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**THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT STAFF IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
STUDENT INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATIONAL PLANS**

By

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B.Ed., University of Alberta, 1993

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

LEADERSHIP AND TRAINING

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

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ABSTRACT

This action research project asked “How could student support staff and teachers collaborate in the development of student IPP development?” This project outlines the importance of collaborative relationships between teacher and support staff as a shared responsibility that is mandated by the Alberta Teachers’ Association (The Alberta Teacher’s Association, 2003). The sponsoring organization is NLSD. This qualitative study included a focus group and interviews of teachers and support staff grade team pairs. Utilizing an action research process, the combination of data was presented to stakeholders in a workshop setting with the purpose of collaboratively identifying ways in which it can be used to enhance teacher-support staff relationships in the IPP development. The study found that there is a desire from support staff to learn and understand more about IPPs as well as a desire to from teachers and support staff to learn how to maximize the working relationship. Priority ethical considerations were given to conducting research on a Metis Settlement.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
CHAPTER ONE- FOCUS AND FRAMING.....	1
Introduction.....	1
The Opportunity.....	2
Significance of the Opportunity	3
Systems Analysis of the Opportunity	5
Organizational Context.....	7
CHAPTER TWO-LITERATURE REVIEW	11
Introduction for Topic One- Support Staff.....	11
Support Staff Studies	11
Support Staff in the Research	11
Support Staff Roles and Responsibilities.....	13
Support Staff Futures	15
Introduction for Topic Two- Professional Learning Communities	15
Definition of a Professional Learning Community.....	15
Importance of Professional Learning Communities	17
Making Professional Learning Communities Work	18
Introduction for Topic Three- Support Staff and Leadership Capacity.....	20
Support Staff Leadership Capacity	20
Approaches to Change	21
Distributed Leadership.....	22
Professional Development	22
Reflection on Practice	23
CHAPTER THREE- CONDUCT OF ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT.....	24
Introduction	24
Research Approach	24
Research Methods	25
Methodology	25
Trustworthiness.....	28
Triangulation.....	29
Data Gathering Tools	29
Collection of Data Sequence.....	30
Data Analysis	31
Sampling	32
Project Participants	32
Ethical Issues.....	33
Study Conduct.....	36
CHAPTER FOUR- ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	39
Introduction to Study Findings.....	39
Collective Profile of Participants.....	39
Beginning to Sort the Data.....	39
Study Conclusions.....	47
Scope and Limitations of the Research.....	50
CHAPTER FIVE- RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS	51
Introduction to Study Recommendations.....	51
Teachers/Support Staff.....	51
School.....	51

District.....	52
Organizational Implementation.....	52
Teachers/Support Staff.....	52
School.....	54
District.....	55
Implications for Future Research	56
CHAPTER SIX- LESSONS LEARNED	57
Introduction to Research Project Lessons Learned.....	57
Process	57
Personal Growth as Learner, Researcher, and Leader	60
REFERENCES	62
APPENDIX A- Letter of Free and Informed Consent	69
APPENDIX B- Focus Group and Interview Questions.....	71

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Focus Group Data	45
Table 2	Interview Data	46

CHAPTER ONE – FOCUS AND FRAMING

Introduction

Northern Lights School Division (NLSD) refers to individuals hired to work with special education students as student assistants. This project examined the outcomes from established relationships between teachers and student assistants in the Individual Program Plan (IPP) process.

I have observed relationships between students, teachers, and student assistants for many years. I have noticed that some support staff members interact well with students, and teachers resulting in a lot of productive engagement, while others do not experience similar success and end up feeling frustrated towards the management of the outcomes of students with whom they are working.

A 2003 publication by the Alberta Teacher's Association entitled *Teachers and Teacher's Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities* clearly states that student assistants are not teachers and do not teach in a traditional sense but under a teacher's direction they can engage in a wide range of support activities for students. Student assistants interact with students with the expectation and understanding that they are to play a role in supporting student learning. This interaction should result in measurable student achievement (Standards for Special Education, 2003).

My position in the school as a classroom teacher has allowed me the opportunity to work with almost all of the Kikino Elementary School support staff. Two years ago, I had the opportunity to be part of the special education support team at Kikino Elementary School. That experience gave rise to my wondering how to maximize the impact of

student assistant actions. Thus, the research question asks: "How could student support staff and teachers collaborate in the development of student IPP development?"

My working questions were:

What are the impacts on students that student support staffs make?

What is the role of the student support team coordinator in this process?

What are the experiences that support staffs provide?

What are the insights that support staffs provide?

The Opportunity

In 2004, Kikino Elementary School, which is part of NLSD, had five full-time student assistant positions. Through the review of the literature, I was able to identify the following terms which appeared to be used interchangeably when identifying assistants in the classroom; paraprofessional, para-educators, student assistants, teacher assistant, support staff, and student support staff. NLSD currently defines these positions as student assistants. Two student assistants are placed in the kindergarten, one in grade one, one in a grade three-four split, and one in a grade five-six split. Each of the support staff members has experience working within Kikino Elementary ranging from as little as one year to twelve years. What was exciting about this opportunity was that the current support staff members were keen to participate in this project because they had little experience in sharing their expertise. As a long time teacher within the school, I had developed a level of rapport with the support staff that allowed us to enter into dialogue to create within a culture of trust.

The timing for this project was also opportune. Kikino Elementary School hired two new teachers in September and one in January of this year. Each of the teachers was paired with a support staff and had experienced the IPP development for at least five months. Further, this opportunity allowed for sharing and learning amongst ourselves as colleagues.

My role as researcher was to support the collaborative dialogue between support staff, classroom teachers and myself. This role represented a genuine leadership stretch for me, as I needed to ensure professional communication, and employ an appropriate leadership style. The most significant aspect of this leadership challenge was to answer the question, "Do I have the skill to support others to recognize their own leadership within?" This was an opportunity for me to observe my own personal and professional growth over the course of the last year.

I believe that in exploring, "How could student support staff and staff collaborate in the development of student IPP development?", the personal and professional benefits to me included learning, being an active participant, gaining recognition from my colleagues, and being a model for them as well. For my sponsoring organization, the benefits included the potential for increases in student achievement, having happy and contributing employees who had opportunity to celebrate what they do by sharing of experiential knowledge, and handbooks that could benefit those who choose to utilize the information provided.

Significance of the Opportunity

Benefits from this opportunity were anticipated and it was hoped that benefits would have extended from the support staff to the teaching staff and to the students of

Kikino Elementary School. These benefits were provided through a forum that supported the ongoing development of support staff in IPP development. These reflective opportunities recognized support staff contributions to student plans. Further, this project was an opportunity to bring a new level of awareness and development that was specifically tailored to their needs. By new level of awareness, I mean that support staff and classroom teachers had opportunity to participate in a dialogue about roles and expectations. This development focused specifically on the specialized role that support staffs play in the education process and direct development towards helping them meet student needs in a manner that is directly applicable to their work situation. The opportunity for our school and division was improved, collaborative professional support to children.

One significant opportunity involved building cohesion amongst all staff working in the school. Because of staff dialogue and sharing, we created a positive environment built on relationships that could potentially strengthen and potentially result in improved working outcomes from the individual student plan. This project gave the support staff the opportunity to highlight and celebrate their work by sharing within the professional learning community of their teams. Celebrations included support staff news sharing at staff meetings, and shared personal reflections. By celebrating what support staff members do in the school, the support staff members brought to the forefront the results of making the educational experience of children more rewarding.

If things continue as they currently are and schools do not choose to undertake the examination of the positive and critical role of support in the school then the relationship of the support staff member and teacher may begin to erode. Opportunities that could

enhance student learning may be missed and new teachers could potentially take longer to understand the critical role of the relationship between teacher and support staff members and how to build, support, and maintain that relationship. My research only addresses one part of the support staff member role, at Kikino Elementary School, in developing and carrying out the goals of the IPP.

Systems Analysis of the Opportunity

My action research project was completed at Kikino Elementary School, which is located within the heart of the Kikino Metis Settlement. The school itself is situated on the highest hill within the main town site. I was born and raised on this Metis settlement.

Kikino Metis Settlement is one of eight land based Metis settlements in Alberta. Alberta is the only government in the world to recognize the Metis as a historical and cultural component of the Province of Alberta (By means of conferences and negotiations we ensure our rights, 1986). In 1985, the province officially recognized the people in a historical landmark agreement that had the land protected and entrenched in the Alberta Act. Since then the collective and local based government has been moving towards self-government where they are responsible for the coordination of programs and services for their members (By means of conferences and negotiations we ensure our rights, 1986).

While education is considered an important matter, previous government effort and focus has been on housing, infrastructure, roads and water and sewer installation. The school itself was built in 1986 and the building and land it sits on leased to the local school district. Since the building of the school on the settlement, local government officials and members have supported education as an important step in promoting the Metis vision of self-government. The local council makes annual financial contributions

The NLSD No. 69 website states the mission of the organization, "*Working Together to Help Every Student Learn and Excel*". As the NLSD continues to move through an environment of change, it established the following vision for its 2003-2004 year, "*Accepting and thriving on change as we prepare students for the 21st Century.*" These statements are relevant to this study as they are important foundations to support the working relationship of support staff, students, and classroom teachers.

Also located on the NLSD website are the following value and belief statements:

In NLSD, we value: Passion for Learning; Mutual Respect; Integrity; Collaboration; Innovation; Increasing Leadership Capacity; Excellence; and Accountability.

In NLSD, we believe: Each and every person can learn; Learning is lifelong; Students and staff are entitled to a safe and caring learning environment; Education is a shared responsibility; and Stakeholders should have opportunities for meaningful involvement (NLSD Reports 2003-2004).

I believe it is from the foundation of these values and beliefs that the excitement and the potential of this action research project emerge, particularly from the statement that education is a shared responsibility (NLSD Reports 2003-2004).

The Superintendent of NLSD recently made an informal announcement regarding a beginning of a restructuring phase of the entire organization. The Superintendent pointed out that the current ratio of teachers to support staff is almost 3:2. He continued on to discuss a phasing in period of four years where schools would look at the option of replacing four support staff with one certified teacher (E. Wittchen, personal communication, April 2004).

Emphasis is placed on celebrating achievement of students and of staff as well. The division offers annual Xerox Legacy Scholarships for Distinguished Service to all staffing areas within the division. The award is presented to the staff member and the scholarship presented to the student in that staff member's name. Celebration continues throughout the year in the form of newsletters and communication. The division publishes six newsletters titled to reflect the pride it places in the collective team. A few examples of the titles given are *Great News*, *NLSD System Newsletter*, *NLSD Native Education and Celebrating Support Staff*. The interesting and exciting piece of this information is that one possibility could be having this project highlighted in the *Celebrating Support Staff* newsletter.

Within this large and dynamic system lies one of the 24 schools. Kikino Elementary School has the unique characteristic of being the only school within NLSD to be fully enveloped within a Metis Settlement with a 100% aboriginal student body comprised of both Metis and Off-Reserve Aboriginal students.

The land upon which this rural school is located is collectively owned by a population base of over 1000 men, women, and children who are on the membership list of the Kikino Metis Settlement. NLSD does own the school building but the land was leased to the Division in a Metis traditional oral agreement that all of the membership agreed. Negotiations for the land commenced upon agreement of all members that the land would be leased to the Division "As long as the sun shines, the river water runs free and the trees stay ever green" (B. Erasmus, personal communication, May 15, 2004). This sharing of land clearly demonstrates the understanding and commitment of the Kikino Metis Settlement to supporting the betterment of the Metis people through education.

Upon entering the school one is greeted by a visible vision, which reads, *The Heart of the School is You!* The school is committed to living the mission that *Kikino Community School believes that learning is a life long journey. We are committed to providing a safe environment that recognizes each child's right to learn, where individual uniqueness and needs will be met and respected* (Kikino Elementary School Three-Year Education Plan 2003-2004). In terms of this project, this vision supports the research question and the learning that potentially can occur.

Kikino School is a kindergarten to grade six school and depending on the budget from year to year may have split classes. Currently the school is staffed with one certified teacher for each grade, one split time special education coordinator, one principal, one non-certified Cree instructor, one secretary/librarian, three kitchen cooks, and one janitor. Current school year enrollment is one hundred and ten students from Kindergarten to grade six, with 40% of the students being identified as having special needs and four support staff positions.

Small teams work together as professional learning communities and each homeroom publishes regular communication in addition to adding to the school communication letter sent out each month. Occasionally teachers and staff participate in professional development sessions outside of school but opportunity to share back into the large group is limited. The school principal holds an assembly at the beginning of each week to share announcements of birthdays or attendance and to promote reading progress of number of books read by all students in the school. It is within this organizational structure that this project will take place. Embedded within the huge system of NLSD #69 is this one small Metis school.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review Topic 1: Support Staff

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to examine how teachers and support staff could collaborate in the development of the student IPP. In conducting a literature review it became evident that there is very little research around support staff and widely different points of view of defining the position. To make clear this study this literature review examined current support staff studies, current research that involved support staff, defining support staff roles and responsibilities, and the future of support staff.

Support Staff Studies

A review of the literature revealed that despite the overwhelming evidence of the growing use of paraprofessionals to support the education of students with disabilities (French & Pickett, 1997), it remains one of the least studied and potentially most significant aspects of special education over the past decade. This trend toward increased numbers of teacher assistants is, to some degree, a consequence of negotiations between employers and employee groups. In their review of the literature on the utilization of paraprofessionals Jones and Bender (1993, p. 7-14) reported the following trends: There is a Canada-wide increase in the number of teaching assistants working with students with special educational needs; There is a lack of data documenting the effects of the use of paraprofessionals on student outcomes.

Support Staff in the Research

One of the few studies of effects of paraprofessionals on students addresses the issue of proximity (Giangreco, M. F., Edelman, S., Luiselli, T. E., & Mac-Farland, S. Z.

of consensus about training topics. Some American states such as Washington, Minnesota, Utah, and Iowa have begun to articulate core competencies for paraprofessionals and the Council for Exceptional Children (1998) has recently included a section on necessary knowledge and skills for paraprofessionals working in the area of special education.

In 1995, British Columbia's Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour commissioned a study to develop an Inventory of Teacher Assistant Training Programs available in the province. The inventory revealed significant diversity in the range of programs, courses, and offerings that existed. The study also raised concerns about program content, consistency, flexibility, and accessibility.

The review of the literature also revealed that inclusive educational opportunities have expanded steadily as school-aged students with increasingly severe disabilities are being provided with access to general education classes (Hunt & Goetz, 1997; McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). Having paraprofessionals accompany these students in general education classes is considered by many teachers to be an essential support (Wolery, Werts, Caldwell, Snyder, & Liskowski, 1995).

Support Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Confusion still exists about the roles of paraprofessionals compared to the roles of the teachers, special educators, and related service personnel (French & Pickett, 1997). Confusion also exists about whether what paraprofessionals actually do is what professionals think they should be doing. Correspondingly, should their training reflect what they actually do or what professionals believe they should be doing? The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1999) described their position on the uses and

misuses of paraprofessional supports by stating, "The intent of using paraprofessionals is to supplement, not supplant, the work of the teacher/service provider" (p. 37). Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman (1999) supported this concern by putting forth the idea that one sign that too much responsibility has been delegated to paraprofessionals is when, "Experienced, skilled classroom teachers and special educators defer important curricular, instructional, and management decisions about a student with disabilities to the paraprofessional" (p. 283).

The research literature identifies roles in which some paraprofessionals engage, but which different sources have identified differently in terms of appropriateness. The roles in question include: (a) student testing and assessment, (b) lesson planning, (c) design of learning activities, (d) extent and nature of instruction, (e) adaptation and modification of curricular materials and activities, and (f) communication and interactions with families (Downing, Ryndak, & Clark, 2000; French, 1998; French & Chopra, 1999; Giangreco et al., 1997; Lamont & Hill, 1991). Disagreement persists about whether, to what extent, or under what conditions such roles are appropriate for paraprofessionals. French (1998) reported on a different aspect of role confusion. Eighteen matched pairs of teachers and paraeducators were divided in their beliefs about whether the paraeducator was an assistant to the teacher or an assistant to the student. Such distinctions of allegiance likely have a significant impact on collaboration and supervision. A series of single-subject studies documented that paraprofessionals have been trained to use specific instructional procedures such as cueing, reinforcement, probing, prompting, and fading of prompts (Hall, McClannahan, & Krantz, 1995; Martella et al., 1993).

Support Staff Futures

The literature suggests that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain paraprofessionals in special education. Lack of orientation and training, poorly defined job descriptions, limited opportunities to advance, low pay, lack of administrative support, and lack of respect have been identified as some of the main culprits (French & Cabell, 1993; French & Chopra, 1999; Hadadian & Yssel, 1998; Morehouse & Albright, 1991).

Literature Review Topic 2: Professional Learning Communities

Introduction

NLSD has adopted a philosophy around improving practice through professional learning communities. This section was included in this literature review to align with current Kikino School staff practice. All staff are encouraged to employ the professional learning community process when embarking on any study that involves change through a studied and collaborative process. This literature review will examine the definition of professional learning communities, the importance of professional learning communities, and how to make professional learning communities work.

Definition of a Professional Learning Community

The term “professional learning community” is integrated to the vocabulary of school districts across both America and Alberta education. Some educators see it as extending classroom practice into the community by connecting with community based service providers (Dufour, 1992). For others, it suggests bringing community support people into the school to add to the curriculum and support learning tasks for students

(Dufour, 1992). For still others, it means having students, teachers, support staff and administrators mutually engaged in continuous learning (Dufour, 1992).

Astuto et al. (1993) have proposed three examples of communities: (1) the professional community of educators, (2) learning communities of teachers and students both within and outside the classroom, and (3) the stakeholder community. Astuto et al. identify professional learning communities as vehicles for the teachers and administrators to continuously search out and share learning, and, as a result, act on their learning by implementation. The result of their actions has been to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the students' benefit; thus, this arrangement may also be termed "communities of continuous inquiry and improvement" (Astuto et al. 1993. p. 3).

Dufour (1992) advocated for a data-driven base to bringing a team together to enhance student performance. MacMullen, in a review and analysis of factors influencing Coalition of Essential Schools reform (1996), followed this idea but concluded that a significant requirement for impact is the inclusion of the whole faculty in developing the vision, understanding the mission, and purpose for which they are engaging, and deciding how to carry out their reform plans. Similarly, in their article "Learning From School Restructuring", Peterson, McCarthey, and Elmore (1996) found that successful school restructuring involved teachers meeting together as a whole staff or in teams.

A focus on the system or the group as a whole does not mean that the individual be ignored, for, as Hall and Hord (1987) emphasize, organizations do not change - individuals do. Fullan agrees that it is the individual who provides the most effective route for accomplishing systemic change (1993); individuals change systems, acting separately and together (1994).

This research project has the framework of a “professional learning community” and the working definition will be “shared vision; collective inquiry; collaborative teams; an orientation toward action and a willingness to experiment; commitment to continuous improvement and a focus on results” (Dufour, 1992 p.45).

Importance of Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities offer a culture where self-efficacy for support staffs can take happen and this is of significant importance for improved collaboration between support staffs and teachers. Self-efficacy in this case would encompass the support staff and teacher's individual judgment about being able to perform a particular activity, in this research that would be IPP's. Rosenholtz (1989) presented findings that a paradigm shift in both the private corporate world and the public education sector in the 1980's began to focus on the influence of work settings on workers. Rosenholtz (1989) brought teacher workplace considerations into the discussion of teaching quality, maintaining that teachers who felt *supported* in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more inclined to be committed and effective than those who did not. Different levels of support by means of teacher networks, cooperation among colleagues, including support staff, and expanded professional roles increased teacher efficacy for meeting students' needs. Further, Rosenholtz (1989) found that teachers with a strong sense of their own efficacy were more likely to accept and implement new classroom behaviors and that a strong sense of efficacy encouraged teachers to stay in the profession.

In a similar vein, Fullan (1991) focused on the teacher workplace and recommended a "redesign [of] the workplace so that innovation and improvement are

built into the daily activities of teachers" (p. 353). McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) confirmed Rosenholtz's findings, by suggesting a strong positive outcome when experienced teachers had opportunities for collaborative inquiry and its related learning. The result was a body of wisdom about teaching that could be shared amongst all staff.

Adding to this discussion of importance of environmental and relationship culture, Darling-Hammond (1996) cited shared decision-making as a factor related to curriculum reform and the transformation of teaching roles in some schools. In these schools, structured time was provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback. Darling-Hammond observes that such teacher workplaces were "embryonic and scattered" (p. 10) but added that direct attention to redesigning the way teachers utilize their time and to rethinking teacher responsibilities is greater now than at any time in the past (p. 10).

Making Professional Learning Communities Work

One primary characteristic of individuals cited by Louis and Kruse (1995) in a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement. In addition, the following characteristics are needed: Respect and trust among colleagues at the school and district level, possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective teaching and learning, supportive leadership from administrators and others in key roles and relatively intensive socialization processes (Louis and Kruse, 1995).

It appears that the supported direction from these writers is to move forward with professional learning communities. The supporting arguments include a list of benefits that outweighs any possible risks. Emily Calhoun (1994), in support of studying the

benefits of professional learning communities in schools, argues that "the results of our study make us intolerant of the status quo that allows the loss of a million students a year, with disenfranchisement from the opportunities our society offers" (p. 3). The obvious resulting benefits to schools to develop professional learning communities makes it almost unethical to ignore the results.

There is a sufficient knowledge base to guide the appropriate and effective learning experiences of all students. Encouraging educators to take the necessary action to learn how to build on their strengths has been problematic (Calhoun, 1994). However, a light appears to be growing as is provided by the number of reports in the literature that focus on collaborative learning activities and the concept of learning communities being designed and implemented in various teacher and administrator preparation programs in higher education (Gamson, 1994; Avila et al., 1995; Matthews, 1995).

Sergiovanni (1996) maintain that classrooms must become communities of learning, caring, and inquiring. For this to happen, the school must become a place where teachers and support staff are involved in a community of learning, caring, and inquiring. Sergiovanni suggests that the "Key to community in both classrooms and schools is a commitment to inquiry, and a commitment to learning as the basis for decisions" (p. 147). He adds that, "If our aim is to help students become lifelong learners by cultivating a spirit of inquiry and the capacity for inquiry, then we must provide the same conditions for teachers" (p. 52). Educator preparation programs can help to bring about these conditions in classroom teachers, principals and support staff.

As mentioned in the introduction to this literature review, many approaches have been offered in the hope that school staffs will gain sufficient knowledge and skills to

provide the effective learning experiences that all students need in order to become successful learners. The message of this review seems clear: Professional learning communities can increase staff capacity to serve students, but success depends on what the staffs do in their collective efforts. Peterson et al. (1996) caution that "while school structures can provide opportunities for learning new practices, the structures, by themselves, do not cause the learning to occur" (p. 119).

Literature Review Topic 3: Support Staff and Leadership Capacity

Introduction

The leadership of NLSD believe and support the philosophy that all staff and students have leadership capacity. Principals and teachers are supported to believe the idea that by building leadership capacity within all staff, learning is one part of this process, then collaborative improvements have increased opportunity to make positive impacts. This literature review examines what is support staff leadership capacity, approaches to change, distributed leadership, professional development, and reflection on practice.

Support Staff Leadership Capacity

A productive way in which schools respond to the challenges involved in education today lies in the manner in which they sustain the improvements they make. Factors in sustaining improvement relate to the ways schools (a) approach change issues (Gray, J., Hopkins, D., Reynolds, D., Wilcox, B., Farrell, S. & Jesson, D., 1999), (b) distribute leadership (Harris 2002), and (c) make professional development available to staff. Lambert (1998) argues that this breadth of involvement in conjunction with the

understandings and skillfulness of all those involved would form the critical foundation to building leadership capacity in schools and in all staff within those schools.

Approaches to change

Gray et al (1999) argue that schools that sustain improvement or increase their impact on student success over time have specific ways of dealing with change issues. They propose these strategies as strategic, tactical, and capacity-building. The tactical approach is about the band-aid, which may lead to improvement, although the improvement may be short lasting. If change continues to be dealt with through a series of quick fixes, this often results in teachers and staff suffering innovation fatigue and facing the daunting task to sustain the improvement (Gray et al 1999: 145-8). The school, which adopts a strategic approach to change, may use a series of short-term tactics but they are aware of the limitations of such approaches and are concerned about how achievement levels can be improved across the school. 'Their agendas had begun to include some of the links between classroom practice and pupils' learning.' (Gray et al., 1999: 145-8). Schools, which had developed a capacity building strategy to help move through change, are described as being: "knowledgeable about the problems they faced, believed that they had engaged with issues of teaching and learning for some time and were able to put forward fairly coherent rationales for the next steps" (Gray et al. 1999:145-8). It was shown to be necessary that these capacity building approaches involve the whole school community in shared values, taking up a variety of roles and building a shared knowledge about the issues they face through targeted professional development and particular kinds of professional development.

Distributed leadership

There is a significant amount of literature on school leadership (Hallinger & Heck 1996). This review focused on sections of the literature that focused particularly on including improvements in relationships to 'improving student learning outcomes for all students over time' (Glickman, C., Gordon, S. & Ross-Gordon, J., 2001. p.49). This is distributed leadership, which Harris (2002) describes as a form of collective leadership in which teachers develop expertise by working collaboratively. Harris argues "...the job of those in formal leadership positions is primarily to hold the pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship. Their central task is to create a common culture of expectations around the use of individual skills and abilities. In short, distributing leadership equates with maximizing the human capacity within the organization (Harris 2002.p.2).

A study by Harris & Chapman (2002) in the United Kingdom found that leadership was distributed through the principal working with and through teams. This involved the whole school taking responsibility for the school's development. As Franey (2002) describes it, distributed leadership provides a more democratic leadership focus for schools, which in turn develops schools as learning organizations.

Professional development

Professional development that involves the staff as a learning community, that targets professional development to the needs of the school and improving student achievement and involves school staff in reflection on practice is positive professional development that helps schools sustain improvement. McNaughton (2002) describes teachers as 'professional experts' that is they have knowledge about what they do,

strategies for carrying it out and ways of 'reflecting on and regulating their performance. This expertise continues to grow throughout teachers' professional lives in explicit ways through courses and/or study and implicitly through their daily work observing and working with students in classrooms. When teachers and schools pool this expertise the school can develop as a 'community of learners.'

Teachers too can view themselves as communities of learners with the explicit purpose of capitalizing on their various talents in order to provide multiple 'ways in' to effective teaching with children in diverse urban schools (McNaughton, 2002).

Franey (2002) citing Hoyle (1974) talks about an 'extended professionalism' in which teachers act as a team on whole school issues understanding 'the wider dimensions of their professional role' developing a 'professional learning culture.' The importance of teachers being conceived as learners alongside their students was illustrated by Franey with a comment from a year 4 student who said, 'it's important my teachers are learners because that makes me a better learner' (Franey 2002).

Reflection on practice

There is a body of research that has outlined the benefits of reflection on practice. Grant (2000) identified teacher research which actively sets out to create change beyond the individual teacher as one with impacts on improving student achievement.

Darling-Hammond (1997) stresses the need for new models of teacher education that envision the teacher as 'one who learns from teaching, rather than one who has finished learning how to teach'

Schools that encourage teachers and resource them to adopt a reflective stance to teaching and learning at both the school and classroom levels are better able to sustain improvement in student achievement.

CHAPTER THREE – CONDUCT OF RESEARCH REPORT

Introduction

A description of the overall conduct of the action research project is outlined in this section. A detailed description of the research approach taken by the researcher as well as a detailed description of the research methods is provided. To support the reader in understanding the background of this report a detailed description of project participants is included, ethical issues are reviewed and a summary of study conduct is provided.

Research Approach

For my inquiry into the research question “How could student support staffs and teachers collaborate in the development of student IPP development?” I have chosen to use a qualitative approach. Qualitative researchers pay much attention to detailed observation. It is this process, which provides contexts for description, and interpretation when researchers ask questions about what is happening around them (Coleman & Briggs, 2002). The detailed approach and consideration, which is given to the holistic picture in which the research is embedded, is necessary for the researcher to make sense of the data only after the researcher is able to understand the data in broad educational, social and historical context (Coleman & Briggs, 2002). Palys (2003) brings a realistic approach to action research in his statement that theory should be grounded in the day-to-day realities of the people being studied. The reason I had chosen a qualitative approach

is that qualitative research acknowledges research that is conducted within life situations. These situations are typical or normal and reflective of the everyday life of individuals, groups, societies and organizations (Coleman & Briggs, 2002, p. 20). A qualitative approach to my research question gave me the opportunity to reflect and deepen my own understanding and perceptions of working with support staff on IPP development. Working with division specialists, colleagues and support staff members provided opportunities to hear about current existing processes and practices.

In contrast, a quantitative approach to research has an emphasis on a deductive approach where the researcher starts with theory and creates situations in which to test the hypothesis (Palys, 2003). This was not the approach of this researcher. This research started with observation and allowed grounded theory to emerge (Palys, 2003). It is for this reason I chose to use a qualitative approach.

Research Methods

Methodology

To examine and develop best practice processes in the shared development of student IPPs requires a melding of experiences and ideas from both the classroom teacher and the support staff. This shared reflective opportunity lends itself to participatory approaches to inquiry particularly community based action research. This approach had its basis in a democratic, empowering, and humanizing approach to inquiry (Stringer, 1999). What is even more appealing to community-based action research is that it allows for the researcher to engage people as equal and full participants in the research process (Stringer, 1999). For action research that was carried out in an elementary school with professionals, this approach recognized research where all are valued in the process.

The findings, results and recommendations are strategies and processes needed to ensure that teachers and support staff are clear in the role that they play in the development of a working IPP. Support staff and teachers are affected by the needs of the special needs students that they serve daily. This project could not take place without their direct input and involvement, which would guide the research process. As researcher, I listened to their triumphs, challenges, made meanings, and connections from the dialogue. My role allowed me to be more facilitative and less directive. This collective process allowed people to be engaged and supported the collective vision and sense of community, which is at the heart of one of their professional learning communities, that is in the relationship of the classroom teacher and the support staff that they work with.

One basic principle of community based action research is the look, think, act framework (Stringer, 1999). Look, means that I needed to gather data and build a picture of the situation. As a researcher, I noticed the increased stress level of classroom teachers spending hours after school to complete an IPP to meet a deadline date set by the special education coordinator. A review of the role of the support staff is included and this literature needs to be supported or disputed.

Exploration and analyzing of what is happening is the next step called think (Stringer, 1999, p. 18). The reasons for teachers spending hours working on the IPPs without the involvement of the support staff was explored and analyzed. By interpreting and explaining the how and why things are as they are, I put forward strategies that will support collective belief in the value of the IPP. I used focus groups and one-to-one interviews to collect the data. The focus group sessions with the remaining teachers and

support staff members and the school principal formed the “think” around ‘what is happening here’ and ‘why are things as they are’ (Stringer, 1999). The one on one interview with the grade team members provided a window to the current reality of the existing working relationships.

The data obtained during the focus group was used to identify key themes. What are the impacts on student achievement that student support staff members make? What is the role of the student support team coordinator in this process? What are the experiences that support staff members provide? What are the insights that support staffs provide? The answers to these questions and a number of others was used to develop strategies and processes to ensure that an IPP is in place with the needs of the child at the forefront and a dedicated commitment from teachers, support staff, child, parent and school staff that addresses successful learning resulting from achievable goals.

The final routine in this community based action research principle is act. Stringer (1999) guides the researcher to plan out priorities with set goals. The purpose was to obtain consensus to ensure success of project completion rather than rushing to show that something was done and decreasing likelihood of success (Stringer, 1999). Implementing would be the next phase and conclusion would come with evaluating (Stringer, 1999). Through the process of description and reflection, my role as action researcher was to produce an ends that is acceptable to all stakeholders (Stringer, 1999). In addition to the completion of the final major project document, the findings were used to develop an action plan to develop strategies and processes to support classroom teachers and support staffs in their contributions to the IPP. The action plan includes the roles of each of the

key stakeholders: classroom teachers, support staff, parents, student, principal and special education coordinator.

Trustworthiness

The nature of this research project is qualitative, with people's perceptions as the focus of the analysis (Palys, 2003). It was necessary to provide evidence that this research had been carried out in a manner that negates superficial, biased or insubstantial results (Stringer, 1999). Trustworthiness of this study was established by reporting on credibility, transferability and dependability and confirmability (Stringer, 1999, p. 176).

Credibility was established through the timed engagement of the school year with participants. In addition, triangulation of information was achieved by looking at the research data from the perspectives of the interview and the focus group as well as comparison with findings from the literature review. Upon completion of data collection from the focus groups, interview arrangements were made to verify for accuracy with the teachers and support staff. Trustworthiness was established by arranging a peer review process that allowed for reflection on research procedures with colleagues who worked on similar projects.

Transferability was established by describing how applications of the research findings could be made to other contexts. This question was part of the focus group discussions and detailed descriptions are available within the report.

Dependability was achieved by providing a clear and detailed accounting of the focus group and interview processes. This description included processes for collecting and analyzing data (Stringer, 1999). All data collected will be made available upon request and where applicable was added as part of the appendix of the final report.

Triangulation

As researcher I compared and contrasted data that I gathered to create a clear perspective on the relationship of teacher and support staff in IPP development. This method, called triangulation, refers to the use of multiple data gathering techniques which I used to investigate my research question (Berg, 2004). In applying triangulation to my research question I completed a literature review, conducted a focus group and carried out four interviews with teacher and support staff grade team pairs.

In the literature review stage of the research I explored the varied definitions and descriptions given to support staff. The purpose was to come up with a working definition and to identify key themes common to all support staff in educational settings. The focus group was defined as an interview designed for small groups where researchers attempt to learn through a discussion about a particular topic of interest (Berg, 2004, p. 123). To carry out this focus group I needed to approach staff to identify issues that currently support or present challenges to the IPP development process. In the third stage I carried out a series of interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to engage the teacher and support staff grade pairs and to gather information about their perception of effective collaboration in the development of IPP's.

Data Gathering Tools

Qualitative researchers see the data gathering process itself as part of the data collection (Palys, 2003). It is from this basis that I set out my data collection process. At the beginning of my project I created three documents that were approved by Royal Roads University as part of my Letter of Agreement- a Research Consent Form to be signed by each participant (see Appendix A), a focus group questionnaire and grade team

pair interview questions (see Appendix B). Participants were contacted at Kikino Elementary School. An explanation of the objective of the research and the role of each member was provided to the participants. A written statement was provided that informed participants about their right to refuse to participate without negative consequence. Participants were informed that names or grades would not be used as part of the data collection. Individual pair interviews and transcribed focus group notes would not be seen by anyone other than the participants once they were completed.

Collection of Data Sequence

The first step in my data collection sequence was to formulate questions for focus group and interviews using a collaborative approach that involved my supervisor and major project sponsor. The questions were tested with one non-participating grade team pair that consisted of a classroom teacher and a support staff. Minor revisions that were necessary were made prior to the focus group and interview sessions.

Once questions were ready I secured participation of the school staff that would be participating. Arrangements were made to advise the group of the planned focus group session with details explaining project and deadline dates. The next step was to arrange interview dates with the grade pair teams. I went to the participant's location of choice to interview. Arrangements were made to ensure food and beverages were available for the focus group and interviews after checking for allergies of the participants. I needed to confirm attendance of participants one week prior to the focus group and interview dates and confirmed again the day before the focus group and interviews.

I secured two tape recorders for focus group and interviews in case of mechanical failure. A preparation for introductions for focus groups and interviews was written and I

practiced introductions. As well as outlining the purpose of the study, I had the consent forms with me. Prior to beginning the focus group and interviews, I reviewed steps that were to be taken to ensure participants confidentiality and to explain procedures for requesting to withdraw from participating in the study and my role as researcher.

It was important that I allowed time for questions, concerns or clarification. It was important that I explained to participants my role as facilitator; the tape recorders and that I would be taking some notes during the focus group. At the end of the session I allowed for time for any questions and explained how I could be reached if participants had any questions or concerns.

Data Analysis

Coleman and Briggs (2002) argue that qualitative research needs to be reflective, systematic, critical and accountable in the ways the researcher proceeds. Six elements of qualitative data analysis as explained by Coleman and Briggs include (a) defining and identifying the data, (b) collecting and storing data, (c) data reduction and sampling, (d) structuring and coding data, (e) theory building and testing, and (f) reporting and writing up research (p. 266).

During the course of this research data was collected from focus groups and interviews. The tapes from the interviews were transcribed into written format and notes were kept and transcribed from the focus group. Opportunities were created for the participants to review the written data for the purpose of verifying accuracy. If there was a need to make changes at that time, changes were made and brought back for confirmation. The data was coded into themes in order to identify any recurring words, ideas, thoughts and experiences.

Coding is a strategy used to identify major elements in written messages (Berg, 2004). Seven major elements can be counted in written messages: words, themes, characters, paragraphs, items, concepts and semantics (Berg, 2004, p. 273). This process helped me, as the researcher, to begin seeing a complete picture that helps to assure accuracy in the interpretation of information gathered by allowing the researcher to link the categories to the data from which they derived (Berg, 2004, p. 273). During coding of the data I counted words and themes as this helped in identifying the categories that were emerging during the process.

Sampling

The idea of using a sample of subjects is to make inferences about some larger population from a smaller one (Berg, 2004, p. 34). For the purposes of this research I used convenience samples. Convenience samples are also known as availability samples (Berg, 2004). Very simply this sample is easily accessible. One consideration that went into choosing convenience samples is that Kikino Elementary School is an isolated rural school where the nearest school would be over 40 kilometres away.

Project Participants

Qualitative researchers see the data gathering process itself as part of the data collection (Palys, 2003). It is from this basis that I set out my data collection process. The project team was comprised of me as researcher, my faculty supervisor, and my organizational sponsor who was Colette Bruce. The participants were Kikino Elementary School principal, Dana Robb, and three teacher support staff grade team pairs.

I invited the school principal to participate in a focus group along with the remaining teacher and support staff members. I also invited the three grade team pairs to participate in interviews.

Participants were contacted at Kikino Elementary School. Participants were told that the objective of the research was to gather information about the IPP process and the role of the responsible parties. A written statement was provided and it informed participants about their right to refuse to participate without negative consequence. Participants were informed that names or grades would not be used as part of the data collection. Individual pair interviews and transcribed focus group notes would not be seen by anyone other than the participants once they are completed.

To ensure manageable data collection focus group sessions did not exceed nine participants and interviews for the grade team pairs was set at three. The questions for discussion in the focus group and interviews were created in collaboration with my project sponsor and project supervisor. Questions were created using vocabulary which participants were comfortable and familiar. I used two tape recorders at each session to safe guard against mechanical failure. With the consent of the participants, I took notes during focus groups and interview sessions. Once data collection had been completed, I used a collaborative analysis approach with the participants. The participants were invited to verify their transcribed conversations.

Ethical Issues

As an action researcher, I have learned that it is my responsibility to ensure that principles, practices, and procedures are in place that will provide a foundation of integrity, accountability, and responsibility to my major project (Royal Roads University

research activity with due diligence to complete the research approval request forms and the draft proposal in order to receive approval prior to commencement of the start of the 2004-2005 school year.

Study Conduct

During the months of September to November I worked on developing my questions with my project sponsor and my project supervisor . I had not planned on a pilot session with my questions but when I learned that my first taped interview had not turned out because of a loud hum in the background of the room I quickly saw the benefits of using that opportunity since it let me see the strengths and weaknesses of my questions and my techniques as a researcher. I became more aware of the influence I had as a researcher/interviewer to influence the participant, yet I also understood the necessity of allowing the participant to tell their story uninterrupted and unencumbered. It was a delicate balance when I needed to ask for clarification and wanted to delve more deeply into areas that seemed of particular interest. I did not want to forget my train of thought, yet I did not want to interrupt the flow of my participant's thoughts and answers.

Upon receipt of confirmation of ethical approval, which did not come until the end of March, I called a staff meeting after school and explained to all staff why I chose my research question. I further explained my research question and worked to build a shared interest in the data results. I handed out the Letter of Agreement for Participation with an invitation to participate. The next day I received the letters back from all staff with confirmation of approval to participate. Interviews were then set up over the course of the next two weeks with the focus group meeting at the end of the interviews.

The actual research participants consisted of four classroom teachers and five

student assistants. My project sponsor and I participated in all interviews and during the focus group. I conducted my own interviews and facilitated the focus group sessions. Each interview ranged in time from thirty minutes to one hour and the focus group lasted approximately one hour.

At the beginning of the interview session, I verified whether or not the participant had signed the consent form. I reiterated that the participant could opt out of the research project at any time and that I would assure confidentiality of the data and participant involvement. I also asked if it was okay to tape the interview and explained that I had two tape recorders set up, one as a backup. When ready, I started the tape recorders and asked the participants to explain his or thoughts and ideas in response to each question. As the participants answered the questions my project sponsor took notes while I encouraged the participants by asking the next questions or asking them to tell me more about a specific area they were talking about. When the participant seemed finished with the questions I asked if he or she had anything else they wanted to add.

Once the session was finished my project sponsor and I debriefed around how the interview went, my perceptions on my performance as a researcher, were there any significant insights or thoughts each of us had during the interview and generally our perceptions on how the interview went. I listened to the tapes and transcribed them using my notes and backup tape for clarification. I labeled the tapes and computer files accordingly. I printed the transcripts and took them to the participants for verification. In most cases, the participants scanned the copy and agreed that was what they had answered. When I asked if they wanted a copy of the transcripts they all stated that they did not.

Generally, the same beginning process was followed for the focus group session. I had each of the four focus group questions printed on large sheets of paper with colored markers at each paper. The participants sat in groups of three and dialogued and recorded their responses to each question and then the papers were passed to the next group. When all of the questions were completed each group presented the question and responses that they had. More dialogue ensued and extra thoughts and comments were added.

When all of the data was collected I printed copies of the data and read each interview one at a time. When reading I decided what constituted a piece of information and cut it out. After I had a pile of cutouts I put them aside. I proceeded to group and cluster similar ideas within the framework of each of the interview questions. I continued in the same manner with the focus group data. At the end of the sorting session I assigned a topic word for each cluster of information.

I made webs, charts, and notations regarding these arrangements, which were kept separate from the actual raw data. Then I started to reread the information as it was clustered. I began to see that certain information could be rearranged and clustered differently outside of the interview question framework. I thought about what the arrangements could be and what the new topics might be, and then I proceeded to re-label and regroup information accordingly.

CHAPTER FOUR – ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction of Study Findings

The study findings are based on my insights from the participants' interviews and focus group session. I have endeavored to be as objective as possible when finding meaning from their personal experiences and truths. To support the reader this section goes into further detail to describe the profile of the participants, the data sorting process, study conclusions and a detailed description of the scope and limitations of the research.

Collective Profile of Participants

The collective profile of the teachers and support staff participating includes one male teacher with the remainder of the participants being female. The collective career experiences indicate that the teachers have taught from kindergarten to grade six. The support staff had worked in kindergarten to grade six as well. Although I did not record their ages I am aware that the range extended from 25 years of age to over 50 years of age.

Beginning to Sort the Data

After transcribing all of the interview tapes and inputting the focus group data I had 20 pages of typed data. I cut out all of the data and ended up with 120 pieces of data that held relevant information. All of the trivial information I cut out and set aside. After this initial sorting I sorted again by keeping the focus group data as one category and the interview questions as a second category.

With the focus group and interview data I began a third round of sorting by putting like attributes together, leaving them, going back and rereading and finally putting

a name to the category. The focus group categories that I identified were; skill, communication/relationships, and knowledge/teaching/learning (Figure 1). When I completed the process with the interview data and named the categories I found the following attributes; learning, monitoring, relationships, communication, process and planning (Figure 2).

I am a very visual learner. When I put the focus group data into the Venn diagram I kept coming back to the point in the middle, where all three intersect. I was trying to integrate my focus group data and my interview data into one collection but I could not find a place to make it fit together. I could see that the data were complementing each other and maybe they did not need to be put all together but rather the data could support a similar idea. After the third round of categorizing the data, I found that the interview data complemented the focus group by further defining and explaining the intersecting point of the Venn diagram! It started making sense when I looked at the three intersecting circles that brought together skill, communication/relationships and knowledge/teaching/learning. It appeared that the data was saying that there is art and a science to using the teacher and student assistant as a collaborative team to developing and implementing the IPP.

After playing around with the data for many weeks I was left with a sense that what I was looking at was a very simple conclusion. I wondered at the simplicity of the idea that there is a point where art meets science. At the point where art meets science the collaborative relationship between the teacher and the student assistant is at an optimal point where learning then occurs for all and is maximized. The initial analysis of data according to the interview questions and focus group enabled me to see that there were

data falling within two distinct categories; scientific aspects of teaching and personal qualities and characteristics. Under each of these main categories, I grouped subcategories; planning, monitoring, process, learning, communication, and relationships.

Within the category scientific aspects, I could see three distinct subcategories; planning, monitoring and process oriented. Within each of these subcategories were areas that were working well and areas that could be improved.

In the area of planning both teachers and student assistants noted the importance of planning required to create, implement, monitor and evaluate the IPP, student, teacher and student assistant performance. It was found that there was varying degrees of confidence on the part of teacher and assistant. One teacher, commented, "I am not confident with a whole lot. I am confident in knowing that there is support for me here. It's matching schedules, finding time. It's impossible during the day to get support and at the end of the day it's just as hard because other people have priorities." As part of the planning phase it was noted that no teacher involved his or her assistant in the actual creation and writing of the IPP.

In the monitoring area I found that all participants noted monitoring to be an area that had to be done. Reasons given for monitoring ranged from goal monitoring to it had to be done for funding purposes or for a student to maintain their coding. Student assistants all made reference to monitoring as part of their job. One grade pair team noted the importance of monitoring and one support staff stated that, "I think what I have done well is watching to see if they have done well with their goal and if they're not I let the classroom teacher know right away and just watching, you know, giving her the information that I can."

In the process area teachers and student assistants made reference to the need for understanding the various process components of the IPP itself and the necessary time required to plan and complete the process. Areas that could be improved revolved around increased stress levels as one factor attributed to the need for more knowledge of the components of the IPP and not knowing what questions to ask. Another student assistant stated, "I don't know their assessment. Like you know what they have been assessed with, you know certain things like mild cognitive, okay, where does it stem from? What's going on? Just certain things like that I'm not comfortable with." Some participants like one teacher also talked about their uncertainties, "I am not that confident or sure of where my actual documentation would come in. I am not so confident about whether my data collection methods that I use are going or showing measurable outcomes."

One identified area that was working well included the common understanding between teacher and student assistant that the IPP was a working document and it was a document that would be created, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. Both teachers and student assistants were able to identify areas that they were comfortable with in the process. A classroom teacher stated, "I am very confident with the goals. With all of the help in the school we know our goals should be short, the smart system. I am also very confident with the accommodations." The student assistant added to this research by stating, "It's all about the goals and my job is to help the students achieve them."

Within the category personal quality and characteristics, I could see three distinct subcategories; learning, communication and relationships. Within each of these subcategories were areas that were working well and areas that could be improved.

Both teachers and student assistants clearly identified learning as an area that could be used to enhance the IPP relationships. Both groups identified areas that were working well and areas that needed further support. Ongoing learning was evident in the understanding, which all teachers reported on, that the IPP was their responsibility to create, implement, and monitor. Areas that required further development were assessment areas where a teacher stated, "The assessment area is by far the weakest area, the area that I really need help understanding. I think I understand but I am no expert or close to it." This was further supported by another teacher who noted that, "training would be an asset for doing a good IPP."

Teachers and student assistants built on learning by identifying that communication was a strength when it was viewed as communication between teacher and student assistant. Both parties identified that there was clear understanding that student assistants took direction from the teacher on a daily basis. Time was set aside on a daily basis for review of all identified students with special needs day events before both parties left for the day. A student assistant remarked, "I think we are pretty confident about communication." Another student assistant, noted "I talk to him and he talks to the parent."

Two identified areas of communication that required support was the added stress of not having enough time to discuss students. Students were not once mentioned in this communication cycle although parents were noted in the signing off of the IPP and when notes were written in the student agenda where the agenda had to have a parent signature. All of the interviewed teachers noted that the student assistants were not involved in the initial creation of the IPP, one teacher did not allow the student assistant to write anything

on the IPP but the student assistants opinion was invited, and the other two teachers invited the student assistants to input their updates on the IPP as a written record. This collaborative approach was foundational to the development of the third segment of the personal qualities and characteristics which contributed to my definition of the art side of an answer to my question of how teachers and student assistants can collaborate in the development of the IPP.

When each individual was asked what they had done well in terms of IPP development respondents all made reference to the establishment and maintenance of a working relationship. This working relationship included dialogue on observations each had made throughout the day, behavior tracking results that the student assistants were responsible for, and acknowledgement of student accomplishments as well as student concerns. It was like both parties recognized a need for the other to be able to carry out their job assignments. Relationships again came up when asked 'what was an essential skill necessary to carrying out a good IPP?' A teacher observed, "If you don't have a relationship with that kid there is no way that an IPP alone can do anything. You have to build that foundation."

Figure 1 Focus Group Data

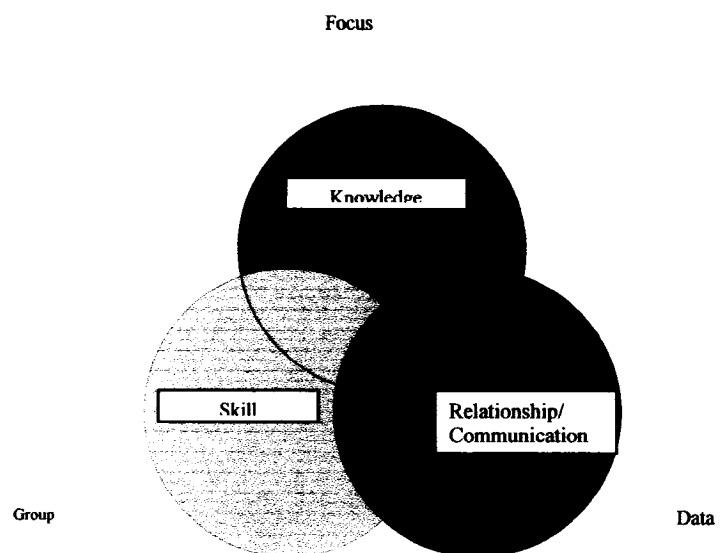
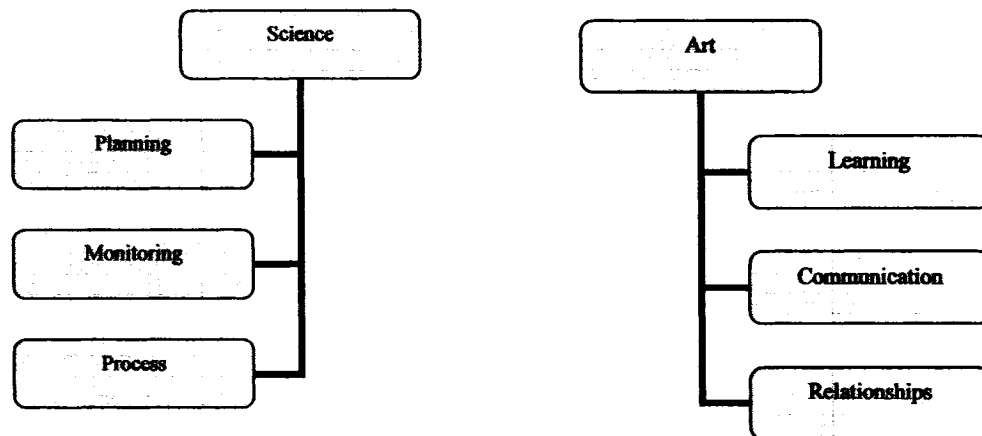


Figure 2 Interview Data



Study Conclusions

As researcher, I have concluded one possible explanation of my initial question of “How could student support staff and teachers collaborate in the development of student IPP development?” Teachers and support staff must be able to talk about necessary skills, focus on communication and building a relationship, and be able to identify the necessary knowledge or be willing to teach and learn about the IPP from inception to conclusion. When teachers and support staff are able to dialogue around these criteria then a unique circumstance exists where the team can then move on to the detail of that circumstance, more specifically, conditions exist to develop the science, which can be described as planning, monitoring, and process of the IPP. In addition to developing the science of the IPP, the art side, which is learning and attitudes towards learning, communication and relationship building can now be used as a foundation for continued pursuit of excellence in the collaboration of the IPP.

Research findings during the focus group on the impact of support staffs include “provides safety and security, is the ‘good guy’ when student is mad at teacher or vice versa, teaches life skills, is a role model for problem solving and knows teacher routine when teacher is away.” Other comments from the group included advocates for student needs, develop personal one to one relationships and complete effective tracking of behavior and seeing trends in students. In the area of academic support, comments included one on one support such as scribing, reading, see small success in students, and potential to bring the child up to grade level. Another area which focused more on relationships again included brings a balance and potentially could make inclusion more successful, provides individual one on one time, a sympathetic ear, sometimes a mediator

and interacts with students at recess and develops rapport/relationships. Other general comments talked about brings insights of the child because of one on one time, shares information with teacher which impacts planning, and allows child to expect consistent expectations.

Findings from the research also examined insights that support staff bring. These data are qualitative and focused on communication as a means of sharing information such as cultural relationship with child, and their observations because many times a teacher is so involved that she/he do not have the time sit back/stand back/disassociate to observe. Other insights that support staff brought included previous job experience, experiences in variety of classrooms and teachers and special needs students, the idea that they have an opportunity to become familiar with a student because of one on one opportunities and an education which is formal in child development/psychology which is different from teacher education. Support staff and teachers also felt that recess supervision gives them different experiences with different IPP students and professional development in the SA portion of providing a quality education to students, for example, Athena, and first aid as well as expertise developed in specific areas like exact signing English. On a different level, the support staff that were from the community felt that they brought more insight to the teacher as to what was happening in student lives out of the school.

This research further explored insights that support staff bring to the IPP process. Focus group data resulted in a range of comments from all staff that explored ideas about behavior-tracking knowledge that would enhance an IPP. The Student Advocacy Counselor felt that insight she brings was different as it comes from a different school of

thought and process and that could support IPP development. Other insights from focus group participants included ideas about how learning success can be logged. Support staff further felt that their experience and focus was different from a teacher's perspective because of the nature of their assignment. The support staff also believed that their attention to detail was more specific and individually oriented, and presented another point of view. Learning and communication comments from support staff included thoughts about how information from professional development conferences and meetings is different from teachers. Other discussion topics included the idea that if support staff are community members then they could possibly bring insight on factors for behavior or attendance and ability to confirm patterns that are being seen by classroom teachers, or not confirm.

One critical link in the collaborative relationship of teachers and support staff in IPP development is the student support team coordinator whose primary duty is to ensure that the IPP meets minimum Alberta Learning standards. This research also explored the role from the perspective of the focus group. The findings fit into a range of thought that extended from, "I don't know, didn't know there was a SST coordinator" to "helps teacher with goals, and strategies for dealing with IPP students." There was general knowledge around some of the duties of the SST coordinator such as, liaison between systems, allows for SA/teacher/SST to meet and work together, acts as information network by attending other school meetings to share ideas and strategies, works as liaison with parents to help explain tests and IPP's, reviews IPP's, checks working, spelling, does testing and does referrals, and schedules out of school testing. As a support person there was some understanding that the position also included provides staff with updated

changes and trends in regards to IPP's, training, source of information and provides information and resources.

As a result of this research a number of recommendations have come forward from classroom teachers and from this researcher. Many of the recommendations focused on learning modules for teachers and student assistants. Application of these recommendations must be considered within the scope of the entire system from the individual classroom to the school, to the district.

Scope and Limitations of the Research

A brief description is necessary for the reader to understand the factors that have or could have limited the application of the research findings. This research took place within a small rural school. The research participants included nine females and the one male on staff participating. Another factor that needs to be noted and would have implications for the research is the participants' age and experience range. Eight out of ten participants were under the age of 30 and had less than five years of teaching experience. These facts placed limitations on the research as perhaps teachers with more experience would hold a different view of the role of collaboration.

CHAPTER FIVE – RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Introduction to Study Recommendations

Recommendations and their implementation will be discussed as they apply to three levels of the education system- teacher classrooms, schools, and school districts. The implications of implementing these recommendations at each level will be discussed as well as the implications of not implementing them.

Teachers/Support Staff

A recommendation resulting from this research is creation and implementation of a series of teaching and learning sessions. The research found that teachers and student assistants have clearly made it understood that support is necessary in two key areas; understanding the IPP components and understanding personal accountability for learning that is necessary to carry out the IPP successfully.

Teachers and student assistants recommended learning modules in how to read assessments, how to understand the technology component of the IPP, how to prepare before starting an IPP, and clarifying roles and responsibilities of teachers, student support workers, and specialist support personnel that come in to provide contracted services within the school. A further identified area was how to use best practice to learn as much as possible about students in less than six weeks.

School

Another recommendation lies in creating a three-year plan for special education within Kikino Elementary School. The creation of a three-year plan would align with the provincial and district practice creating, implementing, and assessing purposeful planning. The three-year plan could include the vision and mission for special education

flowing from the provincial and district vision and mission. The three-year plan could also include sections including, but not limited to, the special education coordinator and IPPning. The plan could include timelines and accountability factors as well as components of collaboration: communication, documentation, and planning.

District

As a result of this research I have come up with recommendations that came from reflection after each of the interviews and from the focus group discussion. It is the recommendation of this researcher that the IPP include a section that reflects a teacher or student assistant learning plan that would allow for learning or journal searches that would help them to develop understanding around the specific needs of that child. With this recommendation comes a further recommendation that NLSD explore the options of entering into an agreement with a university to access a research data base for school staff.

Organizational Implementation

The recommendations of this research will have systematic implications. Consideration must be given to exploring implications for other organizations or groups of NLSD; considerations that explore undertaking the recommendations or not undertaking the recommendations.

Teachers/Support Staff

In order to implement a series of teaching and learning modules around the IPP careful thought and consideration must go into when these learning modules will take place and whether or not there would be other financial costs. Currently, NLSD staff are required to meet two Tuesdays a month for professional development. Kikino School

uses that time to develop a school wide professional learning community around moral intelligence. One Tuesday a month is dedicated to staff meeting. Teachers are expected to do many things after school ranging from planning, preparation, and IPP updating.

If Kikino School staff chooses to implement this recommendation teachers and support staff will have their needs met around their desire to understand more about the technology aspect of the IPP program. Interview results clearly identified teacher and support staff clarification is necessary to understanding roles and responsibilities. Teachers and support staff would also have an opportunity to develop their own learning plans around any IPP area that they wish to focus improved development on. One result of these recommendations would be that teachers and support staff would have a deliberate and focused attention on an area that could improve outcomes for students with special needs.

By choosing to not examine the implementation of this recommendation teachers and support staff may not have the tools to grow as a group. A teacher or a support staff member may take personal responsibility and explore learning opportunities on their own but this may not contribute to growing as a group and developing learning relationships. Teachers and support staff have expressed their needs through this research project. By not giving credence, from their perspective, around their learning needs the possibility may exist that they think why they should bother participating in research again or bother to express their needs.

The researcher recognizes that the principal could play a major role in supporting a vision for special education as well as recognizing, supporting and creating learning opportunities that teachers and support staff are asking for.

Principal support of this recommendation would allow for opportunity to create learning teams. By supporting the needs and creating the opportunities the principal would play a supporting role in creating a culture of learning for all.

By choosing to not support implementation of this recommendation, teachers and support staff will be left on their own to attempt to find ways to satisfy their needs or they may continue as they are with questions and no answers.

School

It is the belief of this researcher that purposeful planning of the creation, implementation, and documentation of the journey makes any type of progress that much more possible. Kikino Elementary School has not targeted special education in the three-year business plan. Direct and purposeful visioning would allow teachers and support staff to clearly understand the purpose, roles and responsibilities and develop common understanding of where they collectively see special education results to be in the future. Kikino Elementary School has supported the direction of NLSD by collecting data on IPP goals achieved that has not been maximized for use, such as improvement or learning, within the school itself. Implementation of this recommendation would create a shared vision, allow for collective teaching and learning, allow teachers and support staff to model learning, and create learning teams. Together, principal, teachers and support staff could identify a goal. From that goal, principal, special education coordinator, support staff and teachers could each define what goals would need to be put in place with accompanying strategies, measures and time lines to contribute to the collective successful achievement of that goal. Ultimately, the impacts could impact personal achievement of staff, and positive outcomes for students and community over time.

Not implementing this recommendation could result in needs around IPP processes being moved to different priority positions for individuals. Possible implications of different priorities for individuals could result in difficulty in forming a team approach to supporting the IPP process. Years of frustrations experienced by long term staff at Kikino School has possibilities of having impacts on staff morale and IPP's not getting the attention they deserve to ensure successful outcomes for special needs students.

District

Implementation of this recommendation would ensure continued growth and development of leadership capacity in the area of special education. As Kikino School develops leaders at differing levels of development, an internal resource of specialists would emerge over time. This recommendation would also make it possible for teachers and support staff to develop in areas of interest rather than trying to fit all into a one opportunity that fits everyone. By staff taking ownership by choosing what they want to learn and how they want to learn it they will have improved success of implementing their learning. By having the division mandate IPP growth as part of the professional development plans they are ensuring that IPP improvements are in line with provincial direction as well as division direction.

Not implementing this recommendation could result in Kikino School staff continuing their current practice of IPP development with little gain in growth over the coming years. Staff may view the provincial and division goals of IPP development and not be clear on future direction for Kikino School because the words may exist but there is little to no action to bring the words to life or make them real.

Implications for Future Research

This research does not stand alone. There are implications for classroom teachers, student assistants, Kikino Elementary School and NLSD. Implications include, but are not limited to, a recommendation for NLSD to develop and implement a division wide consistent approach to carrying out research in the classroom, the school and the division. It would be helpful if teachers were clear in the purpose of research within each of these systems.

This research discovered more questions than answers. It would be interesting if future research gave consideration to subtopics such as the value of trained student assistants versus student assistants who trained through years of experience. Another area that deserves future consideration is the value of special education teachers serving as consultants within schools. With the area of special education one must also consider the value of having a special education coordinator who is special education trained versus having a special education coordinator who has been trained by years of experience in the classroom and school.

CHAPTER SIX – LESSONS LEARNED

Introduction to Research Project Lessons Learned

Reflection and review of the conduct and management of this applied action research project has led me to identify learning that happened around the process of conducting action research. This learning could potentially lead to positive organizational change. On a deeply personal level many lessons have been learned since the inception of this journey.

Process

During the initial residency I made critical connections with other students and began a slow journey toward self-renewal. These personal connections proved to be invaluable when I became immersed in the online courses in the fall. These relationships became symbiotic in support, mentorship, and encouragement that helped all of us to strengthen and build upon our leadership skills. One of the most beneficial activities from the start was the building of a databank of quotations that I used many times over in courses and in my work life.

The online courses provided the opportunity to develop research skills and competency in writing. I developed confidence and competence with each subsequent residency and online instruction course. By the time our second residency arrived I was immersed in the challenges of learning as well as dealing with more 360 feedback on my growth as a leader. I began serious deliberation around my research question while trying to balance personal health and well-being.

At this point, I would like to suggest to others who are completing a thesis that they think about ways and means of organizing information during the literature reviews.

I found it overwhelming and was saved at the end by organizing the literature review information into folders and boxes, like a mini filing cabinet. Once I got going, I would be searching for a quote that I had in mind but I could not remember which book it was in. Sometimes I had read books and articles when my mind was so foggy, that if I had not taken the time to organize them in files, the time spent would have been wasted since I had little recall about the reading.

The general process of getting permission and consent forms in place to begin my research was straightforward. I was able to use my master's project to build a shared vision around special education for Kikino Elementary School.

During the interviews I set up two tape recorders and had my project sponsor take handwritten notes. Listening to my tapes immediately afterward was the best and actually reduced time in transcribing, as the interview was fresh in my mind. After the first interview, I realized that the participants needed to be closer to the microphone, so I made the adjustments in the next interview. Having good quality tapes was important because it added to the clarity of the recorded voice. In transcribing I simply had to sit at my computer, turn on the tape and type. When I needed to catch up on the tape, I simply stopped it, then rewound and listened again for accuracy. The only thing I would change is to follow up more quickly on getting back signed verified copies. I basically had the verbal okay from participants once they read the transcripts, but did not have signed copies of the transcripts showing verification.

I found the analysis phase very interesting and engaging. It was much more simple than I initially thought and I believe this was due to the fact that I did not have an overwhelming amount of data. As a visual learner I had bits of paper spread all over the

table, chairs and counter top. From this process I learned that it is much easier to use a sticky spray on plastic and use bits of paper because this helps to manipulate and manage the data more effectively.

During the analysis I was able to see patterns in the responses of different participants and began to wonder about gender, age, and years of experience. I also realized that certain participants had a significant amount of data while others had only a bit. By having the data on paper I was able to rearrange. However, I made an error. I began to rearrange the strips into different categories and forgot to record the arrangements as I went. When I was finished I realized that I had forgotten to record my journey with the data! At the conclusion, I did regret not recording as I began to question my conclusion and could not go back and see where I made changes and why.

Writing up the results and findings was not straightforward, as I had not kept notes. I would recommend that other students be sure to keep notes as they proceed through the analysis of their data, as these notes become the story.

I had more difficulty keeping my bias separated from the recommendations and had to constantly ask myself if I could make the connections back to the data. Paying attention to the tone of my writing at this stage was critical and sometimes difficult. I want my recommendations to be embraced and understood. I do not want people to read them to say they are already doing what is being recommended, but rather, to take the recommendations from a perspective of the whole picture, realizing that even though people in the system are committed to these items, it only takes a few instances of misunderstanding poor relationships to create a culture of negativity.

Personal Growth as Learner, Researcher, and Leader

While I can certainly proclaim my growth, I understand the value of the test of time in my thoughts and in my actions as a learner, researcher and leader. Personally, this journey began when a colleague invited me to go with him to a meeting about bringing a Royal Roads University Master of Arts in Leadership and Training (MALT) program to Alberta. Completing my master's degree was something that had simply never occurred to me due to time, costs associated and the fact that no individual from my settlement of Kikino had ever attained one. After giving it some thought and with no idea of where the money would come from, I applied with the belief that if it was meant to be, it will be.

When I started the first residence I started to reframe my personal and professional life. I immediately realized how completely overtired and exhausted I was. My first realization was that I needed balance in my life and so went looking for the volunteer activities that I needed to let go of. This was the beginning of an ebb and flow of emotions that would guide my actions for the next two years.

Being involved in the action research process proved to be stimulating and invigorating and helped to replace the sense of loss I experienced initially with letting go of my previous commitments. I enjoyed the collaborative process and as much as I disliked the writing of the literature review I thoroughly enjoyed the search, the reading, the self-debate, and the discovery of the conversation that was happening out there around my research topic. I ended up with an extra box filing cabinet full of research to read at a later date.

I particularly enjoyed doing the research once I got going on it, but being an active person and a doer, sitting for hours on end was not an enjoyable task. I found myself

doing just about anything else to avoid going into my room to read or write and have never spent so many hours watching television.

Once I made it to my room I found that I needed long hours to immerse myself in the task at hand and once started would not emerge for hours on end. I ended up setting up rigid time schedules for myself and was generally able to keep them. Although I was able to continue working on my project, I found my energy depleting and my weight ballooning.

Overall, I believe that this project was ideal for me because it allowed me to work within the practical, objective side of my nature and extended me to the more feeling side which is so necessary when building relationships. Ultimately, I felt like the caterpillar when I went into my innermost recesses of my mind and am now free to fly because I have emerged with the freedom of the butterfly. In my readings about change theory, leadership style and emotional intelligence, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the elements necessary to be an effective contributor and collaborator in life. When looking back over my own life I realize that I was in transition and I did not know to where or what.

My biggest leadership challenge in these past two years was in the journey of personal growth and taking back control of my life and how I choose others to perceive me. Although I recognize that I have not fully accomplished or completed my competency growth I am confident that I and will stay the journey for the rest of my life. I believe that my challenges as a leader are just beginning. From a new perspective of balance, I feel re-energized and committed to my role in the evolution of education.

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APPENDIX A

Letter of Free and Informed Consent

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research project that will examine the individual support staff and classroom teacher relationship in the IPP development process. I, Laurie Thompson, will carry out all research as part of the requirements for completing the Master of Arts in Leadership and Training degree at the Royal Roads University of Victoria, British Columbia. The following outlines the study itself and information about your participation.

The project is entitled:

Educational Student Support Staff and Their Role in Building Shared Responsibility.

The objective of the research proposed is: To examine how student support staff and teachers collaborate in the development of student IPP development.

Rationale for the Study: Integration of special needs students into the education system demands the development and implementation of specialized programs to support the learning needs of that child. Classroom teachers cannot develop and implement these plans alone and the growing resources both inside and outside of the school require coordination of services. One piece of this shared responsibility is the classroom support staff.

A Brief Overview: Volunteers who commit to the program will spend about 2-4 hours over a one month period preparing for, and carrying out, the process. Your involvement in the process will require you to do the following:

Participate in a pre-activity that requires you to reflect on previous experiences in IPP development.

Participate in a teacher/support staff grade pair interview or focus group.

Participate in a post-research activity that will allow you an opportunity to review and confirm the data presented.

In total you will be involved in one interview which will be audio taped and one final review discussion.

The final report will be housed at Royal Roads University and publicly accessible.

What are the benefits for you?

By participating in this study you will have the opportunity to appraise your role in the IPP development. You will have opportunity to reflect on your strengths and your areas for growth. You will also have an opportunity to share your skills and knowledge that can help you to share ownership in supporting special need student success. Your participation is completely voluntary.

What risks are there for you in participating in this study?

There are no external risks to participating in the study. Only you, the researcher, the

major project sponsor and the thesis supervisor will be privy to the data that is collected. All the raw data will be kept in confidence and you will not be identified by name in the study. The data will not be available to the administration of your school and will not be used to evaluate your performance as part of any school or system evaluation. You will have access to all raw data collected about you. All the raw data collected during the study will be secured in a locked file and after two years will be shredded. There will be nine participants in the study. This small number creates the possibility that participants might be identified in published material due to the small sample size.

Your participation in this research study requires a commitment of about one month but you may, at any time, withdraw from the study by simply indicating to the researcher your intention to the withdrawal. No evaluative judgement will be made about you if you choose to withdrawal from the study. All raw data connected to your participation will be immediately destroyed.

Use of audio recording

Signing this document gives approval for use of audiotape as well as permission to dispose of the recorded tapes within 2 years.

When will your participation begin?

The early stages of the research will begin February 1, 2005. The goal would be to have your interview dates or focus group dates in place for the middle of February 2005. The research will conclude by April 2005.

Research Consent

I have read and understood the conditions under which I will participate in this study and give my consent to be a participant.

Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions:

My working questions would be:

- What are the impacts on students that student support staffs make?
- What is the role of the student support team coordinator in this process?
- What are the experiences that support staffs provide?
- What are the insights that support staffs provide?

Grade Pair Team Questions:

Can you explain your individual roles in relation to IPP planning?

As a grade pair team what have you done well in terms of IPP development?

As a grade pair team what are you confident with in terms of IPP development?

As a grade pair team what are you comfortable with in terms of IPP development?

As a grade pair team what are your strengths in terms of IPP development?

As a grade pair team what areas do you need support with in terms of IPP development?

What specific skills do you need to achieve success with IPP goals?

As a grade pair team how do you set up collaborative planning with IPP development?

If you are successful in goal achievement, how are you communicating that to each other?

If you are not succeeding in goal achievement, how are you communicating that to each other?