

Running Head: SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATION

School-home communication:

An examination of the methods and nature of teachers' communication to  
parents of students receiving special education services.

A Master's Research Project Presented to  
The Faculty of the College of Education  
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by

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### Abstract

An abundance of research documents the effects of parental involvement on the social-emotional development and academic performance of students. Parent-teacher communication has been found to be one component essential to establishing parental involvement at school. This communication can, however, become a barrier to parent involvement, especially for parents of students receiving special education services who are often contacted only when problems arise. Using a 13-question electronic survey, this research examined the strategies teachers in rural southeastern Ohio utilized to communicate with parents of students receiving special education services and the nature of those communications. The findings demonstrate that the majority of teachers communicate with parents of students receiving special education services frequently, using multiple strategies. Teachers reported contacting parents of students receiving special education services most often with general information or about academic issues. While communication was reported to be generally positive in nature, very few teachers stated their communication with parents was most often to report something positive.

Previous research has documented the effects of parental involvement on the social-emotional development and academic performance of students (Bemak & Cornely, 2002). Parental involvement, or the perception of parental involvement, has been associated with self-concept (Gibson & Jefferson, 2006; Hay & Ashman, 2003), self-esteem (Laible, Carlo & Roesch, 2004), self-worth (Rubin et al., 2004), positive friendships and peer interactions (Updegraff, McHale, Crouter & Kupanoff, 2001), and overall social-emotional health (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Sturgess, Dunn & Davies, 2001; Updegraff et al., 2001; Veneziano & Rohner, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004).

Supportive home environment and direct parental interaction with school has also shown positive associations with self-control, cooperation and play interaction in early childhood (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen & Sekino, 2004). With regards to academics, parental involvement has been connected with increased homework completion (Bryan & Burstein, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), reading achievement (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999; Shaver & Walls, 1998), math achievement (Shaver & Walls, 1998; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005); and overall academic achievement (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Marcon, 1999).

These findings have influenced public and professional beliefs that increased parent involvement in education is an effective means of directly and indirectly increasing positive educational outcomes for children (Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler & Brissie, 1992). High stakes accountability for academic progress, as required by NCLB, and its link to federal funding through Title I programs make finding ways to increase parental involvement, both at home and within the school itself, a significant issue for school districts.

Although there are many factors that influencing parents' decisions about school involvement, parent-teacher communication has been found to be one component essential to

establishing that involvement. This communication can, however, become a barrier to involvement, especially for parents of students receiving special education services who are often contacted only when problems arise.

The purpose of this study was to examine the strategies teachers use to communicate with parents of students receiving special education services and the frequency and nature of those communications. Data was analyzed to find trends in communication based upon nature of teaching assignment, grade level taught and level of teaching experience. Specifically, this study provides insights into the following questions: Do special educators communicate differently than general educators? Is there a difference in teacher communication based on grade level taught? Is there a difference in teacher communication based on level of teaching experience?

#### Literature Review

##### *What is Parental Involvement?*

The definition of parental involvement varies widely and often encompasses different variables (Katyal & Evers, 2007). In some cases, the very act of being present construes involvement, but in others, a more active role is considered necessary (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth & Lamb, 2000). In relationship to the educational process, parental involvement is often linked with the terms partnership or parent participation (Olsen & Fuller, 2003) and may be used in the context of home-based or school-based behaviors (Epstein, 1995). Olsen and Fuller (2003) define it simply as "... any activities that are provided and encouraged by the school and that empower parents in working on behalf of their children's learning and development" (p. 135).

##### *Legislation Impacting Parental Involvement*

The history of parent involvement in education dates back to the very beginnings of our country (Barge & Loges, 2003; Olsen & Fuller, 2003). At that time, parent involvement with the

formal educational process was community-based and consisted of tasks associated with the governance and administration of the school (Barge & Loges, 2003). Even so, “families still maintained the major responsibility for children’s education” (Olsen & Fuller, 2003, p.19).

From the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, the primary responsibility for schooling shifted to the government with the institution of the public school system (Olsen & Fuller, 2003) and the formalized role of “professional” school personnel (Barge & Loges, 2003). Parental involvement in governance, administration, and curriculum diminished as these were considered matters for professionals. Expectations for parental involvement during this time were mainly based on activities and behaviors that supported school outcomes such as financial contributions, volunteering in classrooms, and providing academic support at home.

The link between parental involvement and educational outcomes came to the forefront in the 1960s and 1970s during the movement to make social reforms in education (Jennings, 2001). In 1965, with the enactment of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Title I program, the need to strengthen the link between parents and schools was formally recognized by making programs more accountable to parents.

Although schools were now encouraged to involve parents within the school setting, no formal regulations existed until 1968 (Jennings, 2001). The development of district-wide parent advisory councils were required by the U.S. Department of Education in 1974 and incorporated into Title I Amendments for schools with 40 or more qualifying students (D’Agostino, Hedges, Wong, & Borman, 2001). In the late 1970s, parent advisory roles were expanded once again and additional changes in legislation included

. . . amendments to the law that mandated the creation of parental advisory councils at both the school and district level. Although such councils were in

existence in the 1970s, Title I was amended in 1978 to prescribe detailed requirements about the composition and the powers of such councils (Jennings, 2001, p. 11).

In the early 1980s, Title I (or Chapter 1 as it was now called), underwent considerable changes. While schools were still required to consult with parents, the specific legislation governing the role and scope of parent councils was removed (D'Agostino et al., 2001). The Hawkins-Stafford Amendments in 1988 began the re-emergence of legislation favoring structured parent involvement. Schools were now required to "... involve parents in planning and implementation; provide parents information in understandable language; evaluate parent programs; and hold parent-teacher conferences" (p. 119). It was further suggested that schools re-examine parent advisory councils and "... expend funds for school volunteers, liaison staff, and resources for home" (p. 119).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, with the implementation of Goals 2000 and then No Child Left Behind, law now mandated partnerships with parents for the purpose of planning specific steps toward helping students achieve state standards (D'Agostino et al., 2001; Domina, 2005). In addition, schools receiving Title I funds were now required spend at least 1% of those funds toward parent involvement programs. Thus, high stakes accountability for academic progress and its link to federal funding have become vital incentives for school districts to find additional ways to increase both home-based and school-based parental involvement.

### *Types of Parental Involvement*

In her 1995 work, Epstein outlined a model summarizing six types of parental involvement as related to activities that promote positive educational outcomes for students. They are: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and

collaborating with community. These types encompass a wide variety of home-based and school-based activities, all of which can be encouraged and/or supported by schools.

Parenting, the first type of involvement in this model, is characterized by creating a home environment that supports student learning. This can include providing for basic physical needs such as food, shelter and clothing, as well as participating in developmentally appropriate parenting practices that meet children's social and emotional needs (Olsen & Fuller, 2003). Schools can assist parents in this involvement by providing information and resources.

The second type of parent involvement, communicating, focuses on school-to-home and home-to-school communication. Olson and Platt (2004) cite effective communication as essential for building trust within the parent-teacher relationship. Olsen and Fuller (2003) agree stating that, "communication is one of the most crucial components for creating and maintaining a constructive partnership with families" (p. 151).

The third and fourth types, respectively, are volunteering within the school or classroom and activities that promote learning at home, such as assistance with homework. The fifth type, decision making, deals with relationships parents form as they become involved in advocacy or decision making roles within the school. The last type, collaborating with community, entails relationships formed as partnerships are created among parents, the school and community organizations in direct support of student outcomes.

### *Influences on Parental Involvement*

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory that states that children's development is influenced by interactions with different levels of his/her environment (Berk, 2005), Epstein's model, as discussed earlier, states that parental involvement is based upon the relationships formed between home, school, and the community (Barge & Loges, 2003; Epstein,

1995; Olsen & Fuller, 2003). In other words, all of types of parental involvement and decisions made regarding the level of involvement can be influenced by the interactions between these environments.

In their 1995 work, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler proposed a five-tiered model outlining factors that influence parental decisions about involvement. At the base of the model, they propose that parents' decisions about whether to be involved are influenced by their beliefs about their role, the impact they can have on student outcomes, whether their involvement is welcomed by the school, and whether their involvement is welcomed by the student. The second tier of the model proposes that once a decision to become involved has been made other considerations such as perceptions of skills and abilities, of specific opportunities for involvement, and barriers, such as time and financial resources, become involved. The remaining three tiers in the model outline more specific influences on student outcomes including methods of influence, strategies, and student-based factors.

The organization of this model is such that a decision based upon one or more of the first tier factors directly impacts or impedes decisions made in subsequent levels of the model. In other words, if parents are negatively influenced by one or more of the first-tier factors, they may opt not to become involved at all. The model also suggests that specific invitations or communications from teachers do not directly affect parents' decision about getting involved, but are only a consideration after the initial decision making process has been resolved.

In a revision of this model, Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey (2005) propose that factors influencing the first two tiers of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model (1995) can be organized into three broad constructs within one level. In this new model,

parents' beliefs about their roles and about the impact they believe they can have on student outcomes are combined into the construct of motivational beliefs.

The second construct, life context, is comprised of parents' perceptions of their skills and abilities as well as barriers such as time and financial needs. The last construct, perceptions of invitation for involvement from others, is made up of perceptions about whether involvement is welcomed by the school, whether involvement is welcomed by the student, and specific opportunities for involvement by way of teacher contact. All three constructs make contributions to parental decisions about involvement, which is considered the second level in the new model. This model, as opposed to the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model (1995), gives equal weight to parents' perceptions of whether or not their involvement is "sought, welcomed, and valued by the child, the child's teacher and the child's school" (Walker et al., 2005, p. 93) as a predictor of parental involvement.

In 2007, Anderson and Minke developed a scale to test the constructs as laid out by the Walker et al. (2005) model. For the construct perception of invitation for involvement from others, their research indicated that "specific teacher invitations [or communications] had the strongest relationship with parents' involvement behaviors . . ." (p. 319). While this research was conducted using parents of urban elementary students and may not generalize to all populations, it is similar to the findings of Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) who studied parent involvement in grades seven through nine. In short, the implications of these models and the subsequent research testing their validity are that parents' decisions are directly impacted by the actions or inactions of schools and their personnel, whether or not the intent is to influence these decisions (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

*Communication and Parental Involvement*

One construct common to the models discussed thus far is communication.

Communication can be defined as “the art of expressing ideas, the act of transmitting, giving, or exchanging information or opinions by writing, speech or signs” (Dettmer, Thurston, & Dyck, 2005, p. 6). It is considered a key component in successful interactions (Olson & Platt, 2004; Rice, 2006) and establishing open lines of communication is the first step toward developing parent-teacher partnerships and increasing parental involvement (Knopf & Swick, 2007).

Deflanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane (2007) add that many parents may want to be involved but are deterred because open lines of communication are not present or not perceived to be present.

Although parents and teachers may have different perceptions about what parent involvement entails, Barge and Loge (2003) found that both parents and teachers agreed that “effective parental involvement required school-home communication” (p. 142). School-home communication is considered to be the exchange of information between parents and the school and/or teacher (Stafford, 1987).

*Frequency of school-home communication.* Teachers have a direct effect on parental involvement through the amount of school-to-home communication they use (Knopf & Swick, 2007). Olson and Platt (2004) suggest increasing the frequency of communication as a one step toward increasing parental involvement. While this communication does not need to occur every day, its frequency should be consistent enough so that parents feel that they are adequately informed and are significant partners in the school-home relationship (Olson & Platt, 2004; Simpson, 1996).

*Methods of school-home communication.* Anderson and Minke (2007) report that little is known about parents' perceptions or preferences in regards to the means in which they receive communication from teachers or schools. However, when analyzing information from focus groups of parents, students, and teachers about perceptions of parent involvement, Barge and Loges (2003) found that parents preferred teachers use forms other than the traditional notes home or after-school parent-teacher conferences to communicate. Parents often express desire for other forms of communication such as phone calls, e-mails (Barge & Loges, 2003; Olsen & Fuller, 2003; Stafford, 1987), and meetings at more convenient times (Barge & Loges, 2003; Winebrenner, 2006). This suggests teachers should use a wide variety of methods to communicate with parents, ideally communicating with each family in a way that is consistent with their needs and desires.

*Nature of home-school communication.* Even though an abundance of research clearly points to the advantages of positive and frequent communication with regards to parental involvement, "evidence suggests that parent-teacher contact tends to be a function of academic or behavioral problems rather than helpful hints or invitations to become involved in the educational process" (Bemak & Cornely, 2002, p. 323). In such cases, contact from teachers may become synonymous with something that has gone wrong, rather than being seen as a genuine effort toward increasing involvement and collaboration (Katyal & Evers, 2007).

A study on the affects of parent efficacy on involvement, conducted by Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, and Brissie in 1992, supports this statement. This study found a negative relationship between parents' beliefs about the successfulness of their involvement and telephone calls from teachers that suggest that telephone contact is still equated with children's problems at school. Epstein (1995) reported similar findings with regards to schools in economically

depressed communities where more contacts were made with families concerning problem behaviors or difficulties than for other purposes. This history of negative contact can act as a significant barrier to future parental involvement (Simpson, 1996; Winebrenner, 2006).

Parents in Barge and Loges' (2003) focus groups agreed, expressing a desire for teachers to contact them about positive incidents, not just when problems arise. Sharing positive accomplishments, no matter how small, reassures parents that teachers are focused on the individual needs of their children (Knopf & Swick, 2007) and that their involvement or contributions to the educational process are valued.

#### *Communication with Parents of Students Receiving Special Education Services*

Chapman and Heward (1982) agree that parent involvement and communication between parents and teachers can significantly affect both the academic and social skills of children with special needs. In their study, daily pre-recorded communication from the teacher about spelling words and strategies for practice was made available to parents for the purposes of increasing student performance on spelling assessments. Results showed that student performance on spelling assessments improved over baseline scores. In addition, parents reported feeling more involved, liked having daily "communication" with the teacher and liked having communication available at times that were convenient for their schedules.

Communication between home and school is necessary to monitor the progress of children with special needs (Chapman & Heward, 1982; Darch, Miao & Shippen, 2004; Montgomery, 2005; Rice, 2006; Simpson, 1996); however, because of the nature of the academic and behavioral interventions these children receive, communication between parents and teachers can easily become focused on challenges rather than accomplishments. Because parents of students receiving special education services are often used to hearing negative comments

about their children, Pogoloff (2004) suggests that some form of individualized positive communication should be frequently transmitted in order to develop relationships that foster parental involvement.

In 2004, Darch, Miao, and Shippen developed a model for involving and communicating to parents of students receiving special education services. This model includes four phases: preparing for parent involvement, establishing parent involvement, maintaining parental involvement and helping parents plan for the transition to the next grade. Each phase develops from the relationships built in the previous phase and includes strategies for effectively communicating with parents. These strategies include: teacher written letters, parent interest surveys, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings and student written letters.

The authors state that the goal of these strategies is to build relationships with parents and students and to describe improvements or other positive situations. Challenges or problems that need to be addressed should be done so during face-to-face meetings and in such a way that parents do not feel threatened or become defensive. The cornerstone to their model is the belief that teachers should institute positive communications, thereby building positive relationships with parents, before problems begin to occur. The authors' overall view on parent-teacher communication can be summarized by the following statement: "Teacher communication with parents should not occur only when the behavior of a student is unresponsive to classroom-based intervention strategies and teachers are soliciting support from the child's parents" (p. 24).

Research reviewed thus far suggests that teachers should communicate frequently, in a variety of ways, and in a positive manner in order to increase parent involvement. However, a search of literature in Education Abstracts and Education Research Complete using the terms home-school communication, parent-teacher communication, parental involvement and/or parent

participation in combination with special education or students with disabilities found no research that examined whether or not teachers were implementing the strategies suggested by the literature when communicating with parents of student receiving special education services.

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine strategies teachers in rural southeastern Ohio utilized to communicate with parents of students receiving special education services and the nature and frequency of those communications. Data on grade level taught and level of teaching experience was collected to provide insight into differences in communication that may appear based upon these variables. Communication trends based on nature of teaching assignment were also examined. With the current movement toward full inclusion setting, strategies that general education teachers use to communicate to parents of student receiving special education services become particularly important as well.

### *Research Design*

Best and Kahn (2003) describe the survey as a method of gathering information from a large population base about a particular topic at a particular point in time. Electronic surveys, a variation of the traditional telephone or pencil and paper-based methods, are generally more cost efficient (Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2000; Moss & Hendry, 2002), are easier to distribute than their counterparts, are returned quicker (Moss & Hendry, 2002) and are easier for participants to use (Cook et al., 2000). An electronic survey was chosen as the instrument for this study due to its convenience.

Access to internet technologies, estimated survey completion time, and use of reminder notices are factors that must be considered when using electronic surveys (Moss & Hendry, 2002). While accessibility to computers and internet technologies is on the rise, this factor can

have a direct impact on the rate of return for some populations. Shannon and Bradshaw (2002) found that many survey professionals successfully implement electronic surveys by “draw[ing] samples from organizational lists (e.g., company employees, university faculty, professional membership) that include e-mail addresses” (p. 180).

To maximize responses, Moss and Hendrey (2002) suggest that electronic surveys should be short and that estimated time for completion stated in the invitation should be as accurate as possible. Their review of previous research found participants were more likely to complete and return surveys when the estimated time to completion stated in the invitation was less than eight minutes.

Research widely supports the use of reminder notices, especially with electronic surveys. In their meta-analysis, Cook et al. (2000) found that response rates generally doubled when reminders were used, however they noticed a decrease in percentage of responses from any subsequent contacts. Moss and Hendry (2002) also found conflicting information about the amount of increase that could be anticipated from more than one reminder.

### *Participants*

The sample for this study was comprised of teachers in grades K-6 employed in public school districts in rural southeastern Ohio that had staff e-mail addresses available on their district Web sites. For the purposes of this study, only grade-level general education and special education teachers were included for participation (i.e., no art education teachers, physical education teachers, paraprofessionals).

Links to all public school districts within Athens, Jackson, Hocking, Meigs, Vinton, and Washington counties were identified from information provided by the Ohio School Boards Association (2008). Of the 19 districts within those counties, two experienced ongoing technical

difficulties with their Web sites during the time data was being collected and eight did not provide staff e-mail addresses on their Web sites. The remaining nine districts provided e-mail addresses for some or all of the staff within 32 of the 36 buildings that currently house students in grades K-6. E-mail addresses were collected from the 32 buildings resulting in a total of 495 potential participants being invited to take part in the study.

### *Procedure*

An electronic invitation to participate in this study, that included a link to the survey instrument, was sent to all potential participants using their school e-mail addresses. Invitations included statements addressing confidentiality and were sent as blind copy messages (Shannon & Bradshaw, 2002) to further ensure the privacy of all message recipients. Participants were given a two-week period in which to complete the survey. An electronic reminder, also sent as a blind-copy, was sent one week after the initial invitation had been sent. Data was collected using an electronic survey site via LiveText that allowed responses to remain confidential. Only the researcher and her advisor had access to the raw data.

Of the 495 invitations to participate that were electronically distributed, 36 were returned due to server errors or mailbox quota issues, thus bringing the potential sample total to 459. One hundred seven surveys were completed resulting in a response rate of 23.3% of the total sample. This is slightly lower than the mean response rate of 39.6% found by Cook et al. (2000) in their meta-analysis of the response rates of 68 internet-based surveys.

### *Instrumentation*

The data for this research was collected using a 13-question survey that was estimated to take approximately five minutes for participants to complete. One question addressed the frequency in which teachers communicate with parents. Participants were asked to pick one of

several choice options. Two questions addressed the strategies teachers use to communicate. Both questions asked participants to pick from pre-selected choice options based on strategies outlined in the literature. One of the two questions asked participants to select the strategy most often used; the other asked them to select all strategies that applied. Six questions addressed the nature of teachers' communications. Five of those questions used a Likert-scale with responses choices of agree, neutral/unknown/undecided and disagree; the other asked participants identify the reason they most often communicated with parents of students receiving special education services by picking from pre-selected options based on information outlined in the literature. One question addressed teachers' overall perception of school-home communication using the Likert-scale described above. The last three questions of the survey were demographic in nature. They were designed to determine the nature of the participants teaching assignment, the grade level taught and the level of teaching experience. See Appendix A for a copy of the survey instrument.

### *Data Analysis*

After the two-week response period had passed, all response data was downloaded in spreadsheet form from the electronic survey site. Of the 107 surveys that were completed, four data sets were excluded from analysis because the grade level taught, as reported by the participant, fell outside of the grade range being examined in this study.

The remaining 103 data sets were analyzed by using the Microsoft Excel data sort function to group and identify like responses. Responses using the Likert-scale were assigned values (agree=3, neutral/unknown/undecided=2, and disagree=1) and the mean level of agreement was calculated for each question. Data collected based on grade level taught was divided into three groups (K-3, 4-6, and those that taught multiple grades in both bands) to

determine whether there were any differences in teacher responses between those bands.

Differences in teacher responses were also examined by nature of teaching assignment (general education or special education) and by level of teaching experience reported (as grouped in the survey question).

## Results

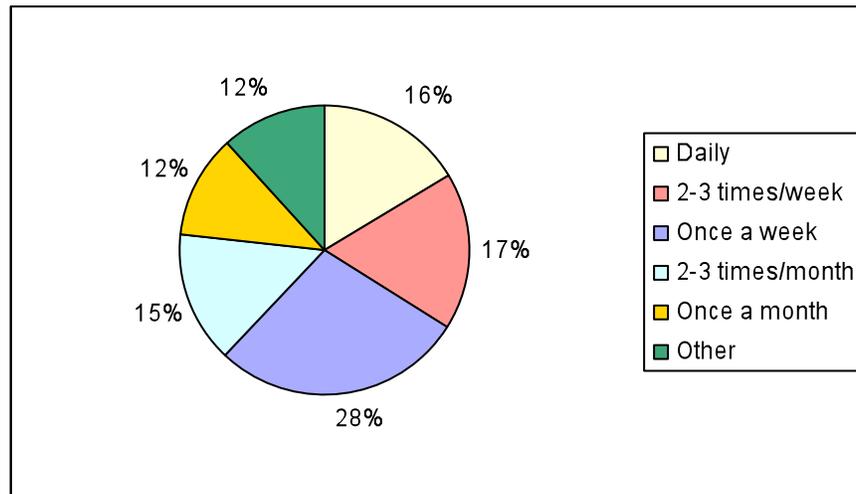
The purpose of this study was to examine strategies teachers in rural southeastern Ohio utilized to communicate with parents of students receiving special education services and the nature and frequency of those communications. Results are reported in the following sections by grouping survey questions that address each of these areas. Differences in level of teaching experience, grade level, and the nature of teaching assignment are also examined.

Of the 103 participants, 76 reported being general education teachers, 25 reported being special education teachers, and 2 did not indicate the nature of their teaching assignment. Fifty-six participants reported teaching within the K-3 grade band, 36 reported teaching within the 4-6 grade band, and 10 reported teaching grade levels from both bands. One participant did not indicate grade level taught. Four participants reported being first year teachers, 10 reported 2-5 years of teaching experience, 15 reported 6-10 years of teaching experience, 38 reported 11-20 years of teaching experience, and 36 reported more than 20 years of teaching experience.

### *Frequency of School-Home Communication*

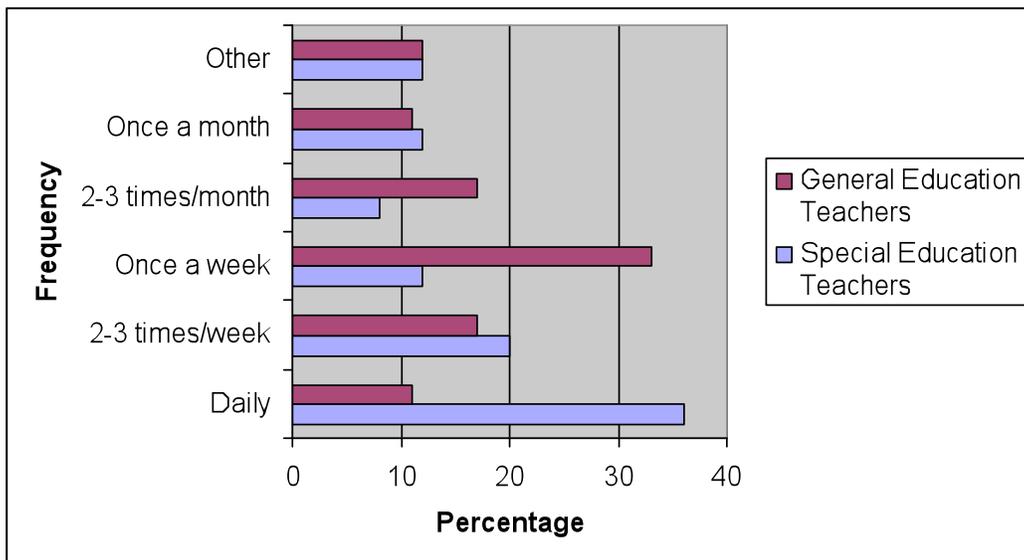
Overall, 17 participants stated they communicate daily with the parents of students receiving special education services. Eighteen participants reported communicating 2-3 times per week, 29 reported communicating once a week, 15 reported communicating 2-3 times per month, 12 reported communicating once a month, and 12 chose the 'other' option. Figure 1 shows the frequency of school-home communication reported by percentage.

Figure 1. Frequency of school-home communication reported by percentage.



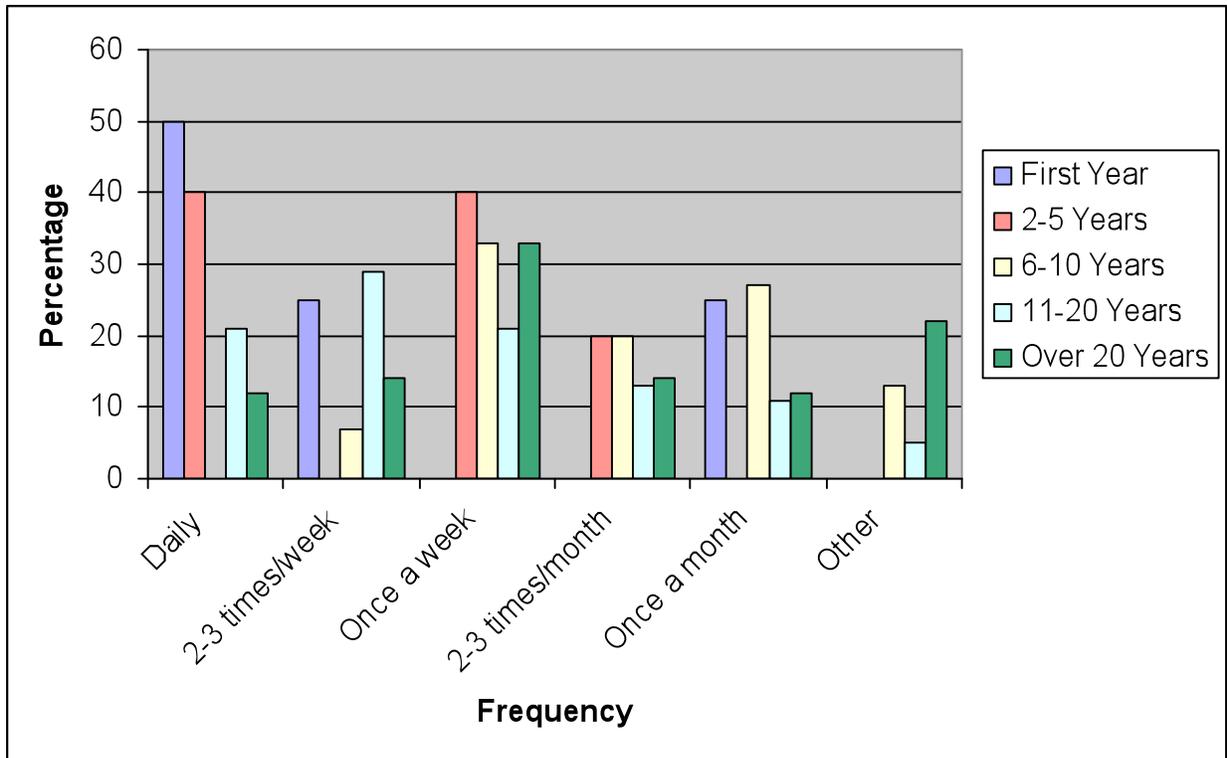
*By nature of teaching assignment.* Fifty-six percent of special education teachers versus 28% of general education teachers reported communicating with parents of students receiving special education services 2-3 times per week or more. Twelve percent of special education teachers versus 33% of general education teachers reported communicating once a week. Thirty-two percent of special education teachers versus 39% general education teachers reported communicating 2-3 times per month or less.

Figure 2. Frequency of communication by nature of teaching assignment.



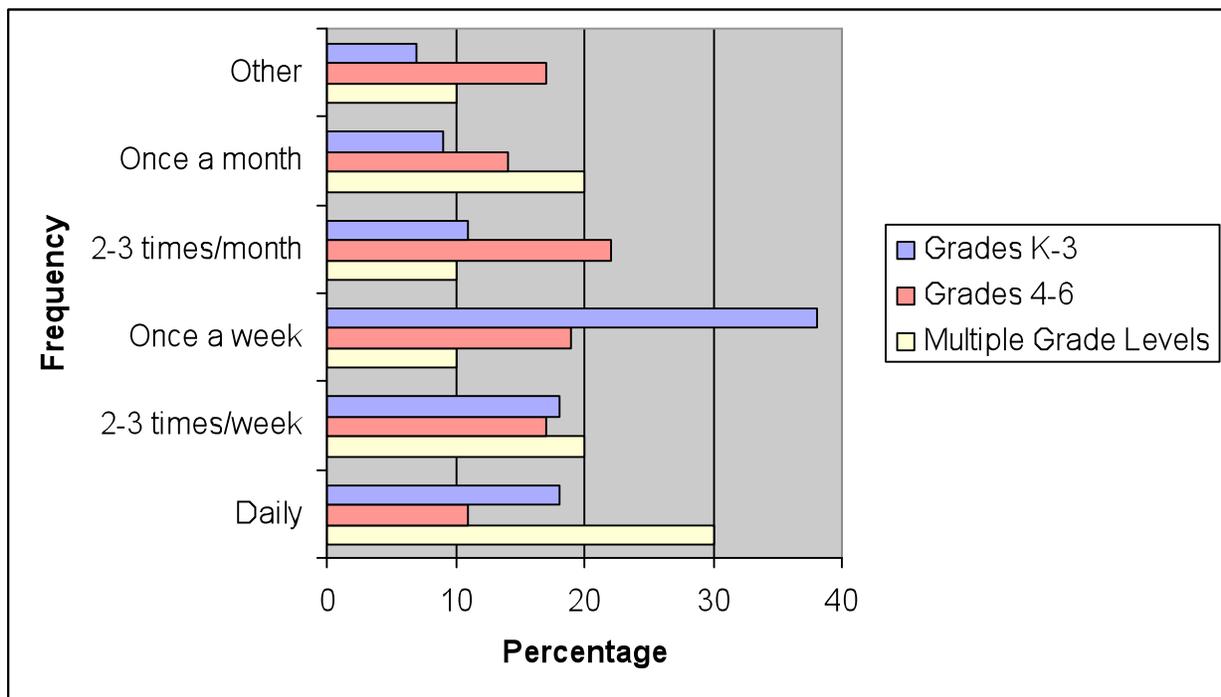
By level of teaching experience. Seventy-five percent of first-year teachers reported communicating with parents of students receiving special education services at least 2-3 times per week compared with 40% of teachers with 2-5 years of experience, 7% of teachers with 6-10 years of experience, 50% of teachers with 11-20 years of experience, and 22% of teachers with over 20 years of experience. Forty percent of teachers with 2-5 years of experience reported once a week contact compared with 33% of teachers with 6-10 years and over 20 years of experience. Twenty-five percent of first year teachers reported communicating 2-3 times per month or less compared with 20% of teachers with 2-5 years of experience, 60% of teachers with 6-10 years of experience, 29% of teachers with 11-20 years of experience, and 48% of teachers with over 20 years of experience.

Figure 3. Frequency of communication by level of teaching experience.



*By grade level.* Thirty-six percent of teachers assigned to grades K-3 reported communicating with parents of students receiving special education services at least 2-3 times per week compared with 28% of those teaching in grades 4-6 and 50% of those teaching multiple grade levels. Thirty-eight percent of teachers in grades K-3 reported communicating once a week as compared to 19% of those teaching in grades 4-6 and 10% of those teaching multiple grade levels. Twenty-seven percent of teachers in grades K-3 reported communicating 2-3 times per month or less as compared to 53% of those teaching grades 4-6 and 40% of those teaching multiple grade levels.

Figure 4. Frequency of communication by grade level.

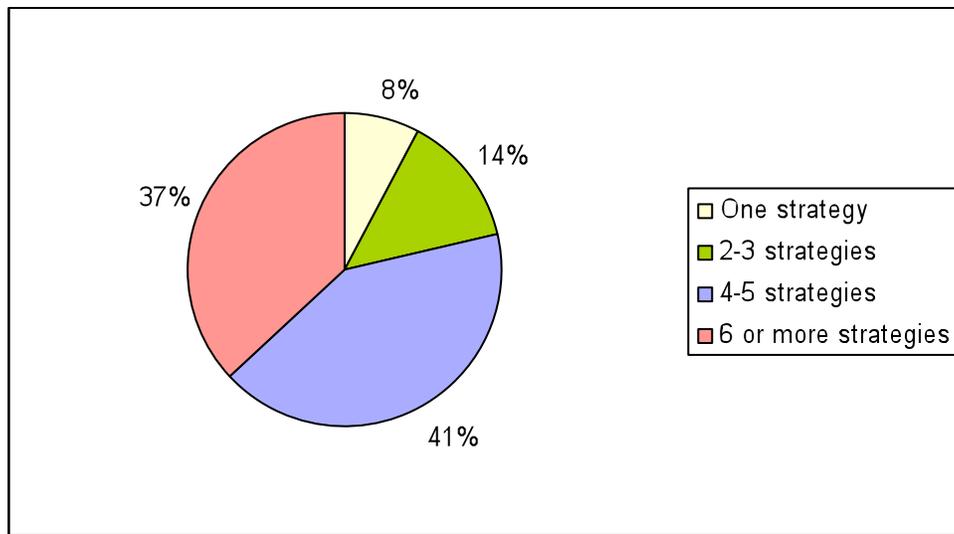


*Methods of School-Home Communication*

When asked to identify strategies used to communicate with parents, 61 participants reported using newsletters, 78 said they communicated by phone, 61 used e-mail, 87 used personal notes sent home with student, 19 used personal notes sent home via mail, 85 used report

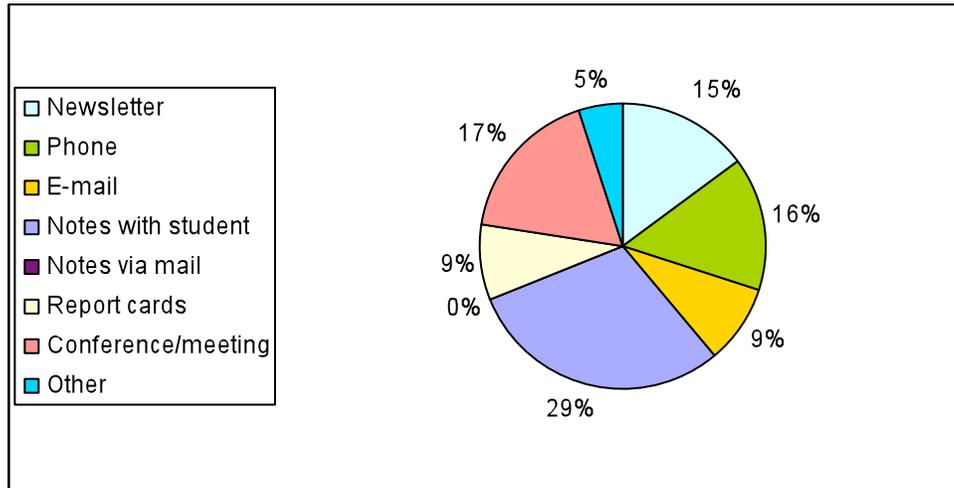
cards or progress reports, 80 used conferences or face-to-face meetings, and 13 reported using some other way of communicating with parents. As participants were asked to check all strategies they used when communicating with parents, many selected multiple options. Figure 5 shows the number of strategies typically used by teachers when communicating with parents and the percentage of teachers who reported using them.

Figure 5. Percentage of teachers reporting the number of different strategies typically used to communicate with parents.



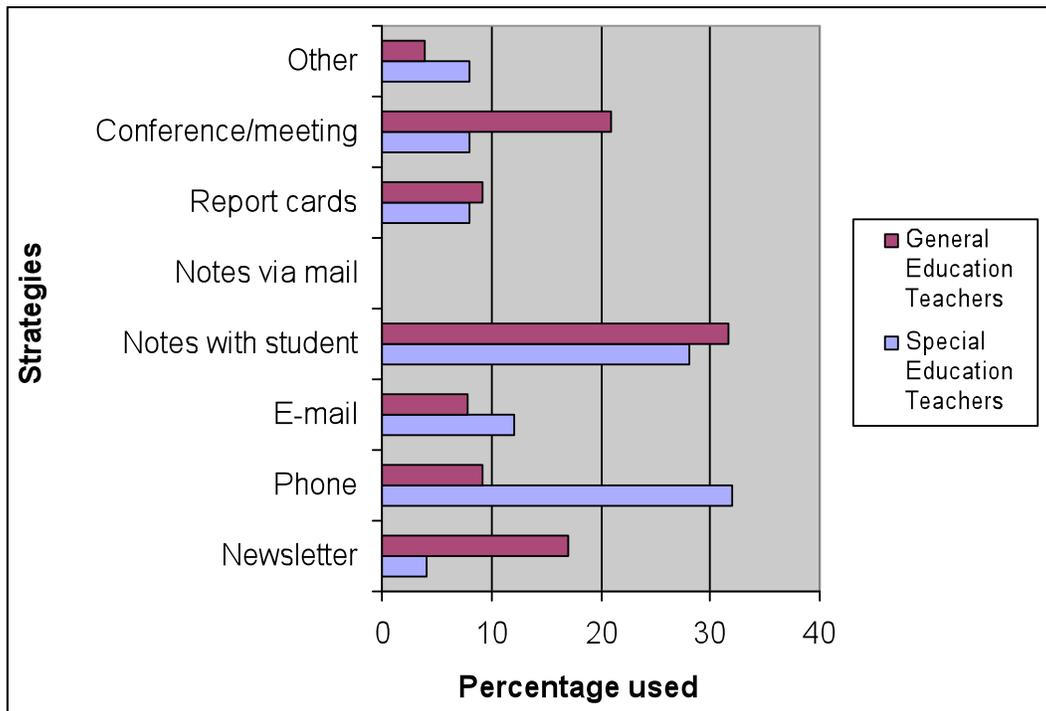
When asked to identify strategies most often used to communicate with parents of students receiving special education services, 15 participants reported using newsletters, 16 reported using phone calls, nine reported using e-mails, 31 reported using notes sent home with the student, nine reported using report cards or progress reports, 18 reported conferences or face-to-face meetings, and five reported using some other method of communication. No participants reported using notes sent home via mail.

Figure 6. Strategies most often used to communicate with parents.



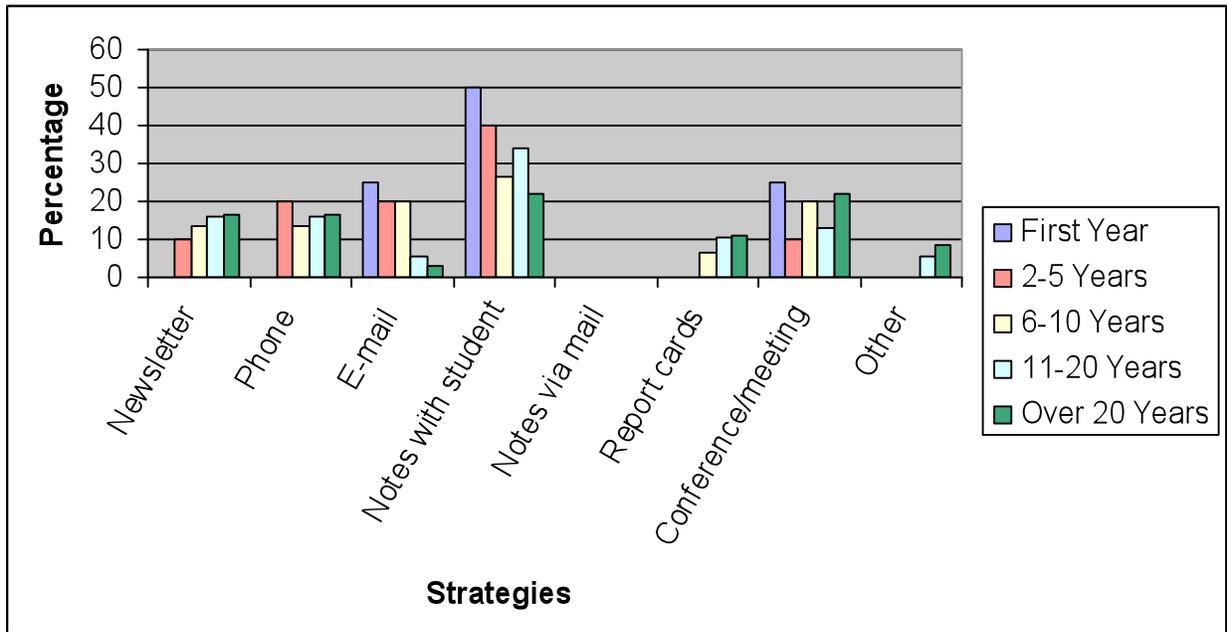
*By nature of teaching assignment.* Special education teachers reported communicating most by phone and by personal notes sent home with students, 32% and 28% respectively. General educators reported communicating most by sending personal notes sent home with students and by newsletter, 31.6% and 17.1% respectively.

Figure 7. Strategies most often used by nature of teaching assignment.



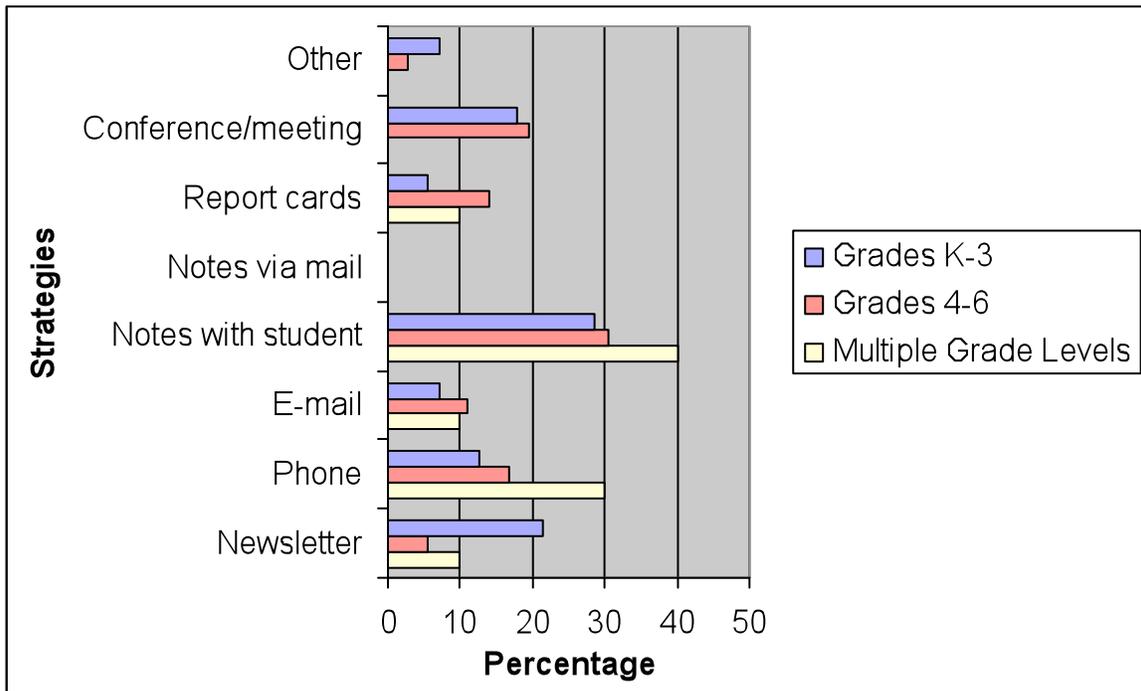
*By level of teaching experience.* With the exception of teachers having over 20 years of experience, teachers with all levels of teaching experience reported using notes sent home with students more than any other strategy when communicating with parents of students receiving special education services. An equal number of participants with over 20 years of experience reported using notes sent home with students or conferences/face-to-face meetings the most.

Figure 8. Strategies most often used by level of teaching experience.



*By grade level.* Teachers from all grade levels reported using notes sent home with students more than any other strategy when communicating with parents of students receiving special education services. The second most used strategy for those teaching in the K-3 band was newsletters, for those teaching in the 4-6 grade band was conferences/face-to-face meetings and for those teaching grades across both bands was phone calls.

Figure 9. Strategies most often used by grade level taught.



*Nature of School-Home Communication*

Survey questions 5 through 10 (see Appendix A) addressed the nature of school-home communication. Responses to questions 5 through 9 were evaluated using Likert-scale response choices of agree, neutral/undecided/unknown, and disagree. The mean scores for these questions are reported in Table 1.

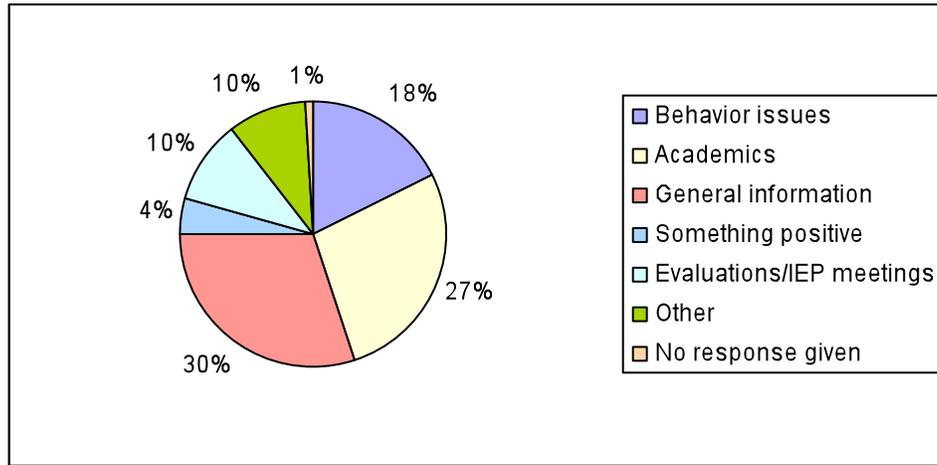
Overall, response scores were positive for questions 5 through 9. Question five, ‘I contact parents of students receiving special education services when there is an academic issue that needs their attention,’ and question seven, ‘I contact parents of students receiving special education services when there is a behavioral issue that interferes with the educational process,’ had the highest level of agreement (M = 2.90). Question nine, ‘The majority of my contact with parents of students receiving special education services is positive in nature,’ received the lowest level of agreement (M = 2.53).

Table 1. Mean response scores for survey questions 4-10.

<b>Mean Response Scores</b>						
	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6	Question 7	Question 8	Question 9
Overall	2.69	2.90	2.74	2.90	2.72	2.53
Special Ed	2.73	2.88	2.79	2.88	2.68	2.60
General Ed	2.71	2.91	2.72	2.92	2.74	2.51
First year	2.50	3.00	2.75	3.00	2.75	2.00
2-5 years	2.80	3.00	2.90	3.00	2.80	2.50
6-10 years	2.53	2.93	2.53	2.80	2.40	2.47
11-20 years	2.73	2.89	2.65	2.89	2.74	2.53
20+ years	2.69	2.86	2.86	2.92	2.81	2.64
Grades K-3	2.75	2.93	2.82	2.88	2.82	2.70
Grades 4-6	2.56	2.83	2.56	2.92	2.56	2.31
Multiple Grades	2.80	3.00	2.89	3.00	2.80	2.50

Question 10 asked participants to identify the reason they most often communicated with parents of students receiving special education services. Twenty participants reported contacting parents about behavior issues, 31 reported contacting parents about academics, 34 reported contacting parents with general information, five reported contacting parents to share something positive, 11 reported contacting parents about evaluations or IEP meetings, one reported contacting parents for other reasons, and one did not provide a response to this question.

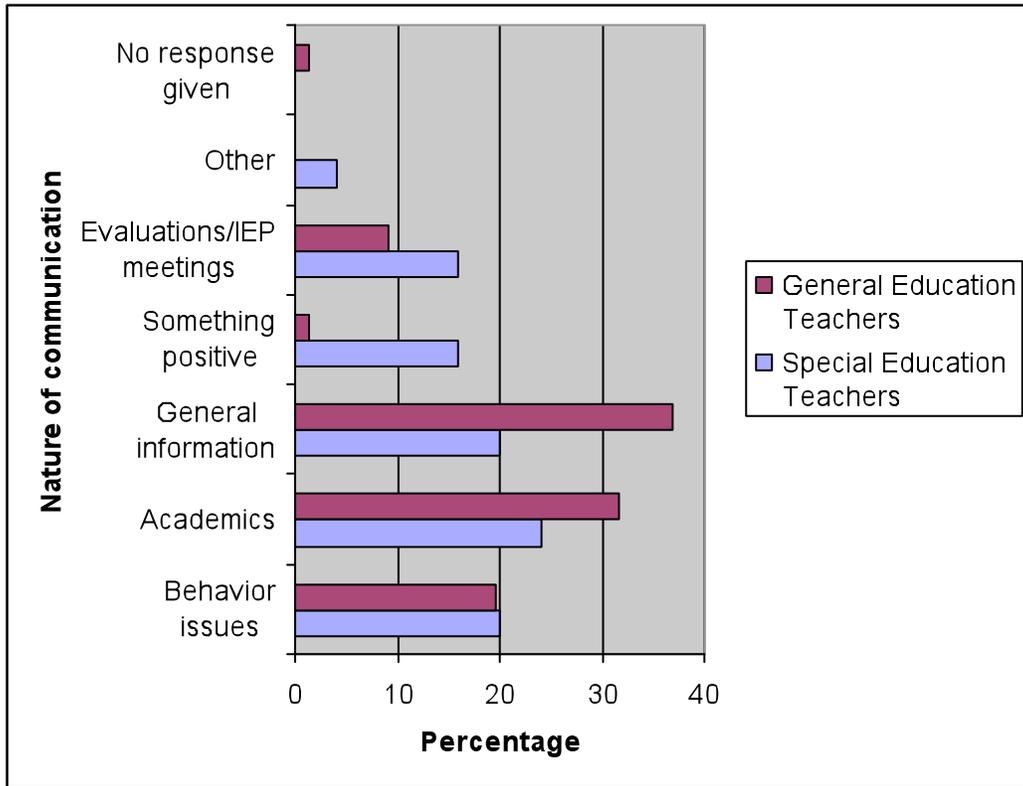
Figure 10. Reasons teachers most often communicate with parents.



*By nature of teaching assignment.* Both special education teachers and general education teachers followed the overall trend by having positive response scores for questions 5 through 9, by having the highest levels of agreement for questions five and seven, and by having the lowest levels of agreement for question nine. Special educators reported a slightly higher level of agreement ( $M = 2.79$ ) than general educators ( $M = 2.72$ ) when sharing academic accomplishments (question 6). General educators reported a slightly higher level of agreement ( $M = 2.74$ ) than special educators ( $M = 2.68$ ) when sharing positive behaviors/incidents (question 8).

General educators responded to question 10 by reporting that they most often contacted parents of students receiving special education services with general information. Special educators responded to question 10 by reporting that they most often contacted parents of students receiving special education services about academics. A larger percentage of special educators than general educators reported contacting parents to share something positive.

Figure 11. Reasons teachers most often communicate with parents by nature of teaching assignment.



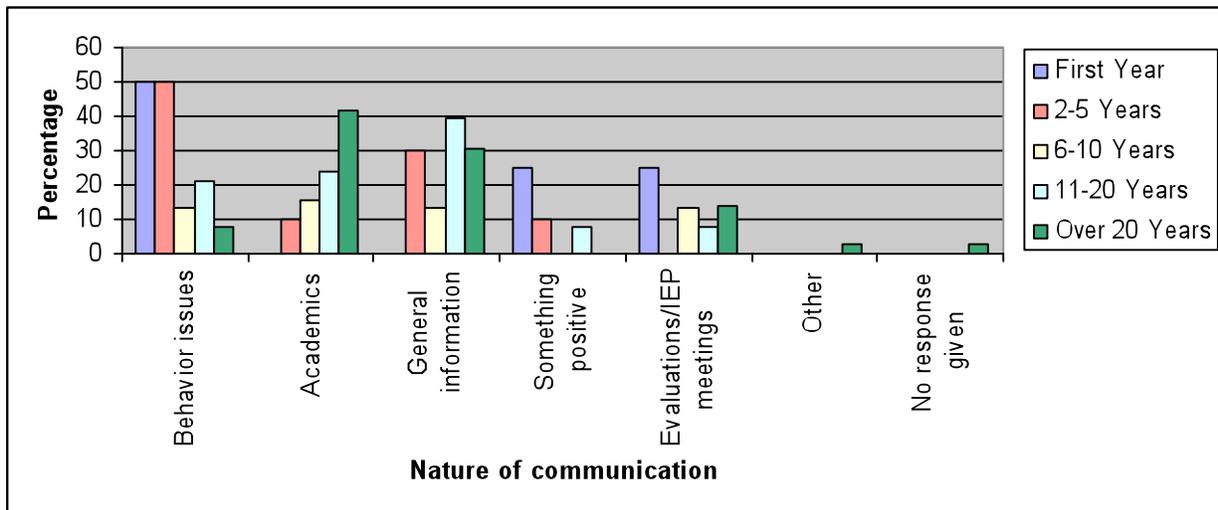
By level of teaching experience. Participants with all levels of teaching experience had positive response scores for questions 5 through 9 with the exception of first year teachers' responses to question nine. This subgroup had a mean response score of 2.0 for question nine which is indicative of the neutral/undecided/unknown response.

Participants with 2-5 years of experience reported the highest level of agreement for questions five, six, and seven. They reported a mean level of agreement of 2.90 when sharing academic accomplishments (question 6) and mean level of agreement of 3.0 when contacting parents about academic (question 5) or behavioral (question 7) concerns. First-year teachers shared the mean level of agreement of 3.0 for questions five and seven.

Participants with more than 20 years of experience and those with 2-5 years of experience reported the highest levels of agreement ( $M = 2.81$  and  $M = 2.80$ , respectively) when sharing positive behaviors/incidents (question 8). Participants with more than 20 years of experience reported the highest levels of agreement ( $M = 2.64$ ) when asked to assess the nature of the majority of their contact with parents (question 9).

First year teachers and those with 2-5 years of experience responded to question 10 by reporting that they most often contacted parents of students receiving special education services about behaviors issues. Participants with 6-10 years of experience and those with more than 20 years of experience responded to question 10 by reporting that they most often contacted parents about academics. Participants with 11-20 years of experience reported most often contacting parents with general information. A larger percentage of first-year teachers reported contacting parents to share something positive than any other level of experience.

Figure 12. Reasons teachers most often communicate with parents by level of teaching experience.



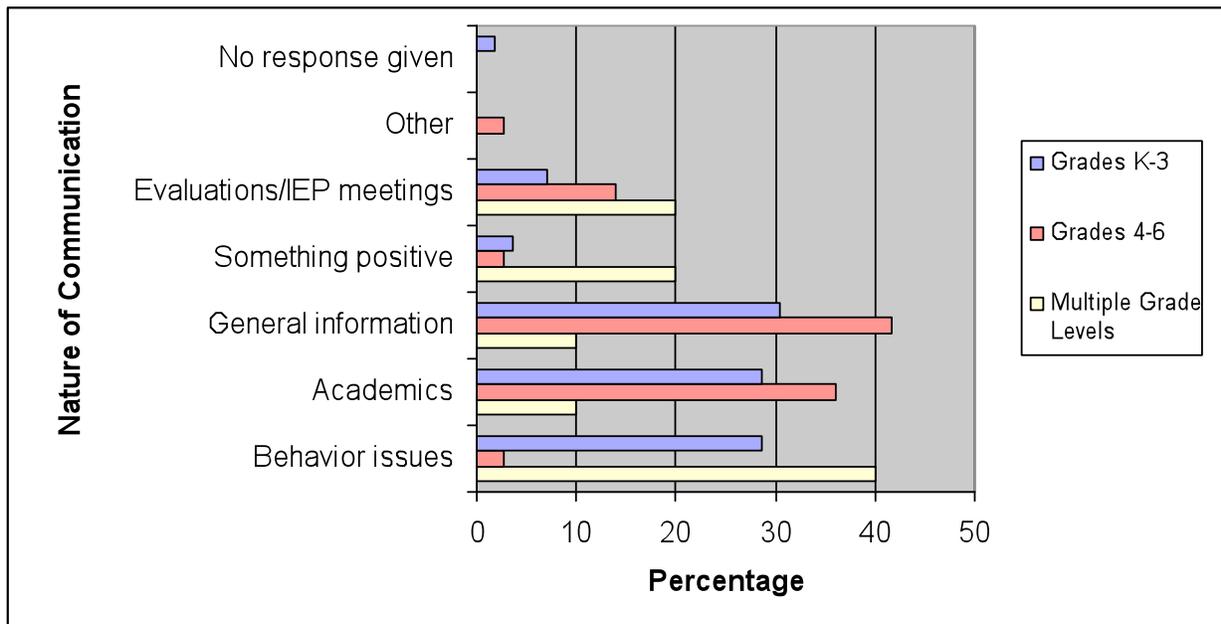
By grade level. Participants who reported teaching in multiple grade levels within the K-3 and 4-6 bands had the highest levels of agreement for questions five, six, and seven. They

reported a mean level of agreement of 2.89 when sharing academic accomplishments (question 6) and mean levels of agreement of 3.0 when contacting parents about academic (question 5) or behavioral (question 7) concerns.

Participants teaching in the K-3 band reported the highest level of agreement ( $M = 2.82$  and  $M = 2.70$ , respectively) when sharing positive behaviors/incidents (question 8) and when asked to assess the nature of the majority of their contact with parents (question 9).

Participants teaching in both the K-3 band and the 4-6 band responded to question 10 by reporting that they most often contacted parents of students receiving special education services with general information. Those assigned to multiple grades across both bands reported most often contacting parents about behavior issues. A larger percentage of those teaching multiple grades reported contacting parents to share something positive than in either of the other two grade bands.

Figure 13. Reasons teachers most often communicate with parents by grade level taught.



### *Overall Perception of School-Home Communication*

Question four in the survey (see Appendix A) asked participants whether or not parents of their students felt as if they were being communicated with adequately. This question was designed to assess teachers' total perception of all components of communication mentioned in this study (frequency, strategies, and nature of school-home communication) and used response choices of agree, neutral/undecided/unknown, and disagree. As reported in Table 1, the mean of response scores for this question ( $M = 2.69$ ) was positive.

*By nature of teaching assignment.* Both special educators and general educators reported positive levels of agreement. Special educators reported a slightly higher levels ( $M = 2.73$ ) than general educators ( $M = 2.71$ ).

*By level of teaching experience.* Participants with 2-5 years of teaching experience reported the highest levels of agreement ( $M = 2.80$ ). First year teachers reported the lowest levels of agreement ( $M = 2.50$ ).

*By grade level.* Participants who reported teaching in multiple grade levels within the K-3 and 4-6 bands had the highest levels of agreement ( $M = 2.80$ ). Those who reported teaching in the 4-6 grade band reported the lowest levels of agreement ( $M = 2.56$ ).

## Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

### *Discussion*

This study was designed to examine the strategies teachers utilized to communicate with parents of students receiving special education services and the nature and frequency of those communications. The findings demonstrate that the majority of teachers in southeastern Ohio communicate with parents of students receiving special education services frequently and use multiple strategies to do so. Teachers reported contacting parents of students receiving special

education services most often with general information or about academic issues. While communication was reported to be generally positive in nature, very few teachers stated that their communication with parents was most often to report something positive.

The following sections provide additional insight and information about the specific research questions: Do special educators communicate differently than general educators? Is there a difference in teacher communication based on grade level taught? Is there a difference in teacher communication based on level of teaching experience?

*By nature of teaching assignment.* Special educators reported more frequent communication with parents receiving special education services than general educators, which is not necessarily unexpected given that they may have more contact with these students. As a rule, special educators used telephone communication or notes sent home with students more often than any other strategies. Strategies most often used by general educators were notes sent home with students or conferences/face-to-face meetings.

Special educators tended to share academic accomplishments more than general educators; however, general educators tended to share more positive behaviors/incidents. Special educators reported most often contacting parents about academics while general educators reported most often contacting parents with general information. Overall, a larger percentage of special educators reported contacting parents to share something positive and considered the majority of their communication with parents of students receiving special education services to be positive.

*By level of teaching experience.* First year teachers and those with 2-5 years of experience had more frequent communications with parents of students receiving special education services than those with any other level of experience. This result may be partially

explained by the current trend of including communication, consultation and collaboration courses as part of teacher preparatory programs and by the emphasis placed on communication with parents that is a part of licensing exams in the state of Ohio.

Overall, a larger percentage of first year teachers reported contacting parents to share something positive; however, teachers with 2-5 years of experience tended to share academic accomplishments more than those with other levels of experience and those with over 20 years of experience tended to share more positive behaviors/incidents than others. Those with all levels of teaching experience reported using notes sent home with students more often than any other strategy when communicating with parents of students receiving special education services. Teachers with over 20 years of experience reported using conferences/face-to-face meetings just as often as notes.

Teachers with over 20 years of experience considered the majority of communication with parents of students receiving special education services to be positive while first year teachers were neutral in this regard. It is possible that the confidence brought on by years of experience interacting with parents may be partially responsible for this finding.

*By grade level taught.* Teachers from all grade levels reported using notes sent home with students more than any other strategy when communicating with parents of students receiving special education services. Those who taught multiple grade levels had more frequent communications with parents of students receiving special education services and tended to share more academic accomplishments while those teaching in the K-3 band tended to share more positive behaviors/incidents. Overall, a larger percentage of those teaching multiple grade levels reported contacting parents to share something positive; however, those teaching in the K-3 band

considered the majority of communication with parents of students receiving special education services to be positive.

#### *Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research*

While the findings show that teachers in this study generally follow suggestions found in research literature for communicating with parents of students receiving special education services, several limitations must be considered when generalizing these results to other populations. First, the sample size of some of the subgroups was very small. Findings based on those subgroups may not generalize to that population as a whole. For example, only four first-year teachers responded to this survey. Findings of first-year teachers' communications with parents of special education from this study may not generalize to the first-year teacher population as a whole.

Second, given the nature of the survey, participants may have only filled out the survey if they had something positive to report. Those who did not feel their responses would shed a positive light on their communication with parents of students receiving special education service may have elected not to fill out or to continue the survey. In addition, participants who completed the survey, a method of communication itself, may have been more inclined to communicate positively and frequently with parents using multiple strategies. Potential participants who did not respond may be less inclined to communicate with parents of students receiving special education services. In fact, the researcher was contacted by one potential participant who indicated that she would not fill out the survey because communicating with parents of students receiving these services was not her job.

Lastly, data in this survey was self-reported by teachers with no observation or collection of information from parent or other sources. While this is a limitation of this study, it does

present an opportunity for future research. It would be interesting to track and compare the actual communication of teachers with what they report, to see if their perceptions of the frequency, method, and nature of their communication actually match their actions. It would also be interesting to survey the parents receiving the communication to compare their perceptions about frequency, method, and nature of communication with those of the teachers.

Other areas that were not addressed by this study, but that may provide potential opportunities for future research, are teachers' perception of barriers that they feel prevent them from contacting parents to communicate something positive and whether an increase in positive communication to parents of students receiving special education services would actually increase the level of parent participation and/or involvement.

### *Conclusion*

These findings add to the previous research on parent-teacher communication both generally and in relation to the special education population. While communication in this study was generally considered positive, teachers reported contacting parents most often about academics, behavior issues, or with general information. This is consistent with previous research findings and conclusions suggesting that the nature of interventions often focuses communication with parents of students receiving special education services on challenges rather than accomplishments (Bemack & Cornely, 2002; Darch, Miao, & Shippen, 2004; Katyal & Evers, 2007; Pogoloff, 2004). It further suggests that communicating with parents frequently, using a variety of methods, and with a generally positive tone may not be effective in encouraging parental involvement if we rarely communicate to share something positive. Even though factors not addressed in this study, such as district/building policies on inclusion, and the stance of district/building leadership toward parental involvement, may come into play, the

overall implications of this research suggest a shift in the way all educators view children receiving special education services and the way we communicate with their parents.

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## Appendix A

## School-Home Communication Survey

1. On average, I communicate with parents of students receiving special education services:
  - Daily
  - 2-3 times/week
  - Once a week
  - 2-3 times/month
  - Once a month
  - Other
  
2. I usually communicate with parents by: (Check all that apply.)
  - Newsletter
  - Phone
  - E-mail
  - Personal notes/letters sent home with student
  - Personal notes/letters sent via mail
  - Report cards/progress reports
  - Conference or face-to-face meeting
  - Other
  
3. I most often communicate with parents of students receiving special education services by:
  - Newsletter
  - Phone
  - E-mail
  - Personal notes/letters sent home with student
  - Personal notes/letters sent via mail
  - Report cards/progress reports
  - Conferences or face-to-face meetings
  - Other
  
4. The parents of my students feel they are being communicated with adequately.
  - Agree
  - Neutral/unknown
  - Disagree
  
5. I contact parents of students receiving special education services when there is an academic issue that needs their attention.
  - Agree
  - Neutral/undecided
  - Disagree

6. I make a point to contact parents of students receiving special education services to share academic accomplishments.
  - Agree
  - Neutral/undecided
  - Disagree
  
7. I contact parents of students receiving special education services when there is a behavioral issue that interferes with the educational process.
  - Agree
  - Neutral/undecided
  - Disagree
  
8. I make a point to contact parents of students receiving special education services to report positive behaviors/incidents.
  - Agree
  - Neutral/undecided
  - Disagree
  
9. The majority of my contact with parents of students receiving special education services is positive in nature.
  - Agree
  - Neutral/undecided
  - Disagree
  
10. I most often communicate with parents of students receiving special education services:
  - About behavior issues
  - About academics
  - With general information
  - To share something positive
  - About evaluations or IEP meetings
  - Other
  
11. What grade(s) do you currently teach?
  
12. What is the nature of your current teaching assignment?
  - Special Education
  - General Education
  
13. Please check the statement that best reflects your years of teaching experience:
  - First year
  - 2-5 years
  - 6-10 years
  - 11-20 years
  - Over 20 years