it continues to grow. But the services are not coming. (S3)

Therefore, part of the reason why families may not be able to secure needed resources for their child is not only due to a lack of knowledge or a less than ideal relationship with their child's school. A bigger issue of a lack of resources and services available in the community exists.

The Purpose of FECs

FEC staff and families also spoke on the purpose of the FEC in families' lives, primarily emphasizing its function to provide support in various forms. The types of support the FEC offers to families maps onto and adds to the process of family empowerment as previously outlined. Therefore, the following section illustrates the FEC staff members' and families' remarks as they relate to the stages of empowerment.

Caring for Family's Well-being As mentioned previously, both FEC staff and families talk about the importance and need for some form of mental health support, whether that be through formal counseling services or, as one Spanish survey responder says, "informal therapy" found in support groups or conversations with staff. Therefore, the FEC applied for and received a grant to provide weekly psychotherapy sessions for parents for three months. The staff speak of multiple occasions where the parents just needed to talk to someone who could listen and understand their situation.

Sometimes they just need to talk to somebody because they're having a heart attack day. And after they talk to you, they feel just so much better and they're ready to go at it again because, you know, they already had that time to talk to somebody that can just listen and understands what they're going through (S2)

The staff also give advice to families regarding self-care:

I just try to give parents a little bit of advice which is also interesting. Don't be hard on yourself and don't overwhelm you[rself] [...] Call when you can and, you know, it's just important to not like, overload yourself right now. (S5)

As felt in the staff's sentiments above, an emphasis and focus on mental health and self-care was an unexpected finding in the data as FEC legislation and family empowerment literature do not center on this theme. However, in an interview with the FEC executive director, she explains that making sure the mental health and emotional well-being of a parent or caretaker is cared for, ensures proper care for their child. Therefore, caring for one's well-being may be an additional component to the family empowerment process that facilitates families' progression through the

stages. Additionally, it will be important to discuss the practical implications of this find in terms of how the FEC itself and its legislation may be improved to address what seems to be a significant need and useful resource for families.

Changing Families' Self-Perceptions Through consultation and advice-giving, FECs address the power imbalance between professionals and families and attempt to increase families' sense of self-efficacy and levels of confidence. Particularly, FEC staff recall several instances where they are helping families prepare for IEP meetings to increase their confidence in their ability to participate.

[...] just like helping them get all their documents, you know, organized by having an IEP binder where they have all the assessments, all previous IEP. So like any medical evaluation so that they feel like they have the power to contribute all the information because they have it right there in an organized [way], you know, they've highlighted the important parts that they want to bring up. (S2)

Furthermore, one important piece of advice that the staff emphasize to families is the fact that they do not have to agree to the IEP right away. Especially in circumstances where the families' first language is not English, the staff member who works with Spanish-speaking families tells them that they can first bring the English copy of the IEP to her to go over it together before moving forward.

Also we always let them know [...] you don't always have to, you know, sign your IEP right there and then if you don't feel that you are ready for it. Especially because since the IEP is given to them in English at the beginning, you know, like the first copy that they get is just in English, so they don't get a Spanish copy until later. But then they're still expected to sign the IEP. And so we always tell them, like if you don't feel, you know, 100 percent sure, then call us and bring back the English copy that they [the school] would give, and we can review it and make sure that everything that's written is what was discussed at that meeting and they [the family] understand it. And then, you know, you can sign it and take it back. Yeah. Just to give them that reassurance that you know they're OK with it. (S2)

Resonating with this exact sentiment, one parent shares:

It [an FEC training] taught me how to read an IEP, and also if I didn't agree with an IEP just because somebody told me to sign it, I don't have to sign it if I don't agree on something (F1)

FEC staff members make it known to families that they have the ability to challenge the professionals, even if it manifests as something such as taking more time to make a decision. As a result, the staff recall usually receiving calls from the parents afterwards, thanking them for the assistance and letting them know that they were able to get an IEP meeting or an assessment or particular service they were requesting for their child. FEC's push to increase families' sense of self-efficacy has led one parent to describe a change in her interactions with her child's school:

I think I'm able to assert myself a little bit more [...] get my point across and know what her needs are and getting them addressed (F1)

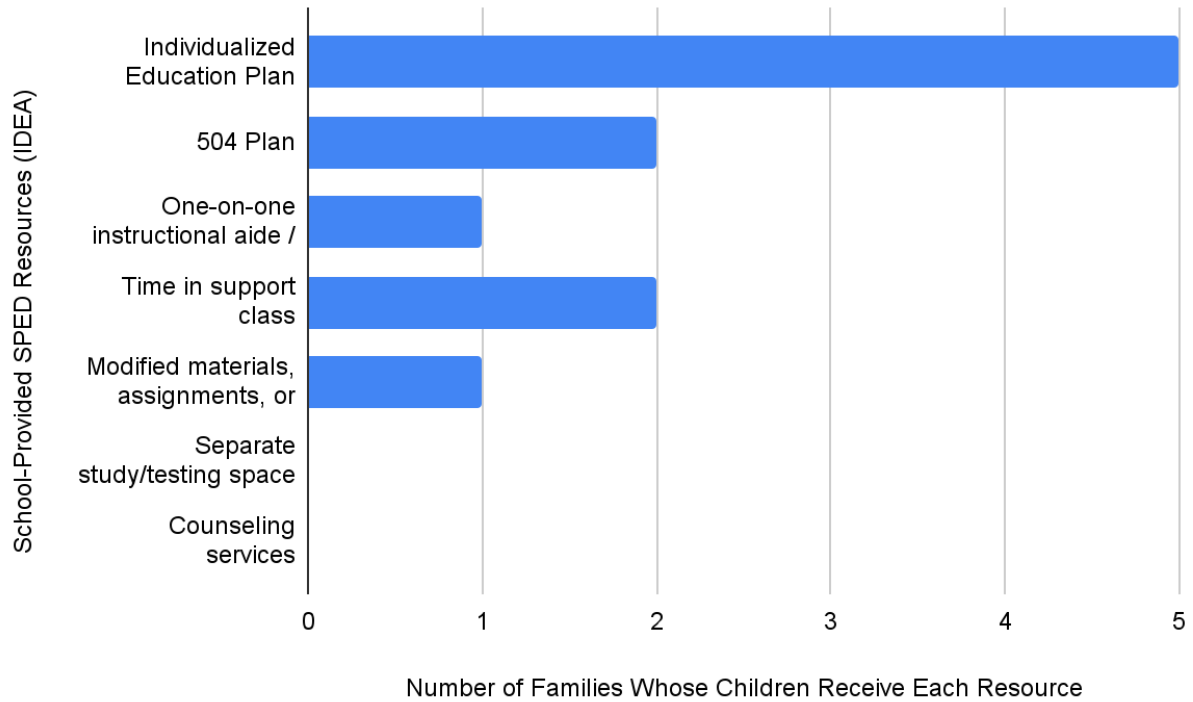
Furthermore, from both surveys, two out of five participants were shown the question that asked families to rate their degree of confidence when engaging in a variety of tasks related to their child's education. Though a small sample, both parents indicated that their confidence in completing such tasks generally increases when they have assistance from the FEC. It is interesting to note that on average participants rated their confidence at a 5 (= moderately can do) for doing the tasks on their own. Therefore, both participants already started with a degree of confidence which then increased with FEC assistance. Families, then, seem to be in the process of developing a stronger sense of self-efficacy which is in line with the FEC's ultimate goal for families.

Assisting Families in Acquiring Skills and Resources FEC staff and families agree that the purpose of FECs is to provide families with information and resources that will enable them to take the next steps in caring for and making appropriate decisions for their child. FECs provide information and learning experiences to families through trainings, workshops, and informational packets. The trainings and workshops focus on what the families want to learn more about and in the past have covered topics such as the IEP process (e.g., information on parents' rights, what to

expect, etc.), baby sign language, and services available to their child that can be requested from schools.

Figure 3

Types of School-Provided Special Education Resources Families' Children Receive



Family survey respondents identified their child’s challenges in their education and the current resources or services their child is currently receiving (See Figure 3). Additionally, families reported their primary concerns regarding their child’s schooling which included concerns about their child not keeping up with their peers, completing schoolwork, reading, processing, and retaining information, a general ability to learn, making social connections, and their child’s ability to “expresarse con los demás” (express themselves with others). Given the families’ persistent concerns and challenges in their child’s schooling, all family participants shared that the role of

FECs is to provide support and information to parents that will assist them with “the extra challenge of raising a child with a disability” (FS3).

Between the English and Spanish versions of the survey, families’ responses to survey questions about the kinds of services and resources they would request from the FEC and which ones they use regularly demonstrated noticeable similarities and differences. In regards to what kinds of services and resources they would request, families’ responses on the English version of the survey included “counseling for parents for coping,” “IEP process and how to appeal,” and “webinars, training opportunities for parents.” On the Spanish survey, responses included “salud mental” (mental health) and “ayuda con documentos para llenar” (help filling out documents). Both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families recognize and utilize the FEC’s ability to assist families in carrying out concrete tasks. They both also find mental health services to be a particularly useful service, pointing to the significance of caring for families’ well-being. However, in response to FEC services and resources that are used regularly, a single response on the English version reported the trainings, and on the Spanish version, both families reported support groups. This difference in responses among English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families points to a potential trend of Spanish-speaking families seeking and benefitting from resources that focus on making connections with other families rather than a focus on trainings and acquiring concrete skills. Relatedly, it was the Spanish-speaking families’ concerns for their child’s schooling, as discussed above, that included their child’s ability to make social connections and express themselves with others. This suggests that Spanish-speaking families may face certain barriers to social connection in their SPED experience that English-speaking families may not be affected by. Additionally, Spanish-speaking families’ particular search to acquire resources that provide social connections and strengthen their mental health and well-being demonstrates

families' awareness and recognition of the challenges they face with SPED, further illustrating the continuative and iterative process of family empowerment.

In addition to providing direct support and resources, FECs provide opportunities for families to build community. FEC staff members often assist in connecting families to other organizations, service providers, and online resources. As one staff member describes:

I mean we get families that have some experience and have been navigating for a while, and so they already know a lot of different things. And then we get families that are brand new where maybe they just had a child, you know? So there's been a new birth and the child has some sort of a special need of a medical disability, a disability, and that they wanted to feel like, where do we start? Like, where can we get support? How do we plug in, not only to our FEC, but to other services in the community, what do they offer? How do we do that? And you know, we try to provide as much information as we can so that they don't have to reinvent the wheel and hopefully not call every single agency in the, you know, in the county or the community to get services. So we try to offer them that to help them. (S5)

In addition, the FEC organizes parent support groups in which parents can connect with their peers and further share information and resources. One parent shared, "I was looking for other parents who have children with ADHD and dyslexia like my daughter. Everyone was super nice and great listeners" (FS4). Similarly, FEC staff observe how families benefit from their support groups:

Parents often share resources, parents make friends with each other and during our support groups or support groups are really there to just co-create a community and connection. And some of the parents who come to our support groups are there because they just need to talk. (S1)

These parent support groups seem to provide a space for parents to talk and connect with others who may be facing a similar situation. This helps let parents know that they are not alone and that they have the support of other parents which can further emphasize families' sense of confidence and power. Again, the continual and iterative process of family empowerment is demonstrated here as *acquiring additional skills and resources* can promote a *changing self-perception* of one's self-efficacy, ultimately leading to action.

Encouraging Families to Take Action and Create Change Though the FEC provides family support in all sorts of ways, the FEC staff emphasize the families' ability to take necessary actions on their own as the ultimate end goal. This directly maps onto the last stage of the empowerment process of *taking action and creating change*. Ensuring that the families have the necessary information (knowledge), resources, and skills to navigate the special education system and related processes, is a step in helping the families feel more comfortable and confident in making decisions and advocating for their child on their own.

So, what does family empowerment mean to me? Well, it means really it means teaching people how to fish, not giving 'em a fish. Well, believe me, I give plenty of fishing poles. I wrote grants. I give away lots of fish, as a metaphor, right? [...] But mainly it means to help people learn how to fish. Like people say, 'Please come to my IEP' and we're like, 'No, we'll give you all the information that you need. You go for the first time yourself and you come back and report to us what your experience was.' So leading people to their best selves. And then there's the second part of that would be once we've led them to their best selves, then they want to go out and help the next person. And that's that part that's turning empowerment into action. (S4)

With the information and resources the FEC provides, families should be able to independently advocate for themselves and for their children. Specifically within the special education system, families should be able to advocate for their child's rights and for the provision of needed services. For example, families should know how to discuss issues with the school and request for meetings and assessments for their child.

[...] I feel like the main goal would be for them to eventually be able to advocate for themselves, then know what to do if they come to a certain situation, or just like teaching them how to write their own letters to request a night meeting or the question assessment. Discuss an issue or a problem with the school being able to do that on their own. Is the goal that we would want for them? Yeah. (S2)

However, taking action does not always have to mean individual families solving problems and creating change on their own. Another way that parents can advocate for their child is by taking

initiative to connect with relevant service personnel and providers for assistance. One staff explains:

And so I've been able to get through some parents and just say, I know this person is there, but I always tell parents, you know, you make that call, you make that connection. It's really important that you feel really good about people that you are going to be connecting with regarding the child, right? [...] There has to be a good connection and you have to feel good about it in order to get a positive result. So that's important, too. So I kind of let them know like, you know, it's not just one person that you should probably contact, it's probably contact several people. And you know, some folks will give like a free half hour consultation. And, you know, I encourage you to do that. (S5)

Along similar lines, another staff member emphasizes the need for families to voice their needs:

I'm letting them know you need to be more vocal about services and support, whether it be behavioral service and behavioral intervention services within the town (S3)

Therefore, FEC staff members encourage families to engage in self-initiated behaviors to connect with related individuals they want or need support from. This further demonstrates the social ecological aspect of family empowerment as families collaborate with and receive assistance from related service providers, community organizations, and institutions to overcome barriers and challenges to their child's education.

FEC-Family Relationships

Data on the nature of the FEC's and families' interactions revealed the kind of relationship that currently exists between the two. Additionally, the FEC staff members spoke of challenges they experience while working with certain families in specific situations.

An "As-Needed" Relationship In terms of how families get connected with FECs, families are oftentimes referred to the FEC through the district service center, schools, hospitals, or other parents. Most family participants reported that their first encounter with the FEC was at some sort of school district meeting or at a parent workshop. Consequently, it is important to think about

how families without the means to attend these meetings or workshops may not have the opportunity to connect with FECs and which families are less likely to attend such events.

Nonetheless, once they are connected, the frequency and mode of interaction between families and FECs suggests a relationship that is largely dependent on whether families determine they need help from the FEC and take the initiative to reach out. In other words, the FEC-family relationship is determined by the families “as-needed.” Among the family survey respondents, participants indicated that they use FEC resources and services at most on a monthly basis (see Figure 4). Additionally, many families prefer brief phone calls to ask a question and receive an answer (See Figure 5). In line with families’ descriptions of their interactions with the FEC, the staff explain that it is mostly up to the parents how much they choose to be involved with the FEC and recognize that they may not hear from a family more than once.

We always welcome families to call us as many times as they want to. Sometimes, you know, families will call us the one time when they're needing help. And once we've provided that service for them, we wouldn't hear from them. But sometimes we hear from them like a year or two later, you know, because they're now they're coming upon something different where they're needing a part of that help (S2)

Following this “as-needed” relationship, families who do maintain a close contact with the FEC are usually those who participate in the support groups regularly or those who are experiencing prolonged hardship.

The ones that we end up working with really closely are our families that are either working with like legal issues, custody issues. You know, struggling like maybe homeless or, you know, struggling to make ends meet, you know, families that have it really -- as a parent working with families, when you know someone's going through a really hard time, they're just kind of act on your list to like, we're going to check in with this person. We're going to keep checking and seeing how they're doing and seeing what kind of things we can show them. (S1)

Therefore, it seems that the interactions between families and the FEC primarily occurs when a family chooses to reach out to the FEC for assistance. Given this reality, it is possible that the FEC

may have difficulty building consistent relationships and a strong sense of community with the families. However, there could be a multitude of reasons why families do not use FEC services as often, including time and scheduling or families' interest in simply resolving a one-time issue.

Figure 4

Frequency of Families' Use of FEC Services

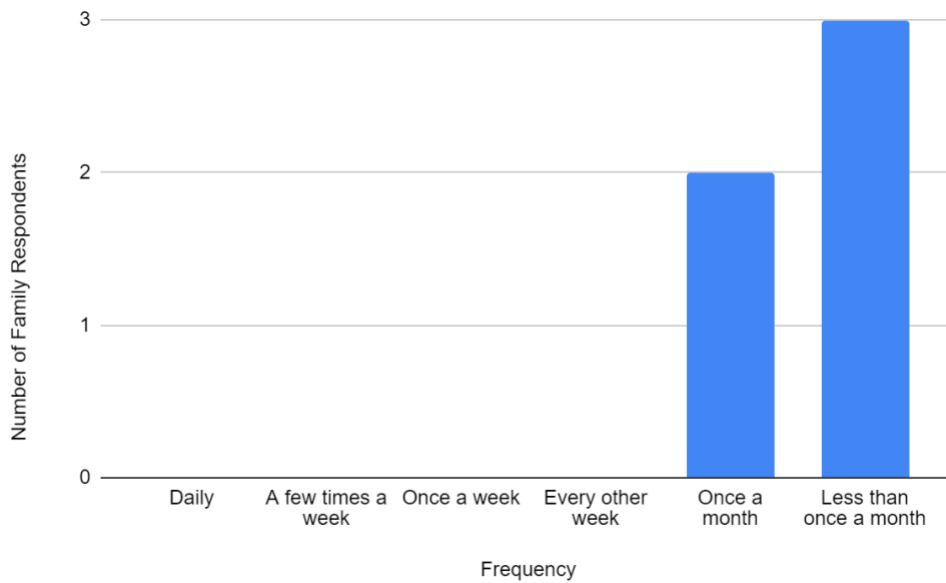
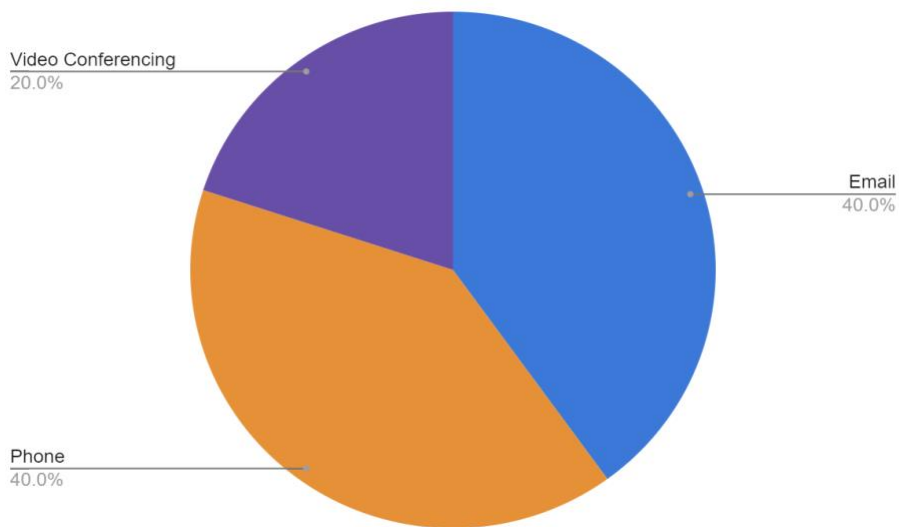


Figure 5

Families' Preferred Mode of Communication with the FEC



Challenges in Building Trustful Relationships With all the families the FEC serves, the staff members talk of the importance of building trustful relationships. They want the families to know that they will be there for them and do whatever they can to provide support. The staff also work to make the families feel comfortable so that they can truly share and express their thoughts and feelings. Especially, because the family may be dealing with and speaking of personal and confidential topics, the staff members want to establish a nonjudgmental and safe space for that as well.

I think the relationship I tried was just somebody that they can feel comfortable with. You know, what we do is confidential. So, I just try to, you know, let them know that they're in a place where they can be comfortable. You know, everything is safe. I, you know, oftentimes I have to say that I have good connections with the parents and I feel like they're, you know, at ease [...] I just try to put their minds at ease now and let them know that I'm there to support them. (S5)

However, in an interview the sole full-time FEC staff member notes a particular challenge in working with Spanish-speaking families that she does not experience with English-speaking families, revealing a potential tension in the FEC-family relationship across cultural differences.

It's different with the English-speaking families than what it is with the Spanish speaking families. Because with the English-speaking families, you know, they'll receive the information and we give them the tools that they need and they seem to know what to do with that information, whereas with the Spanish speaking family... So, you give them the information and sometimes they still don't know what to do with that information. So, it's like constantly, you know, you being repetitive and repeating the things that they have to do, and sometimes they'll call you back several times before they finally can figure out what they need to do with that information that you provided them with. (S2)

When asked why this difference in interactions between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families exists, the staff member points to barriers of language and access to knowledge and power imbalances as discussed previously. However, the staff member's descriptions of working with the Spanish-speaking families expresses a deficit view as they are seen as unable to do tasks without constant guidance while English-speaking families can do the same tasks on their own.

Therefore, a potential challenge within building trustful relationships between the FEC and families may be the FEC's ability to recognize and attend to families' needs without viewing those needs as a deficit. Additionally, the fact that Spanish-speaking families may need additional guidance and support and there is only one full-time bilingual staff member suggests a need for increased FEC staffing, particularly to assist Spanish-speaking families.

Another FEC staff member struggles to express the kind of relationship they want to maintain with families given their purpose to support families but also given the expectation to hold a "mediator" position when conflict arises between families and schools. At times, families and schools may be involved in legal battles due to the nature of IDEA policies that allow for conflict resolution through litigation. However, the FECs believe that litigation does not help anyone, especially not the child with a disability for the child sits in "limbo" while waiting for the adults to resolve their issues. To prevent that, the FEC executive director explained that there is a need for FECS to be the "go-between" among families and schools when conflicts such as that described above may emerge. Thus, a staff member tried to take on this perspective as well saying, "Well, for me, I feel like I'm in a middle ground and I see some of my coworkers and I think they're there too. But we're middle ground. We're definitely on the parents' side" (S3). The contradictory statements within this quote reveals a tension in the role the FEC is to play in families' lives.

The staff member went on to explain that there are instances where families may feel that their child is not receiving needed resources while their child's school or service provider may have decided that provision of these resources are not feasible. Therefore, there are times when the FEC cannot support all families in the ways they are asking to be, despite the purpose of FECs to provide parent support.

Some parents here are asking for things that are not going to happen, and I have to explain that to them [...] but some of them want to go at it full force and I let them know, you know

that you can. But it's just... I've never seen it right? They want something that I've never seen provided. [...] But, you know, I try to help them understand there's other avenues [...], whether it be through your insurance, because if it's that necessary, it's a medical necessity. Then there's other avenues, but sometimes they are sticklers with the school, and I have to kind of help them through that process. (S3)

Within this description, the staff member also expresses the view that sometimes the families that they work with may not be realistic in their requests for resources for their child and therefore need help in thinking more realistically. It may be difficult, then, for FEC staff to encourage families to take action and advocate for their children without giving families unrealistic expectations. A clear definition of what it means to be a “parent support” may be needed to resolve these contradictions.

The FEC Working within Policy Constraints

The FEC faces several institutional challenges due to a delay in updating and revising legislation to meet the changing needs of the FECs and their work with families, illustrating the influence of policy on institutions within the social ecological model. This particular FEC is small with only five staff members in total—two full time employees, including the executive director, and three part-time employees (working under 20 hours/week)—who have only recently received a cost of living adjustment since the FEC first opened 16 years ago. Thus, the staff members hope they may be able to hire more employees to handle the amount of work they have now.

So I feel that there is a huge need not only to open more, but also to hire more staff. And you know, like we haven't been able to also compensate or like provide salaries that are actually, you know, to the level of how expensive it is to live in this area. Or so all of those things, I think, affect the services in a way. So I think that that's something that needs to really consider, you know, just providing more, um, more funding, you know, because, you know, services change all the time. Things get more expensive every time. But then we're still working with the same amount of money from years back so they can try to do as much as you can with the funding that you're currently receiving (S2)

Financial challenges make it difficult for the FEC to provide enough resources to all the families that come to them seeking support. It also prevents the FEC from expanding their outreach to families. Staff believe that receiving more funding will allow the FEC to hire additional staff,

particularly full-time employees, as well as provide the current staff with adequate salaries. Therefore, the staff are hopeful that AB126 will pass.

Another challenge that the executive director describes of is the part of the FEC legislation that mandates that 51% of the Board of Directors to be made up of parents of children with disabilities (with IEPs or Individualized Family Service Plan, i.e., IFSP). “It's really hard to ask those people to give up themselves when they're already really bogged down and that they are a group of people that don't have as much money as all the lawyers I could get on the board or all of the business people I could get on the board and all that” (S4). Still, she recognizes the importance of this mandate to incorporate families’ voices in decision-making saying, “it's the very best thing that's in the legislation and it's the absolute hardest thing.” While this mandate links families to the FEC and gives them the opportunity to directly influence the institution, it can be a difficult one to fulfill given the challenges that families with a child with a disability may face as discussed above. However, if a more substantial sense of community and consistent relationship between the FEC and families were to be built, perhaps the mandate would be able to fulfill its true purpose instead of presenting a challenge to the FEC.

When asked about the delay in passing AB126 to expand FECs and increase funding, the FEC staff members posit that many people, especially legislators, do not recognize the value of the work of FECs. The executive director of the FEC explains, “The closer you get to children, the poorer you get because children don't vote so they aren't valued in the system. So these legislators and these politicians go, ‘Oh, this is whatever, families they could take care of themselves or they don't need the center’” (S4). The executive director speaks of the troubling reality of how individuals in positions of power, in this case legislators and politicians, determine what is of value and should be allocated more attention and resources based on their own interests and perspectives

instead of listening to the actual needs of the community. Thus, in order for families and FECs to exert influence back out onto policy, a joint effort and push for wanted and needed legislation is required.

Strengthening the link between FECs and Families Despite current policy constraints, the staff have plans to improve the work of the FEC by doing more of what they are already doing and most importantly, increase their outreach to as many families as possible. As mentioned previously, certain families with the means to do so are usually the ones sending an email or making a phone call with the FEC first. An FEC staff member who only works with English-speaking families notes:

It's like the demographic of a lot of people seeking supports are people that are already like wanting to help themselves, right? You join a support group because you're already interested in like my mental health and like wanting to, like, become a part of a community and wanting, you're already there. So it's like these people coming together that are already, you know, seeking support (S1)

But the staff express wanting to even reach those who might not know there are resources like FECs out there or who might not even know they need support.

I think these empowerment centers [...] there's opportunity to grow and to be able to reach more families because even in our small areas, I think there's just the lack of information for families. I don't know what could be done about that as far as, you know, the initial, early intervention of it. I think it's just everybody knowing that these services are out there. (S3)

One parent sees the need to reach more families as well:

I'm happy that they're doing the workshops and unfortunately, it's like once a year and not everybody.. a lot of the special education parents sometimes don't attend, you know, maybe just have a database of the recipients of the services. And then, you know, maybe.. Probably gear some kind of advertising just to these parents alone and get 'em more involved or get them more information. You know, so if they can focus or the department can just focus, get a list from the district and let them know, "Hey, you know how you are using these services? Maybe you're interested in these other services." Or there's additional information that you might want to go. There's, you know, the help that you need. (F1)

Thus, having more trainings and workshops, more meetings with the support groups, and being able to share more resources with the families is the next step for this FEC. Furthermore, one staff member suggested better support for families to navigate the service system:

That would be really great if there was one organization and everything kind of, you know, they reached out to that organization and they could get all the different support, but it doesn't really work that way. (S5)

Perhaps a better coordination of all the parent organizations, service providers, and other community institutions, then, could reduce the amount of people that families would have to contact and ensure that their child can receive the necessary resources and services in the most efficient way possible.

Discussion

A number of key findings from the study reveal the challenges that families continue to face in the special education system, the purpose of FECs in families' lives, the kind of relationships that form between FECs and families, and policy constraints on the work of the FEC.

First, FEC staff and families identified that one of the main challenges within the special education system is a lack of knowledge about disabilities and special education resources, services, and processes. Consequently, navigating the special education system can be particularly overwhelming. Other major challenges include families' difficulty questioning or challenging authority, barriers to communication (especially for Spanish-speaking families), and a general lack of needed resources and services in the community.

Second, FEC staff and families described the role of the FEC to be a provider of resources and tools for families to care for their well-being, acquire other necessary resources and skills, and connect families to peer support. As a result, families and staff agreed that the ultimate aim for families is to navigate the special education system and advocate for their children with

confidence. Working towards this goal, FEC staff provide words of encouragement and help prepare families to take action to increase families' sense of self-efficacy and levels of confidence.

Third, the kind of relationship established between the FEC and families is primarily based on whether families determine they need help from the FEC and take the initiative to reach out. The FEC staff describe efforts to build a trusting relationship with families, however, it can be difficult to do so across cultural differences and an existing contradiction between expectations of the FEC to be a parent support while also holding a "mediator" position when conflict arises between families and schools.

Finally, the FEC staff describe facing many institutional challenges; namely, a limited amount of funding which hinders staffing, outreach to families, and ability to provide resources and services to families. Consequently, the FEC can improve by providing more services and strengthening their connections with families.

Implications for Theory

In line with previous literature, FEC staff and families describe practical and sociocultural barriers within the SPED system. The most frequently mentioned practical barrier by FEC staff and families is the lack of access to needed information about disability- and SPED- related resources and services. Though past literature recognizes a barrier to accessible information about resources, services, and parent and child rights (Burke & Goldman, 2018; Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Reid, 2015), the FEC executive director also points to a bigger issue of social conceptualizations of "disability." That is, because society labels "disability" as "outside of the norm," caring for individuals with a disability or how to raise a child with a disability is not common knowledge. As a result, parents who have a child with a disability for the first time are usually unprepared and do not know what resources and services they may need.

Furthermore, FEC staff members and families describe how the sociocultural barrier of the “hierarchy of professional knowledge and status” prevents families from participating in decision-making regarding their child’s education (Kalyanpur et al., 2000, p. 122). One of the FEC staff members explained that this barrier is especially apparent for Spanish-speaking families due to cultural differences of language and questioning authority. Furthermore, the literature that discusses the limits of providing a language interpreter to linguistically diverse families is built upon by the same staff member that emphasized the importance of communicating emotion through language (Burke, & Goldman, 2018). Not only is the linguistic content important to translate and portray, but the emotional context of the utterance is powerful in communication between families and professionals as well. Therefore, a dismantling of this hierarchy and a push for collaborative partnerships between families and professionals is necessary.

The current findings also affirm the conceptual framework of a family empowerment process that follows a social ecological model (Cochran, 1991; Dunlap, 2000; Kiefer, 1984). Conversations with FEC staff and families about challenges and barriers within the SPED system illustrate the first stage of the family empowerment process of *awareness and recognition*. Furthermore, families reported a change in their confidence and assertiveness when interacting with their child’s school, thus evident of a *changing self-perception*. Finally, *acquiring skills and resources* is one of the main areas the FEC provides opportunities for families to do; ultimately, pushing families to *take action* with their newfound knowledge, tools, and social networks. This process of family empowerment operates within a social ecological model as the FEC provides opportunities for families to engage in each of the stages. For example, the FEC assists families in participating in their child’s education by preparing them for concrete tasks, such as participating in an IEP meeting. Additionally, by connecting with the FEC, families can expand their networks

and connect to other service providers in the community as well as other families through their support groups.

These findings contribute to our prior understanding of family empowerment in two ways. Firstly, the FEC staff and families point to a potential component of *caring for one's well-being* within the process of family empowerment that is not found in previous literature. As the FEC executive director explains, caring for the mental health and emotional well-being of a parent or caretaker, ensures proper care for their child. Given that the process of family empowerment requires time and effort from the family, it may be of utmost importance for families to ensure that their mental health and well-being is cared for so that families continue through the process. Secondly, in theory, the FEC and families would make up a community; however, the current “as-needed” relationship that exists between the FEC and families may make it difficult to build a strong community identity. A lack of community that can exert influence on policy may be a reason why the latest FEC legislation has yet to be passed. As the FEC staff mention, policymakers may not recognize the need for family support and resources and at the same time, the community may not be engaging in a collectivized effort to make their need known. Still, the current FEC legislation, which according to the FEC staff members is not providing enough funding and resources, also limits the FEC from doing more outreach and connection to families. Recognition that family empowerment is a process that occurs within a social ecological framework provides FEC staff members and policymakers a holistic perspective of the actors and factors involved in empowering a family.

Implications for Practice

For people and institutions working to provide special education support, two main implications for practice include providing more resources and services and expanding their

outreach and strengthening a relationship with families. It is evident from the family participants in the current study that the FEC resources and services provide meaningful support and assistance to families. Particularly, families reported an increase in their level of confidence in completing tasks related to participating in and advocating for their child's education with the assistance of the FEC. Nevertheless, families also ask that the FEC provide more trainings, workshops, and most importantly, mental health services. Spanish-speaking families in particular asked for more social and mental health support, pointing to a need to make these resources accessible across cultural and linguistic diversity.

In regards to strengthening relationships with families, it is important that those working with families develop the ability to recognize and attend to families' needs without viewing those needs as a deficit. There has been a strong movement away from deficit-thinking when working with families, however there still may be lingering aspects of this way of thinking that need to be addressed through awareness and reflection (Dunlap, 2000). Another way to address the persistence of deficit-thinking is to hire more FEC staff that share a cultural background with the families served. This can promote a better understanding of families' experiences and potentially a closer connection between staff and families (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Additionally, a clear definition of what it means to be a "parent support" and what it entails may be needed to relieve a gap between expectations and reality when families cannot be supported in the ways they are asking to be.

On a similar note, FEC staff express the desire to reach as many families as possible, especially those who may not realize that they need support or that FEC support is available to them. Therefore, it is important for the FEC to think of additional ways in which they can connect with families besides email, workshops, and school district meetings. Families, particularly low-

income families, may not have the means to attend these meetings or workshops to connect with FECs (Friesen & Huff, 1990). Additionally, online resources and communication excludes those families who may lack internet access. One idea is for FECs and schools to partner together so that schools can easily connect families with a child with a disability to the FEC and at the same time the FEC can disseminate information to families through the schools. Specifically, increasing school staff's and teachers' awareness of FECs and available family supports in the area could increase opportunities for families to connect with such resources. Collaborative events between schools and the FEC could then be organized in the community to further expand outreach to families. Overall, a more consistent flow of communication and interaction between the FEC and families could create better coordination of service providers and resources in the area and also create a stronger sense of community that provides further family support and empowerment.

Implications for Policy

The current study illustrates that FECs provide an effective policy solution to assist families in navigating the special education and services system and advocating for their children. In particular, families benefit from the different trainings where they can build on their knowledge and skills, mental health services, and opportunities to connect to other families. It is also evident that the FEC featured in this study faces several institutional challenges to being the best support they can be for families. Therefore, AB126 should be passed and implemented into the California State Legislature as it seeks to expand and improve upon the work of FECs through increasing funding levels to each established center. Increased funding would allow the current FEC to hire more full-time staff, including more bilingual staff, provide even more resources and services to families, and expand their outreach to families. Given the emphasis on the importance of taking

care of families' mental health and well-being, it is also worthy to consider including the provision of mental health resources and services under FECs.

Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation of the current study is the small participant sample from which data was collected. Therefore, it is difficult to generalize the current findings to other families' experiences with the FEC and across the 13 other FECs in California. At the same time, the small sample size allowed in-depth exploration and analysis of the collected data. Still, the fact that the families could only be reached through online surveys and interviews via phone excludes all families who may not have Internet access. This situation made it especially difficult to hear from traditionally marginalized families, particularly low-income and ESL families, which was the original focus of the current study. Though the study tried to reach ESL families by providing a Spanish-translated version of the survey, using survey methods with marginalized populations is known to face many challenges (Harry, 2008). Furthermore, there was no opportunity to interview the ESL families which could have provided additional in-depth information as was collected from the English-speaking families.

Future research, then, should be conducted with a larger sample size of families and across FEC sites to obtain a more representative and comprehensive understanding of the work of FECs across California. Furthermore, further research could take a closer look at the kinds of resources and services the FECs provide to families - the content of the trainings, how workshops and support groups are organized and structured, and how families engage in such events. This would allow an in-depth investigation of the family empowerment process in action. Lastly, future research could investigate the nature of the relationships between FECs, families, and schools on an individual

level and within the social ecological framework. A more holistic view of the work of FECs and their role in the community would be revealed.

Conclusion

The current study has reviewed the literature on the challenges that families, specifically low-income and ESL families, face within the SPED system and current policy solutions to resolve the persistent issues. Family Empowerment Centers on Disability (FECs) in California work to assist families navigate the SPED system and ensure that their child receives the appropriate and necessary resources and services through family empowerment. Family empowerment is a process through which families become aware of the barriers they face, experience a change in self-perceptions of their sense of self-efficacy, and acquire additional skills and resources to ultimately take effective action on behalf of their child. This all occurs within a social ecological model where families, institutions (i.e., FECs), and policy reciprocally influence each other and either create or hinder opportunities for the cultivation of family empowerment. Through online surveys and interviews with an FEC and the families they serve, the current study reveals that the FEC creates opportunities for families to engage in the empowerment process. Additionally, caring for families' mental health and well-being was seen to be an important component of the FEC's work and of the family empowerment process. FEC staff and families also revealed that an "as-needed" relationship exists between them and may face challenges across cultures and when there is a gap in expectations and the reality of the role of the FEC as a parent support. All in all, the FEC proves to provide an effective policy solution to assist families in navigating the special education and services system and advocating for their children. Thus, AB126 should be passed as it aims to expand and improve upon the work of FECs throughout California.

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