Use of Communication and Technology among Educational Professionals and Families

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Abstract

This study explored the perspectives of elementary school families and their preferences in communicating with their child's teacher. The researchers utilized an online survey method which was distributed to the families of one elementary school. Survey questions included areas of communication patterns, perceptions, and advice for improvement regarding communication between teachers and families. Results conclude that there are some discrepancies between family and teacher communication expectations. The intended purposes of these findings are to apply communication methods between stakeholders and families to potentially improve communication methods in schools.

Keywords: Communication, technology, education, teachers, school counselors, families

Introduction

Within an educational setting, effective communication serves as an integral contribution to the academic, social, and emotional success of students. Communication among educators, students, families, and other educational personnel should be analyzed and reviewed periodically to note the effectiveness of the communication. Although there are several mediums for communication between families and educational personnel, they often include the use of technology such as emails, or typical traditional methods such as notes sent home. Ultimately, families feel the need to be connected with their child's educational experience and often seek educators on how to best support students (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014). In order to facilitate the best educational experience for students, it is imperative to understand the different perspectives the various stakeholders have regarding communication patterns and methods that families are most comfortable communicating through.

Literature Review

Communication is an essential part of the daily lives of families, educational personnel, and students across all grade levels. According to Nwogbaga, Nwankwo, and Onwa (2015), "communication refers to the process of exchanging information between or among individuals, groups, institutions, and/or organizations in oral, written, or signed forms through any available media" (p. 33). Through effective communication, which includes verbal and non-verbal communication methods, teams have the potential to collaborate in order to meet a goal or complete a project efficiently (Sharma & Sharma, 2014). Several skills contribute to the effectiveness of communication. Some

include clarity, empathy, active listening, and conciseness when communicating a message (Sharma & Sharma, 2014). Communication serves many purposes within personal and professional relationships.

Additionally, through formal and informal communication experiences, teams become more comfortable with one another and build a significant rapport which, in turn, can have a positive effect on meeting the overall goal. Small talk, or "phatic communication" (p. 218), surrounds general or personal topics and has the potential to build the most rapport with individuals with a common goal, even though it is not directly related to meeting those overarching goals (Placencia, 2004). This small talk is particularly designed to meet our social needs to build a relationship (Nwogbaga, Nwankwo, & Onwa, 2015). According to Pratt, Imbody, Wolf, and Patterson (2017), emphasizing communication regarding personal and professional topics to build bonds between professionals not only benefits professional communication within that team to meet desired outcomes, but it also benefits the surrounding environment, such as a school setting. Building rapport is particularly important in an educational setting because educators and other school personnel are often working to meet the needs of students and their families simultaneously.

In order to build significant rapport, face to face communication, both formal and informal, is unnecessary for every encounter, however, each should be utilized throughout a given project. Rapport can also be built through the use of technology. Technology has had a significant impact on the way society communicates and has, overall, changed communication expectations. In

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order to implement a method of communicating through technology, it is important to have all stakeholders fluidly trained in the communication method to be effective (Sharma & Sharma, 2014). Each individual taking part in the communication should understand the uses, advantages, and disadvantages of the tool being used. Although there is still significant value held in face-to-face communication, technological advances in the realm of communication have eliminated constraints such as time and space (Yumurtaci, 2017). Stakeholders now have the ability to respond quickly via email, text message, online portal, or discussion boards. The ability for quick responses creates an expectation of efficiency. Communication through technology has clear advantages; however, a piece of communication that is lost virtually is the non-verbal aspect which can affect the reception or tone of the message being sent. Yumurtachi (2017) suggests that technological communication is best used when in conjunction with in person communication at the agreed upon discretion of each stakeholder.

Educational Team Communication

Effective communication strategies are not only important when considering the accomplishment of reaching professional goals, but they are also necessary within functioning educational teams. Educational teams are vital to the success of school functioning and students' academic and social fulfillment. Educational personnel teams include families, general education teachers, special education teachers, school counselors, administrators, related service professionals, and others who contribute to overall school functioning. It is imperative that there is fluid communication within this team to ensure a positive and fluid environment. Research has shown that teams with exceptionally high performances exchange information frequently and feel comfortable providing communication to their teammates (Butchibabu, Sparano-Huiban, Sonenberg, & Shah, 2016). Through the exchange of messages, members of the educational team can relay positive information or concerns that likely affect a student's functioning outside the scope of their respective professional view of the student. The effective use of teams in an educational setting provides systematic, holistic support for students (Mahoney, Lafferty, & Nutter, 2003). This system acts as a safety net to maintain a student's positive outlook on the educational environment.

Beyond the overall school functioning, educational teams can engage in the same professional development programming in order to be comfortable using the same educational jargon while communicating and have the same message overall (Lindeman & Magiera, 2014). This method ensures that there are no team members who are unfamiliar with the terms being used and the reasoning behind the choices being made within a school. Considering the varying professional and educational backgrounds an educational team has, specifically regarding teachers and school counselors, there is a significant amount to learn from one another and each brings different experiences as well as knowledge (Rice & Smith, 1993). Consultation within the various disciplines is to be expected in educational collaboration (Tatar, 2009). According to Tatar (2009), advice or information within

respective disciplines in education should be encouraged and "well-received" (p. 122) when working towards a goal in education. In order to effectively work as an educational unit, it is important for each professional to identify and define his or her role and responsibilities within the group (Dagenais, Pinard, St-Pierre, Briand-Lamarche, Cantave, & Péladeau, 2016). Overall, when working in educational teams it is important to keep student success at the forefront of communication regardless of professional objectives.

Teachers Communicating with Families

When considering communication between teachers and families, it is imperative to realize the overlying goal of both stakeholders to educate and socialize the student between the home and school settings (Vickers & Minke, 1995). Traditionally, teachers communicate with families regarding classroom updates, student grades, assignments, or behavioral concerns regarding the student (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). Communication methods can include emails, letters home, phone calls, or even text messages depending on the teacher or family's preference. Traditional methods for teachers when communicating with families, have been through the use of bulletin boards, notes sent home, or in-person meetings. These methods are becoming less effective as technology continues to advance (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). Both teachers and families are relying more heavily on using technology in order to communicate effectively. Using technology has the ability to build connectedness from the family to the school since communication can be instant. Communication from the perspective of the teachers are likely to include mass-messages that go out classwide unless directly relevant to one particular student, while families communicate through technology typically to gain information regarding their child (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). Teachers and families should, ideally, be communicating through dynamic means rather than one-sided.

However, issues such as access and understanding come into concern when using technology to communicate with families. Another issue with teachers communicating with families through technology is that there may be a misperception of tone within the message (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). Technological communications are often quick and direct, and can be perceived as negative. It is important for teachers to utilize the appropriate method, or channel, of communication when reaching out to, or responding to, families. As educators, being accessible through various forms of communication lines is important to reach families where they are socially, from a technological sense, and individual needs is important for student success as well as positive rapport with the student's family.

Ultimately, effective communication between educational professionals and families serve as a fundamental factor of a student's social and academic success. In order to maintain proper communication, it is imperative to have the student's best interests behind each line of communication. Although each stakeholder may have the same goal, defining clear roles can best facilitate the process of communication (Dagenais et al., 2016). This

provides each party with a coherent understanding of expectations for further communication.

Rationale and Research Questions

Across the world, and within education, the use of technology has grown. This growth has changed the methods of communication between educational professionals and families. In a recent study by Kosaretskii and Chernyshova (2013), it was noted that 73 percent of middle school educators, and 68 percent of secondary school educators in the United States primarily use technology to communicate with families. In order to bridge the gap within current research, the researchers sought to understand technological communication patterns and perceptions at the elementary level. This study focuses on communication within one school in order to be applicable to its future communication plans in utilizing technology to best meet the needs of students and their families.

Research Questions

1. What are current technology communication patterns between families and teachers, and how are these existing patterns perceived by families?

2. According to families, what are some ways to improve technological communication (i.e. advice from families)?

Methodology

Procedure

A survey method was used for this study. The researchers provided families with an online survey via email, as well as offered a paper option to complete the survey. This mixed-methods study used descriptive statistical analysis to interpret results of multiple choice survey questions, while using qualitative analysis to interpret narrative survey questions. Themes and coding methods were used to analyze narrative, or open ended, survey questions. Survey questions included demographic information, access information, technological communication pattern questions, perception questions, and open-ended advice questions (Appendix 1). In order to maintain participant confidentiality, the researchers used a polling system through Monmouth University to distribute the online survey. Surveys, informed consent letters, and overall information letters surrounding the study were approved by Monmouth University's Internal Review Board. Approximately 330 surveys were distributed via an email link following a letter and email sent home from the principal of the elementary school.

Participants

The participants of this study were families from a New Jersey elementary school that educates kindergarten through third grade students. Out of the surveys distributed, 28 families responded to the online survey. No families requested a paper copy of the survey to complete, and all participants chose the English option to complete the survey. Informed consent was provided upon opening the online survey, as well as a paper copy if requested by participants.

The majority of participants identified themselves as Caucasian (88.9 percent), followed by Hispanic (7.4 percent), and African American (3.7 percent). All participants had at least a high school education, with one third of all participants that completed a Bachelor's or Master's Degree. More than half of the participants identified as having a child in second or third grade. Only 29 percent of all respondents had a child in kindergarten or first grade. Of the total number of families who participated in this study, 89.3 percent have a child in a general education setting, and 10.7 percent had a child in a special education setting. Families were asked if they had multiple students in the school, and to note what grades they were in. These families were grouped as being a one singular response. Three families reported having multiple students in the school, and were asked to identify the grade levels of each child.

Access. Participant's varied in levels of access in terms of technology use. All participants who responded to the survey have internet access at home. The primary use of the internet for 55.6 percent of participants was for checking emails, with 25.9 percent primarily using the internet for social media, and 14.8 percent who chose "Other" as their primary use for the internet, and 3.7 percent using the internet primarily for school updates. Furthermore, 100 percent of participants who responded have a mobile phone with internet access, and 88.9 percent of participants access the internet outside of the home.

Results and Analysis

This study proposed two main research questions to be investigated: (a) What are current technology communication patterns between families and teachers, and how are these existing patterns perceived by families? (b) According to families, what are some ways to improve technological communication? Each question below comprehensively answers the purpose of this study.

What are current technology communication patterns between families and teachers, and how are these existing patterns perceived by families?

Pattern

Survey questions that surrounded the topic of communication "patterns" in the survey included "How does your child's teacher typically communicate with you?", "When your child's teacher does communicate, typically, what do they communicate?", and "How often does your child's teacher use technology to communicate with you?" Among responses to the first question regarding how communication occurs, families were asked to choose all forms of communication that applies to their experiences. Responses indicated that 72 percent of families claimed that their typical communication is through email, while 8 percent of responses stated it is usually via a phone call, and 20 percent of responders chose "Other" as the option. Upon choosing "Other", respondents were asked to explain further. These explanations included "GoogleClassroom", "paper sent home in folder", or participants claimed that communication is simply "lacking" between the family and teacher.

In reference to the question asking what is communicated, 31.4 percent of families responded saying communication is typically surrounding classroom updates, with 28.6 percent stating academic progress is typically communicated. Finally, behavior concerns allotted for 14.3 percent of responses, and "Other" had a response rate of 25.7 percent of participants explaining other communication purposes which included "class mom" duties, volunteer opportunities, or responses to family initiated communications. Participants were asked to choose all options that apply to their communication with their child's teacher. Out of the 28 participants, there were 35 responses to this question, showing that some participants chose multiple purposes of communication patterns.

Next, the survey question surrounding frequency of communication through technology had the highest percentage allotted to communicating at least once per month with 24 percent. Twenty percent of responses were under the category of "Never" when asked how often their child's teacher communicates through technology, leaving 8 percent for "Multiple Times per Week" and 12 percent for the category of "Once per Marking Period" as well as 12 percent for "Bi-Weekly" communication. Out of the total number of responses, 92.6 percent of participants claimed to use the internet for at least one hour per day, with 40.7 percent of that amount being over four hours each day.

Perception

The second portion of the research question surrounded the perception of families in relation to their communications with their child's teacher. Three survey questions asked surrounding family perceptions include, "In what way do you prefer to communicate with your child's teacher?", "Do you feel as though your child's teacher is accessible through technology?", and, "How do you view the flow of communication with your child's teacher through technology?". The majority of family responses; 76 percent, indicated email as their preferred method of communication, while 8 percent preferred the categories of phone calls, text messages, and other. The responses to the category of "other" explained that they preferred in person communication.

Additionally, family perceptions of teacher accessibility through technology showed that 72 percent of families who participated in this study feel as though their child's teacher is accessible via technology. However, four and three respondents answered "somewhat" or "no" respectively. Furthermore, 64 percent of participants perceive the flow of communication as interactive within the teacher-family grouping. Alternatively, 24 percent of responses indicated that communication is non-existent and 12 percent claimed that communication flow is one-sided.

According to families, what are some ways to improve technological communication (i.e. advice from families)?

Open-ended survey questions facilitated participant responses to the second research question. These open-ended questions included "What advice would you give your child's teacher regarding communication with

technology?", and "What advice would you give your child's teacher on what not to do when communicating through technology?"

Themes that were identified within the first open-ended question range from overall praise in how technology is used to communicate between the stakeholders, suggestions on technological means of communication, to preferences for in-person communication. Messages of praise included participants responding with no further advice or that the teacher is adequate at technological communication thus far. For example, one participant stated that overall communication is "good primarily due to the ease of technology." Another participant who gave praise to their child's teacher stated "keep it up, over-communication is good". Suggestions on technological means of communication offered the idea of using applications or other forms they prefer. Some examples of suggestions include "use Remind app", "GoogleClassroom", or families of students with disabilities requesting to receive more emails as "communication is vital and reassuring". Participants who indicated that they would not like to use technology responded with statements such as "I would prefer to communicate in person with my child's teacher", "respond to emails, don't just send them", and simply "I'm not a fan [of communicating with technology]."

Regarding advice from families for teachers of what to avoid when communicating through technology, apparent themes were timing and the potential for misunderstanding through technology. Responses surrounding the theme of timing accounted for the time a teacher has and the schedule of families to receive and potentially participate in classroom activities. For example, advice on what to avoid included waiting "last minute" to send out emails as families often "have a full schedule and the more notice [they] are given, the better [they] can assist", as well as asking teachers to "find the time" to respond and try "not to forget to respond". Finally, the opportunity for misunderstandings through technology was expressed by one participant stating that "sometimes [when] communicating through technology, the tone of the email can be misunderstood", and that neither teachers nor families can "assume [the message] was received".

Discussion

Key findings in this study sought to identify technological communication trends between families and educators, receive input on how families perceive these trends, and call upon families to provide advice on how to improve communication through technology in elementary education. First, patterns that were identified through this study were consistent with previous research which states that educators are moving towards a more technology based form of communication, such as email, "GoogleClassroom", or other apps, rather than traditional methods such as a note sent home (Currie-Rubin & Smith, 2014; Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). The majority of responses acknowledged that email was the primary method of communication between educators and families. The present study also identified the message most commonly discussed in communications between educators and families surrounded the topics of classroom updates and/or behavior concerns which further aligns

with previous research (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). The frequency of communication between teachers and families showed a wide range from at least once per month to stating that there is no communication. Very few responses stated that they communicate with their child's teacher multiple times per week. When viewing this participant's response, it was noted that the participant had a student who was classified as receiving special education services and, therefore, expected more frequent communication.

According to the survey, most families preferred email as their primary form of communication with their child's teacher. More than half of the families who participated also felt as though their child's teacher was accessible through technology. However, there are noted discrepancies with perception of communication. Although educators are moving towards technology to communicate with families (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013), some families indicated that they prefer in person discussions rather than through the use of technology. To acknowledge this discrepancy, it is best to utilize both methods to be a productive team (Yumurtachi, 2017). Both educators and families should be mindful of the common goal of positive academic growth and socialization for students as a team effort (Vickers & Minke, 1995). Furthermore, for educators, this implies the necessary action of surveying families on how they would like to be communicated with throughout the school year. The team-based approach begins with thorough communication.

The perception the families have towards technological communication, according to this survey, show that slightly more than half of the participants view communication as interactive as opposed to one-sided from the teacher or non-existent. Using this information, educators should make an effort to be interactive when communicating with families rather than posting information without allowing some form of response or discussion. Collaboration and interaction could also be beneficial within families using a discussion board. Utilizing online platforms or mobile applications has proven to aid in the development of professional relationships, increase parent involvement, and reinforce information shared among the school community (Can, 2016). Providing families with a platform to work together may facilitate positive relationships as well as become more self-reliant as a group.

Additionally, previous research supports current results in relation to advice from families to improve communication (Tatar, 2009). Families who responded to the survey provided a wide range of advice which included the different levels of appropriateness when using technology as well as the benefits of using technology when considering time constraints. Most families acknowledged that reciprocity when communicating through technology is necessary, and that they would rather receive an abundance of information rather than not enough. This form of advice should be encouraged and welcomed by educators and administrators (Tatar, 2009). According to Can (2016), collaboration among families and educators in regards to communication strategies has an overall positive effect on a student's academic standing and achievement.

Conclusively, despite a family's preference or perception of communication with their child's teacher, an overarching concept required on each end is the general need for communication. Educators expect a level of openness and communication from families, and the same is expectation is held for educators to reciprocate the communication. Early in the school year, it is important to identify how families want to be communicated with, when they are best reached, and what topics they will be reached out regarding. By setting clear expectations and outlining concise processes, both families and educators will be aware of their respective roles as well as what is to be anticipated in future communications.

Implications for Educational Team Members

Although the focus of this study centered on teachers specifically, these concepts could transfer into communication practices within the school-based educational team. In order to be an effective member of the educational team, one must be able to communicate effectively as well as engage in active listening. Many educational professionals appear to be natural communicators. Communication, however, is a skill that is learned and evolves throughout a lifetime (Hurjui, 2014). Team members are expected to communicate through several communication methods to reach families in order to best meet their needs due to advances in technology and changing expectations of schools (Mullen, Griffith, Greene, & Lambie, 2014). Various communication methods could potentially utilize technology or more traditional methods to reach families or educators.

Families are a significant part of the student's life in relation to school success, however, it is important for educational professionals to recognize that the family acts as its own system separate from the school setting. As the forefront of socialization, schools and families act as the prime facilitators (Kraus, 1998). Therefore, educational personnel, specifically school counselors, and families must work to combine these systems to be a cohesive social and academic experience. Additionally, modelling appropriate communication techniques and patterns in school shows young learners how to effectively communicate with their families, peers and eventually supervisors (Hurjui, 2014). Students will likely pick up on the effectiveness of communication within the relationships of the adults in their lives in order to transfer that into real world experiences.

It is also important to overcome any potential barriers to communication in order to resolve issues outside of the classroom that may have an effect on a student's learning (Hurjui, 2014). Barriers could include access or lack of understanding of technology. Research has suggested that, in order to overcome barriers in communicating with students and families, educational personnel should incorporate a family component or approach to the curriculum, ideally in counseling (Kraus, 1998). This model's concepts of teamwork and thorough communication to students, as well as combining the two systems concurrently helps to have a more active communication style and can potentially improve their lives both in school and at home. In order to most effectively bridge the gap between home and school life, it

is suggested to hold in-service professional development trainings to discuss such matters (Gary, 1991). Ideally these trainings would be data driven and interactive based on the district's needs.

Furthermore, in order to meet goals within the educational setting, having a positive and functioning relationship is necessary (Hurjui, 2014). Without strong relationships among the administration, school counselor, student, family, and educators, it is unlikely that each party will comply with an educational plan to meet appropriate goals. Overall, the effects of the aforementioned stakeholders in collaboration with families have an effect far beyond the walls of a school building (Kraus, 1998). This collaboration begins with noting effective communication patterns, techniques, and has adaptability to change with differing feedback or perceptions.

Limitations and Future Research

The researchers identify that there are limitations within this research study. A primary limitation is the limited sample size of responses to the survey. The limited number of responses makes it difficult for the researchers to generalize the results. Furthermore, on a more global scale, another limitation could be the use of one elementary school for this study. The intention behind using one elementary school was for that particular setting to benefit from the results directly, and implement appropriate communication patterns moving forward. To replicate and improve on this study, it is recommended that researchers distribute the survey district-wide in order to create a communication plan for the school community. Future research should surround communication trends among the various members of an educational team such as school counselors, social workers, or administrators. The researchers encourage duplication of this study based on these limitations in order for elementary educators to use best practices in terms of communicating with families through technology.

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Appendix 1

Communication Survey – Sent via email
through University Polling Institute software
from the School Principal

Demographic Questions

Primary Language Spoken:
- English
- Spanish

Grade Level of Your Child (Note if Multiple)
- Kindergarten
- First Grade
- Second Grade
- Third Grade

Child's Classroom Classification
- Special Education
- General Education

Racial Identification
- Caucasian
- African American
- Asian
- Hispanic
- American Indian
- Other: _____

Highest Achieved Educational Level
- Some High School
- High School Graduate
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Master's Degree
- Doctorate
- Other:_____

Gender
- _____

Access Questions

Do you have a computer or tablet with internet access at home?
- Yes
- No

How often do you use the Internet?
- Never
- 10 minutes per day
- 30 minutes per day
- 1 hour per day
- 3 hours per day
- 4+ hours per day

What is your primary use for the Internet?
- Social Media
- News Updates
- Email
- School Updates
- Other: _____

Do you have a mobile phone with Internet access?
- Yes
- No

Do you ever access the Internet from locations outside of your home?
- Yes. If so, where? _____
- No

Pattern Questions

In what way do you prefer to communicate with your child's teacher?
- Phone Call
- Text Message
- Email
- Online Parent Portal
- Other: _____

How does your child's teacher typically communicate with you?
- Phone Call
- Text Message
- Email
- Online Parent Portal
- Other: _____

When your child's teacher does communicate, typically, what do they communicate with you? Check all that apply.
- Weekly Classroom Updates
- Academic Progress
- Behavior Concerns
- Other: _____

How often does your child's teacher use technology (email, online parent portal, phone call) to communicate with you?
- Multiple times per week
- Twice per week
- Once per week
- Bi-weekly
- Once per month
- Once each marking period
- Never

Perception Questions

Do you feel as though your child's teacher is accessible through technology?
- Yes
- Somewhat
- No

How do you view the flow of communication with your child's teacher through technology?
- One sided
- Interactive
- Non-existent
- Other: _____

Advice Questions

What advice would you give your child's teacher regarding communication with technology?

_____

_____

_____

What advice would you give your child's teacher, if any, on what NOT to do when communicating through technology?

_____

_____

_____