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## **Juvenile Probation Officers' Perspectives of the Special Education Process**

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JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICERS' PERSPECTIVES OF THE SPECIAL  
EDUCATION PROCESS

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education  
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MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Action Research Final Project** of

LAUREN TRAINER

has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the

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Arts in Education degree.

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**DEDICATION:**

This project is dedicated to my family, without whom I would be nothing. Words can't express how much I appreciate their patience, love, and belief in my ability to do this and anything else I set my mind to. I am eternally grateful to have them in my corner.

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## ABSTRACT

### JUVENILE PROBATION OFFICERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROCESS

This qualitative research study examined juvenile probation officers' perspectives of special education. Juvenile probation officers who work with youth who receive special education services agreed to participate in this study to help the researcher learn more about how they view special education. Since the two professional groups (juvenile probation officers and special education teachers) often work with the same demographic, learning more about their perspectives can help improve their working relationships. However, even more importantly, the services youth receive may also be improved through gaining a better understanding of others' perspectives. A combination of formal interview questions and observations were used to collect the data. The themes that emerged from the data were: inadequate communication/lack of understanding among professionals, lack of respect for other professionals and/or their time, respect for education, and frustration with the special education. This suggests that the juvenile probation officers in this study feel that education is very important for the youth they serve, but that they could use more information about special education and benefit from improving their communication and interactions with other professionals. Additionally, special educators could also improve on their communication skills and their understanding of the correctional system when interacting with probation staff.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

Fourteen-year-old Rob committed a crime in his community. He was brought to court and found guilty of robbery. At that time, he was given a sentence and a probation officer who would follow him until he satisfied all the conditions the judge ordered. In Rob's case, that meant completing a nine month day treatment program where he was to work on his criminal thinking and his ability to control his anger. He was also responsible for doing several hours of community service where he could earn \$7.00/hour to pay back the debt he owed his victim from the robbery. He also needed to write an apology letter to his victim, accepting responsibility for his actions, acknowledging the impact his crime had on them, and explaining how he will be different in the future. Finally, there was an expectation that he would attend school on a regular basis and make progress towards graduation. Until he did all of those things, the probation officer would be working with him.

At first, Rob was smug. He thought he'd be able to do all the things he was expected to do with no problems. He planned on going through the motions, checking off each "to do item" on his list, and not really changing or growing at all. However, he wasn't used to an adult really having any power or control over his life. His home life situation wasn't functional (his mother wasn't around much and he had no rules he needed to follow). Being accountable to his probation officer to be home on time, stay sober, and come to school regularly added stressors to his life that he

never experienced before. Additionally, Rob qualified for special education services due to an emotional/behavioral disability. For Rob, this meant that it was very difficult for him to manage his frustration and anger in the school setting and that he had to work closely with the school special education staff to make academic progress. What he thought would be an easy consequence to accept and complete ended up making Rob very angry. Within two weeks, he was so frustrated, he ran away and stopped checking in with his probation officer or coming to his program.

A warrant for his arrest was issued and after three days the police found him and brought him back to the juvenile jail where he waited for another court date. When he went before the judge a second time, there was a discussion about what happened and why he made the choices he did. Rob was able to express to the judge and his probation officer that this was a lot more difficult than he ever thought it would be. He said he thought that he shouldn't have to check in with the probation officer, as though the probation officer was his "dad." He said he had never had a dad and he sure didn't need his "P.O. acting like one." At that point, the judge told Rob that one thing a parent is supposed to do is have rules for his/her children and hold them accountable to follow those rules. He also explained that all children need to go to school and get an education so they can support themselves when they become adults. He acknowledged that the probation officer wasn't his father, nor was that the intent of assigning a probation officer to Rob. However, he explained,



given the fact that Rob committed a felony, he clearly needed someone to help him stay on track. He told Rob that if he didn't start committing himself to the day treatment program and the expectations of probation, as well as school, he would be "locked up" in the juvenile jail.

After that, Rob slowly started to understand that there was no easy way out anymore. Determined to stay out of jail, Rob participated in the groups, classes, and work crews to which he was assigned. After a few months, he emerged as a leader to his peers. He would explain to new youth in the program that there was no way to "fake it" through the program. On his last day in the program, there was a small ceremony to recognize his successful completion. He was asked to say a few words and he said that he was grateful for the relationships he was forced to build with his probation officer and other employees of the program, including the teachers with whom he worked. He said it was hard at first to get used to the responsibility everyone expected him to demonstrate, but that he ended up really liking that people had high expectations of him and also helped him meet those expectations. He was so proud of his success that his face was beaming.

Today, there is no shortage of "Robs" in the system. Youth are committing crimes every day, and everyday there are judges and probation officers that are presented with the challenge to hold them accountable for their offenses and, at the same time, remember they are still children and they still need help and guidance as they grow to become

adults. It is for this reason that the juvenile corrections system is much different than the adult system. Youth who commit crimes have different needs than adults. One of those needs is education. Just because a child commits a crime and gets court-ordered to jail or another treatment program doesn't mean that he/she don't have a legal right to a public education like any other child. In addition to having access to general education in their correctional setting, students who qualify for special education services also have a legal right to those services as well—regardless if they are incarcerated or not.

Unfortunately, a disproportionate amount of students in the juvenile corrections system do qualify for special education services. According to the National Center of Education and Disability in the Juvenile Justice System, up to 80% of youth incarcerated qualify for special education. The percentage of students in general who receive special education services is 7%. Clearly there is an overrepresentation of youth with special education needs in the correctional system. The consequences of so much of the population having special education needs is that juvenile jail and correctional or therapeutic programs must, in addition to providing rehabilitative services for the crimes the youth have committed, also provide an educational program that is in compliance with federal educational laws, including special education laws.

Congress enacted the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (Public Law 94-142) in 1975 (currently enacted as Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as of 1997). Its purpose was and continues to be to protect students with disabilities and to ensure they are receiving the best education possible. Before the law was enacted, it was not uncommon for “handicapped” students to be mistreated and denied what IDEA laid out to be educational rights. For example, all students with special education needs are entitled to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), that that education is supposed to occur in the least restrictive environment possible to meet their needs. Additionally, there is a series of paperwork that must be completed to ensure these laws are being followed to the extent they are required (US Department of Education, 2010).

There are several areas under which a student can qualify for special educational services. In order to qualify for special education services in any area, due process must be followed. First, a team of educators must meet and discuss the area of concern (in what ways a student’s education is being negatively impacted). They must collaborate and form ideas for interventions that may help the student remedy the issues present. If, after documented interventions, the issue is still present, the school can form an evaluation team, consisting of the family and several educational professionals. The goal of an evaluation is to determine if the student meets certain criteria to qualify him or her as needing special education services. These services provide a clear, systematic, individualized team approach to meeting students’ needs.

If the evaluation determines that a student does qualify for special education services, the educational staff and family form a "team" and develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for the student. An IEP is a legal document that lays out specific goals and objectives that are unique to each student that the educators will focus on throughout the year. The goals and objectives are to address the needs the student has that contribute to the student qualifying for special education. Additionally, the IEP discusses any accommodations or adaptations a student may need in an educational setting to achieve academic success. It also addresses any modifications a student may need in standardized testing, how often the educational team will communicate with the parents about the student's progress, and if there is a need for additional educational services for the student over the summer. The purpose of the document is to clearly outline all the services a student is receiving to try to reduce the need for services in the future.

Since both the state and the federal governments clearly define what acceptable due process is regarding special education services, there are several unavoidable meetings that special educators and members of an IEP team are expected to hold to clearly communicate and develop the individualized plan for each student. An IEP team must, by law, consist of specific members (parent, general education teacher, special education teacher and a school district representative). However, the team can deem additional people as team members as they feel is

appropriate. When youth are assigned probation officers from the court, parents and IEP teams often agree they are important to include. Therefore, while not required by law to be part of the IEP team, it is often the case that probation officers do join the IEP team. This means they not only attend IEP meetings but also often provide critical feedback, observations, and support in developing and implementing the IEP. When IEP teams are functioning as they should, the child should benefit from their successful communication and collaboration. One example of this success story is Rob, who ended up graduating from high school, getting off probation, and is gainfully employed as a cook in a local casino.

### **Purpose Statement**

This paper will analyze the way juvenile probation officers view the special education process. The guiding research questions explored in this study were:

- 1.)What is the perspective of juvenile probation officers of the special education process?
- 2.)In what ways can special educators work to include probation officers in students' plans to help improve student outcomes?

### **Importance of the Study**

It is important to learn more about juvenile probation officers' perspectives of special education process because they play a critical role

and take part in it through their connection to juveniles who have committed crimes and who also have special education needs. Hopefully, with this new knowledge, youth will benefit if adult professionals learn about each other. This will result in more effective collaboration, which will allow them to help the youth they serve in a more effective, proactive manner.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

There are many reasons why it is important to examine juvenile probation officers' perspectives of special education. Students who are involved in the correctional system often need more support in all arenas of their lives, including accessing a viable education (Mears & Aron, 2003). That additional support comes, in part, through their probation officers and their teachers at school.

According to the National Council on Disability (2003), "Youth with disabilities are more likely to be detained" (p.168). As Burrell and Warboys (2000) observed: "Youth in the juvenile justice system are much more likely to have both identified and *undiscovered* disabilities." When a child has a disability, whether he/she is detained or not, he/she has access to special education services through his/her school. In this way, special educators and probation officers are forced to work together, often without any knowledge of the other's responsibilities and due process expectations. Understanding the perspectives of the probation officers is helpful to getting the youth served by both the educators and the probation officers, the best services possible. While this is important information to know, little research on the topic currently exists. There is however, much literature that looks at the pitfalls of the agencies that work with youth who have been convicted of crimes.

This review will examine three areas that have been identified as possible perspectives of probation officers of special education: (a) schools and educators don't do their job with youth in the correctional system; (b) schools over-rely on probation officers for discipline; and (c) inadequate communication and/or collaboration between the educator and the probation officer.

### **Schools and Educators Don't Do their Jobs with Youth in the Correctional System**

According to the National Council on Disability's report (2003), "Addressing the Needs of Youth with Disabilities in the Juvenile Justice System: The Current Status of Evidence-Based Research," educational systems don't follow through with their responsibilities in following educational laws, assessments, and providing services to incarcerated or convicted youth (p.183). This report went into detail explaining that oftentimes, education is a key component for at-risk youth to get out of the negative situation they have put themselves in. They explain that misinformation, poverty, and unemployment can lead to a life of crime and that educating youth about this, as well as providing job training, is an effective way to get them off the streets and help them lead law abiding lives. The study also explains that repeatedly, research has uncovered that educators don't focus on these youth in a productive manner. The



study cites examples of students in the correctional system whose educational needs were not met academically or by providing support services that at-risk students needed.

Findings from Clark, Mathur, and Holding's (2011) study suggest that a convicted youth who receives proper transition services (including a proper education) is up to 64% less likely to recidivate. Transition services are services that focus on what students will do for employment, post-secondary education and training, how they will participate in the community, what activities they'll do for recreation and leisure, as well as any home-living skills they may need to practice or gain. These transition services should be integrated into children's school day via their IEP, once they enter ninth grade. Unfortunately, findings also suggest that IEPs and other student reports and records which are required by special education law aren't being created and/or maintained and the students are suffering as a result.

In the juvenile corrections system, approximately 50-80% of the students are eligible for special education services (Moody, 2002). If schools are not meeting their obligations to these students, this impacts many youths. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law that protects the rights of students with disabilities. These rights do not terminate if a juvenile is incarcerated or commits a crime and is put on probation. While IDEA has been around since 1975 and undergone revisions since then (most recently, 2004), there is research that shows

that not all educators are following all that it mandates. Palmaffy (2002) explains that IDEA and how it applies to juvenile offenders is “a complicated stew of statutory language, precedent-setting court decisions, and federal regulations” (p. 2). The research continues to explain that often times, teachers working in the field of special education report that they knew what their obligations to students who qualify for special education were. Yet a review of their work indicated that they in fact did not know what they were supposed to be providing and doing for those students at all. Osher, Quinn, Kendziora, & Woodruff (2002) found that many times there was a “frequent lack of understanding of appropriate educational materials and supports for children and youth with disabilities” among the educators that work with convicted youth (p. 23).

In addition to the lack of preparedness for work and due process obligation on behalf of educators, there is also research that indicates that teachers who work with youth who have been convicted of crimes may discriminate against them (Sander, Sharkey, Groomes, Krumholz, Walker, & Hsu, 2011). Aron and Mears (2003) explain that youth who are repeatedly suspended and expelled have an increased chance of engaging in more delinquency. They share that the frustration often felt by youth who have a history of legal trouble after getting disciplined within a school will often lead to them dropping out of school completely and engaging in more criminal activities within the communities. A report by Leone & Weinberg (2010) explained that students who have disabilities

can be at an increased risk of having negative experiences in school settings. They cited examples such as: increased mobility, being placed in restrictive educational placements, experiencing issues with enrollment or transfer of academic records, and retention. The National Juvenile Justice Network reports that, "zero tolerance policies are funneling children as young as five into juvenile court for minor infractions that previously were handled by school principals and guidance counselors" (2011). It is the mission of this network to get children out of correctional facilities and back with their families and in their schools. They feel that without the positive support from schools in handling their students, they will not succeed in this mission. Additionally, according to a report published on the PACER Website, students of color are overrepresented in the juvenile justice system. Schools' lack of addressing cultural and language differences in a positive, proactive manner can lead to this overrepresentation, impacting probation officers' views of education as it related to the youth with whom they work.

School can and should be a place where children can work on learning and developing their resiliency skills. Students should experience setbacks in a protected, supportive environment and have educational staff there to help them work through it in a pro-social manner. Youth with disabilities often lack resiliency skills and need to practice and develop them more than their nondisabled peers. However, the negative experiences they may experience while in school may make it difficult for

them to do this. Leone & Weinberg (2010) cited that poorly run schools can exacerbate these deficits in youth with disabilities. They explain that, unfortunately, there are schools where students' academic needs aren't recognized and addressed appropriately, resulting in students acting out and being punished. They also explained that the use of physical restraint with students with disabilities as well as the use of negative consequences often results in students not being able to be successful in their academic settings. Finding a way to work with youth with disabilities so that they may stay in school could decrease their recidivism rate within correctional facilities.

This information suggests that schools and/or special educators could do a better job in serving their students who are at-risk. While probation officers work at trying to keep their clients from reoffending, they can meet difficulties trying to keep them in school, receiving the services they need.

### **Schools or Special Educators Over-Rely on Probation Officers for Discipline**

Whitbread, Feinstein, and Kechijian's (2007) findings suggest many juvenile probation officers "feel that schools over-rely on the justice system for discipline" (p.2). They explain their findings which revealed that probation officers felt that "schools need to be better informed about the

function of the JPO (Juvenile Probation Officer) so that there would be less reliance on the JPO to discipline students for matters which are unrelated to their probation plan and outside the scope of the probation officer's role" (p. 13).

Additionally, research by McEvoy and Welker (2000) explain that schools going to "zero tolerance policies" and having increased referrals to juvenile justice systems exacerbate the issues. They explain that schools "criminalizing" behaviors that could be handled by schools alone, without involving probation or corrections, brings and/or keeps students out of school and into the system.

There is even some research by Moran (1991) that showed that incarcerated youths receive a message from the staff with whom they work that legal matters are more important than educational matters. For example, teachers may encourage students to deal with issues with their probation officers or lawyers before they concentrate on their education. The resulting message could be that the correctional system is more important than school and is where students should focus their energy instead of cultivating equally important relationships with school staff to prepare for post-correctional plans.

A study by Leone (1987) found that educators of incarcerated youth need special skills and competencies to work with their students beyond those of other educators. Among the skills listed were those that encompassed recognizing the relationships among all agencies which

work with the youth and maximizing communication. A further study by Bullock and McArthur (1994) also highlighted the importance of educators who work with students in court-ordered programs to have team skills as a necessary component to meet the youths' needs.

It is clear that if educators and probation officers took the time to communicate amongst each other, then they could provide a clear and consistent message to the youths they serve so there is no concept that one is more important or powerful than the other. Both adults need to stand ready to serve and be effective in children's lives and not rely on one or the other to be in charge. Working as a unified team is often not achieved and the student is the one who suffers because of it.

### **Inadequate Communication and/or Collaboration between Educators and Probation Officers**

Cook and Friend (1990) said in their article *Collaboration as a Predictor for Success in School Reform*, "Attempting to define the term collaboration is a bit like trying to solve one of those three-dimensional wooden puzzles that forms to a wooden sphere: The task appears simple enough when presented, but making all the pieces fit together is a lot more frustrating than one would imagine" (p. 79). This is unfortunately true in many cases, and it would appear it is also true when it comes to probation officers and educators in many areas throughout the country.

According to Medaris, Campbell, & James (1997), there have been many calls for greater information sharing within agencies, including among the juvenile justice and educational systems. Due to the fact that workers are from different agencies, this can be difficult. The term “interprofessional relationships” refers to the ever increasing trend of professionals from different fields needing to collaborate to provide services to one group of people. A research study by Arndt, Arthur, Deutschlander, Parboosingh, Suter, and Taylor (2009), looked at how professionals in the healthcare field understood their roles and communicated with one another to create a collaborative practice (p. 41-51). In the article, it explained that oftentimes, something called “role-blurring” occurs. This means that the multiple professionals working with one group start to get confused about which responsibilities are theirs and which are the other professionals’. There is a lack of understanding of what everyone is supposed to be responsible for. This happens and people can get frustrated, over-stressed, or even indignant over the results of the blurred roles. Along with this role-blurring can come finger-pointing and blaming of others when things don’t get done as they are supposed to. Additionally, communication, mutual trust and respect, conflict resolution, willingness to collaborate, positive attitude, team skills, and reflection were cited as being key factors to working effectively together. One suggestion that was made to help facilitate more effective communication was to ensure that field-specific jargon was made friendlier

to lay people. While this research was conducted as it specifically pertains to healthcare professionals, I believe it is relevant to several other interprofessional relationships as well. One example of this is discussed in a study by Altshuler (2003) where the relationship between children's social services and public educators was examined. In this study, the tension between the two agencies was identified. One of the recommendations that came from this study to help repair the relationship and improve the communication was to provide "cross-training" opportunities for employees of each agency so they can all learn more about what the other is trying to accomplish and try to see clearer ways to collaborate instead of simply working alongside each other (or worse, working against each other in some cases).

Another communication hurdle for educators and probation officers are data privacy laws that both educators and probation officers have to follow. Many times workers are afraid to say anything to anyone, for fear of being sued or having consequences brought upon them for sharing confidential information. This hyper-vigilance has led to a host of problems between teachers and probation officers when attempting to share information with one another. A study by Lewis, Schwartz, and Ianacone (1988) indicated that simply sharing information is an issue among agencies who work with incarcerated youth. One agency either doesn't know what the other needs, or is concerned about sharing nonessential information with someone.



The report by Whitbread, et al. (2007) that specifically examined the relationship between the juvenile justice system and public schools in serving children with disabilities found that the number one issue was lack of communication. In their finding, Whitbread, et al. (2007) stated:

This study makes it clear that a free flow of information is vital between the schools and the juvenile justice system. There are a variety of federal and state laws which restrict the flow of information to some extent. Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of these laws mean that few school officials are truly aware of when they can share information. As a result, school officials often err on the side of non-disclosure. This failure to provide information to the juvenile justice system means that probation plans are not as well designed as they might be (p. 14).

Pearl (2007) explained that while educators often have access to basic information about a student's home life, the breadth of their knowledge about a student is academic and includes any school behavioral incidences. Probation officers, on the flip side, may have more information on the family, community, and psychological data of the student. Pearl explains that sharing this relevant information rarely happens, at the expense of the child. These findings are supported by Osher, Quinn, Kendziora, and Woodruff (2002), who identified that appropriate intervention for offending youth requires the communication gap among all professionals and family members involved with the youth to be addressed. Osher et al. (2002), explain that in order to focus on prevention of further crimes, all information needs to be shared to benefit the child.

In addition to the lack of communication, research also shows there is a lack of collaboration between educators and probation officers. The National Council on Disability (2003) states that professionals from different agencies who are expected to collaborate can become frustrated with one another and the limitations and expectations the other has. An example of a program that many counties are using is called Wraparound. This program calls for all the workers, agencies, and important players in a child's life to meet to discuss issues a child is having and to share information. This is an excellent step towards facilitating communication, however, without this formalized process, it often doesn't happen and, as Leone and Weinberg explained in their study, "finger pointing" from agency to agency is often the result instead. Even when these programs are in place, some research has shown educators don't always see their importance in participating or attending the meetings. Probation officers' relationships with educators can be tough to develop if they don't have opportunities to communicate and collaborate their efforts.

### **Summary**

Overall, the perspectives of juvenile probation officers of special education may be influenced by a variety of factors. First, there is the fact that much data exists that supports the thought that special education teachers and administrators don't follow through on their obligations for

special education students who are in the correctional system. Second is the research that documents many probation officers' frustrations with educators who do not want to work effectively with students that are in the correctional system. There are examples of administration enforcing school rules that can push criminally involved students out of school all together. Other studies found that educators often expect probation officers to deal with the problems students who are on probation have during school day. Also, there is research that shows that schools are referring students to the juvenile justice system instead of handling the discipline with school policies. This information may be causing probation officers to receive a message that school isn't the place for the youth with which they work. Finally, the opportunities for the two agencies (schools and probation) to communicate are limited. Sometimes when the opportunity is there for communication or collaboration, educators aren't participating. This too can contribute to probation officers' perspectives of the special education system.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This study was conducted by interviewing and taking detailed field notes of probation officers who work at a day treatment program. The clients that attend the treatment facility where the probation officers are employed are court-ordered to attend based on their criminal history and a judge's order. The probation officers are employed by the county to provide a series of interventions to address the issues that are causing the juvenile to offend in their communities. In efforts to reduce recidivism for juveniles, they use a variety of techniques to challenge the offender's thinking, offer feedback, provide a structured environment and accountability, support the family, collaborate with other county resources, and provide cognitive therapy.

The clients that are ordered to attend this day treatment program are juveniles. It would be a violation of FAPE laws, if the children who qualify for special education services were not given access to an academic program that addressed their special education needs while they are clients there. In order to accommodate this law and the general need for children to be educated throughout their day; the treatment center has incorporated three classrooms as part of the building where students can receive their education daily. The county chose a school district with which to collaborate to provide the educational component to the program. In short, it is a county-run program that includes services

from a school district. The two components are separate but collaborate to meet the needs of the children both criminological and educationally. Therefore the participants of the study (probation officers) are involved in the special education process indirectly on a regular basis through their work with juvenile clients who qualify for special education services.

### **Participants and Location**

The participants in this study are current employees of a day treatment facility for adjudicated juveniles. While their education, professional, and personal histories vary greatly; they are all juvenile probation officers who have experience working with youth who receive special education services. Currently, they are all employees of a county in an urban area of the Midwest. The county has court-ordered programs that serve youth who have been convicted of crimes which to address their criminological needs. The youth that typically get assigned to the specific court-ordered day treatment program where these participants are all employed are typically of low socio-economic status. Most of the youth have a history of chemical dependency and come from families where chemical, physical, emotional, and domestic abuse occurs. Approximately half of the youth that are served in this particular program are white, the rest range from bi-racial, African American, Hispanic, Somali, and American Indian, and Asian descents.

All participants of this study signed a consent form, indicating they understood the nature of the research and their role in it. They were all interviewed at their place of employment at a time they indicated as working best for them. The interviews were audio-recorded to allow the researcher to analyze the responses in depth in order to find themes from it and reflect on the information. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' identity and from this point on the participants will be referred to as:

**Jerry:**

A Caucasian, 34 year old, probation officer who has worked as such for four and half years. Prior to being a probation officer, he worked as a prison guard at a maximum-security prison in Minnesota. He is currently getting his Master's Degree in Social Work.

**Judy:**

A bi-racial, 41 year old probation officer that has worked with juveniles for five years. Prior to being a juvenile probation officer, she worked at a group home for disabled youth.

**Sara:**

A 32 year old, African American probation officer with five and half years of service. Before working as a juvenile probation officer, she also worked in a group home for disabled youth.

**Rick:**

A Caucasian, 36 year old probation officer, who has worked in the field for six years, and has never worked in any other field.

**Todd:**

An African American, 56-year-old, probation officer who has worked in the field for sixteen years. Prior to being a probation officer, he managed a group home for disabled youth.

**Janette:**

A Caucasian, 35 year old probation officer who has worked in the field for seven years. Prior to the position at the day treatment center, she worked as a juvenile probation officer with youth in the community.

**Data Collection and Theory**

This study involved the data collection technique of using interviews to gain information. The type of interview used was a structured, formal interview. According to Mills, a structured interview allows the researcher to ask all the participants the same series of questions and allows for consistency (2010). This format was beneficial to this study because the purpose was to gain insight on the perspectives of juvenile probation officers on the special education process and to learn from the data. By asking them to respond to the same open-ended questions, it gave the

research a clear focus from which to derive meaning. The questions the participants were all asked to respond to are included in appendix A.

In addition to formal interviews, data for this study was also gathered through observer-participant observations. In the weeks prior to conducting the formal interviews with participating probation officers, I utilized a meeting time scheduled daily into the participants' work day referred to as "shift exchange" to make observations of the interactions between special education staff and probation staff. Shift exchange is a daily meeting that nearly all staff that work at the program are asked to attend. The students are scheduled to attend gym class during shift exchange, in an effort to free up most other employees' schedules to make the meeting. Since my participation is expected at these meetings, I was a participant-observer. Therefore, I did my best to write down things I was noticing during the meeting as I was able. Immediately following the meeting, I went and began typing field notes of the interactions. As the observer of several informal conversations and interactions with juvenile probation officers, additional insight was able to be gained through field notes. Tracking field notes after these interactions allowed the opportunity to reflect on the information exchanged while using a new lens. By combining the two forms of data collection, the study yielded a much richer, multi-dimensional perspective.

Once all the data was collected and compiled, the process of coding occurred. This required taking qualitative data (data that does not



exist based on numbers or percentages, rather observations and interviews) and giving it meaning that can be categorized and organized (Mills, 2010). The process that was followed was once the interviews and field notes were completed and typed up, they were physically cut apart into separate pieces of data. The pieces were grouped into categories, or themes. Some pieces of data could fall into more than one category, or theme. This is called co-occurring. There were notations made on the data that co-occurred.

This study used the method of analysis called grounded theory. According to Glaser (2009), a study using grounded theory should begin the process with a question and have theory (or a start to one) emerge as data is collected. I asked the question, *what are probation officers' perspectives of the special education process?* Then, as much as possible, I set aside biases and preconceived notions about my predictions of what probation officers' thoughts were and collected data. From this data I hoped to be able to generate an answer to my research question. In the end, Glaser states that a theory should fit two main criteria:(a) it should fit the situation; and (b) it should work. The "answer," or theory, I came up with should have stayed consistent to the original problem, or question, and it should have come directly from the data collected. Information gained from reviewing other literature helped me frame questions and find themes. However, results of other studies should not have (and did not) skew the results of the data from this study.

## **Qualitative Research**

The purpose of this study was to better understand probation officers' perspectives of the special education process. The method of research selected for this study was qualitative research. Qualitative research is research that uses a narrative and descriptive approach to data collection and to express the results of the data. This allows the researcher to understand the way things are and the meaning of the research from the perspectives of the participants in the study, rather than just focusing on numbers and percentages (Mills, 2011). This study lent itself well to this method because the purpose was to gain information from a specific group of people (probation officers) on a specific topic (the special education process). The desired outcome was to gain an understanding of probation officers' perspectives of the special education process which would help to facilitate a more effective program, benefitting youth.

## Chapter Four

### Findings

The purpose of my research was to learn more about the perspectives of juvenile probation officers on the special education process. My research consisted of gaining information from both participant-observer observations and formal structured interviews. The data seemed to highlight four clear themes about probation officers' perspectives of the special education process.

- *frustration with the special education process*-participants all expressed that working with special educators and the mandates and processes of special education was frustrating at times
- *lack of respect for other professionals and/or their time*-most participants made comments or engaged in behaviors that suggested they may not respect special educators as professionals and/or their time
- *inadequate communication/lack of understanding among professionals*-each participant mentioned that they felt as though the communication between special educators and other professionals was lacking and that they (the probation officers) did not have a secure knowledge of special education processes

- *respect for education*-each participant expressed a clear and consistent respect for education and the need for their clients to have access to a solid academic experience

### **Frustration with the Special Education Process**

As participants answered the formal interview questions I asked, their frustration with the special education process really emerged. I asked a series of questions to try to understand their perspective of the special education process. One occasion when frustration was expressed was in response to a question which asked the participants to consider if they have ever noticed a correlation between children receiving special education services and doing well on probation. This was a question that made them all stop and think for a second before responding. Sara laughed and said she had never even really considered it. She said that all the special education meetings she had been in were “formal, confusing, and kind of boring.” Overall, each probation officer ended up saying either “no” or they “didn’t know.” Janette summed it up nicely by saying, “I guess if I have to think about it this hard there must not be!” While special education is designed to address individualized needs of all students who qualify for it, none of the participants could think of a single instance where they believed either special education services or a special education team improved a youth on probation’s behavior and

seemed to frustrate the probation officers when they were asked the question that led to this realization.

Describing IEP meetings, Janette shared, "I have been in ones where the parents and teachers are screaming at each other over expectations for the child. Those are awkward." Rick, shared that, "A bad one (IEP meeting) is when the parents are told what is going on the IEP, and not asked for their input at all."

On the topic of IEP meetings, Jerry stated, "Well, heck. Sometimes I think that if I don't understand what is going on at an IEP meeting, how are the kids going to? If they don't understand it all, how is it going to help them?" Judy shared, "I've been in meetings where the kids have no clue what's going on. I've been in meetings where the kid is sleeping!" The responses to this question from four different probation officers were all said with a clear tone that indicated dissatisfaction with the IEP meetings they had been to.

Further field note data included interactions with probation officers on the topic of IEP meetings that indicated their annoyance with them.

One probation officer, Todd, said to me,

So I have a question about those goals you write on IEPs. They say things like, 'So-and-So will stop talking 85% of the time while demonstrating 35% respect and withholding 76% inappropriate comments in 7 out of 10 interactions,' or something like that. Who really measures this stuff?

Todd's question is not unusual for people not in the special education field. IEPs are not exactly reader-friendly and he made that clear with the

over-the-top goal he used in his example. He clearly exaggerated the percentages and other jargon used to prove his point of how he finds IEP goals to be. His use of hyperbole indicated that he has been to several IEP meetings in his 16 years and paid attention to how goals and objectives are worded. His question indicated his frustration with his experiences with special education (or at least IEPs). He attended IEP meetings for years and still doesn't think that the goals are being tracked, or that they are even useful. His joking approach was funny, but his intent was clear: he thinks IEPs and special education teachers and the jargon they use are frustrating.

Another probation officer, Rick, had similar thoughts regarding this topic as well. He shared, "Some schools are better at (following through with goals and objectives that were created at IEP meetings) than others, but the ones that don't ever do anything with them are worthless." Probation officers oftentimes rearrange their schedules to attend IEP meetings, which they are told are highly important, and sometimes they leave them feeling as though nothing is going to be done with all the input and information they shared.

When discussing probation officers' thoughts on whether special education services benefit the parents of the students who receive them, frustration was shared again. Judy said:

I think that (the use of special education jargon) maybe a big part of (parents not feeling as if they have a voice in the special education) process. They are expected to go to all

those meetings and I don't think a lot of them really understand what's going on in them. They sit at one end of the table and all the workers are at the other and the parent just nods their head and signs the papers because they don't want to look bad. I didn't know anything about any of this stuff before I got this job and I have an education, I am sober, and I am mentally healthy. Some of these parents can't claim any of those things. How are they supposed to understand special education law and assessments?

This answer honestly expressed the probation officer's perspective of IEP meetings. He explained that he feels as though one needs special training to attend a meeting that is supposed to be there for families to gain access to the best, most effective education their child can possibly get. While this may not be the message educators want students and students' parents to be receiving, Rick's statements indicate it is clearly happening and that it is frustrating.

Probation officers also shared their thoughts on how the students with whom they work directly benefit from special education services. Janette shared:

I worry that these kids hear they are 'disabled' and then they think they don't have to try anymore. They say, 'I don't have to, it's on my IEP...' I don't think that benefits them. They still need to learn and act like human beings. There aren't IEPs once you walk out of school- then what?

Judy said, "I think it (special education) can be a set up. Kids get put in special settings because of ADHD and behavioral problems and are stuck there until they can demonstrate... perfect behavior. I don't even think I could be perfect...It's not fair to expect them to be."

These two probation officers were honestly expressing their resentments associated with two different special education issues. One cited the fact that some students may be using IEPs as a crutch that will only hurt them later in life. As a probation officer whose goal it is to get youth to understand the consequences their choices have on their life, they don't like to see students manipulating their way through their education. They shared that they have seen instances where they believed having an IEP enabled their clients to do just that. The other participant shared that schools which provide special education to students with the most severe disabilities, those that cannot attend classes in the general education setting, are irritating to her. She used the term "set-up" to describe these types of schools. This was frustrating to her, as she had seen many of the youth with whom she works feel as though they get stuck on the fringes of the educational system without a way out. As a probation officer trying to help youth achieve positive goals in their lives, it was irritating to her that, even when they set positive goals to return to a mainstream educational environment, they are not able to get there because of what she felt were unrealistic expectations. She is frustrated that her clients are asked to do something that she believes that can't achieve. While she tries to be supportive, she thinks it's difficult and unfair.



These interactions and observations, as well as the responses to formal interview questions, suggest that probation officers find the special education process frustrating.

### **Lack of Respect for other Professionals and/or their Time**

Another theme that emerged in the data was *lack of respect for other professionals and/or their time*. This theme emerged mostly through field notes data. The time I observed consistently was a time known as "shift exchange." It is a daily meeting time designated for all professionals in the building to discuss the youth they are currently servicing. The meeting is supposed to start at 2:15PM and every single time I observed (eight times), it took until between 2:25PM and 3:35PM for all participating staff members to show up. Sometimes people needed to be called and asked if they were coming, other times people just filed in slowly until eventually everyone was there. Once everyone was present, there was never a formal agenda or system followed. Through the eight observations I made, a theme of disregard or lack of respect for other professionals' time, or in some cases of other professionals in general, emerged. One specific observation on a day after there had been significant behavioral concerns specifically highlighted the lack of respect. It started with staff members coming in late. There were certain staff that wanted to discuss details about several students and their questions were met with shoulder shrugs and vague comments like, "oh, you know." It

ended without a clear communication of what the issues were and what the plan for the next day was, as some probation officers were engaging in a conversation that I recorded in my field notes:

Jerry said to another probation officer, "Hey Rick, what's your favorite Clint Eastwood movie?" Rick shrugged and said, "I don't know." Todd, said, "Oh, there are so many good ones, how can you chose one?" To this, Judy stood up and said, "I take it we're done with shift exchange? I'm not sitting here to listen to this." A few people said they didn't have anything else to say or talk about and Judy left. I sat there for another minute and listened to four probation officers discuss their favorite Eastwood movies. I stood up and quietly left. Larry (another special education teacher), whose classroom shift exchange takes place in, stood up and moved back to his desk and got on his computer. When I left at 3:02, the four probation officers were still there talking about movies and not the significant behavioral issues other coworkers had requested be discussed.

This interaction was an example of some probation officers not taking others' time into consideration, as the teachers (and other staff members as well) end up wasting their time waiting for meetings to begin and/or to stay relevant. The purpose of the daily meeting is to give the professionals involved with the various clients an opportunity to share relevant information with one another to ensure the best possible approach can be taken with each student. The population of youth the professionals work with can be very challenging and, at times, manipulative. This means that clear and frequent communication is important to providing consistent and ultimately effective care. Not showing up for these meetings in a timely manner could be viewed as being disrespectful to other professionals, as could deliberately

withholding details from them. In this observation, Jerry seemed to be intentionally answering the special educators' questions vaguely. He then was responsible for throwing the whole topic of conversation off in an unproductive direction. While it is possible that he had the group's best interests in mind after a particularly stressful day by trying to keep the conversations light, he ended up coming across as being disrespectful to special educators, and even angering a few of his probation officer coworkers who demonstrated this frustration by excusing themselves completely from the situation.

Another field note that contained data that fell into the category of *lack of respect for other professionals and/or their time* was when the probation officers started questioning Larry, a special education teacher, about his lesson plans. Larry set aside two class periods each Friday to teach a cooking lesson to his students. One probation officer asked why the cooking was done because he didn't think it was "important." When Larry expressed disagreement with that, the probation officer clarified by saying:

Oh, no, Larry, I'm not trying to say it isn't important, I just don't think they need to be doing it every single Friday. I walk in there some Fridays and I see them all sitting around talking while you are at the stove. Some of them chop a few vegetables and that's it...for the whole morning.

Larry definitely felt that both the judgment that preceded the comment and the way the comment was delivered were disrespectful. He has been

teaching for more than 30 years. This probation officer's comment was presented in such a way that expressed he had discussed it with other coworkers before addressing it with Larry directly. This left Larry feeling like they had been gossiping about his poor teaching and he felt blamed for not creating a more effective educational environment for his students. While professionals certainly have a right to ask a question about another's tactics or philosophy, this approach did not feel respectful to Larry. He had included cooking in his curriculum to make sure that he was teaching what the department of education refers to as "transition skills." As mentioned earlier, transition skills are mandatory to evaluate and cover for students who receive special education services once they reach the ninth grade. It seems as though Todd, the probation officer who made these comments to Larry about his curriculum, had a misinformed understanding of special education and ended up coming across as disrespectful in the process.

Probation officer Rick said, "Probation is pretty cut and dried. There's not much that the teacher needs to understand in why P.O.s are doing what they are because it shouldn't really affect their job at all." This comment sheds light on the perspective some probation officers have that leads to the interactions between the professionals that seem to lack respect. Probation officers feel as though what they do doesn't affect teachers, even though they are working with the same students. This feeling shows a lack of respect for the important roles of other

professionals. Probation officers often exhibit this lack of respect by showing up late to with educators and making what are perceived as judgmental comments.

### **Inadequate Communication/Lack of Understanding between Professionals**

The theme of inadequate communication and/or a having a lack of understanding between professionals also emerged from the data. It seemed to be an underlying current in negative interactions between probation officers and special education teachers, as well as in the answers participants provided to the formal interview questions. An example of this is when Rick said, "I guess I don't really know what a *good* IEP meeting is supposed to look like. I guess if we get an IEP written by the end of it, it's good?" The fact that this response ends in a question very clearly shows that, while probation officers often sit through IEP meetings, they have no idea neither what the goal of one is nor how to determine if one was successful, positive, or a dismal failure. Probation officers lack the background information on special education due process to walk into a meeting knowing what the outcome should be. The participants' responses indicated that they have never had a special education teacher take the time to communicate to them what IEP meetings should accomplish.

Judy said that she may “make different decisions about placements and consequences for a kid if (she) knew more about special education and the options it provides for some kids on probation.” This indicates that, while there may be a willingness to gain the much-needed information and to improve, there is inadequate communication between the special education staff and probation officers. Additionally, participants specifically stated they thought more collaboration would be helpful for the program, when considering the interaction between probation and educational staff. Judy said, “Communicating more definitely couldn’t hurt our relationship.” Janette said, “It’s silly that we can’t get this (communication) right. We work together all day long.” Jerry said that, “any information that would help him understand what (special educators) do would be helpful in making the job go more smoothly.”

Another example of clear lack of communication and/or understanding between professionals is the statement made by Jerry during the formal interview. He shared: “If we could somehow figure out how to align our goals and approaches we might actually get to be pretty effective around here.” This response indicates Larry’s perception that there is a lack of communication between the two professional groups specifically around “goals and approaches.” Consequently, Jerry feels it has affected the efficacy of the team. Continuing on this theme, Rick shared:

It’s so tough because we work for two separate agencies. We’re (the probation officers) super busy and I know the teachers are too.

We don't take the time to communicate what we're doing and why we're doing it. Sometimes I disagree with what I think you guys are doing and I know you guys have questioned decisions we've made in the past too. I think if we communicated with each other we may be able to avoid some of the judgments.

Similarly, Sara shared, "It's kind of sad because we have an ideal setup here. We work side by side. Our communication should be seamless, yet it is probably our biggest issue. Everyone sees it but no one knows how to step in and do anything about it."

These pieces of data are very clear in articulating specific concerns over the lack of communication between education and probation staff. Jerry honestly shared that the probation staff have disagreed with the educational staff's approaches and vice versa, leading to "judgments" being made about the opposite group. These "judgments" have made for tense feelings towards one another. However, no one had addressed the issue because there is a lack of understanding on how the two separate agencies are supposed to communicate.

Janette also cited communication as being the "biggest issue between probation and education staff." Again, this highlights that communication is an issue contributing to the perspectives probation officers have of the special education process because they are working with special education teachers with whom they have issues that they don't know how to resolve. A statement from my field notes from Jerry that seems to further address this issue:

It's an awkward thing because this is a county program. We are county employees and we have our own boss. We hire you to do education and you have your own boss. We are separate but what we do impacts each other. I never know what to do when I have questions about what you guys are doing. If I go to my boss, he can't really do anything about it because he's not your boss. I can't go to your boss, I don't even really know who he is.

Jerry's comment indicates his perspective that the program is lacking clear direction on how to handle certain situations involving communication. He feels that not knowing who to go to when issues or questions arise is resulting in tension and inadequate understanding among coworkers. This, in turn, negatively impacts interactions and perspectives coworkers have of each other because proper communication doesn't occur to answer questions or to gain clarification.

### **Respect for Education**

Overall, the most resounding theme that was interwoven throughout most responses and interactions from the probation officers was the consistent respect they had for the importance of education. Previously I discussed one of my field notes where probation officer Todd was questioning special education teacher Larry on his inclusion of cooking in his weekly lesson plans. Todd did not understand that special education teachers need to include transition skills in their students' lessons and had questioned Larry about it. Gaining the information helped his understanding of it. However, he shared that the whole reason



he was asking the question was because he has a profound respect for education. He explained:

I understand that (that cooking with the students is important) but these kids need education. They are really behind. You know I have a special interest in the African Americans in particular and they really need to be challenged. Education is their way out.

This statement demonstrates that Todd is very concerned for his clients and feels that education is extremely important for them. Another field note I shared earlier when discussing lack of respect for other professionals also highlights a respect for education. During a shift exchange, Mack, a supervisor, said:

(The students) are not court-ordered here to lay in time out. If they try it again tomorrow, we will bring them in on a violation. They can hear from the judge what their responsibilities here are if they don't want to listen to us.

The probation team all agreed that negative academic performance or "lay(ing) in time out" would not be tolerated. By not allowing students to disengage from their learning expectations, the probation officers indicated respect for the education offered to the youth they serve. Similarly, there was a comment made by Sara who was fed up with students' unproductive behavior. She said, "They had better get their acts together and be in class tomorrow. It isn't going to go well for them if they can't get there. We're really hoping they learned from today. Otherwise, some of these guys are going back to court." She would not have made

this statement if she did not believe that the children belong in the classroom and that receiving their education is important.

Other comments reflect the same beliefs from other probation officers like Jerry who made the comment that teachers should “load” the students up with homework and that the students “should do everything they missed.” He went on to say, “They are all going to stay late to do (the homework).” During a conversation with special education teachers, Todd made the statement, “I respect what you guys (the teachers) do, I just think that you can focus more on school and education and we (the probation officers) can support you with the behavior, that’s all.” Even while expressing some dissatisfaction with the teachers, Todd was making his respect for education clear.

Judy shared that, “I think (an IEP) helps them to understand that(the students) learn differently than other kids and it keeps them on track.” Here, Judy was able to cite benefits to special education. Additionally, Janette answered the same question by saying, “Well...for kids who can’t go to a regular school, (special education) helps (the students) get into the right setting where they may actually be able to graduate.” This comment shows Janette values graduation and also recognizes the role special education plays in helping students to achieve that goal.

Sara talked about special education being helpful to students. She shared that she thinks that “a lot of our kids’ parents don’t care about

anything that has to do with their children so they are not benefited by (special education) but they could be if they got invested." I asked her if she believed that there were aspects to the special education process and jargon that she thought may intimidate those types of parents. To this, she answered, "That's no excuse, (parents) need to suck it up and be parents. There are resources out there to help parents get through it, like PACER." Clearly Sara feels that there is no excuse to not take education seriously. Despite all the frustrating encounters Sara and the other probation officers have had with special education, they are still able to say that education is beneficial to students. All of the probation officers had a significant respect for education.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Discussion**

#### **Overview of the Study**

The general purpose of this study was to learn more about juvenile probation officers' perspectives of the special education process. The topic was deemed important, as a disproportionate amount of juveniles in the correctional system (who therefore have probation officers) receive special education services. This brings probation officers into the complicated world of special education, yet it is usually something they don't know much about. Finding out more information on their perspectives of special education can hopefully improve the working relationships between special education teachers and probation officers and ultimately increase the efficacy of their services to youth. Data for this study were obtained through observations and formal interviews of juvenile probation officers who work with youth who receive special education services.

#### **Summary of Findings**

Overall, four main themes emerged through the research: that there is inadequate communication/lack of understanding among professionals, a lack of respect for other professionals and/or their time, that probation

officers have a deep respect for education, and yet they feel frustration for the special education process at times.

### **Recommendations**

Overall, the results of the research are critical for helping educators and probation officers move forward in their relationships together. It was my hope that I would not just gain insight but also see some ways to improve the quality of services youth with disabilities receive from the various professionals in their lives. Through learning that probation officers needed more information about the special education process and that communication needs to improve, remedies can be implemented fairly easily. Going forward in our professional collaboration, it is helpful to realize that certain probation officers didn't have adequate information about the special education process or weren't communicating their questions.

Being able to pinpoint that there is a lack of respect for professionals and their time was a bit disheartening to see but not surprising. Overall, the driving force for the research question came from feeling an undertone of disrespect and tension in the building. Instead of feeling like we were two teams of educated and invested professionals that can collaborate for the benefit of youth, it felt more like there was "the school side" and the "probation side" and that we were sometimes getting in each other's way. While I honestly believe some of the disrespect

comes from personality conflicts among professionals, I feel most of it can be remedied by improving communication. As with so many negative interactions in life, I feel the feelings of disrespect towards each other at the program where I work are bred through a lack of understanding. For example, I learned through doing this research that probation officers were feeling disgruntled that they were holding students accountable for completing school work that they thought was totally ridiculous. However, because they didn't communicate this, resentment grew, leading to interactions that lacked respect between special education teachers and probation officers. Once the teachers had the opportunity to explain that special education law requires the type of assignment the students were given, the probation officers felt much better about supporting it. They never communicated their frustration; they just acted it out. The special education teachers never explained what they were doing because they were so lost in their "special education world," they just assumed all other players understood what they were doing and why. Lack of communication and understanding led to actions that were less than respectful to each other. While knowing this certainly won't fix every relationship between educators and probation officers, it is my opinion that identifying the need for clearer communication will help everyone respect each other on a professional level, even if not a personal level.

The mere recording of the starting times and acknowledging the purpose of our daily meetings started to make everyone more aware of

how the time was being used. This resulted in a greater respect for one another's time. We decided as a team that we were going to make an effort to start on time and stay "on task" so as to respect everyone's busy schedules better. One way we agreed as a team to do this more effectively is to designate someone as a note taker to keep people focused. The notes are also emailed out to the whole team so anyone who is unable to attend the meetings will know what was discussed and communication is improved. I don't believe this would have occurred without me doing the research and drawing people's attention to the issue. Not only were we able to solve the problem of people feeling like others were not respectful of other's time, but we were also able to improve another issue for us— establishing modes of clearer communication.

The next two themes that emerged from the data seem to contradict each other when first considered. How could the probation officers feel both a deep respect for education, yet be frustrated with the special education process? Analyzing the data helped me to see the two themes aren't mutually exclusive. First, there is the respect for education that I repeatedly found among the probation officers. As I mentioned earlier, my research question emerged from feeling tension when working with probation officers and trying to blend special education and probation services under the same roof. I could tell that the probation officers were feeling frustrated with the teachers. I felt the tension when trying to collaborate, hence the sincere shock I felt when I coded the data from my

research and found that the theme that had the most data in it was the one of respect for education. What I was able to learn through the results was that the probation officers may not understand the complicated special education process, or even support some of the aspects of it that they do understand, but they still believe education is vitally important for the youth they serve. Over and over again, when I started noticing it, they were sending a message that they believe education is a vital piece of the puzzle for at-risk youth to be successful. They may not have chosen to go to school to become educators, but they did choose a field that puts them in a situation where they are invested in youth's futures, much like educators.

So how can probation officers value education so much *and* feel such frustration for it? Well, the answer is simple, really. First, part of it goes back to the issues with communication and lack of understanding. There are so many intricacies of special education law that it is difficult for special educators to keep track of them all, let alone lay people, like probation officers. Once probation officers know the driving forces behind the actions they see special educators taking, they feel better. Adequate communication is again, essential. However, it is not everything. There are things probation officers understand perfectly well and still feel frustrated with. Like one probation officer pointed out, the accommodations students with disabilities receive don't extend to the community, yet some students feel entitled to the special considerations



they have received through special education. This is frustrating to probation officers whose job it is to hold youth accountable for their behaviors in the community. This isn't such an easy fix. While I understand where they are coming from and, frankly, I agree with them, I can't take away accommodations from students that an IEP team determined to be appropriate for a student so they may experience educational success. Accommodations don't apply to the community and that makes sense, but it is confusing for students who get "special treatment" in school but not outside of it.

One thing probation officers consistently shared that I found hugely helpful is how intimidating some of the special education jargon (like "LRE's," "federal settings," and "PLAAFP statements") can be to lay participants of IEP and other special education meetings. I know that it took me years of schooling and practice to learn all the terms and abbreviations associated with special education, it is sometimes easy to forget that when I am running a meeting. The agenda a special education teacher needs to try to get through at meetings is often daunting. Trying to cover all that I needs to be covered in a timely manner can lead to excluding the parents, probation officers, and any other participants who don't know that jargon as well as they do. Several probation officers that I interviewed shared that they don't understand half of what goes on in meetings and that it feels like a formality and not anything that the students, parents, and other professionals actually have anything to do

with. They end up sitting through a meeting that lasts an hour or more and walk away completely unable to tell what was accomplished. This doesn't make anyone view the special education process as friendly, or even helpful.

Now that I have gained insight on the issue of special education jargon being confusing and impeding communication and interaction with members of IEP teams, I have begun to handle all interactions with parents and other professionals in a different manner. I try to frame each phone call or meeting with a quick snap shot of what we are doing and why it needs to be done. I remind the parents and students that they are the most important part of every decision. I always try to make them feel like I not only *want* to hear what they have to say but that I *need* to hear what they have to say to make a meaningful plan. Since I have now entered into a leadership position within my district, I am also able to take this knowledge and help guide other special education teachers through the process of holding an IEP meeting, keeping in mind the perspectives of all the participants at the meeting.

Overall, some of the things I learned from my data are applicable to my building and what I do specifically. However, there are many parts of the results that are salient to others. The concept of interprofessional relationships being difficult is not unique to my place of employment. There are several professionals that find themselves working with other professionals and experience problems. Knowing that communication and

respect are keys to success is useful for every professional, and not field specific.

### **Limitations of the Study**

No study is perfect, and mine is certainly no exception. For example, as I previously mentioned, there were already some negative undercurrents at my place of employment when I started this research. Some individuals were already feeling some of the lack of respect and frustration that came up during my research. These feelings could have interfered with some of the responses given to the formal interview questions. On the other hand, It is possible that even though participants were urged to share their candid thoughts, they were afraid of offending me as I was both the interviewer and their coworker. Had a completely unbiased person been conducted the interviewing, the responses may have been different; I can't be sure.

One thing that I would have changed about the way I gathered the data was the time that I conducted the interviews. I initially thought that the way in which I did it was the best approach. I asked my coworkers who have worked with juveniles who receive special education services if they would be willing to participate in my study and then let them choose a time that was most convenient for them. When I designed the study, I was afraid that no one would want to participate. I thought that by letting them identify a convenient time for them, it would encourage participation.

However, by doing it during the work day (often in lunch breaks) there were students in the building. Because the population we serve can be high maintenance and sometimes make unsafe and dangerous decisions, all staff carries a radio with them throughout the work day that must be turned on. Hearing radio calls while conducting the interview was quite distracting and could cause us to lose focus. In fact, during one interview we had a "code red," an emergency call that requires all available staff to run to a location for backup. This was certainly distracting. It's hard to say where conversations over certain questions would have gone had there not been constant chatter on the radio going on in the background. If I were to do this over again, I would have more confidence that people actually want to participate in studies that involve them and would have been choosier in selecting a quiet time to conduct the interviews.

Another limitation of this study is that, while it is called *Probation Officers' Perspectives of the Special Education Process*, it certainly didn't cover all things special education. In fact, it mostly looked at IEP meetings, special education schools for students with severe behavioral issues, and about academic expectations and program modifications. There is a lot more that goes on in the special education world; it just doesn't pertain as much to what probation officers deal with.

## **Ideas for Future Research**

In this study, I asked the broad question of, "what are probation officers' perspectives of the special education process? I knew there was a disconnect between probation officers and special educators but I didn't know why. The data I collected suggested that while there are a variety of things probation officers think when they deal with clients who have special education needs, the theme that seemed to drive all the others was that of communication and interactions with other professionals. Therefore, I feel that should anyone want continue to research probation officers' perspectives of the special education process, they may try to examine more about the aspects of interprofessional relationships and how people from totally different fields are expected to work together. Learning how to effectively collaborate and communicate despite coming from different professional backgrounds is a positive practice from which anyone can benefit.

## Chapter Six

### Reflection

When I look back to the start of my schooling to become an educator myself, it seems like forever ago. When I was working as an assistant in a special education classroom I knew that I wanted to be a special education teacher and I wanted to take the shortest route possible to get there. I chose Augsburg College because it had a program that was going to work with both my professional and personal schedule and was going to be fairly quick to finish. I had the goal of becoming licensed so I could be a “real” teacher and that was what was important to me. I vaguely thought about the fact that once I obtained licensure, I was also going to be close to finishing a master’s degree. However, I didn’t focus on that too much, as I had a more immediate goal before me in getting licensed. However, as I neared my licensure, the idea of completing that master’s degree started to seem more real. I was aware that the college gives students seven years between finishing their courses for licensure and completing the master’s portion. I remember thinking, “sure I am going to take a little bit of time off, but *seven* years?! Really, who needs that long?” However, as my teaching career started, time started to fly by. I realized one day that I was going to be one of the very people I scoffed at so many years before if I didn’t just get back in school.

I knew that the completion process involved a “thesis.” It seemed intimidating, but I figured I could plow through it, no problem. I was not

prepared for the journey I was about to embark upon. There is no way to “plow through” a large research project. There is a process that needs to happen for which I was not ready. Choosing a topic that was going to stay interesting and motivating but not negatively impact my professional relationships and performance was not as easy as it seems. I changed my topic three times. Next, there was getting approval from the IRB (Internal Review Board), a feat in itself. After that, I got going on collecting my data and making sure I was being ethical throughout the whole process. Looking at what was my “normal day” in a new and objective way really required emotional strength at times. Coding my data was another challenging task, I was forced to continually set aside my personal biases and look at data objectively. As I mentioned before, I thought when I started out on this journey that I was sure I knew what the results of the study were going to be; I thought I had it all figured out. Imagine my surprise when the theme that emerged the most was that probation officers have respect for education! I was certain that they didn’t care at all about anything other than their probation and the corrections system. I was totally wrong. This was not an easy thing to discover.

I found myself having to look at the part I played in the relationships getting to the negative place there were. The frustration the probation officers were feeling could be combated by better communication from the special education teachers. Since conducting this research, I have moved into a leadership role and now have the opportunity to share my insight

with others. What I learned about communication problems among special educators and probation officers is something that I can apply to all relationships. In special education, teachers need to communicate with one another, with the paraprofessionals with whom they work, with administrators, with workers from outside agencies (including probation, social work, related service providers, and more), parents, and students. Now, I can clearly see when people aren't explaining things clearly to one another. I am able to suggest that people try to communicate more effectively before jumping to a negative judgment about another professional or person with whom they work. There is not a day that passes when I don't think about other people's perspectives of what we do as special educators and the message we are sending. Everyone with whom I work always says, "I know, I know...you did your thesis on the perspectives of probation officers on the special education process!" They say this because I refer to it so often. Furthermore, while they are joking with me a bit, I believe that the insight I gained is important and should be shared.

The theme that emerged from my research that probation officers value education was a really meaningful one for me to discover. Again, I was working with probation officers who I felt didn't value what I was working so hard each day to do with the youth we each served. After reviewing my data, I learned that I was seeing this all wrong. Over and over again each day the probation officers were sending messages to me



and to the youth that education is the most important thing they should focus on. Seeing this theme emerge from my data was powerful because it forced me to rethink my judgments and feelings towards my coworkers. While things weren't necessarily going well between us, agreeing about the importance of education was an excellent starting point to try to promote healing and growth.

I was able to start the process of growth and healing slowly. I did small things to ensure what I was doing and what I was saying made sense to the probation officers and was respectful. I tried to learn more about what they wanted to see us as educators accomplish with the youth and opened up a dialogue that was very interesting and helpful for the relationship. Now, when we don't see eye to eye, I ask myself how what I want to do benefits the students' education. I have found that when I answer that question, I have the best starting point to work through the disagreement with the probation officers. Having the common ground of agreeing on the value of education for the youth with whom we work has been excellent to refer back to when we disagree.

Another exciting thing that emerged from me doing this research were the professional connections I have been able to make. For example, I met a special education coordinator who is also passionate about the issue of ensuring incarcerated youth with disabilities receive appropriate and high quality services. Through talking with her, she suggested I contact one of her colleagues from PACER. Upon making

that connection, I was asked to meet with a group to look at the use of both positive behavioral supports in schools and the restorative justice process. I would never have met these people nor had the opportunity to collaborate with them, learn from them, and try to affect change in our schools and juvenile justice systems. This project was the impetus to form those interprofessional relationships, from which youth benefit.

An aspect of this research project that was very difficult for me was finding the time to string all the parts of the paper together while balancing my personal and professional life. However, as I am at the end of this journey, I can honestly say that I am a better educator and all around person for having gone through this experience and I am glad I did it. The whole reason that I went into special education was to help students who aren't given the same set of abilities that are children are born with. The passion to help those students feel successful in their lives, despite their challenges is what keeps me motivated to go to work each day. The things that I learned from doing this paper, along with the interprofessional relationships I was able to build, will lead to the work I do with youth and other professionals is better, and that is what really matters to me.

While I am glad that this project is over, there is a part of me that thinks that it is a shame that now that I actually know what I am doing with action research that I won't have to do it again. Like they always say, "If only I had known then what I know now...."

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## Appendix A

## Questions to Which the Participants Were Asked to Respond:

1. How familiar with special education laws and processes would you say you are?
2. How did you learn the information you know?
3. How often does your job call on you to interact with students who receive special education services?
4. What did you study in school?
5. Do you think the students with whom you work benefit from special education services they may receive?
  - Tell me what ways you think they benefit:
  - In what ways do you think it isn't beneficial to them?
6. Do you think that special education services benefit the parents of the students at all? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
7. What do you see the purpose of an IEP as being?
8. When you think back to IEP meetings you have attended, what characteristics stand out as being a good one and what characteristics stand out as being poorly run, or a bad meeting?
9. Do you think there is a correlation between kids doing well on probation and receiving special education services? Explain:

10. Do you think the goals and objectives that are developed during IEP meetings are effective? Explain:
11. From your perspective, what would help probation staff and education staff work together more effectively?
12. What issues do you see as being the most prevalent between probation and special education staff?
13. Do you think that special education staff could benefit from getting more information on probation and how it works? Explain:
14. Do you think probation staff could benefit from getting more information on special education and how it works? Explain:
15. In general, do you believe special educators and probation officers should collaborate more? Why or why not?
16. Why did you choose this career?