

Communication Between the School System and Home

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Abstract

This literature review presents data from multiple sources including research reports and data sets with the focus of identifying the impact and importance of school to home communication. This report takes into consideration the multiple facets of student engagement, achievement, and success and their links to communication between the school and home. There is a focus on the importance of teacher programs and in-service training providing education on communication strategies, and the possible uses and importance of technology as a communication source. Teacher to parent communication is vital to student success both inside and outside of the classroom.

Keywords: *Communication Strategies; Communication; Communication Skills; Child Development; Parent Participation; Parent-Teacher Cooperation; Teacher Education*

Communication Between the School System and Home

Introduction

An essential piece of the educational school system is the creation of an effective link of communication between a child's school and their home. According to the Louisiana State Department of Education, "Better connections between school systems and homes must be established in order to counteract the underachievement of students in the American school system" (Louisiana State Dept. of Education, 1988, p. 1). Numerous studies present data clearly demonstrating that student success increases when there is an established communication link between a child's school, specifically the child's teacher, and their parent or guardian at home. Despite the overwhelming connection between an established link between the school and home and increased student success, many parents report not hearing from their child's school very often, if at all. A study conducted by The National Household Education Surveys Program found that "eighty-seven percent of students in kindergarten through grade 12 had parents who reported receiving newsletters, memos, e-mail, or notices addressed to all parents from their child's school; 57 percent of students had parents who reported receiving notes or e-mail from the school specifically about their child; and 41 percent of students had parents who reported that the school had contacted them by telephone" (Noel, Stark & Redford, 2015, p. 3).

The topic of the necessary connection between school and home is the spotlight of this literature review, with the focuses of its connection to student success rates, the need for teachers to be educated on the importance of school to home communication, and the use of technology to foster the connection. This literature review explores three research questions. First, what strategies can teachers implement to maximize their effectiveness in

regards to the communication with parents of their students? Second, does technology-based parent communication increase student success? Third, can teaching credential programs and first year induction programs better equip teachers to include teacher to parent communication practices within their first year classroom?

Teachers who have been taught the importance of creating a connection between their students' homes and school implement strong communication strategies, which overall increases student success both inside and out of the classroom. These positive parent partnerships strengthen both the classrooms and the homes of the students involved. According to the Louisiana State Department of Education, "If these connections are expanded and nurtured, students will benefit in multiple ways both at home and in school. Schools need to 'extend their influence by reaching out to parents and involving them'" (Louisiana State Dept. of Education, 1988, p. 1). The greater the positive normative connection, the greater positive impact it will have on the students. "Home and school collaboration is an important means of connecting children's different spheres of life" (Hirsto, 2010, p. 99). This communication dynamic can be promoted by the school's positive, pro-parent involvement culture as well as support and education for teachers in their practice of effective communication strategies.

How Schools Develop Positive Parent Partnerships

It is critical for schools to create a culture that promotes positive parent relationships and fosters this connection from each student's start in school to their exit from school. According to Moorman, et. al., "when parents and teachers coalesce to create continuities between home and school, children's achievement, social functioning, and emotional adjustment benefit" (Moorman, E. K., Sheridan, S. M., Kyongboon, K. B., Koziol, N.,

2013, p. 175). In order to support students in receiving this “emotional adjustment benefit”, teachers need to communicate clearly with parents. Case studies completed by Danielle Pillet-Shore revealed that parents often did not praise their children’s accomplishments because the parents attributed the praise given as self-praise. This correlates to the communication that occurs between teachers and parents, because it is paramount for teachers to encourage parents to positively praise their child’s efforts both inside and out of the classroom. Parent-teacher conferences that provided space for naturally occurring positive praise found that parents positively viewed their student within the sphere of the classroom (Pillet-Shore, D., 2012, p. 183). Further research according to Pillet-Shore states “parents observably work to avoid praising students when interacting with teachers...and when they do...[it] usually does not directly assess the student’s academic achievement or behavior, but rather merely mentions a favorable fact about the student” (Pillet-Shore, D., 2012, p. 190). This demonstrates the need for teachers to demonstrate, through communicated example, the need for positive praise for students within both the home and school spheres of a student’s life. This can be explicitly taught to parents through candid, consistent conversations between parents and teachers.

Teachers and/or administrators most often establish the connection between a student’s school and their home first. Parents often do not fully understand how to establish a connection on their own, or do not believe that they are capable of effective communication with their child’s school. “When parents believe they are capable of being engaged in children’s education and feel it is their role to do so, they are more likely to be involved in children’s learning both at home...and school” (Moorman, E. K., Sheridan, S. M., Kyongboon, K. B., Koziol, N., 2013, p. 175). In order to foster these connections, the school

needs to empower parents and give them simple tools and resources to get connected with their student's teacher and the support staff of the school. Additionally, students' successes and needs within the school setting need to be communicated frequently. According to a study conducted by Sirvani in 2007, "many parents want to help their children if they are aware of their children's academic problems" (Sirvani, H., 2007, p. 32). Oftentimes parents are simply unaware of their student's performance in the school setting, both behaviorally and academically, which is a simple error in communication on behalf of the school site.

Research has shown that parents value the quality of the interactions with their child's school as compared being contacted by the school a large number of times. It is significant for the school climate to promote and support healthy, quality interactions with parents and guardians of the students that attend. "High-quality parent-teacher relationships are related to multiple aspects of children's functioning...parent-teacher relationship quality is associated with children's academic functioning...high-quality relationships are associated with children's diminished behavioral and social concerns" (Moorman, E. K., Sheridan, S. M., Kyongboon, K. B., Koziol, N., 2013, p. 181). It is not only important for schools to emphasize and empower teachers to communicate with parents, but it is essential that the communication that does occur is both personalized and high quality. If the only communication that occurs is group emails or group letters home, the communication is continually stale and impersonal, and the sought-after connection between a child's home and school is nearly non-existent. "When effective, communication between teachers and families provides the two parties with a deeper understanding of mutual expectations and children's needs, thus enabling both to effectively assist children

and to establish the basis of cooperation” (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012, p. 66). Effective, quality communication is personal, positive, and consistent.

Matthew A. Kraft, from Brown University, suggests that schools need to support teachers in their communication practices with the parents and guardians of the students in their classes. “The lack of guidance and clear expectations around teacher-parent communication is arguably [commonly overlooked]...beyond general encouragement by administrators to contact parents, teachers are left to determine when, how, and why they should reach out” (Kraft, M.A., 2016, p. 17). He suggests possible ways of promoting this communication through the provision of “dedicated time during the workday for teachers to reach out to parents” (Kraft, M.A., 2016, p. 17). Administrators have the ability to provide extra time for teachers to communicate with parents. “The promotion of two-way communication would emphasize the importance in a functional relationship of information flow from home to school. It has been argued that parents and teachers would benefit from having more time to talk together and share their views on the world, their histories and experiences, and their visions of the future” (Hirsto, 2010, p. 100). According to the Louisiana State Department of Education, “types of parent involvement include participation in school governance issues, volunteering within the classroom and at the school site, helping their students with their homework and literacy at home, and being a part of parent-teacher associations...this is extended through various forms of communication between the school site and the home in forms such as e-mail, newsletters, phone calls, texting, and other educational applications (Louisiana State Dept. of Education, 1988, p. 2). These various aspects of communication should be used once they are deemed a best fit for each individual student’s family.

Student Achievement Linked to Teacher to Parent Communication

Extensive research has been conducted to decide if there is a correlation between the level of teacher to parent communication and student success both inside and outside of the classroom, much of which has been already discussed or alluded to in this review. “Various studies have shown that parental involvement was a significant component in determining the success of children in school...and found that all students benefit from parental involvement” (Sirvani, H., 2007, p. 32). Louisiana State Department of Education conducted a study on two-way school to home communication with an emphasis on the children’s motivation-related outcomes as a result of consistent communication between teachers and parents. Data was gathered through questionnaires, which were completed by teachers with a variety of experience. Data was collected at two points: prior to their training and after having implemented the strategies learned in their own school setting. The data collected showed that student motivation within the classroom increased depending on the increase in consistent communication between teachers and parents (Louisiana State Dept. of Education, 1988, p. 3). According to Matthew A. Kraft, from Brown University, “teacher-parent communication can have strong, positive effects on students’ success in school” (Kraft, M. A., 2016, p. 15). Kraft analyzed a study presented by the Parent and Family Involvement in Education survey, of which the data from that study showed that school to home communication is at an all-time low, and parents are often unsatisfied with the communication practices of the schools that their students attend. “Overall trends across the last decade suggest schools are not making much progress in improving the frequency and quality of communication with parents” (Kraft, M. A., 2016, p. 15). Kraft and his associates performed studies that link teacher-parent communication to an increase in

student success. For example, “sending parents weekly one-sentence individualized messages from teachers during a high school summer credit-recovery program reduced the percentage of students who failed to earn course credit by 41 percent” (Kraft, M.A., 2016, p. 16). Hirsto agrees to the correlation, “there is some evidence that such collaboration has significant effects on pupils’ school achievement” (Hirsto, 2010, p. 99). When the home sphere and the school sphere of a student’s life are consistently communicating and on the same page, the student’s motivation and success within the classroom improves.

“Achievement is more likely to be enhanced when lines of communication are open, when different groups are sensitive to and respectful of the views of others, and when resources are made available for families in their quest to support their children and the schools they attend” (Hirsto, 2010, p. 99-100).

Teacher Education in Regards to Communication Practices

Since expectations for teacher to parent communication should be high, teachers need the opportunity to receive specific education in regards to communication practices during their credential and induction programs. Walker and Dotger state, “the frequency of parents’ home and school-based involvement behavior is robustly predicted...by teachers’ use of effective parent involvement practices” (Walker, J.M. T., Dotger, B. H., 2011, p. 62). Teachers are most only going to be using effective parent involvement practices and communication strategies if they are explicitly trained and taught to do so. Walker and Dotger continue to discuss the importance of the inclusion of communication practices in teacher education by stating in their research, “Despite the positive impact of family-school partnerships, most teacher education programs fail to help novice teachers develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they will need to engage families as an educational

resource” (Walker, J.M. T., Dotger, B. H., 2011, p. 70). Dogter developed a study in which the data collected specifically showcased the difference in communication skills that teachers had when they did receive specific training in their educational programs as compared to when they did not receive specific training. This was done through a simulated interaction model, or SIM. “Teacher candidates participated in a series of increasingly challenging, one-on-one interactions with standardized parents...candidates receive immediate feedback on their performance within the simulation” (Walker, J.M. T., Dotger, B. H., 2011, p. 71). The simulations were successful in training the teacher candidates the skills to personally communicate with different parents and guardians of students about different topics. Simulations like these could be used within all teacher education programs in order to better prepare teachers to respond to different communication situations, and would equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to create a classroom dynamic that includes positive and consistent communication. According to an evaluation on in-service training, “effective communication is an essential component of professional success” (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012, p. 69). If teachers are to be successful professionals, then they need to be given adequate training in effective communication practices. Teachers who did evaluate different in-service training programs that focused on communication practices participated in a reliable questionnaire afterwards, which reflected a highly positive teacher view in regards to being trained in communication techniques and skills. Training sessions for teachers need to include both theoretical and practical components, discussions on family diversity and communication, the most effective forms of family communication, and research on the effects of parental involvement on student success. “Communication skills equip teachers to recognize the

diversity of the parent body and thus address the ineffectiveness of using an undifferentiated approach with all parents” (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012, p. 80). Simply sending a weekly group email to all parents has been proven to be ineffective in creating consistent, quality communication lines between the school and home spheres of a child’s life. “It is a well-trained teachers’ task to offer all families the proper types of information and to communicate this information in the most appropriate manner for each particular parent so that all parents depart from the school knowing what they need to do to support their child and how they can do it” (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012, p. 81).

Uses of Technology for Teacher-Parent Communication

Teacher to parent communication should reflect the changing technology that is available to students’ homes. A study by Chena and Chena, 2015, investigated the use of “smart device messages as a parent-teacher communication medium. From the results...to use smart device message as a parent-teacher communication medium successfully depends on the intention of parents” (Chena, Z. X., Chena, C. C., 2015). This research demonstrates the importance of getting parents to “buy-in” to their child’s education, and to use personal devices such as cell phones as a means of communicating with their child’s teacher and school. Parents with the ability to use technology should be included and encouraged to use email and messaging apps to creatively and consistently communicate with their child’s teacher. Additionally, most families seem to have access to technology with the increase in popularity of having a smart phone, including over two-thirds of the U.S. consumer population who own smart phones. “The rapidly increasing access to mobile phones, even among low-income families, presents an opportunity to connect with all families using communication technology and to

increase the efficiency of the communication” (Kraft, M.A., 2016, p. 17). Thompson, Mazer, & Flood state “parent-teacher communication needs to evolve to match the current societal standard of technology, permitting that all families have access to technology in one form or another (Thompson, Mazer, & Flood, 2015, p. 186). They continue to state, “smartphone use can increase access to communication via social media and expand the modes of parent-teacher communication” (Thompson, Mazer, & Flood, 2015, p.188). Thompson, Mazer and Flood dive into the idea of Media Richness Theory, which is the theory that, communication between two people will be richer in context and less vague when the correct method of communication is chosen. This theory supports the statement that two-way communication will increase in effectiveness when smart devices are used appropriately. “Richness of a medium is determined by...capability for immediate feedback...[and] ability to personalize a message” (Thompson, Mazer, & Flood, 2015, 189). Thompson, Mazer, and Flood’s work with communication dictates the importance of integrating as much technology into the communication process as possible between the school and home spheres of a student’s life.

Proposed Further Research

Although much research has already been done on the importance of school to home communication, I propose several areas of additional, further research. Additional research needs to be conducted about the effectiveness of communication via technology, including social media and personal devices, between the school and home. This would include research on the various methods, devices, and effectiveness of communication strategies and their correlation to student success within the classroom. “Research on family, school, and community connections must be conducted to understand more about

all children and all families, not just those who are economically and educationally advantaged or already connected to school and community resources” (Louisiana State Dept. of Education, 1988, p. 2). Additionally, research could be conducted that studies the different ways that school systems communicate with families from diverse backgrounds and low-income households. Not only should this research focus on the diverse needs of these families, but suggest best practices for communicating with families who may not have access to technology or need additional support in order to create a connection between their home and the school their child(ren) attend. This research could take the form of various home and school surveys of schools that serve diverse populations. These surveys would often need to be translated into different languages and would need to ask specific, targeted questions about communication needs.

Conclusion

Teacher to parent communication is vital to student success both inside and outside of the classroom. Classrooms that practice effective communication strategies establish a successful link between students’ spheres of life at school and at home, and through this connection both stability and consistency is established. According to studies conducted by Iruka, Winn, Kingsley, and Orthodoxou, “there is evidence that positive home-school relationships are positively related to optimal child development”(Iruka, I., Winn, D., Kingsley, S., & Orthodoxou, Y., 2011, p. 388). Schools need to support teachers and extend high expectations in their communications with parents. “Home and school are the two primary ecological contexts that support young children’s growth during the early years, and the connection between home (parents) and school (teachers) has long been viewed as an essential influence in children’s academic and social-emotional success” (Iruka, I., Winn, D., Kingsley, S.,

& Orthodoxou, Y., 2011, p. 389). The data that supports this imperative connection between home and school for a student and the student's family implies that an increased emphasis needs to be placed on this communication bridge within all schools. Schools cannot only create a culture of open communication, but can also support teachers in allowing them extra time each week to communicate with parents. Teachers need to use technology as a form of communication in a way that works for all families in their classroom, and in a way that matches current technological increases in society. Teacher education programs also need to support teachers by equipping them with the tools and knowledge for effective, positive, and quality communication practices.

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