

Hamline University

DigitalCommons@Hamline

School of Education and Leadership Student
Capstone Projects

School of Education and Leadership

Fall 2022

Effective Teacher-Parent Communication Tools To Empower Families To Be Active In Their Children's Learning

Ellis Richardson

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Richardson, Ellis, "Effective Teacher-Parent Communication Tools To Empower Families To Be Active In Their Children's Learning" (2022). *School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Projects*. 878. https://digitalcommons.hamline.edu/hse_cp/878

This Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education and Leadership at DigitalCommons@Hamline. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Education and Leadership Student Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Hamline. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@hamline.edu.

EFFECTIVE TEACHER-PARENT COMMUNICATION TOOLS TO EMPOWER
FAMILIES TO BE ACTIVE IN THEIR CHILDREN'S LEARNING

by

Ellis Richardson

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

December 2022

Capstone Project Facilitator: Dr. Karen Moroz
Content Expert: Zack Eustis

DEDICATION

To my students of yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Thank you for all of the life lessons you have taught me.. A special thanks to my wife Alexandra, your unwavering support and encouragement allowed me to finish this project and become a better person each day.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction.....	5
My Research Question.....	5
Key Terms.....	6
Personal Journey.....	6
Professional Experience.....	8
Project Context and Rationale.....	9
Conclusion.....	10
CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review.....	11
Introduction.....	11
Importance of Teacher-Parent Communication.....	11
Modes of Communication.....	14
Barriers.....	23
Conclusion.....	27
CHAPTER THREE: Project Overview.....	28
Introduction.....	28
Overview.....	28
Project Description and Rationale.....	29
Adult Learning Principles.....	29
Intended Audience.....	31
Conclusion.....	32

CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion.....	33
Introduction.....	33
Findings.....	33
Revisiting the Literature.....	35
Project Limitations.....	38
Future Projects.....	38
Project Use.....	38
Benefit to the Profession.....	38
Conclusion.....	39

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Educators sharpen their skills as deliverers of content each day. They become more proficient at managing their time and spaces. In order for these logistical elements of teaching to function at their highest level, engagement must be high. If educators want student commitment, family endorsement is the catalyst.

My Research Question

With good reason, rookie teachers are encouraged to focus on day to day classroom logistics. Classroom procedures and routines, delivering thorough quality instruction, and understanding content and curriculum are all key elements of having a successful classroom. That being said, in order to have scholars buy in, with all the daily demands of a classroom with high expectations, there needs to be a sense of belonging. Building a bridge between the classroom and the students' homes can be foundational for fellowship.

As a young teacher, I felt unequipped to build and maintain meaningful relationships with my students' families. I did not have the consistency nor the talking points to make families feel like they were a part of a team along with both myself and the student. Without having a complete understanding of the importance of feeling connected when attempting to learn and grow, family engagement became secondary to the work I was putting in inside of the classroom.

This leads me to my research question: *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?* In this chapter I will provide definitions of key terms for clarity around my

research question, share personal as well as professional experiences, state the professional significance of my research, and provide a summary of my capstone project.

Key Terms

In order to fully understand this project, it's important to note a few definitions. Because family can be defined in many ways, I will be using the definition provided by the American Psychological Association. A family is defined as “ a kinship unit consisting of a group of individuals united by blood or by marital, adoptive, or other intimate ties. Although the family is the fundamental social unit of most human societies, its form and structure vary widely.” (APA, 2022).

I also want to recognize that the term “active role”, when it comes to family participation in their childrens' educational endeavors, can look different from family to family and cross culturally. The way I am defining this active role is in a broad sense. Because of this variation of how families support their children in school, I'm using a broad definition with the intention of being inclusive of many. However, I will touch on the specific ways families participate and support their scholars that have been proven to be impactful. I am loosely defining the term “active role” as participating in the educational experience by encouraging and supporting learning in a multitude of ways. Some of these supports are seen at school and some are done behind closed doors.

Personal Journey

Becoming a parent has been eye-opening for me as an educator. It has given me a great deal of insight as to what a parent may be looking for from the main caregiver for their child each day. At my daughter's daycare, we are able to receive daily updates like photos, bathroom notifications, as well as any notes from our daycare provider about

upcoming days off, clothes we may need to bring in for activities, or information about her day through a mobile application. This allows me to be locked in with her successes as well as what she may need to work on. Being aware of what is occurring each day brings continuity to her day. It allows me to continue work being done at daycare and it also allows her daycare provider to carry on with what we are working on at home. It also keeps me up to date with anything that may be expected of me. I am able to ask questions based on the consistent information that I receive to be more concentrated in my efforts as a parent.

I also think of family communication from the perspective of the student. I remember as a student how I felt when my teachers and parents were on the same page about my learning. In third grade, I had a teacher named Ms. Young. She made it a priority to build a healthy relationship with both of my parents through consistency and keeping communication family centered. She wrote to them, she called them, and hosted events where they could show up if and when they were available to chat. Having free-flowing communication this way made it feel like we were all working together. She never appeared to be separate or more important than others on the team she had created with my family. It felt good to have a teacher care enough about me to connect with my family. When someone cares about you, working through adversity becomes an easier task. The work that Ms. Young did also gave my parents an easy path into my educational journey. As a nine year old, I was not yet able to pass on messages in an efficient manner. This way, my parents were aware of what was going on at my school and able to participate in a way that would not have been possible without the cohesive communication my teacher utilized.

Professional Experience

As I mentioned earlier, effectively communicating with families was a weakness of mine as a new teacher. My experience in the world of education began shortly after I graduated from college. I was working as a paraprofessional for the behavior specialist at an elementary school. I was tasked with jobs like recess monitoring, pushing into classrooms to promote student success, providing proactive breaks, and even standing in as the mascot for all school assemblies. Through this work I began to hone in on what it looks like to build meaningful relationships with students. When to pour into them, when to have fun, when to make boundaries clear, when to ask for help as an adult. All of these skills helped me in the classroom years later.

After obtaining my license and finding myself in my own classroom, my focus turned to quality instruction and routines. I felt comfortable making connections with my students. Building relationships was something that I had done at this point almost exclusively for a few years. The next step was taking time to study the curriculum I would be using for each grade level. I observed more seasoned teachers' execution when running literacy blocks, teaching math lessons and integrating science, social studies, art, or health into daily lessons. I created different schemes for efficient transitions throughout the day. All of which was not only helpful but necessary in my growth as an educator. In order to be a great teacher, the fundamentals are needed. My classroom management skills were building but there were still pieces I was missing in my repertoire.

I remember as a young teacher avoiding conversations with parents for a few reasons. Firstly, I was intimidated by the parents in fear of not having the right answers. I felt unfit to answer questions about a profession I was just learning. I did not want to be exposed as an inadequate teacher for missing something they deemed important. I was also younger than most of the students' parents, with less life experience. This made connecting with families a less than desirable task. Another reason I avoided conversations with families was because I was overwhelmed. Attempting to learn new curricula, deliver sound instruction, and manage a class five days a week is quite an undertaking. Adding one more thing to my plate usually felt impractical, especially when the assignment was not my strength. The third reason I avoided making these connections was the fact that I was tired. Teaching is an exhausting process. Finding energy at the end of each day or during a small break to make contact with my students' families was many times not easy. Most days I felt that in order to get back to school in the morning with zest for learning, I needed to go home and get some rest.

To have a guide or model for effectively communicating with families would have been transformative. Having specific content to address would have given me the confidence to speak with parents without fear of unintentional ignorance. Following a calendar would allow me to be consistent even when feeling overwhelmed. Having a template and not creating something brand new alleviates unwanted stress. A guide would have been one less thing that I would have to use brain power to produce at the end of an exhausting day.

Project Context and Rationale

The aim of this project is to help educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning. The capstone will help rid parent communication of its proverbial deterrents. As mentioned previously, obstacles include anxiety about parent interactions, the task being too overwhelming, and fatigue. My project is a professional guide with resources and a plan of action for efficiently and effectively communicating with families. Providing talking points and a schedule will create consistency and foster community between home and school. The project will be discussed further in chapter three.

Conclusion

In chapter one, I introduced my research question, *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?* I defined key terms directly related to the research question. Personal and professional experience related to family engagement were shared, as well as what the project will involve and the rationale behind it.

The next chapter will consist of the literature review. I will further explore research surrounding family engagement and the educator's role in it. Studies on the benefits of teacher-family communication, the effective modes of teacher-parent communication and the challenges that come with the process will be discussed.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter one detailed my experiences as a student, a father, and as an educator, which led me to ask the question stated above around effective communication efforts by educators to benefit student learning. Chapter two will review a multitude of texts to deepen understanding of the research question at hand. *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?*

The research reviewed in chapter two will bring clarity to how educators can effectively communicate with households for active family participation. This chapter will be divided into four sections. The first section will tackle the importance of teacher-parent communication. In the second section, I will visit strategies and modes used when attempting teacher-parent communication. Finally, the third section will examine the barriers of parent involvement. The literature reviewed in this chapter will give new knowledge and perception which in turn will be used to construct a resource for teachers to use to effectively communicate with families during the school year.

Importance of teacher-parent communication

This section will focus on the significance of communication between teachers and their scholars' parents. The literature reviewed in this section will help determine the weight this type of communication has on student engagement in the classroom, student success academically as well as socially and emotionally.

A barrier to student success that often presents itself in the classroom is off-task student behavior. There are numerous causes for lack of engagement in the classroom. Incongruous academic expectations, a disconnect between the teacher and the scholar, and distractions in the learning environment are all factors that may lead to off-task behavior. One remedy for this issue is making frequent positive connections with parents. By looking for positive student conduct that matches classroom and school-wide expectations and relaying those instances to parents two or more times a week, students' classroom behavior may increase (Fefer, 2020). In this study, teachers were asked to connect with parents on specific positive behaviors noticed throughout the week without asking parents for any additional action steps. This increased positive teacher communication showed an increase in on-task behaviors in the classroom.

Along with teacher-parent communication having a positive impact with regards to on-task behavior in the classroom, it also impacts social skills of students. Higher parent involvement stimulates greater social competencies and less issues with unwanted behaviors in the classroom. Students with parents and teachers who reported consistent parent involvement saw increased abilities to solve problems with peers when upset, follow directions and instructions throughout the day, as well as initiate conversations with classmates (El Nokali, 2010). Being able to stay on task as well as be socially sound promotes higher success at school and beyond.

In addition to engagement and social skills, teachers being proactive in their efforts to reach out to parents and make consistent, positive connections benefit academic success. Teachers are trained to deliver content to students with best practices in mind. We are continuously learning and updating our craft, allowing for the best arena for

learning. By communicating with parents consistently about what scholars are working on, classroom culture, and new concepts coming up, shifts parental attitudes toward their children's education in a positive manner. When parents feel assured about their children's school experience, students are likely to view school in a similar light. When students are able to show up with a positive attitude and in a headspace to learn, with high expectations from parents, positive results are more likely to occur. Students are less likely to benefit from parents helping with homework or delivering content. Families aren't typically trained to provide academic support the way classroom teachers are, but when given the opportunity to be involved through expectations of academic success, the idea of parent involvement and academic achievement are related (Wilder, 2014).

Not only does building a relationship with parents have a direct impact on students, it also has a direct impact on educators. Disciplinary actions taken when unwanted behaviors occur at school, like suspension or expulsion, not only impact children's abilities to be inside the classroom, learning and growing through cognitive stimulation, but also their relationships with their caregivers outside of the home. Child development for pre-kindergarten through third grade students is tied to positive teacher-student relationships (Pianta, 2016). When this relationship is damaged, the ceiling for student growth is stunted. This is especially true for black students, which are suspended at a high rate. Black students in the 2017-2018 school year made up 38 percent of students suspended more than one time, while they only make up 15 percent of the United States' K-12 population (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2018).

Findings show that teachers' perceptions of a strong relationship between themselves and their scholars' parents are tied to lower risk for expulsion for students who have not yet been expelled (Zulauf-McCurdy, 2020). When a teacher has a positive relationship with a parent they may spend more time with their child in the classroom, therefore fostering student growth (Serpell & Mashburn, 2012). Not only does spending time building relationships with parents affect the psyche of families but of the educators themselves. Breaking down preconceived notions about who families or students are, and forming a positive perception of the families being served, benefits teachers and their decision making around keeping students in school.

In summary, when positive relationships are shaped between school and home it is shown to have a positive effect on the students overall school experience. Attendance increases, social skills rise, academic competence increases, parents feel more comfortable and teachers build empathy and care through connections made. It is recommended for teachers to build a partnership with parents as a tool for teaching success.

Modes of Communication

In a fast-paced world, with the wonders and downfalls of technology, communication has changed drastically over the recent years. There are more options than ever when it comes to methods of human interaction. Because of this, the next section will be broken down into just a few categories. The first category being one-way communication, the second being two-way communication, and the last category being the use of newer technologies to foster a consistent and positive relationship between home and school.

One-Way Communication

One-way communication is information being delivered from school to home without the need for parents to respond in any verbal or written manner. Many times this is in the form of a newsletter, school-to-home notebooks, or traditional report cards. When information is written it ends up being organized, formatted well, and it's permanent for later reference (Graham-Clay, 2005).

Newsletters

When relaying information from school to home through a form of a newsletter, consistency will result in effective communication. The mode of communication should stay the same throughout the school year. If the teacher is using email, they should continue to use email to communicate with that letter, and the same goes for paper copies, text, or apps. When parents grow accustomed to receiving the newsletter in a specific format, it catches their attention and they know what they are looking for to receive crucial updates. Graham-Clay (2005) further suggests the formatting of the letter should also stay consistent. If the newsletter is sent home on yellow paper, continue to do so. If a text is sent to families with an emoji at the top of a sun, continue to do so. Make sure the newsletter stays generally the same length as well. All of this will continue to make the written letter to families a more effective tool for communication.

Continuing with the theme of consistency, it should be proactively decided how often this communication will be pushed out to families. If it's a daily message, the note will be much shorter than a weekly or monthly newsletter, but making sure whatever the

decided frequency of the correspondence is stays dependable. It should be noted that communication should be frequent enough to keep parents informed and engaged. When building a new relationship, it can be important to reflect on a couple questions. Has the educator discussed with parents how often they would like to be contacted? The teacher may want to consider having a group of parents who are contacted once a week and a group who is contacted multiple times a week, depending on family preference. The second question being, is the note clearly stated, staying away from negative language? Steering clear of teacher jargon and keeping the letter positive will make for an easy and comfortable read (Davern, 2004).

Again, Davern (2004) states it is important to ensure that the letter is comprehensible to most. It should not be assumed that families have the same depth of knowledge or academic vocabulary in the world of education as teachers. It can be assumed though, that the audience of the newsletter will not only be the parents, but the students as well. Keeping that in mind will make the letter more concise and digestible for the intended audience. The purpose of the letter is to build positive communication between school and home as well as create clear expectations of the happenings at school with succinct updates about news that will support parents in their journey to champion their childrens' learning.

Content Sharing Platforms

Another method to push information out to families in pursuit of clarity and transparency around their kids' school experiences is using a content sharing platform. As families continue to be on the move, keeping information stored digitally inside of their pockets, it's important to honor what's convenient for them. One way to share with

parents is by using an app. Using an app designed to communicate with parents is an easy way to share student content, newsletters, video messages, or photos (Chen & Rivera-Vernazza, 2022).

The app Seesaw is one of the most popular apps designed for family engagement. Parents download the app to be able to navigate the platform for classroom updates. Through Seesaw teachers are able to assign homework, allowing parents to be in the loop with what the expectations for the week may be. Teachers are also able to send newsletters or short updates to parents at any time. Educators can communicate with the entire class or send student specific messages to individual parents. Sharing photos of student work is also another way to engage parents with the day to day happenings at their childrens' school. Again this can be on an individual level or class-wide through photos of general classroom news. One more way to draw families in is to post video messages. Teachers are able to post videos of themselves which can be convenient when looking to vary the posts, while maintaining consistency through the use of the singular app.

Two-Way Communication

Two-way communication is when teachers are in a back and forth dialogue with parents. This could happen over the phone, in person or through a text exchange. The purpose of two-way communication is to build trust in order to clearly communicate in pursuit of the scholars' success. Many times these exchanges are to address an issue that needs a resolution, which can cause tension between the home and classroom. In other situations, the educator calls to recognize an accomplishment. The goal of these interactions should be to build a positive relationship while being productive

(Graham-Clay, 2005). It should also be noted that two-way communication allows for more student-specific news to be shared. Many times with one-way communication, the information being shared is general. It may pertain to classroom updates or even school-wide matters. When there is a two-way conversation, the topic can be tailored to the specific scholar being addressed.

Phone Calls

Phone calls are an established form of two-way communication. They allow for parents and teachers to build trust with one another by having consistent human interaction where both parties are able to take something new from the conversation. By setting aside scheduled time to make phone calls to touch base with families around their childrens' school experiences, teachers can see academic progress, insight into home life that allows for accommodations to be made if need be, positive relationships with parents, and a more trusting relationship with students (Gustafson, 1998).

Proactive positive phone calls are another way to build rapport with parents throughout the school year. By connecting with home about positive observations, it sets a foundation for if and when an uncomfortable conversation needs to be had. Ramirez (2002) stated as a high school teacher that by scheduling time during his prep hour he was able to call all 160 of his students to build a relationship with parents. Families were grateful for the communication and because of this provided him with support throughout his career.

Face to Face Connections

Another way to stay interconnected with parents is meeting in person. Connecting with families face to face is part of the model that Freedom Schools use to positively

impact their scholars. Freedom Schools, which are run under the Children's Defense Fund, deliver summer programming through a research-based curriculum with a multicultural lens that lifts up students and their families through five essential components, one of those components being parent and family involvement (Children's Defense Fund, 2022).

The model of parent involvement not only includes weekly phone calls to each child from their classroom teacher over the six week program, but also includes weekly parent empowerment meetings. Each week families are invited to come to the school for an evening of community building. The evening consists of a meal being served, an activity for families to participate in, information for parents about upcoming events or noteworthy news, as well as time for parents to connect with their children's classroom teacher, also known as the servant leader intern. By taking this time to develop relationships with families, everyone stays on the same page. Building human connections through food, laughter, and a common goal allows for a positive relationship to grow quickly. Parent and family involvement as an essential component of the Freedom School way has proven to have an impact on children academically and socially. The Children's Defense Fund (2022) shows that since 1995, more than 169,000 pre-k through 12th grade children have experienced the Freedom School program across the United States. In 2021, over the course of the six week program, "81 percent of scholars avoided summer learning loss and 87 percent of parents saw increased confidence in their children" (2022, graphic 4).

Parent-teacher conferences are another way to stay up to date with families. Many times conferences have the stigma of being a "reporting session" causing anxiety

for all involved (Metcalf, 2001). Instead they should be looked at as a way to build a solid partnership. Taking time to invite parents to school to discuss what's going well for their kids can alleviate stress from parents who may find academic settings unpleasant. It also allows teachers to make a positive plan with families to keep seeing the wanted behaviors as well as extinguishing the unwanted behaviors without the meeting being solely about these "problem behaviors. Opening doors to parents to come see you doesn't have to be tied to school-wide conference nights. Opening the doors before, during or after school on any day of the week is a powerful way for an educator to show they are invested. Understanding that not all families have a schedule that will align with school-wide conferences opens up space for face to face or zoom interactions throughout the school year. Having that mindset changes the way teachers perceive parent involvement. It doesn't have to be all or nothing. Having a couple nights a year for parents to come to the building can put negative pressure on families in turn souring the parent-teacher relationship. Conferences don't need to be long or have a set agenda either. Catching parents when they pick students up and having a mini-meeting is a great way to have a positive face to face interaction.

Texting

Research shows that the best way to facilitate parent engagement is communicating little and often (Parent Engagement Network, 2021). Texting is an effective way to meet that goal. A study by the Education Endowment Fund (2021) found that by texting regularly with positive and negative messages and reminders about upcoming events, students' attendance and academic performance improved. It's

important that these messages aren't too long or filled with teacher jargon. The longer the note, the more likely it will be left unread.

It is important to consider that not all of the families being contacted will speak English as a first language. Making sure that parents get clear messages and feel comfortable replying for clarification is important. Using a platform to communicate through writing in families' preferred language is one way to do this. One example is the TalkingPoints app. TalkingPoints is an educational technology tool used to help support student success by eliminating barriers to communication, such as language or time constraints. The platform offers two-way translation using algorithms as well as human translators to build relationships between school and home through text messaging. TalkingPoints helps parents be more involved in their childrens' educational experiences, especially non-white families (*TalkingPoints WestEd Study Report*, 2018). The app also helps teachers build meaningful relationships in spite of language barriers.

Teachers are able to operate from the web browser or mobile app, sending messages to families individually or class-wide in their preferred language while parents are able to respond in their preferred language through text messaging, the mobile app, or the web browser. The messages are translated, accommodating the party receiving the message. This tool for communication allows for quick updates and consistent correspondence.

According to an end of year parent survey conducted by TalkingPoints (2017), 85 percent of parents reported having more conversations with their children about school, 90 percent of parents felt more connected to the school community, and 89 percent of families felt more informed about what was going on in their kids' schools. Not only is it

an effective tool for contacting parents but the survey also showed that over 70 percent of parents preferred to be contacted by text message. 80 percent of teachers reported seeing positive changes in their students behavior and overall performance and over 80 percent felt more connected to their students' families.

Home Visits

Home visits are a strategy used by educators to attempt to build a team between home and school to support student achievement. The goal of a home visit is to help foster trusting relationships, create open communication, and build a partnership between teachers and families. Taking time to make home visits has shown to have positive impacts on students' success. It can decrease absenteeism and is tied to higher proficiency in English and Language Arts as well as math (Sheldon & Jung, 2018). Making home visits a regular practice has shown to be a good tool for mindset work. As human beings we all have implicit bias: it is built into our brains as humans. Home visits have an impact on how families see educators and the way educators see the families they serve. Families who experienced home visits reported feeling more comfortable with their teachers than prior to the visits. Instead of seeing educators as authority figures, they were able to relate to them as humans. Because of this, families contacted their childrens' teachers more often. Simultaneously, teachers were able to shift their mindsets about families. Many teachers reported their deficit assumptions around childrens' parents and families were unfounded. Their assumptions about parents' lack of care was proven to be inaccurate. Care was shown in ways that were unexpected to the educators. By stepping into their students' homes, teachers were able to build empathy and in turn alter their previously biased perceptions. Teachers began incorporating student interests noticed at

home visits into the classroom, took a less punitive approach to discipline, and began to contact home more often (McKnight et al, 2017)

In summary, there are many ways for teachers to build partnerships with the families they serve each day. The two main avenues are one-way communication and two-way communication. One-way communication relies on the teacher pushing out information for families without expecting the family to return contact. Examples of one-way communication are written newsletters or classroom updates sent out through content sharing platforms such as Seesaw. Two-way communication is correspondence between parents and teachers that consists of dialogue from both parties. Examples of two-way communication are phone calls, face to face connections, text messaging, and home visits. All of these modes of communication serve their purpose. Educators must understand the families they serve and make their best professional judgment to decide which mode of communication is most appropriate for each scenario.

Barriers

Through the literature reviewed, it is widely accepted that parent involvement has a significant impact on student success, yet there are barriers that make this consistent and effective practice difficult. We can break this down into four factors. The first set of factors being *Individual Parent and Family Factors*. The second set is *Child Factors*. The next set is broad *Teacher-Parent Factors*. The last set of factors is *Societal Factors* (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). The factors in each one of these subgroups can prevent teachers and families from having healthy relationships with one another. By understanding the obstacles that stand in the way of forming solid relationships,

educators can develop strategies to overcome adversity and create an environment that best supports student growth and learning.

Individual Parent and Family Factors

The mindsets of parents differ greatly from family to family. Individually, parents have their own beliefs about their childrens' school, their teacher, their own role, and education in general. Not all parents believe that they need to be involved in their kids' education. If parents believe their role is just to make sure kids get to school, it can be hard to form a meaningful relationship with them. Parents' belief in their own abilities can also deter them from being involved in the educational journey of their children. It is shown that parents with a low level of belief in their capacity to help their children are less likely to make connections with school. The parents' belief is that their interactions will not bring successful outcomes for their children (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Some families may feel uncomfortable helping because of the language of instruction, while others may feel uncomfortable with their own level of academic preparedness. Another factor is the previous educational experiences from either the childrens' previous school or the parents'. If the educational experience for the family has been negative, it is likely they will avoid school contact. It's also important to note that parents' life context plays a factor in their ability to interact with school representatives. For example, parents raising large families on their own may find it harder to interact because of responsibilities at home. Work or lack of work could also be an issue. Lack of work can cause financial barriers for transportation, so can too much work or opposite work hours that can cause scheduling conflicts or overtired adults who find it hard to assist with homework (Catsambis, 2001). Other barriers for parents and family include mental health

issues as well as class, gender, ethnicity, and culture. Poor mental health can make it difficult for families to be involved effectively (Eccles and Harold 1993). Families that possess social and cultural currency that match the values of the school are typically white, middle class, and heterosexual (Reay, 1998). These families have less obstacles to face when attempting to stay involved with their childrens' education. "In general, minorities are less involved, less represented and less informed, and are less likely to have access to resources, as well as more likely to have problems associated with language, transport, communication and child care" (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Their relationships with teachers are generally vastly different because of the lack of shared social values and experiences.

Child Factors

Children bring factors to the table that impact teacher-parent relationships. Children with academic struggles or disabilities can cause parents to be highly involved because of the need for collaboration. It can also drive parents away from school communication because of disagreements over issues pertaining to the student. Hornby (2011) also states that children with high academic performance usually have parents who are more than willing to connect with their kids' teachers. These interactions usually result in gratifying conversations. Inversely, students with challenging behaviors typically have parents who are less willing to be active participants in teacher-parent relationships. Anxiety about hearing more bad news can cause parents to disconnect.

Parent-Teacher Factors

Many of the goals that parents and teachers have are similar, but there are some differences that can negatively impact the relationship between home and school.

According to Bastiani (1989), student progress and issues they may be running into seem like shared agenda items, yet teachers may want to prioritize ways families can help and initiate questions to gain clarity about home practices. On the other hand, parents may want to know more about how their child is doing in comparison to their peers as well as voice questions are concerns about the teacher's practices. When the goals of the interactions between parents and teachers are contrasting this can cause friction. Attitudes or mindsets also affect the relationships being forged. The assumptions made by both the teacher and the parents about education and each other are critical. Teachers often assume parents nowadays don't care about their kids' education or are uninvolved. Parents can believe teachers are fostering a relationship to only deliver bad news or that teachers are experts on things that they have little to no training in. In the end, both of these attitudes impact the important relationship between the two.

Societal Factors

There are a couple societal factors I'll cover that play a role in how parent-teacher relationships are built and maintained. Historically, the way that school zones have been drawn factor in race and class. Neighborhoods with black and brown residents have often been required to bus to schools further away from their homes than their white counterparts because of the gerrymandering of school districts. Living outside of the school community causes issues for parents who would like to continue to build a partnership in person but have problems with the commute (*Nice White Parents*, 2020). Another societal issue is the way schools have historically functioned. Henderson and Berla (1994) highlight the historical context of schools in the United States. Many of the practices put into place at schools from the daily schedule to the way we expect families

to show up for their children are rigid and ineffective for producing meaningful partnerships between parents and teachers.

In summary, it is clear that creating positive relationships between schools and home is beneficial for student success. There are obstacles that get in the way of making this a reality for all teachers and families. Parents bring their own set of skills and beliefs to the table that factor into how relationships are made. Childrens' varying academic and social abilities play a role. Teacher and parent goals that may or may not align play their part as well as the societal factors of school communities. To understand the barriers allows for us to combat them and make meaningful changes.

Conclusion

The literature examined in this chapter addressed the impact strong relationships between parents and teachers have on student achievement socially and academically. Ultimately, a supportive, holistic partnership is molded through a concise and consistent use of the one-way or two-way communication efforts. Chapter two also discussed the barriers that lay ahead of teachers and families in their efforts to be actively involved in this educational partnership. The power of relationships between everyone involved in the school journey was evident and building a solid partnership between home and school is the recommended practice. Chapter three will provide an overview of the capstone project, a professional resource tool for educators to build and maintain relationships with parents in order to foster a successful environment for student learning.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Overview

Introduction

Parent-teacher partnerships are linked to positive student outcomes, improved social skills with peers, increased academic success, and a stronger relationship with teachers (Fefer, 2020). However, efforts to engage families are oftentimes taxing. Without professional development for teachers around building and maintaining positive relationships with parents, good communication can be a daunting task. This led me to ask my question, *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?* The goal is to provide professional development and a solid resource to answer this question and lay out a comprehensive plan for teachers. In this chapter I will lay out a synopsis of my professional development and resource project. I will discuss the literature that provided context for the project, a description of the capstone, and the intended audience of my project.

Overview

This project aims to answer the question *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?* I will provide a professional development session along with an interactive resource to assist teachers in building and maintaining partnerships with families. The intended outcome of the professional development series is to provide information on the benefits of parent-teacher partnerships along with effective modes of communication to foster the relationships. The desired result of the resource is for teachers to have a tiered program to follow for molding and maintaining partnerships with parents.

Project Description and Rationale

This capstone project includes two sections. Section one is the professional development session and section two is the interactive resource for building relationships with families. Section one gives users of the resource their why. Providing teachers with the research behind parent-teacher collaboration allows them to better understand and be willing to commit to communicating with parents. Section two makes the task manageable with a workbook.

The professional development portion of the project stresses the positive significance of teacher-parent relationships. Tying in research from the literature I reviewed, which states these partnerships between home and school and the subsequent impact on the way the children grew socially and academically. Grounding teachers in the research and providing evidence of the importance of this work allows for the second section to be more successfully utilized and realize its full potential. Once the grounding work is completed the session will turn to the effective ways in which teachers can make connections with parents. By walking through the various modes of communication available to teachers and how to execute those methods, teachers will be able to better use the resources available to them through this project.

Adult Learning Principles

In order to effectively deliver content I must think about adult learning principles and how they may differ from those of the children we serve. Throughout my project I will focus on four main principles. I want to make sure my learning is content focused, offers time for feedback and reflection, provides coaching and expert support, and incorporates active learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2017). It is important that

I deliver my message in a way that will be well received and set teachers up for success when implementing the practices showcased.

Content Focused Professional Development

Darling-Hammond (2017), states that when looking to implement an effective professional development, content-focused material is essential. Providing teachers with a clear message and focused strategies for successful implementation is the goal. My professional development session is focused on specific communication practices. The ideas around teaching and learning expressed in this session will have an intentional focus. I will be providing specific examples of how to forge relationships with home allowing for teachers to connect with something and put it into their weekly practices.

Active Learning

Being able to try out the practices proposed in a professional development session is key for buy-in as well as tweaks to be made. Teachers show up with professional expertise, and by allowing them to implement new practices allows for new learning to occur (Darling-Hammond, 2017). My intention is for teachers to work through communication practices by using the workbook provided, the second part of the effort at better communication. Through this active work across the span of a semester or a school year, they will have the opportunity to make adjustments when needed as well as discover what works best for their specific classroom.

Coaching and Support

The role coaches play by guiding, supporting, and facilitating learning in the context of effective professional learning is significant (Darling-Hammond, 2017). A common design for implementing support for professional growth is through one on one

coaching. Through the workbook I plan to have my information readily available if anyone wants to walk through scenarios or process next steps when it comes to family engagement. I want the workbook to be as interactive as possible. This includes having opportunities to discuss in real time how to make adjustments when needed.

Feedback and Reflection

Both feedback and reflection are powerful tools in effective professional development according to Darling-Hammond (2017), allowing time for feedback and reflection can be implemented during one on one time with me but I also intend on having a second professional development session at the end of a selected period of teacher-parent communication. By having a second session, teachers will be able to not only receive feedback, but have the opportunity to give feedback of their own. This allows for collaboration which is also key in professional growth.

Intended Audience

The intended audience for this professional resource tool is elementary school teachers. Elementary teachers are asked to do a great deal of tasks in order to manage a successful school year. Lesson planning, delivering high quality content across subject areas, and facilitating a functioning classroom through classroom management that allow students to show up their best and authentic selves are a few of those expectations. Many times the piece that can become lost is solid teacher-parent partnerships. This can be for a few reasons. Conversations with parents can be uncomfortable. This two-tiered approach to help elementary educators with better parent communication will give educators confidence while easing the burdens of the daily work each teacher has to perform.

Conclusion

In chapter 3 I gave an overview of my professional development session and professional resource tool for elementary school teachers to successfully connect with parents to create strong partnerships for student success. I walked through the ways I will make this learning meaningful and effective for adults and who will receive this professional development. In chapter 4 I will reflect on my capstone project and question *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?* I will continue to look at how this project affects the professional education landscape.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project was to address the research question: *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?* Calling on my experiences as a student, parent and as an educator I have seen the impact communication has on student success. This led me to research how communication between parents and schools impacts student growth as well as how to do so efficiently and effectively.

This chapter will review the findings I came across as a result of the research, writing and construction of the project. I will spotlight the literature reviewed in chapter 2, provide explanation as to how my project will be utilized, describe why it is an important tool for the profession, and provide a concise summary of the chapter as a whole.

Findings

This project has been beneficial to me as an educator for a number of reasons. Throughout my teaching career, using my professional discernment, I have always felt as though parent teacher communication was important. Through this research endeavor I have been able to put credible findings behind my understanding of effective teacher-parent communication practices. Not only was I able to confirm my prior beliefs about communication with families and its impact on student growth, I was able to learn new information, giving me new perspectives and tools to add to my toolbox as an educator. Lastly, collecting this information and packaging it together for the use of

others has given me the opportunity to use it in the work that I do across buildings within my school district as the culture and climate specialist.

As a fourth grade teacher throughout the pandemic my daily priorities evolved from what they once were. My mornings were filled with class contact and teaching, while my afternoons were spent having individual conversations with students, grading, planning and contacting parents. Through this process, I saw how strong my relationships with parents and students became. I could feel my connection with my students grow each week providing the perfect environment for a working relationship. Through my research I wanted to verify this feeling was valid as well as find ways to make this communication effort efficient. Being in front of students for most of the day makes it a challenge to reach out to families consistently. A collection of tools and resources to make this effort manageable would serve me as an educator.

My major finding as I researched my question about communication with families was that a partnership between school and home is important. When positive relationships are shaped between school and home it is shown to have a positive effect on the students' overall school experiences. Attendance increases, social skills rise, academic competence increases, parents feel more comfortable, and teachers build empathy and care through connections made. It is recommended for teachers to build a partnership with parents as a tool for teaching success. Families being presented with information on the academic happenings in the classroom is linked to student success. Families aren't typically trained to provide academic support the way classroom teachers are, but when given the opportunity to be involved through knowledge of academic expectations, academic success is shown to follow. Parent involvement can also

positively impact the way the whole family perceives school. When parents feel assured about their children's school experience, students are likely to view school in a similar light. When students are able to show up with a positive attitude and in a headspace to learn, with high expectations from parents, positive results are more likely to occur. Parent involvement can also positively impact educators. Findings show that teachers' perceptions of a strong relationship between themselves and their scholars' parents are tied to lower risk for expulsion for students who have not yet been expelled. When a teacher has a positive relationship with a parent they may spend more time with their child in the classroom, therefore fostering student growth. Breaking down preconceived notions about who families or students are, and forming a positive perception of the families being served, benefits teachers and their decision making around keeping students in school.

Revisiting the Literature

Another significant finding pertains to the mode in which educators choose to communicate with families. There are two ways to categorize the mode in which families are contacted. One way and two way communication. One-way communication is information being delivered from school to home without the need for parents to respond in any verbal or written manner. Two-way communication is when teachers are in a back and forth dialogue with parents (Graham-Clay, 2005). The goal is to forge a supportive, holistic partnership, molded through a concise and consistent use of the one-way or two-way communication efforts. Examples of one way communication are newsletters and content sharing platforms. Examples of two way communication are phone calls, text messages, face to face visits, and home visits.

Through the review of the literature around one way communication, specifically newsletters I found it is beneficial to families for teachers to stay Consistent. When parents grow accustomed to receiving the newsletter in a specific format, it catches their attention and they know what they are looking for to receive crucial updates. If the newsletter is sent home on yellow paper, it's beneficial to continue that pattern. If a text is sent to families with a specific greeting, that consistency will help with efficient communication. The literature states that the newsletter should be pushed out on a consistent schedule and stays generally the same length. All of this will continue to make the written letter to families a more effective tool for communication. The purpose of the letter is to build positive communication between school and home as well as create clear expectations of the happenings at school with succinct updates about news that will support parents in their journey to champion their childrens' learning (Davern, 2004).

As I reviewed Gustafson (1998), I found that Phone calls are an established form of two-way communication. They allow for parents and teachers to build trust with one another by having consistent human interaction where both parties are able to take something new from the conversation. By setting aside scheduled time to make phone calls to touch base with families around their childrens' school experiences, teachers can see academic progress, insight into home life that allows for accommodations to be made if need be, positive relationships with parents, and a more trusting relationship with students. By connecting with home about positive observations, it sets a foundation for if and when an uncomfortable conversation needs to be had. Ramirez (2002) stated as a high school teacher that by scheduling time during his prep hour he was able to call all

160 of his students to build a relationship with parents. Families were grateful for the communication and because of this provided him with support throughout his career.

As I continued my literature review I also found the best way to facilitate parent engagement is communicating little and often (Parent Engagement Network, 2021). Texting is an effective way to meet that goal. A study by the Education Endowment Fund (2021) found that by texting regularly with positive and negative messages and reminders about upcoming events, students' attendance and academic performance improved. It is important to consider that not all of the families being contacted will speak English as a first language. Making sure that parents get clear messages and feel comfortable replying for clarification is important. Using a platform to communicate through writing in families' preferred language is one way to do this. One example is the TalkingPoints app. TalkingPoints is an educational technology tool used to help support student success by eliminating barriers to communication, such as language or time constraints. The platform offers two-way translation using algorithms as well as human translators to build relationships between school and home through text messaging. According to an end of year parent survey conducted by TalkingPoints (2017), 85 percent of parents reported having more conversations with their children about school, 90 percent of parents felt more connected to the school community, and 89 percent of families felt more informed about what was going on in their kids' schools. Not only is it an effective tool for contacting parents but the survey also showed that over 70 percent of parents preferred to be contacted by text message. 80 percent of teachers reported seeing positive changes in their students behavior and overall performance and over 80 percent felt more connected to their students' families.

Another way to stay interconnected with parents is meeting in person. Many times conferences have the stigma of being a “reporting session” causing anxiety for all involved (Metcalf, 2001). Instead they should be looked at as a way to build a solid partnership. Taking time to invite parents to school to discuss what’s going well for their kids can alleviate stress from parents who may find academic settings unpleasant. Home visits are a strategy used by educators to attempt to build a team between home and school to support student achievement. The goal of a home visit is to help foster trusting relationships, create open communication, and build a partnership between teachers and families. Taking time to make home visits has shown to have positive impacts on students’ success. Making home visits a regular practice has shown to be a good tool for mindset work. As human beings we all have implicit bias: it is built into our brains as humans. Home visits have an impact on how families see educators and the way educators see the families they serve.

Project Limitations

As I continue to work on my toolkit to make school to home communication practices manageable and effective by using my findings through the literature review process, I feel good about what I have created. With that being said I also understand the limitations of this project. The project consists of a professional development session breaking down the importance of teacher to parent communication followed by an explanation of how to use the resources provided for building solid partnerships between home and school. Limitations of these resources are the ask for teachers to take on another task of organizing and setting aside time to make connections with home. The

hope is that these resources will save time in the long run, but an overwhelmed teacher could see these resources as another daunting task to complete.

Future Projects

Based on my research, I would love to see a project addressing the way we understand building relationships with children, and how those practices can be used to foster relationships with their families. I would love to see a project with hyper focused interventions to be used for specific scenarios. I would make an educated guess that many of the interventions we use as teachers to build positive relationships with our students could be used similarly to forge positive partnerships with the adults who parent them.

Project Use

I plan to use my project as a tool for educators across my school district. As the culture and climate specialist, I have the opportunity to partner with many teachers and building leaders. My goal is to collaborate with teachers or buildings who are looking for a way to organize the process of home communication by sharing my resources and professional development session.

Benefit to the Profession

The goal of this project is to enable teachers to do their best as a communicator, so families and students can do their best as parents and students each day. By providing information based on my literature review about the importance of school to home communication in a professional development session, along with resources and tools for teachers to use to implement solid communication practices, teachers will be able to forge partnerships with families that are linked to student success with attendance, academic success and social skills implementation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this capstone project is to address the research question: *How can educators effectively communicate with families to empower them to take an active role in their child's learning?* My major findings included the link between student success and teacher parent partnerships as well as the different ways in which teachers can be effective communicators using one way and two way communication methods. I reviewed the literature from chapter two as well as discussed the importance of the project to the profession and its limitations as a resource. Finally I shared how the project will be used.

REFERENCES

- Bastiani, J. (1989). *Working with parents: A whole-school approach*. NFER-NELSON.
- Catsambis, S. (2001). *Social Psychology of Education*, 5(2), 149–177.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1014478001512>
- Chen, J. J., & Rivera-Vernazza, D. E. (2022). Communicating digitally: Building preschool teacher-parent partnerships via digital technologies during COVID-19. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01366-7>
- Children's Defense Fund. (2022, August 23). Retrieved August 27, 2022, from <https://www.childrensdefense.org/>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M., & Gardner, M. (2017). Effective teacher professional development. <https://doi.org/10.54300/122.311>
- Davern, L. (2004). School-to-home notebooks. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 36(5), 22–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990403600503>
- Eccles, J. S., & Harold, R. D. (1993). Parent-school involvement during the early adolescent years. *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education*, 94(3), 568–587. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819309400311>
- Educational Endowment Fund. (2016). Texting Parents. Retrieved September 25, 2022, from <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/texting-parents>
- El Nokali, N. E., Bachman, H. J., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2010). Parent involvement and children's academic and social development in Elementary School. *Child Development*, 81(3), 988–1005. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01447.x>
- Fefer, S. A., Hieneman, M., Virga, C., Thoma, A., & Donnelly, M. (2020). Evaluating the

Effect of Positive Parent Contact on Elementary Students' On-Task Behavior.

Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 22(4), 234–245.

Graham-Clay, S. (2005). Communicating with Parents: Strategies for Teachers. *The*

School Community Journal, 15(1), 117–129.

Gustafson, C. (1998). Phone home: telehome care. *Home Care Provider*, 3(5), 249–250.

[https://doi.org/10.1016/s1084-628x\(98\)90189-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1084-628x(98)90189-7)

Henderson, A. and Berla, N., Eds. (1994) A New Generation of Evidence. The Family Is

Critical to Student Achievement. National Committee for Citizens in Education,

Washington DC.

Hornby, G., & Lafaele, R. (2011). Barriers to parental involvement in education: An

explanatory model. *Educational Review*, 63(1), 37–52. [https://doi.org/10.1080/](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2010.488049)

[00131911.2010.488049](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2010.488049)

Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in

their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 3–42.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543067001003>

Joffe-Walt, C. (Host). (2020, July 23). I Still Believe in it (No. 2) [Audio podcast

episode] Nice White Parents. Julie Snyder.

Mcknight et al. (2017). Mindset Shifts and Parent Teacher Home Visits. <https://pthvp.org>

[/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/mindset-shifts-and-parent-teacher-home-visits.pdf](https://pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/mindset-shifts-and-parent-teacher-home-visits.pdf)

Metcalf, L. (2002). The parent conference: An opportunity for requesting parental

collaboration. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 17(1), 17–25.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/082957350201700103>

- Mindset shifts and parent teacher home visits fostered Santa Cruz ...* (n.d.). Retrieved August 27, 2022, from <https://test.pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Mindset-Shifts-and-PTHV.pdf>
- Parent Engagement Network. (n.d.). Retrieved August 27, 2022, from <https://parentengagementnetwork.org/>
- Pianta, R. C. (2016). Teacher–Student Interactions: Measurement, Impacts, Improvement, and Policy. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3(1), 98–105.
- Reay, D. (1998). Rethinking social class: Qualitative perspectives on class and gender. *Sociology*, 32(2), 259–275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038598032002003>
- Serpell, Z. N., & Mashburn, A. J. (2011). Family-school connectedness and children's early social development. *Social Development*, 21(1), 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2011.00623.x>
- Sheldon, S. & Jung, S. (2018). Student Outcomes and Parent Teacher Home Visits. Retrieved November 28, 2022, from <https://pthvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/student-outcomes-and-parent-teacher-home-visits.pdf>
- Student outcomes and parent teacher home visits - researchgate.* (n.d.). Retrieved August 27, 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329526064_Student_Outcomes_and_Parent_Teacher_Home_Visits
- TalkingPoints Impact Survey SY 2016-2017. (2017). Retrieved December 1, 2022, from https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rkoORM3iCozjuYFNw1H9__WcbYEafsAG/view

- TalkingPoints – WestEd Study Report: TalkingPoints Increases Parent Engagement for Student Success. (2018). Retrieved December 1, 2022, from <https://talkingpts.org/blog/talkingpoints-increases-parent-engagement-for-student-success/415/>
- US Department of Education (ED). (2022). *Office for Civil Rights: U.S. Department of Education*. Home.
- Vandenbos, G. (2015). *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved December 5, 2022, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/family>
- Wilder, S. (2013). Effects of parental involvement on academic achievement: A meta-synthesis. *Educational Review*, 66(3), 377–397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.780009>
- Zulauf-McCurdy, C. A., & Zinsser, K. M. (2020). How teachers' perceptions of the parent–teacher relationship affect children's risk for early childhood expulsion. *Psychology in the Schools*, 58(1), 69–88. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.22440>