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Preschool Parents' Preferred Method to Communicate with Their Child's Teacher

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Preschool Parents' Preferred Method to Communicate with Their Child's Teacher

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Abstract

This ex-post facto research was conducted to identify preschool parents' preferred method to utilize when communicating with their child's teacher. It also was conducted to determine if the preferred method differed based on socioeconomic status. The researcher tracked the primary ways families chose to communicate most frequently by recording how many times emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, and texting through applications such as Remind, ClassDojo, and Facebook Messenger were sent by parents. Data analyzed through a Friedman Test, a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, and a Mann-Whitney U Test revealed parents significantly communicated more through texting applications. The findings did not differ based on socioeconomic status of the families.

Preschool Parents' Preferred Method to Communicate with Their Child's Teacher

The most significant factor in a child's school success is their parent's engagement in their learning (Gross, Bettencourt, Taylor, Lucine, & Bower, 2019; Powell, Son, File, & San Juan, 2010; Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016; Wilder, 2014). It is important for parents or caregivers to encourage learning at home and involve themselves in their children's education. Successful parental engagement can boost students' reading skills, test scores, and improve school attendance (Santiago et al., 2016).

Parental engagement happens when teachers involve parents in school meetings or events, and parents volunteer their support at home and at school. When parents and teachers work together to support and improve student learning and development, it can promote lifelong learning in students (Baker, Wise, Kelly, & Skiba, 2016; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012). Parental engagement in schools is a collaborative process between teachers and parents. For collaboration to work, teachers must commit to reaching out to engage parents in meaningful ways, and parents must commit to actively supporting their children's learning and development (Baker et al., 2016).

A number of meta-analyses have documented that children whose families are more involved in school display higher levels of achievement than those of families of children who are less involved (Baker et al., 2016; Dearing, Kreider, Simkins, & Weiss, 2006; Jeynes, 2011; Wilder 2014). The types of engagement that led to better outcomes included attending parent–teacher conferences and parent meetings, visiting and volunteering in the classroom, and participating in social events in the school.

The awareness that parental engagement has a positive effect on students' academic achievement and success is so compelling that the Iowa Department of Education has made it

one of its main components for qualification to obtain support from the Statewide Voluntary

Preschool Program for Four-Year-Old Children. Program Standard 7 states, "the program

establishes and maintains collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's

development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language,

and culture" (Iowa Department of Education, 2017, p. 19).

This ex-post facto research will focus on parental engagement in the form of parent-

teacher communication. It will uncover which parental communication strategy parents preferred

to utilize with their child's teacher when their child attended a 4-year old preschool classroom at

a research site in Iowa. It will also investigate if engagement with different communication

strategies differed based on the family's socioeconomic status (SES). By better understanding

how parents prefer to communicate, the program will be better prepared to use the types of

communication that increase communication from parents.

Review of the Literature

The importance of parental engagement in children's learning has been well documented

(Baker et al., 2016; Dearing et al., 2006; Gross et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2010; Wilder, 2014).

Numerous studies have shown that parental engagement, beginning as early as the preschool

years, has a positive effect on children's academic achievement, emotional development, and

behavior (Baker et al., 2016; Fantuzzo, McWayne, & Perry, 2004; Lawson et al., 2012; Wilder,

2014). Families may be involved in their children's education in a variety of ways including

involvement in the home through reading to their child and helping with homework (Fantuzzo et

al., 2004). They can be involved in the school through volunteering in the classroom as well as

through parent-teacher communication. These forms of parental engagement help students

succeed in education (Gross et al. 2019; Powell et al., 2010; Wilder, 2014).

Improved Outcomes

Parental engagement in education has been identified as a beneficial factor in young children's learning (U. S. Department of Education, 2020). A study of Head Start students analyzed the relationships between parental engagement and student outcomes. The participants of this study included 144 children that ranged in age from 46 to 68 months. The participants were enrolled in central city Head Start centers in a large urban setting in the Northeast. The tool used to collect data was the Family Involvement Questionnaire. Once completed by the child's primary care provider, it was then assessed using the standardized Preschool Learning Behavior Scale. According to Fantuzzo et al., (2004) the assessment revealed that parental engagement was associated with lower conduct problem from their students.

A study drawn from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Department analyzed the relationships between parental engagement and student outcomes. The participants of the longitudinal, multi-method study included 1364 children and their primary caregivers from 10 United States research sites. Data from a Parent-Teacher Involvement Questionnaire was collected. Scores were recorded from three standardized assessment tools: a parent-completed Child Behavior Checklist, a teacher-completed Teacher Report Form, and a parent-and-teacher-completed Social Skill Rating System. The scores from all three of these subscales were summed to create a total SQL Server Reporting Services for each child. Analysis revealed a significant relationship between parental engagement, social skills, and behavioral problems. In fact, increases in parental engagement over time were related to concomitant increases in children's social skills and declines in problem behaviors (Nokali, Bachman, & Votruba-Drzal, 2010).

Wilder (2014) conducted a study to synthesize the results of different meta-analyses that examined the impact of parental involvement on student academic achievement. In this study Wilder conducted qualitative research on nine selected meta-analyses that spanned over a decade. Wilder's (2014) meta-synthesis confirmed the significant role parental engagement plays in children's academic achievement. The findings also revealed that parental engagement in the form of parental expectations for academic achievement played a higher role in academic achievement.

William Jeynes conducted three major meta-analyses in the 2000s. Each confirmed the significant role parental engagement plays in children's academic achievement. Jeynes (2003) analyzed 21 different studies in a meta-analysis to determine the positive impacts of parental engagement. The findings revealed that all measured components of parental involvement had a significant positive impact on academic achievement, regardless of the ethnicity of students and type of academic achievement measures. Two years later, Jeynes (2005) analyzed 41 different studies in a meta-analysis to determine the impacts of parental engagement. Findings revealed there was a strong relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement among urban students regardless of their gender or ethnicity. The findings of Jeynes' (2007) meta-analysis indicated that parental involvement positively impacted academic achievement regardless of ethnicity of children.

Parental engagement is not just helping with homework, attending parent teacher conferences, and collaborating with teachers through email. It also pertains to parents' values and attitudes regarding education and the aspirations they hold for their children. "Although values and attitudes may not directly influence academic outcomes, they may enhance academic achievement indirectly by promoting children's motivation and persistence in challenging

educational tasks" (Nokali et al. 2010, para. 3). Fan and Chen's (2001) meta-analysis found that parental aspiration and expectation for educational achievement had vast correlation with their children's academic achievement. It is the home environment where the child learns the skills, attitudes and behavior which could mold them into a productive and successful student (Ankrum, 2016).

Benefits of Parent-Teacher Communication

Parent engagement also includes intentional efforts made by the teacher to communicate with parents in strategies to improve academic success (Baker et al., 2016). Parent-teacher communication does not always come easy. Studies conducted by Ankrum (2016) and Machen, Wilson, & Notar (2005) involving low socioeconomic mothers, revealed mothers want to be involved in their child's education, but they are less comfortable and trusting around teachers, so they are less inclined to become involved.

A study involving parents and staff of six schools in the Midwest exposed the critical need for good communication. Six family and staff focus groups were from 50 parents and 76 staff members. The focused groups were presented with 12 questions divided into 5 areas. An applied thematic analysis was used as an outline to identify themes, organize codes, and structure a team approach to focus group data analysis (Baker et al., 2016). Data showed that parents and staff believed good communication between home and school provides information and assists in the ability of both parents and staff to help the child (Baker et al., 2016).

According to Hoover-Dempsey (2010), parent expectations and parent-school communication are both key involvement forms of parental engagement. A family-school partnership promotes children's learning and positive behaviors, and the relationship between parents and teachers is a key aspect of the mesosystem between home and school (Froiland &

Davison, 2013). Trust is an important dimension of parent educational engagement and parent-teacher communication (Santiago et al., 2016).

Schools are becoming more aware of the benefits to the quality of school life when schools and families form collaborative relationships (Baker et al., 2016; Smith, Wohlstetter, Kuzin, & De Pedro, 2011). Therefore, schools and the United States government are taking on parental engagement as a serious part of the school's organization through the Family Engagement in Education Act of 2015 to ensure that all parents have opportunities, feel comfortable, and can be involved (Congress.gov, 2015). The United States government has made multiple efforts to push for more parental engagement in the school systems (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006; Ankrum, 2016). The efforts of the acts can be found in many school improvement plans. The Iowa Department of Education has also made collaborative school-family partnerships one of its main criteria for qualification to obtain support from the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four-Year-Old Children (Iowa Department of Education, 2017).

Communication and Technology

The way communication is occurring between parents and teachers is rapidly changing. There are many different tools for communication readily available. Parents and teachers are not limited to handwritten notes, newsletters, phone calls, and face to face conferences. The rise of mobile technologies presents new opportunities for using technology to support parental engagement and successful child development (Hall & Bierman, 2015; Snell, Hindman, & Wasik, 2020). These new technologies can include email, web-based programming, mobile applications, and texting.

Using forms of technology to help parents and teachers communicate is important to parental engagement success (Gauvreau & Sandall, 2017; Snell et al., 2020). According to the Pew Research Center (2019), 96% of Americans now own a cellphone of some kind. The share of Americans who own smartphones is now 81%. Along with mobile phones, Americans own a range of other information devices. Nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults' own desktop or laptop computers, while roughly half own tablet computers and e-reader devices (Pew Research Center, 2019). As a result, most parents are equipped to use technology to foster communication, and communication is a critical plank in the bridge that connects home and school (Snell et al., 2020).

"Sending and receiving text messages is the most prevalent form of communication for Americans younger than 50" (Newport, 2014, para. 2). These American prefer texting as a form of communication over phone calls and email, especially among those categorized as possessing low socioeconomic status. Texting between teachers and families as a form of communication has become increasingly practical since the vast creation of applications that enable educators to communicate with families privately (Gauvreau et al., 2019; Snell et al., 2018). With new technology, teachers and parents can text privately and securely without using their own cellular phone number. Texting has the potential to be a powerful parent-teacher communication tool to help foster positive parental engagement (Snell et al., 2018).

Parent engagement is imperative. Communication with parents is changing because of technology. It is important for schools to stay up-to-date and to modify the way they communicate with parents. That is why it is important for teachers to discern parents 'preferred methods of communication, and whether that differs based on socioeconomic status.

Methods

This ex-post facto research will focus on parental engagement in the form of parent-teacher communication. It will uncover which communication strategy parents preferred to utilize within a 4-year old preschool classroom at a research site in Iowa. It will also investigate if engagement with different communication strategies varied based on a family's socioeconomic status. By better understanding how parents prefer to communicate it will help the program determine which type of communication to increase in the hope of improving communication from parents.

Participants

Twelve parents sending their children to preschool in a small, rural school in Iowa participated in this research. The research site enrolls four-year-old children, and three-year-old children with individual education plans (IEPs). It is funded through the all-inclusive Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for four-year-old children. The location of the research site is in a high poverty area (SchoolDigger, 2020). Many students in the school district are on free and reduced lunches due to their family's low income. The community's population is primarily Caucasian. Of the 12 families enrolled at the research site, 41.67% are considered low socioeconomic status, 8.33% are a minority race, and 25% are divorced.

Per Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards (2017), it is the teacher's responsibility to establish and maintain collaborative relationships with each child's family to foster children's development in all settings. These relationships are sensitive to family composition, language, and culture. Therefore, quantitative data was collected by the researcher to gain a more in-depth understanding of how parents prefer to communicate with their child's teacher to engage in their child's learning.

The data was collected by the researcher with permission from the research site's administrator in the 2019-20 academic school year. The researcher received an exemption form from Northwestern College's Institutional Review Board (IRB) when conducting this research. The research conducted during the ex-post facto study was viewed as normal educational practice. Collecting data on parental communication is typical within the researcher's program. The researcher is mandated to provide parental communication data to the state of Iowa during their yearly audits to comply with Iowa Quality Preschool Program regulations. Also, the research is unlikely to adversely impact student learning. Therefore, Institutional Review Board approval was not needed.

However, the researcher did have to seek administration's approval to compare communication data to find a correlation between high and low socioeconomic families. When asked to the have access to this information the researcher was only given initials of the families that were considered low socioeconomic status. It was also agreed upon between the administration and researcher that the research could not use the school's name or students' names within their research. Last, all data collected needed to be returned to the administration upon completion of their study.

Data Collection

In August of 2019, the researcher supplied parents with information on different options they could utilize when trying to communicate with their child's teacher. The given options included a weekend folder that would house handwritten communication, a list of important school phone numbers, a list of important school emails, and information on how to download the Remind application to a smartphone. After looking through preschool orientation paperwork, the researcher found that 100% of parents had a phone, and out of those phones, 100% had

smartphone capabilities. It was also found that 10 parents had an active email address. The

researcher kept track of the main ways families chose to communicate by recording how many

times emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, and texting through applications such as Remind,

ClassDojo, and Facebook Messenger were sent by parents.

The variables analyzed throughout this research include the independent variables of

parental communication and each family's socioeconomic status. The dependent variable was the

preferred use of platforms to communicate with their child's teacher. The researcher kept track

of the main ways families chose to communicate most frequently by recording how many times

emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, and texting through applications such as Remind,

ClassDojo, and Facebook Messenger were sent by parents. The researcher then created four

recording sheets to keep a tally on how often parents used these platforms to communicate with

the teacher to engage in their child's education. At the end of the year the recordings were put

into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to keep an organized record of how parents preferred to

contact the teacher. The Microsoft Excel spreadsheet organized the data by labeling each

family's name in the rows, and the types of communication in the columns. This information was

then transferred into the SPSS data software program to analyze the data.

Results

Table 1

Summary of Parental Contacts Via Device

Device	Low SES	High SES	Total
Emails	7	27	34
Phone Calls	6	6	12

Handwritten Notes	4	5	9
Text Messages	611	1,046	1,657

The study sought to answer the following research question: What are preschool parents'
preferred methods to utilize when communicating with their child's teacher? The frequencies by
which parents from both socioeconomic groups used each method are presented in Table 1. A
Friedman Test was conducted to determine if one communication device was preferred by
families over the others. This test was chosen because it is a nonparametric test analogous to a
standard one-way repeated-measures analysis of variance (Howell, 2014, pp. 538-542). The
Friedman Test was conducted using frequency of emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, and
texting through applications. The Friedman Test showed there was a statistically significant
difference in the number of communications sent by parents depending on which type of
communication strategy used, $X^2(3) = 22.15$, p $< .001$.

A Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was then conducted to determine where the significant
difference existed (Howell, 2014, pp. 531-536). A Bonferroni adjustment was used to control for
Type 1 error. The Wilcoxon Signed- Rank Test indicated that parents did not significantly
engage with emails over phone calls when communicating with the teacher *(Z = -1.55, p = .122).*
The median number of emails sent was 3.00 and the median number of phone calls made was
0.00. Parents did not significantly engage with emails over handwritten notes when
communicating with the teacher *(Z = -2.32, p= .020).* The median number of emails sent was
3.00 and the median number of handwritten notes made was 0.00. Last, parents did not
significantly engage with phone calls over handwritten notes when communicating with the

teacher *(Z = -.412, p = .680).* The median number of phone calls made was 0.00 and the median number of handwritten notes made was 0.00.

However, the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test indicated that parents did significantly engage more with text messaging applications over emails when communicating with the teacher *(Z = -2.934, p = .003).* The median number of text messages sent was 102.50 and the median number of emails sent was 3.00. Parents did significantly engage more with text messaging applications over phones calls when communicating with the teacher *(Z = -2.93, p = .003).* The median number of text messages sent was 102.50 and the median number of phone calls made was 0.00. Last, parents did significantly engage more with texting applications over handwritten notes when communicating with the teacher *(Z = -2.98, p = .003).* The median number of text messages sent was 102.50 and the median number of handwritten notes made was 0.00. Therefore, texting through applications was parents' preferred method to use when communicating with their child's teacher.

Does communication with different communication strategies differ based on the family's socioeconomic status? A Mann-Whitney *U* test was conducted to determine if engagement with different communication strategies differed based on the family's socioeconomic status. This test was chosen because it is a nonparametric test for comparing the central tendency of two independent variables with non-normal distributions (Howell, 2014, pp. 524-531). The Mann-Whitney *U* test was conducted using socioeconomic category (high SES or low SES) as the grouping variable. The four dependent variables were the number of emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, or texting application messages received from parents.

The average number of emails (Mann-Whitney *U* = 27.00, p = .149), phone calls (Mann-Whitney *U* = 18.00, p = 1.00), handwritten notes (Mann-Whitney *U* = 14.00, p = .639), or texting

through applications sent by parents (Mann-Whitney U = 20.000, p = .755) did not differ based on socioeconomic status of the families. Therefore, regardless of socioeconomic status parents utilized each communication option at roughly the same frequency.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

Based on the data collected during this study it can be concluded that texting through applications was parents' preferred method to use when communicating with their child's teacher. Parents preferred to utilize texting through an application with their child's teacher over emails, phone calls, and handwritten notes. Also, based on the data collected during this study it can be concluded that regardless of socioeconomic status parents utilized each communication option at roughly the same frequency. Socioeconomic status did not play a role in how often parents communicated with their child's teacher. The average number of emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, or texting through applications that were sent by parents did not differ based on socioeconomic status of the families.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations that may affect the findings of this research. During the 2019-20 school year the researcher's site closed on March 16th until the end of the academic year in May due to the global pandemic, Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). Through mandate of the state and the research site's administration, the researcher's program continued teaching via distance learning. All classroom lectures and teaching were conducted over the Internet via ClassDojo, without students needing to attend the program in person. Therefore, the primary way for parents to communicate with their child's classroom teacher during those three months was through texting applications or email. Another limitation could be during distance learning it was

not made mandatory for students to attend. As a result of this, some families opted to engage in

their child's distance learning less or not at all. Therefore, some family's communication

decreased over the course of three months or ended completely. Another limitation could be the

small sample size that the data was taken from. A class of 12 students is rather small. A small

sample size can skew results, which in return can decreases the power of the study.

Further Research

To further this research, the researcher could incorporate both 4-year-old programs

running at the research site to increase the sample size. This would give the researcher more

families to study and would in return result in more data to analyze. This information could then

assist the researcher to determine if the program meets Standard 7 of the Iowa Quality Preschool

Program Standards with fidelity. It could also aid in updating paperwork and gathering

information used at preschool orientation, home visits, and fall registration. Most importantly it

could help change the way the research site would communicate with families in the future. With

newfound data the research site could potentially use texting applications as their primary way to

communicate with parents.

<div align="center">

Conclusion

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What are preschool parents' preferred method to utilize when communicating with their

child's teacher? The findings in this study show that parents significantly communicated more

through texting applications. The researcher kept track of the main ways families chose to

communicate most frequently by recording how many times emails, phone calls, handwritten

notes, and texting through applications such as Remind, ClassDojo, and Facebook Messenger

were sent by parents. A Friedman Test was conducted to determine if one communication device

was preferred by families over the others. The Friedman Test showed there was a statistically

significant difference in the number of communications sent by parents depending on which type of communication strategy used. This led the research to conduct a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test to determine where the significant difference existed. The significate differences existed in the amount of the median number of text messages sent.

Does communication with different communication strategies differ based on a family's socioeconomic status? The findings in this study show that the average number of emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, or texting through applications sent by parents did not differ based on socioeconomic status of the families. The researcher kept track of the main ways families chose to communicate most frequently by recording how many times emails, phone calls, handwritten notes, and texting through applications such as Remind, ClassDojo, and Facebook Messenger were sent by parents. A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine if engagement with different communication strategies differed based on the family's socioeconomic status. The Mann-Whitney U showed regardless of socioeconomic status parents utilized each communication option at roughly the same frequency.

This study supports prior research that indicates the way parents and teachers are communicating has changed. Communication is key to establishing and maintaining positive partnerships with parents. Texting in the form of applications is at the forefront in ways of how parents prefer to communicate with teachers. The findings in this research could help change the way the research site can keep a positive parent-teacher partnership and communicate with families in the future.

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