Communicating With Teachers:

Perspectives From Parents of Children With and Without Exceptionalities

A Thesis submitted to the

College of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Education

In the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education

University of Saskatchewan

By

Darla Hobday

Abstract

Parental involvement in education, such as parent-teacher communication, is important for promoting students' success (e.g., Jeynes, 2007). Parental involvement is especially important for students with exceptionalities who face greater challenges to their learning than their peers (Keen, 2007; Taylor, 2000). However, there is very little research on the subject. This study investigated the present state of parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities and compared it to communication regarding students without exceptionalities. It also examined the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication and solutions for improvement. Family systems theory provided the framework for the research questions (Friend & Cook, 2013) and data analysis. Parents or primary caregivers of a student with an exceptionality ($n = 199$) or without an exceptionality ($n = 423$) completed the Parent-Teacher Communication Survey (PTCS). Results found parents and teachers of students with exceptionalities chose to communicate by text or email when communication was infrequent. However, the few parents that were in contact more than once a week tended to use written or face-to-face interactions. Parents of children with and without exceptionalities did not differ significantly in how often they communicated. However, parents of students with exceptionalities were more likely to discuss a variety of topics related to their child's performance in school (e.g., homework completion, peer relationships, classroom behaviour) and be less satisfied with their communication experiences. While some parents reported satisfactory parent-teacher communication experiences, many parents of children with and without exceptionalities struggled to obtain high quality, high frequency, two-way communication with teachers. This research provides an initial understanding of parents' perspectives on the current practices of parent-teacher communication (e.g., modes of communication, topics, frequency, barriers to satisfactory communication) that can inform educators, and other professionals who work with students with exceptionalities and their families, and enable all parties to evaluate and improve their own communication practices. Future research is needed to further our understanding of parents' and teachers' experiences communicating about students with exceptionalities, particularly explorations into teachers' perspectives and the effect of student age on parent-teacher communication.

Dedication

This thesis was inspired by and is dedicated to my extraordinary nieces: Alia and Emma.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Appendices

Chapter 1: Introduction

Students have a wide range of abilities and challenges that impact their ability to learn and participate in school (Winzer, 2005). The learning abilities of students with high and/or low incidence disabilities, such as learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders, sensory impairments, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities and/or chronic illnesses, are often different than their typically achieving peers (Hutchinson, 2010). In Canadian elementary and middle school classrooms, nearly 1 out of every 20 students has an exceptionality (Statistics Canada, 2008a).

In Canada in the last several decades, there has been a significant shift in how the educational system views students with exceptionalities and their families (Hallahan, Kauffman, McIntyre, & Mykota, 2010). In 1982, Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms made it illegal to discriminate against persons with mental and physical disabilities (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982). This ensures all students are entitled to a free and appropriate education, regardless of any limitations in their learning ability. In previous decades, many students with exceptionalities were educated in segregated settings or denied an appropriate education (Hutchinson, 2010), and parents were often thought to be the cause of their children's problems (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011). For example, throughout the first half of the 20th century, many parents were falsely blamed for causing their child's disability by transmitting faulty genes to their offspring or through poor parenting practices (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986). Today, students of varying needs and abilities are educated in Canadian classrooms (Bohatyretz & Lipps, 2000). In addition, parents are no longer viewed as the cause of their children's problems but instead are viewed as important assets and sources of insight into their children's abilities (Hallahan et al., 2010).

Government policy promotes parents' participation in their child's education (Saskatchewan Education, 2002) through parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995). Parental involvement in education has a positive impact on students in areas such as: academic achievement (Jeynes, 2007), attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), and classroom behaviour (Strom & Strom, 2002). The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, formerly known as Saskatchewan Education and Saskatchewan Learning, has provided educators with guidelines for supporting parent involvement in various forms (Saskatchewan Education, 2002). However, it

maintains "effective two-way communication between the school and its families ... is the foundation upon which all other types of parent ... involvement and partnership are based" (Saskatchewan Education, 2002, p. I-4).

It is effective communication that enables parents and teachers to collaborate in helping students with exceptionalities succeed in school (Porter & McKenzie, 2000). When a student has difficulty learning or participating in school, the need for parents and teachers to provide assistance is increased (Nichols, 2000). Students with exceptionalities often struggle with school activities, such as learning to read, paying attention in class, and completing homework. As a result, students with exceptionalities are more likely to require individualized instruction from their teachers and help from their parents to complete their school work (Bohatyretz & Lipps, 2000; Harniss, Epstein, Bursuck, Nelson, & Jayanthi, 2001; Statistics Canada, 2008b). When parents and teachers communicate, they can collaborate to meet the student's needs and provide better instruction by reinforcing the same skills at home and at school (Saskatchewan Education, 2001).

Successful parent involvement requires frequent and continual communication between parents and teachers (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). There are many challenges to effective parent-teacher communication (e.g., lack of time, misunderstandings; Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendoffel, & Dyck, 2009). Various modes of communication (e.g., email, telephone, face-to-face) each have their advantages and disadvantages (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). For example, email is convenient but vulnerable to misinterpretation (Thompson, 2008). It can be sent and received at any time or place, but it lacks the nonverbal cues such as tone of voice and body language that provide additional information during face-to-face conversations (Hernandez & Leung, 2004; Turnbull et al., 2006). Therefore, face-to-face meetings are preferred for discussing complex issues, such as behaviour, but parents and teachers are often limited by a lack of mutually convenient times (Hernandez & Leung, 2004; Munk et al., 2001). Most parents of students with exceptionalities want to collaborate and communicate with their child's teachers (Esquivel, Ryan, & Bonner, 2008). They want high-quality communication (i.e., ongoing, positive, informative, two-way), where their input is valued, but they report that this is often not the case (Davern, 2004; Pruitt, Wandry, & Hollums, 1998). Parents and teachers both struggle to find time to communicate and often wait until a problem arises before making contact

(Epstein, 2001; Munk et al., 2001). As a result, parents are frequently left unsatisfied (Garrett, 2009).

Family systems theory is a useful framework in which to examine and understand families of children with exceptionalities (Pinkus, 2006). From the perspective of family systems theory, a family must be approached as a dynamic whole, rather than examining only its component parts (Taylor, 2000). As such, the interactions between parents and teachers impacts the student (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Parental involvement is beneficial to all students, including those with exceptionalities (Porter & McKenzie, 2000). That is, parent-teacher communication, an important aspect of involvement, promotes student success by bridging the gap between home and school (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). Parents who communicate regularly with their child's teacher are able to support their child's learning at home, as well as share valuable information about the child with their teacher (Darch, Miao, & Shippen, 2004). Parental involvement is important for students' success (Keen, 2007). Therefore, it is worthwhile to examine the current parent-teacher communication practices regarding students with and without exceptionalities in the province of Saskatchewan and determine whether parents are satisfied with these practices. Understanding parents' perspectives of parent-teacher communication is the first step towards helping educators improve parental involvement, and subsequently promote the academic success of all of their students (Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen, 2003).

Statement of Purpose

The aim of this study was to: describe the current state of parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities in the province of Saskatchewan; compare parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities to general parent-teacher communication; and identify the barriers to satisfactory communication, as well suggestions for improvement. Family systems theory (Friend & Cook, 2013) provided the framework for the following questions:

1. How do parents and teachers communicate about students with exceptionalities?

   (a) How often do parents and teachers communicate through written, telephone, email, and face-to-face communication?

   (b) Is there a difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used?

2. How does parent-teacher communication differ between parents of students with

and without exceptionalities (e.g., frequency, topics of discussion, satisfaction)?

3. What are the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication?

4. How can parent-teacher communication be improved?

Definitions

Two main concepts present throughout this research are defined here for the purpose of increased clarity: students with exceptionalities and parent-teacher communication.

Students with exceptionalities. For the purpose of this study, exceptionality will be defined as "an activity limitation or participation restriction associated with a physical or mental condition or health problem" (Statistics Canada, 2007, p. 8). These limitations or restrictions may include difficulty communicating, hearing, seeing, moving, or learning (e.g., reading disability), emotional, psychological, or behavioural conditions (e.g., anxiety), a developmental delay (e.g., autism), or a chronic condition (e.g., cerebral palsy; Statistics Canada, 2007).

Parent-teacher communication. Parent-teacher communication can be defined as "a two-way flow of ideas between home and school" (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26). This communication occurs between a child's primary caregiver and one or more of the child's teachers. It may include written communication, telephone conversations, email and text messages, or face-to-face conversations (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Significance of the Study

Research has demonstrated parental involvement, and parent-teacher communication in particular, is beneficial to student success (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Jeynes, 2007; Strom & Strom, 2002). Students with exceptionalities face greater barriers to success (e.g., behavioural and learning difficulties; Taylor, 2000). Yet, there is a lack of research examining parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities. At present, the state of parent-teacher communication regarding Canadian students with exceptionalities is not known. Starting to gather parents' perspectives on this topic in one Canadian province has the potential to help educators, psychologists, and other professionals who work with families to better understand parents' perspectives, and improve the ways they communicate with parents about students with exceptionalities.

Chapter Organization

In Chapter 2, literature related to parent-teacher communication is reviewed and organized into three major sections: students with exceptionalities, parental involvement, and

parent-teacher communication. In Chapter 3, the methodology of the present study is clearly outlined, including descriptions of the participants, instrument, and data collection procedures. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of the results. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the results, as well as the limitations and implications of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature related to parent-teacher communication has been critically reviewed and organized into three major sections. First, the classification of students with exceptionalities and the characteristics of special education in Canada are explored. Second, the concept of parental involvement and theories that have been developed in this area are considered. Finally, communication between parents and teachers of students with exceptionalities is examined.

Students with Exceptionalities

In Canadian classrooms, students have a variety of physical, cognitive, social and emotional abilities and challenges (Winzer, 2005). Their skills differ along a continuum, so that in any classroom, a wide range of abilities are often present. The learning abilities of some students deviate significantly from the norm and so these students are considered to be *exceptional*.

Exceptionality defined. Children with exceptionalities can be defined as children who are limited in their ability to learn because of high and/or low incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities, speech and language disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders, sensory impairments, physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities and/or chronic illnesses (Hutchinson, 2010). The procedure for identifying and categorizing children with exceptionalities varies among provinces, territories, and service providers in Canada (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). Special education is under provincial jurisdiction, so the labels used to classify students vary between provinces and territories. In addition to education, there are many other fields that provide services to children with exceptionalities, such as law, medicine, psychology, and social work (Winzer, 2005). Each discipline works from its own framework and, as such, defines and classifies exceptionality in its own way.

In order to utilize a classification system that is broadly accepted across disciplines and geographic areas and is, therefore, more generalizable, the present study will define and categorize exceptionality in accordance with the World Health Organization (WHO) and Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2008b; World Health Organization, 2007). The WHO developed a standardized and now widely accepted system of disability classification: the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF; World Health Organization, 2007). The ICF is built upon two overarching concepts: functioning and disability. From this framework, a disability is experienced by a child who has difficulty with activities of

daily living (e.g., bathing or feeding) or who has a physical, mental, or health condition that reduces the type or amount of activities that they can do (e.g., classroom participation or playing with others). The WHO created the ICF-Children and Youth Version (ICF-CY) to accommodate the role of growth and development into the classification of disability among children and youth (World Health Organization, 2007). This expansion of the ICF is important because the same disability can manifest differently during various stages of growth and development (Simeonsson, Scarborough, & Hebbeler, 2006). For example, the ICF-CY includes codes for language development and toilet training; appropriate functioning in these skill areas depends on a child's age.

The ICF is a universal system that is used in many fields, including the health and education sectors, therefore it enables comparisons between bodies of research (World Health Organization, 2007). Within the ICF, an individual's functioning can be classified in one or more of three interacting dimensions: body functions and structures, activities and participation, and environmental factors (Üstün, Chatterji, Bickenbach, Kostanjsek, & Schneider, 2003). Consider a 10 year-old boy who has difficulty concentrating on school work, is always moving or fidgeting, and often acts impulsively. As a result of these behaviours, his academic achievement is low, he struggles to make friends, and his doctor has prescribed stimulant medication. The classification of body function and structure for this boy would indicate the presence of an impairment to his mental functions (e.g. attention functions), as well as the degree of impairment (e.g., moderate; World Health Organization, 2007). His activities and participation would include a description of what he does in his current environment (performance), as well as his optimal ability in a neutral environment (capacity). The performance and capacity codes for this boy would include several areas of impairment: learning and applying knowledge, general tasks and demands, and interpersonal interactions and relationships (World Health Organization, 2007). Lastly, the environmental factors that would be included in this boy's classification would be products and technology (e.g., drugs), and services, systems and policies (e.g., education). In keeping with the current trend away from a focus on impairment and toward a greater emphasis on ability, ICF emphasizes functioning (World Health Organization, 2007). By viewing disability in increments of health, it acknowledges that all people have the potential to experience a decline in health and that disability, therefore, is a universal human experience.

In the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS), Statistics Canada (2008b) defined exceptionality in congruence with the ICF. The present study utilizes the PALS classification system in order to remain consistent with Statistics Canada's practice. This system is suitable for use in surveying adult Canadians because it uses commonly used terms, rather than technical jargon. For example, respondents will not be asked if their child has a musculoskeletal disorder, instead, respondents will be asked whether or not their child has difficulty with any type of movement. Also, the categories do not require a pre-existing diagnosis and so will not exclude children who have not yet received a formal assessment.

The PALS identified the presence of a disability by asking respondents whether the amount or the kind of activities that their child is able to do is limited by difficulties experienced in any of nine categories: agility, chronic condition, communication, developmental delay, hearing, learning, mobility, psychological, and seeing (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Agility referred to the child's ability to move around, including "difficulty bending, dressing and undressing oneself, getting into or out of bed, cutting own toenails, using fingers to grasp or handling objects, reaching in any direction, or cutting own food" (Statistics Canada, 2008b, p. 7). Chronic conditions included conditions lasting at least six months which were diagnosed by a health care professional (e.g., asthma, cerebral palsy, diabetes, epilepsy). Disabilities in the area of communication were defined as having difficulty speaking or making oneself understood. Developmental delays consist of "cognitive limitations due to the presence of a developmental disability or disorder, such as Down syndrome, autism or mental impairment caused by a lack of oxygen at birth" (Statistics Canada, 2008b, p. 7). The hearing disabilities category specified difficulty hearing what is being said in a conversation without the use of an aid or specialized equipment (e.g., amplifier, cochlear implant, computer). Learning disabilities comprise any "difficulty learning because of a condition, such as attention problems, hyperactivity or dyslexia" (Statistics Canada, 2008b, p. 7). Mobility-related disabilities include difficulty walking on a flat surface without the use of a mobility aid (e.g., braces, cane, wheelchair). Psychological difficulties limit "the amount or kind of activities that one can do due to the presence of an emotional, psychological or behavioural condition" (Statistics Canada, 2008b, p. 8). Lastly, seeing disabilities refer to difficulty seeing up close or at a distance, including while wearing glasses or contact lenses.

Though the terms *disability* and *special needs* are often used interchangeably with *exceptionality*, the term exceptionality was used for this study because students with exceptionalities are first and foremost children and learners. Many professionals in the field of special education have adopted this term because it has a more positive connotation and a greater scope of use (Hallahan et al., 2010; Hutchinson, 2010; Winzer, 2005).

Not all children with exceptionalities require special education. From an educational perspective, children are considered exceptional when they require accommodations or modifications to their educational program in order to reach their full potential (Winzer, 2005). The educational experiences of students with exceptionalities vary between schools and individual students, but there are overall trends that characterize special education. Therefore, an understanding of special education in Canada is necessary in order to appreciate the experiences of students with exceptionalities and their families (Heward, 2000).

Special education in Canada. The state of special education in Canada has evolved greatly in recent decades (Hallahan et al., 2010). For instance, the trend in Canadian schools has moved away from segregated classrooms and special schools for students with exceptionalities and toward inclusive classrooms and integrated schools (Hutchinson, 2010). In 1982, Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms made it illegal to discriminate against persons with mental and physical disabilities (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982). It ensured that the needs of persons with disabilities are accommodated in order that they have access to equal opportunities. As a result, all students are entitled to a free and appropriate education, regardless of any limitations in their learning ability (Hallahan et al., 2010). Educational policies that govern which children are eligible for special education services and how their unique needs are met is specific to each province and territory in Canada (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). In general, these policies ensure that the needs of children with exceptionalities are properly met by the educational system. In Saskatchewan, the right of all children aged 6 to 22 to free and appropriate education is ensured by *The Education Act, 1995* (Government of Saskatchewan, 1997). As a result of such policies, today Canadian students, with and without exceptionalities, are guaranteed equal access to education.

Students with exceptionalities are not rare. According to a national survey by Statistics Canada (2008a), 4.6% of children aged 5 to 14 have one or more disabilities and 43.1% of these children receive some form of special education. Of the children receiving special education,

62.4% attend some special education classes and some regular classes, while 56.7% attend only regular classes (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Children in full-time special education classes tend to have more severe disabilities than children in regular classes. The most common reason for receiving special education services is learning disabilities (89.6%), followed by speech or language difficulties (54.3%), developmental disabilities (53.0%), and emotional, psychological, and behavioural difficulties (52.2%; Statistics Canada, 2008a). Physical disabilities, vision and hearing impairments, and chronic health conditions are less common. Some children require special education for more than one condition.

Special education services. In general, special education is not qualitatively different than general education, rather, they vary on several dimensions (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005). Special educators adjust the rate at which lessons are presented and responses are demanded, as well as the pace at which the student is led through a curriculum. Special education is often more intense, with increased hours of instruction for a specific skill, more trials and opportunities, and additional practice time (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005). Special education can provide more attention, individualized instruction, and progress monitoring because there are more educators per child than in general education. Structure and reinforcement are critical in special education. Clear rules and routines help students with exceptionalities to learn what is expected of them and feel more comfortable in their learning environment (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005). Immediate and explicit positive reinforcement, such as praise or a reward, is often used to promote desirable behaviour in special education students but is often not feasible in general education. Though special education often follows the general curriculum, at times students with exceptionalities require unique curricula, such as social skills training (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005).

The education of students with exceptionalities may also require particular teaching techniques, or special materials, equipment or facilities (Hallahan et al., 2010). In order to participate, learn and be fully involved in the classroom, 67.5% of children with disabilities use one or more education aids (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Specifically, paraprofessionals are used by 45.7% of students with disabilities, while note-takers and readers are used by 13.7%. Other types of aids are more disability-specific and so are less common, including sign language interpreters, amplifiers, talking books, and computer software. The educational placement and support services necessary to help a student reach their full potential are outlined and documented individually for each student receiving special education (Winzer, 2005).

Across Canada, special education services are tailored for each child according to an individualized programming plan (Dworet & Bennett, 2002). In Saskatchewan, these plans were previously known as Personal Program Plans (PPP; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008), but are currently referred to as Inclusion and Intervention Plans (IIP; Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2012). An IIP is required for any student with learning goals that differ from those of their grade level or who requires continuing interventions or individualized supports. An IIP is also required for a school to obtain additional funding to support a student with an exceptionality (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). The IIP documents the student's current needs and abilities, identifies areas for development, and outlines the prioritized outcomes for the child (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, 2012). These may include physical, intellectual, communication, social, emotional and personal care skills. The IIP is updated annually and describes what the desired outcome is for the student at the end of the school year (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). It also breaks that outcome into manageable short-term objectives that will be followed in sequence as the student learns and builds upon the new skills (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008, 2012). The IIP also identifies any building modifications or adaptive equipment that will enable the student to succeed, as well as the team members who will implement the IIP. Students receive a variety of instructional adaptations and special education services to help them meet their IIP goals (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). The IIP document is developed by a team of individuals who are invested in the student's outcomes, particularly parents and school professionals. As such, parents of students with exceptionalities serve a vital role in their child's education (Turnbull et al., 2011).

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement is a general term that refers to "parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children" (Jeynes, 2007, p. 83). It is important to acknowledge that families come in many forms; there are biological, adoptive, and foster families. Families may include parents, step-parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, and cousins. Therefore, the term parental involvement was used in this research to encompass the involvement of any significant adult caregiver in a child's education.

The policy of Saskatchewan Learning (2002) "promotes and facilitates the enhanced participation of parents and community members in education and the creation of school, parent and community partnerships" (p. V.7.12i). Based on their policies, the Saskatchewan Ministry of

Education developed the *Working Together: Parent and Community Partnerships in Education: Handbook* to encourage school-family collaboration (Saskatchewan Education, 2002). This handbook outlines the benefits of parent involvement and instructs educators to initiate and promote partnerships with parents.

When parents are involved in their child's education, parents have greater respect for and understanding of the school, and children have more positive attitudes towards learning (Porter & McKenzie, 2000). Parental involvement in children's education is associated with improved academic achievement (Jeynes, 2007), student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), and classroom behaviour (Strom & Strom, 2002).

Parents of students with and without exceptionalities have similar levels of involvement (Gerstein, 2004). Many educators believe that parental involvement is especially valuable for students with exceptionalities (Nichols, 2000; Porter & McKenzie, 2000). Yet, there is a paucity of research on the subject (McDonnall, Cavenaugh, & Giesen, 2010). Most studies of parental involvement have focused on general education students (Deslandes, Royer, Potvin, & Leclerc, 1999). However, there is some evidence that students with exceptionalities also have greater academic achievement when their parents are involved in their education (Deslandes et al., 1999; Gerstein, 2004; McDonnall et al., 2010). The partnership between the family of a child with an exceptionality and school personnel is especially important because it has the potential to promote or hinder the child's outcomes (Keen, 2007).

Parental involvement can be categorized into six types: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with community (Epstein, 1995). As a result of many years of research, these categories are well supported and thoroughly defined (Epstein et al., 2009). For each category, the different practices, challenges, and results have been identified. Schools can support parents in each of these areas in order to promote children's education at home and at school (Epstein, 2001). *Parenting* refers to the child's home environment, which is strengthened through child-rearing skills, understanding of child development, and family support programs (Epstein et al., 2009). *Volunteering* is about organizing and recruiting parents' help in school activities, such as safety programs and classroom volunteering. Parents can also be involved in their child's *learning at home* when teachers provide information and ideas about how to help reinforce lessons and assist with homework (Epstein et al., 2009). Some parents become involved in *decision making* by

participating in parent organizations or advocacy groups. By *collaborating with the community*, schools can provide information about and connect families to additional resources and services that promote the wellbeing of children and their families (Epstein et al., 2009). Finally, the present research questions focus on the *communicating* aspect of parental involvement. Communicating includes school-to-home and home-to-school transfer of information, such as conferences, report cards, and phone calls (Epstein et al., 2009). Challenges to communicating include ensuring readability, clarity, quality, and frequency, and establishing open two-way channels. Implementing successful communication practices can have positive results for students, parents and teachers (Epstein et al., 2009). For example, students can become more aware of what they need to do to improve their performance, parents can respond effectively to students' problems, and teachers can understand families' views on student programs.

Theories of parental involvement. The interactions between a child's family and school can be conceptualized from several perspectives. Three separate but complementary theories are of particular value for demonstrating the importance of shared responsibility and partnership among those involved in the education of a student with an exceptionality: the mirror model of parent involvement, Brofenbrenner's ecological theory, and family systems theory. Each of these contextualist theories emphasizes the importance of school-family relationships for effective parental involvement (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2004).

Kroth and Edge (2007) have developed the mirror model of parent involvement. Underlying this model is the belief that teachers are a vital link between home and school. The basis of this model is that parents are capable and willing to take responsibility for their children's education (Kroth & Edge, 2007). All parents have needs and strengths but to varying degrees. Parents have information about their child to share with the school. Many parents are willing and able to help their child with homework and reinforce the lessons of the teacher. Most parents want information on their child's progress in school (Kroth & Edge, 2007). All parents, including parents of students with exceptionalities, want to better understand their child's challenges and how they can help.

Brofenbrenner's ecological theory provides a useful framework for understanding the role of family-school partnerships in a child's development (Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, & Walberg, 2005). The child is at the centre of this model (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). Family and school are two important components of the first layer of influence in a child's life

13

(microsystem). The interactions between the two are part of the second layer of influence (mesosystem). The second layer does not directly involve the child but family-school interactions effect the child's development (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). This model is valuable because it depicts how the family and school influence the child and also how the child's wellbeing affects the family and school (Christenson, 2003). Therefore, the interests of the child and family are essential to the greater good of the community.

The present research was conceptualized through the lens of family systems theory. Both Kroth and Edge's (2007) mirror model and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory focus on the two-way interactions between parents and teachers, and thus consider this relationship to affect the child only indirectly (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). In contrast, from a family systems perspective, "the family is seen as a complex and interactive social system in which all members' needs and experiences affect the others" (Friend & Cook, 2013; p. 270). The present study was concerned with the impact of parent-teacher communication on student achievement. Grounded in family systems theory, the assumption was made that parents, teachers, *and* students are interconnected. Therefore, a student with an exceptionality must be understood within the context of his or her family and its related social systems (Thomas & Ray, 2006) because "the system must be understood as a whole and cannot be understood by examining only its component parts" (Taylor, 2000, p. 3). Family systems theory provides a theoretical framework for conceptualizing what a family is and how a family collaborates with educators (Taylor, 2000). In recent decades, family systems theory has strongly influenced how professionals understand and respond to parents and children, with and without exceptionalities (Friend & Cook, 2013; Pinkus, 2006).

The central principle in systems theory is that an individual cannot be understood without first appreciating how he or she fits within the entire family (Friend & Cook, 2013). Families are dynamic systems; what happens to one individual impacts the entire family (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2004). A family's characteristics represent potential challenges, as well as potential resources for a student (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). The present study collected information on several family characteristics, including family size, household income, and parent education level. This demographic information was used to understand the family systems of our participants and to enable future comparisons of this sample group with the sample groups of other and further research.

Another key principle of systems theory is that "family interaction with the school, community, extended family, and friends is essential to the life of the family" (Friend & Cook, 2013; p. 271). A family is unlikely to be able to meet all of the needs of its members. Interactions with persons outside of the family are beneficial to a family's functioning. Working from this premise, collaboration between teachers and families increases the likelihood of a student succeeding (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000). Likewise, although the present research concentrated on parent-teacher interactions, the ultimate concern is for the wellbeing of the student.

Parent-Teacher Communication

"Effective communication is essential for building good home-school partnerships" (Kroth & Edge, 2007, p. 40). Of the six types of parental involvement, communication is an especially important component for parents and teachers of students with exceptionalities (Darch et al., 2004). From a parental involvement perspective, communication is "a two-way flow of ideas between home and school" (Hiatt-Michael, 2010, p. 26). This definition distinguishes from the generalized one-way messages, such as handouts and school newsletters, that originate from the school and target all homes (Berger, 2008). It also underscores the value of teachers listening to, engaging, and informing parents (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Inherent to these values is the formation of a relationship between the individuals involved. Relationships between teachers and parents build and develop through repeated communication interactions. When educating students with exceptionalities, there are a variety of challenges that may arise and many opportunities for parents and teachers to interact (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986).

Students with exceptionalities and their families often face greater challenges than their peers and their peers' families (Taylor, 2000). Students with exceptionalities experience limitations in their abilities to participate in physical education, classroom activities, school outings, and informal play with peers (Statistics Canada, 2008b). On average, students receiving special education services have higher levels of physical aggression compared to students without special needs (Bohatyretz & Lipps, 2000). They are also more likely to exhibit symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), such as inattentiveness, distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, and symptoms of depression and anxiety, such as fear, worry, and sadness. Meanwhile, students with exceptionalities have lower levels of pro-social behaviour (e.g., helping other children), cooperative learning skills (e.g., self-confidence and respect) and work skills (e.g., abilities to pay attention to directions, follow rules and work

independently; Bohatyretz & Lipps, 2000). Students with exceptionalities are more likely to be rated by their teachers as being near the bottom of the class in reading, mathematics, written work, and overall achievement than students without exceptionalities (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Students with exceptionalities are also more likely to have repeated a grade than students without exceptionalities. Completing homework is also a challenge for students with exceptionalities and their parents, who spend more time completing homework than students without exceptionalities and their parents (Epstein, Polloway, Foley & Patton, 1993). Students with learning disabilities often have difficulty completing their homework because they struggle with organizing their time and materials, staying on task, and understanding instructions (Bryan, Burstein, & Bryan, 2001). Students with exceptionalities spend more time doing homework and are more likely to require their parent's help to complete their homework than students without disabilities (Harniss et al., 2001).

When a student receives special education services, it is not a guarantee that all of their educational needs are being met. Often, parents of students with exceptionalities must spend a great deal of time and energy advocating and securing services for their child (Porter & McKenzie, 2000). Nearly a quarter of parents of students with exceptionalities believe that their child requires special education services but is not receiving this support, even though nearly two-thirds of their children have already received a professional educational assessment (Statistics Canada, 2008a). Many parents report experiencing difficulty in obtaining special education services, especially parents of children with emotional, psychological, or behavioural difficulties, such as autism or ADHD. Parents of children with exceptionalities frequently report problems related to a lack of available special education services and staff, as well as difficulties having their child assessed for services (Statistics Canada, 2008a). As a result of the many challenges faced by students with exceptionalities, these parents require more direct contact with the school (Polloway, Bursuck, & Epstein, 2001). Consequently, there is often a greater need for collaboration between teachers and parents.

The role of parents of children with exceptionalities has varied dramatically over the years. Parents have been viewed as everything from the cause of their child's disability and passive recipients of professional opinions, to political advocates and valued partners (Turnbull et al., 2011). From 1880 to 1930, the eugenics movement propagated the idea that heredity was the cause of children's intellectual disabilities, which led to widespread institutionalization and

compulsory sterilization of individuals with disabilities in North America (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1986). Later, in the 1940s and 1950s, parents' personality traits and child-rearing practices were blamed for their children's psychological and emotional problems. Today, professionals do not presume that parents are the cause of their child's disability, and they understand that a child's temperament influences parent-child interactions (Hallahan et al., 2010). As a result, parents of children with exceptionalities have become empowered collaborators and active educational decision-makers (Turnbull et al., 2011). The rationale for parent-teacher collaboration is that each side complements the other because they both have unique strengths and make useful contributions (Porter & McKenzie, 2000). For example, teachers benefit from parents' detailed knowledge about their child's disability and what works for the child at home, and parents often benefit from teachers' support and guidance in understanding their child's learning needs.

Inclusion and Intervention Plans (IIPs) exemplify the need for collaboration between the school and the families of students with exceptionalities (Rock, 2000). Parent approval is integral to the implementation of an IIP (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). Therefore, consultation with parents and teachers is essential for gathering and sharing information for the IIP. The school and family must work together to identify priorities and ensure a holistic program. When all the individuals who will be working with the student are involved in developing the IIP, the IIP is more likely to be a success (Rock, 2000). Successful communication between families and educators of students with exceptionalities is imperative in the process of developing an IIP.

Benefits of communication. Schools and families have many reasons to develop their communication practices:

to improve school programs and school climate, to provide family services and support, to increase parents' skills and leadership in school matters, to connect families with others in the school and in the community, to help teachers with their work, to increase ownership and commitment to the school by the community (Epstein, 1996, p. 10)

However, the main reason for promoting parent-teacher communication is to help students succeed (Epstein, 1996). Parental involvement activities (e.g., communicating with school personnel, talking about learning strategies with children) are positively correlated with student achievement in middle school (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Epstein (1986) surveyed the parents of 1,269 elementary school students about their experiences communicating with their children's

17

teachers. She found that when teachers communicate frequently with parents, parents have a better understanding of what their child is being taught in school and feel competent to help their children with schoolwork.

Communication is especially important when educating a child with an exceptionality (Darch et al., 2004). Parents require information from teachers in order to support school programs. Teachers can gain valuable information from parents about the child's attitudes towards learning, his or her behaviour at home, and any other issues that may impact the child's participation at school (Darch et al., 2004). For example, teachers and parents of children with autism frequently communicate to share information about the child's progress or to brainstorm together to solve problems related to the child (Spann et al., 2003). Effective communication between home and school ensures that parents are aware of homework requirements (Bursuck et al., 1999). Teachers who are aware of the child's strengths and motivations outside of school can provide better instruction and parents who are informed about the skills being taught at school can reinforce the same skills at home (Saskatchewan Education, 2001). Consequently, teachers and parents who share information can help the child acquire skills faster. Parents and teachers who communicate about how the child is performing at home and at school can also promote a smooth transition between the two environments (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). For example, when a student is absent, a phone call between the parent and teacher can be used to plan for completing missed schoolwork. Communication keeps parents and teachers up to date and demonstrates a mutual commitment to parent-teacher collaboration. (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). When teachers genuinely listen to parents, they are demonstrating that the parents' views are worth hearing. Ongoing communication can prevent misunderstandings and conflict. Effective communication enables collaboration between parents and teachers (Porter & McKenzie, 2000).

Modes of communication. Successful parent involvement requires frequent and continual communication between parents and teachers (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). The mode of communication is often just as important as the content. Parents and teachers interact and exchange ideas in many ways, including phone calls, written messages, impromptu face-to-face visits and formal meetings (Staples & Diliberto, 2010).

Dialogue journals, also known as school-to-home notebooks, agendas, or communication books, are commonly used to keep parents informed daily about the child's activities at school (Davern, 2004). Dialogue journals are less likely than letters and notes to be lost or misplaced

(Turnbull et al., 2006). They also provide a record of communication over time. A journal does not have to be used daily. When writing in dialogue journals occurs daily, rather than as-needed, parents often get discouraged by the accumulation of negative feedback (e.g., recurring behavioural issue; Turnbull et al., 2006). Depending on the preference of the parents and teacher, the journal can be sent home every second day, weekly or biweekly. One of the disadvantages of dialogue journals is that the tone or intent of a written message may be misinterpreted (Turnbull et al., 2006). When sensitive information needs to be communicated, a face-to-face interaction is often preferred, allowing both parents and teachers to provide immediate clarification and prevent any misunderstanding. Also, parents with low literacy may struggle with written communication (Turnbull et al., 2006).

Telephone conversations can be a valuable method for providing support and information (Turnbull et al., 2006). Most families have telephones. Telephone conversations are most effective when they are brief and to the point. As with written communication, telephone conversations cannot convey body language, and therefore require extra effort to listen carefully and communicate clearly (Turnbull et al., 2006). Generally, telephone conversations are appropriate when a matter can be dealt with briefly, with more involved conversations reserved for face-to-face interactions. Finding convenient times to make and receive phone calls can be a challenge for both parents and teachers (Turnbull et al., 2006). Voice messaging systems allow both parties to receive messages when they are unavailable and return the phone call at a more convenient time. When more than one parent or additional school professionals must participate in a telephone conversation, a conference call is an option (Turnbull et al., 2006).

The internet has changed the way people communicate, including parents and teachers. An increasing number of Canadian families use the internet on a regular basis (Middleton & Leith, 2008). The last decade has seen both a push toward parental involvement in children's education and a rise in the use of email for communication between parents and teachers (Thompson, 2008). Emails between parents and teachers are usually short, direct, and parent-initiated. Common topics of parent-teacher emails are grades, scheduling, health issues and behaviour. Email can serve the same function as traditional forms of written communication, but with added convenience and confidentiality (Thompson, 2008). Email is convenient because messages can be sent or received at any time and location, making it particularly valuable for parents working outside of the home. Parents and teachers are not pressured to respond

immediately and are able to take a moment to reflect and compose their thoughts before replying (Walther, 1996). Parents and teachers can send and receive email at any time or place that they choose (Turnbull et al., 2006). Email is password protected and therefore, less likely than written communication to be viewed by an unintended audience. However, highly sensitive information should not be shared by email because the security of email is not guaranteed (Turnbull et al., 2006). Another benefit of email communication is that a copy of the communication is easily documented (Chaboudy & Jameson, 2001). Problems can be solved the same day, rather than waiting for a face-to-face meeting. Email is more private, and therefore, will not stigmatize the child like a special notebook might (Davern, 2004). However, it is important to remember that there are families without computers, without internet access, or who are not comfortable using this medium (Turnbull et al., 2006). Also, like dialogue journals, email is vulnerable to misinterpretation (Thompson, 2008). Both parents and teachers find it difficult to convey the importance of the topic and their emotions through email because email eliminates the nonverbal cues that are present in a personal conversation, such as tone of voice and body language (Hernandez & Leung, 2004; Thompson, 2008). Though many parents enjoy the ease of access that technology provides, they do not want electronic communication to replace traditional forms of communication, such as parent-teacher meetings (Hiatt-Michael, 2010).

Face-to-face communication may occur in the form of planned or unplanned parent-teacher meetings (Turnbull et al., 2006). Unplanned meetings may occur when parents drop by the school unexpectedly. Planned meetings, also known as parent-teacher conferences, are often used to discuss a student's progress and to plan and make shared decisions about a student's individualized education (Turnbull et al., 2006). Meetings are an opportunity for teachers to ask parents what the child is like at home. Face-to-face communication strengthens the parent-teacher alliance.

Barriers to communication. Parents of children with exceptionalities are a heterogeneous group, and as such, present various needs and challenges for parent-teacher communication (Kroth & Edge, 2007). For instance, the hours and flexibility of a parent's job determines whether they are able to attend an IIP meeting during the day and the structure of the student's family determines with whom the teacher communicates and who is invited to meetings. Successful parent-teacher communication requires overcoming many barriers (Dettmer et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, parent-teacher communication is often limited by teachers' heavy caseloads, parents' work schedules and subsequently, a lack of mutually convenient times to meet in person or talk on the telephone (Munk et al., 2001). Parents complain that teachers are too busy to communicate and that feedback is often received too late to be useful (Garrett, 2009). Telephone messages, written notes, and letters can also be time-consuming (Hernandez & Leung, 2004). Blue-Banning, Turnbull, and Pereira (2000) conducted focus groups with the families of youth and young adults with developmental disabilities, as well as the professionals that supported them. Both the families and the professionals identified time commitment as a difficulty associated with regular communication.

Too often, parents and teachers do not initiate communication until problems arise (Epstein, 2001). Parents feel that teachers only contact them with negative information (Garrett, 2009). When a student begins to experience academic or behavioural difficulties, the teacher reaches out for extra help and resources. As a result, it can appear that parent-teacher communication is commensurate with a student's problems. Parents of students with disabilities report experiencing a power imbalance in their relationships with professionals, such as teachers (Blue-Banning et al., 2000). They feel that the professional is in charge and they are not an equal partner (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004).

There are inherent disadvantages to written communication, regardless of whether it is electronic or on paper. Without nonverbal cues, such as body language and tone of voice, messages may be misconstrued (Hernandez & Leung, 2004). Parents of children with special needs become accustomed to receiving negative information, and as such, they are more likely to interpret an innocuous message as being critical of their parenting or too demanding of their child (Davern, 2004). Teachers find it difficult to discuss complex issues, such as behaviour, through writing (Thompson, 2008). At times, parents become frustrated when they believe that written communication is being used as a substitute for a real conversation (Davern, 2004). Written parent-teacher communication appears to work best for simpler issues regarding students with exceptionalities. However, to date, there is little empirical evidence to support this assumption.

There can also be social and cultural barriers to parent-teacher communication (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). Families of diverse cultural backgrounds may not understand or be comfortable with the culture of the school. Parents may choose not to attend parent-teacher meetings or they

may feel intimidated by the process of formal meetings (Turnbull et al., 2006). While some parents may value efficiency in meetings, others may prefer a more informal or indirect approach, such as using humour and stories. Some parents may be reluctant to interact with school professionals because of negative experiences in their own childhoods (Turnbull et al., 2006). Financial resources may be a barrier for some families (Turnbull et al., 2006). Child care and transportation may have to be arranged for face-to-face meetings. A potential drawback of teachers using email is that it may disadvantage parents who have little or no access to a computer (Thompson, 2008).

Parents' education, literacy levels and English proficiency vary (Turnbull et al., 2006). Written communication from a teacher to parents who speak English as an additional language or have low literacy skills is potentially problematic if the parents have difficulty understanding the message. Often, teachers mistakenly assume that all parents have a reading ability equivalent to a high school student (Kroth & Edge, 2007). Teachers and professionals sometimes use academic jargon when sharing information with parents, which can create a power differential, as well as be confusing for parents.

Parent satisfaction. When teachers believe that they are communicating frequently and effectively, parents often disagree (Garrett, 2009). In a survey of parents and teachers, Garrett (2009) found that parents rated teachers as excellent or good at communicating with parents (45.7%) less often than teachers rated themselves as excellent or good (76.1%). She found similar discrepancies in how often teachers report communicating with parents and how effective the methods of communication are that teachers use (Garrett, 2009). Teachers believed that they provided sufficient information for parents to help their children with homework, but parents reported wanting more information. Teachers felt that parent-teacher communication should become less frequent when children reach the middle and high school levels, but parents continued to want frequent communication (Garrett, 2009). Though Garrett (2009) demonstrated the reliability and validity of her survey instrument and the disparity of parent and teacher perceptions, this survey was not suitable for the present study because of its primary focus on the public relations role of teachers.

Similarly, Murphy (2009) found that teachers' ratings of parent-teacher communication were higher than parents' ratings. Teachers rated their communication as more frequent and more effective than parents, for face-to-face, written and email communication (Murphy, 2009).

Murphy (2009) used the Parent Communication Survey, which was originally authored by Stuck (2004) and has been demonstrated by both authors to reliably assess parent perceptions of two constructs of interest to the present study: frequency of parent-teacher communication through various methods of communication and parent satisfaction with that communication. Stuck (2004) observed a correlation between parents' satisfaction with communication and the mode of communication being used. Parents reported the greatest levels of satisfaction with written communication and planned meetings and the lowest levels with telephone and email communication (Stuck, 2004).

Thompson and Mazer (2012) found that parents' satisfaction with parent-teacher communication was positively correlated with how often the parent and teacher communicated about the student's academic performance. Specifically, parents who communicated regularly with their child's teacher about homework completion, the student's grades, or details about assignments were more satisfied with the communication they received. Thompson and Mazer (2012) developed the Parental Academic Support Scale (PASS) in response to the need for a scale to "directly assess parent-teacher communication in its present form" (p. 136). The PASS is appropriate for the present study because it provides valuable information by breaking down parent-teacher communication into five topic areas: academic performance, classroom behaviour, preparation, hostile peer interactions, and health (Thompson & Mazer, 2012).

Lake and Billingsley (2000) interviewed school administrators and parents of children with exceptionalities to determine the factors that contribute to parent-school conflict. Their respondents indicated that a lack of communication, as well as misunderstood communications, can be sources of conflict between parents of students with exceptionalities and the school (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). In a telephone survey of 45 families of children with autism, Spann et al. (2003) asked parents about parent-teacher communication. Nearly one-third of parents reported that a common reason for communication is to address disagreements or conflicts. While most parents (82%) were moderately satisfied with their parent-teacher communication, 18% indicated low satisfaction and no one was highly satisfied (Spann et al., 2003). However, Spann et al. (2003) only surveyed families of students with autism and did not include any comparison groups. They designed their questionnaire to investigate families' perceptions of special education services, and as such, it would not be suitable for surveying families of all students.

Regardless of the mode or frequency of communication, when parents collaborated with school personnel, they wanted their input to be valued (Esquivel et al., 2008). They favoured an open and honest dialogue with special education providers. Prezant and Marshak (2006) asked parents of children with disabilities what professionals can do to help them and their children. Parents responded that they wanted professionals to listen to them and respect their input. They also wanted to collaborate and communicate with professionals, and to be included in planning and decision making. Parents wanted high-quality communication on a regular basis (Pruitt et al., 1998). They wanted teachers to be open to their concerns and to respond in a timely and consistent manner (Hiatt-Michael, 2010). They wanted teachers to initiate communication and share good news. It is important to find out from families what communication strategy they prefer because they may prefer specific communication methods (Turnbull et al., 2006). By focusing on positive communication and tailoring their communication strategies to fit families' preferences, teachers can enhance the effectiveness of their communication with parents.

Summary

Parental involvement in education is beneficial for all students, including those with exceptionalities (Nichols, 2000; Porter & McKenzie, 2000). Parent-teacher communication is a vital component of parental involvement when a student has an exceptionality because these families face greater challenges and require more support from teachers (Darch et al., 2004; Epstein, 1995; Taylor, 2000). Despite school policies that promote family-school collaboration (e.g., Saskatchewan Education, 2002) and numerous publications on the subject (e.g., Kroth & Edge, 2007; Taylor, 2000), parents often experience difficulty communicating with their child's school (Porter & McKenzie, 2000). The challenges faced by parents of students with exceptionalities dealing with educational professionals continue to be problematic and need to be addressed in order for these students to benefit from the potential positive effects of parental involvement, such as academic success (Spann et al., 2003). This research sought to assess parents' perceptions of the current parent-teacher communication practices of Saskatchewan educators and teachers regarding students with and without exceptionalities to determine whether parents are satisfied with these practices.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to: (1) examine how parents and teachers communicate regarding students with exceptionalities; and (2) determine how parent-teacher communication differs between parents of students with and without exceptionalities. Family systems theory (Friend & Cook, 2013) provided the framework for data analysis, as well as the following research questions:

1. How do parents and teachers communicate about students with exceptionalities?

   (a) How often do parents and teachers communicate through written, telephone, email, and face-to-face communication?

   (b) Is there a difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used?

2. How does parent-teacher communication differ between parents of students with and without exceptionalities (e.g., frequency, topics of discussion, satisfaction)?

3. What are the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication?

4. How can parent-teacher communication be improved?

Participants

Six hundred and twenty parents or primary caregivers of a child who was currently attending an elementary, middle, or high school in Saskatchewan participated in this study. Participants included 199 parents of a child with an exceptionality and 423 parents of a child without an exceptionality. The children ranged in age from 4 to 18 years of age and were in kindergarten through to Grade 12. Participants were instructed to complete the survey according to their experiences communicating with teachers regarding one child. Clear instructions were provided on how to select one child, if the participant had more than one child in their household, in order to encourage completion of the survey and standardize the procedure (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; see Appendix A). Previous surveys have instructed parents to select their oldest child or the child they communicate with teachers about most frequently (Stuck, 2004; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). In the present study, participants were asked to choose a child with an exceptionality, and if this did not apply, to choose their first child alphabetically in order to target parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities and avoid biasing the age of the child in the sample.

Instruments

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their perception of the frequency, modality, and quality of parent-teacher communication. Within a family systems framework, a family's characteristics represent potential challenges, as well as potential resources for a student (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Therefore, the survey also collected demographic information from the parent participants, such as the participant's education level, the child's age, and details related to their exceptionality status. The survey used for this study, the Parent-Teacher Communication Survey (PTCS), was available online and in hard copy. The PTCS is an adapted version of two instruments: the Parental Academic Support Scale (PASS; Thompson & Mazer, 2012), and the Parent Communication Survey (PCS; Stuck, 2004).

The Parental Academic Support Scale (PASS). Thompson and Mazer (2012) developed a scale to "directly assess parent-teacher communication in its present form" (p. 136). In accordance with systems theory, Thompson and Mazer (2012) viewed parental involvement, specifically parent-teacher communication, as a means of academic support that is beneficial to the student. Their aim was to assess how communication functions within an educational context by examining parents' perspectives (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). The PASS was designed to measure "the *frequency* of specific items associated with parental academic support, parents' perceptions of the *importance* of those supportive behaviours, and the *modes* of communication that parents commonly use to communicate academic support" (p. 141).

Initially, Thompson and Mazer (2012) generated a list of 35 topic items to address the various issues discussed between parents and teachers regarding students based on qualitative data from a previous study (i.e., Thompson, 2008). After conducting a factor analysis, the resulting scale consisted of 16 items across five factors: Academic Performance (7 items), Classroom Behaviour (3 items), Preparation (2 items), Hostile Peer Interactions (2 items), and Health (2 items). Each item begins with "This past month, I communicated with my child's teacher(s) about" and is completed by a topic item (e.g., "a question I had about an assignment"; Thompson & Mazer, 2012, p. 148). Three questions accompany each item. The first question refers to the importance of the support to the child's academic success, with responses on a 3-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not important* to *very important*. The second question asks which mode of communication was used to communicate the support: face-to-face, e-mail, phone, or written communication. The third question concerns how often the support occurred in

26

the previous month, with responses on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *not at all* to *about every day* (Thompson & Mazer, 2012).

Thompson and Mazer (2012) conducted a series of studies supporting the reliability and validity of the PASS. As part of the scale development, 191 parents of elementary, junior high, and high school students in a United States school district were asked to indicate how frequently each type of support had occurred during the previous month. The reliability of the PASS was estimated by calculating Cronbach's alpha. Internal consistency values ranged from .74 to .87 for each of the five factors (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Alpha coefficients greater than .70 are generally considered reliable, and those greater than .80 highly reliable (Cohen et al., 2011). Therefore, the five factors of the PASS can be considered reliable. During the pilot study for the PASS, 175 parents of elementary, junior high, and high school students in a United States school district were asked to rate the importance of each type of support (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Again, the reliability was found to be acceptable, with alpha coefficients ranging from .77 to .88 for the five factors. A confirmatory factor analysis supported the validity of the PASS, as it was found that "all items loaded onto their respective latent construct" (Thompson & Mazer, 2012, p. 145).

The Parent Communication Survey (PCS). Stuck (2004) developed the PCS to measure parents' perceptions of teacher communication, "specifically, the frequency with which they are communicated with, and the level of satisfaction they have with that communication" (p. i). Like Thompson and Mazer (2012), Stuck (2004) created an assessment tool consistent with a family systems perspective. The PCS was designed from the perspective that effective communication and collaboration between the home and school facilitates students' success (Stuck, 2004). The original PCS is comprised of three sections: (1) a Parent Communication Scale, (2) a previously developed Parent Trust Scale and (3) a demographic section. The Parent Communication Scale contains four questions with seven items each. The first six items refer to each of the six methods of communication (planned meetings, written, phone calls from the teacher, phone calls to the teacher, informal interactions, and technology), and the final item refers to an overall response regardless of method of communication (Stuck, 2004). The first question (A) asks parents how often their child's teacher communicates with them using each method, as well as overall. The other three questions ask parents to rate teachers' use of each method to communicate general school information (B), child-specific information (C), and

general communication (D). Each item is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from *never* to *frequently* (A) or *poor* to *very good* (B-D; Stuck, 2004).

Stuck (2004) and Murphy (2009) provided evidence for the validity and reliability of the PCS. The validity of the PCS was supported by an expert content validation pilot (Stuck, 2004). A panel of school administrators, parents, and a teacher reviewed the theoretical content and their feedback was incorporated into the final version of the PCS. Stuck (2004) also conducted a pilot study with 23 parents and an item analysis to assess internal consistency. The alpha coefficients for the two questions relevant to the present study were (A) .87 and (D) .93. Similarly, alpha coefficients of (A) .69 and (D) .82 were found when Murphy (2009) used the Parent Communication Scale of the PCS. These alpha coefficients provide evidence that questions A and D are reliable to highly reliable (Cohen et al., 2011).

Parent-Teacher Communication Survey (PTCS). The survey used in this study, the PTCS, contains items adapted from the PASS and the PCS, as well as open-ended and demographic questions designed for this study. Numerous changes were required to both the PASS and the PCS items in order to facilitate the purposes of the present study. For example, the question regarding the importance of each topic item to student success and the two open-ended questions were omitted from the PASS: " 'What types of supportive behaviours are most important to your child's educational success?' and 'Why do you choose certain modes over others for communicating about certain issues with your child's teacher(s)?' "(Thompson & Mazer, 2012, p. 144). Thompson and Mazer (2012) designed these questions to explore parent-teacher communication from the perspectives of media richness theory and social support scholarship. This study focused on parent-teacher communication as a form of parental involvement. Therefore, these questions were not relevant to this research. The questions regarding mode of communication and frequency of communication from the PASS were retained because they help to address this study's questions about: (1) the difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used, and (2) whether parents of students with and without exceptionalities differ in how frequently they discuss particular topics. However, these questions were re-worded in favour of the term "topic" rather than "type of support," as well as for consistency with the other survey sections. The mode of communication option "text message" was combined with "e-mail" to ensure up-to-date terminology. Also, the extra mode of communication option "don't know/not applicable" was included because it cannot

28

be assumed that respondents know the answer or have the information to answer the question (i.e., the situation does not apply to their experience; Cohen et al., 2011).

Questions B, C, and part of D, as well as the Parent Trust Scale of the PCS, were removed due to their irrelevance to this study (i.e., parent rating of teacher's ability to "communicate important school-wide and classroom information" Stuck, 2004, p. 134). The phrase "how good a job do you think" was replaced with "how do you feel," and the corresponding scale option "good" was replaced with "well." These substitutions were made upon the recommendation of Murphy (2009), in order to "avoid misleading the participant" by using biased language (Murphy, 2009, p. 48), and to clarify that the question is seeking the opinion of the parent participant.

The mode of communication options and the frequency scale were modified in order to remain consistent with those from the PASS (e.g., *face-to-face* and *about once a week*). The wording of question A was changed to reflect the mutual responsibility of parents and teachers in communicating with each other. The optional pluralization of teacher (e.g., teacher[s]) from the PASS was maintained throughout the survey, since it allows for variation in the number of teachers a child has at different grade levels.

In addition, two open-ended questions were included to gather qualitative information from parents about the barriers to successful parent-teacher communication, as well as parents' suggestions for improving parent-teacher communication. Exceptionality questions were developed based on the Statistics Canada definition of disability to determine whether the child in question should be classified as a student with an exceptionality (Statistics Canada, 2008b). Demographic information collected from the parents included: child's age, child's grade, parent's relationship to the child, number of children in the household, school type (i.e., urban, rural, urban/First Nations, rural/First Nations), gender, age, relationship status (i.e., single, married, living with a partner, separated, divorced, widowed), education (i.e., some high school, graduated from high school, some postsecondary training, graduated from a college, graduated from a university), household income, and ethnicity (e.g., Canadian, Chinese, Filipino, First Nations, Métis).

Procedure

Online survey. An online version of the PTCS was programmed by the Social Sciences Research Laboratories (SSRL) at the University of Saskatchewan. The SSRL provided an

internet address for the survey, which was distributed by the researcher to potential participants. The SSRL was responsible for collecting all online survey responses, and when the survey was closed, cleaning the data and delivering the data file to the researcher.

Participant recruitment. In order to recruit sufficient samples of parents of children both with and without exceptionalities, initial sampling was conducted using purposive sampling methods (Cohen et al., 2011). A purposive sample targets cases who have in-depth knowledge of the subject of interest by virtue of their role (i.e., *parents* of students) and can be used to boost the proportion of a group that may otherwise be underrepresented in the sample (i.e., parents of *students with exceptionalities*) because there are few of them in the population (Cohen et al., 2011). Upon receiving approval from the University of Saskatchewan's Behavioural Research Ethics Board, numerous school divisions and community organizations were asked to distribute advertisements to potential parent participants for the study.

A letter of invitation was sent by email to school divisions throughout Saskatchewan seeking permission to contact school principals from within their division to assist in recruiting parent participants. Eight out of the 14 school divisions that were contacted granted permission for the researcher to contact their principals. Upon receiving approval from a division, a letter of invitation was emailed to principals within that division asking them to share a letter of invitation with parents of their students. In the letter of invitation, potential participants were informed about the present research, asked to complete the Parent-Teacher Communication Survey (PTCS), and instructed how to access the PTCS.

Children with exceptionalities only comprise approximately 5% of students in Canadian schools (Statistics Canada, 2008a). In order to increase participation of their parents, community organizations serving children with exceptionalities and their families (e.g., Autism Services, Epilepsy Saskatoon, Learning Disability Association of Saskatchewan, Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Saskatchewan) were approached to assist with recruitment. The organizations chose whether to share information about the survey with all their clients or to display information posters and leaflets.

Data collection. All data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire, which was available online, as well as in hard-copy. Only two hard-copies were requested and one was returned. Meanwhile, 618 participants completed the online version, which was disseminated through the SSRL. Upon completion of the survey, participants were given the option of

submitting their email address or phone number to be entered into a draw for one of three $50 gift cards to Indigo Books & Music as an incentive for participation. The survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete, whether completing the online or paper version of the survey. The survey was available for six weeks at the beginning of 2013. Four weeks after the start date of the survey, all principals who received the original recruitment email were sent another email to notify them that the survey would close in two weeks. This reminder email also included an email announcement of this information to share with parents. After six weeks, the sample size ($N = 620$) was large enough to provide sufficient power (.80) and limit the likelihood of committing a Type I error to an acceptable level ($\alpha = .05$; Cohen, 1992). Therefore, the survey link was closed to participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 20.0 (IBM Corp., 2011) for Windows once data collection was completed. The dependent variables in this study were mode of communication frequency, topic of communication frequency, overall communication frequency, topic mode, and satisfaction. The independent variable, Exceptionality Status, was used to divide the parent participants into two groups: parents of children with exceptionalities (i.e., Exceptionality Group) and parents of children without exceptionalities (i.e., Non-Exceptionality Group). In the first section of the PTCS, participants were asked whether their child's participation in school activities has been limited by difficulty in nine areas (i.e., hearing, seeing, communication, mobility, agility, learning, developmental delay, psychological, chronic condition; see Appendix A). If a participant indicated that their child has experienced difficulty in one or more of these areas, the child was classified as having an exceptionality for the purposes of this study.

Research question 1. The first research question posed was: how do parents and teachers communicate about students with exceptionalities? This question had two parts: (a) how often do parents and teachers communicate through written, telephone, email, and face-to-face communication, and (b) is there a difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used? Frequency analyses (e.g., counts and percentages) were conducted to determine how often parents and teachers communicated during the past month using each mode: face-to-face, email/text, phone, and written communication. Cross-tabulation was used to examine the frequency of communication mode used for each topic item. Goodness-of-fit tests

were used to assess each topic item and whether there was a significant difference with mode of communication.

Research question 2. The second research question posed was: how does parent-teacher communication differ between parents of students with and without exceptionalities (e.g. frequency, topics of discussion, satisfaction)? Descriptive analyses (i.e., frequency, mode, and range) were conducted for overall communication frequency, topic frequency, and satisfaction for each exceptionality status group (i.e., Exceptionality and Non-Exceptionality). The Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine: (1) if parents of children with exceptionalities (Exceptionality Group) differed from parents of children without exceptionalities (Non-Exceptionality Group) in their frequency of parent-teacher communication, (2) the topics they discuss, and (3) their satisfaction with parent-teacher communication. The Mann-Whitney U test is appropriate for determining whether there is a difference between two independent samples when ordinal data are being analyzed (Brace, Kemp, & Snelgar, 2013).

Research questions 3 and 4. The third and fourth research questions posed were: what are the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication, and how can parent-teacher communication be improved? The PTCS included two open-ended questions: "What challenges have you faced when communicating with your child's teacher?" and "What would you like to see changed about the way you and your child's teacher communicate?" Thematic analyses were used to identify, organize, and report the themes within the responses in order to provide a qualitative description of parents' experiences from their perspective (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses were first thoroughly reviewed and coded for relevant features, and themes were generated from the initial codes. Family systems theory was used as a framework for generating themes from the data (Friend & Cook, 2013). After rereading the data within the potential themes, the themes were refined by combining similar themes and adjusting themes until the theme groups each contained similar meanings separate from the other groups. Subsequently, the themes were named to reflect the essence of each theme, and examples were found from the data that represented the meaning of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The results of the data analyses are presented in Chapter 4 and discussed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the analyses of the data collected for this study. The chapter begins with a description of the participants sampled in this study. Thereafter, the results are analyzed and presented separately for each research question.

Participants' Characteristics

Six hundred and twenty parents or primary caregivers completed the Parent-Teacher Communication Survey (PTCS). Of those 620 participants, 199 had a child with an exceptionality and 421 had a child without an exceptionality. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the categorical demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, and parent education; see Table 4.1). At least 549 participants answered each demographic question. Overall, participants were mostly female (83.7%), in their 30s (47.8%) or 40s (40.9%), married (80.5%), and reported they had attended or completed some postsecondary education (90.0%). Participants were instructed to answer the questionnaire according to their experiences communicating with teachers regarding *one* child (see Chapter 3 for specific instructions). The age of the participants' children ranged from 4 to 18 years of age, with an average of 10.7 years of age. The grade of the participants' children ranged from kindergarten to grade 12, with an average grade of 5.8.

Research Question 1

The first research question posed was: how do parents and teachers communicate about students with exceptionalities? This question had two parts: (a) how often do parents and teachers communicate through written, telephone, email, and face-to-face communication, and (b) is there a difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used? Frequency analyses (e.g., counts and percentages), used to answer the first part of research question one, were conducted for mode of communication frequency among the Exceptionality Group (see Table 4.2). Four mode of communication statements were rated by participants using a 5-point scale (i.e., *not at all, once or twice, about once a week, several times a week, about every day*) to determine how often parents and teachers communicated during the past month using each mode: face-to-face, email/text, phone, and written communication. Some parents indicated they communicated through written communication *several times a week* (7.9%) or *about every day* (13.7%), and face-to-face communication *several times a week* (5.2%) or *about every day* (3.7%). Relatively few parents said they communicated with the same frequency by email or text (3.7% *several times a week*, 1.6% *about every day*) or by phone (2.7% *several times*

a week, 0% *about every day*). Meanwhile, 10.5% of parents communicated with their child's teacher by email or text *about once a week* and 42.9% *once or twice* a month.

Table 4.1

Frequencies and Percentages for Categorical Demographic Variables

Variable	*n*	%
Parent Gender		
Female	488	83.7
Male	95	16.3
Parent Age		
19-29	28	4.8
30-39	279	47.8
40-49	239	40.9
50-59	35	6.0
60+	3	0.5
Marital Status		
Single	24	4.1
Married	467	80.5
Living with a partner	35	6.0
Separated	23	4.0
Divorced	31	5.3
Parent Education		
Some high school	4	0.7
Graduated from high school	54	9.3
Some postsecondary training	129	22.3
Graduated from a college	166	28.7
Graduated from a university	226	39.0
Household Income		
$39,999 and below	71	12.9
$40,000 or more	478	87.1
Children in Household		
1	128	22.0
2	303	52.0
3	121	20.8
4	26	4.5
5	3	0.5
6	2	0.3
Parent-Child Relation		
Parent	579	98.8
Step-Parent	4	0.7
Grandparent	2	0.3
Foster Parent	1	0.2
School Setting		
Urban	380	65.1
Rural	204	34.9

Table 4.2
Frequency of Communication Mode Usage for Exceptionality Group

Communication Mode	Not at all	Once or twice	About once a week	Several times a week	About every day
Face-to-face	49.2	34.0	7.9	5.2	3.7
Email/text	41.4	42.9	10.5	3.7	1.6
Phone	66.0	28.7	2.7	2.7	0.0
Written	42.6	27.9	7.9	7.9	13.7

Note. All figures are percentages.

A cross-tabulation of topic mode (see Table 4.3) was used to answer the second part of the first research question: is there a difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used? The cross-tabulation examined the frequency of communication modes for each item. Goodness-of-fit chi-square tests were used to determine whether there was a difference between each topic item and the mode of communication that was used to discuss it. Among parents in the Exceptionality Group, the difference between topic and mode of communication was significant for 8 of the 16 topic items. Specifically, there was a statistically significant difference between mode of communication and five topics concerning academic performance: (1) "A question I had about an assignment" $\chi^2(3) = 19.6$, $p < .0005$, (2) "Learning more about homework assignments" $\chi^2(3) = 23.6$, $p < .0005$, (3) "Why my child was not completing assignments" $\chi^2(3) = 9.9$, $p = .019$, (4) "Why my child has a missing assignment" $\chi^2(3) = 9.5$, $p = .023$, and (5) "My child's grades in class" $\chi^2(3) = 18.7$, $p < .0005$. The four topics concerning assignments were most likely to be discussed by email or text message (See Table 4.3). However, the topic of "child's grades" was most likely to be discussed face-to-face, followed closely by email or text communication. The other three topic items that were significantly related to mode of communication were: (1) "A major physical health issue that my child is experiencing" $\chi^2(3) = 10.0$, $p = .019$, (2) "Solutions to address my child's behaviour in class" $\chi^2(3) = 23.7$, $p < .0005$, and (3) "My child's ability to make/maintain friendships with peers" $\chi^2(3) = 25.1$, $p < .0005$. All three of these topics were most likely to be discussed face-to-face (see Table 4.3).

Research Question 2

The second research question posed was: how does parent-teacher communication differ between parents of students with and without exceptionalities (e.g., frequency, topics of discussion, satisfaction)?

Table 4.3
Communication Mode Choice by Topic for Exceptionality Group

Topic of Communication	Face-to-face	Email/text	Phone	Written
Academic Performance				
A question I had about an assignment*	20.6	47.6	9.5	22.2
Learning more about homework assignments*	22.4	49.3	9.0	19.4
Why my child received the grade he/she did	34.4	31.3	12.5	21.9
How my child can improve his/her grade	33.3	33.3	22.9	10.4
Why my child was not completing assignments*	33.3	41.0	10.3	15.4
Why my child has a missing assignment*	35.9	38.5	10.3	15.4
My child's grades in class*	43.2	38.6	13.6	4.5
Classroom Behaviour				
My child goofing off in class	27.0	27.0	18.9	27.0
My child talking back to the teacher	35.3	23.5	23.5	17.6
Solutions to address my child's behaviour in class*	50.0	30.8	11.5	7.7
Preparation				
How my child was not bringing materials to class	31.0	41.4	6.9	20.7
My child's ability to make/maintain friendships with peers*	61.8	17.6	8.8	11.8
Hostile Peer Interactions				
My child being picked on by his/her classmates	44.4	14.8	25.9	14.8
A major classroom behavioural incident (fight, racial slur, etc.)	42.9	10.7	32.1	14.3
Health				
A major physical health issue that my child is experiencing*	44.4	19.4	8.3	27.8
A temporary health issue that my child is experiencing	26.8	26.8	17.9	28.6

Note. All figures are percentages.
*$p < .05$.

Frequency analyses and measures of central tendency and variability were calculated for overall communication frequency, topic frequency, and satisfaction for each exceptionality status group. When asked how often they communicated with their child's teacher(s) during the past month, the modal response of parents in both the Exceptionality and Non-Exceptionality groups was 2 (*once or twice*), with a range of 4 (*not at all* to *about every day*). When asked how often they had communicated with their child's teacher about 16 different topics, the modal response of parents in both the Exceptionality and Non-Exceptionality groups was 1 (*not at all*) for all 16

Table 4.4

Frequency of Topic Communication for Exceptionality (Exc) and Non-Exceptionality (Non-Exc) Groups

Topic of Communication	Not at all		Once or twice		About once a week		Several times a week		About every day	
	Exc	Non-Exc	Exc	Non-Exc	Exc	Non-Exc	Exc	Non-Exc	Exc	Non-Exc
Academic Performance										
assignment question	74.6	77.4	20.2	20.6	4.7	1.9	0.5	-	-	-
homework inquiry	67.4	74.9	24.9	22.6	5.7	1.5	1.0	1.0	1.0	-
grade inquiry	89.1	92.2	9.4	6.8	1.0	0.7	-	0.2	0.5	-
grade improvement inquiry	70.5	83.6	21.8	15.4	5.7	0.7	2.1	0.2	-	-
incomplete assignments	78.2	91.5	17.1	7.8	4.1	0.5	0.5	0.2	-	-
missing assignment	78.6	92.2	17.7	7.6	3.1	0.2	0.5	-	-	-
grades	75.3	87.6	20.6	11.0	3.1	1.2	0.5	0.2	0.5	-
Classroom Behaviour										
goofing off	80.6	92.5	15.7	7.3	3.1	0.2	-	-	0.5	-
talking back	93.3	98.8	4.1	1.0	1.0	0.2	-	-	1.6	-
behaviour solutions	75.8	92.7	17.0	6.8	3.6	0.2	2.6	0.2	1.0	-
Preparation										
class preparedness	86.5	95.9	10.9	3.9	2.6	0.2	-	-	-	-
friendship skills	81.3	93.4	14.6	6.4	3.6	-	0.5	-	-	0.2
Hostile Peer Interactions										
bullying	83.4	92.2	13.5	6.3	2.1	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.2
behavioural incident	86.0	95.9	10.4	4.1	1.0	-	1.6	-	1.0	-
Health										
major health issue	81.3	97.8	13.5	1.5	3.6	0.5	0.5	-	1.0	0.2
temporary health issue	68.9	85.9	28.0	13.7	2.1	-	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.2
Overall	15.5	16.6	48.5	47.7	14.9	18.1	13.4	10.5	7.7	7.1

Note. All figures are percentages. Full topic items, condensed in this table to accommodate numerical data, can be found in Table 4.3.

Table 4.5

Satisfaction for Exceptionality (Exc) and Non-Exceptionality (Non-Exc) Groups

Poor		Fair		Well		Very well	
Exc	Non-Exc	Exc	Non-Exc	Exc	Non-Exc	Exc	Non-Exc
23.4	12.4	25.0	28.2	27.6	33.9	24.0	25.5

Note. All figures are percentages.

Table 4.6

Group Differences in Frequency of Communication Topic

Topic of Communication	U	N_1	N_2	p
Academic Performance				
assignment question	38365.500	193	412	.346
homework inquiry	36203.000	193	411	.026*
grade inquiry	38034.500	192	409	.207
grade improvement inquiry	33888.500	193	409	.000*
incomplete assignments	34241.000	193	410	.000*
missing assignment	33935.000	192	410	.000*
Grades	34814.500	194	410	.000*
Classroom Behaviour				
goofing off	34517.000	191	411	.000*
talking back	37465.000	193	411	.000*
behaviour solutions	32881.000	194	410	.000*
Preparation				
class preparedness	35715.500	192	411	.000*
friendship skills	34408.000	192	409	.000*
Hostile Peer Interactions				
bullying	36176.000	193	411	.000*
behavioural incident	35694.000	193	411	.000*
Health				
major health issue	33142.000	193	411	.000*
temporary health issue	32752.000	193	410	.000*

Note. All tests were two-tailed. Full topic items, condensed in this table to accommodate numerical data, can be found in Table 4.3.

*$p < .05$.

items. However, the range for the 16 items varied from 1 to 4 (see Table 4.4). For example, among the Non-Exceptionality Group responses ranged from *not at all* to *once or twice* (range = 1) for "a major classroom behavioural incident." Meanwhile, among the Exceptionality Group responses ranged from *not at all* to *about every day* (range = 4) for "learning more about homework assignments." When asked how well their child's teacher(s) communicates, the modal response of parents in both the Exceptionality and Non-Exceptionality groups was 3 (*well*), with a range of 3 (*poor* to *very well*; see Table 4.5).

The Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine if parents of children with exceptionalities (Exceptionality Group) differed from parents of children without exceptionalities (Non-Exceptionality Group) in their frequency of parent-teacher communication, the topics they discuss, and their satisfaction with parent-teacher communication. There was no statistically significant difference between groups in the frequency of overall communication ($U = 39952.000$, $N_1 = 194$, $N_2 = 421$, $p = .645$, two-tailed). There were statistically significant differences between groups in the frequency of communication regarding 14 of the 16 topics (see Table 4.6). The Exceptionality Group were more likely to have communicated about these 14 topics than the Non-Exceptionality Group (see Table 4.4). The difference between groups in satisfaction with communication was also statistically significant ($U = 34798.500$, $N_1 = 192$, $N_2 = 404$, $p = .035$, two-tailed). The Non-Exceptionality Group rated their satisfaction more positively than the Exceptionality Group (see Table 4.5).

Research Question 3

The third research question posed was: what are the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication? Out of the 620 participants, 33.6% provided a response to this question. A thematic analysis of the responses to this open-ended question (Braun & Clarke, 2006) revealed seven overarching themes: interpersonal challenges, making contact, communication quality, method of communication, home-school disconnect, exceptional challenges, and no problems.

Interpersonal challenges. According to participants, one prominent barrier to satisfactory parent-teacher communication is interpersonal challenges. Many of the challenges participants reported related to the social aspects of parent-teacher communication. For example, both parents and teachers react emotionally to one another. As one parent said, "usually we get a call when something is wrong therefore the teacher tends to be angry... the parent can often become defensive... Sometimes teachers are also offended when parents question what is going

on." At times, parents felt attacked or judged and teachers became defensive. For example, one parent reported "when attempting to speak with a teacher regarding an exam my child had written, this teacher became angry and defensive with me, making me feel that I had no business being there to talk about my child's education." Some comments indicated that parents did not feel heard, such as one parent who recalled "I have felt that a teacher has not taken my concerns seriously by not inquiring or following up on my concerns regarding inappropriate behaviour on the playground. I felt she was dismissive." Other participants felt that teachers were being overly negative. For example, one parent wrote "when it comes to what we communicate with our teachers - it is frustrating when all we hear is negative information about our child. I would like to see positive info also." Many respondents also indicated that personal attributes impeded their communication with their child's teacher. Parents found some teachers to be difficult to talk to or lacking in communication skills. For example, one parent stated "I find my daughter's teacher is not very approachable. When I have tried speaking with her about concerns, she isn't an easy person to talk with." For a select group of participants who work at their child's school, they suggested that their dual role as a parent and a colleague was a barrier. For example, a participant reported "my biggest challenge is being on staff and keeping our work relationship healthy and still be able to communicate with my son's teacher especially when he was having difficulties in that classroom." In addition to navigating the social aspects of parent-teacher communication, getting in touch with one another can also be a struggle.

Making contact. According to participants, one of the most common challenges parents and teachers face when trying to communicate is making contact. For parent-teacher communication to occur at all, the two parties need to be able to connect. However, many parents expressed concerns that they did not know how to reach their child's teacher. For example, one parent reported "it is difficult to know when you should communicate with the children's teachers." Another parent reported "our teacher did not give us a way to contact her directly (such as an email address)." Other parents reported that the teacher was difficult to reach. For example, one parent shared "the teacher is not always available to speak to you when you call the school. Sometimes you play telephone tag trying to connect." Parents also reported the communication process was made more difficult because their child has different teachers for various subjects. For example, one parent stated "multiple teachers make it difficult to know who to contact and when. The home room teacher does not teach all subjects therefore I must contact

each teacher for information on how my child is functioning in the classroom." Finding the time to communicate, especially a time that was convenient for both the parent and teacher, was a common complaint. For example, one parent reported "when both parents work, finding appropriate time during work hours is difficult as it is for the teacher when he/she is also working." Parents also explained their difficulty with contacting teachers who are busy and already have many demands placed upon them. As one parent shared "I find the teachers my children have had... spend more time dealing with behaviour, attention, and just lack of interest... limites [*sic*] the communication teachers have time for, or have the heart for." Even when parents and teachers manage to make contact with one another, the quality of their communication interactions can leave parents unsatisfied.

   Communication quality. One general theme heard from participants was that teachers and schools are not doing a good enough job of communicating. As a result, the quality of parent-teacher communication is not always sufficient. A common complaint of parents was that there is simply too little communication. As one parent participant shared, "we are not being told if he is having difficulties in class on assignments or tests. We don't know how he is working in class. We do not really hear about what is going on in school." Participants indicated that they often do not receive any communication until a problem arises. Several instances were reported where the parent was not told about an incident at school or was not aware there was a concern until it was too late. For example, one parent reported "When my child was sent to the principles [*sic*] office, I didn't know anything about it. It was my other child who said something about it. I would have liked a phone call or a message in the agenda." Another parent reported "the biggest challenge is we rarely hear from a teacher until things get to a level where the principal is involved and then we are made aware of things." Parents also reported they do not receive enough information from teachers regarding what is happening in school. For example, one parent stated "I find it hard to help my child with his homework when there's no instructions sent home. He gets rather flustered when he doesn't understand and I can't help him if I don't know whats [*sic*] expected." Parents also reported that the communication that they receive is not relevant to their child. For example, one parent shared "I prefer to here [*sic*] about important things occurring in the class; for example, important assignments dates, excursions, events that require my permission or payment, etc., rather than daily updates of everything going on." Parents also expressed concerns related to teachers' delayed response times and failures to follow

through after a conversation. For example, one parent indicated that they have experienced "e-mails not being responded to in a timely manner. They do get responded to, but are sometimes time sensitive ie [*sic*]: wanting to have homework sent home that was missed due to child being ill or missing school due to an apointment [*sic*]." Another parent reported "we have asked for the teacher to look into why our son was given a certain mark...The teacher promised to look into the matter and send us an email with her findings and we did not ever receive an email with the answer." Many parent participants in this study drew attention to the challenges created by a perceived lack of quality communication (e.g., abundant, timely, relevant). However, many participants also identified their concerns with *how* teachers communicated.

      Method of communication. Parent participants in this study highlighted the role of the method of parent-teacher communication. Parent responses referred to communication with teachers using a range of methods, including agendas or communication books, email, text messaging, telephone, face-to-face conversations, and parent-teacher interviews or student-led conferences. Respondents often disliked the method of communication chosen. For example, one parent reported "the teachers I have difficulty communicating with do not use or provide their email, which is the easiest and fastest way to communicate in a busy schedule." Other parents disliked how a method was being used, such as the underutilization of agendas. For example, as one parent stated "the agendas that they are supposed to bring home are either not written in, not brought home, or a to do list. Too expensive to use just for a calendar." In addition, one parent discussed the inappropriate use of email stating "when communicating via email, it is difficult to determine the intent of the teacher... Teachers should discuss negative grades, behaviours or experiences with the parent either in person or over the telephone; Never through email!" The structure of parent-teacher interviews was also a topic of concern for parents. For example, one parent explained "[the] biggest concern was parent/teacher interviews.... Our interviews were student led so my child was in the room. It is hard to be able to ask the teacher anything that you don't want the child to hear." When asked about their challenges communicating with their children's teachers, many participants targeted the method of communication chosen or how it was being used. At the same time, parent responses depicted feelings of disengagement from the school.

      Home-school disconnect. A number of parent responses indicated a general feeling of disconnection with the school. For example, one parent stated "everything in my sons [*sic*]

current school is online and impersonal. Teachers don't pick up the phone and call, they don't send notes home. I get generic notes if at all. The whole school system is becoming increasingly cold and institutionalized." This feeling of disconnect seems to increase as children grow older. As one parent described, "in elementary school, you can pop in to pick up your kids, and you might happen to see the teacher to touch base... In high school, parents rarely go into the school... it's just not normally done that way." Parents also reported a climate in which there are few opportunities to engage with teachers. For example, a parent shared "you don't have a lot of opportunity to talk or meet the teachers. Parental involvement I found was not expected, encouraged or promoted once the kids were in junior high." Rather than being invited into the school, parents described making the effort to communicate with teachers and sometimes feeling like a nuisance for doing so. For example, one parent expressed that "it is often one way communication, by which I communicate a concern." Another parent voiced feeling "like I am bothering the teacher to set up extra meetings... I don't feel like the line of communication is open." In some instances, parents explained that children are given the responsibility of conveying information from the school to the home rather than the teacher initiating communication with parents. As one parent stated, my child's teacher leaves all messages to be communicated via my child. He often forgets or doesn't write enough information in his agenda so I call another parent to see what message their child brought home." Most parents can likely relate to feelings of home-school disconnect, the interpersonal challenges of parent-teacher communication, and concerns with the quality and methods of communication. However, parents of students with exceptionalities face unique obstacles to satisfactory parent-teacher communication.

Exceptional challenges. One topic area emerged concerning the specific challenges faced by parents of students with exceptionalities. This group of parents reported struggling to communicate their child's needs. For example, a parent shared "I think my child's teacher does not understand what autism is. I feel like we are having problems with our communication because she is calling about things that my autistic child is not capable of." Parents also expressed concerns related to obtaining assistance for their child. For example, a parent reported "my son requires a timer to complete work. It is January and I just recently found out that even though it says in his PPP, he does not have a timer and I had to find out through my son." Several parents in this group also pointed out the challenges of communicating with multiple

professionals, such as an educational assistant or a learning resource teacher, in addition to the homeroom teacher. For example, one parent shared "to ask questions, the teacher always sends me to the EA and child support worker b/c [because] they work with my child more. Wouldn't the teacher try to be more involved?" Though many parent participants reported facing many challenges when communicating with their children's teachers, some parents reported being satisfied with their communication experiences.

No problems. The final theme resulting from research question 3 acknowledges the group of parent participants who reported having no problems communicating with their children's teachers. Though the final theme is not a barrier to parent-teacher communication, it warrants being included because a number of participants stated that they had not experienced any challenges. For example, one parent reported "my child's teacher is very open about what she works on with him and areas that he needs improvement. She will let me know if there is something that I can do at home to help him." Many parents were satisfied with the communication that they have experienced with their child's teacher(s). For example, one parent wrote "my son's teacher does an amazing job of keeping us informed between her blog, her videos of the kids and regular emails I always feel as if I know what is going on with my son's education." Parents' experiences communicating with teachers are diverse. As such, parent participants provided multiple perceived barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication. In addition to understanding the challenges parents face when communicating with teachers, it is important to solicit parents' ideas for improving parent-teacher communication.

Research Question 4

The fourth research question posed was: how can parent-teacher communication be improved? Out of the 620 participants, 33.1% responded to this question. A thematic analysis of all parents' responses to this open-ended question revealed seven overarching themes: teacher availability, quality communication, teachers as communicators, parental engagement, utilize technology, parent-teacher conference reform, and no change needed.

Teacher availability. Many parent participants suggested that teacher availability could be improved. One clear message that emerged from parents' responses was that in order to communicate with teachers, parents must be able to reach them. First, parents emphasized that they need teachers' contact information so that they know how to reach their child's teachers. For example, one parent stated "at the beginning of the year, there should be messages from the

teacher on how to reach them and how to set up meetings etc." Second, parents recognized that teachers are often very busy, and therefore, need time to communicate. Parents suggested lessening the demands on teachers' time through smaller class sizes to address giving teachers time to communicate with parents. For example, one parent stated "lower pupil-teacher ratios would help to free up time for my children's teacher to be more aware of their needs and be able to communicate with home/parent in a more effective way." Parents also suggested the school could designate time in a teacher's day for parent-teacher communication. As one parent stated "I still believe that telephone or face-to-face communication is the best and for this to happen effectively, it needs to be scheduled into the teacher's day without interrupting any of their other duties." Increasing teacher availability would be a first a step toward improving parent-teacher communication. The next step suggested by participants would be to improve the overall quality of communication.

Quality communication. Participants in this study indicated they would like to see better quality parent-teacher communication. The solutions that parents submitted for bettering parent-teacher communication were often improvements to existing communication techniques. First, parents suggested communication could be more positive and timely. For example, one parent shared "I would like to hear what my child is doing right once in a while rather than always the negative." Another parent stated, "I would like for her teacher to respond to either an email or a phone call within the week instead of a few weeks waiting for his response." Second, parents suggested communication could be more frequent and personalized to the individual student. For example, one parent reported, "I know that is difficult for them with so many students, but for my case, my son does not tell me much of anything about school, and I'd like to hear more from the teacher about how he is doing." Another parent expressed he/she would like to see "more feedback from teacher personally on how my son is doing as all emails are general info to all classmates." Respondents were generally happy to use an agenda or daily communication book to keep in contact with the school and missed it when the practice was discontinued as their children aged. Some parents also indicated that writing in the agenda should occur more frequently. For example, one parent responded that "we really like the communication book. Every day the parent is required to sign the book, and they see what the child is doing at school." Another parent wrote "things need to be written in the agenda more. I would like to know more about my son's day. I would like to know from class to class what he is learning and what they

think he is struggling with." Parents requested that more information be sent home, especially about assignments, in order to provide homework assistance. As one parent shared, it is "very challenging to assist kids when you don't know what the teacher is looking for." Lastly, many parents voiced that face-to-face conversations are important, and at times, there is no acceptable substitute. As one parent reported "there are so many forms of communicating these days that I am afraid a lot of what needs to be said face to face gets avoided by emails and text messages."

Third, a common subtheme which emerged regarding the quality of communication was that parents want teachers to communicate proactively. That is, parents want to be kept up to date on their child's learning. For example, a parent reported "I would like to see a bit more of an ongoing 'this is what is happening' sort of communication - this semester one teacher has emailed... updates to class activities, expectations, and upcoming assignments." Many parents said they would like to see a monthly or weekly letter about what their child is learning and how they are performing. For example, one parent suggested "regular updates [monthly] on areas of improvement, goals to be worked on, area of study and suggestions that can be done at home to help in these areas." Parents want teachers to give advance notice of upcoming tests, due dates and events. A parent stated "I would also like that if my child has a project due or exam coming up there was a note sent home or something written in my child's agenda." Parents want to be notified as soon as a concern arises with their child so the issue can be dealt with before it worsens. As one parent stated "if he is failing I'd like a phone call so we can discuss what to do about it, just not let him fail and then there's nothing we can do." In the case of an ongoing concern, several parents suggested the school year should begin with a parent-teacher meeting so information can be shared. For example, one parent believed "when a child has a noticed learning problem, there should be a meeting at the beginning of each year to discuss what the options are for assisting the child in their learning." In addition to the overall quality of communication, parents highlighted the importance of the manner in which the teacher communicates.

Teachers as communicators. Parent participants suggested another target area for improving parent-teacher communication: teachers as communicators. Several topics emerged surrounding the theme of teachers and their role as communicators. Parents indicated that, in order to improve communication, teachers must be approachable and open to communicating. For example, a parent explained "one thing that makes communication easy with my son's

46

teacher is that she is very approachable and easy to talk to." Many parents wished their child's teachers initiated communication more often. One parent shared "we like email and would like the teacher to initiate the email instead of us doing the work." Parents also expressed a desire for teachers to listen to their concerns. For example, one parent suggested that teachers "talk less, listen more, take the time to understand what a parent is saying because often... there has been a lot of thought, deliberation and problem-solving attempts that have taken place before speaking with him/her." Several respondents acknowledged that the individual teacher's communication skills are a significant factor in the success of parent-teacher communication. As one parent stated, "teachers need to approach parents with honesty, tact and care... It is hard work when teachers have to deal with parents because such kindness, tact and diplomacy is required for a good school/home relationship to exist." Though teachers play an important role in effective parent-teacher communication, participants suggested that teachers *and* parents have a shared responsibility to communicate about students.

        Parental engagement. Several participants highlighted the area of parental engagement. The relationship between the school and the home was emphasized by parents for improving parent-teacher communication. Essentially, respondents spoke to the need for a school climate that is welcoming to parental involvement. One parent stated "I like the opportunities to volunteer at the school, and to attend special events like concerts, sporting events, and fundraisers as they allow for informal discussion." Many parents suggested that schools organize opportunities for parents and teachers to meet. As one parent expressed, a meet-the-teacher night or an open house at the beginning of the school year to "meet the teacher, see the classroom and the school is a really effective way to open the door to communicating with the school. If communication is encouraged early in the school year, it is easier to continue/maintain the communication." Many parents welcomed teachers' invitations to communicate and collaborate. For example, one parent shared "we had one teacher ask, at the beginning of the year, to send her an email describing our son and what we thought she should know about him. This was a great way to open the door for communicating." Respondents asked for these opportunities as ways to establish the parent-teacher relationship and open the lines of communication. One respondent explained that parents and teachers "need to work together to come up with solutions for both home and school, and the child needs to know there is communication between them so that the same consistency of actions can be taken." In addition to acknowledging the school's role in

successful parent-teacher communication, many parent respondents pointed out their own responsibility. Parents believed parents have to be open to communicating with teachers and should initiate a conversation when necessary. As one parent shared, "I think parents and students need to not be afraid to ask the teacher questions if they have some." Several parents felt their child should share in the responsibility for home-school communication. For example, one parent stated "when there is a problem or issue, I want to know about it. But, I think my child also has a responsibility to report to me how things are going in the classroom." A few parents acknowledged it is nice when the teacher lets them know about their child's successes at school, and therefore, "as parents we should do the same and provide positive feedback when our child has successes at school which are attributed to the good work of the teacher." In addition to acknowledging the type of communications they desire, parents are also aware of the modes of communication they find to be most effective.

Utilize technology. Another common solution proposed by parents was that schools and teachers should utilize technology to improve parent-teacher communication. Parents recommend using technological methods (i.e., email, text message, websites) for most communication because they are easier and more efficient for communicating about students. For example, one parent described her great satisfaction with a teacher's email stating "every day we receive an email from the teacher advising what the school day consisted of for each subject, and she lists upcoming tests, any homework that is required, and any marked exams that require the parent's signature." Many parents reported they prefer the convenience of communicating via email or text, rather than through phone calls and notes. As one parent explained, "email doesn't need to be dealt with immediately the way a telephone call must be.... I don't like to have to wait for a return phone call. Phone tag is irritating." Parents also appreciated blogs, websites, and online grade systems that allow them to access information about their child's school work, as long as they are updated regularly. As one parent shared "it is nice when teachers have blogs so you can see if they are supposed to have any homework and what they did in class that day." Another parent reported "our school implemented a system of allowing parents to track the students' marks and completion of assignments called Home Logic. I think this is a very useful tool." While many parents would like teachers to embrace new communication technologies, they continue to value the parent-teacher conference as a mainstay of parent-teacher communication.

Parent-teacher conference reform. Many parents offered suggestions for improving one specific form of parent-teacher communication: the parent-teacher conference. A substantial number of parents responded with changes they would like to see to the current structure of these private, scheduled meetings. First, parents suggested that these meetings be longer and held more often. For example, one parent stated "parent-teacher interview times need to be increased from 15 mins [*sic*] to at least a half hour in order for myself to get a real clear understanding of how my child is doing in and out of class." Another parent shared "I would like to see parent teacher conferences every three or four months as opposed to twice a year." Parents also expressed they would like these meetings to be scheduled in a way that allows them to meet with all of their child's teachers. As one parent stated "at the student-parent teacher conferences we only see one teacher and I would like to be able to talk to more teachers to see how my son is doing. There just isn't enough time for that to happen." Another parent shared they would like to choose whether their child is present for the entire meeting because "it is difficult to have an open discussion with a teacher about how your child is doing with the child in the room." Though participants suggested a variety of improvements to parent-teacher communication, some parents reported being satisfied with their communication experiences, and therefore, did not feel any change was necessary.

No change needed. The final theme resulting from research question 4 acknowledges the experiences of parent participants who reported having no problems communicating with their children's teachers and responded that no change is needed to parent-teacher communication. As with the first open-ended question, the question of how to improve parent-teacher communication received many positive responses indicating that no problems existed and therefore, no changes were necessary. One parent shared "I think communication of parents and teachers has grown in leaps and bounds in the last 10 years. I do think that many teachers try very hard at having informed parents with the introduction of class web sites and newsletters." Another parent stated "I think we have had an excellent communication with our teachers. They are very accessible and are always ready to answer questions or concerns we may have." Though a few parents felt no change to parent-teacher communication was necessary, many more presented a variety of suggestions for improvement. Together with the quantitative results from research questions 1 and 2, the open-ended responses from research questions 3 and 4 begin to

describe Saskatchewan parents' experiences communicating with teachers about children, with and without exceptionalities.

The implications of these findings are discussed in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the current state of parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities and compare it to parent-teacher communication regarding students without exceptionalities. Family systems theory provided the theoretical framework for this research by conceptualizing how a family collaborates with educators (Friend & Cook, 2013; Taylor, 2000). Family systems theory maintains that families are dynamic systems, and as such, the interactions between home and school impacts the student's wellbeing (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2004; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990). Parent-teacher communication is an important component of parental involvement in education, and as such, has the potential to promote student success (Staples & Diliberto, 2010). The benefits of strong parent-teacher communication are critical for students with exceptionalities who face greater challenges to their academic achievement (e.g., behavioural and learning difficulties; Taylor, 2000). This study also sought to identify the challenges that parents face when communicating with teachers and how parents would like to see parent-teacher communication improved. The following research questions were posed:

1. How do parents and teachers communicate about students with exceptionalities?

    (a) How often do parents and teachers communicate through written, telephone, email, and face-to-face communication?

    (b) Is there a difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used?

2. How does parent-teacher communication differ between parents of students with and without exceptionalities (e.g., frequency, topics of discussion, satisfaction)?

3. What are the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication?

4. How can parent-teacher communication be improved?

Summary of Findings

1. Most parents of students with exceptionalities communicated *once or twice* a month (27.9-42.9%) or *not at all* (41.4-66.0%) for all four modes of communication (i.e., face-to-face, email/text, phone, and written communication). Two-thirds of these parents did not have a single phone conversation. Approximately half the parents indicated that they had communicated with a teacher at least once per month by email/text (58.7%), face-to-face (50.8%), or

51

written communication (57.4%). Fewer parents used phone communication (5.4%) at least once a week than using written (29.5%), face-to-face (16.8%) or email/text (15.8%) communication as frequently.

2. Among parents of students with exceptionalities, there was a significant difference between the method and the topic of communication for eight topics ($\chi^2(3) = 9.5\text{-}25.1$, $p < .05$). Four of these topics concerned assignments (e.g., learning more about homework assignments) and were most likely to be discussed by email or text message. The remaining four topics concerned the child's grades, behaviour, friendships with peers, and major physical health issues, and were most likely to be discussed face-to-face.

3. Parents of children with exceptionalities and parents of children without exceptionalities did not differ significantly in how often they communicated with their child's teacher ($U = 39952.000$, $N_1 = 194$, $N_2 = 421$, $p = .645$, two-tailed).

4. For topics ranging from homework and academic performance to classroom behaviour and health problems, parents of students with exceptionalities were significantly more likely to have communicated about the topic at least once in the past month ($U = 32752.000\text{-}37465.000$, $N_1 = 191\text{-}194$, $N_2 = 409\text{-}411$, $p = .000\text{-}.026$, two-tailed). Parents of students without exceptionalities were more likely to report that they had not communicated about the topics at all.

5. Parents of students with exceptionalities were less satisfied with their parent-teacher communication than parents of children without exceptionalities ($U = 34798.500$, $N_1 = 192$, $N_2 = 404$, $p = .035$, two-tailed).

6. Participant responses to an open-ended question revealed seven general barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication: interpersonal challenges (i.e., emotional reactions, unreceptive teachers), making contact (i.e., time constraints, unsure how to contact), communication quality (i.e., too little, not timely), method of communication (i.e., electronic vs. in person), home-school disconnect (i.e., generic communication, feeling unwelcome), exceptional challenges (i.e., obtaining services, multiple professionals involved), and no problems.

7. Participants provided suggestions for improving parent-teacher communication in seven areas: teacher availability (i.e., scheduled communication time), quality

communication (i.e., frequent, individualized, proactive), teachers as communicators (i.e., approachable, open to communicating), parental engagement (i.e., school welcomes parental involvement), utilize technology (i.e., email, text messages, school website), parent-teacher conference reform (i.e., more frequent, parent preference to meet without student), and no change needed.

Communication Regarding Students with Exceptionalities

The first research question posed was: how do parents and teachers communicate about students with exceptionalities? This question had two parts: (a) how often do parents and teachers communicate through written, telephone, email, and face-to-face communication, and (b) is there a difference between the topic of communication and the mode of communication used?

Communication Infrequency. Frequency analyses (e.g., counts and percentages) were used to assess how often parents of students with exceptionalities and teachers communicated during the previous month using each mode: face-to-face, email/text, phone, and written communication. Overall, communication was infrequent between teachers and parents of students with exceptionalities. Most parents communicated *once or twice* a month, or *not at all* for all four modes of communication. Two-thirds of these parents did not communicate with a teacher by phone. This result is consistent with participants' responses to the open-ended questions (e.g., "the teacher is not always available to speak to you when you call the school. Sometimes you play telephone tag trying to connect"). Parents reported it can be difficult to reach their child's teacher by phone and it is less convenient to communicate by phone than by other methods. More parents indicated that they had communicated with a teacher at least once per month by email/text than by face-to-face, phone, or written communication. Once again, parents' open-ended responses provide possible explanations for their preference for email/text. Many parents suggested electronic communication is easier and more efficient than traditional methods of parent-teacher communication (e.g., "the teachers I have difficulty communicating with do not use or provide their email, which is the easiest and fastest way to communicate in a busy schedule"). However, more parents indicated using written or face-to-face communication at least once a week than using email/text or phone communication as frequently. This trend suggests that frequent parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities occurs through written and face-to-face means.

The results of this study suggest that when parents and teachers communicate through email and text messaging regarding students with exceptionalities, this method is used for infrequent communication. For communication on an as-needed basis, parents may find email is the easiest and most convenient method. Indeed, Thompson (2008) interviewed parents and teachers, analyzed their emails, and found that they chose email over other modes of communication in large part because of its convenience. The asynchronous nature of email means that parents and teachers can be reached at any time, and parents do not have to be concerned about disrupting the teacher, who can respond at his or her convenience (Thompson, 2008).

Meanwhile, this study found that the few parents and teachers who communicate about students with exceptionalities frequently (i.e., *several times a week* or *about every day*) are more likely to do so through writing or a face-to-face conversation than through email/text or over the phone. This trend may be explained by two activities: the regular use of school-to-home notebooks by some teachers and parents who frequently pick up or drop off their child at school. As previously mentioned, students with exceptionalities face greater challenges in school and often require additional supports (Darch et al., 2004; Taylor, 2000). Therefore, students with exceptionalities may also be more likely to use a school-to-home notebook and be escorted to and from school by their parents than students without exceptionalities. It is also possible that parents and teachers of students with exceptionalities are more likely to take advantage of casual meetings to communicate, such as when the parent picks the child up from school. When Stuck (2004) compared parent-teacher communication by various modes of communication between the elementary and middle school levels, parents of elementary school students were much more likely than parents of middle school students to communicate frequently in writing or through informal interactions. Younger students are generally given less responsibility for communicating information between the home and school. Perhaps students with exceptionalities are also given less responsibility for communication than their typically achieving peers.

Difference between communication mode and topic. Cross-tabulation and goodness-of-fit tests were conducted to determine whether there were significant differences between the topic and mode of communication. Among parents of students with exceptionalities, there was a significant difference between the method and the topic of communication for eight topics. Four

54

of these topics concerned assignments (e.g., learning more about homework assignments) and were most likely to be discussed by email or text message. The remaining four topics concerned the child's grades, behaviour, friendships with peers and major physical health issues, and were most likely to be discussed face-to-face. This trend suggests parents choose the convenience of email/text for more everyday concerns regarding homework, but prefer to discuss more serious matters face-to-face. Similar information was gathered from the open-ended questions. Parents reported an in-person or telephone conversation is more appropriate than email for discussing certain topics, such as negative grades and behaviours.

Thompson and Mazer (2012) found similar results with a heterogeneous group of parents who preferred email for communicating about minor issues, such as homework assignments, but preferred face-to-face conversations for discussing more serious concerns, such as behavioural and social issues. Email seems to be effective for communicating simple and concrete information, while face-to-face communication is more suitable for sensitive and complex topics (Thompson, 2008). The results of the present study suggest that this is also true for parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities. Although this group of parents preferred the convenience and efficiency of email and text messaging for straightforward matters, such as homework problems, they opted for face-to-face discussions of more serious topics, such as classroom behaviour and major health issues. It is important for professionals who work with children with exceptionalities and their families to note this distinction and adjust their communication practices accordingly.

Comparing Parents of Students With and Without Exceptionalities

The second research question posed was: how does parent-teacher communication differ between parents of students with and without exceptionalities (e.g., frequency, topics of discussion, satisfaction)? When parents of children with and without exceptionalities were asked how often they communicated with their child's teacher(s) during the past month, the most common response for both groups was *once or twice.* Overall, the frequency of parent-teacher communication did not differ significantly between the two groups. This is somewhat surprising because students with exceptionalities often face greater challenges in school than their typically achieving peers and, as a result, require more support from parents and teachers. Support, whether in the form of homework help or resolving behavioural issues, likely involves parents *and* teachers, and therefore parent-teacher communication. The results of this research suggest

that parent-teacher communication is equally infrequent among parents and teachers of students with and without exceptionalities. Stuck (2004) and Murphy (2009) found similar rates of overall communication frequency to this study. It appears that parents of students with and without exceptionalities experience the same amount of parent-teacher communication and that that amount is too little. Munk et al. (2001) found that general education parents and special education parents agreed that infrequent communication is a serious problem.

Though their rate of overall communication did not differ significantly, parents of students with and without exceptionalities differed in how often they discussed specific topics with teachers. As part of the Parent-Teacher Communication Survey (PTCS), parents rated how often they had discussed sixteen topics with their child's teacher(s) in five areas: academic performance (e.g., "learning more about homework assignments"), classroom behaviour (e.g., "solutions to address my child's behaviour in class"), preparation (e.g., "how my child was not bringing materials to class"), hostile peer interactions (e.g., "my child being picked on my his/her classmates), and health (e.g., "a temporary health issue that my child is experiencing"). On 14 out of 16 of the topics, parents of students with exceptionalities were significantly more likely to have communicated about the topic at least once in the past month. Meanwhile, parents of students without exceptionalities were more likely to report that they had not communicated about the topic at all. Though parents of students with and without exceptionalities did not differ on how often they communicated with teachers, they were more likely to have discussed fourteen of the topics in question. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that parents of students with exceptionalities have a variety of concerns, and therefore, have discussed a wider range of topics with their child's teacher(s) while still having a similar number of parent-teacher communication interactions as parents of students without exceptionalities. Also, although the list of topics queried to parents covered a broad range of concerns, it was not an exhaustive list. It is possible that other issues are more relevant to parents of typically achieving students, such as test dates and student absences. However, previous research has demonstrated that students with exceptionalities are more likely to experience difficulty with the topics queried in the PTCS than students without exceptionalities (e.g., academic performance, classroom behaviour, peer relationships, health; Bohatyretz & Lipps, 2000; Bryan et al., 2001; Statistics Canada, 2008b).

Parents of students with and without exceptionalities also differed significantly in their satisfaction with parent-teacher communication. Although there was a wide range of responses

from both groups (i.e., *poor* to *very well*), overall parents of students with exceptionalities were less satisfied. In their open-ended responses to the PTCS, many parents of students with exceptionalities alluded to possible reasons for this pattern. They wrote that they felt teachers did not fully understand their child's disability or illness and were not doing enough to help their child. Perhaps parents of students with exceptionalities are less satisfied with parent-teacher communication because they have struggled to communicate their child's needs and challenges, and have often felt unheard. The response of parents in this study is consistent with the research of Pruitt et al. (1998), who interviewed parents of students receiving special education services. The response they received was that educators should listen to parents and value their input because parents know their children. Their respondents also voiced that teachers need to learn more about individual disabilities and accommodate their individual learning needs (Pruitt et al., 1998). It is also likely that the content of parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities is more negative, thus leaving parents less satisfied. As previously mentioned, parents of students with exceptionalities in this study were more likely to discuss a variety of concerns (e.g., grades, behaviour, peer interactions) with their child's teacher(s) than parents of students without exceptionalities. If students with exceptionalities face larger and more frequent challenges, the conversations that parents and teachers have about these students are likely going to be more difficult and leave both parties less satisfied.

Barriers to Parent-Teacher Communication

The third research question posed was: what are the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication? In response to the question "what challenges have you faced when communicating with your child's teacher?" parents identified barriers in seven themes: interpersonal challenges, making contact, communication quality, method of communication, home-school disconnect, exceptional challenges, and no problems. Interpersonal challenges included both parents' and teachers' emotional reactions to communication interchanges, and parents' perceptions of teachers as not open to communication. Making contact referred to the difficulty parents and teachers have finding mutually convenient times to communicate and parents not knowing how to reach teachers. The theme of communication quality was comprised of instances where parents felt that communication was too infrequent, too little information was provided, and communication came too late or not at all. Another area of concern was the method of communication chosen by the teacher. Parents did not always agree with the chosen

method, such as using email when the parent felt a phone call or face-to-face conversation would have been more appropriate. Parents also reported that a perceived home-school disconnect made them feel less welcome to communicate with teachers, and therefore less likely to do so. The theme of exceptional challenges highlighted the barriers specific to parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities, such as parents struggling to explain their child's learning needs to teachers and to access additional resources. Furthermore, a considerable number of parents had not experienced barriers to parent-teacher communication (i.e., no problems).

Family systems theory (Friend & Cook, 2013) was used as a framework for generating themes from the data. Guided by this theory, the analyses of parents' responses focused on interactional patterns since "from the systems perspective, communication breakdowns represent a faulty system rather than faulty people" (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990, p. 146). The seven themes identified reflect several key components of family systems theory. Interpersonal challenges, making contact, and home-school disconnect highlight how parents, teachers, and students are members of a complex and interconnected system, and as such, the characteristics and experiences of each member affects the others. The interactions between the child and teacher, the child and parent, and of particular interest to the present study, the teacher and parent, occur within this system and these interactions are influenced by the characteristics of each individual member. In other words, when a parent and a teacher attempt to communicate, each one brings to the table a particular set of beliefs, experiences, needs, and motivations that impacts their interaction, and in turn affects those who are connected to them, such as the student. Communication quality and method of communication underline the necessity of school support to the family system. When a family is unable to meet all the needs of its members, they may turn to members of the community, such as the school. However, exceptional challenges and no problems exemplify how the needs of each family are unique. Some families require little or no community support. Other families seek support but differ in their expectations. These differences are illustrated by the range of concerns voiced by parents over the frequency, quality, and methods of parent-teacher communication.

Parents of students with and without exceptionalities identified a variety of barriers that impede satisfactory parent-teacher communication. As demonstrated by the numerous themes that arose repeatedly in participants' responses, these parents have many shared experiences and

opinions. Through their responses, parents added depth to the quantitative findings in this study by illustrating the nuances of parent-teacher communication. Having this insight into parents' perspectives is valuable for teachers, and other professionals who work with students, who wish to understand and empathize with parents who are involved in their child's education. The results of this study reinforce the idea put forth by Garrett (2009) that teachers may not be aware of the type of communication that parents desire. When Garrett (2009) compared parents' and teachers' perceptions of parent-teacher communication, more parents than teachers reported that they were not receiving enough information to help their child be successful, that they were not contacted with good news, and that their emails and phone calls were not returned promptly. Parents were also more likely to report that teachers did not initiate contact, encourage parental involvement, or provide their availability for phone calls and meetings (Garrett, 2009). Parents felt that they were not given enough feedback, they were only contacted when there was a problem, and websites were not updated often enough to be useful (Garrett, 2009). One thing parents and teachers did agree on was that teachers do not have enough time to communicate (Garrett, 2009). Together, the results of the present study, and Garrett's (2009) research, suggest that a lack of time may be an underlying barrier to more effective parent-teacher communication. It seems that teachers are stretched thin and parents are busy, which may exacerbate other communication barriers.

Improvements to Parent-Teacher Communication

The fourth research question posed was: how can parent-teacher communication be improved? In response to the question "what would you like to see changed about the way you and your child's teacher communicate?" parents identified suggestions in seven areas: teacher availability, quality communication, teachers as communicators, parental engagement, utilize technology, parent-teacher conference reform, and no change needed. Many of parents' recommendations for improving parent-teacher communication mirror the barriers they experienced. For example, teacher availability echoes the barrier of making contact. Participants identified difficulty making contact with teachers as a barrier and increasing teacher availability as a corresponding solution. Teacher availability highlights that teachers need more time to communicate and parents need to know how best to reach them. Suggestions in the area of quality communication included making communication more positive, frequent, timely, and individualized. In the area of teachers as communicators, parents indicated that parent-teacher

communication is enhanced by teachers who are approachable communicators and skilled listeners. Parents expressed a desire for parental engagement, which is essentially the opposite of home-school disconnect. In other words, parents want schools to welcome parental involvement and for teachers to open the lines of communication. Parents requested that teachers better utilize technology by updating their websites more regularly and embracing the convenience of email and text messaging. Many parent responses were specific to parent-teacher conference reform; parents would like to have more time in these meetings, including time without their child present. There was also a group of parents who had not experienced any challenges, were satisfied with their current parent-teacher communication, and felt that there were no changes needed.

As with the previous open-ended question, family systems theory (Friend & Cook, 2013) was used as a framework for generating themes from the data. The analyses focused on the interactional patterns of parents' responses. The themes that emerged from the analyses of the second question (i.e., improvements to parent-teacher communication) closely mirrored those of the first question (i.e., barriers to parent-teacher communication), and as such, they reflected many of the same aspects of family systems theory. The second set of themes reiterate the complexity of a family system and the interconnectivity of the system's members. In accordance with family systems theory, teacher availability, quality communication, teachers as communicators, parental engagement, utilize technology, and parent-teacher conference reform all focus on improving interactional patterns, rather than changing people. Furthermore, these themes underscore the potential benefits of interactions outside of the family to a family's functioning. Successful communication between a parent and teacher can have a positive impact on the academic success of a student.

The present study provides an assortment of recommendations from parents on how to strengthen communication between parents and teachers. In Saskatchewan, parents of children with and without exceptionalities want to be able to reach teachers, but they also want teachers to reach out to them and to truly listen. Parents are willing to make the effort to communicate with teachers and acknowledge that teachers are also under many time constraints. Parents embrace email and text messaging when it is appropriate, while valuing traditional methods of parent-teacher communication, including parent-teacher conferences. Parents also appreciate

communication that is positive, individualized, and proactive. Though these suggestions may appear lofty and idealistic, they represent a larger goal for parents and teachers to aspire to.

The qualitative results of the research support the findings of Blue-Banning et al. (2004), as well as of Thompson and Mazer (2012). Through focus groups and individual interviews, Blue-Banning et al. (2004) found that parents of children with and without exceptionalities value communication that is frequent, open, and honest. It was also important to parents that professionals are tactful, positive, and clear when they communicate. Similarly, the parents surveyed by Thompson and Mazer (2012) felt that it was important to know how their child is performing in class, to have proactive parent-teacher communication about potential problems, and to have multiple opportunities to communicate with teachers. They also appreciated when teachers spoke positively, responded promptly, and maintained an open line of communication (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). When considered as a whole, the research illustrates the form of high-quality parent-teacher communication parents desire.

Limitations

The first limitation that may have impacted the results of this study is the sampling procedure. Participants were recruited from one western Canadian province. The main method of recruitment relied on the permission of school divisions and the cooperation of school principals. Out of the school divisions that were contacted, eight granted the researcher permission to contact principals and six denied the request. Subsequently, it was up to principals within the approved divisions to decide whether to share the recruitment information with their students' parents. Whether individual principals chose to advertise the study is unknown. It is possible that the home-school communication practices differed between the school divisions and principals that supported this study and those who did not. In addition to this possible confounding variable, the sample may have been biased in other ways because it was not selected randomly, therefore limiting our ability to generalize the results beyond the participating schools. Randomized selection of school divisions, as well as schools and teachers within each division would have been ideal but was not feasible. It is not possible to calculate a response rate since it is not known how many parents received recruitment information. However, 620 Saskatchewan parents completed the PTCS. This sample size was sufficient for the statistical analyses of this research.

A second limitation to take into consideration is how the data was collected. Data was collected primarily through an online survey. However, advertisements were distributed online, as well as through paper posters and brochures. The advertisements informed potential participants that a hard-copy version of the survey was also upon request. Two requests for hard copies of the survey were received. These two paper copies of the survey, along with an addressed postage-paid return envelope, were mailed out. One paper survey was returned. The additional effort required to obtain and return a paper survey may have prevented parents from doing so. Parents who would prefer completing a survey on paper rather than online may also differ in how they prefer to communicate with teachers. Several parents who wanted to complete the survey online contacted the researcher because they could not access the survey. Presumably more parents experienced the same problem. The Letter of Invitation to Parents instructed the participant to "copy and paste the following link into your browser," but it seems that some parents tried to copy and paste the address into their search bar, which does not work (see Appendix C). This may reflect their level of comfort with using technology. It is not possible to know how many parents were deterred from completing the survey because of difficulty accessing it. However, it is possible that these individuals would differ from parents who did complete the online survey in their parent-teacher communication preferences. It is recommended that future research provide clear hyperlinks to online surveys to maximize ease of access for participants. However, it is important to note that 620 Saskatchewan parents from a variety of backgrounds (i.e., age, rural or urban, education level) successfully completed the PTCS.

Another possible limitation related to data collection is the timing of the survey dissemination. Several factors related to *when* the survey was open were considered. For example, it was important that the survey be administered late enough in the school year so that parents and teachers had ample time for potential communication. It was also desirable to avoid the busiest times, such as the end of the school year. In the end, participant recruitment occurred during January and early February, which immediately followed a December school break and also coincided with the end of a semester for many school divisions. Several of the survey questions refer to "the past month," however, participants' responses may have not experienced a typical month, depending on their school's schedule and when they completed the survey. Distributing the survey at a different time of the school year may have reduced this confusion.

Finally, the design of the survey instrument used in this study (i.e. the Parent-Teacher Communication Survey) may have imposed some limitations. The Parent-Teacher Communication Survey (PTCS) was composed of adapted versions of the Parental Academic Support Scale (PASS; Thompson and Mazer, 2012) and the Parent Communication Survey (PCS; Stuck, 2004). There is limited reliability and validity evidence for both the PASS and the PCS. Thompson and Mazer (2012) conducted research to develop and pilot the PASS. Subsequently, there has not yet been any published research using the PASS, as it is a relatively new instrument. The PCS was developed by Stuck (2004) as part of her dissertation. The reliability and validity of the PCS was demonstrated once by Murphy (2009), also as a part of a dissertation. Future research using these instruments to collect validity and reliability evidence would benefit parent-teacher communication research by providing a quality instrument for assessment.

Implications for Practice

The broader purpose of this study was to inform educators, and other professionals who work with students with exceptionalities and their families of the current state of parent-teacher communication (i.e., modes of communication, topics, frequency), as well as illuminate the problems and potential solutions in parent-teacher communication. Perhaps by understanding parents' perspectives, educators will be better equipped to communicate with them. Parental involvement in a child's education, in particular parent-teacher communication, is beneficial for all students (Jeynes, 2007). It is especially important for students with exceptionalities because these students face greater barriers to success in school than their typically developing peers (Keen, 2007). The results of this study indicated parent-teacher communication can be improved, especially communication regarding students with exceptionalities. As previously discussed, parent participants in this study offered many suggestions on how to improve parent-teacher communication (i.e., teacher availability, parental engagement, utilize technology, quality communication, parent-teacher conference reform, proactive communication, teachers as communicators, home responsibility). Educators and administrators may wish to draw upon the ideas of these parents. School divisions may want to prioritize high quality parent-teacher communication through allocation of resources, scheduling of teachers, or professional development opportunities. In addition to this research, there is some indication that teacher training on communication skills may be one avenue for enhancing parent-teacher

communication (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012). Although it is imperative that educators and administrators continue to value the role of parents in education, it is prudent for the researcher to refrain from making any specific recommendations at this time, without further understanding of the current practices and perspectives of teachers.

Implications for Future Research

There is a paucity of research in the area of parent-teacher communication regarding students with exceptionalities, and so there are many directions for future research to expand upon this research. Parents' responses to the open-ended questions of the PTCS provided valuable insight into their experiences interacting with teachers. Parents of students with exceptionalities mentioned concerns unique to their situation, such as communicating with Educational Assistants and explaining their child's diagnosis. Parents of students with exceptionalities also reported being less satisfied with parent-teacher communication than parents of students without exceptionalities. Though the present research considered students with exceptionalities as a group, in fact, these students have a variety of physical, cognitive, social and emotional abilities and challenges (Winzer, 2005). As a result, the experiences and perspectives of parents and teachers of students with exceptionalities vary. An in-depth qualitative analysis, such as a focus group, would help to better understand parent-teacher communication among parents of students with exceptionalities, why they are less satisfied, and the unique experiences of communicating about specific exceptionalities.

The present study examined only parents' perspectives on communicating with teachers about students with exceptionalities. Yet, it has been demonstrated that parents and teachers may have very different perceptions of communication effectiveness (Garrett, 2009). Future research may wish to examine the other half of parent-teacher communication because even less is known about teachers' perspectives. It would be useful to understand teachers' current communication practices and preferences, as well as how teachers' perspectives compare to parents' perspectives.

The participants who completed the PTCS varied on a number of demographic variables (e.g., child's age, rural or urban, parent education level). However, exceptionality status (i.e., whether the child had an exceptionality or not) was the only variable analyzed in this study. It would be interesting to explore the relationship between parent-teacher communication and other characteristics of children and their families. For example, the effect of age on parent-teacher communication warrants exploration. The present study examined parent-teacher communication

regarding students from kindergarten to grade 12. However, Stuck (2004) found that parents at the elementary and middle school levels differed in their frequency of and satisfaction with communication.

Many parents of students with and without exceptionalities reported that they are satisfied with their parent-teacher communication experiences, have not experienced any challenges and would not make any changes. In the future, it would be beneficial for researchers to frame their research question positively and ask parents "what *is* working?"

Conclusion

Students with exceptionalities and their parents often face great obstacles to learning (Taylor, 2000). Parent-teacher communication is a major component of parental involvement, and as such, has the potential to help all students succeed in school, including students with exceptionalities (Keen, 2007). Yet, there has been little research to date assessing how parents and teachers communicate regarding students with exceptionalities, and how well it is working. By viewing parent-teacher communication through the lens of family systems theory, we can understand how parent-teacher interactions have the potential to promote academic achievement for students, especially students with exceptionalities.

This study described the current state of parent-teacher communication from the perspective of parents of children with exceptionalities. This group of parents tends to communicate by text or email when communication is infrequent, but the few that are in contact with teachers more than once a week tend to use written or face-to-face interactions. This study compared parents of children with and without exceptionalities and their experiences with parent-teacher communication. Though the groups did not differ in how often they communicated, parents of students with exceptionalities were more likely to discuss a variety of topics related to their child's performance in school and to be less satisfied with their communication experiences. This study also solicited parents' perceptions on the barriers to satisfactory parent-teacher communication and their ideas to make improvements. Parents provided a variety of responses outlining how they would like to see high quality, high frequency, two-way communication.

Overall, this study illustrates how parents and teachers communicate about students in Saskatchewan and how that communication differs when a student has an exceptionality. Research in this area has important implications for students with exceptionalities, their parents,

and the professionals with whom they work. The results of this study suggest that parents of students with exceptionalities require more parent-teacher communication than is currently occurring. Further study is necessary to better our understanding of effective parent-teacher communication in order to address this real concern in the education system.

References

Berger, E. H. (2008). *Parents as partners in education: Families and schools working together.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Blue-Banning, M., Summers, J. A., Frankland, H. C., Nelson, L. L., & Beegle, G. (2004). Dimensions of family and professional partnerships: Constructive guidelines for collaboration. *Exceptional Children, 70*(2), 167-184.

Blue-Banning, M. J., Turnbull, A. P., & Pereira, L. (2000). Group action planning as a support strategy for Hispanic families: Parent and professional perspectives. *Mental Retardation, 38*(3), 262-275.

Bohatyretz, S., & Lipps, G. (2000). Diversity in the classroom: Characteristics of elementary students receiving special education. *Education Quarterly Review, 6*(2), 7-19. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 81-003-XIE

Bursuck, W. D., Harniss, M. K., Epstein, M. H., Polloway, E. A., Jayanthi, M., & Wissinger, L. M. (1999). Solving communication problems about homework: Recommendations of special education teachers. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 14*(3), 149-158.

Brace, N., Kemp, R., & Snelgar, R. (2013). *SPSS for psychologists.* (5th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryan, T., Burstein, K., & Bryan, J. (2001). Students with learning disabilities: Homework problems and promising practices. *Educational Psychologist, 36*(3), 167-180. doi:10.1207/S15326985EP3603_3

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. (1982). Part I of the Constitution Act, 1982, being Schedule B to the Canada Act 1982 (U.K.), 1982, c. 11

Chaboudy, R., & Jameson, P. (2001). Connecting families and schools through technology. *Book Report, 20*(2), 52-57.

Christenson, S. L. (2003). The family-school partnership: An opportunity to promote the learning competence of all students. *School Psychology Quarterly, 18*(4), 454-482. doi:10.1521/scpq.18.4.454.26995

Cohen, J. (1992). A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin, 112*(1), 155-159.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research methods in education* (7th ed.). New York: Routledge.

Couchenour, D., & Chrisman, K. (2004). *Families, schools, and communities: Together for young children* (2nd ed.). Clifton Park, NY: Delmar Learning.

Darch, C., Miao, Y., & Shippen, P. (2004). A model for involving parents of children with learning and behavior problems in the schools. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 48*(3), 24-34. doi:10.3200/PSFL.48.3.24-34

Davern, L. (2004). School-to-home notebooks: What parents have to say. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 36*(5), 22-27.

Deslandes, R., Royer, E., Potvin, P., & Leclerc, D. (1999). Patterns of home and school partnership for general and special education students at the secondary level. *Exceptional Children, 65*(4), 496-506.

Dettmer, P., Thurston, L. P., Knackendoffel, A., & Dyck, N. J. (2009). *Collaboration, consultation, and teamwork for students with special needs* (6th ed.). Columbus, OH: Pearson.

Dworet, D., & Bennett, S. (2002). A view from the North: Special education in Canada. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 34*(5), 22-27. Retrieved from http://cec.metapress.com/content/0380V31MP835M2M4

Epstein, J. L. (1986). Parents' reactions to teacher practices of parent involvement. *The Elementary School Journal, 86*(3), 277-294.

Epstein, J. L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships: Caring for the children we share. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*(9), 701-712. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/20405436

Epstein, J. L. (1996). Advances in family, community, and school partnerships. *Community Education Journal, 23*(3), 10-15.

Epstein, J. L. (2001). *School, family, and community partnerships: Preparing educators and improving schools.* Boulder, CO: Westview.

Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Sheldon, S. B., Simon, B. S., Clark Salinas, K., Rodriguez Jansorn, N., . . . Williams, K. J. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Epstein, J. L., & Sheldon, S. B. (2002). Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement. *The Journal of Educational Research, 95*(5), 308-318. doi:10.1080/00220670209596604

Epstein, M. H., Polloway, E. A., Foley, R. M., & Patton, J. R. (1993). A comparison of teachers' and parents' perceptions of the problems experienced by students identified as having behavioral disorders, learning, disabilities, or no disabilities. *Remedial and Special Education, 14*(5), 40-50. doi:10.1177/074193259301400507

Esquivel, S. L., Ryan, C. S., & Bonner, M. (2008). Involved parents' perceptions of their experiences in school-based team meetings. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 18*(3), 234-258. doi:10.1080/10474410802022589

Friend, M., & Cook, L. (2013). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Garrett, L. M. (2009). Parent-teacher communication: What parents and teachers think and what school leaders need to know. *Journal of School Public Relations, 30*(1), 28-50.

Gerstein, S. (2004). *Benefits and influences of parent involvement for children with learning disabilities* (Master's thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (NR06300)

Government of Saskatchewan. (1997). *The Education Act, 1995.* Regina, SK: Author.

Hallahan, D. P., Kauffman, J. M., McIntyre, L. J., & Mykota, D. (2010). *Exceptional learners: An introduction to special education.* Toronto, Canada: Pearson.

Harniss, M. K., Epstein, M. H., Bursuck, W. D., Nelson, J., & Jayanthi, M. (2001). Resolving homework-related communication problems: Recommendations of parents of children with and without disabilities. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 17*(3), 205-225. doi: 10.1080/10573560118464

Hernandez, S., & Leung, B. (2004). Using the internet to boost parent-teacher relationships. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 40*(3), 136-138.

Heward, W. L. (2000). *Exceptional children: An introduction to special education* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Hiatt-Michael, D. B. (2010). Communication practices that bridge home with school. In D. B. Hiatt-Michael (Ed.), *Promising practices to support family involvement in schools* pp. 25-55). Charlotte, NC: Information Age.

Hill, N. E., & Tyson, D. F. (2009). Parental involvement in middle school: A meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote achievement. *Developmental Psychology, 45*(3), 740-763.

Hutchinson, N. L. (2010). *Inclusion of exceptional learners in Canadian schools: A practical handbook for teachers* (3rd ed.)*.* Toronto: Prentice Hall.

IBM Corp. (2011). IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows (Version 20.0) [Computer software]. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.

Jeynes, W. H. (2007). The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement. *Urban Education, 42*(1), 82-110. doi:10.1177/0042085906293818

Kauffman, J. M, & Hallahan, D. P. (2005). *Special education: What it is and why we need it.* Boston: Pearson Education.

Keen, D. (2007). Parents, families, and partnerships: Issues and considerations. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 54*(3), 339-349. doi:10.1080/10349120701488855

Kroth, R. L., & Edge, D. (2007). *Communicating with parents and families of exceptional children* (4th ed.)*.* Denver, CO: Love.

Lake, J. F., & Billingsley, B. S. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial and Special Education, 21*(4), 240-251.

McDonnall, M. C., Cavenaugh, B. S., & Giesen, J. M. (2010). The relationship between parental involvement and mathematics achievement for students with visual impairments. *The Journal of Special Education,* 1-12. doi:10.1177/0022466910365169

Middleton, C. A., & Leith, J. (2008). An analysis of Canadians' scope of internet usage. *Ted Rogers School of Information Technology Management Publications and Research.* Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/trsitm/11

Munk, D. D., Bursuck, W. D., Epstein, M. H., Jayanthi, M., Nelson, J., & Polloway, E. A. (2001). Homework communication problems: Perspectives of special and general education parents. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 17*(3), 189-203.

Murphy, J. L. (2009). Survey study of the relationship between parents' and teachers' perceptions of what constitutes effective school-to-home communications (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (AAT 3344457)

Nichols, S. (2000). Parental involvement in supporting children with learning difficulties. *Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties, 5*(2), 28-33. doi:10.1080/19404150009546624

Patrikakou, E. N., & Weissberg, R. P. (2000). Parents' perceptions of teacher outreach and parent involvement in children's education. *Journal of Prevention & Intervention in the Community, 20*(1-2), 103-119. doi:10.1300/J005v20n01_08

Patrikakou, E. N., Weissberg, R. P., Redding, S., & Walberg, H. J. (Eds.). (2005). *School-family partnerships for children's success.* New York: Teachers College.

Pinkus, S. (2006). Applying a family systems perspective for understanding parent-professional relationships: A study of families located in the Anglo-Jewish community. *Support for Learning, 21*(3), 156-161. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9604.2006.00422.x

Polloway, E. A., Bursuck, W. D., & Epstein, M. H. (2001). Homework for students with learning disabilities: The challenge of home-school communication. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 17*(3), 181-187.

Porter, L., & McKenzie, S. (2000). *Professional collaboration with parents of children with disabilities.* London: Whurr Publishers.

Prezant, F. P., & Marshak, L. (2006). Helpful actions seen through the eyes of parents of children with disabilities. *Disability & Society, 21*(1), 31-45.

Pruitt, P., Wandry, D., & Hollums, D. (1998). Listen to us! Parents speak out about their interactions with special educators. *Preventing School Failure*, *42*(4), 161-166. doi:10.1080/10459889809603732

Rock, M. L. (2000). Parents as equal partners: Balancing the scales of IEP development. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 32*(6), 30-37. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=EJ609767

Saskatchewan Education. (2001). *Creating opportunities for students with intellectual or multiple disabilities.* Regina, SK: Author.

Saskatchewan Education. (2002). *Working together toward school[PLUS]: Parent and community partnerships in education: Handbook.* Regina, SK: Author.

Saskatchewan Learning. (2002). *Children's services policy framework*. Regina, SK: Author.

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2008) *Personal program plans (PPP): SMART outcomes and student outcome rubrics.* Retrieved from www.education.gov.sk.ca/PPP-SORs

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2012). *Inclusion and intervention plans.* Retrieved from
http://www.education.gov.sk.ca/IIP

Simeonsson, R. J., Scarborough, A. A., & Hebbeler, K. M. (2006). ICF and ICD codes provide a
standard language of disability in young children. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology,
59*(4), 365-373. doi:10.1016/j.jclinepi.2005.09.009

Spann, S. J., Kohler, F. W., & Soenksen, D. (2003). Examining parents' involvement in and
perceptions of special education services: An interview with families in a parent support
group. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities. 18*(4), 228-237.
doi:10.1177/10883576030180040401

Staples, K. E., & Diliberto, J. A. (2010). Guidelines for successful parent involvement: Working
with parents of students with disabilities. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 42*(6), 58-
63.

Statistics Canada. (2007). Participation and Activity Limitation Survey 2006: Technical and
methodological report. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-628-XIE. Ottawa, Ontario.
http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-628-x/89-628-x2007001-eng.htm (accessed November
12, 2012).

Statistics Canada. (2008a). Participation and Activity Limitation Survey 2006: A profile on
education for children with disabilities in Canada. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-
628-X no. 004. Ottawa, ON. http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-628-x/89-628-x2008004-
eng.htm (accessed November 12, 2012).

Statistics Canada. (2008b). Participation and Activity Limitation Survey 2006: Families of
children with disabilities in Canada. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 89-628-X no. 009.
Ottawa, ON. http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-628-x/89-628-x2008009-eng.htm
(accessed November 12, 2012).

Strom, R. D., & Strom, P. S. (2002). Teacher-parent communication reforms. *The High School
Journal, 86*(2), 14-21. doi: 10.1353/hsj.2002.0025

Stuck, L. C. (2004). An exploratory study of the relationships between teacher to parent
communication, parent trust, and teacher trust (Doctoral dissertation). Available from
ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (3134406)

Symeou, L., Roussounidou, E., & Michaelides, M. (2012). "I feel much more confident now to
talk with parents": An evaluation of in-service training on teacher-parent communication.

School Community Journal, 22(1), 65-87. Retrieved from
http://www.schoolcommunitynetwork.org

Taylor, G. (2000). *Parental involvement: A practical guide for collaboration and teamwork for students with disabilities.* Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.

Thomas, V., & Ray, K. E. (2006). Counseling exceptional individuals and their families: A systems perspective. *Professional School Counselling, 10*(1), 58-65. Retrieved from http://schoolcounselor.metapress.com/content/WHR69001G7573M75

Thompson, B. (2008). Characteristics of parent–teacher e-mail communication. *Communication Education, 57*(2), 201-223. doi:10.1080/03634520701852050

Thompson, B., & Mazer, J. P. (2012). Development of the parental academic support scale: Frequency, importance, and modes of communication. *Communication Education, 61*(2), 131-160. doi: 10.1080/03634523.2012.657207

Turnbull, A., & Turnbull, R. (1986). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: A special partnership.* Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Turnbull, H. R., & Turnbull, A. P. (1990). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: A special partnership* (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill.

Turnbull, A., & Turnbull, R. (2000). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Collaborating for empowerment* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Turnbull, A., Turnbull, R., Erwin, E. J., & Soodak, L. C. (2006). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust* (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Turnbull, A., Turnbull, R., Erwin, E. J., Soodak, L. C., & Shogren, K. A. (2011). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnerships and trust* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Üstün, T. B., Chatterji, S., Bickenbach, J., Kostanjsek, N., & Schneider, M. (2003). The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health: A new tool for understanding disability and health. *Disability and Rehabilitation, 25*(11-12), 565-571. doi:10.1080/0963828031000137063

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*(1), 3-43. doi:10.1177/009365096023001001

Winzer, M. (2005). *Children with exceptionalities in Canadian classrooms* (7th ed.). Toronto,

Canada: Prentice Hall.

World Health Organization. (2007). *ICF-CY: International classification of functioning,*

disability, and health: Children & youth version. Geneva, Switzerland: Author.

Appendix A: Parent-Teacher Communication Survey

Parent-Teacher Communication Survey

Parent-teacher communication plays an important role in the success of our students. The purpose of this study is to learn from you, the parents, how you communicate with your child's teacher(s).

If you have more than one child in school, please select the child who experiences one or more of the difficulties described below. If these do not apply to any of your children, please select the child whose name is first alphabetically among your children.

A) The following questions concern whether a physical condition, mental condition or health problem reduces the amount or the kind of activity your child can do at school. **Please respond "yes" only for difficulties or conditions that have lasted or are expected to last for six months or more.**

Does your child...?		
have difficulty hearing - e.g.) uses a hearing aid, cochlear implant, TTY, amplifier, or another aid	YES	NO
have difficulty seeing - e.g.) uses magnifiers, large print or Braille reading materials, talking books, a white cane, or another aid	YES	NO
have difficulty speaking or making him/herself understood when speaking - e.g.) uses a voice amplifier, computer, picture board, or another aid	YES	NO
have difficulty walking on a flat firm surface, such as a sidewalk or floor, or walking up or down a flight of stairs - e.g.) uses orthopedic footwear, cane or crutches, walker, wheelchair, braces, lifts, or another aid	YES	NO
have difficulty using his/her hands or fingers to grasp or hold small objects, such as a pencil or scissors, difficulty bending down and picking up an object from the floor, or difficulty reaching in any direction - e.g.) uses a hand or arm brace, grasping tools, pencil grip, adapted utensils, or another aid	YES	NO
have difficulty learning, remembering or concentrating - e.g.) a learning disability, such as dyslexia, hyperactivity or attention problems	YES	NO
have a delay in his/her development, either a physical, intellectual or another type of delay, because of a condition or health problem - e.g.) autism, Down syndrome, mental impairment due to a lack of oxygen at birth	YES	NO
have any emotional, psychological or behavioural conditions - e.g.) anxiety, depression, substance abuse, anorexia, or another condition	YES	NO
have a chronic condition(s) that has lasted or is expected to last six months or more - e.g.) asthma or severe allergies, heart condition, kidney disease, cancer, diabetes, epilepsy, autism, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, migraines, arthritis or rheumatism, paralysis, missing or malformed limbs, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Down syndrome, or any other complex medical care needs	YES	NO

If you responded "YES" to one or more of the above questions, please answer the following:					
In the past 6 months, how often has your child had difficulty participating in school activities because of the above condition(s)?	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Less than once per month	Never
How much difficulty does your child have with school activities because of the above condition(s)?	A lot of difficulty		Some difficulty		No difficulty

B) Please use the scale below to indicate how often you and your child's teacher(s) use each of the four types of communication: (circle one response)

This past month, I communicated with my child's teacher(s) using...	NOT AT ALL	ONCE OR TWICE	ABOUT ONCE A WEEK	SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK	ABOUT EVERY DAY
Face-to-face conversation	1	2	3	4	5
Email/ text message	1	2	3	4	5
Phone	1	2	3	4	5
Written communication	1	2	3	4	5
OVERALL, during the past month, how often did you communicate with your child's teacher(s)?	1	2	3	4	5

C) How often have you communicated with your child's teacher(s) over the last month regarding each of these topics? (circle one response)

This past month, I communicated with my child's teacher(s) about...	NOT AT ALL	ONCE OR TWICE	ABOUT ONCE A WEEK	SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK	ABOUT EVERY DAY
A question I had about an assignment	1	2	3	4	5
Learning more about homework assignments	1	2	3	4	5
My child being picked on by his/her classmates	1	2	3	4	5
Why my child received the grade he/she did	1	2	3	4	5
How my child can improve his/her grade	1	2	3	4	5
Why my child was not completing assignments	1	2	3	4	5
Why my child has a missing assignment	1	2	3	4	5
A major physical health issue that my child is experiencing	1	2	3	4	5
A major classroom behavioural incident (fight, racial slur, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
My child goofing off in class	1	2	3	4	5
My child talking back to the teacher	1	2	3	4	5
A temporary health issue that my child is experiencing	1	2	3	4	5
My child's grades in class	1	2	3	4	5
How my child was not bringing materials to class	1	2	3	4	5
Solutions to address my child's behaviour in class	1	2	3	4	5
My child's ability to make/maintain friendships with peers	1	2	3	4	5

D) For each topic, if you communicated with your child's teacher(s) about it in the past month, what method of communication did you use to communicate?

This past month, I communicated with my child's teacher(s) about...	FACE-TO-FACE	EMAIL/ TEXT MESSAGE	PHONE	WRITTEN COMMUNICATION	DON'T KNOW/ NOT APPLICABLE
A question I had about an assignment	1	2	3	4	5
Learning more about homework assignments	1	2	3	4	5
My child being picked on by his/her classmates	1	2	3	4	5
Why my child received the grade he/she did	1	2	3	4	5
How my child can improve his/her grade	1	2	3	4	5
Why my child was not completing assignments	1	2	3	4	5
Why my child has a missing assignment	1	2	3	4	5
A major physical health issue that my child is experiencing	1	2	3	4	5
A major classroom behavioural incident (fight, racial slur, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
My child goofing off in class	1	2	3	4	5
My child talking back to the teacher	1	2	3	4	5
A temporary health issue that my child is experiencing	1	2	3	4	5
My child's grades in class	1	2	3	4	5
How my child was not bringing materials to class	1	2	3	4	5
Solutions to address my child's behaviour in class	1	2	3	4	5
My child's ability to make/maintain friendships with peers	1	2	3	4	5

E)	POOR	FAIR	WELL	VERY WELL
OVERALL, how do you feel your child's teacher(s) does communicating with you?	0	1	2	3

F) Sometimes parents are not happy with how often they communicate with teachers, what they communicate about, or how the communication occurs. In your experience, what challenges have you faced when communicating with your child's teacher?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

G) In your opinion, what would make parent-teacher communication better? What would you like to see changed about the way you and your child's teacher communicate?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

H) Demographic Information

1) How old is your child? ___

2) What grade is your child in? ___

3) What is your relationship to the child?
   ☐ Parent   ☐ Step-Parent   ☐ Grandparent
   ☐ Foster Parent   ☐ Aunt/Uncle   ☐ Other_____

4) How many children (age 18 and under) live in your household?

5) Please check one setting that best describes where your child attends school:
   ☐ Urban   ☐ Urban/First Nations
   ☐ Rural   ☐ Rural/First Nations

6) What is your gender?
   ☐ Female   ☐ Male

7) What is your age?
   ☐ 19-29   ☐ 30-39   ☐ 40-49   ☐ 50-59   ☐ 60+

8) Please check one that best describes your marital status:
   ☐ Single   ☐ Married   ☐ Living with a partner
   ☐ Separated   ☐ Divorced   ☐ Widowed

9) What level of education have you completed?
   ☐ Some high school   ☐ Graduated from high school   ☐ Some postsecondary
   training
   ☐ Graduated from a college ☐ Graduated from a university

10) What is your annual household income?
   ☐ $29,999 and below   ☐ $30,000 to $39,999   ☐ $40,000 or more

11) What ethnicity/culture do you identify with? (e.g. Canadian, Chinese, Filipino, First Nations, Métis, etc.) Please specify: _____

Appendix B:

Participant Recruitment Materials

UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY & SPECIAL EDUCATION

Are you a **parent**?

Does your child attend a Saskatchewan elementary, middle, or high school?

Would you like a chance to win one of three **$50 gift cards** to Indigo Books & Music?

If yes, please consider taking **10-15 minutes** to complete this **online survey**.

Parent-Teacher Communication Survey

The title of this research project is *Communicating with teachers: Perspectives from parents of children with and without exceptionalities.* The purpose of this study is to give you the opportunity to share your perspectives on parent-teacher communication, the challenges parents face when communicating with teachers and possible solutions for improvement. This research study is part of my thesis to obtain a Masters of Education and has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board.

If you wish to participate, please visit: ***survey website***.

If you have any questions about the study or would like to receive a paper copy, please contact:

Researcher:
Darla Kalenchuk, B.A., M. Ed. candidate
Email: ddk827@mail.usask.ca
Home Telephone: (306) 979-7553

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Laureen McIntyre, S-LP(C), CCC-SLP
Email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca
Office Telephone: (306) 966-5266

This research was supported by:

Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LEAFLET

Are you a **parent**?

Does your child attend a Saskatchewan elementary, middle, or high school?

Would you like a chance to win one of three **$50 gift cards** to Indigo Books & Music?

If yes, please consider taking **10-15 minutes** to complete this **online survey**.

The title of this research project is *Communicating with teachers: Perspectives from parents of children with and without exceptionalities.* The purpose of this study is to give you the opportunity to share your perspectives on parent-teacher communication, the challenges parents face when communicating with teachers and possible solutions for improvement. This research study is part of my thesis to obtain a Masters of Education and has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board.

If you wish to participate, please visit: ***survey website***.

If you have any questions about the study or would like to receive a paper copy, please contact:

Researcher:
Darla Kalenchuk, B.A., M. Ed. candidate
Email: ddk827@mail.usask.ca
Home Telephone: (306) 979-7553

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Laureen McIntyre, S-LP(C), CCC-SLP
Email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca
Office Telephone: (306) 966-5266

UNIVERSITY OF
SASKATCHEWAN

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY & SPECIAL EDUCATION

Appendix C:

Letters of Invitation

LETTER OF INVITATION TO SCHOOL DIVISIONS

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education
College of Education
28 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1

December 1, 2012

Contact Name
School Division Address

Dear *Contact Name*:

I am a master's student in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan, supervised by Dr. Laureen McIntyre. For my master's thesis, I am conducting a research study to explore the communication that occurs between parents and teachers about general students and students with exceptionalities in Saskatchewan elementary, middle, and high schools. The research study is entitled *Communicating with teachers: Perspectives from parents of children with and without exceptionalities* and has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board.

I am approaching you, as the Director of the *School Division Name*, to request permission to recruit parent participants within your school division. With your approval, I would like to ask school principals to forward an email Letter of Invitation to all parents. The letter contains information about the study, including a link to the online survey which takes 10-15 minutes to complete (please see attached letter). Those who complete the survey may be entered into a draw for one of three $50 gift cards to Indigo Books & Music as a thank you.

The information gathered from parents by this study has the potential to help educators and other professionals who work with families to better understand parents' perspectives and to improve the ways they communicate with parents about all students, especially students with exceptionalities. I hope you will be a part of it.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,

Darla Kalenchuk

If you have any questions about the study please feel free to contact:

Researcher:
Darla Kalenchuk, B.A., M. Ed. candidate
Email: ddk827@mail.usask.ca
Home Telephone: (306) 979-7553

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Laureen McIntyre, S-LP(C), CCC-SLP
Email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca
Office Telephone: (306) 966-5266

LETTER OF INVITATION TO PRINCIPALS

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education
College of Education
28 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1

December 1, 2012

Contact Name
School Address

Dear *Contact Name*:

I am a master's student in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan, supervised by Dr. Laureen McIntyre. For my master's thesis, I am conducting a research study to explore the communication that occurs between parents and teachers about general students and students with exceptionalities in Saskatchewan elementary, middle, and high schools. The research study is entitled *Communicating with teachers: Perspectives from parents of children with and without exceptionalities* and has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board.

With *Director's Name*'s permission, I am approaching you, as the Principal of the *School Name*, to request your help in recruiting parent participants. I am asking that you please forward an email Letter of Invitation to the parents of your students. The letter contains information about the study, including a link to the online survey which takes 10-15 minutes to complete (please see attached letter). Those who complete the survey may be entered into a draw for one of three $50 gift cards to Indigo Books & Music as a thank you.

The information gathered from parents by this study has the potential to help educators and other professionals who work with families to better understand parents' perspectives and to improve the ways they communicate with parents about all students, especially students with exceptionalities. I hope you will be a part of it.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,

Darla Kalenchuk

If you have any questions about the study please feel free to contact:	

Researcher:
Darla Kalenchuk, B.A., M. Ed. candidate
Email: ddk827@mail.usask.ca
Home Telephone: (306) 979-7553

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Laureen McIntyre, S-LP(C), CCC-SLP
Email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca
Office Telephone: (306) 966-5266

LETTER OF INVITATION TO COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education
College of Education
28 Campus Drive
Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1

December 1, 2012

Community Organization Name
Address

Dear *Contact Name*:

I am a master's student in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan, supervised by Dr. Laureen McIntyre. For my master's thesis, I am conducting a research study to explore the communication that occurs between parents and teachers about general students and students with exceptionalities in Saskatchewan elementary, middle, and high schools. The research study is entitled *Communicating with teachers: Perspectives from parents of children with and without exceptionalities* and has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board.

I am approaching you to request your help in recruiting parent participants to complete a brief online survey (also available in hard-copy). Those who complete the survey may be entered into a draw for one of three $50 gift cards to Indigo Books & Music as a thank you. If you are willing, I ask that you please do one or both of the following:

- Forward the Letter of Invitation (please see attached letter) by email to your clients who are the parent or primary caregiver of a child in a Saskatchewan elementary, middle, or high school.

- Display a poster and leaflets, provided by the researcher, containing information about this research study in your office or waiting area.

The information gathered from parents by this study has the potential to help educators and other professionals who work with families to better understand parents' perspectives and to improve the ways they communicate with parents about all students, especially students with exceptionalities. I hope you will be a part of it.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing your response.

Sincerely,

Darla Kalenchuk

If you have any questions about the study please feel free to contact:

Researcher:	Faculty Supervisor:
Darla Kalenchuk, B.A., M. Ed. candidate	Dr. Laureen McIntyre, S-LP(C), CCC-SLP
Email: ddk827@mail.usask.ca	Email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca
Home Telephone: (306) 979-7553	Office Telephone: (306) 966-5266

Parent-Teacher Communication Survey

Dear Parent,

You are being invited to take part in a brief online survey because you are the parent or primary caregiver of a child in a Saskatchewan elementary, middle, or high school. It will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete this online survey. (Please contact the researcher to obtain a paper version of the survey.) To thank you for your voluntarily participation in this study, you may enter your name into a draw for one of three $50 gift cards to Indigo Books & Music.

The title of this research project is *Communicating with teachers: Perspectives from parents of children with and without exceptionalities.* The purpose of this study is to give you the opportunity to share your perspectives on parent-teacher communication, the challenges parents face when communicating with teachers and possible solutions for improvement. This research study is part of my thesis to obtain a Masters of Education and has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board.

If you wish to participate, you may copy and paste the following link into your browser: **survey website**. Please take a moment to share this email with other parents who may be interested in sharing their views on parent-teacher communication.

Sincerest thanks for your help,

Darla Kalenchuk
Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education
University of Saskatchewan

If you have any questions about the study or would like to receive a paper copy, please contact:

Researcher:
Darla Kalenchuk, B.A., M. Ed. candidate
Email: ddk827@mail.usask.ca
Home Telephone: (306) 979-7553

Faculty Supervisor:
Dr. Laureen McIntyre, S-LP(C), CCC-SLP
Email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca
Office Telephone: (306) 966-5266

Appendix D:

Participant Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN
    Department of Educational Psychology & Special Education

Parent-Teacher Communication Survey

Dear Parent,

Welcome to a new research study: *Communicating with teachers: Perspectives from parents of children with and without exceptionalities.* It will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete this online survey. To thank you for your voluntarily participation in this study, you may enter your name into a draw for one of three $50 gift cards to Indigo Books & Music.

Purpose of the Research

The goal of this study is to understand the communication that occurs between parents and teachers about students, with and without exceptionalities, in Saskatchewan schools.

Potential Risks & Benefits

There are no known discomforts, inconveniences, or risks to you by participating in this study. However, if you should experience any distress, you may discontinue at any time. It is possible that information gathered by this study will help educators, psychologists, and other professionals who work with families to better understand parents' perspectives and to improve the ways they communicate with parents about all students, including those with exceptionalities.

Confidentiality

Your responses to the survey questions will be completely anonymous. No identify information will be collected about you as part of the survey. Demographic information, such as your relationship to the child and whether your child has an exceptionality, will be used to organize the data and to analyze the results. The responses gathered from participants will be pooled and the results will only be reported in summarized form. The results of this study will be used primarily in the completion of a master's thesis and may also be shared at professional conferences, in research presentations, or through publications.

If you choose to provide your email address or phone number to enter into the draw for one of three gift certificates, this information will be stored separately from the survey data and

cannot be linked back to your survey responses in any way. This information will only be used to fill out your draw entry and will be destroyed immediately after the draw is complete.

Right to Withdraw

Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the study for any reason. Should you wish to withdraw, simply indicate this by not completing the survey and your data will not be saved. There is no penalty for withdrawing and nobody will be upset. Your right to withdraw your data from the study will apply until you submit your completed survey. After this point, your responses cannot be withdrawn because of the anonymous nature of the study.

Questions, Concerns & Follow-up

This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office ethics.office@usask.ca (306) 966-2975. Out of town participants may call toll free (888) 966-2975.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if you are interested in learning about the results, please feel free to contact the researcher or her supervisor. An electronic copy of the thesis will be available online through the University of Saskatchewan at http://ecommons.usask.ca.

Consent

By completing and submitting the survey, **YOUR FREE AND INFORMED CONSENT IS IMPLIED** and indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this unique research opportunity. Your contribution is greatly appreciated!
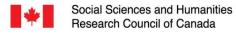
Researcher:
Darla Kalenchuk, B.A., M. Ed. candidate
Email: ddk827@mail.usask.ca
Home Telephone: (306) 979-7553

Supervisor:
Dr. Laureen McIntyre, S-LP(C), CCC-SLP
Email: laureen.mcintyre@usask.ca
Office Telephone: (306) 966-5266

This research was supported by:

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines du Canada

Canada