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# Understanding Qualitative Metasynthesis

## Issues and Opportunities in Early Childhood Intervention Research

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Qualitative metasynthesis is an intentional and coherent approach to analyzing data across qualitative studies. It is a process that enables researchers to identify a specific research question and then search for, select, appraise, summarize, and combine qualitative evidence to address the research question. This process uses rigorous qualitative methods to synthesize existing qualitative studies to construct greater meaning through an interpretative process. The purpose of this article is to describe qualitative metasynthesis as an innovative research approach for the field of early childhood intervention. Although this is not a new research approach in other fields, the authors suggest that it can offer a promising practice in the field of early childhood intervention. In this article, the authors explore how qualitative metasynthesis can be a practical and effective approach of inquiry as they continue to broaden their understanding about young children with disabilities and their families.

**Keywords:** *qualitative research; metasynthesis; early childhood intervention*

Interest in and use of qualitative research has increased significantly within the past two decades in the field of early childhood intervention (e.g., Brotherson, 1999; Brotherson, Cook, Erwin, & Weigel, 2008; Mandell & Murray, 2009; McWilliam, 2000; Minke & Scott, 1995; Peck, Hayden, Wandschneider, Peterson, & Richarz, 1989). Yet, while the last decade has seen an increase in the number of qualitative research studies in early childhood intervention, little is known about how a collective body of qualitative research contributes to our understanding of a particular topic within the field. In other words, there is a lack of knowledge about how to integrate or synthesize findings *across* qualitative studies related to young children with disabilities and their families.

There is a growing interest in integrating findings across qualitative studies to discover patterns and common threads within a specific topic or issue (e.g., home–school collaboration,

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assistive technology, assessment) as well as to deepen our understanding of evidence-based practices. Through a process of qualitative research metasynthesis, our knowledge base may be broadened to serve young children with disabilities and their families. The purpose of this article is to provide readers with a rationale, overview description of the definition and purpose, and summary of how to conduct qualitative metasynthesis as a means of synthesizing and interpreting qualitative studies in the field of early childhood intervention. As described by Bruder (2010), we will also use the term *early childhood intervention* to refer to services for children ages birth to 5 years who are eligible to receive services under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

We draw a distinction between metasynthesis and meta-analysis. Meta-analysis is a statistical procedure that attempts to integrate a body of quantitative research, often focused on reducing findings to a standardized metric such as a mean effect size (Forness, 2001). Metasynthesis, sometimes referred to as *meta-ethnography* (Noblit & Hare, 1988), is a procedure for qualitative research synthesis that produces interpretive results from the integration and comparisons of findings from a body of qualitative research (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007)

## Rationale for Use of Qualitative Metasynthesis

There are a number of reasons why greater attention needs to be given to synthesizing qualitative studies. First, interest in and use of qualitative research has increased significantly within the past decades, particularly in the fields of early intervention and early childhood special education (e.g., Brotherson, 1999; Brotherson et al., 2008; Mandell & Murray, 2009; McWilliam, 2000; Minke & Scott, 1995; Peck et al., 1989). Some of these researchers have explored phenomena such as general family member attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Harry, Klingner, & Hart, 2005). Others have done more evaluative studies and identified perspectives about the services that families are receiving or the partnerships experienced with practitioners (e.g., Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004).

Synthesizing a collective body of qualitative or ethnographic research to identify common themes and/or to compare and contrast different groups on a general topic provides deeper insights that might not be available in a single study. Similarly, qualitative studies focused on evaluative explorations of practices and services that could, through synthesis, make a greater contribution to understanding the overall efficacy of interventions. An important caveat is that qualitative metasynthesis does not create an opportunity for generalization about findings gathered through qualitative research. However, the large and increasing body of qualitative research requires a mechanism to understand more about how a collective body of qualitative research contributes to our understanding of a particular topic within the field.

Second, qualitative metasynthesis allows for a broader approach to evidence-based research, practice, and policy by expanding how knowledge can be generated and used in our field (Buisse & Wesley, 2006; Giangreco & Taylor, 2003; Sailor & Stowe, 2003; Schorr, 2007; Winton, 2006). Within the evidence-based conversation, metasynthesis would not be limited exclusively to studying the effectiveness of intervention but also to provide additional unique contributions such as identifying specific patterns and contexts to deepen

our understanding of a particular intervention. For complex interventions, rigorous evidence must come from more sources than randomized experiments. Other *ways of knowing* can provide evidence that is contextually valuable because it illuminates the connection between activities and outcomes, although it does not offer *proof* of the connection (Schorr, 2007). As Schorr (2007) pointed out, many social service interventions are multifaceted, nuanced, and relationship based, and therefore do not lend themselves to standardized *dosage*-based interventions appropriate for randomized control group treatment designs. Because of myriad broad and complex issues related to providing services and supports to young children with disabilities and their families, flexible and naturalistic approaches that document experiences, perspectives, relationships, and phenomena are required. As such, there is a compelling need for more coherent and systematic ways of compiling and synthesizing qualitative data. In other words, the contribution that qualitative metasynthesis can make to evidence-based practices does not focus solely on what practices or interventions work or do not work, but rather, it can help in understanding how, when, or why an intervention could be effective. In this way, evidence-based practices can be viewed through a broader contextual and culturally rich lens.

Third, moving from knowledge generation to knowledge application has become even more complicated with a growing overload of information requiring new ways of managing and making sense of an explosion of research findings (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Qualitative metasynthesis has emerged in other fields as a response to the proliferation but underusage of qualitative research findings (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). The limited attention given to synthesizing qualitative studies in the field stands in sharp contrast to the attention given to the development of techniques for conducting syntheses of quantitative research (Forness, 2001; Sandelowski, Docherty, & Emden, 1997). Qualitative metasynthesis is an approach not only important for making sense of multiple research studies, but it has also the potential to identify gaps and omissions in a given body of research and can add a depth of dimension and interpretation to qualitative studies (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010).

## Definition and Purpose of Qualitative Metasynthesis

Defining specifically what metasynthesis is and what it is not is an important first step in examining how a metasynthesis process can be a viable approach to deepening our understanding of a distinct body of qualitative research. Qualitative metasynthesis focuses on selecting qualitative studies on a specific body of knowledge and translating those findings into one interpretation offering a richer, more complete understanding of the phenomenon (Sherwood, 1999).

Zimmer (2006) noted that qualitative metasynthesis is not an assimilated literature review of a particular area or a secondary analysis of primary data from a group of identified research studies; rather, it is an *interpretation* of the findings of the selected studies. In other words, the researchers conducting the metasynthesis are not only synthesizing the findings from a carefully selected pool of studies but also are actively engaged in a complex and in-depth analysis and interpretation of these data. Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) suggested further that “meta-syntheses are integrations that are more than the sum of parts in that they offer novel interpretations of findings that are the result of interpretive

transformations far removed from these findings as given in research reports” (p. 18). In summary, it is important to remember that this approach is not merely an in-depth examination or summary of existing literature but a highly sophisticated synthesis and analysis of qualitative research. Qualitative metasynthesis is a complex and deliberate process that differs from a literature review because of the emphasis on analyzing and interpreting findings across studies. It also differs from secondary analyses because in secondary analysis, the original raw data are the subject of analysis in these reviews, whereas the findings, not the raw data, are analyzed in a metasynthesis (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Failure to use a systematic process to understand a collective body of qualitative studies within a particular knowledge base may thwart the progress of early childhood intervention.

There are several important distinctions between meta-analysis and metasynthesis that may aid in our understanding of metasynthesis, most notably in the purpose of the analysis. Zimmer (2006) suggested that in meta-analysis, the aim is to collect, aggregate, and condense quantitative data to a common and standardized numerical value (i.e., an effect size). The intention of a metasynthesis is not to summarize or replicate the findings as it is in meta-analysis but to interpret the findings. A primary purpose in meta-analysis is to determine cause-and-effect inferences, whereas in a metasynthesis, the focus is on examining a deeper understanding of meaning within a particular context (Walsh & Downe, 2005). Furthermore, Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) noted that “language is viewed as a structure or artifact of culture that must itself be interpreted” (p. 17), suggesting that the objective of metasynthesis is translating, explaining, and discovering meaning from the written narrative. In short, the aim of metasynthesis is to integrate and interpret patterns and insights systematically across qualitative investigations while also maintaining the integrity of the individual studies. An examination of qualitative metasynthesis has not received nearly the amount of attention as techniques used in meta-analyses, particularly in the field of education.

## **The Promise of Metasynthesis in Early Childhood**

Qualitative metasynthesis first emerged in the 1970s and was recognized as an important development in research (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Qualitative research metasynthesis has gained considerable attention over the past decade in the social science field (Dixon-Woods, Booth, & Sutton, 2007; Major & Savin-Baden, 2010) and most visibly in the nursing field (Barroso et al., 2003; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007; Sandelowski et al., 1997; Sherwood, 1999; Zimmer, 2006). It holds a promise of providing a unique and significant contribution to the education field in much of the same way it has transformed the nursing field. This is due, in part, to the similarities in the human service component in the nursing and education fields. Recent interest in qualitative research metasynthesis has also been growing internationally (Atree, 2005; Finlayson & Dixon, 2008; M. L. Jones, 2004; Savin-Baden, Macfarlane, & Savin-Baden, 2008; Zimmer, 2006).

In our search of the literature, we have been unable to identify a formal metasynthesis in early childhood intervention. Scruggs, Mastropieri, and McDuffie (2007) conducted a metasynthesis in the special education field in their investigation of 32 qualitative studies on coteaching in inclusive classrooms. Hundersmarck (in press) examined the relationship between teacher qualifications and teaching quality through qualitative metasynthesis.

Other examples of qualitative metasynthesis have emerged in the educational arena such as a metasynthesis on the impact of high-stakes testing on curricula (Au, 2007) and a partial metasynthesis combined with narrative reviews on self-determination for students with disabilities (Cobb, Lehmann, Newman-Gonchar, & Alwell, 2009). Clearly, the application of qualitative research metasynthesis has not been fully examined or realized in the field of education, but these examples illustrate the potential of this approach.

The danger in *not* synthesizing qualitative research in education eventually lands on the intended beneficiaries of the research, including children, families, practitioners, administrators, and policy makers. Scruggs et al. (2007) suggested that “without developing the connectedness latent within and across qualitative studies, this important body of research may exert only a limited impact on policy and practice” (p. 395). In addition to the risks associated with the failure to implement a method for systematically integrating and synthesizing qualitative research, there is another compelling reason for considering the use of metasyntheses in the early childhood intervention field. There continues to be a strong focus on developing and using evidence-based practices (Bruder, 2010; Odom & Wolery, 2003; Wesley & Buisse, 2006). As qualitative research often focuses on perceptions, beliefs, and values of various stakeholders, qualitative metasynthesis offers a promising way to identify family and practitioner wisdom and values that Buisse, Wesley, and Snyder (2006) proposed as essential components of evidence-based practice.

### Issues Related to Qualitative Metasynthesis

There are two general issues that have been discussed in the literature regarding conducting qualitative metasynthesis. First, there is the issue of discerning or measuring the quality of qualitative research. In other words, how do investigators conducting a metasynthesis judge the quality of each research study included in the qualitative metasynthesis? It is important to recognize that qualitative research as a body of research is not as unified as quantitative research. There are significant differences in theoretical perspectives (e.g., interpretivism, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, feminism, and postmodernism) as well as differences in methodologies; for example, between case studies, ground theory studies, critical ethnographies, or narrative studies to mention just a few (Crotty, 1998). Diverse strands of qualitative research are influenced by different disciplines and different epistemological assumptions (Prasad, 2005).

There is lack of agreement over what criteria can be applied to qualitative research; however, a number of quality considerations have been discussed in the literature and can be used with many qualitative methodologies (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002; Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Creswell, 2007). Most qualitative studies use and report strategies used to address *credibility* and *trustworthiness*. These are somewhat analogous to validity and reliability, and researchers can use a variety of strategies to address credibility and trustworthiness such as triangulation, member checks, prolonged engagement, and peer debriefing (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Creswell, 2007). In addition to noting strategies of credibility and trustworthiness used in a study, the transparency and clarity of the research process (e.g., systematic data collection and analysis) is important to evaluate the quality of each research study included in a metasynthesis.

A second issue of concern in conducting qualitative metasynthesis is how to synthesize without sacrificing the relevance or integrity of individual studies. Do efforts to synthesize sacrifice the essence of the human experiences found in the original research? Is the nature of qualitative research antithetical to synthesis? Is qualitative research “as resistant to synthesis as are poems” (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007, p. 7)? Some argue that in qualitative metasynthesis the critical context may be stripped away and the rich, thick description and context of qualitative tradition will be sacrificed. Others have argued that this issue can be addressed by providing a framework with rich contextual information about the setting and participants so that the context is not stripped away (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). Scruggs et al. (2007) noted that although these are valid worries, these concerns “should also be weighed against the consequences of *not* summarizing qualitative research” (p. 395). Without developing interpretations across qualitative studies, important bodies of research may exert only limited impact on practice or policy.

It is important to recognize these two issues associated with conducting qualitative metasynthesis, yet the advantages and contributions outweigh the issues associated with qualitative metasynthesis. The following discussion describes how this approach can be applied effectively to expand and deepen our understanding of early childhood intervention.

## **The Process of Conducting Qualitative Metasynthesis**

Metasynthesis is an intentional approach to synthesizing and interpreting data across qualitative studies. It is a process consisting of discrete steps (or phases) that enable the researcher to identify a specific research question and then search for, select, appraise, summarize, and combine evidence to address the research question. This process uses rigorous qualitative methods to synthesize existing qualitative studies to construct greater meaning through an interpretative process. Various authors have described this process somewhat differently, but they are essentially similar. What is most critical for a quality approach to metasynthesis is that the process of metasynthesis is comprehensive and rigorous at each step of the process. Noblit and Hare (1988) provided the classic and first key text on qualitative metasynthesis, and Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) followed as leaders in qualitative metasynthesis in the health/nursing field. More recently, Major and Savin-Baden (2010) have provided an introductory text on metasynthesis that is a useful guide for social science researchers. The following discussion is summarized into six steps and gives a basic description of the qualitative metasynthesis process with examples drawn from the literature. This description only highlights each step; for a more complete discussion of criteria and considerations at each step of the process, see Major and Savin-Baden, Sandelowski and Barroso, and Noblit and Hare.

### **Step 1: Formulate a Clear Research Problem and Question**

As with any research inquiry, developing a specific and articulate research purpose and research question is the first task of the metasynthesis. Tong, Lowe, Sainsbury, and Craig (2008) conducted a metasynthesis of qualitative studies that explored experiences of parents with children who have chronic kidney disease. The stated purpose of their synthesis

was to inform the development, implementation, and evaluation of support strategies offered by general practitioners and multidisciplinary teams for parents who have children with chronic kidney disease. Nelson (2002) conducted a metasynthesis of qualitative studies related to mothering children with mental and physical disabilities. She focused on the experiences of mothering *other-than-normal* children, with the purpose of providing insight into clinical practice applications and policy-supporting mothers. Scruggs et al. (2007) conducted a metasynthesis focused on how coteaching is implemented in inclusive special education classrooms. Their research questions focused on the perceptions and problems of teachers, perceived benefits, and factors leading to the success of coteaching. These three examples illustrate that the research question for a metasynthesis should be focused enough to guide the selection and analysis of the literature to be synthesized.

## **Step 2: Conduct a Comprehensive Search of the Literature**

Considerable effort is needed to develop an exhaustive list of studies that might be included in the qualitative meta-analysis. Researchers identify keywords and access all available databases within a perimeter of dates. This involves learning how different databases translate terms according to subject headings and collecting identified research, including gray literature such as dissertations, theses, and research reports. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of articles may need to be fluid and flexible because the procedures for screening may change as the researchers learn more about populations, models, and various defining characteristics of the interventions they are locating. Tong et al. (2008) listed 52 terms used as keywords in five electronic databases (Medline, Embase, PsycINFO, Index to Nursing and Allied Health, and Sociological Abstracts). Their search yielded 338 articles, and of these, 242 were excluded based on selection criteria. Their final analysis was based on 16 selected articles reporting the experiences of parents of 358 children with chronic kidney disease. Nelson (2002) searched six electronic databases (Medline, PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Center, Sociological Abstracts, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature [CINAHL], and Dissertation Abstracts) and included 12 studies in the final synthesis. Scruggs et al. (2007) searched similar electronic databases in addition to a “hand search of relevant journals” (p. 396) to identify any articles that may have been overlooked with other procedures. They located 32 quality studies to include in the metasynthesis. It is critical at this step to complete as comprehensive a search as time and resources allow.

## **Step 3: Conduct Careful Appraisal of Research Studies for Possible Inclusion**

A key task at this step is to determine what studies are to be included and what features to account for in the appraisal. Researchers strive to clarify and use specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. Appraising qualitative research can be difficult because qualitative research cannot be treated as a unified field due to plurality of methodological approaches and methods (Dixon-Woods, Shaw, Agarwal, & Smith, 2004). This step involves developing a means for determining the similarities of studies by using comparison parameters such as stated research purposes, research questions asked, data collection techniques, data

analysis, and kinds of findings reported. The researcher might also want to consider using an appraisal or rating guide for comparisons in identifying and locating the information appropriate for synthesis. For example, Dixon-Woods et al. (2004) used prompts for appraising qualitative research such as “Are the research questions clear?” “Are data collection and analysis appropriate to the research question?” and “Are the claims made supported by sufficient evidence?” Sandelowski and Barroso (2003) developed a typology of findings to classify qualitative data by type and content of findings with emphasis on the degree of transformation of data. At the end of this step, researchers select the final sample of studies to use in the qualitative metasynthesis.

It is at this step of the process that the type and quality of the research to include in the metasynthesis would be evaluated. Summers et al. (2008) conducted a preliminary metasynthesis of qualitative research on how parent-led supports provide emotional well-being for parents of children with disabilities. After conducting a search of the literature, their research process at this step included three criteria for inclusion. First, did the article (or gray literature) focus on an intervention related to parent support? Second, did the article focus on outcomes experienced by parents or other family members that had elements of well-being? Finally, did the article use (at least in large part) a qualitative methodology that was clearly articulated in the “Method” section? For this criterion, Summers et al. used the checklist in Table 1 to evaluate both the transparency and clarity of the research process and to document whether credibility and trustworthiness were addressed. Five articles with scores of high to moderate overall standards were included in the metasynthesis. An important caveat is that using this checklist in a rigid or unreflective way may overlook important research to include, so flexibility is essential.

#### **Step 4: Select and Conduct Metasynthesis Techniques to Integrate and Analyze Qualitative Research Findings**

In this step, the researchers begin to determine how the studies are related by examining key concepts, themes, or metaphors from the findings reported in selected studies. They strive to compile and edit findings while preserving and maintaining the integrity and context of the original research. They may examine relationships that exist within and across study findings and identify first-order, second-order, and third-order themes and interpretations across studies (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). The result is an analysis and interpretation of the studies that moves the original findings to a higher level of understanding. Critical for conducting a high-quality metasynthesis at this step is the use of rigorous qualitative data analysis procedures.

Nelson (2002) used Noblit and Hare’s (1988) method of synthesizing studies by identifying key phrases, themes, concepts, or metaphors from the studies. The researcher made preliminary assumptions concerning the relationships between studies. Translations were developed while maintaining the context of individual studies but allowing for comparison of results. Synthesizing translations revealed a process with four steps inherent in the experience of mothering *other-than-normal* children, under which identified themes were categorized.

Tong et al. (2008) used a synthesis approach that was a modification of techniques described by Noblit and Hare (1988) and by Campbell et al. (2003). They used a constant

**Table 1**  
**Checklist for Assessing Quality of Qualitative Research Process**

Article reference: Including publication type (e.g., journal, dissertation, book chapter, conference proceeding).

Reader/evaluator:

Date:

	Possible points	Points given
Research problem and purpose	2	
Problem is stated clearly and related to research literature		
There is a clear statement of research purpose and/or question		
Method: Data collection and analysis	6	
Study is methodology qualitative		
a. Sampling plan and data collection are appropriate to the question		
b. Data analysis plan is consistent with design and purpose		
Described the participants/subjects of the study and how selected		
Researchers show an awareness of their influence on the study and its participants (e.g., described experiences and/or assumptions with which the researcher entered the research)		
Data collection procedures are fully described (interviews, focus groups, document analysis)		
Steps/process of data analysis is clear with examples		
Techniques for credibility and trustworthiness described and correctly used		
Findings	5	
Interpretation of data are plausible and/or substantiated with data		
Overall findings address the purpose of the study		
Ideas (e.g., themes, categories, concepts) are precise, well developed, and linked to each other		
Results offer new information about or insight into the target phenomenon		
Quotes provide support/evidence for each theme/concept presented		
Discussion and implication	2	
Returned to research questions proposed at the beginning and discuss interpretation and significance of findings		
Recommendations for intended audience and future research issues		
Total points	15	

Note: Scoring: highly overall standards of quality and credibility = 11-15; moderate overall standards of quality and credibility = 6-10; and low overall standards of quality and credibility = 1-5.

Source: Adapted from Summers, J. A., Brotherson, M. J., Naig, L., Ethridge, B., Singer, G. H., Kruse, A., & Wang, W. (2008, March). *A preliminary synthesis of qualitative research: Gaining emotional well-being from other parents*. Paper presented at the Beach Center on Disability State of the Science Conference, Washington, DC.

comparison method, analyzing subsequent articles in comparison with other studies. The researchers read each article repeatedly to ensure that all concepts and relationships were explored. They used the format of first-order, second-order, and third-order constructs to analyze and reinterpret the studies. First-order constructs were true to context with quotes from original participants, second-order constructs were interpretive themes developed by the original researchers, and third-order constructs were derived from the synthesis of multiple studies that constructed new and common themes.

Scruggs et al. (2007) conducted a metasynthesis also using a constant comparison method of analysis. They began by converting all documents into digital format for use with NVivo (a computer program for data analysis). The team used open coding to identify and code all relevant texts across 32 research studies and constantly revisited coding decisions to identify 69 initial categories. Subsequent analysis focused on axial coding to identify relationships between and among codes. The analysis process continued with reduction of initial categories to major superordinate and ordinate coding categories identified and discussed, including many quotes and examples from the analysis.

### **Step 5: Present Synthesis of Findings Across Studies**

In this step, the researchers present what has emerged through the process of qualitative metasynthesis. Effective presentation of findings should take into consideration the different audiences who could use the metasynthesis to benefit the bridge from research to practice. Many metasyntheses use a visual display (charts, figures, tables) to represent the findings for readers graphically. Nelson (2002) provided visual summary tables that helped the reader follow the process of metasynthesis. The summary table included the metaphors, themes, or concepts identified across 12 studies and then a table of the mothering steps revealed in secondary analysis and categorized themes. To assist health professionals to understand and use the metasynthesis findings, Tong et al. (2008) provided a very descriptive figure or map of third-order constructs and major observations about the experiences of parents.

Summers et al. (2008) also used an inductive constant comparative analysis approach as described by Creswell (2007) to synthesize the findings across the five selected articles to reduce categories into major themes. Throughout the process, multiple researchers were involved in peer debriefings and reaching consensus to assure credibility. Table 2 provides a summary of the synthesis of findings across studies and shows the seven major themes that emerged in the metasynthesis across the five studies.

### **Step 6: Reflect on the Process**

Throughout each step of the metasynthesis process, the researcher needs to be self-reflective (Major & Savin-Baden, 2010). For example, in Step 1, questions to pose might include the following: "Is the research question clear?" "How, if at all, should the research question change?" and "Who is the audience for the results of this study?" In Step 3, other self-reflective questions might be explored such as whether articles were included from the gray literature. In addition, the reflection should revisit the inclusion and exclusion criteria, based on the researcher's sense of whether the topic is completely covered.

As with all qualitative studies, the issues of credibility and trustworthiness need to be addressed. What strategies did the researchers use to address credibility (e.g., member checking, triangulation, reflexivity, and peer debriefing)? How was a reflective process used? Was more than one researcher involved in appraisal of studies as well as synthesis and interpretation of studies? Were the specific techniques of metasynthesis transparent?

**Table 2**  
**Thematic Analysis Across Qualitative Articles: Example of Emotional Supports**

Theme	Ainbinder et al. (1998)	Huws, Jones, and Ingledew (2001)	R. S. P. Jones and Lewis (2001)	Law, King, Steward, and King (2001)	Solomon, Pistrang, and Barker (2001)
Perceived sameness, reduced isolation	Understanding from parents who "know," immediate and intense connection, reduced isolation (but differences in logistical, situational, or preferences/values result in a lack of effective "match")	Social value of group, sense of universality created by similar experiences	Being "family-like," feeling close relationships, celebration and support	Kindred spirits—common bond, common experiences, "like members of the family," reduced isolation	Belonging, being understood, friendships
Learning practical skills	Information, hopeful outlook, new perspectives	Providing information and solving problems	Information, advice, hope, and optimism	Learning from each other, strategies for dealing with systems, source of information	Information, advice, relationships with professionals
Mutuality of support, shared narrative, general emotional well-being	Opportunity to give as well as receive, lifted spirits	Emotional and esteem support, expressing pride and encouragement for accomplishments, sharing experiences and surviving day-to-day	Sharing trials and achievements (but minority opinions not tolerated, response by "flaming" the online commenter)	Wanting to share experiences and learning with each other, common experiences, shared perspective of the group	Opportunity to help others, sharing experiences and emotions
Empowerment	Feeling empowered and appreciated		Parents as agents for change, sense of purpose in life	Sense of legitimacy and power to tackle issues, power to "stand up"	Control/agency, feeling more confident, strengthened
Sense of normalcy	Sense of normalcy about feelings	Parents incorporate strategies to normalize effects of autism	Affirmation that child is a child first and handicapped second		
Validating and affirming feelings		Validating and reciprocating concerns	Validating and supportive environment		
Cognitive strategies: Reframing, causal attributions, religious support, humor		Sharing interpretations and dispelling myths, sharing research and personal models of causes, cures, using humor	Celebration of birth of the child with Down syndrome		

Source: Adapted from Summers, J. A., Brotherson, M. J., Naig, L., Ethridge, B., Singer, G. H., Kruse, A., & Wang, W. (2008, March). *A preliminary synthesis of qualitative research: Gaining emotional well-being from other parents*. Paper presented at the Beach Center on Disability State of the Science Conference, Washington, DC.

Both Nelson (2002) and Tong et al. (2008) provided some reflection of the process in discussion of study limitations. For a more in-depth reflection on the methodological issues of metasynthesis, see a study by Thorne, Jensen, Kearney, Noblit, and Sandelowski (2004). Each of these authors has conducted metasyntheses, and they offer individual reflections on their distinct methodological experiences over time.

## Future Directions

Qualitative metasynthesis is a viable and necessary approach to strengthening our understanding of early childhood intervention. This systematic process of integrating and interpreting relevant data across qualitative studies provides a unique and important contribution to reducing the gap between research and practice while providing a framework to explain a body of qualitative research and deepen an understanding of a particular issue.

The field of early childhood intervention is facing some significant challenges (Bruder, 2010). Not only are families facing more complex and unique circumstances but also the agencies that serve them are increasingly complex, fragmented, and underfunded (Brotherson et al., 2008; Bruder, 2010; Epley et al., 2010).

There are several areas in which a qualitative metasynthesis might be particularly useful to the field. For example, there is already an established qualitative knowledge base on family–professional partnerships, so it would be helpful to analyze the body of qualitative studies in that area. Family voices have been more noticeably represented in the research in early childhood intervention, and yet there are still marginalized groups which are not consistently or adequately heard. One possibility is to conduct a qualitative metasynthesis on the knowledge base across studies to examine perspectives and experiences from families of various backgrounds, including, but not limited to, racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity. Another area in which qualitative metasyntheses might be helpful is an analysis of inclusive education to further investigate and analyze positive outcomes and practices for children, families, and practitioners.

As described earlier, there are many ways of *how* to use a metasynthesis approach. For example, conducting a metasynthesis with a variety of stakeholders (e.g., families, practitioners, administrators, policy makers, researchers) as well as across a variety of disciplines can help bridge the gap between research and practice because of the representation of rich and diverse perspectives regarding a body of knowledge in the field. Furthermore, working collectively with the same stakeholders to determine implications of the metasynthesis findings would be a logical and natural next step in translating research into practical applications. Finally, university faculty could use a metasynthesis approach in courses, thesis and dissertation proposals, and related projects to teach graduate students specific skills in synthesizing, analyzing, and interpreting an existing body of qualitative research.

These are just a few suggested future directions regarding qualitative metasynthesis. Most importantly, it is necessary to identify areas in which qualitative metasynthesis can make a long-lasting and valuable contribution to the field and could be of significant benefit to the stakeholders at whom the research is aimed.

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