

COMMUNICATION AS A CONDUIT FOR SUCCESSFUL PARENT
ENGAGEMENT: EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS SPEAK UP

by

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To the love of my life, everyone needs a Travis, but I am lucky to have one!

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STACY ANN BRAZELL

ABSTRACT

COMMUNICATION AS A CONDUIT FOR SUCCESSFUL PARENT ENGAGEMENT: EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS SPEAK UP

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This dissertation delves into the crucial realm of teacher-parent communication, recognizing its pivotal role in establishing a foundation of trust with families. This study employs a qualitative approach to emphasize the bidirectional and continuous nature of effective communication. It adopts a case study methodology, focusing on ten early childhood teachers within a Michigan school district. Through in-depth interviews guided by a common question—“How do you perceive and describe communication with parents?”—the research unveils two central themes: 1) the identification of effective communication strategies for building trust and 2) the exploration of collaborative learning, professional development, and new teacher experiences. The findings shed light on teachers' perspectives regarding communication with families, revealing insights into professional development, new teacher learning, mentorship, empathy, administrative support, and collaborative learning. These discoveries contribute to a nuanced understanding of teacher-parent communication and hold promise for shaping future practices and policies in education and family involvement.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BNIM	Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method
CTE	Collective Teacher Efficacy
GRSP	Great Start Readiness Program
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
NI	Narrative Inquiry
SCT	Socio-Cognitive Theory
SLT	Social Learning Theory
SQUIN	Single Question to Induce a Narrative
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The focus of this research evolved from my experiences as a teacher in Michigan's state-funded preschool program for at-risk, four-year-old children, called the Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP). I begin with the story of my experiences as a teacher who learned the importance of teacher-parent-communication. I became inspired to learn more about teacher-parent communication from the stories told by other early childhood teachers who sought to have effective communication with children's parents and with other members of family,

When I moved up to teach kindergarten, I thought I knew what was best for the children in my classroom because I had three years of GSRP teaching experience, and I had been trained in the HighScope and Creative Curriculums. Furthermore, I had completed a master's degree in teaching and had earned endorsements for teaching children from pre-kindergarten through third grade, as well as special education programs for children from birth to age five. I relied on the funds of knowledge of my classroom families (Wilinski & Vellanki, 2020) to provide help and support their children in school. In GSRP classrooms, access to these funds of knowledge is facilitated because teachers are required to communicate with families daily (Implementation Manual, n.d.) I brought these same notions with me into my kindergarten classroom. I thought families would reach out to me before and after school, and I thought I would have time to reach out and talk to all my families. I thought I would be in constant contact, just the same as the GSRP program. However, I quickly realized that kindergarten was different. In

kindergarten, I was no longer required to have parents sign their children in for the day. Typically, at sign-in at GSRP, I would have a short conversation with each parent and get a quick rundown of their child's day. Kindergarten, however, had stricter time limits. I was no longer required to have at least two daily 30-minute blocks of outdoor time as in the GSRP program (Implementation Manual, n.d.), but instead, my district only allowed for a 15-minute recess each day. Kindergartners were expected to take computer-based tests and read sight words automatically and accurately. In the GSRP program, the adult-to-child ratio was 1:8, and in the kindergarten classroom, it was 1:28. In a like manner, in the GSRP program, I had an assistant teacher, whereas in kindergarten, I had no such support.

In my first year of teaching kindergarten, I had a struggling student in my class. He often blurted silly sounds and words, or rolled around on the carpet, knocking into other children. He was sweet and had a smile that lit up the room. When he did any academic work, he could not start without me standing next to him. Likewise, when I left to help another student, he could not complete his work. He often misspelled his name, but the printing was neat. I began to feel he was fooling around. When I tested him for a reading level, he could not complete a level 1 book. A level 1 book is appropriate for children who know less than forty upper-case and lower-case letters. The patterns in the books are simple phrases, and they repeat. Furthermore, the topics of the books are familiar to children, and each page contains one line of text. Children at this reading level will need explicit instruction on reading left to right and be taught to pay attention to spoken words and match each word to the printed text on the page. He scored in the seventh percentile on the required state testing. I was at a loss; I tried all the tricks I knew

from GSRP. In the GSRP program, I was able to form a bond with the children by having them sit at my table and engaging them in conversation to find out what they like, what they play with, and who they play with. I made sure to spend some days eating at their lunch table since lunch was served family-style-where the children set the table, poured their own drinks, decided what they would eat, and cleaned up their area. Nevertheless, none of these tricks worked for this child; therefore, I felt it was necessary to try another strategy. From my experience, many children like to mimic the behaviors of other children, and with that thought in mind, I tried to pair him up with several children whom I felt were more mature. To seek assistance for him in the classroom, I attempted to contact his mother through email in hopes of gaining valuable information about him. Unfortunately, my emails went unanswered. In addition, speaking with her at the end of the day proved to be unhelpful as she was distracted and overwhelmed with her newborn.

Weeks went by, with the mother never responding to my emails. She no longer picked up her son after school; instead, she would send his grandmother. I told his grandmother how much he did not get done in school and that he sat at his seat, did not participate in class, or rolled around on the rug and bothered other students. I informed her that for him to learn, he would need to do more work and participate with the rest of the class. Grandmother finally had enough. She looked at me and asked, “Is there anything he can do right?” With that, she stomped off. I was stunned, and I didn’t know how to respond. I went to my classroom and sulked, and I could not understand why she would say such a thing. After a long pause, I decided that I needed to fix this. I knew I needed to apologize.

I stayed after school late that night and called the child's mother. I started by checking to see if this was a good time to talk, and when she said yes, I apologized and admitted I was wrong. I then asked her to help me help him. I told her that she needed to hear the truth, that I needed her help, and that she needed my help so we could help her child. I had learned an unbelievably valuable lesson about communication.

From that day forward, when communicating with families, I always talk about what the child can do, followed by what needs improvement. The boy's family also learned to trust me and to ask what they could do at home to help him. It has been almost ten years since that incident, and I am still in contact with that boy and his family. This experience helped me grow as a teacher, and it helped me decide to keep on teaching. With this experience, I finally realized I chose the right career and learned to be a better teacher.

About five years later, I was allowed to be his little sister's kindergarten teacher. The mother requested me to be her teacher; she felt she could trust me to do my best, and we built a great two-way relationship. The boy saw both his mother and his teacher come to an understanding, and he heard us communicate. He saw that his mother was willing to help his teacher when the teacher stopped talking and listened. Thanks to this experience and the many more that followed, I now understand how important communication can be for the child, the family, and the teacher. Nevertheless, not enough is done to prepare new teachers for what they will encounter. This study, therefore, will provide rich data and insight into teacher and parent communication and how these communications affect teacher self-efficacy.

Background

Communication is like a conduit that binds, connects, and secures relationships in one sense; in another, it can resolve conflicts and clear up misunderstandings. Ideally, teachers contact families daily because communication is essential in forming trusting relationships and engaging families (Caspe, 2003; Lawson, 2003; Marschall et al., 2016). However, more than just frequent communication with families is required. Teachers need both skills and knowledge to communicate effectively with families. Researchers have focused on teacher communication to shed light on family engagement approaches that increase student learning (Epstein, 2005; Kraft & Daughtry, 2013) and decrease behavioral outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; McNeal, 1999).

Having taught preschool through first grade for the last fifteen years, I have noticed my colleagues struggle daily to communicate with families. They will avoid calling families or asking other teachers for help with using and saying the right words. Some teachers who choose not to make a call home find excuses for not having time to call. Some might say they missed their prep time or have other issues that take precedence. Often, these same teachers will call the next day because the situation bothers them. However, issues can be exacerbated when a teacher call is not made right away. For example, a child has to lose recess because they did not finish their classwork. The child complains to the family about the loss of recess time but neglects to tell the family that the loss resulted from not finishing the classwork. Some teachers are lucky to have been placed with a mentor teacher who taught them to document all parent communication. Often, these mentor teachers share this knowledge because they have been in a situation where they did not record communication with a family and later were

asked by the administration for the dates when they made parent contacts. Other teachers keep calling logs to provide evidence that they are communicating with parents because this helps them prove their effectiveness in their yearly evaluations.

In many elementary buildings, the teachers' lunch break and daily preparation time have been spent with colleagues discussing parent communication. For example, in my building, we discuss the importance of making phone calls to the parents or family to check on a student if that child has been absent. Other colleagues have talked about being proactive and sending emails to clarify field trip procedures. Still, other more serious discussions have been about difficulties with parents or how to relay news that their child failed a test or has been injured at school. It can be challenging to share this kind of information with a parent with whom they have yet to establish a good relationship. Thus, the importance of these conversations during a lunch break or a preparation cannot be underscored. As a lead teacher, I have advised mentee teachers on addressing many concerns. I have also contacted my colleagues for advice on approaching certain subjects with a parent. We call this "helping by giving words, which is to help a teacher address a conversation so that no one is offended. My colleagues and I are grateful for the support we give each other. However, some teachers do not have such a support system. These teachers often mindlessly go into conversation and attempt to communicate with parents without a mentor teacher or colleagues to bounce ideas off or give them advice. The lack of support can affect a teacher's ability to feel that they make a difference in the lives of children, leading to a lower sense of self-efficacy (Yulianti et al., 2021). De Connick et al. (2019) found that teacher self-efficacy affected many areas of a teacher's professional life. These include the teachers' ability to advance student learning, effective teaching

practices, job satisfaction, well-being, and commitment to their job. Fefer et al., (2015) found when teachers feel they cannot communicate with families and make a difference, which leads to more stress and more work, and they can become burnt out. Teacher burnout is one of the many reasons teachers leave the career field. On the other hand, Jung and Han (2013) found when teachers and parents have good two-way communication, an ongoing exchange between the teacher and the families through phone calls, emails, or texts can help parents and teachers feel supported and trusted. When parents and teachers communicate, children feel successful, and successful children want to do well in their learning and attend school. Therefore, teachers need families to help their child/children at home and to seek help if they feel their child needs it. Assisting a child at home can take on many forms. Epstein (2009) stated that helping children who are struggling to learn encompasses supervising homework, studying for tests, ensuring daily school attendance, and understanding the specific areas where they may need more assistance in learning.

Over the last fifteen years, I have seen how teacher-parent communication has changed from both parents' and teachers' perspectives. Teacher-parent communication has become instant, meaning that if either party needs to contact the other, they can do so from their cell phone (Thompson et al., 2015). Cell phones have become a new way to communicate with families and teachers. Using a cell phone is considered a form of digital communication because parents and teachers do not need to talk to each other but can access texts and emails directly from their phones. Some teachers are comfortable using digital communication, while others favor a weekly or daily typed or handwritten note that physically goes home with the child (Thompson et al., 2015). Some teachers

want to become better communicators and are willing to seek opportunities to develop better skills in digital communications through professional development (Thompson et al., 2015). Other teachers feel that digital mediums are not the answer to better communication. Still, other teachers think communicating on a digital platform will have unforeseen consequences because once a message is entered, it never goes away. They fear that what they wrote can be used against them or put them in opposition to the administration (Thompson et al., 2015).

As the current group of teachers begins to retire or leave the field of education, researchers need to understand how to help new teacher candidates who may have a better understanding of the current technologies. In addition, seasoned teachers may need professional development on new technologies to use effectively and efficiently for communication. Understanding communication strategies will help teachers find better ways to communicate with all families and ensure that they feel heard and understood. To better understand what teachers need in professional development and training for effective parent-teacher communication, it is crucial to uncover educators' perceptions of communicating with families. This involves exploring how these perceptions align with or deviate from their expectations. The impact on early childhood teachers is significant due to the unique dynamics of communication in this developmental stage. As students progress through higher grades, the frequency of communication between teachers and families tends to diminish. This phenomenon, supported by various sources (Epstein, 2011; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Youker, 2007), highlights the necessity of tailored training for early childhood teachers to navigate these communication challenges. By understanding early childhood educators' specific needs and perceptions, professional

development programs can better equip them to engage effectively with parents, ultimately enhancing the overall learning experience for students entrusted to their guidance.

Throughout this dissertation, there is a consistent reference to parents and families, with the understanding that families are inherently included, even if not explicitly stated. The study aims to delve into the narratives of early childhood teachers, investigating how they perceive and articulate their experiences of communication with families and examining the impact of such communication on teacher self-efficacy. More precisely, the guiding research question for this study is: How do early childhood teachers perceive and describe experiences in communication with families?

CHAPTER TWO

THEORY

Conceptual Framework: Relevant Major Theories and Research

Communicating with families means that information from the school or the teacher that will be shared with families is clear, helpful, relevant, and respectful. It also means that communication is ongoing. Teachers communicate with families on many topics and issues and vice versa. Furthermore, communication with families should be two-way, with both teachers and families initiating conversations. Communication with families has a direct association with family engagement and parent involvement. For families to get information about ways to engage with their child at school, at home, or in the community, they need to know what opportunities exist. Family engagement and parent involvement are two different ways parents and families are involved with their child's school. However, there is a distinct difference between involved parents and engaged parents (Epstein, 2009). Involved parents participate in activities that are decided upon by the staff. Parent involvement may include volunteering for a coat drive, being a reading buddy, or being a lunchroom helper. The school or teacher determines these activities, and the families are asked to help. On the other hand, engaged parents become an integral part of the planning process of activities. Parent engagement happens when schools allow parents to provide input and take ownership of the activities. Examples of parent engagement are when parents are asked what kind of after-school programs they would like to see implemented and then asked to help facilitate the program's running. Furthermore, there can be an overlap between involvement and

engagement. It is not an either-or situation. Parents can be both involved and engaged. In this dissertation, the terms “parent” and “family” refer to the adult or adults responsible for the care and upbringing of children. This may include biological, adoptive, and foster parents as well as grandparents and other members of a family who parent the child.

Several theories support the importance of communicating with parents. The theories that I chose examine family engagement from a larger ecological perspective. First, I examine, describe, and discuss Epstein’s model of parental involvement and overlapping spheres of influence, then Bandura’s social learning theory and self-efficacy. Finally, I conclude with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which connects family and culture to a child’s first teacher.

Epstein’s Model of Parent Involvement

Figure 1 shows three overlapping spheres that influence a child’s life: family, school, and community. Epstein (2019) has stated that all three spheres must work jointly to help the child develop and learn. When teachers take the time to find effective and respectful ways to communicate with families and inform them of the child’s progress, strengths, and areas that need improvement, they help to promote a child’s academic and social development. Epstein’s model suggests that effective communication and collaboration between teachers and families can promote positive outcomes for children. Positive outcomes happen with open and regular communication. Teachers can also provide families with resources and strategies to support their child’s learning at home.

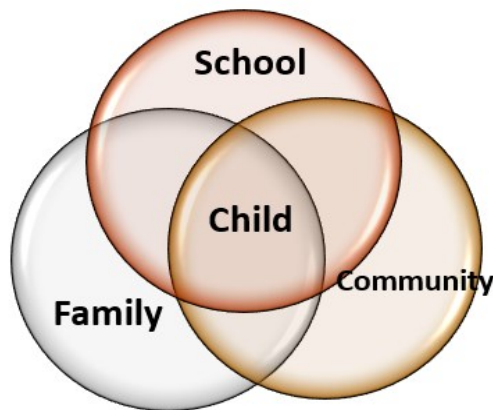
Furthermore, Epstein proposed that when teachers and families work closely together, teachers will better understand the child’s cultural background and the unique needs and interests of the child and the family. With this information, the teacher can make learning

and instruction more creative and fun, meet the needs of individual learning, and celebrate the diversity of the families in the school.

Figure 1

Epstein's Overlapping Sphere of Influence

Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence



Note. Adapted from *School, family, and community partnerships: preparing educators and improving schools* (p. 28), by Joyce L. Epstein, 2001, Boulder, CO: Westview Press. Copyright 2001 by Westview Press, a member of Perseus Group. Reprinted with permission (permission 9/23/2023)

Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence model suggests that the spheres influence and affect a child's development. While, for the most part, these spheres work together to support the child's development, there may be times when they create tension, such as when the spheres pull the child in different directions. This can create undue stress and lead to conflict since the three spheres may pull the child and create an

imbalance, like when parents have different expectations or values than those promoted in the school or community spheres. For example, a family may prioritize religious traditions that conflict with school schedules or expectations. These differences can cause stress and anxiety in a child because the school is pulling them to participate in a program during the time the family has set aside for prayer and reflection. Another example may be in the school sphere. The school and teacher may prioritize academic achievement over extracurricular activities, yet extracurricular activities may be more valued in the child's family than the educational piece. Again, this creates tension and stress for the child because the teacher expects all children to excel in all areas of academia. In contrast, the family wants the child to hone physical skills to enhance the child's chances of being on the basketball team. Finally, an example from the community sphere which includes a child's friends and peer groups. A child may be pulled into a conflict with their family or even school because the child's peer group may prioritize unsafe behaviors and socializing that may interfere with academic or extracurricular activities, which may again be prioritized by the family or the school. This pull can create tension, stress, and conflict for the child because they want to fit in with their peer group and hang out at the mall, but they also want to be a good student and study for an upcoming test or attend a worship service with their family.

Conflict can emerge between the different spheres of influence when more understanding and communication is needed between them. Therefore, parents, schools, and communities must collaborate to create consistent and supportive environments for children. Epstein proposed that these environments should value and prioritize the needs and interests of children and provide ways to maintain open communication. Then, the

three spheres can work together to ensure the child succeeds academically and becomes a contributing community member. Epstein (2009) stated that schools make choices about their communications with families:

They might conduct only a few communications and interactions with families and communities, keeping the three spheres of influence that directly affect student learning and development relatively separate. Alternatively, they might conduct many high-quality communications and interactions to bring all three spheres of influence closer together. (p.10)

For example, a school may send out a memo to all students about an upcoming vaccine clinic that is only written in English, consequently leaving out those families who do not speak English. On the other hand, another school may send a memo written in multiple languages. They may also make phone calls, send emails, and post information on their website, reaching many families in many ways. Making every effort to reach all families is critical. As Epstein (2009) stated, “Two-way communications increase understanding and cooperation between school and home and show students that their teachers and parents are in contact with each other to help them succeed in school” (p.64).

Epstein (2019) categorizes involvement into six types. Upon examining these types, a common thread emerges – each one necessitates effective communication for success. Consequently, following Epstein's definition, I present my italicized insights on the crucial role of communication, outlining how it is indispensable for fostering and promoting successful parent involvement and engagement. These are:

Type 1: **Parenting:** Help all families establish a home to support children as students. *Teachers communicate information about support programs that help with health and nutrition and parent training courses.*

Type 2: **Communicating:** Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress. *Teachers set up conference times, regularly schedule phone calls, and send newsletters informing parents of school programs and their child's progress.*

Type 3: **Volunteering:** Recruit and organize parent help and support. *Teachers communicate the need for volunteers in the classroom and other types of parent support for the school.*

Type 4: **Learning at home:** Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning. *Teachers communicate ideas to parents about how to help their child become more successful at school with activities related to curriculum and homework.*

Type 5: **Decision-making:** Include families as participants in school decisions and develop parent leaders and representatives. *Teachers communicate the need for parents as leaders and representatives of the school*

Type 6: **Collaborating with Community:** Coordinate resources and services from the community for families, students, and the school, and provide services to the community. *Teachers communicate to families the available community resources such as cultural, recreational, and social support available to families and children.*

Knowing what the administration expects from teachers in parent communication can help teachers be better equipped to communicate. Training in different forms of communication, along with explicit instruction on how to communicate with families, may allow teachers to gain confidence in their ability to communicate. This confidence may be needed to avoid burnout and keep more teachers in the teaching profession (Gartmeier et al., 2016; Morris & Taylor, 1998; Xu & Gulosino, 2006). Teachers who receive training in parent communication are more likely to have the skills necessary to communicate effectively with parents, which can help reduce misunderstandings and conflicts. This can lead to a more positive and supportive school environment, which can help prevent burnout and boost teacher self-efficacy (Ozmen et al., 2016). Still, with more direct training in parent communication, teachers feel more confident, competent, and effective in their ability to communicate with families, which can boost their self-efficacy and improve job satisfaction. Furthermore, teachers will become better at identifying and addressing issues that may arise and contribute to burnout or low self-efficacy. With training in parent communication, teachers will be able to identify where they need more support or resources to guide them to better communication with parents. Moreover, teachers who receive training in parent communication are more likely to understand the importance of parent-teacher collaboration and the promotion of student success. This can lead to teachers feeling more connected to their students and families.

Overall, explicit training in parent communication (Epstein, 2019), can be an effective tool for supporting teacher well-being and job satisfaction. By helping teachers develop practical communication skills, boosting their confidence, and promoting a greater understanding of the importance of parent-teacher collaboration, this type of

training can help create a more positive and supportive school environment for everyone involved.

Bandura's Socio-Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1977) socio-cognitive theory emphasizes the crucial role of observational learning in a child's development. According to Bandura, children acquire knowledge by observing the actions of others and the outcomes of their actions. This implies that parents and educators can act as role models for their children by demonstrating effective communication skills. Additionally, teachers can set an example for parents by demonstrating active listening, using open-ended questions, and giving constructive feedback. By modeling these communication skills, teachers can facilitate better communication between themselves and parents regarding their child's education and vice versa.

Bandura's socio-cognitive theory focuses on the role of self-efficacy in human motivation, behavior, and learning. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to perform a specific task or achieve a particular goal successfully. In teacher-parent communication, Bandura's theory can help us understand how it can impact both parties' self-efficacy and motivation. Bandura's theory suggests that self-efficacy is developed through four key sources of information: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological and affective states.

Socio-Cognitive Theory (SCT) has its origins in the 1960s when it was known as Social Learning Theory (SLT), initially proposed by Bandura (1986). This theory suggests that learning occurs within a social context characterized by an active, reciprocal exchange involving individuals, their environment, and their behaviors. It emphasizes the

significance of a person's past experiences in shaping their reactions and behavior. In essence, past experiences play a pivotal role in determining how and why individuals react to certain situations.

One of the key objectives of SLT is to elucidate how individuals can achieve goal-directed behaviors that can be sustained over time through control and reinforcement. SLT comprises five core constructs: reciprocal determinism, behavioral capacity, observational learning, reinforcement, and expectations (The Social Cognitive Theory, n.d.). However, Bandura (1986) introduced an additional construct called self-efficacy, leading to the renaming of the theory as Social Cognitive Theory

Self-efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1977), pertains to an individual's belief in their ability to execute the behaviors necessary to achieve specific performance goals. It encompasses an individual's confidence in their capacity to control their motivation, behavior, and social environment. Central to Bandura's SLT is the idea that humans have the capacity to shape and mold their behaviors. This transformative process is driven by the development of beliefs in their abilities and capabilities, which subsequently lead to changes in their actions.

The fundamental premise of the social cognitive theory is that humans learn primarily through the process of observing others. However, successful learning also depends on factors such as motivation, reinforcement, coaching, and instruction, which collectively contribute to an individual's ability to effectively acquire and apply new knowledge and behaviors. Figure 2 shows the four components of self-efficacy.

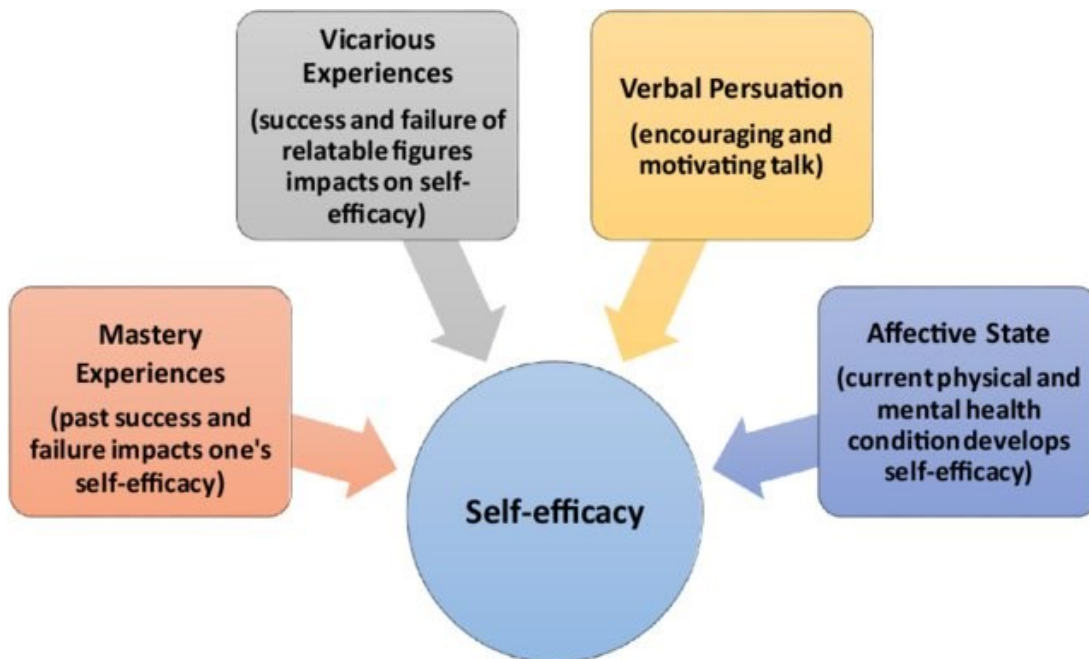


Figure 2

Principal Sources of Self-Efficacy

Note. Principal source of self-efficacy. Adapted from “Toward a framework for strengthening participants' self-efficacy in online education” by A. Kundu. 2020, *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*, 15(3), p. 354. doi: 10.1108/AAOUJ-06-2020-0039

Bandura's SCT has four components. The first is mastery experiences, which refers to the successful completion of tasks or goals. Thus, when teachers and parents collaborate effectively, they can support a child's academic and social development, creating a sense of mastery and accomplishment for all parties involved. This can increase self-efficacy and motivation for both teachers and parents. Mastery of similar experiences can help us feel we will be successful in future experiences. The second component is social modeling or vicarious experiences, which refers to experiences that refer to observing the successful performance of others. Teachers and parents can learn from each other's experiences and build their self-efficacy when they work together and

share their successes and challenges. Social modeling suggests that by watching someone we think is like us—and has similar talents—be successful, we feel we will succeed too. The third component is social or verbal persuasion—which refers to feedback and encouragement from others. When teachers and parents communicate positively and provide feedback and encouragement to increase each other's self-efficacy and motivation, it is then that both parties believe we can succeed. Finally, the fourth component is the physiological response, which refers to an individual's emotional and physical reactions to a situation. When teachers and parents work together effectively, they can create a positive and supportive environment to improve their emotional well-being and reduce stress and burnout. This can increase self-efficacy and motivation for both parties.

Bandura's SCT theory suggests that effective teacher-parent communication can impact both parties' sense of self-efficacy and motivation, ultimately contributing to improved children's academic and social outcomes. By supporting each other's mastery experiences, providing social persuasion, sharing vicarious experiences, and creating a positive environment, teachers and parents can work together to promote self-efficacy and motivation for everyone involved. The ability of an observer to learn a new action depends on their stress level, mental health, and self-efficacy. To achieve these goals, we need to have a positive mindset. Moreover, having a positive mindset will help increase self-efficacy. Conversely, a melancholy mood full of self-doubt is related to lower self-efficacy, and the chance of success is limited (Bandura, 1986).

To help teachers who lack skills or confidence in teacher-parent communication, it is essential to allow them to observe others who demonstrate successful parent-teacher

communication. The observations can be done in a natural setting or videotaped for later viewing. These teachers should also have time to practice a similar task with a trusted peer and later a parent once they are confident. Additionally, as part of every new school year, each teacher should be encouraged to set a goal they wish to obtain and share it with their trusted peers. The role of the trusted peer can be to observe their skills and encourage them along the way. Finally, all teachers need to possess self-efficacy, which can be better achieved when teachers have a positive attitude. Administrators need to find ways to ensure that the building emits positive and warm feelings. So that teachers feel successful, their spirits are lifted, and they feel valued and heard. From Bandura's theory, it can be inferred that effective parent-teacher communication is essential for teachers' feelings of self-efficacy, as does Lev Vygotsky's work with sociocultural theory.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

In his sociocultural theory, Vygotsky (1981) emphasized the relationship between human beings and their environment. He saw how deep social connections and culture could affect peoples' development and learning. Vygotsky said that social connections help us to learn the meaning of things and why they are important. Through these social connections, we learn to attend to what is essential, how to change and develop our skills, and to pick up on cues and attitudes to help us understand what needs to be done. His theory suggests that social interactions happen on two levels. The first level is social, where learning is seen in how people interact within their community. The second level is the individual level, and what Vygotsky (1981) called "*inside the mind*" learning occurs. Vygotsky also believed that children's first teacher is their family and culture. A child's early learning takes place in their community. For this reason, children obtain an

understanding of the world through these contacts and links. His theory states that humans use tools to alter and change thinking. Scaffolding is one of the tools used. Scaffolding is where we are given a small, achievable task to perform and can be successful at it. Then, we are given a task outside our zone of proximal development (ZPD). The job is more challenging, and the help of a more knowledgeable other (MKO) or adult is needed for us to be successful.

As we master these tasks, we build confidence and can gradually complete more complex tasks without help. Therefore, Vygotsky's theory strengthens the understanding that a child's home life is essential, and parents contribute significantly to a child's development and academic achievement. From sociocultural theory, when parents and teachers work together and communicate effectively, they can create a supportive environment that fosters a child's cognitive and social development. Vygotsky's theory also emphasizes the ZPD, which refers to the range of tasks that a child can perform with guidance and support from an MKO. When looking at family communication, teachers can work with the family to recognize the level of understanding and the child's ZPD. With this information, teachers and parents can work together to give the appropriate support and guidance to help children progress and achieve their goals. Additionally, Vygotsky's theory proposes that children learn best when they engage in relevant and meaningful activities when they can connect what they are learning to their daily experiences. Effective parent-teacher communication can help by ensuring that parents are aware of what their child is learning in school and can provide opportunities for the child to use what they learned outside of school. For educators, this means our community of peers and colleagues teaches us how to act with and around parents and

what is important in interacting with them. This theory emphasizes the importance of effective communication between parents and teachers. Educators can learn from their peers, colleagues, and those with more experience about what constitutes good teaching practices. With the right support and guidance, professional development in communication can be successful, even if it requires stepping outside of our comfort zones.

Review of Literature

The search for literature surrounding parent-teacher communication led me to three significant subtopics: types of communication, implications for preservice teacher education, and communication barriers.

Types of Communication

Table 1 presents the literature used to investigate the phenomenon and guide the research around types of communication used by families and teachers. In order to comprehend the intricate dynamics of communication within educational settings, it is imperative to delve into the existing body of literature that has laid the foundation for understanding the roles played by families and teachers. By examining the various types of communication employed by families and teachers, this literature review not only provides a theoretical framework but also guides the trajectory of our research. The following table synthesizes a range of scholarly contributions, offering a roadmap to the nuanced interplay between home and school communication in the educational landscape.

Table 1

Types of Communication

Thompson & Mazer (2012)	Leenders et al. (2019)
There are more ways to communicate because of new technology; communicating is more manageable.	How teachers create a trusting relationship, come to an agreement, support learning at home, and involvement of families in decision-making.
Parents felt that teachers must be proactive in communication.	Informal contact and inviting families into the classroom were ways to form trusting relationships.
Parents felt that it is the teachers' job to initiate communication.	Teachers mentioned their availability, but parents missed face-to-face conversations. Teachers send home a daily notebook for notetaking. Some families walk into the school and the classroom.

A research study was conducted by Thompson and Mazer (2012) in a Southern United States school district where 175 parents of students from elementary, junior high, and high school levels were surveyed. The survey measured the level of academic support provided by parents using the 16-item PASS scale, as well as their satisfaction with the support their child received from their teacher, their perception of their child's success in school, and open-ended questions. Results showed that families now subsequently had more ways to communicate with schools, with two-way communication being highly valued. However, parents expected teachers to initiate the first contact, which can be challenging for teachers at the beginning of the school year due to

classroom organization, curriculum preparation, and school routines. Teacher engagement in decision-making with families can be difficult, but it is essential for parent engagement if it is to be effective. Leenders et al. (2019) conducted another study, interviewing 55 teachers from special education, at-risk, and mainstream primary education schools in the southern Netherlands. The researchers found that communication between teachers and families is more productive when both parties have the same understanding of each other's expectations. Involved families can contribute to their child's success in school, as well as the success of the school and teachers.

Implications of Communication on Preservice Teacher Education

Table 2 presents the literature used to investigate the phenomenon and guide the research around preservice teacher education. Within the realm of preservice teacher education, a comprehensive understanding of the field requires a nuanced exploration of the foundational literature that informs and shapes research endeavors.

Table 2

Preservice Teacher Education

Donohoo (2018)	Gartmeier et al. (2016)	Morris & Taylor (1998)	Xu & Gulosino (2006)
Collective teacher efficacy CTE can be stronger than the link between SES and student achievement	That teachers are unprepared to communicate with families	Courses can influence pre-service teachers' perceptions of their ability to plan and implement family involvement programs in schools	The degree or certification a teacher obtains does not reflect the quality of the teaching

Table 2 - Continued

Preservice Teacher Education

Donohoo (2018)	Gartmeier et al. (2016)	Morris & Taylor (1998)	Xu & Gulosino (2006)
When CTE was present, teachers set high expectations and had a strong focus on academic pursuits.	Teachers obtain the skills on their own throughout the school year without guidance.	School/Community Relations course boosted confidence and increased level of comfort when working with families and communities	What a teacher does that determines the quality.
CTE can be stronger than the link between SES and student achievement.	Most teachers scored themselves high to medium range in communication with families.	Pre-service teachers made the most significant gains in acquiring skills, knowledge, and strategies needed to implement a parent involvement plan.	That teacher-parent interactions and communications positively affect students' academic performances.
In a CTE school, there was less teacher burnout and more job satisfaction	Teachers with low scores felt they could have done better with forming questions to ask parents and felt less confident in making specific agreements that concluded a meeting.		Teacher-parent partnerships affect the way teachers think about teaching.
Teachers felt less stress in a CTE school.	More time spent on parent contact did not correspond to higher confidence and scores. Teachers who scored higher talked the most to their colleagues about parenting issues.		The problem is getting teachers to partake in establishing a parent-teacher partnership. Teachers are burnt out, have past experiences that did not result in positive parent-teacher partnerships, or, worse, teachers may fear parents impeding or getting in the way of activities.
	Skills needed should be taught in pre-service classes.		To help teachers see the benefits of parent partnerships, principals must clearly show the advantages and opportunities such a partnership can bring to the students, teachers, and school.

Donohoo (2018) conducted research on collective teacher efficacy (CTE), which refers to the shared belief among teachers in a school that they can positively impact student success. Donohoo identified productive behaviors that promote student achievement as a result of CTE and examined other potential outcomes of this shared belief in their ability to influence student outcomes. When teachers in a building with high CTE believed that, as a group, they could make a difference in the academic outcome of their students, their impact was more significant than the effects of socioeconomic status. Xu and Gulosino (2006) found that for teachers to see the benefits of communication with families, the administration needs to show the advantages such communication can bring to the classroom, the teacher, and the building. Moreover, Donohoo's research showed that new teachers in schools with higher CTE were less likely to leave the teaching profession and experienced more job satisfaction and less burnout. Gartmeier et al. (2016), found that teachers found that teachers who already have higher confidence in their parent-communication skills use opportunities for shared reflection and everyday learning to a larger extent. Morris and Taylor (1998) found that completion of a School/Community Relations course improved students' ability and comfort level in working with parents. While specific courses positively impact how pre-service teachers plan and implement family involvement programs at school, they do not correlate to the quality of teaching. Therefore, it is crucial for the administration and school staff to believe that they, as a group, make a difference in the students' lives despite being challenged with poverty.

Barriers to Communication

Table 3 presents the literature used to investigate the phenomenon and guide the research around barriers to parent-teacher communication. Exploring the phenomenon of parent-teacher communication necessitates a thorough examination of the barriers that may impede this crucial interaction. This table provides an overview of the literature selected for this investigation, offering valuable insights into the challenges surrounding communication between parents and teachers. This table serves as a comprehensive reference point, guiding the research towards a nuanced exploration of the factors influencing parent-teacher communication dynamics

Table 3

Barriers

Conus & Fahrni (2019)	Lua et al. (2019)	Soutullo et al. (2016)
Why is it that teacher practices for boots-on-the-ground teachers are different from those procedures that are deemed to be best practices in communication with families, as seen in the field of research Teachers must build relationships with the first child from a family who enters the school.	Participating parents, teachers, and principals noted that home-family alliances are needed for children to be successful in school. Participating parents lacked understanding of family partnerships	Immigrant families and teachers do not share the exact definition of parent involvement. Immigrant families tend to ask their children about homework and understand this as involvement.
Parents felt that the teacher was responsible for reaching out to families.	Participating families mentioned the time commitment	Teachers seek to have families attend and participate in conferences and school activities
Parents want information on their children weekly	Participating teachers stated that a partnership could help teachers learn about parents and families and support a child	Immigrant families spoke of not feeling welcome or safe at school
Teachers felt that they did not need to communicate as often as parents wanted	Teachers also noted that families could help more if they knew what the schools needed.	Families lacked support and resources, and the fear for undocumented families.
Teachers used the phrase, “No news is good news.”	Because many families have both parents employed outside of the	The researchers refer to the cultural/ language

Conus & Fahrni (2019)	Lua et al. (2019)	Soutullo et al. (2016)
Teachers' attitudes are holding back parent-teacher communication	home, activities for family partnerships may need to be more practical and can quickly be done with little time commitment	mismatch between the child and the teacher. This mismatch can put the child at odds with the family as the child adopts the school's culture.

Communication between parents and teachers can be difficult due to various barriers. In a study conducted by Conus and Fahrni (2019), they interviewed six Swiss kindergarten teachers and twelve families with children who had just started school that year. The study revealed a contradiction between expectations and routine communication, with teachers insisting less on the necessity for frequent communication than parents. Another study by Lua et al. (2019) interviewed six principals, twelve teachers, and twelve parents in six Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms. According to the teachers and principals, the main barriers to implementing home-school partnerships were time limitations and the parents' lack of knowledge. In a study by Soutullo et al. (2016), the researchers looked at eight different schools located within a highly populated urban school district that is situated in one of the top five counties in the United States, which is noted for its significant immigrant population. Eighteen elementary teachers of varied backgrounds identified language and culture, family resources, and undocumented status as barriers to engagement. Researchers found that educators and families often have different understandings of best practices in family communication, with teachers feeling that parents need to be physically present at school to be considered engaged. However, immigrant parents may feel unwelcome or unsafe at school. To ensure all families are involved, welcoming parents of all students should be a priority. Some

families may find the time commitment challenging due to outside work obligations. Practical engagement strategies can benefit all families. Partnerships between parents and teachers can aid in understanding the families they serve, inform parents of teachers' needs, and help students succeed. Narrative Inquiry (NI) can serve as a valuable tool to overcome communication barriers that could hinder effective collaboration between parents and teachers. These barriers could arise due to various reasons, such as a lack of resources in the families' native language, an unwelcoming school environment, or screening policies that discourage families from participating or becoming volunteers. NI can help bridge these gaps and promote fruitful collaboration between parents and teachers by offering a better understanding and suggestions for improving communication.

Summary

Effective two-way communication is a recurring theme in the literature review. However, it also reveals several significant research gaps. Thompson & Mazer (2012) emphasized that parents often expect teachers to initiate communication. Leenders et al. (2019) stressed the importance of building trust between teachers and families. Various studies (Conus & Fahrni, 2019; Lua et al., 2019; Soutullo et al., 2016) identified barriers to effective communication between parents and teachers, such as time constraints, language and cultural differences, and parents' lack of knowledge.

Gartmeier et al. (2016) and Morris and Taylor (1998) highlighted the importance of pre-service teacher education in developing communication skills. Donohoo (2018) underscored the positive impact of collective teacher efficacy on both teacher satisfaction and student outcomes. Thompson and Mazer (2012) also noted the influence of

technology on communication, suggesting that it can either hinder or facilitate parent-teacher communication.

By addressing these research gaps, educators and policymakers can better understand the dynamics of family-teacher communication and develop strategies to enhance collaboration for the benefit of students' academic success and overall well-being. Furthermore, these research gaps underscore the need to consider the voices of teachers.

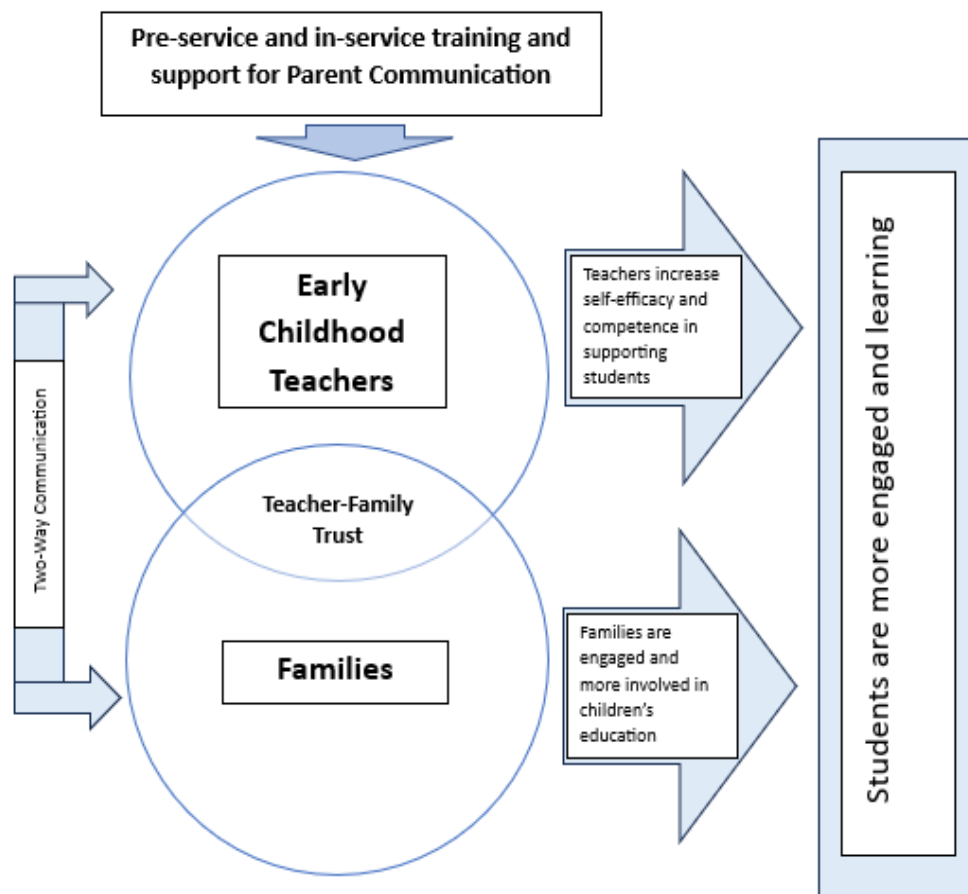
A comprehensive investigation into parent-teacher communication and its impact on teacher self-efficacy and daily life is essential for prompting colleges of education to prioritize family engagement. Recognizing these research gaps also underscores the need for a deeper exploration of how effective communication can facilitate teachers in individualizing student learning and planning differentiated lessons. This study aims to uncover challenges that teachers face in communicating with families, examining its influence on their commitment to the profession, and understanding whether communication demands contribute to unnecessary teacher burnout. By addressing these gaps, the research aims to provide insights that can help future teachers succeed and develop improved approaches to parent-teacher communication. The choice of Narrative Inquiry as a method for exploring educational experiences is informed by its capacity to offer a nuanced understanding of these dynamics. The focus on early childhood teachers arises from the author's direct experience in pre-kindergarten to second-grade education, and the significance is further justified by the distinctive nature of communication between early childhood teachers and families, which diminishes as students' progress to

higher grades, as indicated by various sources (Epstein, 2011; Youker, 2007; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013).

A theory of change model for parent-teacher communication is depicted in Figure 3, and illustrates the steps that can be taken collaboratively to improve a teacher's self-efficacy, increase parental engagement, and ultimately lead to positive student outcomes

Figure 3

Theory of Change Model for Parent Teacher Communication.



CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Overview and Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative approach and adopted a case study methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Creswell, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 2008) to investigate teachers' experiences regarding communication with families. The case study was centered around a single school district in Michigan, located outside a prominent urban center. I used the Single Question to Induce a Narrative (SQUIN) technique for gathering participants' stories, acknowledging that teachers are eager to share their stories (Wengraf, 2001). I delve into the comprehensive research design of this study, situating it within the framework of Narrative Inquiry (NI). Within the context, I reveal the heart of NI and its alignment with the research objectives. Following this, I explain NI as a methodology, finishing with its theoretical underpinnings (Bell, 2002). This study prompted an exploration of literature focused on NI, with a particular emphasis on a book by Wengraf in 2001. Within this domain, I address three key subtopics: studies utilizing NI, those employing Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM), and those incorporating SQUIN. The following sections provide a detailed overview of the procedures used for participant interviews, culminating in a description of the planned data analysis. Two approaches to using narratives to understand individuals' experiences are "A single question to induce a narrative" SQUIN and the BNIM. The first approach involves asking a simple prompt, while BNIM is a structured and comprehensive method used in qualitative research and psychotherapy. Both methods use narratives to

understand individuals' experiences, however, SQUIN is a simple prompt to elicit a story or memory, while BNIM is a more thorough and interpretive method.

As previously noted, data was collected through SQUIN. This qualitative study will analyze the experiences of those working as early childhood teachers in pre-kindergarten through first-grade classrooms in one large Title I district in Michigan. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that experiences happen narratively. Narrative Inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experiences should be studied narratively. My interest in studying early childhood teachers stems from different places. First, my teaching experience is in pre-kindergarten to second grade, which is considered early childhood. Second, in early childhood, communication between teachers and families is done more frequently, and that frequency of communication wanes as students move to the upper grades (Epstein, 2011; Youker, 2007; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013). I used NI to give a deep and complex understanding of the lived experiences of those early childhood teachers. With the stories told, I will give teachers a platform and a voice to be heard by other teachers, administration, and early childhood education professors. Furthermore, I want to better understand what teachers need in professional development and teacher training to prepare them for the many facets of parent-teacher communication. I strongly believe that communication between parents and professionals is crucial and should be treated as such. I aim to uncover early childhood teachers' perceptions of communication with families and explore its impact on their well-being. By identifying potential sources of anxiety and burnout, we can create a collaborative environment that fosters effective communication and support. Ultimately, my goal is to

provide valuable insights that will help alleviate anxiety and burnout, leading to a more fulfilling and sustainable teaching experience in early childhood education.

Narrative Inquiry (NI)

The most basic purpose of qualitative research is to understand the complex social world using non-numeric data; it is the how and why (Salkind, 2011). Narrative Inquiries study stories or narratives (Andrew et al., 2008). Stories are the basic unit that reflects what it means to be a human (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Riesmanm (2002) states that stories are expressions of personal perspective incorporating learned social and cultural experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the construction of a narrative experience as a reflective experience relationship between living a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story. Qualitative research can help place meaning in people's work and lives and "explores the meaning of human experiences and creates the possibilities of change through raised awareness and purposeful action" (Taylor & Francis, 2013, p.3). Connelly (2000) outlines the construction of a narrative experience as a reflective process that involves three interconnected elements: living a life story, retelling that life story, and reliving it. In this context, qualitative research plays a crucial role by helping to ascribe meaning to individuals' work and lives. Qualitative research is described as a method that delves into the significance of human experiences, offering a deep exploration that can lead to increased awareness and purposeful action. Essentially, this approach aims to uncover the underlying meanings in personal narratives, contributing to a richer understanding of individuals' experiences and fostering the potential for positive change through heightened awareness and intentional actions. Teachers have many stories to tell. Connelly (2000) outlines the construction of a

narrative experience as a reflective process that involves three interconnected elements: living a life story, retelling that life story, and reliving it. In this context, qualitative research plays a crucial role by helping to ascribe meaning to individuals' work and lives. Qualitative research is described as a method that delves into the significance of human experiences, offering a deep exploration that can lead to increased awareness and purposeful action. Essentially, this approach aims to uncover the underlying meanings in personal narratives, contributing to a richer understanding of individuals' experiences and fostering the potential for positive change through heightened awareness and intentional actions. They share their stories and classroom accounts with others in the field. Stories help set the scene so researchers can have a shared understanding. The philosopher Charles Taylor (1989) explained that our understanding capacity is rooted in self-definition. These stories shared by teachers recollect the events as they remember them. What is significant to the teacher is what is remembered. By telling stories, teachers bring the researcher closer to the participants. In narrative research design, the researcher describes the participants' lives through the stories they gathered, retelling the experiences, and discussing the meaning gleaned from the stories as they relate to those individuals.

Gathering stories of experiences in communicating with families in combination with the ones that puzzle teachers will help in understanding what roles teachers play and what strategies or mindsets are needed to engage families successfully. The individuals who benefit from the stories are the researchers, educators, and those involved in teacher training and professional development. Gathering stories of experiences in

communicating with families, especially those that present challenges or puzzles for teachers, assists in comprehending the roles teachers play in these interactions.

Additionally, it provides insights into the strategies and mindsets necessary for teachers to effectively engage with families. Ultimately, the aim is to enhance understanding and inform the development of more targeted and supportive approaches in teacher training programs and professional development initiatives. NI is best suited for this research for these reasons. Some participants feel relieved because they have the interest of a researcher who is willing to listen to them and record their stories. Narrative Inquiry is a form of narrative experience. NI, as described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), is a means of experiencing and living the stories of others, allowing readers to "experience the experience." NI offers teachers the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs, backgrounds, and the perspectives of others, potentially addressing barriers to parent-teacher communication.

Beattie and Conle (1996) conducted a study that explored the relationship between teachers' personal and cultural backgrounds and their teaching approaches, focusing on how hidden patterns and experiences influenced their work in the classroom. Researchers identified these patterns through personal narratives and collaborative reflection for personal and professional growth. Observing the impact of Narrative Inquiry (NI) on teachers' reflections and understanding of parent-teacher communication can be achieved through several avenues. Reflection on beliefs and backgrounds is one way that teachers can engage in NI that may be observed as they reflect on their own beliefs, cultural backgrounds, and how these factors shape their perspectives on parent-teacher communication. This reflective process can provide insights into any potential

barriers or challenges they may face in establishing effective communication with parents. Hidden patterns can be observed. Beattie and Conle (1996), observed and identified hidden patterns and experiences influencing teachers' work in the classroom. This observation involved analyzing personal narratives shared by teachers, as well as engaging in collaborative reflection. The identification of these hidden patterns offers a tangible way to observe the impact of Narrative Inquiry on uncovering influences on teacher behavior and practices. Collaborative reflection of the teachers involves the sharing of their narratives and engaging in reflective discussions with others. Observing these collaborative interactions can provide insights into how teachers collectively make sense of their experiences and collaboratively develop strategies for effective parent-teacher communication. Professional growth can be tracked throughout the Narrative Inquiry process, one can observe how the exploration of personal narratives contributes to their development as educators. Changes in attitudes, approaches, or strategies related to parent-teacher communication may be evident as teachers apply insights gained through narrative reflection. Overall, the observation of teachers engaging in reflective practices, sharing personal narratives, and collaboratively exploring the impact of their beliefs and backgrounds can provide tangible evidence of how Narrative Inquiry contributes to understanding and addressing barriers in parent-teacher communication.

The told stories have the potential to become both a valuable professional development approach and a research approach for teachers. Considering the professional development approach, the told stories can serve as a powerful tool for teachers because they have personal relevance. The teachers' own narratives provide a highly personalized and relevant context for learning. Use of a vignette (see Appendix B) or a short narrative

to exemplify how a teacher's personal story can be deeply relevant to their professional development reflecting on personal experiences in parent-teacher communication allows educators to directly apply insights to their practice. Real-life stories such as the vignette help teachers understand the complexities of parent-teacher interactions in specific classrooms and communities.

By reflecting on their own experiences and challenges in parent-teacher communication, educators can directly apply insights to their practice. Another way is to learn from real-life stories that allow teachers to understand the complexities of parent-teacher interactions within the context of their specific classrooms and communities. This contextual learning is often more impactful than generic or abstract training. When teachers share their stories in a collaborative settings this fosters a sense of community among teachers. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for collective problem-solving, with educators learning from each other's successes and challenges.

By utilizing the vignettes as told stories for professional development and reflection approach for teachers is likely to be effective due to its personalized, context-specific, and community-building nature, offering valuable insights and fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and successes in parent-teacher communication.

Bell (2002) suggests that NI can also give a voice to marginalized groups, such as immigrants, migrants, and those with different sexual orientations. Meier and Stremmel (2010) emphasize the importance of storytelling in encouraging research and investigation among early childhood teachers. Sharing stories between teachers and

families can help them reflect, question, and see each other as partners, promoting two-way communication.

Saras (2015) research in Argentina examined how shared experiences and feelings contribute to the meaning of Narrative Inquiry (NI). It offered participants a platform to share their stories and opinions, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject

Therefore, parent-teacher communication and experiences should be studied narratively. However, some participants may want others to learn from their experiences, so they do not make the same mistakes or as an example of what to do if a similar situation happens to them. Lastly, some people want to tell their stories as a cathartic way to express themselves to release strong emotions. Dunne (2003) asserts:

Research into teaching is best served by narrative modes of inquiry since to understand the teacher's practice (on his or her part or the part of an observer) is to find an illuminating story (or stories) to tell of what they have been involved with their students. (p.367)

Researchers' Role

Note that as the researcher of this study, my involvement and perspective on the topic should be considered as it could impact how I collect my data, whom I ask for stories and the interpretation of results. I work as an intervention teacher, helping students struggling with reading and writing. This entails communicating with their families. In addition, I have over 15 years of experience teaching in early childhood classrooms, where I faced challenges with parent communication and relied on my colleagues for support. As a result, I recognize the significance of fostering communication between parents and teachers to support children's development. Thus, I

make it a priority to provide opportunities for families to engage in dialogue when necessary.

My firm convictions give rise to particular inclinations regarding educators who undervalue the importance of parent-teacher communication. In my capacity as a researcher, it was essential for me to acknowledge varying viewpoints and sustain an understanding of them throughout the process of collecting and analyzing data. In my first year as a kindergarten teacher, I realized the importance of having effective conversations with families. At first, I thought I knew everything there was to know about teaching, but when I encountered children and their families who needed help, I realized I was missing key communication skills. It became clear that without proper training, teachers may not fully understand what it takes to have good parent communication. My decision to pursue this research is rooted in my belief that teachers may lack a comprehensive understanding of effective parent communication due to insufficient training, and it has also become evident that numerous untapped opportunities exist for teachers to initiate meaningful conversations with parents.

Participants

This study used a purposive sampling of early childhood teachers. Patton (2002) states that a purposive sampling method effectively allows the researcher to include participants who can provide in-depth information necessary to understand a phenomenon being investigated. Approximately 60 early childhood teachers are in the school district of interest. Purposive sampling was the most effective method in identifying participants from the large pool of candidates. The participants were all female and included two PreK teachers, three kindergarten teachers, and five first-grade

teachers (see Table 4). Each teacher was given a number, and I will refer to them as that number to ensure confidentiality.

Table 4

Participants' Profiles

Job Title	Years in Field
Pre-Kindergarten	
1	>5 years
1	<5 years
Kindergarten	
2	>5 years
1	<5 years
Grade 1	
2	>5 years
3	<5 years

Recruitment of Participants

In February of 2023, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for my study (see Appendix D). I reached out to the school district and requested permission to send a recruitment email to all PreK, kindergarten, and first-grade teachers in the district. After receiving approval, I sent out invitations via email (see Appendix E) to 37 educators. I used the strategy of nonprobability criteria sampling, following Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach. Participants were current or former teachers in a PreK,

kindergarten, or first-grade classrooms with a valid Michigan teaching certificate.

Participants were recruited on a first-come-first-serve basis, with an equal number of experienced (more than five years) and newer (less than five years) teachers.

Setting

The research was carried out in Title I schools within the largest school district in a county located in Michigan outside a major urban center. The district has over 28,000 students, of which approximately 63% are designated as economically disadvantaged. The student demographics include 75% white, 10% two or more races, 7% African American, and 6% Hispanic/Latino (*Mi School Data*, n.d.).

Communication between teachers and families could be challenging due to various factors, such as parents being employed or single parents supporting their families. To conduct interviews, an online platform called Zoom was utilized. It provided several benefits, including scheduling interviews at suitable times, having a flexible setting, and being cost-effective, as no physical meeting location was required. Additionally, the software enabled efficient transcription of the interviews.

Data Collection

This study used Narrative Inquiry using a Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN). SQUIN is used when participants are ready to share their stories. Narrative Inquiry using SQUIN allows the researcher to retell the participants' stories. There are four primary qualitative data collection types--observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell, 2003) --with the interview being mostly recommended to collect participants' narratives. The Narrative Inquiry is often conducted

in a relaxed, conversational style to encourage participants to uncover their individual stories. Kvale (1996) states:

In an interview conversation, the researcher listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world, hears them express their views and opinions in their own worlds, learns about their views and their work situation and family life, their dreams and hopes. The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an interview, an inter change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest. (p. 1)

The significance of Narrative Inquiry research becomes evident through the depth of emotions and the richness of content that emerges from the interviews. This research approach uniquely captures the lived experiences and personal narratives of individuals, providing a window into the complexities of their stories, emotions, and perspectives. By delving into these deeply personal accounts, Narrative Inquiry not only uncovers the intricacies of human experiences but also allows for a profound exploration of the multifaceted aspects of the research subject.

Participant Protection and Data Management

Safeguards were in place to minimize the risk of infringement of confidentiality by keeping research records as confidential as possible. The researcher changed the names of participants displayed on the Zoom screen to researcher-generated ID numbers

before recording. The MP4 files recorded via Zoom were created directly onto the researchers' computer rather than the cloud, in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. Once download, the recordings were deleted after Zoom-generated transcriptions were checked for accuracy. No identifying information was transcribed, and the material from these discussions was only reported as "teacher 1", "teacher 2," etc. The researcher was the only one with access to the recordings. Data was de-identified by using code names instead of the actual names of participants. All recordings were destroyed after being transcribed, and any online interviews were conducted using a Zoom connection approved by Oakland University. The recording was stored on the password-protected server until the transcription was made and then was deleted. No copies of the audio file were accessible once deleted

Interview Protocol

First Session

A Zoom interview was arranged at a convenient time for the participants. The interview question was designed to allow participants to share their stories freely: "All teachers have a range of experiences in communicating with families. Please think of your experiences communicating with families. Can you describe to me a situation or situations that puzzle you?" The researcher remained attentive and did not interrupt the interview. While the interview was ongoing, the researcher made note of any noteworthy stories or points raised. The duration of each interview was determined by the length of time each participant was required to fully recount their experiences, lasting between 40 to 60 minutes.

Second Session

After the initial interview, a follow-up Zoom meeting was scheduled to review my notes, ensure accuracy, and clarify any responses from the participant. The meeting lasted between 15 to 25 minutes. One week before the meeting, I sent each participant the transcripts of their initial interviews and a draft of a vignette that I had crafted based on their expressions of what puzzles them in communicating with families. I asked the participants to contact me by phone or email if they needed to make corrections, seek clarifications, or provide further details regarding the transcripts.

Data Analysis Plan

According to Merriam and Merriam (1998), data analysis is a complicated procedure that involves going back and forth between specific data and broader concepts, using both inductive and deductive reasoning and description and interpretation. The data analysis for this study encompassed tasks such as transcription, coding, identifying patterns, generating themes, and crafting vignettes based on teachers' stories (see Appendix B). These vignettes pose distinctive communication situations with families that can be used for training purposes. To guarantee transparency, I followed a five-phase process (Bingham, 2023).

Phase One-Organizing the Data

Subsequently, I systematically organized and managed all my qualitative data to maintain rigor and trustworthiness in accordance with the recommendations of While et al. (2012). Proper data organization is crucial for upholding high standards of quality and reliability. To capture the interviews, I employed Zoom's recording feature and then transcribed them. After each interview, I diligently rectified any transcription errors. This

process allowed me to effectively handle the transcripts and identify emerging themes. For coding the data, I adopted an inductive approach. I stored the transcripts securely on my password-protected computer in my home office to ensure their confidentiality.

To guarantee the trustworthiness and reliability of my research, I adhered to the guidelines put forth by While et al. (2012), meticulously organizing and managing my qualitative data. This entailed creating labeled file folders based on categories I identified during the transcription and interview reading. This approach facilitated the identification and extraction of specific statements and quotes and provided an initial structure for the data. By following this method, I can readily access and retrieve the necessary data for my research.

To establish the transferability of the study to other groups or situations, a reflective journal was used to record thoughts about interpreted data and any potential biases or assumptions, as outlined in Appendix F. The participants' provision of rich, detailed descriptions supported the evidence of transferability, as suggested by Merriam (2009).

Phase Two-Sorting the Data

In the second phase, I transferred the data into Word documents and initiated the coding process. To uncover codes and patterns, I made use of the comment tab. By organizing the data in Word documents, I gained a better understanding of the extensive dataset I had gathered. I also printed these Word documents and made margin notes as I went through them.

During this stage, I encountered some data that didn't neatly fit into specific categories. To retain this data for future reference, I created a separate Word document

called "miscellaneous" and stored it there. Furthermore, I observed some commonalities in the emerging codes and patterns, which aided in refining my thoughts and ideas. This phase also allowed me to begin pre-coding by highlighting keywords and interesting concepts. I revisited my notes and identified potential code development. Following this phase, I separated the data that aligned with my ideas and set aside any data that didn't fit the established patterns.

Phase Three-Understanding the Data

In the third phase, I began the data coding process by carefully examining the content. I looked for recurring topics and patterns within the data, which enabled me to identify emerging trends and potential themes by revisiting the concepts present. While analyzing the organized data, I created codes and reviewed them repeatedly. I then organized these codes into groups that seemed related. For each group, I generated a separate Word document labeled "Codes" and listed the codes within. Once I put all the codes together in this Word document, I could see them working together smoothly. It helped me shift codes between groups or take some out, reframing/renaming codes to address overlaps, and finding the best spots for them. As the last step for phase three, I checked my handwritten notes (see appendix 9) to fine-tune my codes.

Phase Four-Interpreting the Data

During the fourth phase, I first reviewed the "Codes" Word document to ensure their relevance. Then, I utilized Word's "find" function to search for specific keywords and phrases that frequently appeared in the codes. I copied and pasted these key elements into a separate Word document labeled "Themes," aiming to identify overarching topics that related to those terms. Ultimately, I managed to identify two primary themes: one

centered on communication with parents and the other focused on communication within the school institution by staff and administration.

Fifth Phase-Explaining the Data

During the fifth phase of my research, I engaged in a comprehensive reevaluation of the models proposed by the three theorists: Epstein, Bandura, and Vygotsky, that I chose to work with. I also linked the research from the literature review to create a well-supported explanation of my data. This phase aimed to establish a more profound connection between their theoretical frameworks and the practical insights and feedback garnered from the study participants. By delving into these models in conjunction with the real-life experiences shared by educators, my intention was to bridge the divide between theory and practice. In doing so, I aimed to shed fresh insights on the pertinence and practicality of these theoretical frameworks within the context of authentic classroom dynamics and interactions between parents and teachers.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the research (see Appendix 8), I found ways in which different models worked well together. I used this information to explain my methodology, the categories, and the frameworks I employed in this study. This helped me explore how these models could be customized and improved to better support teachers in engaging with parents effectively.

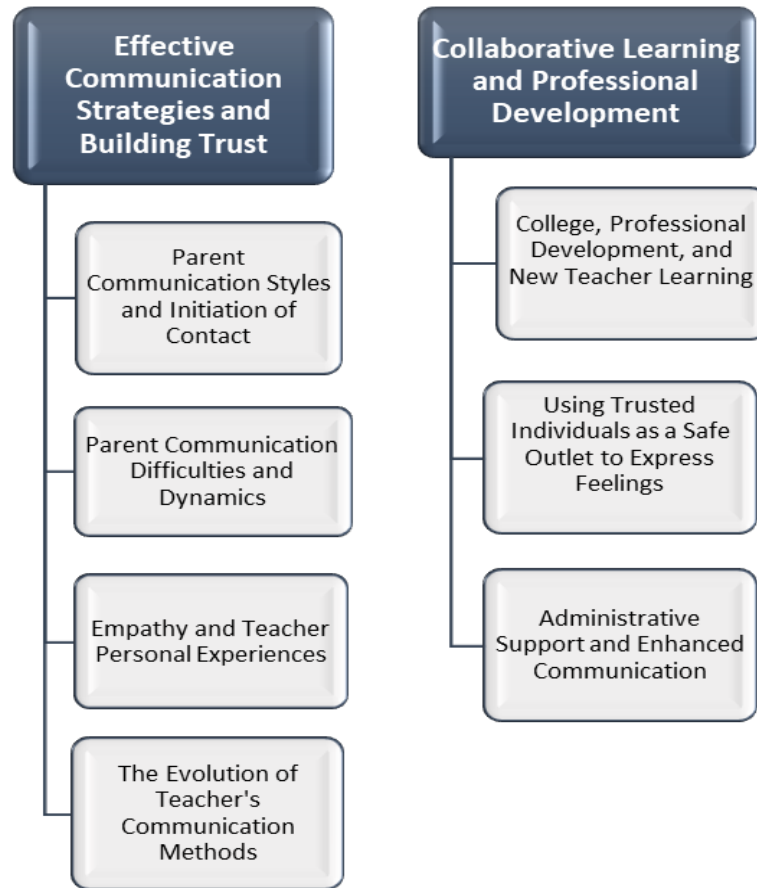
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The study method was designed to answer this research questions: How do early childhood teachers perceive and describe experiences in communication with families? The study method provided rich insights gained from in-depth interviews conducted with each of the ten participants. Within these conversations, these early childhood educators candidly shared their perspectives on family communication and the inherent emotions entwined with this vital aspect of their profession. Through a careful analysis of these ten narratives, a nuanced understanding of their perceptions and viewpoints began to crystallize. From this analysis, two prominent themes emerged. The first theme, Effective Communication Strategies and Building Trust, includes four distinct yet interrelated sub-themes: 1) Parent Communication Styles and Initiation of Contact 2) Parent Communication Difficulties and Dynamics 3) Empathy and Teacher Personal Experiences 4) The Evolution of a Teacher's Communication Methods. Complementing this, the second theme, Collaborative Learning and Professional Development includes three equally important sub-themes: 1) College, Professional Development, and New Teacher Learning, 2) Using Trusted Individuals as a Safe Outlet to Express Feelings, 3) Administrative Support and Enhanced Communication. This carefully structured framework of themes and sub-themes offers a logical and insightful evaluation of the key elements supporting effective communication, as perceived and experienced by this group of dedicated early childhood educators. See Figure 4.

Figure 4

Themes and Sub-Themes



Note. This figure demonstrates the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews of 10 early childhood teachers and how they perceive communication with families.

In organizing the results section of this chapter, a deliberate and systematic approach is employed. Each theme is presented as a Level 1 heading, providing a broad overview, while subthemes are explained as Level 2 headings, offering a more detailed exploration (see Figure 4). Under each heading, are comprehensive descriptions, insightful explanations, and illustrative examples taken directly from the interview data.

This meticulous organization is designed to ensure a coherent and in-depth examination of the identified themes and subthemes, enriching the reader's understanding of the research findings.

Effective Communication Strategies and Building Trust

The first theme that emerged was the significance of effective communication strategies and building trust between teachers and parents. This resulted in the creation of open channels for communication and the development of trust by customizing communication to suit the preferences of each parent. As highlighted by Thompson and Mazer (2012) and Leenders et al. (2019), even though engaging with parents presents its share of difficulties, it remains essential for success. The sub-themes discussed are 1) Communication Adaptation and Initiation of Contact, 2) Parent Communication Difficulties and Dynamics, 3) Empathy and Teacher Personal Experiences, and 4) Evolution of Teachers' Communication Style.

Communication Adaptation and Initiation of Contact

Parental communication styles can naturally evolve in response to various factors. More than half of the interviewees discussed how life events, including significant milestones like marriage, welcoming a new baby, or an adoption, can trigger changes in how parents communicate. In scenarios where parents perceive their child facing mistreatment from peers or educators, some may adopt a defensive stance, scrutinizing the teacher's decisions and suspecting unfair treatment. This defensiveness can pose obstacles for teachers when addressing concerns in a constructive manner. **Teacher 1** shared her experience of a mother becoming defensive and vocal after she felt her child was being picked on by the teacher: "*...it started to be you're picking on my kid... You're always*

saying he's the one. You tell me he had a bad day...even if it was a bad day I'd say you had a bad day...tomorrow we'll be a better day...but that didn't seem to help her either."

In addition, parental communication styles can undergo alterations when parents enter into marriage or welcome a new baby. In such cases, these parents might carelessly sideline their other children as they adapt to changing family dynamics and prioritize the new additions. **Teacher 2** recounted a situation where the introduction of a new baby and marriage led to the father, who was previously involved in disciplining a child and in direct communication with the teacher, withdrawing from communication: "...as we talked, mom said, well, you know her dad just got married and is getting ready to have a new baby, and I was like, well, yes, that most definitely could be what was causing the issues." In another family, the dynamics of adoption become a challenge. **Teacher 4** was faced with challenges in the adoption procedure, and when the adoption plans did not go as expected, the parents became discouraged. The teacher explained, "*The situation with adopting her daughter had gone awry, and some issues the daughter is having...*" This caused the parents to become despondent and forgetful. When the teacher would have a conversation with the family, she said, "...they would forget some of the earlier conversations and behavior plans they had made." **Teacher 9**, takes time out of her day to call a parent because she says,

I have one parent who uses apps because she has kids at the high school level, middle school, and elementary school, and they all use different kinds of apps. She's overloaded with way too many apps, she says, and she said it's too hard to keep up with, so she doesn't look at the Newsletter or the extra activity paperwork that comes through with their classrooms. It's

just too stressful, she said. So, she's like the phone or a text works better for her. We don't usually give out our phone numbers, but we did for her.

By tailoring her communication specifically to the needs of the parent, she overcame barriers created by the busy life of a parent. **Teacher 7**, upon reflection on her experience last year, indicated:

So fast forward to this year as a second-year teacher, I thought about things that I learned, and I've learned through colleagues in the beginning of the year. I sent out a parent survey to find out which way they want to communicate - would they like to use Facebook or Newsletter? Remind or other possibilities. The top two ended up being newsletters and the reminder app. So, right at the beginning of the open house, my last station was that you had to sign up for Remind, So I was able to catch each and every parent right away. I have in my class this year 22 students, and at the open house, 19 of them were already signed up. So, it's been a huge success compared to last year.

Teachers in this study adapted strategies such as using new communication platforms, Google Voice, and social media platforms like Facebook to connect with parents. They understood the need for effective outreach and began using the same forms of communication that their students' families used. **Teacher 10** commented, *"I get them where they are at, so if it's on Facebook, then it's Facebook where I communicate with them."* She also stated that she knows how important it is for parents to be engaged and that engagement helps kids. She said,

The reason you go into education is to help kids and families. And you know it's nice to see that you're accomplishing that goal by reaching out to parents and their kids and making them a part of their child's education and their child's world.

The teachers spoke of the various ways to communicate with families, including non-digital methods like face-to-face conversations, phone calls home, or notes. Digital methods such as Facebook, text messaging, and email were also employed. Parents' communication preferences can vary, with some favoring digital methods and others opting for non-digital channels. Finding common ground is essential to prevent parents from feeling inundated or overwhelmed. **Teacher 9** reported an overwhelmed parent:

I feel bad sometimes because I know parents sometimes feel like they're missing things. I have to remember myself that nobody's perfect, and as I said, there are so many different apps that I can use. Some parents get overwhelmed by the number of apps that I have. But for instance, there's this parent who didn't see a seesaw message, and she asked me if I could just call her instead next time or maybe even just send her a quick email because it takes a long time for her to check the app because the message didn't upload it onto her phone. It's easier for her to just get a phone call. I respect that, though. She did ask me; can you please call me; I don't think that's a bad thing. I think it was great for her to let me know; like she said, put something in his backpack. I respect her sensibility and make it fair for her.

All the teachers were able to improve parent engagement and build trust by adapting their communication strategies. Teachers made themselves accessible to parents, sometimes in ways they wouldn't normally do. Taken as a whole, the participants emphasized the importance of meeting parents where they are, recognizing the diversity in parent engagement levels, and adapting their communication strategies to build strong teacher-parent relationships.

In the wake of the extraordinary circumstances brought about by COVID-19, the importance of effective communication strategies and building trust between teachers and parents has emerged as a crucial theme. This has necessitated the customization of communication to align with the diverse preferences of each parent, as noted by Thompson and Mazer (2012) and Leenders et al. (2019). COVID-19 threw a wrench into many communication styles and forced them to make adaptations to their communication. Participant (7) became frustrated during COVID-19

I was often very frustrated by my parents' lack of communication during the pandemic she said, ...the parents just wouldn't respond... I would not hear from families for quite a while and this was very unusual...and I would then reach out to them in Facebook Messenger. Sometimes I was lucky and got them.

Teacher 9, a preschool teacher discussed home visits, and how COVID-19 played a role in the way families became less receptive to home visits.

Sometimes it can be rough, like going into homes because parents are uncomfortable with it, and many will say you know it's because of COVID-19, and if they seem uncomfortable, I kind of like, say you know,

what works best, for you. I try putting them at ease. I tell them we can meet on a zoom call, if that is better.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to notable changes in parent-teacher communication. Some parents became less responsive, prompting teachers to adapt by using digital platforms like Facebook Messenger for outreach. Home visits also became challenging, as parents were uncomfortable due to COVID-19, leading teachers to offer alternatives like Zoom meetings. This highlighted the importance of flexibility and diverse communication approaches during pandemic-induced disruptions.

Parent Communication Difficulties and Dynamics

Parental communication styles exhibit a natural evolution in response to various factors. A significant majority of interviewees, more than half, delved into the impact of life events such as marriage, the arrival of a new baby, or adoption on how parents communicate. These pivotal moments often act as catalysts for shifts in communication dynamics. Notably, when parents perceive their child undergoing mistreatment from peers or educators, a common response is to adopt a defensive stance. In scrutinizing the teacher's decisions and suspecting unfair treatment, this defensiveness presents a substantial challenge for teachers striving to address concerns constructively. **Teacher 2** found herself in a situation where she was hoping to persuade the parent of a boy in her class to visit their family doctor after their meeting. She was satisfied with the possibility of providing the child with the necessary assistance. But, as time passed, she realized that he had not been to the doctor. *"I thought this mom was on the ball."* The teacher said, *"She seems to want what is best for her child; you know she was, I felt truly an advocate for him. Yeah. So yes, I feel that some people can play with words."*

Later in the interview, this same teacher came back to this situation and stated, *“She became frustrated and was wondering why he wasn’t getting help...when all she finally said is he was diagnosed with dyslexia...”* The teacher recalled,

I know that was not enough to certify him as otherwise health-impaired OHI...all she wanted was for him to be in the special ed room. She would say I’m taking him to outside resources, and I’m getting him tested more. We never got any of that paperwork or the test results. I could have been helping him.

The teacher curtly stated, *“I felt that a lot of precious time was lost...”*

As a result, the teacher's ability to offer the child appropriate support was hindered. This issue was particularly evident when the parent voiced their worries but did not take the actions that the teacher deemed necessary. This inconsistency between what was expressed and what was done caused confusion and hindered the prompt addressing of the child's needs. When information was left unshared, the result was a delay in the teacher's understanding of the child’s behaviors and led to missed opportunities for appropriate support. In some cases, parents failed to share critical personal history that could significantly affect a student's behaviors. **Teacher 5** gave an example of a child getting what she wanted when she acted out. What she wanted was to go home and play on her cell phone. She said the dad would tell the child,

Your sister doesn't act like that. Look at how she acts, and then he'll go, and like he'll continue to bully her and buy her whatever she wants. I said

you can't do that. We're not going to get anywhere. He treats her with ice cream after school, and she still doesn't get it. And neither does he. It can be so frustrating, and I think, come on, doesn't he know that's not helping her? It's not helping anyone....

There were times when the teachers sounded exasperated. Teachers would talk about parents not making connections to the poor behaviors of a child that stem from poor relationships or poor role models in the child's life. From the teacher's viewpoint, she felt these circumstances are a direct connection to bad behaviors. **Teacher 5** talked about building trusting bonds with her families, and she admits that forming these bonds can be complicated. *"I'm on their side. I communicate with them so often and in many places and ways, but having a positive relationship is really tricky."*

Teacher 3 considered herself lucky to have had a looping year. A looping year is when a teacher is asked to move up to teach the next grade level. She was informed that her position as a kindergarten teacher was no longer needed, but she was offered a first-grade position instead. At first, she was hesitant about the idea, but the transition allowed her to handpick a few students for her class in the upcoming year. She expressed, *"I felt initially, I was so stressed out by parents that I was like, I'll kind of talk to your kid in order to talk to you."* But then there was this transition to a new grade, and she already had created some bonds with parents, so she felt confident in her ability to speak to them about their child because she had been their teacher for two years now. She recalls initially not wanting to talk to parents in her first year of teaching, but she recalled that the

following year she, “...really liked seeing Jake's growth from day one in kindergarten to now in first grade, so it made it that much easier. I had more to tell them about where he started to where he is now.”

Looking at the other perspective of effective communication and building trust, when **Teacher 7** first began teaching, she decided to share her cell phone number with some parents. She recalls,

I gave out my personal cell phone number, which I should not have done to a certain amount of parents. ...there was a few parents that were contacting me over breaks, or even on the weekend, asking me about their children like; for example, a mom called me at 6 am to ask me why their child's bus wasn't there yet, and it was midwinter break, and it was 6 am! So, I did have to learn that I will never give out my personal cell phone number again. Now, I use the basic Facebook messenger. I feel like, at least with the basic messenger, like, it's there, but there's still a boundary there, but I don't know. It still feels different than giving up my personal phone number.

Based on the interviews, teachers faced communication difficulties when dealing with parents who had different family dynamics. This included parents who had a lenient parenting style and did not want to set boundaries for their children. On the other hand, some parents were authoritarian and relied on threats and punishments for their children to comply. There were also parents who were passive-aggressive and blamed themselves for their children's behavior in school.

Moreover, teachers had to deal with different situations in the classroom. For instance, a child whose mother had cancer did not attend school daily because they were at home with the mother. In another case, a family was placed in a shelter far from their home since it was the only shelter that accommodated their large family. Additionally, a family had to deal with a member who had mental health issues and could not be relied on to pick up the child from school. Despite these challenges, the teachers made considerable efforts to bridge the communication gap and fostered understanding with the families they served.

Teacher 2 reported that she uses a direct and straightforward communication approach, which allowed her to avoid giving vague information that can confuse parents. She stated, *“I do not play with words. I'm too direct and to the point...maybe could be that **I never had that fear of talking to parents.**”*

Communication issues can be common in families, but co-parenting presents unique challenges based on the interviews. **Teacher 5** discussed several instances where situations with parents who co-parent can be difficult. She said, *“Because you’re talking to one parent, that doesn’t mean that somebody else is in charge is listening to it at home because they might not even live with that parent.”* She gives an example of this, *“...like this child in the beginning of the year, I thought she lived with her mom fully...found out that she was always living with her dad. Dad had no idea about her behavior.”*

In this instance, there was a message going to only half of the family, and that half did not relay the message to the other half, and the child's behavior continued until the dad was made aware of the issues.

Teacher 2 also spoke of co-parenting difficulties. In her description, she talks of a student with anger issues and tantrums. The anger and tantrums were becoming increasingly challenging to manage, even after communicating with the mom. She wondered what she could do, and then:

Finally, the mom told me she was getting remarried ...and that the little girl's father had to go to counseling for major anger issues while they were married, and that was why she divorced him. The little girl spent most of her time with her mom, but every other weekend, from Thursday until Monday, she was with her dad, and apparently, mom and dad did not talk about what was happening at school. She also didn't tell me that the girl's father was getting married and was going to have a new baby. I only found this out because the girl was having a really bad streak of tantrums and throwing things in the classroom. As we talked, Mom said Well, you know her dad is getting ready to have a new baby, and I was like well, yes, that most definitely could be what was causing the issues. This was information that had I known earlier, I could have helped her cope, or I would have suggested counseling earlier in the year... mom didn't listen, and the dad wasn't really a part of our conversations ever.

In summary, the teachers encountered communication challenges with parents due to differing expectations influenced by the backgrounds of the teachers. These challenges encompass conflict resolution, managing diverse parental expectations, and understanding co-parenting dynamics. Teachers had varying approaches to handling conflicts with parents, and some struggled with unresponsiveness, leading to low parent

engagement. The conversations showed the teacher's frustration when a parent didn't follow-up with medical advice for their child, causing delays in addressing the child's needs. The discussion also explored family dynamics, encompassing lenient and authoritarian parenting styles, which exacerbated communication difficulties. Co-parenting challenges were emphasized, with messages not consistently reaching all family members and impacting the child's behavior. Despite these obstacles, teachers committed themselves to bridging the communication gap and nurturing understanding with the families they served.

Within these evolving communication dynamics, the nuances of teacher self-efficacy come to light. Teachers with a strong sense of self-efficacy navigate these challenges with a belief in their ability to positively influence parent-teacher interactions. They recognize that addressing parental concerns effectively requires adept communication skills and a resilient approach when faced with defensiveness. The self-efficacious teacher is more likely to view these obstacles as opportunities for constructive engagement, understanding the intricate dance between evolving parental communication styles and the teacher's role in fostering a collaborative environment.

In this context, the teachers who exhibit a heightened sense of self-efficacy emphasize the importance of validating parental concerns before addressing any perceived issues. Their confidence in their ability to navigate defensiveness allows them to approach these situations with empathy, turning potential obstacles into opportunities for strengthening the teacher-parent relationship. As the tapestry of parental communication styles unfolds, the thread of teacher self-efficacy weaves through,

influencing how challenges are perceived and navigated within the intricate dance of evolving dynamics.

Empathy and Teacher Personal Experiences

While not greatly discussed by all teachers, the sub-theme of empathy emerged as a notable aspect in understanding families and children. Among those who did touch upon empathy, its significance was strongly stressed. These teachers highlighted how employing empathy contributed to the creation of a more supportive environment for both parents and children, fostering increased collaboration. Furthermore, the teachers recognize that addressing parental concerns effectively requires not only adept communication skills but also a resilient approach when faced with defensiveness. The self-efficacious teacher is more likely to view these obstacles as opportunities for constructive engagement, understanding the intricate dance between evolving parental communication styles and the teacher's role in fostering a collaborative environment. Specifically, one participant underscored the pivotal role of validating parental concerns before addressing any issues, emphasizing the transformative impact of empathetic approaches in enhancing teacher-parent interactions. As **Teacher 1** spoke, her body language changed, and the tone of her voice changed as she relayed

But I do know that that tool, of just using empathy, looking into their eyes, listening, giving them a voice repeating back to them, you know they're concerned so that they know that you understand, or if you can clarify. Did I hear you right by this? Is this what you mean? And you know those kinds of things, listening and empathy. It works wonders, and a lot of those parents just want to feel understood.

It was evident that the teachers were drawing on their personal experiences, like having grandchildren, for example, to foster empathy for students and families. **Teacher 2** said, *“I remember just saying that whole entire year when I went from fourth grade to first grade...I was so used to working with older children. I don’t want to make them cry.”* In this case, she was using empathy to help her deal with a new grade level and a new approach to working with younger children. She goes on to say, *“Yeah, that really hit home for me the minute my granddaughter Kylee was born. I don’t want my grandchildren to be treated that way. It was like, you know, really eye-opening for me.”* In a similar manner, **Teacher 1** was able to draw from her own experiences as a mother and a teacher to understand parent perspectives. She explained the vast differences between her own children and followed that up with the fact that each child is different, and it is her job to put a positive spotlight on those unique differences for families. It is the emotional connection and empathy in her communication that helped her to address many parent concerns. On the other hand, she also used an indirect approach; she used her willingness to listen to parents and her ability to use humor to resolve conflicts as they arise. While listening, she was able to validate a parent's concerns about her child.

I think the best tool for anybody is just to understand how they're feeling. Maybe to put themselves. You put yourselves in their shoes, and you gather as much information as you can. Sometimes, what we perceive as somebody's needs are completely different from what they truly need because we are gathering all of our information from things that we've had in our past experiences, that we think that we know how they feel or what they need, and sometimes just letting them speak, and with a nod or

*an understanding of like **putting yourselves in their shoes**, makes them feel, validated, or understood and sometimes it takes their stress level down.*

Another way that **Teacher 1** resolves conflict is with humor. She states,

I guess humor is something I use just to make people feel comfortable. And to make light of like maybe some not super heavy situations, but situations that can be made light of, like, if I have a conversation about a learned helplessness behavior for a 5-year-old in my classroom, they have to have everything done for them, and they cry if their mitten, doesn't go on the right way, or that kind of thing. And you know, we have this conversation with a child's parent about how we can help their child become more independent, like put them in the Independent Club, or I take a screenshot or send them a picture of their child wearing their snow pants over their coat. And their glove hanging off by a thread. But they did it themselves, and those kinds of like little anecdotal or humorous little bits of progress, for parents, sometimes lightens the mood.

By using empathy, teachers can set the foundation for good parent-teacher communication. This teacher also used this approach with a parent who was concerned about their child's ability to keep up with classmates and was able to understand the parent's emotions. She validated the parents' feelings before addressing the needs of the parents and used humor to lighten the mood. **Teacher 1** chuckles,

I've noticed that there are certain personalities that can be inflamed by somebody that doesn't feel like they're listening to them, or that kind of

thing, and they explode. And all it really took is somebody just to say, oh, I can see that you're feeling upset, or I can see that you have some concern about this. Let me hear more about your thoughts and let me hear more of your thoughts so I can understand where you are coming from. And sometimes, just by talking, their whole demeanor changes, and they feel like, oh, you're on my side. But I can think of some individuals where this worked in my favor. To, like, listen to them and say, Oh, my gosh! My heart hurts for how you're feeling right now; let me have more information so that we can problem-solve this altogether.

Teacher 1 also uses her own family experiences and the differences between her own children to show parents that all children develop differently.

I talked about my son, who I had in speech. He didn't even talk until he was two and a half. He went to speech here at this school, and you know, like those experiences. I knew there was intelligence there, but nothing was coming out, and so, you know, that kind of puts people at ease. I also talked about my daughter, who is a super smart, very intelligent girl who did not read in kindergarten, and then, in first grade, she was reading off the charts. So, every time that people say, oh, you know, they're not this or that, or they're not performing where they need to be. I'm like, not every kid starts in the same spot and goes to the same level every year.

And expresses what she sees to parents that their child can do.

By communicating what I see she can do, telling the parents there are things that we can work on, and telling her (the mother) not to

worry...again, like I said, not every kid starts in the same spot and goes to the same level every year. So be patient and keep talking to her.

Teacher 9, a preschool teacher, talks about home visits and uses empathy and understanding for parents who may seem uncomfortable with the concept of having a teacher in their home. She said,

Sometimes it can be rough, like going into homes because parents are uncomfortable with it, and if they seem uncomfortable, I kind of like say, you know, we have this option that we can meet in the park or at McDonald's or something whatever works best, for you. I try putting them at ease...I understand that sometimes, coming into their homes can be difficult because they don't feel like they have their best foot forward, but you know they like to hear your voice, and they can sometimes tell that you're nervous, and that's okay.

In summary, this section examines how teachers adapt their communication styles over time based on their experiences and feedback from parents. Teachers were able to draw on their personal experiences, like having grandchildren or being parents themselves, to foster empathy. By empathizing with parents, teachers create a more supportive environment and enhance collaboration. They emphasize the importance of validating parental concerns before addressing any issues. Additionally, humor and the willingness to listen are used to resolve conflicts and build a foundation for effective parent-teacher communication.

Evolution of Teacher's Communication Methods

The last sub-theme explores the evolving landscape of communication methods in education. Most of the teachers in this study address how their communication changed since they began teaching. This theme also highlights the shift from traditional methods like face-to-face and phone calls to digital platforms like Class Dojo and SeeSaw, and social media like Facebook and Facebook Messenger. The dynamic shifts in communication techniques, as explored in the earlier sub-theme, intersect with the difficulties encountered in interactions between parents and teachers. Teachers remained aware that communication demands were diverse among families, driven by their uniqueness, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach. These needs encompass families managing diverse grade levels and varying age groups among their children, which can pose communication challenges. Additionally, some families are navigating significant life events, such as welcoming a new child, celebrating a marriage, or dealing with unforeseen medical diagnoses. Teachers, who possess self-efficacy remained attentive to these evolving circumstances, skillfully adapting their communication strategies to meet the diverse needs of the families they serve.

While technology provides new avenues for communication, it can also pose difficulties, as mentioned by some teachers who found certain digital platforms to be less user-friendly or overwhelming for parents. The need for tailoring communication to parents' preferences, a topic in the current sub-theme, aligns with the teachers' efforts to adapt their communication strategies to meet parents where they are in the evolving digital landscape. These overlapping themes highlight the complex dynamics of teacher-parent communication in the context of changing technology and diverse parental

preferences. This shift in communication dynamics influenced the teachers in this research in the following ways. **Teacher 6** talked of using technology and the shifts she had gone through *“in the middle of my career, I started doing Dojo and some of those other technological programs...It simplified the process of parent communication for me.”* Some teachers said that while they do have several ways for parents to contact them, they are finding out that for their families, the most effective way is to use Google Voice. **Teacher 8** stated, *“but what really works is Google Voice.”* The ability to share real-time updates with families has allowed teachers to enhance communication and build relationships. Because of the flexibility in the communication methods has helped them accommodate parents’ preferences and abilities. **Teacher 6** said, *“I guess I’m better at it (talking to kids) now, which is with kids, right...I approach things very directly, and not everyone (parents) likes that”* While **Teacher 5** uses Facebook to show kids interacting, she states,

I also think it's important for parents to see their kids on the Facebook page having fun with the other students because sometimes I think that parents get the wrong impression of some students in the classroom, and all they ever hear is that this kid did this. Or this kid did that, and they're always hearing the same thing about the same kids. So, it's nice for them to see their child getting along with that kid that they're always complaining about. Also gives those parents a chance to see their child interacting with other kids.

Changing technology also has some disadvantages. **Teacher 8** says, *“When I used Skyward to send out messages, I found out that it is not user-friendly at the elementary*

level. I found it was not helpful to send messages out through Skyward.” She is faithful to her traditional way, uses a Dojo app, and makes phone calls. This group of teachers talked about the impact of the changing communication methods on parent involvement.

Teacher 7 indicated, *“Sometimes they don’t answer my messages. It is hard to reach parents no matter what method I use.”*

Considering the information from the interviews, the teachers were subjected to various aspects of communication challenges when interacting with parents with different family dynamics and situations. Despite this, the teachers showed great efforts to bridge the gap, coordinate communication, and foster understanding of the dynamics of the families they served.

During each interview, all participants shared their unique challenges and conflicts, with some teachers even relating to similar experiences. However, one situation which several researchers, the U.S. Government and accountability (New NCES Data Also Show Increase in Student and Teacher Absenteeism, 2022; Patrick et al., 2020 *U. S. Government Accountability Office (U. S. Gao)*, 2023) confirm that the COVID-19 pandemic presented major difficulties, challenges, and communication dynamics for parents, families, and all in the teaching profession. Although not all participants mentioned COVID-19, those who did emphasized its impact on their communication. For example, **Teacher 3** had never thought to use Facebook to communicate with her families, but due to COVID-19, she began using it as a means of contact. She stated,

I also feel like communication has changed a lot from when I was in college until now. With COVID-19, I never thought that I'd have a

Facebook group for my class. I thought Facebook was never gonna be something that I would utilize as a classroom thing. But with COVID and parents having not been able to come in, I was just posting so many more pictures, and that became a primary source for me to communicate with them and to share information and all pictures. Parents communicate with me on Facebook because that's something that parents are more comfortable with. I have a Dojo app. but honestly, my parents Facebook message me over anything. Especially if it's super urgent cause I know I'm gonna see that. So, I do use the Dojo, but parents are more likely to use Facebook.

Most teachers were able to manage conflicts that arose, and some teachers were forced to adapt to new teaching environments, be creative, and embrace new ways of connecting with parents and families. **Teacher 6** suggested that COVID-19 taught teachers to communicate better.

*I think since COVID-19, the use of technology has made communication with parents a lot easier... COVID-19 prompted teachers to find and adapt to new methods and ways of communication....COVID taught us **how to do it right** somewhat better and in many different ways...made us be creative and flexible in ways that I would have never done before.*

These teachers discussed both the positive and the negative changes in communication they saw due to COVID-19. Teachers reflect on how the pandemic has influenced parent-teacher interactions and communication practices. Moreso, they spoke

of the need to navigate the changing landscape brought on by the pandemic. These teachers faced communication obstacles and provided valuable insights into diverse parental backgrounds and circumstances, promoting understanding and bridging gaps. Collaborative learning and professional development played a key role in improving communication with parents. This section highlighted teachers' efforts to bridge communication gaps, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with strategies like active listening, a positive approach, and sharing personal experiences to clarify expectations.

In conclusion, this section examined how teachers' communication styles evolve over time in response to their experiences and feedback from parents. Participants shared their journeys in adapting their communication techniques to connect better with parents and families. The importance of effectively communicating academic and behavioral expectations to parents, emphasizing a positive approach, and assuming parents have their children's best interests in mind were also ways the teachers' communication styles change over time. Effective communication strategies such as active listening, maintaining eye contact, and asking for clarification were identified. They also discussed challenges, particularly with parents who had negative perceptions of education due to their own experiences and the impact of COVID-19. Some teachers adopted direct communication styles.

Collaborative Learning and Professional Development

The second theme this study revealed is that about half of the teachers feel they were not adequately prepared in college when it comes to communicating with parents. However, this study also found that through professional development and ongoing

learning, these teachers felt they could improve their communication skills. While some teachers reported feeling insufficiently trained in communicating with parents at the college level, many received help from their administration and mentors, both assigned and found. Those who sought guidance from a mentor, or another teacher felt they experienced an improvement in their communication skills, and this led to increased confidence when speaking with parents and families. The sub-themes discussed are 1) College, Professional Development, and New Teacher Learning, 2) Using Trusted Individuals as a Safe Outlet to Express Feelings, and 3) Administrative Support and Effective Communication.

College, Professional Development, and New Teacher Learning

In the first sub-theme of this section, five of the teachers indicated a lack of communication preparation during their college years. They felt that this lack of preparation has led to the impact on their current communication challenge. **Teacher 6**, with disdain in her voice, states, *“No, **I don’t think college taught me to communicate well**, at least when I was in college. I don’t remember taking any courses on communication...”*

Some of the teachers reflected on both the limitations of college education in developing effective communication skills and the uncertainty about the practicality of communication-focused coursework offered during college years. **Teacher 6** said pointedly, *you go to college to learn theory, but **you learn to communicate with experience**.*” A preschool teacher, **Teacher 8**, said, *“I feel like our parents just need to be educated.”* She was referring to what she observed from the parents and families in her classroom. She went on to say, *“It feels like they don’t know how, when, or what to*

tell us about their child...” And she admitted she doesn’t really know what to tell parents and families, *“I am not sure what I should share with them.”* In another conversation, **Teacher 5** understood that she did not have formal training (in communication) and sought out guidance. She acknowledged that during difficult conversations, the ones about disruptive child behaviors or lack of student progress, *“I don’t feel like education classes, that they taught me...how to have those difficult conversations...”* She also went on to say, *“I went to college, and what I wanted to learn about communication...how do I let parents know when something is serious or something that just really shouldn’t happen at school? I never got addressed.”* In the interview with **Participant 8**, a preschool teacher, she recognized the need for professional development (PD) to enhance teachers’ communication skills. She discussed the desire for workshops or PD days to better equip teachers to engage parents effectively.

We have not really had much PD...they had that chat with us teachers in the beginning of the school year about making sure we know how to use SeeSaw, and to make sure parents are on it. I think it would be beneficial to have PD days for us. I think it would be beneficial to our parents and maybe to help teachers; I think they talked about giving us PD in the beginning, and they let it go. It gets brushed under the rug; we’re talking about other things instead.

It was her hope that more training could help teachers effectively utilize and find communication tools to help them engage parents in meaningful ways. This hope for more training reflects an acknowledgment of the pivotal role that self-efficacy plays in teachers' ability to effectively utilize communication tools and engage parents

meaningfully. *“But in the end, we need to kind of how we connect with these parents. Or is what we are doing working? If it isn’t, what else can we do? Maybe there’s something else.”*

Likewise, **Teacher 10** stated, *“I really didn’t learn anything in college (about communication); they just talked about how it’s important to communicate...I know parents, especially at my school, really appreciate that (communication), and they feel that communication is very important.”* **Teacher 3** said, *“...they told me parents would be the worst part of teaching.”* **Teacher 1** remembers having a week-long introductory training on communication during her first year of teaching. She states,

I think back to when I first started. And when I taught in a different district, they had a new teacher induction like they do in lots of different places. And we actually had a whole week-long class on communication, and I learned so much from that that I have taken with me even to this day, you know, the common strands of making sure someone feels validated and understood before you speak a word you try to gather as much information about how they're feeling and what they're needs are like.

Teacher 4 stated, *“...here's one communication thing: I don't think college taught me to communicate well, at least when I was in college. I don't remember taking any courses.”* And later on, toward the end of our interview, she brought communication back to the forefront and made the following statement.

I want to go back to the thought of college and preparing me for communication with families and parents, I don't really remember because, I mean, think about it: back then, we didn't even have all these

apps that you could use. You know, it was like you had a phone number...I probably shouldn't say it didn't prepare me. But I know that when I first started teaching, there were not all these different ways.

Teacher 6 stated,

...you don't learn about communicating with parents in college. I think a lot of the things you learn in college are theoretical and really not applicable to doing the actual job of teaching.

Teacher 10, who did not go to college but took an alternative way of teaching through Teach for America, stated,

They talked about ways of fostering engagement with parents, you know, like digitally. There was some stuff about what kind of things you can do and current models of communication, you know, but nothing like what I really needed or could use. It was not helpful at all.

During her interview, **Teacher 10** also expressed the desire to have a set of strategies that she could refer to that would help her communicate with families effectively. She shared that she had prior experience as a long-term substitute teacher, where she regularly sent home newsletters. It was unexpected for her to find that Teach for America instructors only talked about parent engagement and digital forms of communication.

The other teachers interviewed did not mention receiving new teacher induction or training regarding parent communication or expectations about preferred platforms. In general, the teachers emphasized the fact that their college programs did not adequately

prepare them for effective communication with parents. Furthermore, they recognize the need for ongoing professional development in this area.

Using Trusted Individuals as a Safe Outlet to Express Feelings

The second sub-theme explores mentorship, where experienced teachers, referred to as mentor teachers, guide and support new teachers in enhancing their skills. In this mentorship context, the role of self-efficacy in shaping teachers' experiences becomes evident. Among the ten teachers interviewed, insights into teacher self-efficacy are revealed through the presence or absence of a mentor and the perceived benefit derived from the mentorship. Teachers who proactively sought or were assigned mentors demonstrated a belief in their ability to improve their skills through guidance.

Conversely, the three teachers finding limited benefit from their mentors, relying more on personal experiences, may indicate varying levels of self-efficacy. This interplay between mentorship and self-efficacy highlights how teachers' confidence in their capacity to learn and grow influences the impact of mentorship on their professional development. Among the ten teachers interviewed, eight had mentors—five were assigned, and three found mentors independently. Notably, two teachers, while not mentioning finding a mentor, assumed mentoring roles themselves. One of the preschool teachers, **Teacher 9**, said that when she did not get assigned a mentor teacher, she found her own. She wondered,

...if you don't have a mentor teacher, like who can be your mentor? A teacher? Kind of create one for yourself. It's kind of what I did this year;

my person who is right next door to me; she's been like my mentor. I've kind of just created her as my mentor teacher, and I've asked her questions, and she's helped, and she's from the special education department.

Teacher 7 was passionate about new teachers finding a mentor. She declared, “Mentors will help. I can’t stress this enough. You’ve got to have somebody to bounce those ideas off, to check in with.” When **Teacher 4** came to the realization that at her new teaching assignment, either the teachers were new to teaching, new to the district, or new to the building, she had this to say, “So, basically, we're all kind of new to the building. So, she (the newly graduated teacher is trying to keep her head above the water. Joe’s just crazy. Yeah, I told my principal the other day. I’m on an island! We need help!” **Teacher 10** talked about how, as a new teacher, you have all this information you are trying to take in the way the building works, how to take attendance, getting the lunch count down to the office, and then you are trying to reach out to parents it can be overwhelming. When she saw a struggling new teacher, she stepped in to help.

We have had some really unique situations at this school...the new kindergarten teacher, for the first few months, she was like trying to learn the curriculum and trying to figure it all out. And when you're focused on the curriculum, and you've got parents who do stuff, you kind of need to have that (mentor) advice. She had a parent, and the parent basically did not even answer the phone anymore because the child's behavior were so bad. You know, we discussed the fact that if someone is on the emergency card, you know, you can talk to them about the child and the child's

welfare. So, grandma is on the emergency card, and I told her to not to mess around with the mom, go through grandma and try that way.

Even veteran teachers who have been teaching for many years still seek the help of mentors. **Teacher 6**, in her interview, said, “...*my mentors are my colleagues; they are the people that I go to, and I use as a sounding board...I’m open to more advice than I used to be.*” Many of the interviewed teachers recognized the significance of mentorship from their more experienced colleagues and acknowledged how mentors contribute to their growth as a teacher, growth as effective communicators, and growth as team players.

When teachers utilize team dynamics for collaboration, they find it easier to face challenges and find support when they work in a collaborative environment. Through this approach, the teachers interviewed found it helpful to use their team to rehearse effective communication strategies and to use suggested approaches to appropriate communication. Maintaining consistency from year to year can be important to families. **Teacher 10** said, “*I usually use my team to work with...like March is reading month, so we’ll put some things together to do that is the same for all the kids...you know some parents are going to be really upset if their other child didn’t get the same thing that their oldest child got.* Cooperative team dynamics played a role in helping **Teacher 7** feel supported, and she goes on to say, “*My partner teachers last year just introduced me to some new things I wasn’t really that familiar with...They just wanted to make sure that I knew how to say things in an appropriate way.*” When winter came, and **Teacher 7** admitted she did not have a clue how to get her students to wear appropriate winter gear, she declared, “*My partner teacher told me how often I should be communicating with*

families...they even showed me how to send home little notes about when winter is coming...I can't tell you how much this helped me." Mentor teachers helped their mentees understand the importance of maintaining a positive balance between positive and negative communication. **Teacher 7** asserted, "I would say my biggest piece of advice from me and the biggest help for me was that I had co-teachers that I cooperated with and was able to communicate with, and they were able to help me with communication," Another participant, **Teacher 2** knew when she needed to reach out for help and realized that no one was there. She said she did not know how to talk to a parent about behaviors in the classroom when she first became a teacher. She indicated,

*I had to find someone. So, I found Jill, another teacher in my building...**She helped me out** a lot when I first started, and she helped put me at ease...then, as **I became more confident in my teaching**, then I was able to really say what I wanted to say.*

Teacher 2 frankly stated,

I never ask for help...besides getting help from my first principal...I felt that I had more knowledge than many people...even those who taught longer than me...I had my own kids...I was talking to parents often...maybe that's why Kelly is asking me for help...and poor Sara, she's just overwhelmed...We really had to talk her down the ledge...now I feel like she's comfortable asking and venting about parents and behaviors. I don't judge.

Teacher 7 gave the recommendation of using your co-teachers to collaborate,

I would say that the biggest advice for me and the biggest help for me was that I had co-teachers that I cooperated with and was able to communicate with, and they were able to help me with communication. They made things a lot easier. They helped me figure out how to say positive things and told me not to be just that teacher of calls when things are negative because no parent wants to hear every single day that their child did something wrong, even if it's just a quick, hey, I want to let you know your child's doing really good today. I really like how they participated. It sets the parents at ease and lets them know that you care and do appreciate their child and that you are a good teacher because I know parents, especially at my school, really appreciate that, and they feel that communication is very important, especially in education.

Teacher 10 mentioned that her assigned mentor is currently unavailable. She commented that she relies on her team to help her keep student activities consistent as a way to avoid angry parents.

As for my mentor, she hasn't been around for a while because her daughter is ill, so I don't have anybody to bounce ideas off...in previous years, I was told when you have siblings in the building, you kinda wanna do what you did last year so that you can keep it consistent.

Teacher 9 acknowledged that she needed to seek out teachers who would help her and, in turn, help her students and their families. She admits to not knowing how to appropriately share with families and how to say things correctly.

So, I have to seek out those special education teachers to help me word things in a certain way because you can't say certain things, and when the speech teacher comes to me and tells me that I have to tell a parent that the child needs speech, or there's something else going on that's really hard because I was like, Oh, my gosh! What do I do? I was freaking out. I was in panic mode because I didn't know what to tell them, and college didn't prepare me for that. I didn't know how to talk to those parents. You don't get prepared to make those phone calls about IEP meetings or referrals in college. It was the words and wording that I needed the most help with. You can't say, for instance, you can't say to a parent that their child is non-verbal. There's a different way to say it. There's wording that you have to use. And I needed to know what it was.

She also leaned on her co-teachers, who share a common space in the school with her and are easily accessible. She reported,

I learned it from my peers; even though I don't have a mentor, I do seek out people. Last year, I did not have a mentor either. I do have some good teachers this year that I do work with, and we have conversations in the hallway, And I'm like, I have this going on and, how would you do this? What would your approach be? Could you help me, or can I get something from Special Education? These teachers can help me understand and prepare for my conversations with these parents. It's really nice to have support from them. They're not on an island, and we're not on an island even when you don't have a mentor teacher. When things are really rough,

*you don't know who to go to, and you don't know who has the answers, and it's kind of frustrating. **The person that works right next to me has been my rock.** I've kind of just created a spot for her and me to chat, and when I have to talk, she's very helpful. She's in the Special Ed department, so she helps me a lot with those special ed conversations. I think we've fallen into sync. So that helps a lot, too.*

Yet another teacher, **Teacher 6**, who did not have a mentor at the beginning of her career, went on a search for one.

So then, like most people did, I had to find someone...another teacher in my building and not even in at my grade level...I learned what worked and didn't work. And then, as I became more confident in my teaching...I was able to really say what I wanted to say. Also, it helps to know your parents and how to communicate...some parents can handle what you have to say, and some can't.

The participants shared their experiences with mentors and the importance of communication in their teaching roles. They spoke of a willingness to help colleagues, gave non-judgmental support, and emphasized the significance of co-teachers in maintaining positive communication with parents. Others spoke of the challenges when they did not have a mentor but were able to rely on their team for support. One spoke of the need for guidance with sensitive conversations, noting the importance of seeking support from peers when she did not have a mentor. All these conversations and experiences underscore the value of mentorship, peer support, and the need for effective communication in the teaching profession.

Administrative Support and Effective Communication

This sub-theme explores the ways in which principals offer support to their teaching staff regarding communication with families. **Teacher 7** highlighted the importance of understanding the expectations of the principal and how they can impact the teachers. She noted, *“And I think it makes a difference...understanding how your administrator does communicate, and what are their expectations, as well.”* Moreover, **Teacher 6** provided insights into how her principal encourages new teachers to *“seek a variety of experiences, interact with different people, and become aware of the diverse communication styles in different communities even within the district where you work.”* She went on to say that she has heard the principal emphasize that *“no one gets it right the first time; communication is a skill that develops over time and with a lot of different experiences.”* **Teacher 2** disclosed going to her principal when she didn’t know what to say to her parents, and she fondly recalls what her first principal told her.

I remember my first principal, and I would go into his office and say, but the parents just aren’t understanding what I am telling them. He would say what did you tell them, and I’d tell him what I said and follow that up with, but what I really wanted to say is this....And he’d be like, NO, you can’t say that, but you can say this. Or you can sort of beat around the bush and say this, and he would give me many different ways to say something to my family that they would better understand; he helped me be a better communicator, and that kept me out of trouble

Teacher 4 admitted the need to have her principal help find a solution that both the teacher and the parents could agree on. She said, *“My principal told me*

to document and keep records of all my communications with the parents and family...and he reminded me that the documentation could be very helpful in addressing the conflict with the parent.” She recalled that when she and the parents came to an impasse, *“my principal stepped in to mediate the discussion and helped us all find a solution we could agree to.”* She also told how she was having difficulties with a child not getting a permission slip signed and the parent insisting that the note never came home, which was causing her a lot of stress. She stated, *“The principal knows of all the issues this parent has caused in the three years his child has been in the building...the principal stepped in right away because he kind of does handle the communication with this one parent...he (the principal) knows that he (the parent) is mentally unstable.”* She declared, *“it’s important to have the support from your administrator.”*

In another interview, **Teacher 6** reported, *“My principal just handles all the negative stuff, even phone calls from angry parents...it takes a lot of burden off the teachers because I think we take that stuff to heart, and he knows it can be troubling.”* **Teacher 7**, explained the importance of aligning with their administration on expectations for the frequency and methods of communication with parents. *“I know that our administration would like us to communicate on a weekly basis with parents...I think it’s important to **understand what** your administration wants you to communicate and **how they want you to communicate...**”* It appeared that when the principals set clear communication goals, they help teachers connect with parents early in the school year and guide teacher-parent interactions. **Teacher 5** explained that *“within the first month of*

*school, it is the expectation of our principal that all teachers in the building will make a positive phone call home to parents.” Teacher 4 stated, “I think it makes a difference. It does make a difference like, you know, **understand how your administrator does communication**, and? What are their expectations, as well?”*

Teachers often rely on the administration to communicate with them what is expected in the scope of parent communication. **Teacher 4** also emphasized the importance of knowing upfront what the administration requires in terms of parent communication and how it should be addressed.

I know, like all the districts, even the administration for our district, I mean, now they have a Facebook page, and they wanna get your classroom on Facebook. ...they really encourage that.

When a problem arose with a student, the mother went directly to the principal instead of the teacher. The principal then met with Teacher 4 and listened to both sides of the story. **Teacher 4** said, “...*the principal made a phone call to the parents. I can't remember if they actually touched base with each other. I think the principal left a voicemail.*”

After the principal made this call, **Teacher 4** recalled,
...then the mom sent that email to the principal stating that, you know, telling her she 100% supported the teacher, and there's absolutely no problem here. We don't need to call back.

Teacher 4 remembered her principal taking the lead and ensuring that a teacher received support when dealing with a parent with mental health concerns.

The parent, the dad, who doesn't want anything digital, complains about that, but he doesn't come to any conferences. And so, they really try to say he's kind of like a manic depressive. He's always up and down, and everything, so she kind of does handle the communication with that one; I think I've had one conversation with the dad after that on the phone, and because of what they know from him previously, they see, right away, the principal basically said, I can be there for the conference, so she (the principal) tries to sort of handle that one.

Teacher 7 was able to adapt to the expectations of her administration. She stated the importance of a supportive administration and stated,

I know that our administration would like us to communicate on a weekly basis with the basics, with parents and talk to them about what we're focusing on this week, but our administration has changed hands mid-year, and so this new administration has a different idea of how parent communication goes. So, I think it's important to understand what your administration wants you to communicate and how they want you to communicate, and even how often.

Teacher 10 had the support of her principal to help her with a difficult parent situation and worried about multiple failed attempts to set up a meeting with a parent. She was unable to schedule time with the mother, so she sought help from her principal to resolve the issue. The principal said, well, this is the time that we can meet. The parent was given a choice of two options. She was also told that the team would not meet just because somebody gets ticked off, especially since she's fully aware of his behaviors.

Teacher 2 talks about her principal's expectations for the start of the school year.

At the beginning of the school year and before September is over, a "non-negotiable" for my principal is she wants us to make a positive phone call home to all the children in our classrooms...and I will make sure to see them at pick up or drop off so that they can see me, they can hear my voice, and they can see my demeanor, and see how I act and react to them that way, when I have to call them about a problem behavior they understand where I am coming from. You know they saw me at a good time, and I was kind and understanding, and they see I want the best for their children. I really think that helps.

The importance of administrative support and effective communication is emphasized in the last sub-theme, highlighting how it promotes effective communication between educators and families. School leaders have a crucial responsibility in establishing an atmosphere that fosters effective communication. Principals can help teachers by taking note of their previous dealings with parents and offering support whenever necessary. Some teachers stressed the significance of aligning with administrative expectations regarding parent communication frequency and methods, but teachers did not solely rely on this support. They also received assistance from their colleagues and mentors, whether assigned or voluntary.

This chapter examined the complex dynamics of teacher-parent communication, exploring two key themes that emerged from the research findings. The first theme underscored the pivotal role of effective communication strategies and trust-building between teachers and parents. The nuances of communication adaptation, initiation of

contact, empathy, and the evolution of teachers' communication methods are thoroughly examined. The chapter emphasized the importance of understanding diverse family dynamics and highlighted the evolving parental communication styles and teacher self-efficacy. The second theme revealed some challenges faced by teachers in their communication journey, indicating that many teachers feel inadequately prepared in college. However, the study disclosed the transformative impact of professional development, mentorship, and administrative support in enhancing teachers' communication skills and confidence. Through insightful narratives, the chapter exposed the complexities of teacher-parent communication, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, while highlighting the resilience and adaptability of educators in bridging communication gaps and fostering understanding.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Imagine a school community where parents and educators work together to provide children with a richer educational experience. This partnership would not only benefit children but also provide teachers with increased confidence and skills to support children. The final chapter of this study aims to answer the guiding research question: How do early childhood teachers perceive and describe experiences in communication with families? After analyzing the ten narratives, two primary themes emerged. The first theme, Effective Communication Strategies, and Building Trust, encompasses four interconnected sub-themes: 1) Parent Communication Styles and Initiation of Contact, 2) Parent Communication Difficulties and Dynamics, 3) Empathy and Teacher Personal Experiences, and 4) The Evolution of Teacher's Communication Methods. Adding to this, the second theme, Collaborative Learning and Professional Development, includes three equally dynamic sub-themes: 1) College, Professional Development, and New Teacher Learning, 2) Using Trusted Individuals as a Safe Outlet to Express Feelings, and 3) Administrative Support and Enhanced Communication. This structured framework provides a clear and insightful evaluation of the essential components of effective communication, as perceived and experienced by dedicated early childhood educators.

The study sought to understand how early childhood teachers perceive and describe their experiences in communicating with families, and how this communication affects their self-efficacy as teachers. The research has significant implications for educators. This chapter highlights the dynamics and complexities of teacher-parent

communication and presents ways to improve this communication for the benefit of all involved. The headings guide attention to key aspects of early childhood teachers' communication with families, revealing nuanced responses to the research question: How do teachers perceive and describe these experiences? Themes and sub-themes emerge, shedding light on teachers' perceptions, descriptions, and the impact on their self-efficacy. I then discuss how findings relate to field theory and research, addressing confirmation, disconfirmation, and gaps.

I also outline study limitations, acknowledging the potential instructional value for teachers, parents, and administration. The study sample provides a rich database of teachers' stories, insights, and perspectives on developing teacher-parent communication efficacy.

First and foremost, the findings underscore the critical need for targeted professional development programs focused on enhancing teachers' communication skills, particularly in the context of engaging with parents. Colleges and teacher education programs may need to reassess their curriculum to ensure comprehensive preparation for effective communication with parents, addressing the identified gap perceived by teachers in their college training.

Moreover, the emphasis on mentorship as a valuable resource for new teachers suggests that educational institutions should encourage and facilitate mentorship programs. Providing mentorship opportunities can contribute not only to the professional development of teachers but also to the improvement of their communication skills.

Recognizing the role of mentors in shaping effective communicators and team players is crucial for fostering a supportive and collaborative teaching environment.

Principals and school administrators play a pivotal role in creating an atmosphere that fosters effective communication.

Administrative support should extend beyond setting expectations to actively engaging in initiatives that facilitate communication between teachers and parents. This may involve creating platforms for regular communication, offering resources for skill-building, and recognizing the diverse needs of families when setting communication expectations.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication dynamics further highlights the need for flexibility and adaptability in communication approaches. Educational institutions may consider integrating technology training into professional development programs to equip teachers with the skills needed to navigate digital platforms effectively.

Additionally, strategies for maintaining consistency in communication despite external challenges, such as pandemics, should be explored. The themes in this chapter of the research not only correspond with the theory but also resonate cohesively with the comprehensive literature review.

These overarching themes summarize key concepts that seamlessly integrate with the theoretical framework, establishing a solid narrative that bridges the gap between research findings and the foundational principles derived from both theoretical foundations and the exploration of the literature.

In Chapter Four, I systematically presented the resulting themes and subthemes derived from this study and organized them as Level 1 or 2 headings. These headings are now revisited in Chapter Five to structure a comprehensive discussion that delves into

each theme, exploring its connections to relevant theories and existing research. Furthermore, Chapter Five expands its focus to include dedicated sections on the study's limitations and implications. These sections offer insights into the constraints of the research and provide valuable considerations for further research endeavors, practical applications, policy development, and the enhancement of professional development in the field of teacher-parent communication.

I conducted interviews with early childhood teachers to explore the following research question: How do early childhood educators describe and perceive their experiences in communicating with families? I especially wanted to get at their stories, with the hope that I could better understand the problems that plague them around teacher-parent communication. I also have a belief that with the retold stories that I used for the vignettes; I could help teachers develop skills necessary for communication with families. This study employed a qualitative design and a case study methodology that is grounded in Narrative Inquiry (NI) and incorporates a Single Question aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN) technique for gathering participants' stories.

Effective Communication Strategies and Building Trust

The primary theme that surfaced from the study emphasized the importance of employing effective communication strategies and fostering trust in the teacher-parent dynamic. This led to establishing open communication channels and cultivating trust through tailored communication approaches catering to each parent's preferences. As emphasized by Thompson and Mazer (2012) and Leenders et al. (2019), despite encountering challenges in engaging with parents, such efforts remain indispensable for success. What follows are descriptions of the sub-themes found in this primary theme.

Parent Communication Styles and Initiation of Contact

In the realm of parent-teacher communication, understanding the diverse communication styles of each party is paramount. Research consistently emphasizes the role of teachers in initiating contact with parents, a principle underscored by numerous studies (Capse 2003; Epstein 2009; Graham-Clay 2005; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005; Keyes 2000; Leenders et al. 2019). Moreover, Thompson and Mazer (2012) stress the importance of two-way communication, with teachers taking the lead. This proactive approach is essential for effective communication. Teachers demonstrate flexibility by adapting their communication methods to meet the changing needs of parents. For instance, Teacher 6 embraced technology later in her career, utilizing platforms like Class Dojo to enhance parent-teacher engagement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Teacher 6 and her colleagues innovated unconventional communication strategies to reach out to parents and families, reflecting a paradigm shift in professional identity.

The teachers in the realm of this dissertation demonstrate a notable level of flexibility by customizing their communication approaches to accommodate the diverse and changing requirements of parents. For example, Teacher 6 embraced new technology and in her interview, Teacher 6 revealed that she only started using platforms such as Class Dojo, which are specifically designed to improve communication and engagement between parents and teachers, in the middle of her career. Additionally, when COVID-19 pandemic hit, Teacher 6 and her colleagues had to come up with innovative and unconventional ways to reach out to parents and families, which they had never tried before.

In a different scenario, Teacher 3 found it essential to modify her communication strategies to effectively meet the needs of families, prompting her to embrace Facebook at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, Teacher 5, initially hesitant about using Facebook, later utilized the platform to showcase children's interactions and harmony within her classroom. The utilization of tools like Facebook and Google Voice underscores the adaptability of these teachers, as they employ social media platforms to provide parents with glimpses into authentic classroom interactions and moments of joy.

Teacher 8 uses Google Voice because of its ability to share real-time updates therefore enhancing communication with families and building relationships. Vygotsky (1981) believed that effective communication between teachers and parents can greatly improve children's learning. Simply talking is not enough; it's important to engage in genuine communication that can positively impact the school environment. Vygotsky (1981) believed that when teachers and parents communicate well, it can significantly enhance children's learning. It's not just about talking; it's about genuine communication that can make the school environment better. Educators who embrace this approach help foster positive relationships and meaningful dialogues that go beyond the classroom (Donohoo, 2018). Thus, all that teachers put into parent-teacher communication reveals not just adaptability but a great commitment to fostering meaningful connections. This commitment contributes to a more enriched and collaborative educational environment. When teachers communicate with parents, they're not just giving updates, they're building a stronger mesosystem that ensures continuity in academic and social emotional support that students receive at school and at home.

Parent Communication Difficulties and Dynamics

Understanding and adapting to diverse parent communication styles is not only a valuable aspect but a fundamental one in building strong teacher-parent relationships. This necessity is underscored by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), emphasizing context and more skilled adults in a child's development. Communication serves as a crucial bridge between educators and the families they serve. Within the framework of this dissertation, the teachers express challenges with parents from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds who may be uncomfortable with default communication approaches. This highlights the complexity of engaging parents not at ease with conventional communication methods, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity and humility in interactions.

One teacher shared proactively using parent surveys to identify preferred communication channels, showcasing how teachers can align methods with parental preferences. This customization bridges the gap between what parents are comfortable with and what is most effective, echoing findings by Thompson & Mazer (2012), emphasizing the preference for two-way interactions. However, acknowledging that parents often expect teachers to initiate contact poses challenges, particularly at the school year's start.

The practice of "meeting parents where they are" becomes crucial in building a solid partnership between educators and families. Leenders et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of shared expectations for productive communication between teachers and families, highlighting the necessity of understanding and flexibility in diverse parent communication styles.

This sub-theme provides an in-depth exploration of the challenges teachers face in engaging with families and through parent-teacher communication. Some participants voice concerns about communication complexities and dynamics of different family structures, while others share experiences in overcoming challenges and highlight the significance of self-efficacy. Teachers' adaptability and capacity for learning indicate higher self-efficacy, aiding in overcoming various communication difficulties and navigating family dynamics successfully. The shared stories illuminate how educators navigate various challenges, highlighting the importance of transparent and efficient communication to engage parents effectively. Teacher 1 encountered a parent expressing defensiveness and vocalizing concerns about perceived dislike toward her child. Meanwhile, Teacher 2 faced re-engaging a parent who had previously been involved but became disengaged due to changing family circumstances. In another scenario, Teacher 5 grappled with managing unruly classroom behavior stemming from a family dynamic where the child was overly coddled. As a new teacher, Teacher 7 encountered the challenge of setting boundaries when a parent misused her cell phone number, leading to inappropriate calls. Lastly, during the COVID-19 Leenders et al.'s (2019) research supports the idea that beneficial communication requires a common understanding of expectations. Effective communication extends beyond information transmission to ensure parents are active participants in their child's educational experience, aligning with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978).

The study shows teachers struggling with communication challenges rooted in diverse parenting arrangements, emphasizing the importance of adaptability, empathy, and understanding in the parent-teacher relationship. Navigating dynamics between

multiple caregivers requires well-crafted, empathetic, and efficient communication strategies.

In summary, the sub-theme comprehensively examines the challenges teachers face in communication due to diverse family dynamics. Aligned with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), the findings highlight lessons that stress the paramount importance of fostering family engagement in their child's education.

Empathy and Personal Experiences

The sub-theme presented next draws upon existing literature to shed light on the crucial role of effective communication in fostering productive teacher-parent partnerships. Several researchers (Conus & Fahrni, 2019; Lua et al., 2019; Soutullo et al., 2016) unravel the multifaceted barriers inherent in parent-teacher interactions, necessitating tailored, empathetic responses. This sub-section of the study highlights the pivotal role of empathy in comprehending family and child dynamics, validating parental concerns, and crafting relatable narratives to bridge communicative divides, which aligns coherently with the underpinnings of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and Bandura's Socio-Cognitive Theory (1986).

Moreover, this sub-theme explores the narratives of educators to uncover the intricate dynamics of teacher-parent communication. The narratives reveal the adept utilization of empathy in comprehending diverse contextual dimensions, such as language barriers, cultural disparities, and disparate parental engagement levels. The study emphasizes the importance of empathetic and nuanced

communication in navigating these challenges and establishing mutually enriching partnerships with parents.

This sub-theme further highlights teachers' use of relatable anecdotes and personal experiences to nurture empathy and establish a connection with parents. Gartmeier et al. (2016) emphasized the importance of nuanced and empathetic approaches in teacher-parent partnerships, which thrive not merely on pedagogical proficiency but also on adeptly navigating intricate communication dynamics amid many challenges. Gartmeier et al. (2016) study also underscores the significance of emotional intelligence in communication dynamics, specifically the judicious use of humor and attentive listening as conflict resolution tools. The results align with the fundamental principles of active listening and affirmation, which are reflected in the teacher's dedication to comprehending and validating the viewpoints of parents.

This sub-theme highlights the importance of educators using empathetic and effective communication strategies, such as validation and nuanced language, to establish collaborative and mutually beneficial partnerships with parents. In essence, it emphasizes the need for educators to use strategic communication in their pedagogical approach to ensure that their interactions with parents are empathetic and productive.

The Evolution of Teachers' Communication Methods

The final sub-theme delves into the evolution of communication methods within education. It sheds light on the transition from traditional face-to-face and phone communication to digital platforms such as Class Dojo and SeeSaw, along with social

media tools like Facebook and Messenger. These changes in communication techniques intersect with the challenges encountered in parent-teacher interactions. Educators recognize the diverse demands of family communication, shaped by individual circumstances, including managing children across different grade levels and age groups. Additionally, families navigate significant life events, such as new additions, weddings, or health issues, which can impact communication dynamics. Teachers must remain attuned to these evolving circumstances.

While technology provides new avenues for communication, it can also pose difficulties, as mentioned by some teachers who found certain digital platforms to be less user-friendly or overwhelming for parents. The need for tailoring communication to parents' preferences, a topic in the current sub-theme, aligns with the teachers' efforts to adapt their communication strategies to meet parents where they are in the evolving digital landscape. These overlapping themes highlight the complex dynamics of teacher-parent communication in the context of changing technology and diverse parental preferences. This shift in communication dynamics influenced the teachers in this research in the following ways.

Considering the interview information, the teachers faced various communication challenges when interacting with parents with different family dynamics and situations. Despite this, the teachers showed great efforts to bridge the gap, coordinate communication, and foster understanding of the dynamics of the families they served.

Collaborative Learning and Professional Development

The second theme of the study illustrates how teachers are driven by their commitment to professional growth and effective communication with parents. Notably,

some teachers ventured beyond their immediate teaching circles to tap into the wealth of knowledge within the Special Education department, recognizing its specialized expertise in navigating parent-teacher dialogues and fostering self-assuredness.

This study revealed that educators working with young children actively sought to enhance their communication skills through collaborative efforts with both families and peers, aligning with the principles outlined in Epstein's 2001 theory. Epstein emphasizes family-school partnerships and cooperative interactions between educators and parents in promoting student success. By utilizing trusted colleagues as valuable resources for refining communication skills, teachers highlight the core tenets of Epstein's theory, advocating for collaboration and support from trusted individuals to cultivate stronger family-school relationships.

The study illuminates the proactive steps taken by early childhood teachers to refine their communication skills through collaboration, aligning with Epstein's theory (2001) that underscores the significance of family-school partnerships. Leveraging trusted colleagues as sources for improving communication skills emphasizes the foundational principles of Epstein's theory, urging collaboration and support from trusted individuals to foster more robust family-school relationships. Additionally, the research conducted by Donohoo (2018) underscores the influential role of teacher efficacy and the transformative impact of teacher collaboration. This aligns with educators' pursuit of professional growth and effective communication with parents through collaborative efforts with colleagues. Furthermore, Donohoo's research emphasizes the importance of teachers having a supportive figure for exchanging ideas and seeking guidance.

This theme emphasizes early childhood teachers' active pursuit of professional growth, stemming from their dedication to effective communication. It also underscores the profound impact of social and cultural factors that influence their decisions to collaborate, emphasizing the dynamic nature of teacher-parent interaction and strategies employed to foster productive educational partnerships.

College and Professional Development

The research by Donohoo (2018) on collective teacher efficacy (CTE) highlights the power of teachers believing that, as a group, they can positively impact student success. This shared belief is crucial to the success of the students but also the success of the teachers. Within the parameters of this dissertation, the teachers express a lack of communication preparation during their college years. Teacher 6 emphasizes that college teaches theory, but communication is learned through experience. However, if teachers collectively believe they can make a difference, it impacts student outcomes and could shape their communication approach. Research on communication benefits by Xu and Gulosino (2006) shows that for teachers to see the benefits of communication with families, the administration must show them the advantages. Teacher 8 highlights a lack of professional development (PD) in communication skills. Teachers specifically mention the need for workshops or PD days. With the administration's support, teachers can improve communication through effective PD, which could enhance their ability to engage with parents. The research by Donohoo (2018) also indicates that new teachers in schools with higher CTE are less likely to leave the teaching profession and experience more job satisfaction. In the context of this dissertation study, the teachers who did not receive teacher preparation courses from college expressed dissatisfaction with the lack

of communication training. Connecting this, if schools foster a sense of collective efficacy, it may contribute to the satisfaction and retention of new teachers by addressing their specific needs, such as communication skills. Several teachers spoke of gaining confidence in parent communication skills. Gartmeier et al. (2016) found that teachers with higher confidence in parent-communication skills use opportunities for shared reflection. In the scope of this dissertation, the teachers also desired a set of strategies to have handy for a reference when they found themselves in challenging situations with parents. If teachers are confident in their communication skills, they may be more inclined to seek and utilize opportunities for reflection, which could further enhance their abilities. Morris and Taylor (1998) found that specific courses positively impact how pre-service teachers plan and implement family involvement programs. With in the study presented in this dissertation, the teachers highlight a lack of preparation in college for effective communication with parents.

In summary, in the realm of this dissertation, the teachers expressed communication challenges and highlighted gaps in their college preparation. The research on collective teacher efficacy, communication benefits, and professional development's impact aligns with these challenges. Schools can foster a sense of collective efficacy by providing targeted professional development and building confidence in communication skills could contribute to addressing the teachers' concerns and improving their abilities in engaging with parents.

Using Trusted Individuals as a Safe Outlet to Express Feelings

The role of mentors in supporting new teachers highlighted the importance of mentors in their professional development, with some actively seeking out mentors when

not assigned one. The literature, as discussed by Thompson and Mazer (2012), emphasizes the role of mentors in providing support and guidance to new teachers. This aligns with the teachers' experiences of turning to mentors for advice and guidance and was seen throughout the study. Within the study presented in this dissertation, the teachers quickly acknowledged that mentors are crucial in helping new teachers navigate challenges, providing a sounding board for ideas, and offering practical advice. In the scope of this dissertation, the teachers described seeking advice from colleagues when mentors were unavailable, highlighting the importance of a supportive teaching community. Donohoo's (2018) research on collective teacher efficacy supports the idea that mentorship contributes to job satisfaction and reduces burnout. The teachers' experiences resonate with the positive outcomes associated with mentorship. The research by Leenders et al.(2019) emphasized that effective communication between teachers and families is more likely when there is a shared understanding of expectations. In the teachers' narratives, seeking guidance from experienced colleagues aligns with building a collaborative and supportive teaching community. Additionally, they also spoke about the benefits of collaborative team dynamics in rehearsing effective communication strategies, maintaining consistency, and finding peer support. The importance of collaboration is supported by Gartmeier et al. (2016), who found that teachers with higher confidence in parent communication skills engage in shared reflection and learning. Teachers' reliance on team dynamics in this dissertation study aligns with this research, underscoring the positive impact of collaborative efforts. Some teachers in the dissertation study faced challenges with communication and sought

assistance when dealing with sensitive topics or lacked a mentor. Seeking help from peers was crucial in overcoming these challenges.

Soutullo et al. (2016) identified language and cultural differences, among other factors, as barriers to engagement. The experiences of the teachers resonate with the concept that seeking assistance from colleagues is crucial in addressing communication challenges. Within this dissertation study, teachers recognized the significance of mentorship in enhancing their skills as effective communicators, team players, and professionals. Additionally, Morris and Taylor (1998) found that specific courses have a positive impact on how pre-service teachers plan and implement family involvement programs. The experiences of the teachers also support the idea that mentorship and collaboration contribute significantly to ongoing professional development and growth.

In conclusion, the teachers' experiences of mentorship, seeking guidance from colleagues, and valuing team dynamics align with the research literature on the positive impact of mentorship, collaborative efforts, and effective communication in the teaching profession. The findings underscore the importance of building a supportive teaching community to enhance teacher effectiveness and student success.

Administrative Support and Enhanced Communication

It is crucial for teachers to grasp the expectations set by their principals regarding communication with families. Research by Xu and Gulosino (2006) revealed that for teachers to recognize the benefits of family communication fully, administrators must illustrate the advantages of such engagement. Teachers can play a vital role in facilitating effective communication by aligning themselves with the principal's expectations.

Furthermore, the teachers in this study offered insights into how principals can encourage new teachers to seek diverse experiences and comprehend various communication styles.

Principals emphasized that communication is a skill that develops over time, taking some pressure off the teachers and contributing to their confidence in engaging with parents. Teachers also recalled seeking guidance from the principal when facing challenges in communicating with parents. The idea that effective leadership can support teachers in developing their communication skills is supported by Donohoo's (2018) research. Mentoring from principals, providing alternative ways of expressing themselves, and enhancing their communication strategies can all benefit teachers. Additionally, within the confines of this dissertation, some teachers highlighted the importance of documentation, and on the principal's advice, they kept records of communications. When conflicts arise, and teachers need help, the support of the principal can be invaluable. Teachers mentioned that the principal's support helped mediate discussions and resolve conflicts with parents. Donohoo (2018) found that teachers in schools with higher collective efficacy are less likely to leave the profession and experience more job satisfaction. Principal involvement in conflict resolution can positively impact teacher satisfaction and retention. Teachers also reported that principals handle negative situations, including phone calls from angry parents. Gartmeier et al. (2016) suggest that teachers with higher confidence in parent-communication skills use opportunities for shared reflection. If principals take the lead in handling challenging situations, it can support teachers in developing their confidence, and they can learn from the principal how best to handle challenging situations. Teachers also emphasize aligning with administrative expectations for communication frequency and methods. When

administrators set clear communication goals, it helps teachers connect with parents and guide teacher-parent interactions (Xu & Gulosino, 2006). Within the context of this dissertation, teachers also mention the principal's expectations for positive phone calls at the beginning of the school year. Clear communication goals can guide teacher-parent interactions (Xu & Gulosino, 2006).

In conclusion, effective contributions, clear expectations, mentorship, and involvement in conflict resolution all contribute to positive teacher experiences in communication with families. By extension, positive outcomes for students and parents are also achieved.

Limitations

The study's limitations provide valuable opportunities for future research to deepen and broaden our understanding. One inherent constraint lies in the sampling approach, which limits the generalizability of the findings. While the study's sample, comprising teachers with varying years of experience across preschool, kindergarten, and first grade, yielded rich data on teacher-parent communication, it is crucial to acknowledge that different samples may offer additional or divergent perspectives. Notably, the absence of male and/or non-binary participants in the current study suggests the importance of exploring diverse samples to capture a broader range of viewpoints. Besides gender, future studies could consider various samples, such as those with a mix of teachers exhibiting a wide range of self-efficacy in teaching or teachers differing in ethnicity and race, socioeconomic status, educational levels, or languages spoken at home. This diversity would enhance the robustness of findings and contribute to designing more effective professional development initiatives.

Another limitation lies in the study's exploration of factors influencing teacher effectiveness in parent engagement. While conventional demographic variables were considered, future research could delve into nuanced factors, such as teachers whose parents emigrated, educators without children, immigrant families or refugee families, and those with highly involved parents. These nuanced perspectives could offer a more comprehensive understanding of teacher-parent communication's complexities.

Another avenue for future research involves examining variations across different grade levels. As explored in this dissertation, teachers are treated as a collective unit, potentially overlooking differences among grade levels. Adopting a more granular approach and examining each grade level independently could reveal commonalities and divergences, providing insights into parent engagement dynamics at various educational stages.

Furthermore, expanding the scope beyond the teacher's perspective is essential. Incorporating the viewpoints of parents and administrators would enrich our understanding of teacher-parent communication dynamics. Exploring the experiences and expectations of parents and the perspectives of school administrators could contribute to a holistic understanding of the interplay between educators, parents, and the educational institution. These nuanced insights could identify additional factors influencing effective communication, thereby refining strategies for fostering positive teacher-parent relationships. In summary, future research should address the identified limitations, diversify samples, explore nuanced factors, adopt varied data collection methods, and consider the perspectives of parents and administrators to advance our understanding of teacher-parent communication dynamics comprehensively.

Recommendations

Recommendations for teachers include accessing continuous professional development opportunities to enhance communication skills with parents, including vignettes (Appendix 8), participation in workshops, webinars, and conferences focusing on effective communication strategies. Encouraging collaborative relationships with colleagues and providing mentorship opportunities, particularly for newer teachers, facilitates engagement with experienced educators or administrators for insights into parent communication. Reflection on communication approaches and acknowledging strengths and areas for improvement are essential.

Teacher preparation programs should consider integrating specific training modules on effective communication with parents. Practical scenarios and role-playing exercises such as those included in vignettes (Appendix 8) can simulate real-world situations, while guest speakers, including experienced educators and communication experts, offer valuable perspectives. Field experiences should include hands-on exposure in diverse educational settings, enabling future teachers to practice and observe effective communication strategies. Emphasizing technology integration showcases its potential in communication.

Administrators should prioritize ongoing professional development, vignette studies, workshops, and training sessions addressing the unique challenges in parent-teacher interactions. Establishing mentorship programs pairs newer teachers with experienced mentors to navigate communication challenges. Clear communication expectations, addressed regularly, and guidelines for maintaining consistency in communication practices contribute to a supportive framework.

These recommendations collectively aim to support teachers, teacher preparation program instructors, and administrators in fostering effective communication between educators and parents. Implementation can enhance communication skills, enrich curricula, and establish a supportive framework, ultimately improving the overall educational experience for students. The vignettes (see Appendix 8) included in this dissertation are essential for understanding the concepts presented. They can be incorporated into workshops where educators analyze scenarios and discuss effective communication, problem-solving, and decision-making strategies. Additionally, they serve as training sessions for new teachers focusing on parent-teacher communication. Principals can utilize vignettes during professional learning community meetings to stimulate discussions about best practices. Analyzing and reflecting on vignettes together allows educators to learn from each other's experiences and collaborate on solutions to common challenges. Vignettes provide a practical and interactive approach to professional development, enabling educators to engage in realistic scenarios and apply their skills in a supportive learning environment. They offer a deeper insight into educators' experiences and are valuable resources for researchers, policymakers, and educators alike. The vignettes feature the experiences of five educators: Jennifer, Sue, Millie, Sarah, and Lynn (fictitious names), each with a unique story set in different educational environments. As you read through these accounts, pay attention to parent-teacher communication's challenges, strategies, and dynamics. They serve as case studies that complement the broader themes explored in the dissertation. The stories offer a detailed perspective on the challenges and successes of building strong connections between schools and families, encapsulating the voices of educators on the frontline. As

you engage with these narratives, consider the implications for practice and potential avenues for improving communication in diverse educational contexts.

Conclusion

This study delves into the multifaceted realm of communication and adaptation between parents and teachers in education, emphasizing the significance of fostering two-way communication and proactive contact initiation between the two parties. Teachers employ adaptive communication styles, utilizing modern platforms such as Facebook and Google Voice to cater to the unique preferences of parents, ultimately fortifying the partnership between home and school.

Furthermore, the study explores diverse styles of parent communication, underlining the vital importance of cultural sensitivity in teacher-parent interactions. It emphasizes teachers' need to adapt communication strategies to complement parental preferences, ensuring meaningful and effective communication. Additionally, the study highlights the challenges teachers face when engaging with families, emphasizing the necessity of transparent and efficient communication to keep parents informed and engaged in their child's educational journey.

Empathy and personal experiences emerge as invaluable tools to enhance teacher-parent communication, allowing teachers to better understand parent perspectives and enrich the quality of communication. Mentorship is central to teachers' growth, providing valuable insights and support and reinforcing their communication skills. This aligns with Bandura's Socio-Cognitive Theory, emphasizing the pivotal role of observational learning and self-efficacy in professional growth.

The study also underscores the importance of collaborative learning and professional development in honing communication skills and building thriving family-school relationships. Administrative support is recognized as influential in enhancing teachers' self-efficacy in parent-teacher communication, with school leaders playing a vital role in bolstering teachers' confidence and competence in navigating the intricate dynamics of parent-teacher interactions.

In summary, this study profoundly explores how teachers perceive parent communication, emphasizing the critical importance of fostering two-way, ongoing communication, adaptation, empathy, mentorship, and administrative support in enhancing teacher-parent interactions. These elements collectively pave the way for the success of students' educational journeys.

Reflecting on the episodes described in the introduction, it is evident that my experiences as a teacher have profoundly shaped my understanding of effective teacher-parent communication and its role as a conduit to successful parent engagement. Transitioning from teaching in Michigan's state-funded preschool program to kindergarten exposed me to the stark differences in communication dynamics and expectations. This led me to realize the unique challenges kindergarten presented and the necessity for a different approach to communication.

Encountering a struggling student in my kindergarten class highlighted the importance of proactive and empathetic communication with families. Despite facing difficulties engaging the student's mother, transformative experiences prompted me to reassess my communication strategies, prioritize building trust and understanding with families, and establish collaborative relationships that led to positive student outcomes.

These experiences have reinforced my belief in the critical role of teacher-parent communication in promoting student achievement and well-being, driving my commitment to advocating for effective communication practices to support both students and fellow educators. Through this study, I aim to contribute valuable insights into teacher-parent communication and its implications for teacher self-efficacy, ultimately fostering positive outcomes for students and families alike. *This is how I have come to use communication as a conduit.*

APPENDIX A

CODING SCHEME

Code Mapping: Three Iterations of Data (to be read from top to bottom) ¹

CODE MAPPING FOR TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION

(Research Question)

RQ: How do early childhood teachers perceive and describe experiences in communication with families

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Effective Communication Strategies and Building Trust
Professional

(Communication with parents) | 2. Collaborative Learning and Development
(communication around the institution of education) |
|--|--|
-

(THIRD ITERATION: APPLICATION TO THE DATA SET)

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Parent Communication Styles and Adaptation
1. Parent Communication Difficulties and Dynamics communication
1. Empathy and Teachers' Personal Experiences Outlet to Express Feelings
1. Evolution of teachers' communication methods | 2. College and Professional development
2. Administrative support and effective communication
2. Using Trusted Individuals as a Safe |
|---|--|
-

(SECOND ITERATION: PATTERN VARIABLES)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1A. Tailoring Communication to Parent Preferences
1B. Challenges in Co-Parenting
1C. Balancing Personal and Professional Boundaries
1D. Addressing Inconsistent Communication with Parents | 2A. Seeking Professional Development for Parent Communication
2B. .Administrative Support for Effective Communication
2C. Value of Mentorship
2D. Seeking Guidance from Colleagues |
|---|---|

¹ Format adapted from Anfara et al. (2002).

(FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES/SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS)

1A-1D

1A. Google Voice	1B. Teachers feel horrible if communication is unclear and parents are upset	1B. Families don't answer texts/families don't respond to emails	1C. I do not share my cell phone number with families	1D. Inconsistent communication with parents
1A. Teachers send out text	1B. Barrier to communication	1B. Families not following through with consequences	1C. Teachers know best about children.	
1A. Parent-teacher conferences	1B. Communication is overwhelming	1B. Parents don't see a teacher as a professional	1C. Teachers need to establish boundaries.	
1A. Parents know their children the best	1B. Communication is tricky	1B. Parents have bad past experiences with schooling		
1A. The teacher is humble	1B. Frustrations with family communication	1B. Teachers cannot respond to communication right away		
1A. Teachers keep documentation of communication	1B. Lack of communication affects what the teacher does in the classroom	1B. Teachers do not have a good way to get in touch with the family.		
1A. Teachers use empathy	1B. Parents didn't mention any real concerns, or they are not responsive	1B. Teachers do not like email or texts		
1A. Teachers use humor with families	1B. Families want paper communication	1B. Thought I had good communication		
	1B. Families don't answer phone calls	1B. Uncomfortable with parent communication		

(FIRST ITERATION: INITIAL CODES/SURFACE CONTENT ANALYSIS)

2A-2D

2A. Colleges paired me to communicate with families	2B. Administrative Support for Effective Communication	2C. Value of Mentorship	2D. Found other teachers to talk to
2A. Of course, I can communicate because I went to school to teach.	2B. Communicating with family members on the spectrum /Not going to the teacher with a problem	2C. Mentor's help	2D. Found themselves helping others and sharing knowledge
2A. Scared of parent communication.	2B. Principal deals with difficult parents.	2C. I have a mentor.	2D. Other teachers told me to keep up the good work
2A. Schools offered professional development in communication. 2A. Supported by the principal.	2B. Principals inserted themselves into situations where they were not needed	2C. Found a mentor	

APPENDIX B

VIGNETTES

The following vignettes provide practical insights into the various challenges faced by early childhood teachers in establishing communication with parents. These stories demonstrate how teachers must navigate complex situations to establish effective partnerships with parents in an educational setting.

- **Effective Communication Strategies and Building Trust**
- ***Parent Communication Styles and Initiation of Contact***



Teacher's Name: Jennifer

Background: Jennifer is a kindergarten teacher with twenty-two years of teaching experience. She has been at the same elementary school for school for the last fifteen years. She has experience in both general education and special education classrooms. She is well like amongst the staff and the families. She is one of the most requested teachers in her building and one of the first classroom to be filled at the start of the school year. Jennifer loves her job and can usually brush off the frustrations of families and their negative comments and suggestions. In her classroom last year, she had a difficult child and a helicopter parent. Jennifer shared her experience of a mother becoming defensive and vocal after she felt her child was being picked on by the teacher.

What is puzzling: “The fact that the mother did not want to hear her child was the one causing so many problems. “...it started to be you're picking on my kid... You're always saying he's the one. You tell me he had a bad day...even if it was a bad day, I'd say you had a bad day...tomorrow we'll be a better day...but that didn't seem to help her either.” Jennifer has tried many times to have a good conversation with the mother, but nothing seems to appease her. She cannot figure out what has happened. “When school started, I

felt we had a good relationship the mother and me, but as the school year went on, the child's behaviors began to increase. Maybe I should have reached out sooner when I first noticed his increase in bad behavior and now maybe it's too late. I get to the point in my day where I fret walking all the children out for pick-up time...I fear talking to her and worrying I will say the wrong thing and she will accuse me of picking on her child in front of the other families."

Possible Questions:

- What suggestions might you have for Jennifer?
- Have you felt the same as Jennifer? Discuss this amongst your group.
- What advice would you give Jennifer if she came to you about this situation?

Reading:

- Ghazvini, A. S., & Readdick, C. A. (1994). Parent-caregiver communication and quality of care in diverse child care settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 9(2), 207–222. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006\(94\)90006-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006(94)90006-X)
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Suggested Resources:

- Harvard Center on the Developing Child: Offers insights into child development, including the impact of early experiences on a child's brain development. It can help educators better understand the importance of early childhood education. Website: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>
- Child Mind Institute: The Child Mind Institute provides information and resources on child and adolescent mental health, including articles and guides for educators dealing with children who may have experienced trauma. Website: <https://childmind.org/>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): The NAEYC website offers a wealth of resources, articles, and guidelines for early childhood educators, including best practices for engaging parents. Website: <https://www.naeyc.org/>

- **Effective Communication Strategies and Building Trust**
- ***Parent Communication Difficulties and Dynamics***



Teacher's Name: Sue

Background: Sue is a teacher in a preschool classroom. She has been in this position for almost a decade. Sue got her early childhood degree and teaching certification the traditional way through a four-year university. Currently, she has a full caseload of sixteen children ranging from four to five years old. The school year is halfway over, and the first home visits were done in October. Home visits are a time to share valuable information about the program and expectations of the program and for the family and child to meet the teacher. During the home visit, the teacher also better understands the families she will be working with. This year, two administration turnovers hindered her ability to give out important information pertaining to the communication platform they are expected to use with all families at the home visit.

What is puzzling: It is mid-January, and Sue is puzzled by why parents do not share important information about their child's well-being. Sue recently had a child who had spent the night in the emergency room with his mother while his father was being treated for a drug overdose. The child was dropped off at preschool, and the mother said she hoped he had a good day. She never mentioned the trauma the child saw or that he got no sleep. Within minutes of the drop-off, he begins throwing tantrums, screaming, and yelling. Sue and her assistant tried everything to calm him down to no avail. Sue tried several times to send his mother a text, but she never responded. Later, when she and her assistant teacher were mentally and physically exhausted, Sue called home after lunch to let his mother know how his day was and questioned if he was feeling well. To her surprise, the boy's mother told Sue that the child was in the emergency room he had been up all night. Sue states, *"had we known this, we could have provided him with a quiet place and a cot to rest on. Because that day, there was very little learning going on."* Sue said, *"we are also puzzled by the fact that parents do not tell you when their child is sick. It's a lot of us who feel like it's a daycare in that we feel that our parents are all about the drop off of their child and that they're not, they're not thinking of their children."*

Their children are ill. They are covering it up with aspirin. This is more like daycare and not the educational experience to start their foundation and prepare them for school.”

Possible Questions:

- What suggestions might you have for Sue about home visits?
- How can Sue help bridge the gap between parental expectations and the educational objectives of her preschool?
- What actions, if any, can Sue take to encourage parents to be more open about their child's well-being and health?
- Do you think the recent changes in administration could have affected Sue's ability to communicate with parents effectively?

Reading:

- Klass, C. S. (2008). *The home visitor's guidebook: Promoting optimal parent & child development* (3rd ed). Paul H. Brookes Pub. Co.
- Ghazvini, A. S., & Readdick, C. A. (1994). Parent-caregiver communication and quality of care in diverse child care settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 9(2), 207–222. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006\(94\)90006-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006(94)90006-X)
- Forkey, H., Szilagyi, M., Kelly, E. T., Duffee, J., The Council on Foster Care, Adoption, and Kindship Care, Council on Community Pediatrics, Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, Committee on Psychological Aspects of Child and Family Health. Springer, S. H., Fortin, K., Jones, V. F., Vaden Greiner, M. B., Ochs, T. J., Partap, A. N., Davidson Sagor, L., Allen Staat, M., Thackeray, J. D., Waite, D., & Weber Zetley, L. (2021). Trauma-informed care. *Pediatrics*, 148(2), e2021052580. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-052580>

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- **Collaborative Learning and Professional Development**
- **Using trusted individuals as a safe outlet**



Teacher's Name: Millie

Background: Millie has been in early childhood education for about 15 years now. She struggles with appropriate parent communication. She has had her share of angry parents who have reported to the principal their dislike for the teacher's classroom policies. She has come to the realization that maybe she needs a better way to communicate and could really use the help from a teacher with a proven track record and one who helps her build trusting relationships.

What is puzzling: *"When I think, does this really puzzle me...well, looking back on it, it doesn't puzzle me because the way I approached it was wrong. Well, not wrong, but not effective. What I really needed to do was to find someone in my building who could help me find a better way to approach the way I communicated with my parents. You know, a lot of parents have a bad history in education, especially early education, where they didn't feel very comfortable, or they had bad experiences where school was not a good place for them."*

Possible Questions:

- What suggestions might you have for Millie
- What step should Millie take in reaching out. Where would be the first place you would send her?
- What actions, if any, can Millie take to encourage parents to be more trusting of her?

- Do you think Millie could become a successful parent communicator? Why or why not? Explain your thinking

Reading:

- Ghazvini, A. S., & Readdick, C. A. (1994). Parent-caregiver communication and quality of care in diverse child care settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 9(2), 207–222. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006\(94\)90006-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/0885-2006(94)90006-X)
- Forkey, H., Szilagyi, M., Kelly, E. T., Duffee, J., The Council on Foster Care, Adoption, and Kindship Care, Council on Community Pediatrics, Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, Committee on Psychological Aspects of Child and Family Health. Springer, S. H., Fortin, K., Jones, V. F., Vaden Greiner, M. B., Ochs, T. J., Partap, A. N., Davidson Sagor, L., Allen Staat, M., Thackeray, J. D., Waite, D., & Weber Zetley, L. (2021). Trauma-informed care. *Pediatrics*, 148(2), e2021052580. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-052580>

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 - Website: <https://www.naeyc.org/>

- **Effective Communication Styles**
- **Parent Communication styles and adaptations**



Teacher's Name: Sarah

Background: Sarah is a passionate early childhood teacher, who states: *“So, basically, our parents don't read the newsletters. They don't answer their phones anymore, and I know that when you text them, if they don't have enough minutes, they don't answer the text. I have been trying to talk to one of my parents about the number he gave me, but I just can't reach him. I relay have some important information about his son.* Sarah is frustrated, she just spoke to the parent and the best time to talk is after 2:30, she is done with work at 3:30 and needs to get home to pick up her children from school. After talking to her co-workers, Sarah decides to have her mother pick up her children from school so she can touch base with the parents. As Sarah strives to engage the parent in his child's educational journey, she finds another roadblock. During their call, the parent tells Sarah that he is unavailable from 9-2 p.m. unless it is an emergency because that is when he is sleeping. Sarah tells him that she will ask if her principal could cover her room for 30 minutes from 2-2:30 so she can have a much-needed conversation with James.

What is puzzling: *“When I think, does this really puzzle me...well, looking back on it, it doesn't puzzle me because the way I approached it was wrong. Well, not wrong, but not effective. What I really needed to do was to find someone in my building who could help me find a better way to approach the way I communicated with my parents. You know, a lot of parents have a bad history in education, especially early education, where they didn't feel very comfortable, or they had bad experiences where school was not a good place for them.”*

Possible Questions:

- What clarifying questions might you have for Sarah about her current communication modes and attempts?
- What can Sarah do to engage her families in two-way communication?
- How can Sarah ensure the continuation of two-way communication?

Reading:

- *The Intentional Teacher* Chapter 2 Building Relationships with Families p.24
- *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs* Section: The Primary Grades p. 324-326
- *School, Family, And Community Partnerships* Chapter 2 Using the Framework to Reach School Goals—Stories from the Field p. 63-82

Suggested Resources:

- Harvard Center on the Developing Child: Offers insights into child development, including the impact of early experiences on a child's brain development. It can help educators better understand the importance of early childhood education. Website: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>
- Child Mind Institute: The Child Mind Institute provides information and resources on child and adolescent mental health, including articles and guides for educators dealing with children who may have experienced trauma. Website: <https://childmind.org/>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): The NAEYC website offers a wealth of resources, articles, and guidelines for early childhood educators, including best practices for engaging parents. Website: <https://www.naeyc.org/>

- **Effective Communication Strategies and Building Trust**
- ***Empathy and Teacher Personal Experiences***



Teacher's Name: Lynn

Background: Lynn is a first-grade teacher, and she loves reading and storytelling. She has been teaching first grade for two years now. She came from a charter school where she was the music and art teacher. She has little experience with parent-teacher communication because she was never a classroom teacher, so she did not have to have individual parent teacher conferences. Lynn has three children of her own. One is in middle school, and two are in elementary-a second grader and a fifth grader. She feels that she can relate to many of the issues some of her students' families are going through.

What is Puzzling: When parents want their children to always be at grade level in all area. *"I feel that parents don't have realistic expectations for their children and then look to place blame. It's funny, one of my students was having difficulty with reading. I made a call to the mother, and she was really upset that her daughter was not at grade level for reading. I felt really bad for this mom, no one wants their child to have problems with learning. This mom wanted to know if it was something she did. "I didn't know what to say. Then it came to me... my own child hated reading in elementary school. He is now in middle school, and I had to really reflect on what this meant." I had to make more time in our busy day to get that reading in. I knew that all children develop at different rates and by me telling her about my child I got her to calm down. Together we made a plan that the mom felt she could manage at home. The plan was to read for at least 15 minute with her daughter and to review the alphabet and sounds. I am second guessing the fact that I told her about my child's reading struggle.*

Possible Questions:

- What suggestions might you have for Sue about home visits?

Reading:

- Forkey, H., Szilagyi, M., Kelly, E. T., Duffee, J., The Council on Foster Care, Adoption, and Kindship Care, Council on Community Pediatrics, Council on Child Abuse and Neglect, Committee on Psychological Aspects of Child and Family Health. Springer, S. H., Fortin, K., Jones, V. F., Vaden Greiner, M. B., Ochs, T. J., Partap, A. N., Davidson Sagor, L., Allen Staat, M., Thackeray, J. D., Waite, D., & Weber Zetley, L. (2021). Trauma-informed care. *Pediatrics*, 148(2), e2021052580. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-052580>

Suggested Resources:

- importance of early childhood education.
Website: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>
- Child Mind Institute: The Child Mind Institute provides information and resources on child and adolescent mental health, including articles and guides for educators dealing with children who may have experienced trauma.
Website: <https://childmind.org/>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): The NAEYC website offers a wealth of resources, articles, and guidelines for early childhood educators, including best practices for engaging parents.

Website: <https://www.naeyc.org/>

APPENDIX C

PERMISSION TO USE FIGURE

From: Joyce Epstein
Sent: Sunday, September 24, 2023 4:08 PM
To: Stacy Brazell <>
Subject: RE: Seeking Permission to use a figure

To: Stacy Brazell
From: Joyce Epstein
Re: Permission Granted

Thank you for your note and interest in research on school, family, and community partnerships.

This is to grant permission to you to use my theoretical model of *Overlapping Spheres of Influence* in your dissertation study.

All that is required is that you provide a full reference to the original work on the diagram(s) and in your references.

See Chapter 2, Reading 2.1 in:

Epstein, J. L., & Sheldon, S. B. (2023) *School, Family, and Community Partnerships: Preparing Educators and Improving Schools, Third Edition*.

New York: Taylor and Francis.

Best of luck with your study and completing your program.



Joyce L. Epstein, Ph.D.
Co-Director, Center on School, Family, and
Community Partnerships and
National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS)
Professor of Education
2800 North Charles Street, Suite 420
Baltimore, MD 21218

Phone: (410) 516-8807
Email: jepstein@jhu.edu
Web: www.partnershipschools.org

APPENDIX D

IRB APPLICATION APPROVAL



Date: February 9, 2023

Study #: IRB-FY2022-387

Study Title: communication as a conduit

Submission Type: Initial

IRB Decision: Exempt

Research Team:

Stacy Brazell

Tomoko Wakabayashi

Based on applicable federal regulations, the above referenced study has been determined to be Exempt, with the following categories:

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Letter and Consent Document:

This letter along with the IRB approved (date-stamped) consent document can be found in Cayuse in the Submission Details page under Letters and Attachments, respectively. Please make sure to use the most recent IRB approved version of the consent form in consenting participants.

Permission from Research Sites:

Please note the following:

- This IRB exemption determination letter means that this research has met one or more of the federal criteria for exemption per 45 CFR 46.104- Exempt Research.
- Before the research is initiated, permission to conduct research at a given site must be obtained from all research locations listed in the IRB submission. You must keep copies of all such permission letters for your files.
- It is the responsibility of each researcher to follow all applicable policies and procedures of any outside institution where the research will be conducted.

Modifications:

Any changes to this exempt project must be reviewed by the IRB prior to initiation by submitting a MODIFICATION request. Do not collect data while the changes are being reviewed. Data collected during this time cannot be used in research.

Record Retention:

Exempt projects will be retained by the IRB office for three years after the last action on the project.

You are approved to start the research. Please retain a copy of this notification for your records.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office.

Thank you.

The Oakland University IRB

APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

I am Stacy Brazell, a Ph.D. student in Early Childhood at Oakland University. My faculty advisor is Dr. Tomoko Wakabayashi at the Department of Human Development and Child Studies at Oakland University. I am conducting a research study to get a better understanding of the ways teachers communicate with families.

I am recruiting 6-15 individuals who are pre-kindergarten to first-grade teachers to participate in a focus group discussion. I will ask questions and seek clarification on responses for a better understanding of how teachers are feeling about communication with families as it pertains to teacher self-efficacy, yearly evaluation, and the ease of communication. The focus group will take approximately 1.5 hours.

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you can change your mind at any time. The focus group will take place via zoom as directed by the researcher.

If you wish to participate in the research study or have any questions about the research, please contact me at

Stacy Brazell

sbrazell@oakland.edu

810-841-9107

Or

Dr. Tomoko Wakabayashi

twakabayashi@oakland.edu

APPENDIX F

DATA MEMOS

audioAmanda21322816096.m4a | Editor | Trint

trint audioAmanda2132281...

Find & Replace Undo Redo Highlight Strike Add Marker Comment

Version	Speaker	Text	
	Speaker 1	00:09:44 They might not be communicating with you all the time, but they're reading what you're communicating to them.	☐
	Speaker 2	00:09:54 To my. So I.	☐
	Speaker 1	00:09:57 Upload them every Monday morning and I post them to see.	☐
	Speaker 2	00:10:02 For. Along with some type of. Activities for children to be able to do.	☐
	Speaker 1	00:10:11 At home with their parents.	☐
	Speaker 2	00:10:14 And then.	☐
	Speaker 1	00:10:16 I don't get very good responses. Well, it's hit or miss with the responses for the activities. Some of the children, they'll do it. Some of the parents will do it, or they'll reach out and they'll ask questions	☐

Handwritten notes:

- must be overwhelming to put out information no one reads*
- Teachers want to contact them*
- she make some parents can be involved*
- found ways to make comm work for both teacher and families*
- See saw*
- include news and letter activity for children and families to engage in at home and reach out questions*
- technology*

https://app.trint.com/editor/HTTrIurJqSs-hx7LwIC_pw

16/38

Participant 7



So, I'm a second-year teacher, and I feel like the biggest challenge was as a first-year teacher, besides learning the new curriculum, it was trying to figure out what parents want, trying to figure out that platform that they wanted to use, and to communicate but

I was very fortunate. I had people that could help me. They gave me ideas of different apps that I could use or different ways that I can communicate, like with a newsletter, not just monthly, but weekly sending home reminders, sending home little notes, things that last year were very frustrating.

I gave out my personal cell phone number, which I should not have done to a certain amount of parents. And there was a few parents that were contacting me over like break sometimes, or even on the weekend, asking me about their children, like, for example, a mom called me at 6 am to ask me why their child's bus wasn't there yet, and it was midwinter break, and it was 6 A. M. So, I did have to learn that I will never give out my personal cell phone number again.

If I do give out a number, I will go to Google Voice. I know that some people are familiar with it, and my other teacher, who used it last year, and it happened to be very well for them.

Something else that's been frustrating this last year that I've learned from reflecting on this year is accepting phone calls during class time. There was oftentimes when parents would be transferred down to my classroom on the phone, and I would just assume that it was the office calling, and I would pick it up, and then I would have like this really, really long conversation I'd be caught well, I'm trying to teach, and my class would be out of control, and I didn't know how to stop it. So last year I felt like communication was very hard last year, too.

I tried to use the reminder App, and out of my twenty-two parents, only nine had signed up, so I would usually just send home newsletters for communication, but then, when looking at children's folders, it was typically just left in their folder each day, I got so frustrated every day. So, it was really discouraging. Last year to see that parents really weren't looking at what I was doing, or even what I was saying, or what was coming up next. I would even give out incentives if you signed up for remind for your child; your child would get 10 Gator bucks or five gold cash, and they still weren't happening. They still weren't signing up.

So fast forward to this year as a second-year teacher, I thought about things that I learned, and I've learned through colleagues in the beginning of the year. I sent out a parent survey of which way to communicate they would like to use- would they like to communicate with me by Facebook or Newsletter? Remind or other possibilities. The top 2 -a newsletters and the reminder app. So, right at the

Commented [SB1]: What to use for communication

Barrier

Commented [SB2]: mentors

Commented [SB3]: Do not give out cell number to parents

Commented [SB4]: Use Google Voice

Commented [SB5]: Frustration

Commented [SB6RS]: Reflective

Commented [SB7RS]: Creating boundaries

Commented [SB8]: Getting parents to sign up for communication apps

Commented [SB9RB]: Parents not know what is happening in the classroom

Commented [SB10RB]: Not reading newsletters

Commented [SB11RB]: Discouraged

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