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Educator Self-Reflection: Parent Communication Methods in Special Education

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Abstract

Communication between educators and parents/guardians increases positive relationships as well as provides opportunities for collaboration. Purposeful and intentional planning for the communication allows for positive moments, thoughts, ideas, and concerns regarding a students' educational progress (academics, services, social/emotional) to be shared. West and Pirtle (2014) found that parents feel the essential qualities for special education teachers to possess include understanding, training, and effective communication. They felt it was important that their child's special education teacher was able to effectively communicate with the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team; this included seeing the educator/parent or guardian relationship as a 'partnership.'

When students have multiple needs and receive multiple special education services, it is *vital* that relationships are built and communication is ongoing between parents/guardians and the student's case manager. This is often completed via the use of communication notebooks, behavior charts or emails. However, even with daily communication and tools, parents may feel as though they are missing important information or even feel uncomfortable. In one study, conducted with 281 parents of students with disabilities, only 56% felt comfortable sharing their thoughts, feelings and concerns during IEP meetings and 32% of parents experienced negative reactions from others at meetings and (Ingalls et al., 2016).

As a special educator who primarily works with students with multiple and severe needs, I created this project to reflect on all types of communication, various formats, and benefits of communication between parents/guardians and myself. Through this reflection and analysis, I found patterns in the types of communication that were most successful, communication that resulted in changes to teaching or learning practices, and what was most beneficial to students

themselves. I found that communication opportunities and occurrences took place most often with my students who were non-verbal and had more significant needs. I also found that sharing daily behavior charts with parents/guardians often resulted in only one-way communication. Through these findings, I have reviewed and considered new systems of communication to ensure comfort and positive relationship building with students' parents/guardians.

Introduction

Background

Communication, defined as “a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior,” as well as “information transmitted or conveyed,” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) is a behavior that requires thoughtful consideration, initiative, and response. Communication can encompass a great deal of information and carry a significant amount of weight. In education, communication between all stakeholders, including with numerous school personnel and the families of students, is imperative. Over the last eight years I have worked in education, more specifically in the role as a special education teacher. Special education has continued to change and evolve over the last eight years, but one thing that has remained constant and essential is communication between special education staff (special education teachers, paraprofessionals, service providers, administrators), related school staff, and students’ families.

In reviewing the field of special education, communication centers around students' needs and processes, and special education policies and processes (Strassfeld, 2018, p.285) and it may involve different forms (verbal, non-verbal/visual/written) and occur through different formats (phone, text, email, face-to-face). Communication may be affected by the purpose behind the communication. For example, formal communication meant to convey special education policies, procedures, processes and student services during evaluation processes or individual education plan (IEP) meetings is much different than the informal day-to-day communication encounters or interactions, including emails, phone calls, direct messaging, or written notes regarding academic and behavioral progress.

Throughout the last eight years, I have reflected upon my teaching, not only in service delivery, but also in communicating and collaborating with those individuals most involved in students' educational careers. For the purposes of this study I considered my communication interactions and methods with the parents/guardians of the students I provide services to and students I casemanage. I considered the relationships I have with the students and their parents/guardians as well as the typical communication types and formats that were utilized. Alternative methods and formats that I might utilize to improve communication between parents/guardians and myself were evaluated and explored. Through this reflection and analysis, my goal was to find patterns of the types of communication that were most successful, communication that resulted in changes to teaching or learning practices, and those that were most beneficial to students.

In this journey, I found three factors to take into consideration with communication and collaboration: the view of the teachers, the view of the parents/guardians, and the involvement of the parents/guardians. Finally, I found that communication methods between parents/guardians and school personnel should be evaluated to ensure adequate and effective communication opportunities. The next section highlights each of these factors.

Teachers' Views of Communication

Teachers are required to take many classes throughout their college education program to ensure they are adequately prepared for their role as an educator. Required classes and courses vary depending on area of focus but one area that is often lacking or missing from these programs focuses on parental communication and collaboration. In fact, it is evident from research that teachers do not feel adequately prepared to communicate and collaborate with the

parents of the students they work with. Murray et al. (2008) stated, “All too often, graduating teacher candidates lack the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and confidence necessary for building collaborative relationships with parents.” Strassfeld (2018) highlighted why this lack of skills can be detrimental,

When teachers are poorly equipped with the basic skills to communicate effectively with parents, to offer support and resources to parents as they navigate the special education system, or to share and disseminate knowledge regarding advocacy and mediation remedies available under law when disputes arise, parents lose an opportunity to tap into the potentially rich resources and knowledge of a special education teacher (Strassfeld, 2018, p. 284).

In a study conducted by Beck and DeSutter (2020), special education professionals shared that they had not received adequate training through their college programming on how to facilitate IEP meetings. This was true even as special educators know that IEP meetings are a key time in which effective communication and collaboration is important. The special education professionals involved in this study felt “the education courses they took during their degree programs did not provide group or meeting facilitation skills necessary to run high-intensity and high-stakes IEP meetings” (Beck & DeSutter, 2020, p. 133). Although not every IEP meeting facilitated by a special education teacher needs to be described as ‘high-intensity’ or ‘high-stakes,’ feeling adequately prepared and comfortable to lead an IEP meeting is important. Strassfield (2018) adds to this, stating that special education teachers have a complex role, “including responsibilities and obligations to both a school or district and parents, and both parties may have competing interests and goals that a teacher has to manage carefully” (p.289). It is evident that additional professional training, at the college level, is needed in order for special

education teachers to feel that they are prepared to lead meetings with students' parents/guardians as well as manage their complex roles.

College level teacher preparation programs include limited focus on parental involvement; including necessary skills for communication, informing parents/guardians, and providing them with valuable resources (Strassfeld, 2018, p. 290-291). Strassfeld proposed that teacher preparation programs include program course(s) on parental involvement "...because of the wide range of theory, practice, and pedagogical matters that should be addressed to adequately prepare pre-service teachers to provide both academic instruction to students and support to families" (Strassfeld, 2018, p.290). It is also proposed that "family involvement training in teacher education programs should be fostered over a period of time using a variety of methods throughout the curricula" (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009, p. 498). There is not one instructional method that will adequately prepare teachers to work with parents/guardians, so it is important that they are provided with varied approaches and opportunities to learn and practice effective knowledge and skills for communicating with students' parents/guardians (Ratcliff & Hunt, 2009, p. 498).

Parents'/Guardians' Views on Communication and Collaboration

It is important to recognize parents'/guardians' feelings surrounding special education. Navigating the 'world' of special education, even as a veteran parent of a child receiving special education, can be challenging as policies, processes, and procedures change and evolve. Therefore, as parents do navigate this world it is imperative special educators consider their roles and how they might support parents and their feelings. The following sections highlight specific

times in the special education process where communication is vital: initial diagnosis, labeling, and meetings.

Initial Diagnosis. Research has demonstrated that parents/guardians have varying feelings and views towards special education (Ingalls et al., 2016, Fish, 2006). In a study conducted by Ingalls, Hammond, Paez, and Rodriguez (2016) the reactions of parents/guardians when notified that their child may have a disability were reviewed. They found that;

Forty-seven percent of parents/guardians indicated they were prepared and relieved to hear the news that their child had a disability, 16 percent indicated they were shocked by the news and/or felt a sense of disbelief, 14 percent indicated the news made them sad, 13 percent indicated that they were frustrated and/or angry by the news, and 11 percent stated that the news caused them to be scared and/or worried. (Ingalls et al., 2016, p. 48-49)

These were parents'/guardians' feelings towards an initial diagnosis, and the staggering realization in these results is that more than half of the participants experienced feelings of shock, disbelief, sadness, frustration, or worry regarding the initial diagnosis or qualification for special education services. Based on these results, it seems there was a likelihood of miscommunication with parents/guardians during the evaluation process, as well as the possibility that they were not adequately informed. This highlights the importance of communication throughout the identification process and ensuring parents have a sense of the big picture in that the process lends itself toward better, more individualized education for their child. As discussed in the next section, the communication needs to be ongoing.

Labeling. Lalvani (2015) conducted a study that focused on the meaning and implications that surround raising a child with a disability, including raising a child with a disability in the education system. The study highlighted that parents shared negative views regarding labeling their child because of perceptions that might arise as a result of a label, and that some labels were viewed as less acceptable than others (Lalvani, 2015). Some parents shared that the identification of a cognitive impairment or intellectual disability was the least desirable because either of these diagnoses would lower teachers' expectations of their child. One parent stated, "...I still wouldn't allow you (the psychologist) to put it in paperwork because I know the next teacher is going to put a ceiling on it [student learning]..." (Lalvani, 2015, p. 383). Rather than seeing their child as a label, parents believe that teachers need to see their children as individuals, with unique strengths and abilities (West & Pirtle, 2014, Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

IEP Meeting. Communication in special education seldom occurs between only two people; in fact numerous people with varying roles in the education of a child attend most gatherings. This can be disconcerting. In one study, parents/guardians were asked about their feelings when initially entering the very first IEP meeting; as indicated by study results, "69% felt overwhelmed, anxious, and/or shocked; 19% stated they felt comfortable, 11% reported they felt uncomfortable, and 1% of the parents indicated that they felt guilty" (Ingalls et al., 2016, p. 49-50). The feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious, shocked, and uncomfortable are concerning. The hope is that upon exiting this first IEP meeting, parents'/guardians' feelings regarding the meeting shifted to a more positive experience.

Imagine the feelings one might have if they already felt they didn't fit, or belong. In a study by Mueller and Buckley (2013), fathers' experiences while navigating special education

processes were studied. A unanimous finding through this study highlighted that fathers felt “...as if they did not comfortably fit within the education team or the special education system itself” (Mueller & Buckley, 2013, p. 43). Reasons cited for these feelings included differences between male and female communication roles, being unfamiliar with the special education system and process, and that they felt that it was overwhelming (Mueller & Buckley, 2013). Several fathers also shared that educators seemed to assume that, as a father, they would take a more passive role than the mother at IEP meetings and in making educational decisions. Overall, many fathers felt excluded from the team and from the school (Mueller & Buckley, 2013).

Based on experiences such as those mentioned above, parents/guardians of a child with a disability may be wary about communication and schools in general. In a study conducted by West and Pirtle (2014) parents/guardians who had a child with a disability were interviewed regarding skills and knowledge that they perceived to be essential for special education teachers. Communication was a main theme that emerged through interviews with parents/guardians. Under the area of ‘communication’ the skills of ‘partnering and sharing of resources’ as well as ‘respect’ were also emphasized (West & Pirtle, 2014, p. 295-296). The following points from the study highlights the importance of communication and knowledge.

- Parents/guardians felt that it was important that effective special education teachers possess the ability to have “communication with families and the ability to establish positive relationships with them [parents/guardians]” (p. 295).
- Parents/guardians believed that “great teachers understand that parents have invaluable insight and ideas about what works for their child” (p. 295).

Although students may spend more time each day at school than at home, this time frame is for just a short period in terms of a student’s whole life. Parents/guardians are present long term for

their child, so they will have valuable information to seek and consider in the child's educational planning. Parents/guardians noted the need for respect in that parents want to feel that their "advice and knowledge is respected and solicited by the teacher" (West & Pirtle, 2014, p. 296). Basically, parents/guardians want to know that school personnel are not only hearing what they have to say/share, but also that they consider advice that has been given. Parents/guardians are essentially the "expert" on their child, so it is important to consider their input.

Finally, it is important that school personnel consider parental/guardians' feelings and attitudes towards their child's disability diagnosis and special education (West & Pirtle, 2014). This is especially important in developing positive communication experiences, collaboration and building relationships. Feelings and attitudes vary amongst parents/guardians based on diagnoses provided, experiences with school personnel, and the overall special education process; however it is important that school personnel contemplate how they may be feeling.

Parental/Guardian Involvement and Communication

As parents/guardians navigate through the 'world' of special education; whether it be appointments, diagnoses, evaluations, meetings, or communication/collaboration with various personnel, it is important to consider their involvement in their child's education. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parental/guardian participation and involvement is mandated - meaning that parents/guardians are required team members on their child's IEP team and should be included in all meetings, conversations, and decisions made regarding their child and their child's education. Leenders et al, 2019 stated, "Parental involvement in a child's school career is extremely important for children's development, especially in primary school" (p. 519).

Research has shown that parental/guardian involvement in their child's education is associated with greater academic achievement, including for children who have a disability diagnosis (Strassfeld, 2018, p. 284). For parents/guardians of a child with a disability, it can be challenging to form a working relationship with school staff working with their child, but this can be resolved through school personnel showing an authentic interest in the child, being approachable, and being receptive to what the parents have to say (Leenders et al., 2019). Relationships between parents/guardians and school personnel can also be strengthened through developing further understanding of a child's strengths and challenges, as well as the family's beliefs, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and their priorities (Garbacz et al., 2022, p. 325).

Parents/guardians often are uninformed about special education policies, processes, and procedures, so in turn they leave decisions regarding their child's education to school personnel (Leenders et al., 2019, p. 521). Therefore, it is important that school personnel provide parents/guardians with information and resources to increase their knowledge of special education, as well as decisions that are being made regarding their child's education. The *PACER* center is a valuable resource to parents/guardians of a child with a disability. *PACER* provides "assistance, workshops, publications, and other resources to help families make decisions about education and other services for their child or young adult with disabilities" (*How pacer helps, 2023*).

Increasing communication and collaboration, and forming positive relationships between parents/guardians and school personnel can lead to positive outcomes for students. This also opens up opportunities to discuss more difficult situations or topics, including learning difficulties, behavioral concerns, and/or communication concerns. Leenders et al (2019) stated, "Positive home-school relationships, founded on trust and approachability, may give teachers

and parents the opportunity to talk about parenting issues and home life” (p. 521). Increased knowledge regarding a student’s home-life can help school personnel better understand the impact of a child’s disability diagnosis on a family. This is not to say that a child’s disability diagnosis has a negative effect on a family, but that it is important to share the impact of the diagnosis. Lalvani (2015) points out that “Although many parents did identify stressors related to their children’s disability, most did not attribute these solely to their children’s impairment but rather, viewed these as resulting from a combination of their children’s impairments and environmental factors” (Lalvani, 2015, p. 388). Other factors leading to better student outcomes may include educating other individuals on their child’s disability and related impairments, working to protect their child from rejection, and advocating for their child’s needs (Lalvani, 2015).

When school personnel communicate with parents/guardians, teachers and parents/guardians tend to stay in line with societies’ perceived roles. School personnel/teachers can be viewed as “advice givers,” while parents/guardians can be viewed as “advice seekers” (Leenders et al., 2019, p. 520). Unfortunately, in this type of communication, it can be assumed that it is only the advice of school personnel that is acknowledged. To combat this, as well as to respect and encourage communication amongst parents/guardians, it is evident that two-way communication be present. Two-way communication involves sharing information, questions, and feedback back and forth between parents and school personnel. Leenders et al (2019) highlighted that effective communication provides for a “...deeper understanding of mutual expectations and children’s needs” (p. 520). To establish this two-way communication, it is important to consider parents’/guardians’ preferred methods of communication. For some parents, they may prefer communication via email or an online platform, and for others a phone

call, note home, or face-to-face meeting will be preferred. In some instances, it will be helpful to have parents/guardians share two ways they would prefer to communicate with school personnel. In considering preferred methods of communication, school personnel should also seek out parents'/guardians' preferred time to contact (Hall et al., 2003, p.69). This may not always be feasible for school personnel, but it shows parents/guardians that their preferences are being considered.

Communication: Methods and Effectiveness

In a special education setting, communication occurs on a daily basis, often between school personnel, service providers as well as with parents/guardians of students. Therefore, as Nagro (2015) shares, “School personnel are tasked with developing communication systems that are both effective and efficient when trying to balance the constant flow of information to be shared, with the limited time available to do so” (Nagro, 2015, p. 256). This communication may occur more often than in a general education setting and can be found to carry a greater amount of ‘weight’ as there may be more sensitive or difficult topics to discuss such as regression in academics or concerning behaviors being observed. There are different forms of communication that may be used within the school system; these may include email, phone calls, a note home, or a face-to-face meeting (Davern, 2002, p. 22).

In special education it is not uncommon for school personnel, more specifically special education staff such as paraprofessionals or special education teachers, to communicate with parents/guardians via notes. In fact, written messages are the most frequently used form of parent/guardian communication. Davern (2022) pointed out, “School personnel, particularly those affiliated with special education, often find themselves jotting a quick note daily or several

times per week - to parents or caregivers about their child with a disability” (p. 22). These notes may be utilized per request of parents/guardians, or they may be initiated by school personnel in an effort to keep parents/guardians informed of their child’s school day.

A common form of communication amongst parents/guardians of a child with a disability and school personnel is a school-to-home notebook. There are various names by which a school-to-home notebook can be referred to, including “...communication notebook, daily log, traveling notebook, dialogue journal, notebook, system, and daily report card” (Hall et al., 2003, p. 68). The notebook goes between home and school on a daily basis and contains information regarding a student’s school day.

This written form of communication can be beneficial as it serves as a way to communicate essential information regarding a student’s school day with their parents/guardians. For students with greater communication difficulties, such as being unable to expressively communicate information, communication notebooks can fulfill a variety of functions between home and school such as an overview and insight into their child’s school day (Davern, 2004, p. 23). An effective school-to-home notebook system includes; “a tool to facilitate collaborative problem-solving, analysis of information and ongoing documentation of program implementation and student’s progress” (Hall et al., 2003, p. 68). Information included in a student’s school-to-home notebook can include; an overview of daily activities completed, eating patterns, behavior, social interactions, progress, and upcoming events or activities can be included (Davern, 2004, p. 23). For parents, this written documentation is helpful in having a record of their child’s progress.

However there are drawbacks to written communication and these are important for special education teachers and school personnel to be aware of prior to implementing a

school-to-home notebook for students. Drawbacks to written communication may be that parents'/guardians' first language may not be English, parents/guardians may have varying literacy levels, there may be different levels of readability of the note, and the intended message may not be as clear (Nagro, 2015; Hall et al., 2003). Hall et al. (2003) reviewed home-to-school communication entries and found “teacher entries frequently lacked specific information, were not data driven, rarely addressed individualized education program (IEP) goals, and tended to reflect the opinion of one teacher rather than all school staff involved with the student’s educational programming” (Hall et al., 2003, p. 69). For some parents/guardians, for whom English is not their first language, they may be able to orally communicate in English but have difficulties reading English. Davern points out, “...others [parents/guardians] may have life difficulties that are simply exacerbated by yet another piece of paper to manage” (Davern, 2004, p. 22). Due to these drawbacks and concerns, written communication in home-to-school notebooks may often be a one-way exchange, as the teacher or school personnel are sharing information but have minimal parental/guardian input.

Conclusion

Through this process of building effective communication and collaboration, parents/guardians and school personnel must continue to work together to meet the needs of students receiving special education services. Effective communication and collaboration amongst parents/guardians and school personnel takes effort, time, and thoughtful application. The viewpoints of teachers and parents/guardians are important to consider when building effective communication, as is the amount of parent/guardian involvement. Finally, in searching for the most effective communication that will be beneficial to everyone, the actual

communication methods used to collaborate with parents/guardians and school personnel should be considered.

Project Description

Currently I am in my eighth year of teaching special education. Over the last eight years, I have had the privilege and opportunity to work with students of varying needs and abilities. Specific areas of disability for the students I have worked with have included: specific learning disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, other health disabilities, autism spectrum disorder, developmental cognitive disabilities, and severely multiply impaired. As a special education teacher providing services and acting as the case manager for students with varying needs and abilities, I have worked to establish effective and positive collaboration and communication between myself and the parents/guardians of the students. I want parents/guardians to feel comfortable to contact me, to ask questions, share information and concerns, as well as allow me to openly share information and concerns regarding their child.

Establishing effective and positive collaboration and communication takes time, effort, and thoughtful processing. Over the past eight years I have learned a lot in terms of collaboration and communication with parents/guardians, as well as learned different ways in which to generate productive relationships. It was important for me to realize the method of communication that works for one student's parents/guardians, may not work or be as effective for another student's parents/guardians. I also found that the method of communication may vary depending on the information to be shared or communicated between myself and parents/guardians.

Throughout these eight years, I have continued to review and revise how I communicate with parents. In my beginning years of teaching, communication mainly occurred via phone calls or email. I had not worked with students' parents/guardians to determine the best way to communicate with them. Instead, phone calls and emails took place when I was able to make them (i.e. prep time, breaks, or before school/after school). Phone calls were not always convenient, successful, and/or considered appropriate. Some parents/guardians found it concerning when they received a phone call from the school phone number mid-school day. Other parents did not answer a phone call, nor did they return a phone call. Emails were effective for some parents, however for others it was not.

About four years ago, in an effort to attempt to have more communication, I encouraged parents/guardians to fill out a survey at the beginning of each school year, or upon an initial meeting. This survey requested parents/guardians share their contact information, preferred method of contact, child's before and after school transportation plan, breakfast/lunch/snack plan, any allergies or health concerns the child may have, child's interests/strengths/motivations, and any concerns that parents/guardians may have regarding their child. Although I did learn about some students through the survey, it was not always returned, leaving me determined to find the best method of communication for all of my parents/guardians.

Through this study, my goal was to complete a self-reflection of communication methods I utilized with parents/guardians and evaluate alternative methods that could be utilized to improve communication systems. I wanted to further contemplate ways to increase communication methods and interactions between myself and my students' parents/guardians.

Methods

This study consisted of reflecting on all types of communication being utilized with parents/guardians, including an analysis and evaluation of the specific formats and benefits of each type. The goal was to determine best practices and/or find alternative methods that might be utilized to improve communication between parents/guardians and myself. Permission to conduct the study was received by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of MSUM and then parents/guardians were invited to participate, based on their role as parent/guardian of a student currently on my special education caseload and/or a student with whom I provided special education services. All communication between home/school was collected and reflected upon. This included copies of the communication notebooks, behavior charts, emails, and other methods of communication (i.e., meetings, phone calls). Pseudonyms were used for both students and parents/guardians, and information such as the classroom teacher's name or the name of a paraeducator was redacted. Through this reflection and analysis, I hoped to find patterns of the types of communication that were most successful, communication that resulted in changes to teaching or learning practices and what was most beneficial to students. As needed, I looked to create new systems of communication.

IRB Process. I provided a select set of parents/guardians with a consent letter regarding an invitation for their participation in my study. Parents/guardians were selected based on current communication methods that have already been established, as well as through prior conversations held with students' parents/guardians regarding this study and their willingness to participate. Six signed consent letters were returned. Participants in this study include two sets of parents who have children with diagnoses of moderate to severe disabilities, receive one-on-one

paraprofessional support throughout the school day, and receive their ‘core’ academics or instruction in my special education resource room. Another parent agreed to participate in this study; this parent currently homeschools their child, and then their child comes into the school to receive special education services for academics. This parent is considered to be their child’s ‘teacher’ and is responsible for teaching all the “core” curriculum. The final participants in this study were three sets of parents who have children with diagnoses of mild to moderate disabilities, receive direct services in my special education resource room for academics and social skills, and receive additional support from paraprofessionals and related service providers. Communication methods and occurrences between these six sets of parents/guardians and myself were reflected upon through this study.

Data Analysis. The reflection and analysis of all communication took place through a “thematic analysis” as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87). This thematic analysis started with collecting data related to my overall focus of communication with parents/guardians of students I work with. The collected data included: individual notes, copies of communication book entries and daily behavior charts, emails, and transcriptions of phone calls or face-to-face conversations that took place between myself and students’ parents/guardians.

Once this data was collected, I worked through the first three steps/phases of Braun and Clarke’s *phases of thematic analysis*. These three phases consist of familiarizing yourself with your data, generalizing initial codes and searching for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). Through the first phase, I familiarized myself with the data by reviewing and evaluating each of the pieces of communication I had collected. In reviewing these collected pieces of communication and data, I coded each piece of data. Some pieces had only one code while others

had multiple codes associated with it. Once that task was completed, I organized the coded data into related themes or relationships amongst each piece of communication.

Findings

In evaluating the communication pieces collected, key similarities in coding and themes emerged. I also made some key discoveries through reviewing the different pieces of communication I collected. Codes that were used to categorize findings included: communication format, prior communication (appointments/absences/meetings), academic progress, and behavior concerns. Figure 1 defines each code while the following sections highlight each code, examples, and my reflections upon review and analysis.

<p>Communication Format: The tool used for communication between teacher and parents/guardians. Examples included notes, emails, texts, etc...</p> <p>Prior Communication: Communication that occurred between students' parents/guardians and myself prior to events, activities, appointments, or absences from school</p> <p>Academic Progress: Communication surrounding content learning (reading/math)</p> <p>Behavior Concerns: Communication surrounding behavior</p>

Figure 1. Codes and Definitions

Communication Format. The code *communication format* refers to the method in which I communicated with my students' parents/guardians. In reviewing data collected, communication formats between my students' parents/guardians tended to vary from situation to situation and individual to individual but generally included daily communication books, daily behavior charts, notes, emails, texts, phone calls, face-to-face conversations, and an online format (*Seesaw*).

Two students involved in this study had daily communication books. Due to the extent of information shared with parents, I relied on a pre-printed formatted communication book from *Michaela Lawrence -- Especially Education on Teachers Pay Teachers* (Lawrence, 2018). Both of these students, Derek and Cody, had limited communication skills (non-verbal, minimal vocalizations, AAC device) and received support from a one-on-one paraprofessional. Figure 2 highlights an example of one day's entry from a communication book. The first document was created by Lawrence, and the other two were created by me.

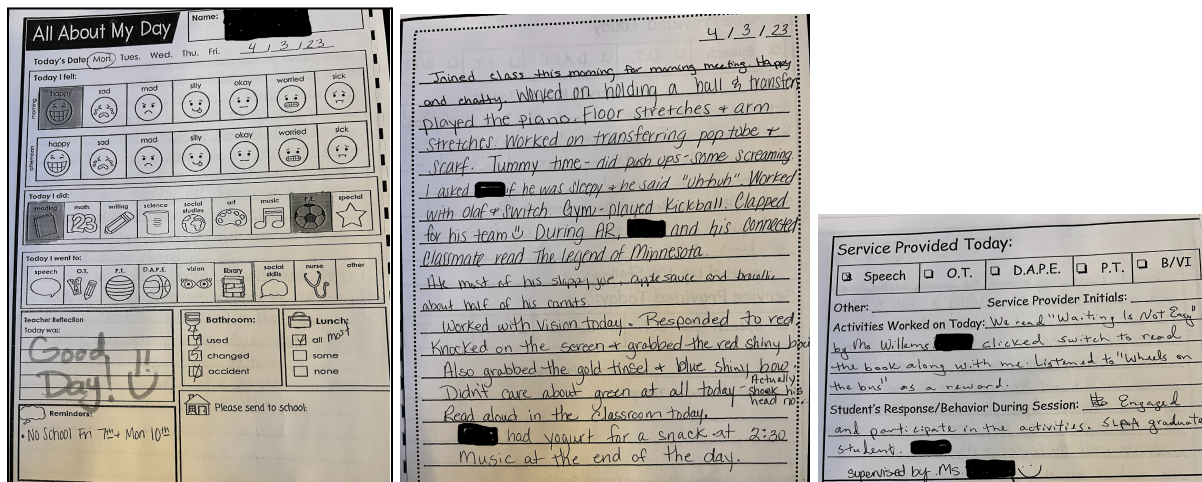


Figure 2. Derek's Communication Book entry (4/3/2023)

Entries in these daily communication books included paraprofessionals documentation of how the student felt in the morning and afternoon (as based on student observations, behavior, and interactions), activities and services they participated in or completed, a bathroom log (including a weekly bathroom log at the back of each communication book), a description of how much they ate for lunch, space to write down reminders or ask for items to be sent to school, and a space for me to write about and reflect upon the student's day.

On the opposite side of the page was space for special education staff to write notes about what Derek and Cody did throughout the day, progress during work sessions and on tasks completed, or anything they observed or noticed regarding Derek and Cody's behavior

throughout the school day. On the backside of this notes page was a space for related service providers to write about individual sessions. Entries often included notes on therapy sessions from speech/language providers, the Developmental Adapted Physical Education teacher, or the occupational therapist/occupational therapy assistant.

These daily communication books were well received by both Derek and Cody's parents as they allowed them to have a glimpse into Derek and Cody's school day, including tasks/activities completed and their behavior throughout the school day. Over the course of the data collection period, I occasionally asked Derek and Cody's parents authentic questions about the information shared in the communication book. I did this in the book as a way to communicate with them without having to call, text, or email. Inadvertently, the questions also served as a way for me to determine if they read through these daily communication entries.

In reviewing the daily entries shared with Derek and Cody's parents, I found there were several daily entries in which Cody's mother, Ashley, wrote a note back to a question I had asked or to a note that a paraprofessional shared. For instance, prior to beginning the study, Ashley had shared at Cody's annual IEP meeting that he was interested in some new videos. These were preferred videos that Cody enjoyed watching when he was at home. I wrote in Cody's daily communication notebook entry that I was requesting a list of these videos. His mother followed up with an email stating that she had read my note and subsequently shared information regarding these new video choices. However, I noted that it was not often that there was two-way communication through these daily communication books. A majority of the time, communication started from school staff.

Other communication formats that were often used with the parents/guardians of students included phone calls, email, direct messaging, face-to-face conversations, and an online platform

(*Seesaw*). Of these, I feel that emails, direct messaging (text messaging), and face-to-face conversations allowed me to discuss necessary topics, academic/behavioral concerns or progress, and/or share important information with students' parents/guardians. These were also the most commonly used methods of communication as evidenced by the number of parents utilizing them and they were also the communication methods in which I received direct messages back; thus finding them to be the most effective.

For each of the other communication formats (phone calls and daily behavior charts), I found drawbacks. For example, phone calls were not as convenient for me to make due to schedules and timing, nor did parents/guardians always pick-up or return my phone calls. Students' daily behavior charts did not allow for two-way communication, in fact I realized that sending home students' daily behavior charts is definitely slanted toward one-way communication. In order to make this a two-way communication method, I need to establish a way for parents/guardians to be able to respond regarding their child's daily behavior chart. This is addressed in the synthesis/reflection section of this paper.

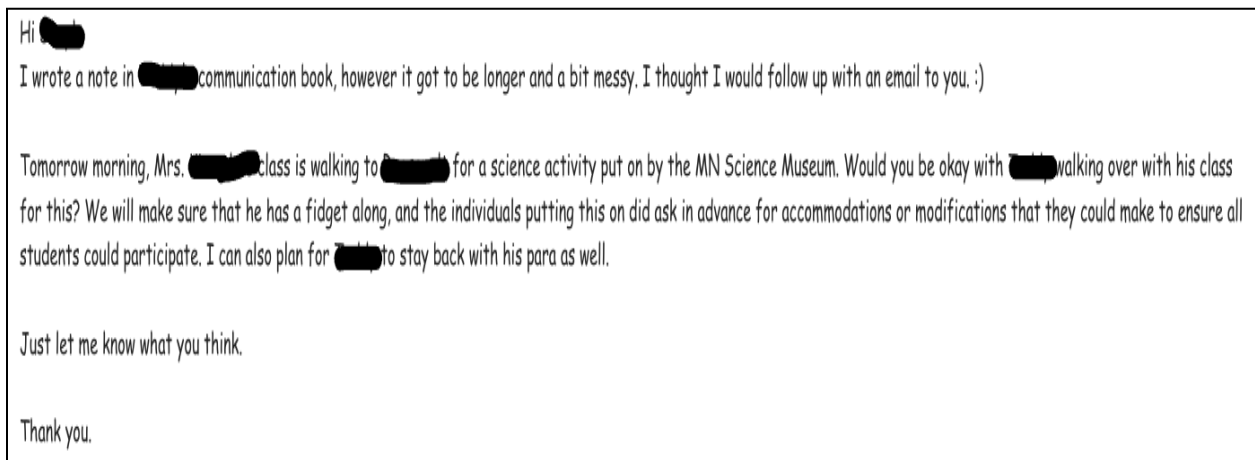
The communication formats that I used with each set of parents/guardians varied. For example, the only method of communication that I used for three students' parents/guardians was email. These three students are Daniel, Cody, and Avery. This is the method that was established early on, and I found it to be the most effective way to communicate with these parents/guardians. For another student, Jesse, I communicated solely with his mother, Amy, and these communications took place through email or face-to-face conversations. Additionally, Jesse had a behavior chart that was sent home each day.

Amy, on occasion, subbed within the school building and during one such day she stopped by my classroom to discuss Jesse's academic, social, emotional, and behavioral progress.

This was a moment in which I was able to talk with Amy regarding Jesse's most recent behavior, including concerns regarding his ability to complete academic work independently and without disruptions. She shared with me that she has noticed this on Jesse's behavior charts, and has had discussions with him at home regarding work completion and making disruptive noises or statements in class. Jesse's mother's visit was unexpected, but allowed for us to have a moment of "real time" two-way communication and subsequent collaboration in which we were able to discuss having the paraprofessional (who is present in Jesse's classroom throughout the day) step away from Jesse during independent work times to determine if he could complete the classroom work without additional assistance. If the disruptive noises continued, the paraprofessional would step back in.

For the other two students, Derek and Hunter, I communicated with their parents through several different methods. We communicated through phone calls, email, direct messaging (text messaging), and face-to-face. In reviewing collected data, these were the two sets of parents that I communicated with most often and through varying methods. As I reflected upon this communication frequency, I was not surprised and I felt it made sense that I would more frequently communicate with these students' parents. Derek required significant support and services throughout the school day and was considered non-verbal so he was unable to communicate his wants, needs, and/or concerns to his parents or to school staff. Due to Derek's diagnoses, frequent communication and collaboration amongst his parents and myself was vital. Hunter was homeschooled and received his core academic instruction from his mother, Brooke, while special education services were provided by the school district. Brooke and I communicated at least one time per week regarding curriculum areas being covered, areas in reading or math Hunter was struggling with, and any changes in schedules.

Prior Communication. *Prior communication* was another code that was common amongst several pieces of collected data. Prior communication referred to communication between students' parents/guardians and myself prior to events, activities, appointments, or absences from school. I found that prior communication took place mainly between myself and Derek and Cody's parents. Due to their more significant needs/support, this prior communication was helpful in planning and communicating with necessary school staff members. Prior communication also took place between myself and Brooke, as Hunter was homeschooled and Brooke was his primary teacher. Figure 3 highlights an example of prior communication that took place between Ashley and myself. This prior communication helped ensure that Ashley was informed of the school event that week and if she thought it would be most beneficial for Cody.



Hi [redacted]
I wrote a note in [redacted] communication book, however it got to be longer and a bit messy. I thought I would follow up with an email to you. :)

Tomorrow morning, Mrs. [redacted] class is walking to [redacted] for a science activity put on by the MN Science Museum. Would you be okay with [redacted] walking over with his class for this? We will make sure that he has a fidget along, and the individuals putting this on did ask in advance for accommodations or modifications that they could make to ensure all students could participate. I can also plan for [redacted] to stay back with his para as well.

Just let me know what you think.

Thank you.

Figure 3. Prior communication

Academic Progress. The code *academic progress* referred to communication surrounding content learning (reading/math). This communication consisted of information about academic progress within the general education classroom as well as my special education resource room.

A common theme amongst a large number of communication pieces collected, through all

formats, was academic progress and concerns. In reviewing collected pieces, information regarding academic progress was frequently shared with students' parents/guardians.

An example of this academic progress communication was an email exchange I had with Amy regarding a math concept Jesse was struggling with in his class (see Figure 4). The paraprofessional, present with Jesse during math in his general education classroom, talked with me after math class one day. She shared that Jesse was struggling grasping classifying quadrilaterals. This was a math concept that Jesse's class was reviewing in preparation for the state assessment. In my communication with Amy, I shared a classifying quadrilaterals worksheet and provided context for asking for her support (see Figure 4).

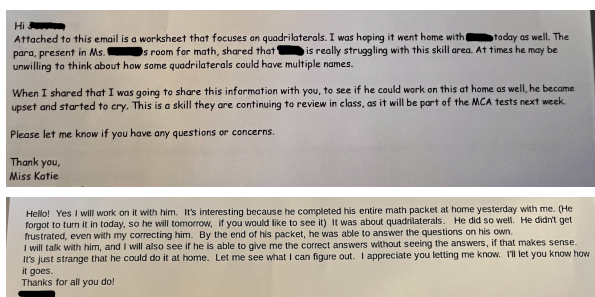


Figure 4. Academic Progress

Though brief, this communication and collaboration exchange was a great opportunity for Amy and me to share our thoughts on his academic progress, and it also led me to question if Jesse was truly demonstrating what he knew while he was in the classroom setting. Further communication interactions and exchanges will allow us opportunities to share and problem solve about Jesse's behavior within the classroom setting and overall.

Academic progress and concerns were also shared on daily behavior charts or within daily communication books. I found that paraprofessionals and I both tended to document students' progress during scheduled work sessions throughout the school day. In further reviewing collected data, it seemed academic communication was very one-way. Even with

exchanges such as the two-way one Amy and I had regarding Jesse's math, I noticed there were not opportunities for many follow-ups regarding students' academic progress or concerns.

Behavior Concerns. The code *behavior concerns* referred to communication surrounding student's behavior. For this code, behavior included social, emotional, and behavior (compliance, disruptive behaviors, aggressive behaviors). In reviewing a variety of collected pieces, information regarding behavioral concerns was frequently shared with students' parents/guardians and there were some students for whom communication was daily, including copies of daily behavior charts (Parmerlee, n.d.). Students' behavior charts not only include their behavior across the school day, but they also showed me, paraprofessionals and parents/guardians the classes in which students' behavior was more of a struggle (as indicated by behavior charting). Additionally, there was space for school staff (general education teacher and special education staff) to write notes.

Date: 3/27-23

Subject	I complete multi-step learning activities in class with no more than 2 prompts.	I will complete my work in an appropriate manner, without frustration.	I will accept when I am unable to complete my work.	I will follow adult directions without arguing.	Stars	Total Stars
Morning Work	★	★	★	★	4	4
Reading/Writing - Resource Room	★	★	★	★	5	9
P.E.	★	★	★	★	4	13
Number Corner (at Speech)	[Handwritten scribbles]					
Reading Skills	★	Correct errors	★	★	10	19
Recess / Lunch	★	★	★	★	4	33
Science	★	★	★	★	5	28
Spelling practice	★ Extra star for helping another student				1	28
Math	Eventually put computer away - then started playing with things at his desk. Started fine with a struggle.				0	28
Music / Library	★	★	★	★	4	30
Math - Resource Room	★	★	★	★	4	30
Spelling / Grammar / Writing	11	11	-	11	0	36
Social Skills - Resource Room	★	★	★	★	4	40
End of Day Check-In - Resource Room	83	85	91	82		

Stars	%	Color	Actual Daily %
47-62	90% or more	Purple	40/47
42-46	80% - 89%	Green	
37-41	70% - 79%	Yellow	
36 or less	69% or Less	Red	9/30

O.T. []

Did I have a safe body today, and use kind words? Yes or No

Did I use a break when I needed to today? Yes or No

Daily Notes: Speech ★
Sitting under table throwing marker, writing on table and other kids things.

Date: 4/3/23

Subject	I calmly completed learning activities in class. - with 2 or less prompts.	I completed my work independently without arguing.	I will take responsibility for my actions without getting upset.	Stars	Total Stars
Morning Meeting / Number Corner	★	★	★	3	3
(Music) Library	★	★	★	3	6
Reading / Writing - Resource Room	★	★	★	3	9
Reading / Writing	★	★	★	3	
Grammar / Spelling	★	★	★	3	15
Recess / Lunch	★	★	★	3	17
Math	★	★	★	3	21
P.E.	★	★	★	3	24
Math - Resource Room	★	★	★	3	27
Science	★	★	★	3	30
Math Apps / Math Workshop	★	★	★	3	33
Social Skills - Resource Room	★	★	★	3	36
End of Day Check-In - Resource Room					

%	Color	Actual Daily %
90% or more	Purple	36/36
80% - 89%	Green	
70% - 79%	Yellow	
69% or Less	Red	

Speech: []

Did I have a safe body today? Yes or No

Did I use a break when I needed to today? Yes or No

Daily Notes: hard time getting started & focusing today expressed his frustration multiple times.
Really good day! !! -Miss Katie

Figure 5. Editable Behavior Charts (Parmerlee, n.d.)

In the past, I have had parents/guardians reach out to me regarding their child's daily behavior charts, behavior documentation, and concerns they have. At a recent IEP meeting, Daniel's mother, Casey, shared that she had noted that core academic times, within the general education classroom, were times in which Daniel displayed more negative behaviors. Some of the behaviors noted by school staff during these times were:

- sitting under table, throwing marker, writing on table and other kids' things
- playing with pencil, drawing on folder, told 'para' no when asked to write and pay attention to teacher
- started playing with things at his desk and then sat on the floor and played with a string
- refusing to complete work and follow staff's directions.

Daniel's IEP team discussed the concern that behaviors were occurring during core academic classes within the general education classroom. Daniel receives paraprofessional support for all academics in the general education classroom, however even with this support and accommodations/modifications made to academic tasks, he was still displaying behaviors. It was noted that these core academic times are when the academic concepts and expectations are higher for Daniel. The team, including Casey, proposed that Daniel's special education re-evaluation be moved up from next fall to this current school year, thus allowing the IEP team to have new data to look at and review regarding Daniel's educational programming. The IEP team will then determine the appropriate services and supports that are needed to help Daniel succeed academically, as well as socially/emotionally, as based on the evaluation data achieved.

This communication with Casey indicated to me that she was frequently reviewing his behavior charts. Although there was not continuous communication between us it was clear she was taking note of how Daniel's school days went and was comfortable enough to bring up her concern during his IEP meeting. As a result of this communication, we were able to see trends and work together to ensure Daniel's needs were being met.

Behavioral progress and concerns were also shared within daily communication books, as paraprofessionals and myself documented any emotional or behavior concerns we noticed throughout the school day. As with other communication, I found that behavioral communication with students' parents/guardians could also be considered to be very one-way. Communication from school was shared with parents/guardians on a daily basis, however if parents/guardians had questions or concerns they had to continue the communication through another format.

An example of two-way communication, initiated by myself, is in the following email exchange (Figure 5). This allowed me to communicate with Cody's mother, Ashley, regarding his behavior throughout the day. I was also able to share about the scratch on his face. Due to Cody being non-verbal and unable to communicate this with Ashley, it was important to make sure that she was informed.

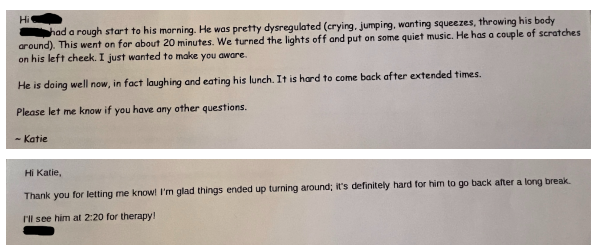


Figure 5. Behavioral Concerns

Synthesis/Reflection:

This self-reflection and study was eye opening for me and allowed me to reflect upon the topic of 'communication with parents/guardians' that I have been working on since I started my

teaching career. In reviewing collected data, I found that there is still a disconnect between some parents/guardians. There were times when it was apparent that only one-way communication was taking place, with the communication primarily occurring from school. This one-way communication was difficult for me to accept as I missed out on conversations or dialogue between parents/guardians and myself.

I found through this study that I engaged in more communication and collaboration opportunities with the parents of students (Derek and Cody) with more significant needs. This was a surprising realization for me because I knew I communicated with these parents frequently, but I was unaware of how often or the amount of conversations we had throughout the school week. Both of these students were non-verbal and unable to vocalize their wants, needs, frustrations, or to recap their school day for their parents. For both Derek and Cody, their parents and school staff were acting as their “school voice” to share information, concerns, and recap their day.

I strive to have open, two-way, communication with students' parents/guardians, but found that it has been difficult to achieve with the communication formats currently in place. In reflecting on these current communication methods with parents/guardians, I wanted to figure out how I could make them more two-way without adding additional work or be burdensome for parents/guardians. In the following paragraph, I lay out what I will do moving forward to increase communication and collaboration opportunities with students' parents/guardians.

I will continue to utilize daily communication books for students who receive more support and services, and who may be non-verbal. These daily communication books have been well received by students' parents/guardians as they provide information regarding a student's school day. I will continue to use daily behavior charts with those students who have a ‘behavior’

IEP goal and the IEP team determines need one. These daily behavior charts can be used to share students' academic progress, as well behavioral progress and concerns.

However, in an effort to increase communication and collaboration opportunities amongst students' parents/guardians and myself regarding student's behavioral progress, I will provide parents/guardians with a bi-monthly overview regarding students' behavior chart data (Figure 6). This bi-monthly overview will be provided in the format of a chart with the student's behavior objectives at the top and the behavior data spanning two weeks. This chart will allow parents/guardians to review students' behavior across multiple weeks and help us review increasing concerns, specific areas of concerns, and/or behavioral progress.

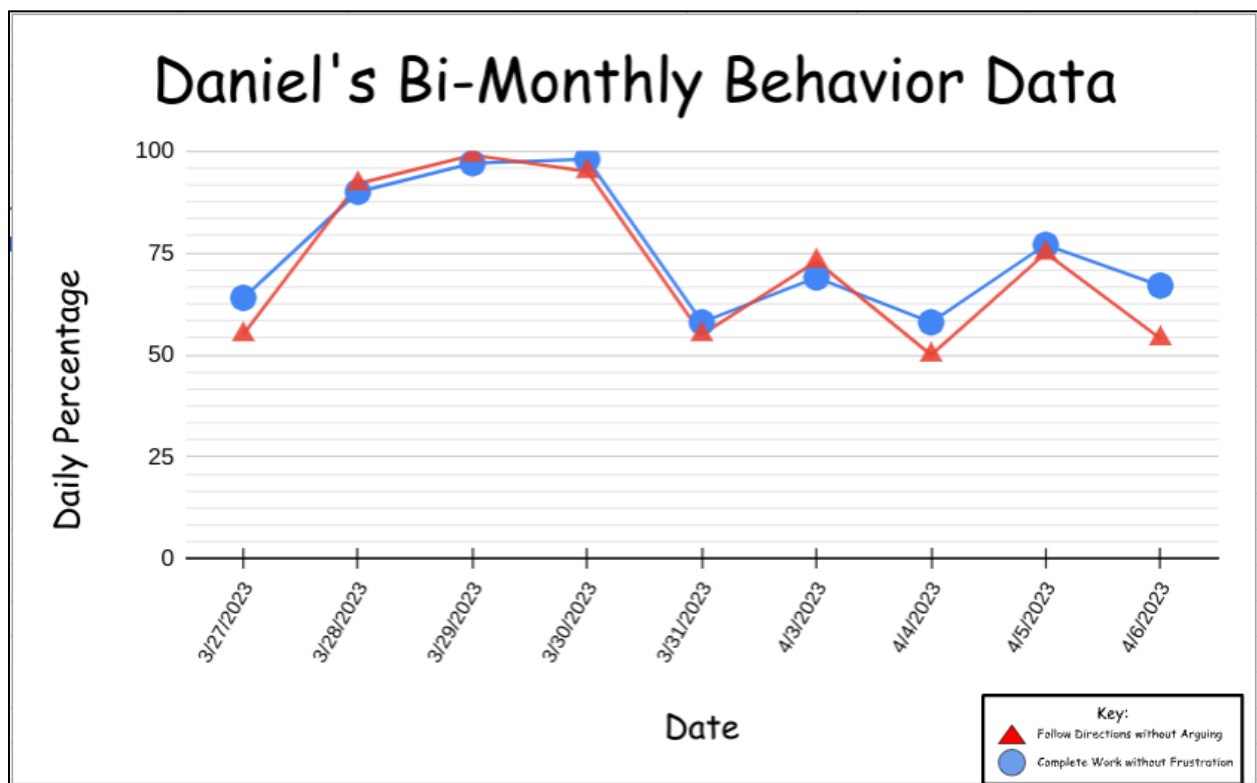


Figure 6. Bi-Monthly Behavior Chart Data

I will also provide all of my parents the opportunity to meet with me on a monthly basis to discuss any pressing topics or concerns, as well as answer any questions. These meetings will

be brief, lasting only 15 minutes, and can take place via phone, *Google Meet*, or in-person. My goal is that through these multiple communication methods and formats, I will have more opportunities to communicate and collaborate with students' parents/guardians.

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