

# ***Children Enrolled in Multiple Programs: Characteristics, Supports, and Barriers to Teacher Communication***

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**MARY M. DONEGAN**

*University of Michigan-Dearborn*

**MICHAELENE M. OSTROSKY & SUSAN A. FOWLER**

*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

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*Many preschool children with special needs who require full-day child care are dually enrolled in a special education preschool and another early childhood program. The purpose of this descriptive study was to obtain information regarding current practices in staff communication across these programs in 6 communities. A sample of 24 teachers of children enrolled in more than 1 program completed a questionnaire and participated in a structured interview. Findings indicate that teachers recognized the need for staff communication; however, the intensity and nature of their communication varied. Teachers communicated most frequently across programs when behavior problems were evident and when time and resources were available. A comparison of actual to ideal practices yielded differences in both frequency and method of communication.*

As the number of dual-career and single-parent families has increased, the demand for full-day child care has risen. In 1993, approximately 60 percent of mothers of children under 6 years old were in the work force (Children's Defense Fund, 1994). Families of preschool children with special needs who require full-day child care and special services have two options in the current system: (a) full-day inclusive preschool and child care settings or (b) dual enrollment, in which children with special needs make daily transitions between half-day special education programs and preschool, child care, or Head Start programs. The extent to which children with special needs are served in inclusive child care settings remains undocumented. Federal regulations governing the provision of pre-

school special education services (Federal Register, 1989) include enrollment in half-day special education programs and half-day community-based programs as another option for meeting the least restrictive environment requirement. Unfortunately, data are limited on the extent to which children at risk or eligible for special services are enrolled in two or more programs each day. Only one previous study examined dual enrollment and it was limited to a survey of 17 early intervention (birth to 5) programs in New Mexico (Klein & Sheehan, 1987). In these programs, 40% of parents surveyed were using an average of 26 hours of child care per week in addition to the hours of special education services.

Enrollment in two or more separate pro-

grams to ensure full-day services for children with special needs is not an ideal service delivery system for many children. Staff expectations, service provision, and daily routines may differ across programs and affect children's abilities to negotiate these daily transitions (Kagan, 1993). Transitions that formerly took place once a year now take place daily and may result in unnecessarily fragmented services for young children (Bredenkamp, 1987). Parents, teachers, and caregivers may be unaware of what happens in other settings when there are no links between home, preschool, and child care. In addition, young children with special needs often have delays in language development which may have an impact on their ability to relay important information to caregivers.

Advocates for young children argue for the need to reconceptualize early childhood services into a single system of comprehensive services that do not separate the functions of education, enrichment, and child care (Caldwell, 1991; Kagan, Rivera, & Parker, 1991). However, full-day inclusive programs are currently not available in all communities. Until service systems are better integrated or combined, a mechanism for communication and collaboration across programs in which children with special needs participate each day is needed.

Regularly scheduled communication across programs in which children with special needs are dually enrolled has potential benefits for the children, their families, and program staff. Communication can improve the quality of services for children through identification of needed supports, increased consistency and continuity (Caldwell, 1991; Kagan, 1993), and improved assessment and educational planning (Bailey & Wolery, 1989). Communication between programs may assist staff in identifying appropriate supports a child with disabilities will need to be more independent. Staff who communicate can ease a

child's daily transitions by sharing important information, bridging gaps in services, and reducing unnecessary duplication of services between programs. Because child behavior often varies between settings, multiple sources of information are needed for assessment and planning, and for determining the extent to which skills generalize across settings (Bailey & Wolery, 1989). Staff who do not communicate are likely to have an incomplete picture of children's abilities.

At this time, no research has been conducted on the extent to which special education and early childhood staff communicate with one another about dually enrolled children. The purpose of this study was to gather descriptive information regarding the nature of communication between special education staff and early childhood staff who work with young dually enrolled children with special needs, as well as to investigate the relationship between ideal and actual practice. The following research questions were addressed: (a) What are the characteristics of actual and ideal communication between early childhood special education (ECSE) and early childhood education (ECE) staff? (b) What factors influence the need for staff communication? (c) What factors serve as facilitators and barriers to staff communication? (d) What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks to communication between program staff? and (e) What are potential ways ECSE and ECE staff can assist each other?

## **METHOD**

**Participants** Twenty-four preschool teachers from six communities in central Illinois participated in this interview study. Twelve of the teachers worked in special education preschools operated by local education agencies serving children ages 3–5, and 12 teachers worked in private or public community-based early

childhood settings. All of the participants were women.

The group of early childhood special education teachers had more years experience in their current position ( $M = 8.25$  years, range = 1–20 years) than the early childhood education teachers ( $M = 6.4$  years, range = 1–19 years). However, the ECE teachers had a mean of 12.8 years (range = 6–23 years) experience working with young children, in contrast to the ECSE staff mean of 9.75 years (range = 1–23 years) experience. The ECSE staff had completed more years of formal education than the ECE staff. The group of ECSE teachers were comprised of six teachers with master's degrees and six teachers with bachelor's degrees; the group of ECE teachers were comprised of six teachers with bachelor's degrees and six teachers with some college education.

The 12 ECSE teachers were selected from six different communities; their names were obtained by contacting the special education directors in six school districts, who then identified principals of schools in which special education preschool classes were located. The principals identified teachers whose classrooms contained preschool children with special needs who were enrolled in community programs as well as the special education preschool. Teachers with at least 1 year's experience working with dually enrolled children were contacted by telephone and asked to participate. Of the 14 eligible ECSE teachers contacted, 12 agreed to participate.

During the interviews, ECSE teachers identified a total of 10 early childhood programs in which their students with special needs were enrolled. Telephone calls were made to the directors of these programs to request participation by staff members who had at least 1 year of classroom experience working with dually enrolled preschool children with special needs. Nine of the 10 directors identified 12 eligible teachers, all of whom agreed to

participate. The group of ECE teachers was comprised of six Head Start teachers, five private child care teachers and one preschool teacher/director. In most cases the ECE teachers did not currently share a dually enrolled child with the ECSE teachers who participated in the interview.

### ***Instrument***

A structured interview based on a review of the literature and discussions with experienced early childhood professionals was developed for this study. Before the study, sample interview questions were pilot tested with one ECE and one ECSE teacher and revisions were made based on teacher feedback. The interview protocol consisted of 30 questions asked to all participants and follow-up probes, as needed, to expand on a participant's response. The interview questions were organized according to broad categories of interest related to the five research questions. Table 1 presents samples of interview questions according to each research question. All interview questions pertaining to current communication were framed as communication that took place within the preceding 12 months. A complete interview protocol is available by contacting the first author.

### ***Procedure***

Before the interview, the participants completed a short demographic questionnaire that addressed teaching experience and classroom information such as the adult to child ratio and the number of children attending other programs. Participants were interviewed in person by a doctoral student in early childhood special education. Each interview ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. All interviews were conducted at each participant's work setting and audiotaped for later transcription. Following the interview, each teacher received a \$10 gift certificate to thank her for her participation.

**TABLE 1**  
**Research Questions and Sample Interview Questions**

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1. What are the characteristics of actual and ideal communication between early childhood special education staff and early childhood program staff?  
Regarding those children with IEPs who attended more than one program, tell me about the child and program you communicated with the most. Who in the other program did you communicate with? How often? What method did you use? What did you communicate about?
  2. What factors influence the need for staff communication?  
Tell me about a child who didn't seem to have any problem being enrolled in more than one program. Did you communicate with the other staff about this child? If not, why? If so, what did you communicate about? Tell me about a child who had difficulty being enrolled in more than one program.
  3. What factors serve as facilitators and barriers to staff communication?  
What made it easy to communicate with the staff at other programs?  
What made it hard for you to communicate with the staff at other programs?  
What would it take to overcome these barriers?
  4. What are the perceived benefits and drawbacks to communication between program staff?  
Were there any benefits from the communication which took place? Please describe them. Were there any drawbacks to the communication which took place? Please describe them.
  5. What are potential ways in which ECSE and ECE staff can assist each other?  
If program staff had infrequent communication about children with special needs who attend both programs, in what ways could special education staff assist early childhood staff? In what ways could the early childhood staff assist the special education staff?
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### **Data Analysis**

The descriptive information was analyzed through frequency counts of quantifiable responses and through a content analysis of responses following procedures recommended by Johnson and LaMontagne (1993). Each audiotaped interview was transcribed by the interviewer, who then read and reread the transcripts in order to become familiar with the responses.

Frequency counts were done for those questions yielding yes/no responses (e.g., did you communicate with the other staff?) or brief responses that could be categorized in a quantifiable way. For example, responses to the question, "How often did you communicate?" were sorted into one of the following categories: frequent (more than once per month), variable (changing in frequency over

time), infrequent (from once to four times per year), and none.

A team comprised of the interviewer and two coders independently bracketed responses into units of analysis for seven (34%) randomly selected interview transcripts. A unit of analysis was defined as each complete reference to objects, events, or people addressing a question of interest. An individual response to a question could contain several units of analysis. For example, when asked what an ECSE teacher ideally would discuss when communicating with the child's other teacher, the following response was bracketed into three units of analysis: "(Probably the skills they see), (and with the kids, since we have so many kids with behavior problems, how they [the children] interact with

the normal population) (and how they [the children] handle being in a large group)."

Any discrepancies between members of the team on bracketing of responses into separate units of analysis were negotiated until consensus was reached. The interviewer bracketed the remainder of the interviews independently. When the interviewer had questions regarding bracketing, she met with one of the coders to discuss the response.

Following bracketing of responses into complete and separate units of analysis, each response unit was transferred to an index card and coded according to interview question and participant. All of the cards were sorted according to the five original research questions. Cards not addressing any of the research questions were set aside for later examination in a category labeled "other." Then the cards for each research question were sorted and grouped according to emerging themes until each card fit only one theme.

### ***Intercoder Agreement***

Intercoder agreement was calculated at two points to determine the accuracy of interview transcriptions from the audiotapes and theme integrity. A research assistant listened to three randomly selected interview audiotapes and compared the interviewed teacher's responses to the transcriptions to check for accuracy. An agreement was marked for each interview response in which the written transcript matched the audiotape. A disagreement was marked each time the research assistant noted that a word or phrase that might influence the meaning of the response was missing from the transcription. Agreements were divided by the sum of agreements and disagreements and multiplied by 100 to yield a percentage agreement. The overall agreement was 91% (range = 89–95%) for accuracy of transcriptions.

In order to establish the integrity of the themes, a graduate student who had no prior

involvement in the data collection and analysis, independently sorted 25% of the responses for each open-ended interview question into themes generated by the investigator. An agreement was scored each time the independent coder sorted a card into the same theme as the interviewer. The ratio between number of agreements and the number of agreements plus disagreements was used to compute the agreement percentage. Intercoder agreement for theme integrity was 87% (range = 60% to 100%). One theme (past experience communicating with other program) with a limited number of responses, accounted for the low rating of 60%. The interviewer and coder then reached consensus on the disagreements.

## ***RESULTS***

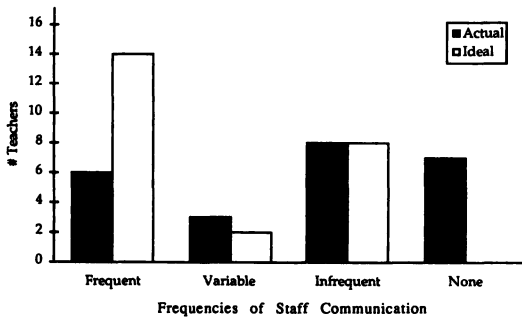
The results of this interview study are organized according to research question topics: a) comparison of current to ideal communication between staff, b) factors influencing the need for communication, c) factors serving as facilitators and barriers to staff communication, d) perceived benefits and drawbacks to communicating across programs, and e) potential areas of staff assistance.

### ***A Comparison of Current to Ideal Communication Between Staff***

Interview responses were analyzed to determine frequency, method, and content of teachers' actual communication and their perceptions of ideal communication. Teachers also were asked with whom they communicated and ideally with whom they preferred to communicate.

Figure 1 presents the teachers' reports of the frequency with which they communicated during the year and what they proposed as the ideal frequency of communication. A total of 17 staff reported communicating with other program staff dur-

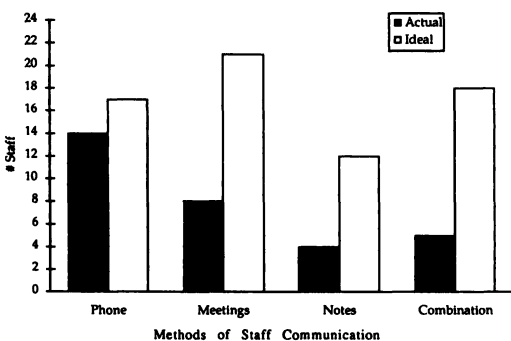
**FIGURE 1**  
**Comparison of actual to ideal frequencies of staff communication.**



ing the previous 12 months. The remaining seven staff did not communicate, although two of them reported communicating in prior years. The frequency with which many staff communicated with one another differed from what they reported to be ideal communication. Fourteen teachers reported frequent communication as ideal, and no teachers identified a total lack of communication as the ideal. In practice, only six teachers engaged in frequent communication (more than once per month).

Figure 2 presents information on the actual and ideal methods of communicating as reported by the 24 teachers in this study. Most teachers indicated a strong preference for meeting in person or combining meetings with

**FIGURE 2**  
**Comparison of actual to ideal methods of staff communication.**



notes, telephone calls, and visits. However, in actual practice most teachers relied primarily on the telephone for communication across programs, mostly because of time restraints.

When asked to identify with whom they communicated, 17 of the 19 teachers who reported communicating with other programs in the past identified the teacher as the person with whom they exchanged information; the teacher also was identified as the ideal contact by all 24 participants. Several teachers reported that they also would like to communicate with other staff members as needed, including the director, social worker, occupational therapist, personal aide, and school nurse. When asked what topics they would like to discuss, staff most frequently reported child behavior to be of interest. However, staff also were interested in sharing methods to work with the child, educational planning, gaining information about the other program, and discussing family issues.

***Factors Influencing the Need for Communication***

Not surprisingly, staff communicated most frequently about children with problem behaviors and those experiencing difficulty with daily transitions (i.e., those children who were tired, stressed, or disruptive). The most frequently used descriptors for children who had difficulty making transitions between programs were behavior problems, fatigue, and distress, which included crying, tantrums, whining, and irritability. An ECSE teacher described what she learned from making a telephone call to a Head Start teacher about a dually enrolled child: "They were seeing the same things, the crying and not wanting to participate in what was going on."

Frequent communicators reported that they contacted other program staff to discuss behavior issues and medical concerns, to obtain or provide progress reports, and to ad-

dress parents' concerns. In one situation, staff from two programs frequently exchanged information with one another, the family, and the physician to make the diagnosis of attention deficit disorder. The eight teachers who reported infrequent communication also cited behavior/discipline issues and progress reports as the most frequent reasons for communicating. Similarly, the three teachers who reported engaging in variable communication did so to address crises regarding child behavior, medical issues, and family issues.

It appeared that teachers did not communicate often about children who easily made transitions between programs (i.e., children who demonstrated a positive attitude and friendliness to others, and who talked about events in the other program). Teachers reported communicating about these children, mostly in regard to initial adjustment behavior, and, in one situation, about kindergarten placement. Staff cited three reasons for not communicating with other staff regarding children who easily made transitions: no need, parents were a source of information or liaison, and lack of time. A special education

teacher gave the following reason for not communicating about children who make transitions easily: "There are too many others who need it and there's no time to [communicate] about the good ones."

**Factors Identified as Facilitators and Barriers to Staff Communication**

As is evident in Table 2, time was an overwhelmingly apparent theme as both a facilitator and a barrier to communication. As one ECSE teacher explained, "There's always the time factor. It's a very time consuming thing to share information." Of the barriers teachers identified, concerns about lack of time, schedule conflicts, and competing demands accounted for 64% of the responses. An ECSE teacher gave her perspective of what makes communication with ECE staff difficult:

Their time restraints, I mean if the day care staff have kids all day long and [in the evening] if they have families or maybe are single parents and don't have sitters, it would be really hard [to find time to communicate].

**TABLE 2**  
**Factors Serving as Facilitators and Barriers to Staff Communication (and Frequency of Response)**

Categories	Responses (#)	
	Facilitators (15 Staff Responded)	Barriers (24 Staff Responded)
Logistics Related to Time	Available time (5)	Lack of time (17) Schedule conflicts (5) Other demands (7)
Other Logistics	Easy telephone access (3) Information release forms (3) Physical proximity (1)	Unavailability of telephone (2) Confidentiality issues (2)
Attitudinal	Other staff's willingness (5) Shared interest (1)	Lack of respect (5) Lack of effort (2)
History	Past history of communicating (6)	Lack of knowledge (4) No prior history (1)
Total # of Responses	24	45

Logistical factors supporting staff communication included having parent permission to share information and easy access to a telephone. A positive attitude, such as commitment and willingness, also helped communication efforts. One ECE teacher said, "I think it has to be something both sides want and both sides feel is important." On the other hand, attitudes reflecting lack of respect toward other programs and differences in philosophy hindered communication. A Head Start teacher expressed her opinion:

I think overall the school system here does not view Head Start as a purposeful education program. I think they think it is more of a day care center. I don't think they realize I have a teaching degree and certificate.

Past history of staff communication was also an important facilitating factor.

The 24 participants were asked to identify possible solutions to the barriers they discussed. The two most frequently mentioned solutions were having adequate resources and making a personal effort. Not surprisingly, adequate resources included (a) time set aside for staff to make visits or telephone calls and attend meetings and (b) funds to hire substitutes or to pay staff for the extra time needed to communicate with other programs. Personal effort, the second most frequently mentioned solution, included the willingness and desire to initiate communication with other programs. Finally, five teachers cited administrative support as a possible solution. An ECSE teacher said, "It would take an administrator who truly saw a need for this."

### ***Perceived Benefits and Drawbacks to Staff Communication***

The 19 teachers with a history of communicating across programs were asked to reflect on benefits and drawbacks stemming from staff communication. Seventeen of the teachers identified benefits and, of the 26 re-

sponses generated, the majority (18) addressed ways the interchange helped staff and children. Themes that emerged around benefits included gaining information about the child and other program, easing of teacher concerns about the child, building a relationship between programs, and making better decisions about the child. Staff communication allowed several teachers to make comparisons of behavior across settings, make joint decisions with families about kindergarten placement, and develop behavior management plans. Some teachers reported that children demonstrated improvements in behavior from increased consistency between programs in addressing children's needs. As the following quotation from a Head Start teacher illustrates, when teachers from different programs share information and ideas, children as well as staff may profit. "I think there were [benefits] not only for the child but it helped us to build a relationship. She offered suggestions and reassured me. She also let me know the parents would be willing to help." Drawbacks to communication were identified by only half of the respondents. The two most frequently cited drawbacks pertained, once again, to lack of time: schedule conflicts and the amount of time required to communicate. Drawbacks mentioned once included differences of opinions between programs regarding kindergarten placement, having information misrepresented when communicating through a liaison, and lack of follow-up.

### ***Potential Areas of Staff Assistance***

Finally, staff were asked to describe ways in which ECSE staff could assist ECE staff and vice versa if frequent communication took place. Both groups identified potential contributions from special education staff including information on special techniques and adaptations, behavior management strate-



gies, identification of child goals, and the sharing of curricular ideas and test results.

Considerable overlap existed between both groups of staff in their responses to ways ECE staff could assist ECSE staff. The most frequent response by ECSE staff was that ECE staff could share their perceptions of a given child's abilities in large group settings. Both groups of teachers reported that ECE staff could assist ECSE staff by working on the same goals, providing feedback on child progress, sharing information about families, and exchanging curricular ideas.

Teachers were asked to describe the role they would like to have when communicating with staff in another program. Fourteen teachers described themselves as wanting to be participants in a collaborative process, using descriptors such as flexible, open, and mutual. An ECSE teacher discussed her role in an ideal relationship as "an equal with the other teacher. Somebody has to initiate but hopefully real mutual and equal."

Seven teachers described themselves as potential participants in an expert model of consultation in which special education teachers would provide information and make suggestions to teachers in child care and Head Start. An ECSE teacher explained the need for an expert model: "I would probably have more insight on extra equipment or activities the student might need just because I have more of a special ed background and the other teacher would have more of a regular ed background." When describing the content of the ideal relationship between staff at different programs, teachers described it as mostly sharing information and discussing experiences. An ECSE teacher described her view of an ideal staff relationship as "working together and sharing ideas about what works with each student, and things that each of us can do to help the student."

## **DISCUSSION**

Despite the finding that all interviewed staff recognized the need to communicate across programs when a child is dually enrolled, a majority did not maintain regular or frequent contact with the other program. Barriers to communication cited by teachers involved logistics of communicating, negative attitudes, and lack of prior history or relationship. Teachers overwhelmingly reported that lack of time was the major barrier to communication, accounting for the significant discrepancy between actual and ideal communication rates. Less frequently cited logistical hindrances were lack of access to the telephone and written procedures to ensure parental permission to exchange information.

Given numerous demands on teacher time, communication between programs is more likely to take place when resources are available and administrative policies and support are in place. First and foremost, administrators may promote communication by providing staff with release time for telephone calls, program visits, or meetings related to dually enrolled children. Creating time to initiate and maintain contact with other programs might reduce other barriers cited, such as lack of information about the other program and negative attitudes about other programs.

Administrative policies supporting time for communication with other programs are unlikely, however, unless administrators and teachers share a vision for service integration that places the child and not the classroom unit at the center of service delivery decisions. For dually enrolled children, communication about the child's experiences and services across the day is a necessary first step toward service integration. At least one program involved in this study had policies that supported regular and sustained communication across programs. An ECSE teacher who maintained frequent contact with an-

other program attributed her ability to do so to school policies setting aside one day each week for home (or program) visits and to her classroom practice of exchanging daily notebooks between school, the other program, and home.

In the present study, negative staff attitudes and a lack of knowledge regarding other programs were identified as barriers. These attitudinal barriers to communication (e.g., perceived lack of respect) are similar to barriers related to preschool integration (Odom & McEvoy, 1990; Peck, Hayden, Wandschneider, Peterson & Richarz, 1989; Rose & Smith, 1993). A lack of communication, collaboration, and respect may stem from limited information about other people and programs (Rose & Smith, 1993).

In addition to overt attitudinal barriers expressed by interviewed teachers, more subtle bias about sharing information between programs may exist in early childhood education (Caldwell, 1991). Perhaps separate locations, philosophies, and funding sources also contribute to the absence of networking among staff in different programs. These barriers are likely to remain unless the concept of a child's team is expanded to encompass child care staff, families, and special education staff joined together in their mutual concern about the growth and development of a given child.

Most teachers expressed a desire for collaborative relationships between ECE and ECSE staff. Their desire for collaborative relationships support their comments that benefits to communicating about individual children outweighed any drawbacks. Collaborative relationships among ECE and ECSE teachers could be developed on several levels. For the most part, teachers reported rather informal instances of communication, often revolving around the need for joint planning to solve a behavior problem presented by the child. Teachers rarely reported collab-

oration at a more formal level, such as participating in IEP planning or program conferences. No instances of joint staff development were reported. Yet ECE teachers expressed clear interest in learning about methods to work with children with special needs, which might be addressed through individual consultations between teachers or at a systems level through joint inservice training of staff. Staff development in effective teaming and collaboration skills with an emphasis on shared expertise might also form the basis for joint inservice training (File & Kontos, 1992). Although there was a tendency for some teachers to view ECSE teachers as the experts, most teachers indicated a desire for shared expertise.

The need for collaboration and communication between staff who work with dually enrolled children would not be an issue if all children were served in a single setting. As Caldwell (1991) and Kagan and Rivera (1991) have argued, there is a need to reconceptualize early childhood services into a single system in which programs provide comprehensive rather than fragmented services. As one preschool teacher/director succinctly stated, "I feel like instead of moving the kid, we should have the kids in one spot and move in intervention services."

Attempts were made to minimize subjectivity and increase dependability by obtaining information from two sources (special education and early childhood staff) and using independent coders. Despite these efforts, there are several limitations to this descriptive study. Reports on past staff communication behavior were based on retrospection and lacked other sources of information to confirm teacher reports. Additionally, this study, based on a sample of 24 teachers in one state, may not be representative of early childhood services in other geographic and demographic areas, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Missing from this study, which focused on teacher experiences and perceptions, are the viewpoints of families of young children with special needs who are enrolled in multiple placements. Questions regarding family members' preferences as well as experiences with various models of service delivery remain. Future research is needed to determine whether families consider communication and consistency between program staff a worthwhile goal that can promote their children's development and lead to increased service coordination. If so, research on models of program relationships for staff who work with dually enrolled children and families is needed. The impact of increased staff communication on child outcomes, parent satisfaction, and program coordination are additional areas in need of further research.

### **Conclusion**

When children with special needs are enrolled in two or more programs, families and professionals may assume that the children will benefit from the experience and that these two programs are meeting their needs. For some children, dual enrollment is an opportunity to have the best of two worlds: intensive specialized services in a reduced group size and large group socialization or enrichment opportunities in a community program. For other children, dual enrollment may create problems and stress resulting from fatigue and inconsistency and may manifest itself in behavior problems. This study, which focused on communication between program staff who simultaneously worked with preschool children with special needs, indicated that staff recognized the relationship between communication and improved quality of services for young children. The remaining question is how to move from our current practice of limited communication and coordination of services to a system of sharing information and collaborating for the benefit

of children with special needs and their families.

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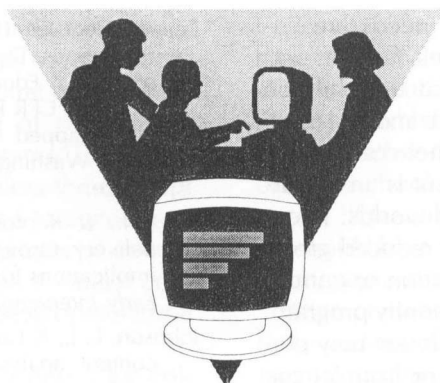
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Address correspondence to **Mary Donegan**, School of Education, University of Michigan-Dearborn, 4901 Evergreen Road, Dearborn, Michigan 48128–1491.

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