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An Internship in Elementary School Administration

At the Mary S. Shoemaker School

Woodstown, New Jersey

1998 - 1999

by

Christine H. Carpenter

A Master's Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the  
Master of Arts Degree of The Graduate School of  
Rowan University  
May, 1999

Approved by

Professor

Date Approved

May 1999

## Abstract

Carpenter, Christine H.

An Internship in Elementary  
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Mary S. Shoemaker School,  
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1998-1999  
Ronald L. Capasso, Ed.D.  
Educational Leadership

This study was conducted to determine strengths and weaknesses in communication between teachers and the CST and to identify ways to improve that communication using action research.

Data was gathered by having 19 regular education teachers complete surveys regarding their feelings in respect to communication with the CST, guidance counselors, special education teachers, and other regular education teachers. Members of the CST, the guidance counselor and the special education teachers were interviewed regarding the communication process, and follow up interviews were also conducted with in-class support (ICS) teachers regarding the survey results. The survey and interview data was analyzed according to frequency and trends.

It was concluded that regular education teachers need to feel more comfortable with the laws relating to the needs of classified students. It was recommended that the CST should meet with teachers to review legal changes. Communication with previous teachers and special education teachers was also found to be very important and should be encouraged as well.

## Mini-Abstract

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This study was conducted to determine strengths and weaknesses in communication between teachers and the CST and to identify ways to improve that communication.

Findings indicated that teachers need to more about the laws relating to classified students. It was recommended that the CST should meet with teachers to review legal changes.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to begin by thanking my university mentor, Dr. Ronald Capasso. His constructive criticism and feedback challenged me, and his years of experience provided valuable insight which was greatly appreciated.

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Most importantly I would like to thank my husband, Andrew. His unending faith and pride in me served as my greatest motivation.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Purpose of the Study

In recent years there has been an increasing number of special needs students placed in regular education classrooms for varying periods of time. This change has resulted in a different relationship between Child Study Teams (CST) and regular education teachers. This study will provide information to both the CST and the regular classroom teachers regarding each others' needs and desires in respect to communicating regularly and effectively. Teachers are more open to information and recommendations from their colleagues than from outsiders (Farlow, 1996), so the more communication and support that is provided from and for each other, the better. The purpose of this study is to understand what strengths and weaknesses there are with respect to communication between regular classroom teachers and the CST and to identify ways to improve that communication using action research.

#### Definitions

The two terms used most often to describe the practice of teaching students with disabilities in the regular classroom are inclusion and mainstreaming. The definitions of these terms can vary depending on who is being asked to define them. In the October, 1998 issue of Educational Leadership Jean B. Crockett, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and James Kauffman, Professor of Education at the University of Virginia,

point out that it is difficult to study inclusion because what people define as inclusion varies from setting to setting. Some schools define inclusion as including all students with disabilities in the regular classroom all day. Others define it as including all students with disabilities in the regular classroom, but on a part time basis. Finally, others even include separate, special schools designed specifically for special needs students as part of their definition of inclusion (Sack, 1997). A broader definition of inclusion can encompass all of the ideas above. For example, inclusion can be defined as “the practice of serving students with a full range of abilities and disabilities in the general education classroom with appropriate in-class support” (Roach, 1995).

For the purposes of this study the definitions provided by Mr. Rich Cooke, head of the CST in the Woodstown - Pilesgrove School District. Mr Cooke defines inclusion as having learning disabled students in the regular education classroom, with an aid, for a portion of the day. The inclusion approach, no matter how it is defined, is used often by districts to comply with the regulations set out by the federal government in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the needs of each student determines what inclusion means for each individual.

Mainstreaming is another technique that schools use to meet federal regulations regarding students with learning disabilities. It also involves having students spend a portion of their day in the regular education classroom. Students who have been declassified and spend their entire day in regular education classrooms are also considered mainstreamed, however, students like this are not involved in this study. Modification may include curricular modifications or tests taken in the resource room. The most significant difference between inclusion and mainstreaming involves the type

of support that the special needs student receives while in that regular education class. Inclusion students in regular education classroom receive additional academic support in the classroom through ICS, but students who are mainstreamed do not receive that additional academic support while in the regular classroom. They receive their additional support via the resource center, outside of the regular classroom. This continuum of services designed to meet the needs of individual students has resulted from federal statutes, regulations and court decisions (Yell, 1988).

### Limitations of the Study

This study will take place in the Mary S. Shoemaker School in the Woodstown-Pilesgrove School District. It will involve regular education teachers from kindergarten to 4<sup>th</sup> grade and all four members of the CST. Two special education teachers will also be included in the surveying.

This study is limited by the data collection technique. Participants will be asked to complete a survey, and the strength of the study will be determined by how comfortable the individuals completing the survey feel when giving their responses. Their honesty when responding is critical to the accuracy of the data and validity of the conclusions.

Because this study is only surveying teachers in the Mary S. Shoemaker School, the findings will be limited to the Mary S. Shoemaker School. Though some of the concerns and needs that the elementary school teachers have may be similar to those of the middle and high school teachers, it is likely that a majority of the concerns and desires would differ because of differences in course offerings, scheduling and grouping of students.

### Setting of the Study

The Woodstown-Pilesgrove Regional School District serves the town of Woodstown and the surrounding township of Pilesgrove. The most recent census data reports the population of Woodstown as 3,154 people with 21.3% of that population being 65 years or older. This percentage is the highest in Salem County, but despite that voters have been mostly supportive of the schools and their needs at election time.

In Woodstown 79 % of the individuals 25 years or older have at least a high school education. 96.3% of the residents in Woodstown are employed, and the median household income in Woodstown is \$33,155. The median value of an owner occupied house in Woodstown is \$102,500.

The population of Pilesgrove is 3,250 people. The percentage of residents age 65 or older is 10.2%. 99.1% of the residents in Pilesgrove are employed, and the median household income is \$46,368. This is well above the county median of \$33,155.

Overall the district is well supported by the community and the voters. The last time a budget was defeated was in 1996. It was only defeated by a handful of votes. School budgets are typically passed in this district. The district operates on a yearly budget of \$12,892,811. The district has also been recognized for its ability to keep per pupil expenditures down while maintaining high student test scores and quality programs. The current per pupil expenditure is \$6,700.

The Woodstown-Pilesgrove School Regional District is made up of three schools: the Mary S. Shoemaker Elementary School (grades K-4), the Woodstown Middle School (grades 5-8), and the Woodstown High School (grades 9-12). The Mary S. Shoemaker School was built in 1955. At that time it included a library, gymnasium/cafeteria, and 14

classrooms. An addition was put on in 1962 which added eight classrooms. The latest, and most significant addition to date, took place in 1991. It included an additional six regular education classrooms and a new art classroom, music classroom, child study team office, library and gymnasium. There are currently 30 classrooms in the school.

The students who attend the Mary S. Shoemaker School either live in the small town of Woodstown or in the surrounding, rural area of Pilesgrove Township. The student population consists of 510 students, 84% of which are White, 12.6% are Black or African American, 1.8% are Asian, and 1.6% are Hispanic or Latino. 17.7% of our student population qualifies for free or reduced lunch. 1% of our student population has limited English proficiency, and the students turnover rate is 11.6%. 10.6% of the student population receives special education services.

The students with disabilities are classified as follows: one hard of hearing, one seriously emotionally disturbed, one orthopedically impaired, two mentally retarded, five multihandicapped, six speech impaired, nine preschool handicapped, and 29 physically or neurologically impaired. In an effort to meet the needs of some of these students at an earlier age, in 1997-98 a preschool handicapped class was created. There are currently two preschool handicapped classes, and there is a total enrollment of twelve students. The Child Study Team believes that this has enabled them to identify and meet the needs of these students better than they have been able to in the past.

The staff members include two administrators, 26 full time and five part-time classroom teachers, four full-time and one part-time resource teacher, four full-time paraprofessionals, six full-time and two part-time support staff individuals. This is a total of 42 full time and seven part-time staff members. The population that this study will

address is kindergarten through fourth grade teachers, special education teachers and CST members from the Mary S. Shoemaker School. The entire population of 28 will be used in the data collection procedure.

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses a gap that currently exists in the literature. Studies often indicate the importance of collaboration between special education teachers, regular education teachers and the CST when meeting the needs of students, however there is not much information on how to collaborate effectively. This gap in the literature is something that needs to be addressed if collaboration is to be productive. “Developing a staff’s capacities for talking together may be the most significant investment faculties can make for student learning” (Garmston & Wellman, 1998).

Effective collaboration and open communication is important to many people in our community. It is important to the teachers because it supports them when they are looking for alternative strategies in their classrooms. It is important to the CST because they need to be kept aware of what is going on in the classroom to make the most informed decisions on the needs for each individual child. Most importantly, collaboration and good communication is important to the special needs students and their parents because it ensures that the decisions being made regarding the students are based on input from the people who spend the most time with the students - the regular and special education teachers, and the people who know the most about the laws and what the services the school can offer for the child - the CST.

### Organization of the Study

Chapter Two contains a review of the literature which will include research relating to inclusion and mainstreaming. Chapter Three outlines the research design, describes the development and design of the research instrument, explains the sampling techniques and data collection approach, and details the data analysis plan. Chapter Four presents the research findings, and Chapter Five describes the conclusions, implications and any need for further study.

## Chapter 2

### Review of the Literature

Inclusion, mainstreaming and in class support (ICS) are all terms that have received a lot of attention since 1990 because of the IDEA. This federal law required that schools educate students with disabilities along with children who are not disabled “to the maximum extent possible” (University of Northern Iowa, 1996). This requirement has put a lot of pressure on Child Study Teams (CST) to provide educational opportunities for students with disabilities in the regular classroom, and it has also put a lot of pressure on regular education teachers to meet the needs of these students with disabilities in the regular education classrooms. This relationship between the regular education teachers and members of the CST has changed as a result of this legislation, and research has shown that the quality of this relationship can have a significant impact on the success of inclusion, mainstreaming and ICS.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to define the needs of regular education teachers through the use of a survey, and to identify the wishes and needs of the guidance counselor, special education teachers and members of the CST through interviews. Once these needs have been successfully articulated, steps will be taken so that all of the members of the collaborative group will feel as though they are better understood and more able to communicate successfully.



## Defining the Terms

The two terms used most often to describe the practice of teaching students with disabilities in the regular classroom are inclusion and mainstreaming. The definitions of these terms can vary depending on who is being asked to define them. In the October, 1998 issue of Educational Leadership Jean B. Crockett, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and James Kauffman, Professor of Education at the University of Virginia, point out that it is difficult to study inclusion because what people define as inclusion varies from setting to setting. Some schools define inclusion as including all students with disabilities in the regular classroom all day. Others define it as including all students with disabilities in the regular classroom, but on a part time basis. Finally, others even include separate, special schools as part of their definition of inclusion (Crockett and Kauffman, 1998). A broader definition of inclusion can encompass all of the ideas above. For example, inclusion can be defined as “the practice of serving students with a full range of abilities and disabilities in the general education classroom with appropriate in-class support” (Roach, 1995). Rich Cooke, head of the CST in the Woodstown - Pilesgrove School District, defines inclusion as having learning disabled students in the regular education classroom, with an aid, for a portion of the day. The inclusion approach, no matter how it is defined, is used often by districts to comply with the regulations set out by the federal government in the IDEA, and the needs of each student determines what inclusion means for each individual.

Mainstreaming is another technique that schools use to meet federal regulations regarding students with learning disabilities. It also involves having students spend a

portion of their day in the regular education classroom. Modifications may include curricular modifications or tests taken in the resource room. The most significant difference between inclusion and mainstreaming involves the type of support that the special needs student receives while in that regular education class. Inclusion students in regular education classroom receive additional academic support in the classroom through ICS, but students who are mainstreamed do not receive that additional academic support while in the regular classroom. They receive their additional support via the resource center, outside of the regular classroom. This continuum of services designed to meet the needs of individual students has resulted from federal statutes, regulations and court decisions (Yell, 1988).

### Legislation

Legislation goes back as far as section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Section 504 states that “no otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States...shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of , or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance...”(University of Northern Iowa, 1996). This was only the beginning.

The most current of these mandates comes from the IDEA. It states that “each state must establish procedures to assure that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities...are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special education, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services can

not be achieved satisfactorily” (University of Northern Iowa, 1996). Though the law does not state that inclusion and mainstreaming are required, it does certainly support those practices when appropriate.

The code of Federal Regulations supports the IDEA by stating “that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (University of Northern Iowa, 1996). This is not the only place where we hear these same words echoed.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mandates that “no qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits or the services, programs or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity” (University of Northern Iowa, 1996). There seems to be no room for debate. Students with disabilities have the right to be, and will be part of the regular classroom environment. “Inclusion, therefore, is not mandated by the law. But the law does mandate that the primary consideration in determining the least restrictive environment for a particular student must be made in accord with his or her individual needs” (Yell, 1998).

### Response to Legislation

Despite the legislation, not everyone is a believer in inclusion. Some individuals

believe that the push for inclusion is based on the need for districts to save money, and others believe that teachers today are not qualified to teach in inclusive classrooms (Roach, 1995). Many regular classroom teachers are less than enthusiastic about inclusion as well. "Many educators in elementary and secondary school feel unprepared to face predicaments with regard to special education initiatives" (Crockett and Kauffman, 1998). Teachers worry about how they will determine the grades of the students with disabilities in their classrooms and they worry about their own accountability for the success of these students (Roach, 1995). These concerns are compounded by the pressure teachers feel to cover a certain amount of course material in a restricted amount of time, while at the same time individualizing instruction for special needs children (Hardin & McNelis, 1996). Administrators have these concerns as well. They are faced with increases with their student populations, and they must deal with the lack of preparation that both they and their faculty are experiencing (Crockett and Kauffman, 1998).

### Recommendations for Successful Inclusion and Mainstreaming

The question then becomes how are schools going to effectively bring these students into the regular classroom so that all students can be successful, especially considering the apprehension of some regular education teachers? Fortunately there is a plethora of literature suggesting ways to address these concerns.

There are several key recommendations that appear again and again in articles regarding inclusion and mainstreaming. Training and inservice support for teachers is reported as being critical for the success of these programs. Training that seems to be the most helpful for regular education teachers includes site visits, problem solving sessions,

and instructional and curricular adaptations. Teachers must feel free during these times to professionally discuss the needs and disabilities of specific students in order for these sessions to be truly successful (Roach, 1995). Another suggestion includes intensive professional development as well as a full time facilitator that would help teachers to improve their instructional strategies (Slavin, 1996).

These instructional and curricular adaptations are one of the biggest concerns for teachers, and it is interesting to learn that “teachers who successfully teach students without disabilities have the skills to successfully teach students with disabilities” (Giangreco, 1996). The very techniques for instruction that are the most productive for regular education students are also the most productive for students with disabilities (Roach, 1995). The state of Vermont developed a list of “best educational practices” for students with disabilities in 1986, and later in 1991 revised the list and made it into a list of exemplary teaching practices for all students; therefore supporting the notion that good teaching is good teaching for all students (Thousand & Villa, 1995). Some of these active learning strategies include, cooperative learning, peer coaching and thematic instruction (Farlow, 1996).

An additional recommendation that is seen throughout the literature for making inclusion successful involves making the students with disabilities an important part of the classroom community. This can be done by allowing students with disabilities to have the same access to things in the classroom as do regular students (Roach, 1995). Teachers can also assist in this transition by talking, joking and encouraging special needs students as much as regular education students. In addition, keeping students with and without disabilities on the same schedule as much as possible also helps to make

students part of the classroom community as well as helping to make things easier for the classroom teacher (Giangreco, 1996).

The most common recommendation found in the literature involves collaboration. Collaboration is reported as one of the most important elements in having a successful inclusion program. It is necessary for the regular classroom and special education teachers involved to have time to meet because it is likely that, in the beginning, the regular classroom teacher will have had minimal experience with inclusion (Roach, 1995). Because of this need to have time to meet group planning time should be arranged (Thousand & Villa, 1995). The collaborative group can and should include more than just the regular and special education teacher but must remain small and focused on a single set of goals (Giangreco, 1996). This collaboration will help the regular education teacher to feel more comfortable with teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Michael Giangreco conducted twelve research studies involving inclusion and what made it successful. His number one suggestion to teachers when including students with disabilities in a regular classroom was to collaborate. Communication is the most critical factor in the success of collaboration because it affects group decision making, leadership, and conflict resolution (Pettit, 1997). Most teachers today were not trained in special education, and because of the trends toward inclusion they have special education students in their classes for longer and longer periods of time. These regular education teachers need to feel comfortable talking with members of a collaborative team including special education and speech teachers as well as members of the CST, so that they can share concerns and successes (Roach, 1995). Their communication with special education teachers, guidance counselors and the CST is going to be a critical factor in

whether or not they have success while teaching students with learning disabilities in their regular education classrooms.

Research has defined collaboration as the most important element in the success of inclusion programs that have been designed to meet state and federal mandates to provide students with disabilities with the least restrictive learning environment. If districts are going to collaborate successfully they need to look at how to communicate successfully. Unfortunately there is very little research regarding successful communication in schools.

Teachers are often preaching to their students about the need to work together, and students are guided in their knowledge of how to do this through carefully designed cooperative learning activities. If schools are going to successfully implement inclusion, mainstreaming and ICS, then special and regular education teachers, guidance counselors and members of the Child Study Team need to be given time and techniques regarding how to work cooperatively so that they feel the strength of each other's experience and expertise. Chapter Three will explore further how this might be done.

## Chapter 3

### The Design of the Study

#### Research Design

This action research project was completed in an effort to understand what strengths and weaknesses there were with respect to communication between the CST, guidance counselor, special education teachers and regular education teachers. This study was designed to provide information to both the CST and the regular classroom teachers regarding each others needs and desires in respect to communicating regularly and effectively.

Data was gathered in two major ways. Regular education teachers were surveyed regarding their feelings in respect to communication with the CST, guidance counselors, special education teachers, and other regular education teachers. Members of the CST, the guidance counselor and the special education teachers were interviewed and asked to reflect on their communication with each other and the regular education teachers.

Following the completion of the survey and interviews, the data was analyzed. Once again, the goal of this data analysis was to understand what strengths and weaknesses there were with respect to communication between the CST, guidance counselor, special education teachers and regular education teachers.

#### Research Instrument

A survey containing eight questions was used to gather information from the kindergarten through fourth grade teachers (Appendix A). These questions all related to



the regular education teacher's desires to communicate with the CST, guidance counselors, special education teachers and other regular education teachers regarding the special needs students that they have in their classrooms.

All eight questions required the individuals answering the survey to select which of the pre-worded answers best described their feelings. Responses were still counted if individuals selected more than one of the possible answers on any given question.

#### Site and Population Selection

The population that this study addressed was 21 kindergarten through fourth grade teachers, two special education teachers, one guidance counselor and four CST members from the Mary S. Shoemaker School in rural, southern, New Jersey. The entire population of 29 was used in the data collection procedure.

#### Data Gathering Procedures

A survey was used to gather information from the 21 kindergarten through fourth grade teachers. The wording of the questions was examined to avoid leading, ambiguous or unclear question. All questions included pre-worded responses. Individuals were asked to respond to the questions by placing an "X" in the space that indicated the statement that best described them. There was also an area for additional comments.

Participants were given the surveys in the beginning of October and were asked to respond within one week. In an effort to maximize the percentage of surveys completed, and to minimize any non-response bias, the survey had a cover letter attached. The cover letter was presented in a professional manner. It informed participants of the purpose of the research project and reviewed the population. The cover letter made the subjects aware of approximately how long it would take them to complete the survey and when

the survey needed to be returned. It also reinforced the confidentiality of their responses. The letter concluded by once again reminding them of how helpful their responses would be and thanking them for taking the time to respond.

Interviews were conducted in a one on one manner between the intern and the special education teachers, guidance counselor and members of the CST. The questions asked during the interviews related to how often they communicated with the other individuals being surveyed and interviewed. These questions included: what barriers are there currently to effective communication between the CST and regular classroom teachers; what are the strengths of communication between the CST and regular classroom teachers; how can communication be improved?

Following the collection of the surveys it was necessary for the intern to conduct follow up interviews with some of the individuals who completed the surveys. The individuals who participated in the follow up interviews were selected because they currently have special needs students in their classes. The purpose of these follow up interviews was to develop a better understanding of why teachers responded the way they did on the survey. During the interview the intern gave the teachers an idea of what results were anticipated, and then teachers were asked to give the intern a better understanding of what their train of thought was as they answered the survey.

#### Data Analysis Procedure

Once it was determined that the maximum number of surveys had been returned, the responses from the surveys and interviews were analyzed according to the frequency of responses. These frequency scores were then examined for trends. When the trends that emerged were not as the intern had anticipated, follow up meetings were arranged

with teachers who had returned surveys and who currently had special needs students in their classes. The results of these interviews were used to clarify the reasons behind the trends that were observed in the data.

The data gathered during interviews with the members of the CST, guidance counselors and special education teachers, was used to provide an additional perspective relating to the communication process. These responses were also analyzed for parallels in respect to the strengths and weakness of the communication process and suggestions for how the process could be improved.

Following the collection of the survey data and both types of interview data, time was taken to report the data and to explore possible conclusions, implication and areas for further study.

## Chapter 4

### Presentation of the Research Findings

The goal of this data analysis was to identify what strengths and weakness, regarding communication, are perceived to exist between regular education teachers, special education teachers, members of the CST and guidance counselors. Information regarding the perceptions of these individuals was gathered via surveys and interviews. Once the data was collected via the surveys and interviews, the responses were analyzed according to their frequency. As can occur with action research, the project did not always proceed as had originally been expected.

It became clear through questions asked by teachers regarding the survey and comments written directly on returned surveys, that the perspective of kindergarten teachers is different than that of first through fourth grade teachers. The reason for this difference is that kindergarten teachers rarely have classified students in their classes because that is where the identification process begins, and since the process is so lengthy, most students are not classified until they reach first grade. Therefore, only the survey results of first through fourth grade teachers were considered for the purposes of this data analysis.

Seventeen surveys were distributed to first through fourth grade teachers, and fourteen of those surveys were completed and returned. Table 1 reports how often regular education teachers would like to have the opportunity to meet, regarding the needs of the classified students, with members of the CST, guidance counselors and

special education teachers. Out of the 19 teachers, 10 of them wanted to meet with the special education teachers on a weekly basis. Meetings with the guidance counselor were also highly desired; six teachers wanted to meet with them on a twice a month basis, and five wished to meet on a weekly basis. A majority of regular education teachers who responded to the survey, eight, indicated that they would like to meet with the CST once a month. Four teachers would like to meet with them twice a month and four would like to meet with them on a weekly basis.

Table 1

Desired Frequency of Contact Regarding Classified Students

	<u>Monthly</u>	<u>Bi-Monthly</u>	<u>Weekly</u>
CST	8	1	4
Guidance Counselor	2	6	5
Special Ed. Teacher	2	2	10

The results for this portion of the survey demonstrate that regular education teachers wished to meet most often with special education teachers regarding the classified students in their classes. Out of the 14 teachers who responded to the survey, 10 felt that they did not have adequate time to meet with special education teachers, and three felt they did. One teacher did not respond to that question. Their next priority was to meet with the guidance counselor, and the majority felt the need to meet least often, monthly, with the CST. When teachers were asked if they would prefer to have these meetings scheduled or on a more casual basis, three teachers responded that they would prefer to have the meetings scheduled, and eight reported that they would like the meetings to be on a more casual basis. Three teachers selected both scheduled and casual as their meeting preference. Teachers who responded to both clarified their responses

with written comments indicating that they would like to start out with scheduled meetings, and if things were “working out” they could move to meeting as needed. Others indicated that they would like the meetings with the CST to be scheduled, and the meetings with the special education teachers and guidance counselor to be more casual. These additional comments account for the selection of both the scheduled and casual responses.

The final two questions of the survey were used to gather additional information regarding teacher desire to meet with the previous teachers of their classified students and teacher familiarity with legislation regarding students with disabilities. Both responses were very strong. All 14 teachers who responded to the survey reported that the communication they have had with the previous teachers of these special needs students has been valuable, 13 of the responses even went so far as to label it as “very valuable”. The legislation responses were also significant with three teachers responding that they would not categorize themselves as being familiar with the laws regarding students with disabilities. 10 teachers responded that they were moderately familiar with the laws, and only one respondent was comfortable classifying him or herself as being very familiar with the law. The responses to both of these questions were further explored during follow up interviews.

Individual, follow up meetings were arranged with one teacher from each grade level. The teachers who were selected had returned surveys and currently had special needs students in their classes. The purpose of these interviews was to clarify why teachers made the selections that they did, and to gain further insight into their interpretation of the results.

The interview began by the informing the teacher of the assumptions that the intern had prior to distributing the surveys. The intern had anticipated that teachers would want to meet most often with members of the CST, and that meetings with the guidance counselor and special education teachers would not be as critical. The results of the survey were then shared with the teacher, and the teacher was asked why the intern's assumption was not accurate.

There were strong parallels between the responses of the teachers. They all reported that meeting with the special education teachers frequently is the most critical because they are the only other adult in the building who works as often with that child. They explained that the special education teachers can relate more to specific frustrations or concerns that the regular education teacher may have because they work on a day to day basis with the special education students in a manner similar to that of the regular classroom teacher. Teachers reported that having this common experience made communication more comfortable and effective. They also reported that meeting with the CST was not needed as often because they did not work with the child as frequently, and once the IEP (Individual Education Plan) was established the CST's involvement with the child was minimal compared to that of the special education teacher. Therefore, it was ultimately up to the regular and special education teachers to establish some continuity for the child and to implement what was outlined in the IEP.

The regular education teachers were also asked how they rated themselves with respect to their knowledge of the laws regarding special needs students. They all indicated that they were not comfortable saying that they were very familiar with the laws because the laws were constantly changing, and even though they may have gotten

something in their mailboxes regarding the changes, it was still difficult to keep up. One teacher also reported that she felt she understood the “spirit of the law”, but she could not name the specific laws or quote directly from them. The issue of the changes in laws regarding special needs students also came up in meetings with special education teachers and a member of the CST.

Two special education teachers were also interviewed individually to give their perspective on the strengths and weaknesses of communication between the regular education teachers, special education teachers and CST. They reported their role as being the “middleman” between the CST and regular education teachers. They also stated that they believed regular education teachers would want to meet with them most frequently because they knew the kids better than anyone, and they could relate to what the regular education teacher was experiencing. They also pointed out that they were able to make modifications to the students’ IEPs, so if the regular classroom teacher saw something that was a cause for concern, it should have been discussed with the special education teacher prior to going to the CST.

Both of the special education teachers articulated similar strengths and weaknesses in the communication process. The strengths were perceived as having the actual CST office located in the elementary school building and the open door policy that existed. Barriers to effective communication that were reported by both special education teachers included the case load and paper work that the CST was forced to deal with as well as the constantly changing laws that they had to continue to stay abreast of. These same strengths and weaknesses were reflected by a CST member.

Following the survey and teacher interviews, the results were discussed with a



member of the CST to get yet one more perspective. Prior to being told of the responses given by the special education teachers, the individual being interviewed reported the strengths that she perceived in the communication process as being their location in the building which makes access to teachers and CST members much easier. She also reported the open door, no appointment necessary, attitude as being another strength. These responses both reflected those of the special education teachers. There was also a parallel relating to the frustrations in respect to communication between CST and regular education teachers. The major frustrations included the frequent changes in laws and the massive amount of paperwork that was necessary for each case. The consistency in perceived strengths and weaknesses was positive because it indicated that many of those involved in the communication process saw the same pros and cons.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions, Implications and Further Study

Though the research findings were not as dramatic as the intern has anticipated they would be, there were still trends that surfaced from both the survey and interview data. These trends do have merit, and should be considered as the school plans for the future.

#### Major Conclusions and Implications

The issue that stood out the most through the survey responses and interviews was the need for regular education teachers to feel more comfortable with the laws relating to the needs of classified students. When this was brought up during the interview with the CST member, the CST member suggested the possibility of meeting briefly with each grade level once a month during their common planning time to review issues such as changes in the laws. This would also be an opportune time to discuss any other concerns or questions the regular education teachers may have regarding the special needs students in their classes.

There were also some things that came up which the Mary Shoemaker School staff should be proud of with respect to communication. These things include the open door policy and the proximity of the CST in the elementary school. These conditions allow for frequent communication because teachers have the opportunity to drop in during their prep time and after school to discuss issues or concerns they may have. This availability of casual communication was what the regular education teachers desired

most according to the survey results, and those casual interactions would not be available if the CST was located elsewhere or required an appointment.

Finally, it also became evident that communication with previous teachers and special education teachers is very important to the regular education teacher when it comes to working with classified students. Because of the value placed on this by the teachers, the district should encourage this type of communication. Since collaboration has been found to be essential for the success of special education students in the regular classroom, it seems that it would be in the district's and the students' best interests to foster this type of teacher-teacher interaction.

#### Intern's Leadership Development

During the course of this internship, the intern learned the importance of direct communication. The importance of this became evident very quickly beginning with the questions from the kindergarten teachers regarding how they should approach the survey. Their perspective was so different than others, and prior to issuing the survey that difference had not been articulated by the intern, kindergarten teachers, special education teachers or members of the CST, but as we discussed why the questions did not relate to their situation it became clear that their view was very different than others'. As a future administrator it is very important to ask for others' perspectives rather than to just assume they are understood.

The importance of not making assumptions was also reinforced when the special education teachers were interviewed. They pointed out that they viewed themselves as the middleman between the CST and the regular education teachers. It is important for everyone involved to realize that this is how they view themselves so that they are not

unintentionally offended if a regular education teacher were to go directly to the CST with a concern rather than going to the special education teacher first. Once again, the intern learned that it is important to view issues from many perspectives and not to assume that an individual feels a particular way without asking him or her first.

### Organizational Change and Further Study

The majority of change that will occur in the district will take place over time, and the results of the study will continue to influence changes that are made in the future. One immediate outcome that has benefited the organization involves opening the lines of communication. During the interviews the intern was made aware of many different perspectives regarding the communication process. These perspectives were not always as expected, and after hearing other views and being able to share them with other teachers and CST members, there seemed to be a better understanding of where each other was coming from. In order for everyone to be aware of the different perspectives, more consistent communication needs to exist.

One way to foster this communication would involve the establishment of monthly grade level meetings with the CST. This time already exists for each grade level, but if the CST was included once a month, it would not only help the regular education teachers to stay more aware of the requirements for special education students, but it would also give the teachers an opportunity to ask questions and share concerns. This more frequent communication will help everyone involved to better understand each other's position and frustrations. This collaboration would not only help the adults involved as professionals, but most importantly collaboration has been found to directly benefit the students, and that is the bottom line.

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**Appendix A**  
**Research Instrument**

October 15, 1998

Dear Colleague,

I am currently doing some research for my administrative internship at Rowan University. This research project has grown out of the information you were so kind to provide me with last year in respect to communication with the Child Study Team. The Child Study Team appreciated the feedback you gave, and they are currently looking at effective ways for them to communicate with teachers and for teachers to communicate with them. The purpose of this study is to find out what is working **well** so that we can do more of it. Your responses are very important to all of us.

Attached to this letter is the questionnaire that I need you to fill out. Feel free to complete it at your convenience; it should take less than five minutes. I will be sharing the results with Rich Cooke, Linda Coakley and my advisor at Rowan University, Dr. Ronald Capasso, but your answers to the questions are confidential and no one will be specifically mentioned.

Once again, I know that you are busy, but I would truly appreciate your cooperation in returning the survey to school by October 16th. Your response will be very helpful to all of us. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Christy Carpenter

**Please answer the following questions and place your completed survey in my mailbox by October 20<sup>th</sup>. Thank you!**

1. Do you have any classified students in your class, and if so, how many?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Number \_\_\_\_\_

2. How often would you like to have contact with the Child Study Team regarding these students?

Once a Month \_\_\_\_\_ Twice a Month \_\_\_\_\_ Weekly \_\_\_\_\_

3. How often would you like to have contact with the guidance counselor regarding these students?

Once a Month \_\_\_\_\_ Twice a Month \_\_\_\_\_ Weekly \_\_\_\_\_

4. How often would you like to have contact with the special education teacher regarding these students?

Once a Month \_\_\_\_\_ Twice a Month \_\_\_\_\_ Weekly \_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you feel you have adequate time to meet with special education teachers?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

6. Would you prefer the contact with the CST, guidance counselor and special education teachers be in the form of a scheduled meeting or something more casual such as "I'll catch up with you if I need something"?

Scheduled \_\_\_\_\_ More Casual \_\_\_\_\_

7. How familiar are you with legislation regarding students with disabilities?

\_\_\_\_\_ Very Familiar - I have read and understand the laws.

\_\_\_\_\_ Moderately Familiar - I know the major parts of the law, but may need some interpretation.

\_\_\_\_\_ Not Familiar - I am unfamiliar with the laws regarding special needs students.

8. How valuable is the communication you have had with the previous teachers of these special needs students?

\_\_\_\_\_ Very Valuable - I have almost always found it useful.

\_\_\_\_\_ Moderately Valuable - Sometimes it is useful and sometimes it isn't.

\_\_\_\_\_ Not Valuable - I usually have not found it useful

Additional Comments:



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