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Communication with families: Understanding the perspectives of early childhood teachers

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Abstract

Communication between teachers and families in early childhood is a key aspect of successful teacher-family engagement. The goal of this exploratory study was to investigate how teachers communicated with families in early childhood classrooms and what they communicated about. This study of 31 teachers working with children birth to age five, primarily in the Midwestern U.S. examined how they described communication with families using semi-structured interviews. Findings indicated that teachers used multiple formats to communicate with families about children's daily routines, developmental progress, and other relevant information. Teachers preferred in-person communication although challenges occurred due to classroom dynamics and the global COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Technology such as apps and messaging emerged as an efficient way to reach most families,

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however difficulties facilitating reciprocal communication with families were described. Further research is needed to identify successful communication strategies for both teachers and families, thus building higher quality teacher-family partnerships.

Keywords: childcare teachers, early childhood education, family partnerships, teacher-family communication, technology

In 2019 more than 60% of young children birth to age 5 in the United States (U.S.) attended an early childhood (EC) center-based program (Cui and Natzke, 2021). The relationship between families and those who work in EC programs is widely viewed as important and beneficial for supporting children's development and later school success (Elicker et al., 2013). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2018) and the Office of Head Start (OHS, 2016) recommend EC teachers establish and maintain relationships with the families of children in their care to learn about families' culture, inform families of children's progress, share practical information about classroom activities, and promote family engagement. Indeed NAEYC (2018) emphasizes "we cannot overstate the importance of the relationship between the teacher and the family" (p. 12). Communication is a key facet of forming and maintaining the family-teacher relationship (Marvin et al., 2020).

Although an increasing number of formats are available to facilitate communication between families and EC teachers, little is known about EC teachers' perspectives of these options. Understanding EC teachers' perspectives is important as they are largely responsible for creating the foundation for ongoing communication with families of children in their care, yet their perspectives are insufficiently addressed in the literature. A recent increase in the use of technology in teacher and family communication (Haney, 2020; Snell et al., 2020) coupled with an ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic has forced communication into more indirect forms, for example, the switch to use of online platforms and applications (apps) by teachers in the Pacific region (Dayal and Tiko, 2020) creating a further need to understand teachers' experiences with communication. The purpose of this study was to understand teachers' reports regarding communication with families—both how teachers communicate with families and the content of their communication.

Family engagement

Family engagement is a key component of quality EC programs as recognized by policies and recommendations for best practices in the U.S. and internationally (Acar et al., 2019; NAEYC, 2018; Sabol et al., 2018). Although a complex concept, family engagement is broadly described as the “beliefs, attitudes, and activities of families to support their children’s learning, whether at home, at school, or in the community” (Weiss et al., 2014: xviii). Researchers, practitioners, and policy makers are advocating for a shift away from family engagement activities and practices that are disconnected from curriculum and learning (Casper et al., 2011). Instead, opportunities to extend and integrate learning across settings are encouraged (Casper et al., 2011). It is the shared responsibility of schools and communities to inform families and offer information about children’s learning (Weiss and Lopez, 2015). Thus, family engagement, in part, hinges on the success of teacher and family communication.

The notion that a positive relationship with two-way communication between teachers and families is foundational for advancing children’s outcomes is supported in the research (Christenson and Sheridan, 2001; Marvin et al., 2020; Weiss and Lopez, 2015) and a central tenet of human ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Human ecological theory emphasizes the bi-directional influence of multiple systems and is the guiding framework for this study because the theory identifies the development of communication and relationships between the home and EC teachers as influential to the child’s learning and development. Such bi-directional relationships have been shown to benefit not only children, but families and teachers as well (Dunst et al., 2008; Elicker et al., 2013; Sheridan et al., 2010). Two-way communication that is open, clear, and values everyone involved can foster stronger teacher-family relationships and in turn, improve family engagement and child outcomes (Marvin et al., 2020).

Communication as an element of family engagement

The use of effective communication between teachers and families can help foster children’s learning and development. A study conducted in New Zealand reported that communication with their child’s teacher

supported families to extend learning to the home setting (Higgins and Cherrington, 2017). Furthermore, a literature review inclusive of studies conducted internationally reported that teachers provide more responsive planning when they have knowledge of the family context (Stratigos and Fenech, 2021). Little is known, however, about teachers' perceptions of communicating with families. Addressing this gap is particularly important given the multiple formats that could be used and content that could be addressed in communications to foster family engagement.

Format. Teachers report that family preference is an important factor when selecting the format of communication and that often one format alone is insufficient, requiring multiple formats to reach multiple families (Barnes et al., 2016). Common approaches to communication can be organized into three categories: verbal, paper, and electronic (Barnes et al., 2016).

Verbal communication includes casual face-to-face conversations (e.g. drop-off, pick-up) and more formal conversations (e.g. family-teacher conferences, home visits; Barnes et al., 2016). The scheduled formats to facilitate in-person communications occur infrequently throughout the school year. Conversations with families at pick-up and drop-off are more frequent (Oakes et al., 2020) and serve as a primary and important way for teachers to obtain and share knowledge about the children in their care (Barnes et al., 2016). However, conversations during pick-up and drop-off may have time constraints. A study with Australian teachers found that the lack of time at pick-ups and drop-offs was a challenge in building relationships with families (O'Connor et al., 2018).

Families may also prefer information to be shared in written, paper format if the teacher is not available to talk (McGrath, 2003). Other types of communication distributed via paper include newsletters, notebooks, display boards, and flyers (Barnes et al., 2016). Some teachers see this approach to communication as the most valuable and reliable way to share information with families; however, other teachers noted that written communication lacked reciprocity (Barnes et al., 2016). For example, a paper display of activities, upcoming events, and due dates can be shared via a flyer or bulletin board but does not offer opportunities for families to respond.

Family engagement and communication are evolving as digital media offers extensive opportunities to connect and collaborate with families (Weiss and Lopez, 2015). New electronic technologies available can include, but are not limited to, email, social media, ePortfolios, mobile apps, and texting (Higgins and Cherrington, 2017; Snell et al., 2020; Stratigos and Fenech, 2021). These technologies have features that can make communication easier, such as automatic translation for non-English speakers and allowing individuals to communicate without using their personal mobile phone numbers. Using electronic technologies in EC can provide a fast and easy way to share information and give a professional appearance, with teachers describing apps with an academic focus as helpful for informing families about learning topics at school and extending learning at home (Stratigos and Fenech, 2021).

Content. A primary consideration is the content of communication because what is being shared and discussed is as important as how it is being shared and discussed. There are several topics of communication between teachers and families. Although limited research exists on teachers' perspectives regarding communication with families, Barnes et al. (2016) found that teachers reported wanting to get to know the families personally to learn more about them and build rapport. This was underscored by teachers identifying that without time to build a relationship and get to know each family in a positive way, teachers might only hear from families when problems arise and families are upset, stressing the relationship before it has a chance to be established. The teachers also reported wanting to talk with families about volunteering and being part of the child's classroom, explaining the program policies, and to share knowledge of child development to support developmentally appropriate expectations.

Teachers' content of communication may be influenced by what families prefer and expect. The limited research examining this topic identifies that families report wanting to communicate about their child's activities (e.g. sleeping, behavior; McGrath, 2003), social emotional development, and school performance (Olson and Hyson, 2005). Families also wanted the opportunity to share their own experiences with their child, their priorities, and their opinions and feedback with

teachers (Olson and Hyson, 2005). Additionally, families want personalized information about their child including photographs and information on daily routines such as sleeping and eating (Stratigos and Fenech, 2021).

Purpose

Despite this emerging work, more is known about families' experiences of communication in EC and less about teachers' perspectives. This is critical as teachers play a main role in the communication process. Thus, the focus of this exploratory study was to understand reports of EC teachers' working with children birth to age five about their communication with families. Specifically, we used semi-structured interviews with EC teachers and address two research questions:

- (1) How do teachers communicate with families in their classroom?
- (2) What topics are the focus of communication between teachers and families?

Methods

Participants

We interviewed 31 EC teachers working with children birth to age five, primarily from the Midwestern U.S. Table 1 presents demographic information for participants and their programs. Similar to the characteristics of the US workforce (Paschall et al., 2020), participants mostly identified as Caucasian/White and were female, ranging from 23 to 53 years old. They included both novice and experienced teachers in EC, with an average of 4 years at their current program. Most participants (58.1%) held a Bachelor's degree with a range of other educational experiences. Regarding the type of programs in which teachers worked, most (64.5%) participants identified their programs as receiving some public funding.

Table 1. Teacher and program characteristics ($n = 31$).

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Mean (standard deviation) or frequency</i>	<i>Observed range or %</i>
Age	36.5 (10.1)	23-57
Years worked in early childhood education	10.7 (9.0)	2-30
Years worked at current job	4.0 (3.3)) 0.3-21
Number of children in the classroom	14.0 (5.6)	7-29
Education		
Associate's	3	9.7
Bachelor's	18	58.1
Master's	5	16.1
CDA	1	3.2
Other	2	6.5
Unreported	2	6.5
Type of educational degree		
Early childhood & elementary education related	14	45.2
Non-early childhood & elementary education	9	29.0
Unreported	8	25.8
Race or Ethnicity		
Caucasian/White	27	87.1
Hispanic	1	3.2
African American	1	3.2
Unreported	2	6.5
Gender		
Female	31	100
Program status		
Full day	28	90.3
Half day	1	3.2
Unreported	2	6.5
Program base		
Public	20	64.5
Private	7	22.6
Unreported	4	12.9
Classroom type		
Infant (0-18 months)	3	9.7
Toddler (18-36 months)	7	22.6
Preschool (36-60 months)	18	58.1
Unreported	3	9.7

Data collection

All research procedures were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board prior to beginning data collection. We employed snowball sampling to recruit participants (Sadler et al., 2010). A study flyer including information about the study, participation criteria, and researchers' contact information was shared with community contacts and via social media and resharing was widely encouraged. To be eligible, participants had to: (1) be the legal age of consent (over 19), (2) teach in an EC program, and (3) have scheduled plan time available at work. Interested teachers contacted the researcher and were then emailed additional information about the study. After this, they were asked to complete an online form through Qualtrics and schedule data collection. The consent form informed participants about their rights to withdraw and anonymity for participation. Follow-up email reminders were sent after a week as needed. At the start of the interviews, teachers were verbally re-consented to the study and recording of the interview. Part of the data were collected during the global COVID-19 pandemic and amidst ongoing efforts by EC programs to meet health and safety standards. To accommodate additional strains of the global COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were offered considerable flexibility in scheduling/rescheduling their interviews and the option of not using video during the interview. Thirty-one teachers completed interviews.

The interview protocol was developed to solicit EC teachers' perspectives regarding planning and family engagement aspects of their work as well as their views about the EC field more generally. For this study, teachers' reports regarding communication was the central focus. Interviews were conducted individually by the first three authors between January to December 2020. Research team members recorded their initial thoughts after conducting each interview, a form of memoing (Birks et al., 2008). The semi-structured interviews lasted on average between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted and recorded through an online video conferencing platform Zoom (Zoom Video Communications Inc, 2021). Participants received a \$20 gift card as compensation for their time. Prior to data analyses, all interviews and any other data were de-identified.

Data analysis

All the research team members participated in the data analysis process, with the first, second, and third authors involved in the data collection process thus bringing deep knowledge of the participants for interpretation. The fourth author provided an outside perspective during analysis and encouraged additional interpretations of the data. Prior to analyses, all interviews were transcribed verbatim using the Otter.ai service and the automatic transcription feature of Zoom. The transcripts were checked for accuracy by the first and second authors.

We used an inductive thematic analysis approach to analyze the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and identify significant themes and patterns. Given our central research question for this study, we mainly focused on teachers' responses to three specific interview prompts: (1) *How do you share information with the families of children in your classroom?* (2) *How do families share information with you?*, and (3) *What are the most common things you discuss with families of children in your classroom?* As a first step, all authors read and re-read the transcripts several times to familiarize and immerse themselves in the data. Next, multiple transcripts were randomly chosen, and the same transcripts were read by each member of the research team. In this step transcripts were read in their entirety to begin data immersion and understand teachers' overall thinking about communication and families. After an additional team meeting to review emerging themes, transcripts were divided and assigned to each author. The responses to the three mentioned prompts were analyzed and patterns specific to how communication occurred between teachers and families and the content of communications were identified.

Authors' memos related to interview notes and initial thinking about each interview were referred to during analysis to support data interpretation. Transcripts were then reviewed again in their entirety to identify any other references to communication with families across interview questions. For example, when asked about how their programs supported relationships among families and teachers, one teacher commented that, "I think it's very important to have a relationship with the family, especially now with COVID. I don't get to see my parents because they are not allowed to come and drop

their kids off to the classrooms anymore.” Any such participant responses relating to communication with families across all other interview prompts were also included in our analyses. The emerging patterns after the inclusion of responses to other interview prompts were reviewed and discussed multiple times before arriving at the final themes. The identified patterns were combined to generate overarching themes (Braun and Clarke, 2019).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ reports regarding their communication with families. Almost universally, teachers described valuing relationships with families but also used multiple formats within and across classrooms to meet the needs of their families. These formats were important in shaping the content of communication. Next, we describe teachers’ preference for in-person communication, then turn to unpacking the complexity of the other communication formats and the influence of the global COVID-19 pandemic on these communications. In all instances, the content of the communication and opportunities for how communication facilitated reciprocal relationships with families are described.

Teachers preferred in-person communication

Almost all teachers preferred communicating with families in-person, which primarily consisted of verbal communication. Teachers often described how they communicated during unscheduled meetings such as drop-off or pick-up times. Most of these conversations occurred individually with families and were perceived as important to build the teacher-family relationship. One teacher commented:

We, my families, all have at least talk 15 minutes [sic] at pick-up and that is unusual ... Ours will take a real interest in what’s going on with their kids, how their day went, how they socializing, and all of those things and they developing [sic]. I got great relationships with my families.

Another form of in-person communication commonly mentioned by teachers were the individual family-teacher conferences, home visits, and a few commented the use of family events in the classroom and across the program. These conferences were scheduled throughout the year as needed and evidenced in comments such as, “We’re also required to do conferences for them, so we do conferences, when they turn two and a half, and then when they turn three....” and “So we do conferences with the parents, so anytime they want to check in with us.” For some teachers, these events were important to building connection with families, for example, one teacher said, “We have parent nights ... So, we just want to build that community.”

The content of these various in-person communications varied. Teachers often reported sharing information about children’s daily routines and any concerns or challenges which may have occurred throughout the day during the daily unscheduled meetings. Additionally, teachers reported that families used the daily in-person conversations to communicate with them and share information about their children’s routines at home or any upcoming events (e.g. doctor appointments). For example, one teacher commented, “We talked about how their nights were, how their morning has been.” These in-person conversations provided opportunities for back and forth sharing of information between teachers and families, evidencing reciprocity between teachers and families. This is exemplified by one teacher, “... you get to have that conversation. I feel like it puts you on a deeper level of understanding the child and where they’re coming from because you’re understanding their home background.”

Discussions with families relating to goals for the school year, children’s developmental progress, and any behavioral challenges generally occurred during the scheduled family-teacher conferences and home visits. This was evident in comments such as “The parent teacher conferences kind of talking, where they’re at developmentally, what our next steps are, what our goals are” and “then also during the conferences, we kind of discuss where they are right now in each of the domains, you know, social emotional, language, literacy, math, science, those things that we’re seeing, where they’re at and where they’ll be heading.” Although the scheduled in-person conversations may provide opportunities for reciprocal communication from families, there were no direct mentions in the teachers’ responses about how families communicated back through these conferences.

Descriptions of how the global COVID-19 pandemic health and safety regulations adversely impacted in-person communications underscores the importance of in-person communications for teachers. Many teachers discussed the loss of in-person communication and the impact it had on relationships. One teacher described:

... because we don't have those, you know, those one-on-one interactions. Those are[sic] really one-on-one and face-to-face conversations are a huge part of, you know, the relationship building.... And trying to figure out how you replace that, which I don't think you can totally replace it.

Given the global COVID-19 pandemic, many teachers described how they shifted to using electronic formats (e.g. using google texts, zoom video conferencing) to replace these in-person communications as exemplified by this teachers' comment:

Well, because of the virus, really nobody can come beyond the front door ... I mean, we send out a text and try to connect with them, how they best want to be connected. I mean, some want the, you know, phone call, some want the text message, some want email, some want Facebook Messenger.

This teacher, like others, described the shift to alternative formats of communication to facilitate reciprocal communication with families and increase family engagement.

Growing role of electronic communication

Electronic communication was another commonly mentioned format of communication and used daily by teachers. Most teachers reported using online apps (e.g. *Tadpole*, *Seesaw*) and/or social media to communicate with families both individually and as a group. As one teacher described, "We use the Learning Genie app. It's a communication system with [sic] where we record observations to connect to the curriculum as well as weekly messages, any school messages. So, it's all connected through that app."

The content of communication between teachers and families and the reciprocal nature of the communication was influenced by the type of electronic communication used and the opportunities it provided. Most often apps and sometimes social media were used to communicate children's participation in learning activities by sharing pictures and videos of children. Furthermore, some teachers even mentioned being required by their program to share a minimum number of pictures through apps. "We are asked to send at least two pictures a day of each child like doing an activity as well. So, they get all of that information." Despite the frequent sharing of pictures and videos of children's activities with families, teachers did not describe how communication through apps and social media were accompanied by explanations for how activities supported children's learning. Rather they seemed to be more about "showing" and less about explaining the activities in the curriculum or inviting families to respond back—best exemplified in the last quote about families "getting information."

Other types of electronic formats that were used include emails, phone calls, and text messages. These were used for communication about children's daily routines, program-wide events, and any concerns (e.g. a high temperature) which may have occurred during the day. These conversations occurred both individually and as group communication depending on the purpose. One teacher described the use of emails to share group information to all families in her classroom, "So every Friday, my classroom, we send out an email to the parents, we usually provide next week's lesson plan. . .or if we have an event coming up, will usually communicate with them that way." In many cases these seemed to be about teachers sharing information with families but lacked an invitation or reason for families to respond.

Teachers also described communicating daily routines to families electronically, for example, ". . . throughout the day, we have it [daily notes] on iPads, we mark their bathrooms, when they slept, where we're located if we're on the playground or taking a walk." This format provided some opportunity for reciprocal communication from families and a few teachers encouraged families to share relevant information through apps. For example, one teacher commented:

What we've asked the parents now with COVID is we've asked them to provide any communication, like any kind of communication, that they have for us on to Tadpoles, like how their child's night went, the night before, do they sleep well, as they have breakfast, that kind of thing.

However, despite the opportunity for reciprocal communication, this approach often resulted in one-way communication. One teacher voiced this challenge and desire for families to be more responsive through apps, "I think, as a parent, it's just hard to remember to like enter in notes or whatever. It's convenient, as a teacher, I wish more parents would." This teacher described how despite the ease of communicating via apps, families often did not take advantage of those opportunities. Another teacher commented that she used multiple approaches to reach families. "So, some of those ones that I can't, I don't have a high response on Seesaw or email, I'll text them and they will normally text me back." Similarly, other teachers tried to be more adaptable in order to increase reciprocal communication.

The global COVID-19 pandemic partly influenced the use of electronic format by teachers and replaced the more formal, in-person family-teacher conferences and family events through video conferencing platforms such as Zoom. This was evident in comments such as, "another thing we do is we've been zooming with families that want to have conferences," and "I did have a parent meeting last night, over Zoom." Some teachers also described that, although sharing their personal phone numbers was unconventional, it was the format used to facilitate reciprocal communication, particularly during the global COVID-19 pandemic. One teacher mentioned:

I had a parent actually call me last night to ask me a question on my personal phone which you know that's like a boundary that I wouldn't have cross before, but after COVID is like, you know, you have to do certain things to stay in contact.

Adapting to the global COVID-19 pandemic regulations, a few teachers also found creative ways for community building and for families to engage with each other in the absence of program-wide events. For example:

We created a parent talk time where we can create a Zoom and all the parents of that age group can meet via Zoom and talk about things and ask questions and get advice from one another and from us.

This type of electronic communication facilitated reciprocity and community building by providing families opportunities to respond to information shared by teachers and engage with other families virtually.

Complexities of paper communication

Overall, paper formats were infrequently mentioned, but were still used by some teachers to communicate with families. A few teachers used handwritten notes or daily sheets to send home to families and share information. One teacher described this as “we have papers each day that we fill out, like when they were changed, when they were fed.” However, some teachers struggled with receiving communication from families in this manner and described how families sometimes were unaware of the notes sent home. This is evident in comments such as, “I don’t think that parents check their backpacks either, so a lot of stuff are just still in their backpack,” and “. . .we have a folder that goes home every day back and forth. And I don’t really get notes in there.” Although a few teachers mentioned difficulties reaching out to families this way, there were no clear responses on the reciprocal communication that handwritten notes elicited from families.

The paper format of communication was also used for sharing group information with families in and across the classrooms. Some teachers used monthly or weekly newsletters to communicate group information such as one teacher reported, “Every week I send out a weekly newsletter that I write up, on the newsletter I write down like the unit that week that was the theme.” Another type of group communication occurred through family information classroom boards, exemplified by this teacher’s description, “And then I have a bulletin board that’s kind of like a panel documentation out in the hallway that shows a lot of their artwork.” Similarly, one teacher reported sharing learning goals via a family information board, “It actually has like our letter of the week, our color of the week, our Spanish, our sign language and in all of that [sic] on there. So that’s kind of how we keep in touch.”

Some teachers shifted away from this during the global COVID-19 pandemic, “Well before COVID, we would share information by talking to them and by a parent newsletter and by just notes if there was something coming up”

Additionally, paper communication, in part, occurred through evolving electronic technologies (e.g. through apps and emails). This was evident in comments such as “we have a Tadpoles app on our iPad. And so, we record all of that information into their daily sheet.” Here the teacher described how apps served as an electronic version of daily sheets, sharing similar information with families but virtually. Thus, this format no longer entirely occurred through paper and overlapped with electronic format of communication.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand teachers’ reports regarding their communication with families, focusing on the format and content of these communications. Our findings align with previous research (Barnes et al., 2016) identifying communication formats as verbal, electronic, and paper; with paper merging into the electronic format. Importantly, the findings indicated that the format of communication influenced what was communicated, who was sharing information, and the reciprocity of communication between families and teachers. Additionally, the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic influenced how teachers communicated with families and seemed to accelerate the use of technology. Next, we discuss our findings and their implications for practice.

Communication important to building strong teacher-family partnership

Participants emphasized communication with families as important for building strong familyteacher relationships. In-person communication was the most preferred format and occurred through unscheduled conversations during drop-offs and pick-up times, to share information about daily routines such as nap and food schedules. These conversations garnered reciprocity from families and were perceived

by teachers as creating stronger family-teacher relationships. Our results are in accordance with research finding that families' communications about children's routines and behaviors assists in building rapport between families and teachers (McGrath, 2003). Having the opportunity for face-to-face conversation can facilitate a bi-directional dialog between teachers and families, as well ensuring families and teachers relay important information directly (e.g. doctor visits, program closings, etc.).

Although in-person communication had benefits of facilitating higher family reciprocity, limitations in time seemed to be a struggle in engaging in meaningful communication for both teachers and families. Previous research with teachers in Australia reported in-person conversations as a challenge when considering the limited time during these conversations (O'Connor et al., 2018). Additionally, not all families may have the resources and the availability to engage in lengthy conversations with teachers during drop-offs and pick-ups which may contribute to some families having less opportunities for engaging in reciprocal conversations about their child. The global COVID-19 pandemic was another constraint to in-person communication that restricted informal conversations, with some teachers sharing how they missed the opportunity to communicate with families in-person. Thus, although in-person communication seems to be a preference for both teachers and families, there is still a need for alternative methods for communication.

Advantages and challenges to electronic communication

Technology improved teachers' access to families through tools such as apps, social media, texts and calls, video conferencing and emails; especially at times where traditional in-person communication opportunities were limited. Consistent with previous literature (Thompson et al., 2015), technology aided the development of regular, positive communication between teachers and families. Our findings illustrate that the content of communication generally had an academic focus with daily routines communicated electronically too. The limited research both in the U.S. and internationally, about the content of teacher-family communication has shown that families want teachers to share school progress and individualized pictures of

children (Olson and Hyson, 2005; Stratigos and Fenech, 2021). Our findings highlight that teachers were addressing these expectations. This can be significant in establishing a responsive family-teacher relationship, where families and teachers are on the same page and feel valued. Furthermore, aligned with previous studies (Barnes et al., 2016), our findings indicated that communicating through the paper format seldom occurred and was perceived as an inefficient way to engage families. Using electronic technologies can provide opportunities for reciprocal written communication occurring virtually and instantly. Providing information to families in a variety of formats (e.g. in-person conversations, emails, and apps) increases the likelihood that they will receive the information in a timely manner and ensures that no information is missed due to varying communication preferences of families.

Despite facilitating daily communication and the ability to reach families quicker, the electronic format also had limitations. Technology may increase teacher workload and influence having work-life boundaries (Stratigos and Fenech, 2021). In our study, some teachers shared how they communicated after work hours with families over phone calls and texts which became more pronounced during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Supporting teachers to have work boundaries may be critical for supporting teacher wellness.

Program requirements may put pressure on teachers to focus on the quantity of documentation rather than communicating meaningful information to families. Participants reported sharing required images and videos of children participating in classroom activities but did not report how they connected the sharing of children's activities to their learning. This lack of connection to the curriculum may be a missed opportunity to explain to families how children's learning is supported through classroom activities and to extend learning to home. Further, consistent with earlier literature (Stratigos and Fenech, 2021), teachers noted that only a few families used apps to communicate back with them. Together, the missed opportunity to show children's learning by teachers and lower reciprocity from families when using electronic format can be a concern for family engagement. With new technologies adopted often by programs, further research is needed to support teachers in effectively utilizing emerging technologies to share meaningful information with

families. Importantly, a study in New Zealand found that teachers were overwhelmed with the frequency of technological communication (Higgins and Cherrington, 2017). Likewise, future research can benefit from examining the perspectives of families about communication through technology, to ensure more reciprocity from families and to make sure that they are not overwhelmed by the frequency of communication by teachers.

Supporting in-person communication through other tools

In-person communication is the prevalent format of communication used in EC settings (Barnes et al., 2016). However, as mentioned previously, not every family may have the affordance to engage in conversations during daily drop-offs and pick-ups, which was further exacerbated by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Using alternative in-person communication tools can support both teachers and families to increase the frequency of reciprocal communication and stay engaged. Some teachers in our study used electronic video conferencing platform for family-teacher conferences. Such use of technology provides ease of access to both teachers and families and allows for in-person communication virtually and during times preferred by teachers and families. Although access to internet and technology may not be accessible to all families; some families may benefit from communicating this way, thus providing teachers longer time to communicate with families about their children's learning without classroom distractions, and more opportunities present for families to communicate back with teachers.

Relaying vital information to families who are unable to communicate at length with teachers is crucial. Paper format in our study was seldom reported to be used by teachers and lacked clarity on facilitation of reciprocity from families. Nevertheless, paper tools such as newsletters can supplement in-person communication and be one way to overcome limited communication during dropoffs and pick-ups. Prior research has found that families do prefer written communication when they are unable to talk to teachers (McGrath, 2003). Yet, care should be taken to not primarily rely on any one format for relaying information to families. In our study, some teachers using paper format reported difficulties with communicating this

way because families were unaware of notes sent home. The bi-directional influence of multiple systems, central to the human ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), makes a successful two-way partnership between teachers and families crucial to child outcomes (Marvin et al., 2020). To help teachers build strong teacher-family partnerships and identify successful communication strategies, future research should examine the effectiveness of the types of formats teachers use in garnering reciprocal communication and engagement and how these communication strategies are related to children's learning development. Teacher training programs are one way to provide opportunities for teachers to learn and practice effective communication strategies, especially for engaging hard-to-reach families, regardless of the format of communication. However, it is also not feasible to train and expect teachers to adhere to each family's preferences individually. A balance between generally meeting families' needs and at the same time not overwhelming and overworking teachers is essential.

Limitations

This study sought to understand EC teachers' reports about communicating with families, including *how* and *what* teachers discussed with families. Although not intended to be representative of all EC teachers, the sample size of this study should be considered when interpreting the findings. Additionally, as this study was focused on the reports of teachers as a means to share their experiences regarding communication, no families were included. Still, family engagement is meant to support the child's learning at home and school, thus future research should also examine families' perspectives about communication concurrently and connect this to children's learning. Lastly, the onset of global COVID-19 pandemic occurred during data collection and although some data reflect the experiences of teachers related to global COVID-19, the interview protocol did not include a specific question about the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on communication and more direct investigations of this may be merited.

Conclusion

Communication between the home and school environments is important because it is an avenue for promoting family engagement. Exploring teachers' perspectives provides valuable insight into the formats teachers use, the content they share, and family's opportunities for reciprocity. Teachers reported that communication is valuable to their ability to partner with families and although teachers prefer in-person interactions, they have adapted to using other tools to support communication. Electronic formats of communication are valuable and have many advantages, however, teachers also acknowledged challenges and nuances to using electronic and multiple formats of communication. Overall, it is not feasible for teachers to individualize communication formats based on each family's preferences and expecting them to do so can contribute to work overload. Communication formats should be selected with the needs of families in mind but also be manageable for teachers.

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