UNDERSTANDING POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE COMMUNICATION INSTANCES BETWEEN SPECIAL EDUCATORS AND PARENTS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WITH EBD

A Dissertation in
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by
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Abstract

Using a multiple case study methodology, interviews were conducted to examine current practices and perceptions of the communication practices of teachers working with high school students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). These interviews involved questions about general communication instances which occurred each week, communication strategies used each week, and how progress was being made on forming relationships with parents.

Results confirm previous researchers’ hypotheses regarding methods, purposes, and regularity of positive communication incidences. Communication that met the positive goals of nurturing and maintaining relationships was open and frequent, reciprocal, and informal. Limitations are discussed as well as issues of trustworthiness. The case study concludes with a discussion and suggestions for high school special educators of students with EBD.
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Understanding Positive and Negative Communication Instances between Special Education Teachers and Parents of High School Students with EBD

**Introduction**

**Emotional and Behavioral Disorders**

The academic difficulties of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are well documented (Lane, Little, Redding-Rhodes, Phillips, & Welsh, 2007; Balagna, Young, Smith, 2013). In recent years, researchers have identified the academic characteristics of these students, which include low levels of academic engagement (Lane, et al, 2007; Van Acker & Talbott, 1999) and below-average performance in reading, writing, and math (Lane, et al, 2007). In the absence of effective interventions, Lane et al., (2007) suggest that students with EBD are more likely than general education students, and students in other high-incidence disability categories (e.g., learning disabilities), to experience academic failure, be retained in grade, and leave school before graduation (Wagner & Davis, 2006; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, & Epstein, 2005).

High school students’ with EBD are one of the most underserved populations in today's schools (Kauffman, Mock, & Simpson, 2011; Mustian & Cuenca-Sanchez, 2012). According to the U. S. Department of Education (2003), by the time students with EBD reach the end of high school, nearly 48% of them will drop out. Students with EBD continue to struggle outside of the school setting, as evidenced by underemployment and unemployment, impaired social relationships, and a higher than average need for mental health services (Lane et al., 2007; Walker & Gresham, 2004; Zigmond, 2006).
The population of students receiving services in the United States for EBD has increased more than 20% in the past ten years (Balagna, Young, Smith, 2013). There are currently almost a half million children and adolescents in the United States receiving services in special education under the category of EBD (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Wiley, Siperstein, Bountress, Forness & Brigham, 2015). With the increasing number of children, there is also a growing number of caretakers and parents who are expected, and required, to participate in their child’s special education program.

Through Federal legislation, parents of children identified with EBD are assured of their involvement with the schools through the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process. IDEIA (2004) Section 614 states that the IEP must contain the evaluation criteria utilized, the present levels of functioning of the student, a determination of educational needs, the goals and objectives based on educational needs, placement that will support the reaching of the determined goals and objectives, and the duration of the special education services to be provided. Further, the members of the IEP team, including the parents, are to collaborate and must agree on the aforementioned information in order to develop an educational program that meets the needs of the child. Quality family-school communication must be developed to ensure an effective program (Booth & Dunn, 2013). Special educators and parents, as a collaborative group, are to maintain positive communication to ensure that all rights guaranteed through legislation are provided to the student with EBD through his/her team’s mutual efforts in the IEP process.

**Communication in Collaborative Groups**
Communication is the process by which individuals share meaning. More precisely, it can be defined as a “transactional process between two or more parties whereby meaning is exchanged through the intentional use of symbols” (p. 64, Engel et al., 1994). It is a transaction and the participants are all involved in a symbolic interaction in which words, pictures and other stimuli are used to convey thoughts (Blythe, 2000). For effective communication to occur, each participant must fully understand the meaning of the other’s communication, or a counterproductive dialogue can ensue, or no dialogue at all. Only through knowledge and understanding of the communication process are the members of the collaborative group, such as teachers and parents, likely to achieve their objectives (Fill, 1999).

There are many important factors related to effective communication. First, open and frequent communication is needed (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). It is important for collaborative members of any group to interact often, update one another, discuss issues openly, and convey key pieces of information to one another. Second, both informal and formal channels of communication must be established (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). These channels, which could consist of paper, computers, email, text or voice messages, are used by collaborative partners to send and receive information, keep one another informed, and convey opinions to influence the group’s actions. Members of the collaborative group also establish personal connections, producing a better, more informed and cohesive group working on a shared project (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). To establish effective communication it is vital that a system of communication is set up at the beginning of the collaborative process by identifying the responsibilities each member has for his/her communication (Alaszewski & Harrison, 1988; Agranoff & Lindsay, 1983; Bierly, 1988; Coe, 1988).
In general, it may be necessary to provide incentives within and among organizations to reward or draw attention to effective communication and discourage ineffective communication (Bierly, 1988). The strategy, or channel, that is used must reflect the diverse communication needs of the particular collaborative group (Horwitch & Prahalad, 1981). It is important to acknowledge that problems and obstacles will arise, and that they must be communicated. All members of the collaborative group must acknowledge that conflict can be positive, and there are topics on which the members of the group will “agree to disagree” (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Finally, the representatives of collaborating organizations should remain consistent in order to develop strong personal connections. If representatives "turn over" too rapidly, or differ from meeting to meeting, strong links between individuals will not develop (Blythe, 2000).

**Parent-Teacher Communication**

In schools, the “representatives” or “members of the collaborative group” include teachers and parents. Teachers often struggle with increasing family engagement in education (Cary, 2006). According to Weiss and Edwards (1992), an underlying goal of school-home communication is “to provide consistent messages to families that the school will work with them in a collaborative way to promote the educational success of the student” (p. 235). While 98% of teachers believe that working well with parents is a trait of an effective teacher, and 90% see communication as one of their school’s priorities, the greatest challenge beginning teachers report and the areas in which they feel least prepared is parent communication (Cary, 2006; The Met Life Survey of the American Teacher: Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships, 2005). Barriers from a teacher’s perspective include negative experiences with parents, uncertainty about working with linguistically and culturally diverse families and inadequate school support for involvement efforts (Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones & Reed, 2002). In fact,
over 60% of high school teachers ever initiated contact with “almost none” or “a few” parents (Dornbusch, 1988).

Three decades of research has examined the impact of typical family involvement in the elementary through high school (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014). In one early study, Duncan (1969) compared the attendance, academic achievement, and drop-out rate among two junior high classes. In the experimental class, students’ parents met with counselors before their child entered junior high school. In the other class, students’ parents did not meet with counselors. Results suggested that after three years, students whose parents had met individually with guidance counselors had significantly higher attendance rates, better grade point averages, and lower drop-out rates. These trends are continuing to be observed today (Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014).

Unfortunately, parent-teacher communication may be particularly difficult at the high-school level. The size and routine nature of schooling at the high school level limit teachers’ communication with parents (Scott-Jones, 1987). Many high school teachers instruct twenty to thirty-five different students each class period, so they could possibly teach over one hundred different students per day. These educators, as compared with elementary school teachers, may not see the practicality of getting to know their students and their students’ parents (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Scott-Jones 1987). The decrease in parent participation may also be influenced by the higher level of academic work required at the high school level and by parents’ insecurity about their ability to help their children academically (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Scott-Jones, 1987). Parent-teacher communication in high school has challenges that must be overcome, but parent-special educator communication is essential and required by law.
Parent-Special Educator Communication

IDEIA (2004) provides a structure for parents to play a central role in the creation of their child’s special education program, though many parents feel alienated from the process (Fish, 2006, 2008). For example, IDEIA (2004) states that parents may initiate assessments, but there is widespread reporting that parents who want their children tested are often turned away by the school district (Fish, 2008). Difficulties arise because teachers and parents are often unsure how to utilize appropriate channels of communication as they attempt to navigate the IEP process (Hughes, Valle-Riestra, & Arguelles, 2002; Ivey, 2004; Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003). Fish (2006) found that parents felt that they were not valued by elementary special educators during the IEP process and being relegated to a secondary role caused great frustration for parents. The parents felt that they were not equals and the lack of communication made them feel like the IEP process was just a formality.

Parental advocacy is crucial to the process of education for children who may become identified or are already identified as special needs. IDEIA secures parental rights to: initiate assessments and reassessments for special education services; take part in creating and re-evaluating an IEP; consent to special education placement and services; file due process complaints, and advocate for their child's rights at discipline hearings (Department of Education: Child Find, 2013). Without parental advocacy, the implementation of IDEA in the educational process of children at risk for, or with disabilities, may be less consistent and/or less comprehensive (Ferguson, 1984; Luetke-Stahlman & Hayes, 1994; Rice, 2006).

Rationale

Significant questions remain, particularly about the nature of high school teacher and family communication and the influence of these partnerships on student success. High school
teacher and family communication is a long standing problem. In fact, in 1999, 97% of high school teachers reported that communication with parents is one of their biggest challenges (Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999). It is important to note however, that almost all of these teachers believed that parent involvement in their schools was important.

There have been no studies to date that have focused on the methods, purposes, and regularity of family-school communication and high school special educators, specifically those families with students with EBD. With federal legislation requiring parental involvement in special education programs, and the positive impact parent communication seems to have on post-secondary outcomes, it is crucial to explore these relationships with special educators in the high school environment. To fill gaps in research and to support the work of high-school educators, this study will address three main questions:

1. What are special education teachers’ perceptions of high school students with EBD and their families?
2. What are the methods, purposes and regularity of contact that contribute to positive communication between special education teachers and families of high school students with EBD?
3. What are the methods, purposes and regularity of contact that contribute to negative communication between special education teachers and families of high school students with EBD?

The proposed exploratory study is an attempt to understand the factors that drive positive communicative exchanges and potential barriers that contribute to negative instances of communication between special educators and families of children with EBD. It is essential to understand how this communication is established and maintained, as once these relationships
are understood, interventions may be developed, evaluated, and put in place to improve all family communications, including those in high school environments.

Method

Design

This research study utilized case study methodology, which enabled the researcher to investigate the communication strategies of high school teachers of students with EBD within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). More specifically, this study used a multiple-case design (Creswell, 2013) involving three cases of individual special education high school teachers and their communication practices. Multiple-case design was appropriate for this study, as the researcher intended to “capture” the perceptions of the special education teachers, who are in the unique situation of working with families of adolescents with EBD (Creswell, 2013).

In order to explore special education teacher perspectives on strategies, difficulties and perceptions of teacher-family communication, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, using a cognitive interviewing process, for five weeks using a “verbal probing” technique. The use of a semi-structured interview format allowed the interviewer to ask teachers a core set of questions as well as use probes (conditional and emergent) to explore related topics, as appropriate.

The Cognitive Interview. A meta-analysis by Memon, in 2010, concluded that the Cognitive Interview (or CI) is one of the most successful methodologies used in psychology during the last 25 years. Cognitive interview is a technique that helps interviewees retrieve key details regarding past events. Ryan (2012) suggests that during interviews, respondents engage in
a series of processes or interrelated tasks. CI gives the interviewer the chance to probe these processes and break down the interconnected tasks by utilizing a series of memory retrieval and communication techniques that are designed to elicit more detailed information from the interviewee than standard interview techniques (Memon, 2010). For example, a standard interview question may be designed such as “Did you contact the parents of your students this week?” The cognitive interview style requires that the question be asked focusing more on memory retrieval: “Think of an incident of positive communication this week. Can you tell me what was happening?” In this way, the memory is activated before direct inquiry, leading to more accurate and detailed responses.

There are three approaches to cognitive interviewing: The think-aloud technique, the verbal probing technique, and the hybrid model. This study employed the Verbal Probing Technique.

**Verbal Probing.** Willis (1994, 2005) suggests that verbal probing provides focus to the participant’s behavior. Given that participants may diverge onto irrelevant tangents when relying entirely upon memory of events, he suggests that carefully selected probes may help focus attention on pertinent issues. Using the verbal probing technique the researcher asked specific questions about the special educator’s thinking rather than just recording what they spontaneously reported (Blair & Presser, 1993). Probing was used to specifically target the various cognitive processes (comprehension, retrieval) involved in answering the interview questions (Willis, 2005). Empirical research provides support in favor of conditional probes (Conrad & Blair, 2009), and this study employed conditional probes (probes which were used only if the teacher exhibits certain behavior (e.g. “I noticed you paused for a long time before you answered, could you tell me why?”) and emergent probes (unscripted probes which occurred to the interviewer within the course of the interview in response to comments by or behaviors of the participant. (e.g. “You
mentioned that you called the parents but their response was negative, could you tell me some more about it?) (Ryan, 2012).

Participants

Recruitment. After receiving approval from the Office of Research Protections, an email was sent to 15 directors of special education from 15 different mid-eastern school districts. Five of these school districts were in a rural portion of a mid-eastern state, eight were suburban, and two were in urban areas. The email contained an invitation for teachers to participate in the study, indicated the intent and description of the study, and criteria for participant selection. The researcher asked the directors of special education to, if permissible, contact their high school special education teachers of adolescents with emotional/behavioral disorders with details of the study. Interested teachers then contacted the researcher for more information regarding the study. After the directors of special education sent descriptions of the study to eligible teachers, five teachers emailed the researcher with an interest in participating. After the researcher was contacted by potential participants, she proceeded to email each teacher to introduce herself, describe the study and time commitment, and arrange a time and day for the first face to face interview. The researcher asked each teacher details of her/his position to ensure that he/she was a high school special education teacher of children with EBD.

Of the five interested participants, one teacher was excluded because she was a middle school teacher, and another was excluded because she did not teach students with EBD. Next the teachers were asked if she/he would be willing to participate in the study. The researcher indicated that the teacher would be paid $50 cash as an incentive to participate in the study. After securing interest, the researcher then scheduled an initial interview at a time and place convenient to the participant.
**Description of Participants.** The three participants in this study were female and primarily majored in elementary education and minored in special education in their teacher preparation programs (see Table 1). All were assigned as emotional support teachers in high schools. The participants had taught for between six and nine years, and two of the three had students with multiple disability identifications in their classrooms.

Jennifer went to a small local college and majored in Elementary Education. She minored in Special Education, and received her certification as part of her degree program. During her teacher preparation, Jennifer did not take any classes in Parent-Teacher Communication, though she noted there was a chapter of a text-book devoted to the topic in her Introduction to Special Education course. She took a Classroom Management Course which taught her in-depth about students with EBD. Jennifer indicated that she had not had any professional development devoted to the topic of EBD or Parent-Teacher Communication during her 9 years as a classroom teacher. She mentioned that she did have professional development on classroom management techniques, which was related to EBD, but did not focus exclusively on that population.

Savannah majored in Elementary Education and minored in Special Education and Spanish at the medium sized college that she attended. She became a certified special education by taking the minor and passing the Praxis tests which enabled her to be identified as “highly qualified.” In Savannah’s teacher preparation training, she did not take a class on Parent-Teacher Communication yet she did take a class entitled Emotional/Behavioral Disorders. That class is what made her decide that she wanted to be a special education teacher, as “it was very interesting.” Savannah has had professional development devoted to home-school communication. It was a presentation given by professors from a local university to the entire faculty on a teacher workday. They discussed formal and informal methods of communication, and Savannah said “it was professional
development if you know what I mean” indicating that she did not find the presentation particularly useful.

Pauline majored in Special Education at a small rural college and became certified in special education through her degree program. This degree program did not have a class on home-school communication though she did take a class titled “Mild to Moderate Disabilities” that had an extensive section on EBD. Pauline’s school administration emphasized home-school participation through several formal professional development lectures. These lectures took place during teacher workdays before the school year started and mid-year. These lectures were given by local teachers who had gone to a conference and were presenting their findings. Pauline reported that, “they had good ideas but they didn't apply [to her high school students]. Their strategies were for more elementary [schools]”. Pauline had not taken any professional development courses that focused on students with EBD, though she “is open to it if any are offered.”

TABLE 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Jennifer</th>
<th>Savannah</th>
<th>Pauline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major/Minor in Teacher Prep</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education/Special Education</td>
<td>Education/Special Education/English</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>K-12 Special Education Certified?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Preparation Classes in Communication?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Preparation Classes in EBD?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development in Communication?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development in EBD?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration Teaching</td>
<td>9 yr</td>
<td>6 yr</td>
<td>10 yr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades Taught</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>11th and 12th</td>
<td>9th and 10th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities Taught</td>
<td>Emotional support, autistic support, learning support</td>
<td>Emotional support, learning support</td>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting</td>
<td>Inclusion/Pull-Out</td>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>Pull-Out</td>
</tr>
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<td>Suburban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseload</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Risks, benefits, ethical consideration.** Assumed risks to the individual participants were no greater than those faced in everyday situations. Each teacher was compensated for her time with $50 cash upon completion of the interviews. Every precaution was taken to ensure the anonymity of the individuals and the high schools in which they work. There was no direct contact with students or parents, thus decreasing the opportunity for student confidentiality to be compromised. All participants used pseudonyms when individual identification was necessary. The final report does not include any information that would compromise the identity of the high school or the individual participants.
Procedures

The research plan called for a total of 15 interviews. Each of the three participants were interviewed five times across a period of five weeks. Interview questions were asked in a semi-structured format, with follow up questions and probes based on the answers provided or behavior displayed. Specific questions focused on descriptions of that week’s communication strategies and behaviors, perceptions of problems encountered each week in their home-school communication and their reactions to these problems. All interactions were audio-taped using an electronic digital voice recorder for coding purposes. Upon completion of the interviews, the audio file was sent to a transcription service who immediately transcribed the files verbatim. The researcher reviewed approximately 50% of the transcription to ensure accuracy. One-hundred percent of the reviewed transcripts were found to match recordings.

For the first interview the researcher met one teacher at her school, one at a local business, and one at a library. After participants provided their signatures on a written consent form, the initial face-to-face interview began (See Appendix A for questions). Prior to beginning the first interview, participants were told that if any questions made them feel uncomfortable, they could omit that question and move on to the next. The initial face-to-face interviews lasted an average of 23 minutes.

Phone interviews took place weekly, for three weeks, on Thursdays. Jodi’s interviews took place during her lunch break at school at 11:20. The researcher spoke with Jennifer and Savannah after school, Jennifer at 3:00 while she was still in her classroom, and Savannah at 4:30 when she arrived home. The phone interviews lasted an average of 8.5 minutes.
Upon the fifth week, the researcher again met face to face with each teacher at the same locations as the first meeting, data were reviewed, the incentive was provided and the researcher thanked the teacher for her participation (See Appendix A for script).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis consisted of examining, categorizing, and recombining evidence to produce empirically based findings (Yin, 2014). Data were analyzed using an iterative five-step process, which included review of theoretical proposition; transcription of data; unification of data into thought units, identifying themes, inter-rater reliability and member checking for reliability purposes (McNaughton, 2014; Yin, 2014) The data analysis was a step-by-step iterative process; each step informing the analysis in the next step.

**Review theoretical proposition.** In this case, previous research was analyzed to identify attributes of effective, positive communication. Extant research suggests that open communication (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992); frequent communication that is set up ahead of time (Alaszewski & Harrison, 1988); informal methods of communication must be established (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992); and consistency of communication partners (Blythe, 2000) all contribute to instances of positive communication. The researcher used this theoretical orientation to guide the case study analysis. These attributes of positive communication helped organize the entire analysis, pointing to relevant contextual conditions to be emphasized as well as explanations to be examined (Yin, 2014).

**Transcription of data.** The second step of data analysis involved transcribing the all interviews and reading the entire data set several times to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ responses (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996) and to ensure construct validity (Yin, 2014).
Unification of data into thought units. A thought unit is a segment of the interview response that is an idea that can stand on its own (Kapp, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The thought unit is identified by examining and breaking down the sentences of each response according to their content. If a sentence had two elements, (i.e. “We usually send home all of our IEP documents, if the parent doesn’t come to a meeting, certified mail”) the researcher broke the statement up into: a) “send home all of our IEPs certified mail (method of communication), and (b) “parent doesn’t come to meeting” (frequency of contact). This iterative process was repeated for the entire data set, and the thought units created the patterns that were next identified as common themes. Each thought unit was placed into a table that was divided into three columns: (a) theme code, (b) participant code, and (c) unit of data (participant’s comments).

Identifying themes. The themes established in this study were identified using the inductive, or "top down" approach, strongly linking the themes to the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 1990). This approach was employed because the data were collected in an interview format. This form of thematic analysis was data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The unitized data were analyzed for concepts that were similar across the data set (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Themes were identified by grouping thought-units that occurred regularly across the data set and they were put into categories in line with the major research questions. For example, many statements were centered on types of communication, which was in line with our research question, and that would be identified as a theme. Themes were then broken down into subthemes to further categorize the data. After all the thought units were coded, a theme table was generated. (See Table 2 for example) Operational definitions were created for each theme.
(See Table 3). The lead researcher met with an expert of qualitative research who provided feedback on the theme titles and operational definitions.

**Member Checking and Inter-Rater Reliability.** Before the fifth face-to-face interview, the researcher presented a draft (member checking) of the analyzed data to each teacher for review. During the fifth interview, a hard copy of the data analysis was reexamined by both researcher and teacher working as a team. One hundred percent consensus was met, as all three participants approved of the researcher’s use of quotations and agreed that the researcher had represented their viewpoints accurately. After member checking was performed the researcher shared approximately 20% of the data set (random sample with the codes removed) with two trained graduate students who were familiar with qualitative research, case study methodology and the content being studied. The graduate students then coded the data at the theme level, to assess the validity of the themes, and the completeness of the operational definitions (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Agreement scores of 90% (27/30 agreements) and 87% (26/30 agreements) were reached at the theme level. All discrepancies were discussed until 100% consensus was met with both graduate students.

**Results**

Each participant answered questions regarding their perceptions of communication with parents of students with EBD, as well as positive and negative instances of communication. The results are presented below based on the research questions. The themes that emerged were characteristics of students with EBD and their families, methods of communication, purpose of
communication, and regularity of communication. These themes are discussed following each research question.

**Research Question 1: What Are Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions of High School Students with EBD and Their Families?**

**Characteristics of high school students with EBD.** In the first face-to-face interview, the participants were asked directly about their experiences working with students with EBD. Participants reported that experiences of working with students with EBD were generally negative.

Savannah thought of challenging behavior first when the question was initially posed stating, “It's much more day-by-day. You can't expect that today they're going to do the same thing that they did yesterday. It's sometimes very frustrating, because they are able to do the work that the learning support kids struggle with. It's just that they can't overcome their emotional or their behavioral issues. They sort of hinder getting the work done. So, you have to sort of play it by ear.” Pauline, an emotional support resource teacher, mentioned that several of her students are “cutters” and that makes communication tricky as a mandated reporter. Although she always communicates with parents about dangerous, health-threatening behavior, she states “one of my policies in my office, and I explain this to my students, is that everything that they share with me is confidential. I don't necessarily always call the parents and tell them, because I feel like there needs to be a level of trust and rapport. I want that student to trust me.” Jennifer, an inclusion special education teacher who has eighteen emotional support adolescents on her caseload, when asked about her perception of EBD adolescents quickly replied “If one thing happened in the morning, it would trigger his whole day. It was a series of triggering and it ended with some violence, outbursts. He almost would have to go home. Once he would have all
these behaviors, there was no turning back. His mother would have him come and get him. That was the only time she came to school, when the principal called and said she had to come in.” She emphasized that her students often exhibit behaviors because they have disabilities, and they cannot control themselves.

Savannah, a veteran teacher from a rural school district, paused to think and replied with the only positive characteristic mentioned in response to this question, “He was never disrespectful. His respectful level had come leaps and bounds, so that's why it was disheartening to see [him failing at the end of the school year]”. All three teachers were prompted to think of positive characteristics of students and families, though the other two teachers failed to report any positive characteristics.

**Characteristics of families of high school students with EBD.** All three of the teachers interviewed expressed frustration when working with families of adolescents with EBD. Parental motivation for contact was questioned by two of the three teachers. Jennifer stated, “At first they communicated well, then the communication totally dropped off. Then it started to pick back up, and it was odd to me that we went through a whole two quarters [with no communication]. The second, and third quarter, also no communication, now we are in the fourth and the dad begins calling and acting all very concerned and it wasn't a couple days later I got paperwork to complete for social security. It makes me wonder what his you know, really what his motive was for being so involved.” Pauline questioned motivation as well, “They wanted something. I'm guessing that's why their communication caught back up.” Another theme that was expressed by the teachers was “lack of follow-through” on the part of the parents. Savannah faced a difficult situation with communication, and then seemed to give up all efforts. “It was just frustrating, because the mother, she really had just lost all control of him. And it was almost like she gave
up. So, we were fighting a battle that we weren't going to win.” Jennifer also expressed frustration about follow through. “They agreed, [that he needed to get his work done] and of course, [the parents said] they'll get on that; they'll make sure that they do it at home, but then few will follow through and the work is still not done.” She also stated “I have some personal opinions that parents are real into it at the beginning of the year and want to make a good impression and then you know, there is no follow through at home.” Although she felt extreme frustration, Savannah stated that a few families were supportive. “One is from a foster family. The other one, it's just the mother and she's quite supportive. The other one, it's just the father and he has been quite supportive.”

**Research Question 2: What are the Methods, Purposes, and Regularity of Contact that Contributes to Positive Communication between Special Education Teachers and Families of High School Students with EBD?**

Positive communication is defined (See Appendix B) as communication that leads to positive relationships or the achievement of some goal. As the communication literature states, positive communication is “open and frequent… formal and informal… and develops personal connections” (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992 p. 14-15). An important decision that must be made is setting up a preferred method of communication at the beginning of the year. This prepares teachers and parents for a regular, reliable communication process, therefore introducing an environment that is conducive to maintaining positive relationships.

**Methods.** Email was the preferred communication choice for all three teachers, as it is “extremely convenient.” However, Savannah has had the most success with texting families. “I texted her mother and she got back to me right away. I wanted to tell her [the parent] that [the
student] was having a rough day. She got back to me right away, and I told [the student] and she
[the student] immediately straightened up.” She stated that “This is the first time I ever really
texted a parent. It sort of has a stigma, but it shouldn't.” Texting involves giving out the
teacher’s cell phone number, which made the other two teachers uncomfortable. In the initial
interview, Jennifer stated “I do [communicate], I attempt to. Some parents are much better at that
than others. I do phone calls, I do progress reports, I do emails.” Savannah has also met face-to-
face with a father after her student displayed challenging behavior. “His dad came in after a
particularly horrific day that this boy had.”

Jennifer also communicates with one of her students’ parents through a homework
agenda. “We created a homework agenda that we send back and forth with each other. Very
elementary based practices, but very functional on another level.” Savannah and Pauline do not
use assignment books. Savannah mentioned that she “calls home when an assignment isn’t
turned in.” Pauline takes a similar approach, “I will email the parents sometimes when an
assignment is late, but mostly I just leave it up to the student. I mean, they are in high school and
need to take responsibility.”

Pauline expressed frustration when attempting to email parents, so she now relies on
certified mail to send official documents. “We usually send home all of our IEP documents, if
the parent doesn't come to a meeting, certified mail. So I thought that was kind of a last ditch
effort to kind of get some of these parents on board and here at the end of the year.” Savannah
commented that she is flexible with communication, and often meets with a parent face-to-face.
“He's not a texting, emailing guy. He comes in during the day and will meet with us.”
Purpose. Throughout the entire study, there were no instances of communication made in response to positive behaviors demonstrated by any student. Ninety-eight percent of communication was made because of challenging behaviors demonstrated by the adolescents with EBD. The other 2% involved calls to set up meetings, describe homework assignments, and check on absences. Pauline expressed her reason of an incidence of communication: “I remember calling the parent saying, ‘We need to have a meeting, because this has happened again. It can’t continue.’”

Savannah had incidences of communication that were meant to deescalate a situation. “One night after school, they had this big project to do. The boy was all worked up because something happened. So, the mom, she texted me at night and she said, "I don't mean to text you outside of school, but he wants to know this, this and this." And I said, "No, it's not a problem," and I answered it right away.” Jennifer discussed her motivation for her contact. “[I attempted contact to] kind of to cover to me as well because like I said it's very typical they come back in the end and say like well I didn't know this and you know, I save all my emails and I certainly carbon copy myself on them but still this is just a you know, more of a backup as far as letting them know that I did make contact and was attempting on my part.”

Regularity. When communication was regular and set up ahead of time, relationships tended to be more positive. The most positive incidences of communication were reported by Savannah, who has had success texting her parents. She stated “His mom and I text frequently throughout the day and she's so prompt with responding. It works wonders.” When prompted on whether or not this communication was set up ahead of time, she replied “we gave each other our numbers at the beginning of the year so I believe it was expected. I share my number with
parents at the beginning of the year so they can text me with problems. It has really helped. When I am having an issue [with a student] I just say that I am going to text your mom and he straightens up right away.” In Savannah’s perspective, this regular communication has helped develop rapport and positive relationships with that family of her student. Savannah did not give her phone number to all families at the beginning of the year however. “Only those that I really know” was the criteria for those that Savannah texted.

Savannah proactively texted “a few parents because [the students] had assignment due dates coming up and I wanted them to finish their work.” The end of the school year has prompted a great deal of communication. All three teachers have contacted parents to report that their students are failing their grade. Jennifer stated, “We're wrapping up the end of the year, so I have a couple kids who are in danger of failing their 9th grade, so I had attempted some emails.”

**Research Question 3: What are the Methods, Purposes, and Regularity of Contact that Contributes to Negative Communication between Special Education Teachers and Families of High School Students with EBD?**

Instances of negative communication are defined as communication that failed to achieve a goal, or did not result in improving or establishing relationships with families. Often, when a method of communication is not reciprocal, parents or teachers may not be invested in the process. Establishing personal relationships is an important goal of positive communication, and often when these connections are not established, negative outcomes occur.

**Method.** Often, negative instances of communication occurred when administrators (e.g., principal, assistant principal) called or emailed parents. Jennifer often relies on her
principal to make phone calls when her students have behavioral referrals. “I have a student who is straight ED diagnosis. Or, you know classification. This student has had multiple referrals for behavioral issues, parents never, you know, it's very quick phone calls when I'm in the principal’s office, when he [the principal] tries to make contact.”

Pauline reported an instance of negative communication during a conference call that ended in an attack on her teaching skills. “[The mother] conference called the boy's father in [location] so it was this really kind of ... I couldn't keep track of things and it was a lot of saying things like, ”This woman can't control your son,” things like that.” Pauline no longer contacts that parent, deciding that there is no possibility of building and maintaining a relationship with that family.

When a parent did not have access to email, Pauline does not attempt to contact the parents at all. “There’s been a handful that I just don't get the communication, so I don't try anymore. And that's generally ... A lot of them just don't have email. And, I'll be honest, if they don't have access to email, I'm probably less likely to contact them, only because, I feel like emailing ... I can email them at any time and they're going to get the message versus calling is hit or miss; they may not be available and then I'm not available. On occasion, that does happen where it's just by phone, so it takes me a lot longer to communicate with them.”

**Purpose.** Negative behavior often characterized the motives behind instances of communication that resulted in negative outcomes. During these incidents, parents either did not respond (most often) or responded in a way that did not improve teacher-parent relationships. Pauline stated that when parents were unresponsive and she has little rapport with a student, she would not attempt contact. “I have one student in particular who the parents have never come in,
never come to an IEP meeting. I've never called them. I would say that's partially by choice, because I have very little rapport with that student. So, me calling home would just cause more problems. So, I generally leave that up to administration to call if they need to.”

**Regularity.** Most instances of communication that took place rarely or on an as-needed basis resulted in negative outcomes and barriers. Savannah faced a barrier to regular communication because of one of her parent’s work schedule. “The mother of the boy, she works a lot, so it's very hard to talk to her.” Savannah also reported that the mother’s work schedule was impeding the child’s school attendance. “He's 17-years-old. Mom would leave for work before he would leave for school, so he just wouldn't come to school. She kind of didn't know what to do.” Pauline also expressed frustration about a mother’s work schedule: “That was a parent that was very difficult to get her to come in to school because she works all the time, and, generally, the only time she would come was when the boy was being suspended, because she would have to come in and take him home.”

Pauline stated that she communicates regularly, though hesitated when prompted to tell the researcher more details about her habits. “I feel like I do communicate pretty regularly but, at the same time, on an as-needed basis.” Pauline’s biggest frustration is that most parents did not know what was going on in school. “We have parents that, to be quite honest, who have no clue what we are doing. It’s not because I didn’t try to contact them, it’s just because they don’t want to know. They can’t handle it. They didn’t call me back in the beginning so I just stopped trying.”

**Discussion**

This purpose of this research study was to add to the literature on the factors that
contribute to positive communication between special education teachers and families of adolescents with EBD. It also explored potential barriers that contribute to negative communication between special education teacher and families of adolescents with EBD.

Results indicated that teachers identified variables that affect communication in both positive and negative ways. Variables related to positive communicative relationships were the use of creating positive opportunities for regular, informal communication, starting early in the year and maintaining it throughout the year, yet 98% of communication incidences were the result of negative behavior. Regular communication about positive events would have been beneficial for the entire collaborative group, including parents, students, and teacher. The most common element of negative incidences was when the teachers’ relied on administrators (e.g. principal, assistant principal), who may have been less familiar with the day-to-day situations in classrooms, to communicate with parents. This use of primarily formal communication did not generate positive relationships, and the entire collaborative group was affected.

Research in communication offers guidelines for establishing successful collaborative groups. Open and frequent (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014) communication is required for parents and teachers to share information about their child’s needs, progress, and interests. Expectations concerning student behavior, achievement and discipline should be communicated regularly. These communication practices sets the stage for establishing shared goals and mutual decision-making (Christenson & Hirsch, 1998; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014). In the current study, there were no instances of communication concerning expectations, or achievement. Discipline was often the only purpose for contact between special educators and the families of students with EBD. Empirical studies have indicated that when primarily positive events are communicated, positive
relationship goals are often achieved (Christenson & Hirsch, 1998; McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014). Students with EBD need mutual constructive communication in order to learn “what they are doing right” instead of always focusing on the negative (Mires & Lee, under review). The current study shows that the system of home-school communication between parents of adolescents identified with EBD and some special education teachers may be broken. There were not many examples of positive communication practices. The results confirm that successful collaborative groups may not be established if communication is not explicitly constructive, open and frequent.

As the communication competence research indicates, it is beneficial to develop a regular, reliable, and varied two-way communication system (Alaszewski & Harrison, 1988; Agranoff & Lindsay, 1983; Bierly, 1988; Coe, 1988). An effective teacher sets lines of communication up ahead of time that are convenient to both the parent and teacher. It must be reliable, so both teacher and parent do not become frustrated. In the present study, Savannah established lines of communication ahead of time, giving her cell phone number to her families at the beginning of the year and giving permission for them to text her. Texting is an example of informal, regular, and reliable two-way communication. Although this leans in the positive direction, there is debate whether texting is appropriate, or distracting, in a classroom environment. That being said, texting may be the preferred method of communication for many adults and may increase overall communication among teachers and parents. Teachers and schools may need to rethink the methods used to communicate with parents in order to facilitate higher levels of communication.

As the communication literature indicates, establishing positive communication prepares both teacher and parents for mutual decision-making (Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison,
Parents may be empowered when they know they can contact their student’s teacher regularly, and an important aspect of trust is developed. The results of this study indicate that parents do not contact teachers regularly, and teachers do not contact parent regularly. This identified lack of communication may lead to distrust and a disconnect between home and schools.

Parents value sincere interaction with school personnel over highly structured programming (Christenson & Hirsch, 1998; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014). Less formal, more personal communication with schools that promote parental sense of ability was preferred over more formal interaction (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014). According to one parent quoted in Finders and Lewis (1994): “Whenever I go to school, they want to tell me what to do at home. They want to tell me how to raise my kid. They never ask me what I think. They never ask me anything” (p. 53). Lindle (1989) reported that parents’ most wanted teachers who seemed sincere and had a desire to be helpful. One of the teachers interviewed for this study, Savannah, was contacted at night by a parent who was reaching out for help. Savannah responded and was grateful for that contact. This personal communication may advance Savannah’s intent to form a positive relationship with that parent, though we do not know if this type of communication continued throughout the school year or occurred for more than one student.

Successful teachers strive for a positive orientation, rather than a crisis orientation. A “win-win” orientation works much more effectively than placing blame either on the parent or child (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Often times this takes thinking creatively and problem-solving ahead of time to determine the best way to approach a difficult situation with a parent (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). For example, it is important to communicate with parents when
the situation is not at crisis level, (while the child is having trouble with homework) or before it becomes an emergency (outburst because he doesn’t understand). Although it is necessary to find a balance and communicate good news and successes of the student, as well as problems, the teachers in this study did not do this. None of the participants communicated good news or positive occurrences. Indeed, 98% of the communication was based on negative behavior.

Given the demands on both parents and teachers, strategies for establishing formal and informal communication links (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992) need to be streamlined by using both school-wide and individual teacher communication strategies (Kraft & Dougherty, 2012). School strategies such as the use of assignment books or homework journals, parent-teacher grams, homework hotlines, electronic technology (class listserv) and school-family newsletters are useful for disseminating school-based information relevant to specific grade levels or classes and reach many families effectively. Individual teacher strategies, as used by all teachers in the study and also drawn from the communication literature, emphasizes personal relationships, may consist of home visits, phone calls, emails, texting, and personal notes. The most effective communication systems are set up at the beginning of the school year, and teachers and parents must collaboratively identify each of their responsibilities for communication (Alaszewski & Harrison, 1988; Agranoff & Lindsay, 1983; Bierly, 1988; Coe, 1988; Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014). This type of personal contact has been found to be the most effective method of reaching out to families who are disengaged from their child’s schooling, uninvolved, or who feel disenfranchised (Kraft & Dougherty, 2012).

Savannah, Jennifer and Pauline did not fully develop informal communication links, which may have negatively affected relationships with families.

**Summary.** The data collected in this study aligned with the positive communication
hypothesis posed by Mattessich & Monsey (1992). The factors that contribute to positive instances of communication links regular and reliable informal communication, set up at the beginning of the school year, is the most effective way to establish and maintain positive incidences of communication. Though it did not always maintain a positive orientation, (many texts were in response to challenging behaviors) Savannah was the only teacher who attempted sincere interaction with parents, rather than highly structured programming done on a school-wide level. These results emphasize the importance of individual, teacher-initiated interaction in establishing trust and rapport with the families of students. These positive instances of communication can be maintained across a wide range of families. Savannah worked with a variety of families including therapeutic foster mother and working families. Despite this, Savannah struggled to identify any positive characteristics of her relationships, based on her only contacting parents due to negative behavior.

Barriers encountered by Jennifer and Pauline were difficult to overcome. They had a high number of negative instances of communication, though Pauline felt that she has good rapport with most of her families. When prompted to explain more about positive instances of communication, Pauline often focused on the negative. She reported very few positive instances of communication. These barriers included no regularity or frequency of communication, often calls and emails were made sporadically or only in response to challenging behavioral incidences demonstrated by the student. When the teacher leaves communication up to school administrators, which both Pauline and Jennifer reported several times, parent relationships do not seem to be formed or maintained, as this communication technique is impersonal, formal, and does not have a positive orientation.

**Limitations.** Although interesting, the results of the present study should be viewed
through its limitations. Interview data can be insightful, as it provides explanations as well as personal views. The questions in this study were field tested with a trained graduate assistant before this study was conducted, however, it is possible that some questions did not adequately assess desired constructs. Interview data may also be limited by response bias and inaccuracies due to poor recall. The possibility of these limitations was reduced through the use of cognitive interviewing, which is specifically designed to decrease inaccurate responses due to poor recall, however these limitations are still possible.

During the interviews conducted throughout this study, the researcher purposefully paid close attention to the participant’s perceptions or own sense of meaning (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1990). Because the interviews were designed to capture the teachers’ own sense of reality, a methodological threat may have been created due to the conversational nature of the interviews. Conversations can lead to a mutual and subtle influence between the researcher and interviewee, often referred to as reflexivity (Yin, 2014). The researcher’s perspective may have unknowingly influenced the participant’s responses, and those responses may have unknowingly influenced the researcher’s line of inquiry. In other words, the participant may only tell the researcher what she thought the researcher wanted to hear (Yin, 2014). This limitation was countered by the researcher being acutely aware of this threat, and using diligence to “keep to the script” when conducting the interviews (Yin, 2014).

**Trustworthiness.** Addressing the concept of validity and trustworthiness in research is critical to its design (Newman & Ridenour, 2008). Particularly in the development and analysis of qualitative research, measures must be taken to ensure the highest level of trustworthiness. In order to address this issue the researcher put into place two “design validity criteria” (Newman & Ridenour, 2008). The first criterion was the use of member checks, which took place during the
final face-to-face interviews. The teachers had the opportunity to review and comment on the initial interpretations of emerging themes extracted from their own data. The researcher both emailed, and presented a hard copy of her initial analysis, and the teachers were asked for confirmation that themes, quotes, and analysis were accurate. A level of 100% consensus was attained, all three teachers confirmed that the analysis correctly depicted their views and attitudes. The second criterion, inter-rater reliability, ensured that the researcher’s explanations were not “from their own need base” (Newman & Ridenour, 2008) but could be confirmed by other colleagues.

Along the lines of trustworthiness, assumptions should be considered prior to engagement in qualitative research. By design this study relied on the interpretation and perceptions of the individuals involved. The most basic assumption is that participants and the researcher were honest throughout all stages of the study. It was also assumes that each participant’s prior life experiences would influence her perceptions and strategies of communication and the relationships that are formed because of it. For this reason, findings cannot be generalized and are descriptive in nature.

**Conclusion.** This research study utilized case study methodology. A multiple-case design (Yin, 2014) was used to create a rich descriptive (Merriam, 1998) report of the current practices and perceptions of the communication practices of teachers working with high school students who are identified as having EBD. The semi-structured (Yin, 2014) interviews provided data about the teacher’s communication practices and perceptions of barriers and relationships. These interviews involved questions about general instances of communication, which occurred each week, communication strategies used each week, and progress on forming relationships with parents. The iterative process of data examination allowed the researcher to construct
meaning in an ongoing manner throughout the data analysis period. Results support the initial hypotheses regarding positive communication incidences. Communication that met the positive goals of nurturing and maintaining relationships was open and frequent, reciprocal, and informal.

In conclusion, several applied lessons were learned through this inquiry. First, informal methods of communication, such as texting, may be beneficial and help maintain positive relationships, yet in this study there is no conclusive evidence that positive relationships were formed. Phone calls and emails, though convenient, may be even less effective, if the goal is to build and maintain positive relationships with families. Second, teachers who use open and frequent, reciprocal, and informal communication practices may experience more success in developing positive communication than teachers who rely on formal, infrequent, and one-way modes of communication as they did in this study. Third, teachers who do not experience success in their communication practices report less motivation to continue to try to involve parents, as all three teachers express that they feel worn out and frustrated at the end of the day. It is clear that positive communication practices are crucial in forming family-school relationships.

For high school students’ with EBD, positive relationships between their parents and the schools may be a critical variable for positive academic, behavioral, and social outcomes. Yet the system seems to be broken, at least for some teachers. As research shows, positive family relationships increase each student’s possibility of successful adult outcomes (Murray, McFarland-Piazza & Harrison, 2014) and the teachers in this study demonstrated that they are not close to forming positive relationships. With the current state of communication, it is unclear if positive relationships are even possible, without a significant effort on the part of researchers and administrators alike. Future researchers along with teachers and high school administrators
should work together to further refine and validate methods that enhance relationships based the qualities of positive communication presented in this study.
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<tr>
<th>Coding Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Example Statements by Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of Adolescents with</td>
<td>Positive Characteristics</td>
<td>He was never disrespectful. His respectful level had come leaps and bounds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional/Behavioral Disorders</td>
<td>Challenging Characteristics</td>
<td>It's much more day-by-day. You can't expect that today they're going to do the same thing that they did yesterday</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>It's all these other barriers they have to overcome before they can even worry about the work</td>
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<td>If one thing happened in the morning, it would trigger his whole day. It was a series of triggering and it ended with some violence, outbursts</td>
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<td>I had a student who expressed to me that she was cutting</td>
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<td>Characteristics of Families of</td>
<td>Positive Characteristics</td>
<td>I have an autistic support with an emotional disturbances like there is an exceptionally, and that family is very much involved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adolescents with Emotional/Behavioral</td>
<td>Challenging Characteristics</td>
<td>The dad was always very adamant that he didn't want him [the boy] to come in, because he wanted everybody to be able to talk freely without anything affecting, which was nice. That was nice</td>
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<td>Disorders</td>
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<td>you don't get a lot of support</td>
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<td>they come back when they're failing and are like what can I do?</td>
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They agreed, and of course, they'll get on that; they'll make sure that they do it at home, but then few will follow through and the work is still not done.

I do phone calls, I do progress reports, I do emails.

We created a homework agenda that we send back and forth with each other. Very elementary based practices, but very functional on another level.

He's not a texting, emailing guy. He comes in during the day and will meet with us.

We usually send home all of our IEP documents, if the parent doesn't come to a meeting, certified mail.

Typically, what we would do is the principal would call the dad.

One mother I text almost every day.

He's 17-years-old. Mom would leave for work before he would leave for school, so he just wouldn't come to school.

The mother of the boy, she works a lot, so it's very hard to talk to her.

That was a parent that was very difficult to get her to come in to school and, generally, the only time she would come was when the boy was being suspended, because she would have to come in and take him home.

We have other parents that, to be quite honest, who have no clue what we are doing.

Yeah I have more success with my parents of autistic kids then I do with emotional disabilities.

None

I remember calling the parent saying, "We need to have a meeting, because this has happened again. It can't continue."

Frequent absences, change in behavior, things like that. The one was regarding ... The one phone call was regarding a discipline issue that had occurred,
I have a couple kids who are in danger of failing their 9th grade, so I had attempted some emails

**Positive Interactions**

Methods

His mom and I text frequently throughout the day and she's so prompt with responding. It works wonders.

Regularity

I feel like I do communicate pretty regularly but, at the same time, on an as-needed basis.

Purpose

The boy was all worked up because something happened. So, the mom, she texted me at night and she said, "I don't mean to text you outside of school, but he wants to know this, this and this." And I said, "No, it's not problem," and I answered it right away.

**Negative Interaction**

Methods

This student has had multiple referrals for behavioral issues, parents never respond, you know ... It's very quick phone calls when I'm in the principal’s office, when the principal tries to make contact.

there's been a handful that I just don't get the communication, so I don't try anymore.

if they don't have access to email, I'm probably less likely to contact them, only because, I feel like emailing ... I can email them at anytime and they're going to get the message versus calling is hit or miss; they may not be available and then I'm not available so it takes me a lot longer to communicate with them

Regularity

Some parents ... I've attempted to contact with some of my not very cooperative parents all year long and I haven't heard from them until now and it's the third quarter and then their child is in danger of failing, and now it's like what can I do now?

I have one student in particular who the parents have never come in, never come to an IEP meeting. I've never called them. I would say that's partially by choice, because I have very little rapport with that student. So, me calling home would just cause more problems. So, I generally leave that up to administration to call if they need to.

Purpose

I couldn't keep track of things [the mother was saying] and it was a lot of saying things like, "This woman can't control your son," things like that.
Appendix A

Topics and Questions Asked by the Researcher in Each Interview

First Week Face-to-Face Interview Questions and Prompts

Demographic Questions

A. So let’s start out, can you tell me a little bit about your teacher-prep experience? Where did you go to college?

B. How long have you been a high school emotional support teacher?
   
   A. What grades do you teach this year?
   B. Do you teach a self-contained class? Or inclusion classroom?
   C. How many students with EBD do you work with?
   D. Working with students with EBD can be a mixed bag. Do your student have other disabilities?
   E. In general, how do you find your experiences working with the students with EBD? What is rewarding? What is challenging?

Research-Related Questions (Day 1)

F. What is your experience working with the families of these students? Are there barriers you encounter?

G. Think of an incident in working with a family that was positive.
   a. Can you tell me about the situation? What was going on?
   b. What happened that was positive?
   c. How did you contact that family?
   d. Do you experience this positive interaction with this family regularly?
   e. What were the short and long-term outcomes of this interaction?

H. Think about an incident in working with a family that was negative.
   a. Can you tell me about the situation? What was going on?
   b. What happened that was negative?
   c. How did you contact that family?
   d. Do you experience negative interactions with this family regularly?
   e. What were the short and long-term outcomes of this interaction?

Three Weekly Telephone Interview Questions and Question Prompts:

A. About how many times did you contact your students’ parents this week?
   b. What were the general purposes of your contacts?
      i. Decision-making
      ii. Behavior
iii. Achievement
iv. Discipline
v. Goals
c. Is this regular communication,
   i. Set up ahead of time?
   ii. Once in a while?

B. Think about one of these incidents that was positive, can you describe this time?
   a. What positive happened?
   b. Do you experience this positive interaction with this family regularly?
   c. Why do you think this is?

C. Think about one of these incidents that was negative, can you describe this time?
   a. What made it difficult?
   b. Do you, in general, find communication with this family difficult?
   c. Why?

Fifth Week Face-to-Face Interview

A. I want to review a summary of what went on during our five weeks together, just to be sure you agree with what I wrote and I didn’t omit anything that you feel was important.
B. (Show preliminary analysis data)
C. Does this summary accurately reflect your practices and experiences?
D. (review together)
E. So what I am going to do is add your section to my paper, clean it up a little bit to get the flow of the whole dissertation, but I won’t change anything substantial.
F. Overall, what was the most positive incident that you can remember and had the most impact on you?
   i. How did you feel after this incident?
      1. Motivated?
G. What was the most negative incident that you remember?
   a. How did you feel after this incident?
   b. Do you feel that this negative incident (name it) is common across many of your students with EBD?
   c. Why do you think that is?
   d. Is there a specific characteristic of your families that makes it generally difficult to communicate with them?
APPENDIX B

Operational Definitions of Coding Themes

1. Characteristics of Adolescents with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders. Comment that provides information related to positive and challenging traits of adolescents with EBD. Does not include barriers created to communication.

2. Characteristics of Families of Adolescents with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders. Comment that provides information concerning positive and challenging traits of parents of adolescents with EBD. Does not include barriers to communication.

3. Methods of Teacher-Parent Communication. Any method the teacher uses to contact parents, or any method the parents uses to contact the teacher. (e.g., “emails,” “texting,” “phone calls”)

4. Barriers to Parent-Teacher Communication. Any person, situation, or action that impedes either teacher or family contact. Barriers can include parental work schedule, the teacher’s availability, or personalities of either party.

5. Purposes for Communication. Comment that provides information containing the reason the contact took place. (including positive behavior, challenging behavior, set up a meeting)

6. Positive Incidences. Any comment that provides information on the methods or regularity, of positive interactions. Positive interactions are deemed positive in that they were productive at achieving a goal, such as building or maintaining positive relationships with the family.

7. Negative Incidences. Any comment that provides information on the methods and regularity of negative interactions. Negative interactions are judged negative when they fail to produce positive outcomes, build positive relationships or reach the specified goal.
APPENDIX C

Understanding Positive and Negative Communication Incidences Between Special Educators and Parents of High School Students With EBD; A Literature Review

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A Literature Review
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Special Education

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Understanding Positive and Negative Communication Incidences Between Special Educators and Parents of High School Students With EBD; A Literature Review

This literature review will provide an in-depth examination of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) the communication literature, and the methodology used in the present study. More specifically four elements will be addressed.

1. The characteristics for positive communication, and traits of negative communication. It discloses the important features of collaborative groups, and communication competence.

2. The nature and details of contemporary studies on home-school communication, and briefly discussed highlights of the parent involvement literature.

3. Features of the methodology used in the present study, such as the Cognitive Interview process, will be presented.

4. A summary of the Critical Incidence Analysis literature will be presented.

Overall, this literature review provides details about the rationale for the study and key methodological elements. It explicates why procedures were used in the current study and the research that supported the data analysis process.

Emotional-Behavioral Disorders

The academic difficulties of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) are well documented (Lane, et al., 2007; Mattison, Spitznagel, & Felix, 1998; Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). Off task behavior and frequent absences due to behavioral disruptions limit academic learning time for children with EBD (Witt, Hannafin, Martens, 1983). In recent years, educators have also recognized the academic characteristics of these students, such as low levels of academic engagement (Lane, et al, 2007 Van Acker, Farmer, & Sutherland, 1999) and below-
average performance in reading, writing and math (Lane, et al., 2007; Mattison, et. al., 1998; Nelson, et. al., 2004).

**Definition.** EBD is difficult to define. In fact, some think that students are identified as having this disability when adults in authority say so (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2006). In other words, in many cases the application of the definition is subjective. Definitions of this disability, including the one used in IDEA (2004), are based on the one developed by Eli Bower (1960, 1982). In the federal definition, IDEA (2004) uses the term *emotional disturbance* to describe students with EBD.

Older versions of IDEA used the term *serious emotional disturbance* to describe this disability identification, but *serious* was dropped in 1999 when the U.S. Department of Education created the regulations for the 1997 version of IDEA. The government did not, however, change the substance of the definition when it changed the term. In describing the change, the Department of Education commented, "[It] is intended to have no substantive or legal significance. It is intended strictly to eliminate the pejorative connotation of the term 'serious'" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 12542). In addition, some implied parts of the federal definition are important to understand. For example, although only one characteristic listed in the IDEA (2004) definition need be present for the student to qualify for special education, whatever the characteristics, the child's educational performance must be adversely affected. The definition also requires that the child exhibit the characteristic for a long time and to a marked degree, or significant level of intensity.

**Prevalence.** Individuals classified with EBD represent 8.1% of all students’ ages 6–21 served under IDEA, or .72% of the school population (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a). However, prevalence studies have suggested that the actual percentage may be much higher.
Boys outnumber girls in this category by about 3.5 to 1 (Oswald, Best, Coutinho, & Nagle, 2003).

Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, and Epstein (2004) synthesized the results of 25 studies examining the academic status of students with EBD from 1961 to 2000. The final sample of students across all studies included 2,486 students with EBD with an average age of 11.22 years and an average IQ of 94.89. From the studies reporting demographic data, 80% of the sample were boys, 69% Caucasian, 27% African American, 3% Hispanic, and 1% mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds. These studies yielded 101 effect sizes with a mean effect size of .69 (SD .40). This means that on average, students with EBD were performing significantly lower than their same-aged peers without disabilities on all reported academic measures (Reid, Gonzalez, Nordness, Trout, & Epstein 2004).

**Characteristics.** EBD refers to a number of different, but related, social-emotional disabilities. Individuals classified as EBD meet several criteria established under IDEA, including the following:

- An inability to exhibit appropriate behavior under ordinary circumstances
- An inability to maintain relationships with peers or teachers
- An inappropriate affect such as depression or anxiety
- An inappropriate manifestation of physical symptoms or fears in response to school or personal difficulties

These characteristics must be manifested over an extended time period and have a negative effect on school performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a).

Individuals classified as EBD represent a range of severity. Specific emotional disturbance areas include childhood schizophrenia; selective mutism (failure to speak in selected
circumstances); seriously aggressive or acting-out behavior; conduct disorders; inappropriate affective disorders such as depression, social withdrawal, psychosomatic disorders, anxiety disorders, self-mutilating behaviors; and excessive fears (or phobias) (Kauffman, 2005). Individuals characterized as socially maladjusted (e.g., juvenile delinquency) are not considered EBD according to IDEA, unless they also exhibit other evidence of emotional disturbance (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a).

**Outcomes.** In the absence of effective interventions, Lane et al., (2007) suggests that students with EBD are more likely than general education students and students in other high-incidence disability categories (e.g., learning disabilities) to experience academic failure, be retained in grade, and leave school before graduation (Wagner & Davis, 2006; Wagner, Kutash, Duchnowski, & Epstein, 2005). Adolescents with EBD continue to struggle outside of the school setting, as evidenced by underemployment and unemployment, impaired social relationships, and a higher than average need for mental health services (Lane et al., 2007; Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, Whetsel, & Green, 2004; Zigmond, 2006). According to the U. S. Department of Education (2003), by the time students with EBD reach high school, nearly 48% of them will drop out.

**Parental Role in Special Education**

IDEA (2004) requires parents to be fully included during all stages of the special education process. IDEIA (2004, Sec. 614) states that parents must participate in the identification process for services and the development of the individualized education program (IEP). The IEP contains the student’s placement and program, and defines how the student’s progress will be assessed. Section 615 contains procedural safeguards, which serve as the foundation for parent-school communication. Parents must be presented with procedural
safeguards and the school district must communicate with parents their rights and responsibilities under the law. Without communication, or an understanding of their role in the education of their child, parents will not be able to participate to the degree necessary to ensure positive outcomes for their child.

Communication is supported by law by requiring parents to participate and articulate their goals for their children within the IEP process (IDEA, 2004). Parents should also have input into what services they believe their child is entitled to receive. This school and family communication is essential in the success of students displaying disruptive behavior (Power et al., 2012). Schools provide inputs consisting of opportunities, demands, and rewards for learning; the family provides inputs of attitude, effort, and conception of self. The inputs from the family are viewed as providing the "social capital" or building blocks needed by schools to optimize learners' outcomes (Carlson, 1993). Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 identified priorities for maximizing the parental role with increased consultation and collaboration roles (McLaughlin, 1975; Vannest, Davis, Davis, Mason, & Burke, 2010). This may increase positive school outcomes (Cox, 2005; Fabiano, et. al., 2010).

Active family participation can include parental engagement in educational tasks at home, such as helping students with homework, as well as effective communication between school and family, such as family conferences to resolve problems at school (Power et al. 2012). Interventions for children with disabilities have often less emphasized promoting family involvement in education. Dougherty & Dougherty (1977) report that teachers have typically in the past only contacted parents with negative feedback. In turn, the child fears a call home, or it becomes a negative consequence for disruptive behavior. Families are often dependent on
teacher communication, as children are often not forthcoming with what happens in schools (Kelley & McCain, 1995).

**Family Involvement Research.** Three decades of research has examined the impact of family involvement in the elementary through high school. Duncan (1969) for example, compared the attendance, academic achievement, and drop-out rate among two junior high classes. In the experimental class, students’ parents communicated with counselors before their child entered junior high school. In the other class, students’ parents did not have contact with counselors. Results found that after three years, students whose parents had communicated individually and directly with guidance counselors had significantly higher attendance rates, better grade point averages, and lower drop-out rates.

During the past two decades, research has demonstrated “the quality of relations between schools and families plays an integral role in student success” (Mattingly, et al., 2002, p. 349). Several reviews of the literature (Fischel et. al., 2005; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Mattingly, et al., 2002) support the reciprocal relationships between parental involvement and a variety of student outcomes. Fan and Chen, in a meta-analyses of quantitative results from across studies report significant effect sizes in support of family-school relationships (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2005, 2007). Both national surveys, and smaller empirical studies have demonstrated that when schools and families work together, student academic performance is greatly enhanced (Barnard, 2004; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow & Fendrich, 1999; Redding, et al., 2004; Simon, 2001).

Additionally, there may be a strong relationship between parental involvement and particular academic areas, such as in reading: (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Epstein, 1995) and mathematics (Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Catsambis, 2001; Sheldon &
Epstein, 2005). The impact of school-family linkages extends beyond academic achievement; it also improves student classroom behavior (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon, 2002) and school attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Communication

With federal legislation requiring parental involvement in special education programs, and the positive impact parent communication seems to have on post-secondary outcomes, it is first essential to understand the definition and issues concerning the collaborative relationship. The collaborative relationship in the present study includes parents or caregivers and special education teachers. This relationship, built on mutual respect, is critical to understand if we are to determine the elements of positive communication.

The Collaborative Relationship. Vosler-Hunter (1989) working with the Families as Allies Project at Portland State University identified issues of trust, communication, information sharing and equality that appear to be central to developing a collaborative relationship. The Families as Allies Project recognizes four important elements that seem to promote collaboration between families and teachers of children with emotional and behavioral disorders. These include: (a) mutual respect for skills and knowledge, (b) honest and clear communication, (c) open and two way sharing of information, and (d) mutually agreed upon goals.

Mutual respect for skills and knowledge. Essential to the creation of the home-school relationship is the understanding by both parties that all members have equal value towards the benefit of the child. Parents and teachers must be aware of and accept the assets and skills that each brings to the relationship. Parents, because they know and understand their child best, are experts on their family and the child. Parents have many skills concerning what “works” and
what does not work with their child (Vosler-Hunter, 1989). Teachers obtain specialized skills through training and experience, and these teachers can offer parents opportunities to gain new understanding about their child’s behavior or disability, alter methods of management to be more beneficial, and how to try new intervention strategies at home. Successful collaboration can only occur when parents and teachers understand the others’ skills and knowledge, and recognize the unique contributions each brings to the table.

**Honest and clear communication.** There is a need for truthful input and resulting feedback from both the teacher and the parents to be able to fully understand what the child needs, to create opportunities for intervention, and assess progress.

A problem often occurs in communication when messages are misunderstood. Teachers must be specifically aware of this limitation when communicating with families. Unfamiliar language cannot only lead to misunderstanding, but it can be frustrating for the parents and leave them feeling inferior or hesitant to contribute. It is also important for parents to feel comfortable enough to ask questions during meetings or if they do not understand what is being said or need clarification. Routine processes of information giving, questioning, and clarification can lead parents and teachers toward a climate of understanding and help them realize that they have successful communication.

In many ways, respect is the result of partners being honest in their feelings and expectations, and clear and open in how they communicate their thoughts. Truthful input and feedback is essential for both parties to be able to understand the needs of the family, generate strategies for help, and evaluate progress.
Two-way sharing of information. The extent and nature of information that is communicated between teachers and parents is also of extreme importance. Research has indicated that parents often report that they need more “information.” A teacher’s compassion and responsiveness to the informational needs of the parents, and a family's understanding of reciprocal sharing of important information will help bring about the collaborative relationship.

Both parents and teachers must communicate. Throughout the special education evaluation process, parents must disclose a large amount of personal information concerning their child and family. They may also be required to share hopes, and frustrations. When teachers equally share information about themselves or their experiences, parents appreciate it and feel more at ease. The desire to “connect” is a natural and necessary part of the parent-teacher relationship.

Mutually agreed upon goals. Parents often express frustration when they feel that the teacher is the dominant party in deciding what is best for their child, especially when the parent feels that he/she is taking on the passive role. The teacher typically gains a great deal of information from the parent, as they consult with other members of the IEP team. Next, a plan of action, or IEP, is created. This document has a great impact on the lives of the child, parent, and family. Parents must understand and contribute to the creation of goals for their child, or they may not seem to be of any value to the parent. In working toward mutual goals, the parent and teacher will work together enhancing communication.

The above elements, though certainly not the only issues involved in successful collaboration, are basic build blocks upon with the collaborative relationship will develop. To combine these blocks requires commitment to the process of believing their joint efforts can make a difference in helping their child. Both parties must be willing to be flexible, as family-
school communication can make an enormous difference for their child’s success (Vosler-Hunter, 1989)

Strong communication skills are vital for educational professionals. In their meta-analysis of 70 studies over a 30-year period, Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified 21 responsibilities of school professionals—one of which is communication. The majority of the remaining 20 responsibilities require communication skills. Lunenburg and Irby (2002) specifically identified communication as the requisite skill of today’s teachers. “Tasks cannot be accomplished, objectives cannot be met, and decisions cannot be implemented without adequate communication” (p. 210). The importance of the communication about which Lunenburg and Irby wrote and its various forms in today’s PK-12 school environment cannot be over-emphasized. Adequate communication, otherwise known as communication competence has been recognized and explored in-depth for 45 years. This line of research provides the researcher with characteristics to further refine her definition of positive communication incidences and negative communication incidences.

**Communication Competence.** Communication competence was introduced in the 1970’s and continues to be a popular area of studies concerning interpersonal communication (Rubin, 1990). Spitzberg and Hurt (1987) concluded that academic, personal, and occupational success can only result through competent communication. Spitzberg (1993) also stated that, “competence plays a central role in the success and failure of all significant human relationships” (p. 38). More recent research confirms these claims, including studies, for example, on conversational memory (Miller & de Winstanley, 2002), conflict management (Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001; Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Olson, 2002), and social support (Anders & Tucker, 2000).
There are two factors that are characteristic of groups displaying communication competence: Open and frequent communication, and the establishment of formal and informal channels of communication.

**Open and frequent communication.** It is important for collaborative group members to interact frequently, update each other, openly discuss issues, and convey all necessary information to one another. Because of this, it becomes necessary to set up a system of communication at the beginning of a collaborative effort, and identify the responsibilities each member has for communication.

A 1988 study, The Denver Partnership provided an example of how open communication increased the success of the collaborative groups. The Partnership created a strip-mall and used frequent and open communication to strengthen relationships "To establish the district, business leaders carried a major leadership role. The approach included extensive collaboration, networking, and communication. Leaders met with other property owners and with elected and appointed public officials, circulated petitions, published notices in newspapers, and held informal meetings. Although boundaries were controversial, the property owners approved the district... The mile-long mall quickly became popular, attracting about 50,000 pedestrians and 40,000 shuttle bus riders per day and many more people dining, talking, resting, people-watching, or sunning in the various public spaces." (Coe, p. 501).

Another project of The Partnership, the development of a new convention center, was not so successful, due in part to the lack of open communication. "The convention center task force planning process was relatively closed, offering little opportunity for input by citizens (who believed they would bear the cost). Communication with the community of interest was mainly one-way media communication, rather than networking or two-way communication. Opponents
considered the project to be too heavily driven by business interests promoting their own welfare." (Coe, p. 511) In the end, the project was rejected and shut down, due to negative public opinion. The lack of open communication led to negative consequences.

**Establish informal and formal communication links.** Communication links refer to the channels used by collaborative partners to send and receive information, keep one another informed, and convey opinions to influence the group's actions. Communication strategies must be planned to reflect the diverse communication styles of the members of the collaborative group. Stable representation from collaborating organizations is needed to develop strong personal connections. If representatives "turn over" too rapidly, or differ from meeting to meeting, strong links will not develop. Communication efforts such as meetings, and trainings should promote understanding, cooperation, and transfer of information. Setting aside purely social time might be helpful for members of a collaborative group. Members that establish personal connections produce better, more informed, and a more cohesive group working toward a common goal.

In schools, the “representatives” or “members of the collaborative group” referenced above would include special educators and parents. It is important to see how the general communication literature overlaps or differs from results of studies on communication conducted in the schools. To accomplish this task, it is necessary to understand the status of communication in the schools, for this study particularly, in high schools. Henderson (1987) examined the relationship between parent involvement (including communication) and children’s school achievement. She reviewed 49 studies and concluded that "the evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to better schools" (Henderson, 1987, p. 1). The
communication links found between elementary schools and typical families has been studied extensively, and the findings have indicated the importance of understanding parent-teacher communication. High school parent-teacher communication is less understood, as there have been very few studies that have focused on this population. This may be due to the fact that possibly it is a challenge due to the fact that contacting parents is not central to the high school teachers mission (Broderick & Mastrilli, 1997: Dornbusch, 1988).

**Home-School Communication with Typical High School Families.** Adolescents’ whose parents communicate with teachers at events such as Open School Night or College Night, earned higher grades compared to children whose parents did not attend. This may be explained by the possibility that the parents who attended are actively demonstrating their values and sincerity of their emphasis on education (Dornbusch, 1988). DePlanty, Coulter-Kern, and Duchane (2007) determined that parents, teachers, and high school students value the importance of home-school partnerships, but communication between these groups is not satisfactory. Unlike elementary school teachers, many high school teachers do not perceive relationships and communication with parents as essential to student success (Broderick & Mastrilli, 1997).

High school teachers may observe their students’ increasing need for autonomy and independence as a signal that students do not desire or need parent-teacher communication as a form of support (Dauber & Epstein, 1993). The size and routine nature of schooling at the high school level also limit teachers’ approach to students and, consequently, their parents (Scott-Jones, 1987). Many high school teachers instruct twenty to thirty-five different students each class period, so they could possibly teach over one hundred different students per day. These educators may not see the practicality of getting to know their students and their students’
parents than are elementary teachers who serve only one class of students for the entire day (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Scott-Jones 1987).

Dornbusch, (1988) gave questionnaires to 307 high school teachers and over half of these teachers reported that they had infrequent communication with parents. Although contact was sparse, teachers had the most communication with parents of students with behavior problems. Few teachers reported any desire for more contact with: parents who are active in the school, parents of above-average children, parents interested in helping their children, and parents of average students. Half of the teachers in the study wanted more communication with parents of those children with disciplinary problems. Teachers report that they initiate more contacts with parents than parents initiate with them. Yet, over 60% of the high school teachers described initiating communication with “almost none” or “a few” parents (Dornbusch, 1988).

Studies have shown that when communication is built on mutual respect and the reciprocal sharing of ideas, a system of support is constructed to enhance student educational accomplishment (Henderson, 1988a; Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Teachers are more likely to initiate positive collaboration with parents if they see families as essential resources of support and when they involve all parents as equal partners (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).

Despite research findings, most families are not involved in their high school students’ learning in school or at home (Epstein & Lee, 1995; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). The Search Institute conducted a study and found that four practices of parental involvement – (a) discussions about homework, (b) discussions about school and school work, (c) helping with homework, and (d) attending school meetings and events significantly decline between grades six and twelve. This study showed that by their junior or senior year in high school, very few
adolescents have parents who continue to be active and express an interest in their education (Beman, 1995).

Significant questions remain about the nature of high school and family communication and the influence of these partnerships on student success. In 1999, 97% of high school teachers reported that communication with parents is one of their biggest challenges (Sanders, Epstein, & Connors-Tadros, 1999). There have been no studies to date that have focused on the importance of family-school communication and special educators.

**Benefits of Home-School Communication in the High School Environment.** When parents communicate with teachers and counselors at college-preparation workshops, or when parents and adolescents talk about future planning, teenagers earn significantly higher grades in English and math and complete more course credits in those subjects (Simon, 2001). This positive influence may occur for several reasons. First, adolescents may understand that their parents’ value college plans, and their parents support earning good grades. Second, when these parents attended the workshops, they may have communicated with professionals about college requirements such as good grades and credits earned, and therefore encouraged or monitored their children’s efforts to improve grades and take necessary credits to get into college.

Simon (2001) conducted a large study about family and school relationships and came to four important conclusions:

1. When school staff members communicated with parents about teenagers’ post-secondary plans, parents were more likely to attend postsecondary planning workshops and talked more frequently with teenagers about college and employment.
2. When school staff members communicated with parents about volunteering, parents were more likely to volunteer as audience members at school activities.

3. When school staff members communicated with parents about how to help teenagers study, parents worked more often with their teenagers on homework.

4. When school staff members contacted parents about a range of school-related issues, including their teen’s academic program, course selection, and plans after high school, parents talked with teenagers more often about school (Simon, 2001, p. 15-16)

**Barriers of Home-School Communication in the High School Environment.** When teachers identify the changes they believe are needed to improve student success, parent support and interest is mentioned more often than any other factor (Langdon & Vesper, 2000). There are an increasing number of parents who refuse to return phone messages, appear unwilling to reinforce school codes of conduct, and ignore requests to attend conferences. This lack of cooperation coincides with a rise in classroom misbehavior (National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Results from polls reveal that nearly half of parents fear for the safety of their children while at school (Gallup, 2001).

The disengagement of parents is also worrisome for policymakers in education who believe that, until more families establish and enforce the rules of good behavior at home, reforms at school cannot succeed (United States Department of Education, 1998). The public recognizes that parents can have a powerful influence on minimizing misconduct in the classroom. A randomly-selected national sample of 1,000 adults was asked to identify the single most important thing that could be done to reduce school violence and peer abuse. Parent involvement was identified more often than other deterrents. Similarly, the amount of parental
support was perceived as the most important reason why certain schools are able to out-perform others (Gallup, 2001).

Based on the understood benefits of home-school communication in high school, the current study investigated parent-teacher communication with special education teachers of high school students with EBD. In order to explore special education teacher perspectives on their strategies, difficulties and perceptions, the researcher will conduct semi-structured interviews for five weeks using the “verbal probing” technique used to help teachers remember certain events. The use of a semi-structured interviews will allow the interviewer to ask teachers a core set of questions as well as to use probes (conditional and emergent) to explore related topics, as appropriate. This method of interviewing is called Cognitive Interviewing (CI).

**Methodology of the Current Study**

The methodology of the current study includes CI and Critical Incident Analysis. CI, which became popular in the 1970’s, explains how the data was collected. The interview questions used in the present study were designed using a CI Framework. The questions were constructed to: investigate the participant’s comprehension of the question, understand her retrieval strategies, and explore her judgment of important incidences and finally, how she composed the response that was recorded as data. The communication technique used by the researcher was specifically designed to uncover a large amount of information about critical incidences. This data was then analyzed using a process informed by the critical incident analysis literature.

**The Cognitive Interview.** A meta-analysis by Memon, in 2010, concludes that CI is one of the most successful instruments used in psychology during the last 25 years. Ryan (2012) agrees and argues that during the interview process, respondents engage in a series of processes
or interrelated tasks. CI consists of many strategies that are used in different ways, there is no single way of conducting a CI, and there is not a universally accepted definition (Beatty & Willis, 2007; Willis & Miller, 2011). CI has been described as a method that uses a series of memory retrieval and communication techniques, which are designed to obtain more information from the person who is being interviewed (Memon, 2010).

Geiselman and Fisher developed CI 25 years ago after numerous requests from lawyers and police officers for a new technique of improving eye-witness interviews. It is based upon the psychological principles of memory and retrieval of information, and empirical research on the CI has documented its ability to improve eye-witness reports by increasing the correct number of details that they report while only slightly increasing the number of incorrect details (Gilbert & Fisher, 2006; Memon, 2006, 2010). Empirical and qualitative tests of CI have also shown that police officers trained in CI methods gain more detailed information from eyewitnesses (Fisher, Geiselman & Amador, 1989; Clifford & George, 1996; Kebbell & Milne, 1998; Fisher & Schrieber, 2007; Memon, 2010). An adapted version of the CI has been used to elicit very accurate information in a survey used to assess physical activities that had been performed 35 years earlier (Fisher, Falkner, Trevisan, and McCauley, 2000). The CI is also used for interviewing children and adults during custody disputes and to see if they are competent to stand trial, and to gain important information about attitudes, moods and present opinions of interviewees (Köhnen, Schimossek, Aschermann, & Höfer, 1995; Memon, 2010).

In CI, questions are standardized because they are scripted in written form and are read exactly as written by interviewers (Beatty, 1995; Willis & Miller, 2011). CI has developed to the point that established national and psychological laboratories—at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention; U.S. Census Bureau; and Bureau of Labor Statistics—regularly submit draft questionnaires to cognitive testing and base decisions concerning modification of these instruments on the results (Willis & Miller, 2011).

The CI consists of a set of strategies (e.g. think aloud, verbal probes) that enable the researcher to deeply analyze how the interviewee’s responses to interview questions (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000; Ryan, Gannon-Slater, & Culbertson, 2012). Traditionally, CI is conducted by using in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a small sample of approximately 10–30 interviewees (Ryan, Gannon-Slater, & Culbertson, 2012). The typical CI interview starts out with the respondent first answering a researcher generated question, and then answering a series of follow-up probe questions to gain a deeper understanding of the initial answer (Ryan, Gannon-Slater, & Culbertson, 2012). The CI encompasses four basic cognitive stages that are invoked when the interviewee answers an interview question: (1) comprehension of the question; (2) retrieval from memory for the information used to prepare an answer to the question; (3) the decision process that influences the respondents reporting of a response; and (4) the response process, in which the interviewee produces an answer to the question (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000).

**Comprehension.** Comprehension is when the respondent pays attention to instructions given and listens to and makes sense of the question. The interviewee has to determine what information is being connected, make connections between key terms in the question and relevant concepts (Ryan, Gannon-Slater, & Culbertson, 2012; Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000).

**Retrieval.** After the interviewee grasps the question, they retrieve information to answer it. The participant must bring to mind information from their long-term memory, and integrate it
with their short-term memory so it can be used. Retrieval processes include recall strategies and cueing to activate recollections and memories. The wording of the question serves as retrieval cues that activate the interviewee’s memory in searching for information (Ryan, Gannon-Slater, & Culbertson, 2012). Semantic memory involves vocabulary, structural language features and conceptual knowledge. This is distinguished from episodic memory, which includes events and actions that occurred in time and space (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). Asking interviewees to answer questions about their behavior (How many times did you…?) is associated with episodic memory while more abstract concepts are more connected with semantic memory (Bradburn, 2004). Retrieval is influenced by many factors. These include whether the question asks for first-hand experience or secondhand knowledge, length of time since actions occurred, and the quality and number of examples used. There must be a fit between question terminology and the participant’s experience, as this will make answering the question less burdensome to the respondent (Tourangeau et al., 2000).

**Judgment.** Interviewees must engage in a variety of cognitive tasks to extend and integrate what they retrieve from memory. They must evaluate how important and complete the information is that they retrieve from their memory. They must make inferences if the answer involves long-term memory, and synthesize the information retrieved in order to answer the question (Tourangeau et al., 2000). The most important issue is whether the interviewee is able to appropriately judge the relevant information. Some respondents may be unwilling or unable to make a judgment based on information they possess, or they may take short-cuts to bypass the cognitive task required to make a thorough judgment. If this is the case, they may simply interpret a question superficially, which is known as “satisficing” (Krosnick & Presser, 2010).
The interviewer should decrease the difficulty of the questions to lead to more accurate self-reports (Krosnich & Presser, 2010).

**Response.** After making judgment, the interviewee chooses an answer and communicates it (Tourangeau et al., 2000). The main task is for the respondent to fit their answer to the response format offered (Bradburn, 2004).

**Verbal Probing.** Researchers using the verbal probing technique take an active role in the interview. Beatty and Willis (2007) report that verbal probing was developed because researchers realized that they required more information about the respondents’ thought processes than other modes of questioning revealed. The verbal probing technique asks specific questions about the interviewee’s thinking instead of just listening to what they spontaneously report (Blair & Presser, 1993; Ryan, Gannon-Slater, & Culbertson, 2012). This type of probing can be used to target specific cognitive processes (e.g., judgment, response, etc.) involved in answering the interview questions (Willis, 2005). Probes may be standardized or non-standardized, though empirical evidence suggests support for standardized probes (Conrad & Blair, 2009). Beatty and Willis (2007) identified four different types of probes to be used within this technique. These are: (a) anticipated probes, (b) spontaneous probes, (c) conditional probes, and (4) emergent probes.

**Anticipated probes.** Anticipated probes are scripted and based on the knowledge that some part of the question being asked may be problematic. (e.g. Could you tell me what you understand by the phrase parent communication?).

**Spontaneous probes.** Spontaneous probes are not scripted in advance, and are not in reaction to anything said during the interview. They are mainly used by researchers when they
realize that a problem has occurred in the course of the interview, and it is used to address those issues.

**Conditional probes.** Conditional probes are scripted probes, which are used when the interviewee exhibits certain behavior (e.g. I noticed you paused for a long time before you answered, could you tell me why?)

**Emergent probes.** Emergent probes are unscripted and may occur to the researcher within the course of the interview. These probes may be made in response to comments by or behaviors of the respondent. (e.g. You mentioned parent communication was generally negative, could you tell me some more about that?)

Verbal probing is supported in the literature as a reliable Cognitive Interview technique. One of many benefits to verbal probing is that the researcher can focus attention on important issues, rather than allowing the conversation to veer off topic. If verbal probing is used immediately after the question has been asked, then the interviewees’ thought processes are not interfered with (Willis, 2004). Also, this method of questioning may reveal information, which may not have been known unless explicitly asked by the researcher (Beatty, 2004, p.64). The researcher maintains a great deal of control of the interview using verbal probing, and she is able to keep the respondent focused for the time required to gain the maximum amount of information. Finally, and most importantly, verbal probing provides data that is beneficial (Willis & Miller, 2011) to understanding the participant’s experience of events.

In the case of the present study, teachers were given cognitive interviews based on critical incidences of communication that occurred each week. To analyze the critical incidences, the researcher will combine verbal probing and critical incidence analysis to get a deep understanding of family-school communication practices of the participants. It is “deep
understanding” that provides the researcher with critical data, trustworthy results and accurate analysis. It is important to understand cognitive interviewing in order to comprehend how the researcher secured the data. It is also helpful to examine critical incident analysis, in order to explain part of the present study’s data analysis process.

**Critical Incident Analysis.** The traditional technique for analyzing critical incidents has been used extensively in service research for several decades (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). This technique has been used to capture data on and analyze both positive and negative critical incidents. Edvardsson (1992) reports that data collection concerning critical incidents can be done in several ways, such as using personal interviews, focus group interviews, and direct observation. The traditional critical incident technique was first used and defined by Flanagan (1954). Since then, the definition of “critical incident” has slightly changed. Flanagan initially described his technique as a set of strategies and procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior. He wrote:

“By an incident is meant any observable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act. To be critical, an incident must occur in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effect” (Flanagan, 1954, p. 327).

Critical incidents have been used in interviews and focus groups extensively in service quality, business and management literature. These incidents are defined as “interaction incidents, which the customer perceives or remembers as unusually positive or negative when asked about them.” (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001) The customer often recalls these accounts and tells them as anecdotes, or stories (Bitner, 1990; Edvardsson, 1988, 1992; Flanagan, 1954; Roos, 1999b; Stauss, 1993).
In 1995, Johnston used a traditional questionnaire to collect data on positive and negative incidents. The advantage with this method is that a permanent product, a written account of the incident where the participants express themselves with their own words, is produced. The disadvantage is that the participants may be unwilling or unaccustomed to taking the time to write extensive accounts of their experiences, often leaving out details that they feel were unimportant. When personal interviews are used, the investigator has an advantage of being able to include follow-up questions and by probing arrive at a better understanding and description of the critical incident (Johnston, 1995). This procedure was employed in the current study while the interviews were taking place (follow up questions). The thick descriptions of each incident that were reported by the participant provided the researcher with abundant data from which to derive themes and categorize statements accordingly.

Summary

Researchers have been analyzing the benefits of home-school relationships for thirty years. It is now established that when schools and families work together, student academic performance is greatly enhanced (Barnard, 2004; Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow & Fendrich, 1999; Redding, et al., 2004; Simon, 2001). The impact of school-family linkages extends beyond academic achievement; it also improves student classroom behavior (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon, 2002) and school attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Federal legislation requires parental involvement throughout the special education process. From the initial evaluation to placement, parents of children with disabilities are essential partners in ensuring student success. Empirical studies have shown that home school communication has an enormous impact on post-secondary outcomes and grade point average.
Parent-teacher communication also impacts the likelihood of a student dropping out of high school. Its importance cannot be overestimated.

Positive communication is defined in the current study as “any comment that was productive at achieving a goal, such as building or maintaining positive relationships with the family.” (Mires, p.39) The characteristics of positive communication are: open and frequent, informal, mutually respectful, and honest, with a two-way sharing of information. This positive communication theory informed the present study as it provided categories and a framework for the themes that emerged. The literature informed the researcher regarding what is needed for positive communication and for positive relationships to occur.

The CI and critical incidence literature helped inform the researcher during both the data collection procedure and at the data processing stage. By designing the research questions in a way that prompted trustworthy recall, the researcher gained a deep understanding of each participant’s reality, and the incidences that they deemed most important to report. By analyzing the themes and comments completely and thoroughly, the researcher is departing with an understanding of “what is happening with home-special educator communication in the high schools that were studied.” Home-school communication must incorporate the above characteristics of “positive communication” in high schools to improve, not only adult outcomes, but every day high school experiences for students with EBD.
References


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References


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