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## "We Ultimately Just Need to Connect" Engaging in a Digital World: Perceptions From Families and Educators During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**“WE ULTIMATELY JUST NEED TO CONNECT”**  
**ENGAGING IN A DIGITAL WORLD: PERCEPTIONS FROM FAMILIES AND**  
**EDUCATORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(in Education)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

August 2023

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Dissertation Advisor: Dr. James Artesani

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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Henderson & Berla (1994) state “the evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life” (p.1). The objective of this study was to explore how the COVID19 pandemic changed the way elementary educators needed to connect and develop relationships with the families of their students. This study addressed the broad research question of how elementary teachers and families perceived their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic using focus groups from rural central Maine. They also discussed what technology and digital modalities were used to communicate with each other when schools were required to move traditional teacher-family activities such as conferences, school visits and meetings to a virtual platform. Historically family engagement has been researched as to its importance and effect on student achievement (Hattie, 2008; Epstein, 2011; Ferlazzo, 2011) and the pandemic heightened the need for strong parent engagement. While using technology to communicate was not a new phenomenon in education (Tobokla, 2006; Fleming, 2012) using a variety of means and ways to communicate helped bridge communication barriers.

Parents developed confidence interacting with teachers as a result of the use of technology, specifically email, messaging and video-conferencing.

(Hayhurst, 2021; Logan et. al., 2021) This study investigates a new phenomenon in education as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is significant as a study in an area that is just being developed and researched. The findings and suggestions can be utilized immediately to support communication through digital modalities. Using focus groups rather than surveys makes the study uniquely situated to hear the thoughts and perceptions from educators and parents, in a new area of educational research.

## **DEDICATION**

“If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.” Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

I dedicate this body of work to every adult and child who has come into my life for a season, a reason or a lifetime. You have all handed me one more brick for the foundation I just finished. For that, I thank you all.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I entered my thirtieth year of education in 2019-20, I never imagined how that year would end or that it would become a focal point of my doctoral dissertation. I would like to acknowledge the perseverance and persistence of my University of Maine Professors, especially Dr. Jim Artesani, Dr. Susan Bennett-Armistead and Dr. Janet Fairman for continuing to educate and mentor me in the world of Zoom. Thank you to Jan Neureuther, my Prevention and Intervention Cohort partner, for the zooms, the laughs, the advice and the very important statistics study groups. Thank you as well to Dr. Sid Mitchell and Dr. Meredith Swallow for pushing the edges of my thinking and helping me arrive at a well-developed study.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the part MSAD #46 has played in my educational journey and to my Ridge View Community School colleagues. Three special teacher angels- LeAnn, Joanne and Amy came into my life for a season and inspired me to appreciate the here and now. I think of them often, all phenomenal teachers and colleagues no longer with us. I promised a long time ago to LeAnn that my first publication would always be dedicated to her, so here's to a promise kept.

The families and students that I have encountered have always inspired me and I appreciate every opportunity to positively impact a child's educational journey. I am grateful for the conversations and insights that the parents shared with me about their experiences. The view from where they sit matters greatly.

Finally, I lovingly appreciate and acknowledge the quiet support from my husband, Kevin, and children, Abbey and Casey, who ran life as usual while I completed this journey. If I inspire my children to keep reaching for their dreams, no matter what their age, I will be a happy

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut the world down in rural Maine and throughout the country in mid-March. The school year continued remotely until the end of May but in a very haphazard fashion. Many families developed partnerships with the school in an unprecedented manner. Parents, caregivers, and teachers became involved in weekly or daily correspondence and involvement with each other. Goals 2000 (1994) "included parent involvement as one of eight national goals and includes research funding for Family, School, Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University and the Office for Educational Research" (Hiatt-Michael, 1994). The question could be asked: what does involvement look like between families and schools? Despite longitudinal educational research indicating the importance of family partnerships with schools (Hanifan, 1916; Epstein, 2004, 2006; Ferlazzo, 2011; Fischer et al., 2020), there have always been barriers that need to be overcome for communication to take place (Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot-Lawrence, 2003). The fact that the fall 2020 pandemic return to school safety guidelines prohibited visitation to the school presented a physical barrier, unlike any other time in history. Partnerships between home and school now had to be completely reimagined for the times in which we live.

#### **Goals of the Study**

The goals of this study were to understand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on family and school communication and involvement and how educators and parents perceived the changes. I wanted to learn what helped families and educators transcend the physical barriers of the pandemic to communicate and engage with one another.

As an elementary educator, I participated and observed during the school years affected by the pandemic. I found myself in the position of learning how to reach out to families who

preferred continued remote learning for their children in the fall of 2020. I was the teacher for a self-selected, fully remote grade 1 classroom. Other students had returned to the physical school. Parents could choose either of these options in the fall of 2020. I sensed that families began to gain power as partners in their student's learning. As the teacher, I was not the expert in this new modality, but rather a learner adapting alongside the families. Necessity had forged a partnership for communication in a new reality. The school building remained closed to all parents, regardless of whether their child was physically attending school or participating remotely.

At the beginning of the pandemic, families relying on free and reduced meals were now having these meals distributed to their homes by bus, along with work packets and directions for instruction at home. Some teachers made drive-by visits to homes to keep connected with their students. Teachers had a window into family life, from the outside but also from within, if the house had connectivity for digital remote instruction. While the playing field might not have been leveled for all families, norms were reset, and an infusion of federal funding helped ensure that all families had the support needed for students to live and thrive educationally within these new guidelines. Families who were previously food and financially secure received added assistance as their economic circumstances fluctuated. Some families who were previously unable to overcome various barriers to engage with the school, such as finding transportation or childcare, were finding their voice in the virtual conversations in which they participated.

I experienced a close relationship with my remote parents that I do not think I previously felt with the parents of my students. Because I was appearing in their home via video-conference every school day, often for an individual lesson, we had conversations and connections that were sometimes very personal. One mother appeared to enjoy the times when I would join for individual lessons so much, I would have to ask her to let me begin with her daughter. I always saw the adult first because the adult was starting the Zoom session for the younger students. As

the year progressed, this mother would talk to me about her sleep and health, and it became clear that although she always referred to me professionally, she came to think of me as a person in her life with whom she could discuss things. She would often email questions or thoughts about school or projects between the Zoom sessions for her daughter's lessons. She very much wanted her daughter to be successful, as she hadn't finished high school herself. It wouldn't be unusual to get an email where she was emotional that her daughter had written a story or read a book, and she felt proud as a mother.

I felt the difference in relationship building resulted from the technology we were using, which provided face-to-face interactions and frequent communication on email and messaging applications. This same mother admitted that in a pre-pandemic world, she did not go to school conferences or meetings and had little involvement with the teachers with her older children. The school had not been a pleasant experience for her as a student, so when transportation in this rural area was difficult, it was an easy excuse for her to stay away. While this was a self-chosen situation for these families to be remote for the 2020-21 school year, I felt there was power here in how we could reach out in new, creative ways to all families.

All eighteen of my families joined their scheduled parent-teacher conference on Zoom. One hundred percent participation at a scheduled parent-teacher conference was not an experience I had ever encountered. I sought to look beyond my own experiences to determine whether this was true for other teachers and what implications this might have for parent-school relationships in a broader context. I was motivated to talk with parents and educators about their experiences and perceptions during the 2021-22 school year after I had returned to my job as a literacy specialist (not a remote classroom teacher as I was during the 2020-21 school year). I wanted to understand how my experiences and epiphanies aligned with their experiences.

## **Early Pandemic Effects on Education**

Once the federal government issued millions of relief dollars for schools to address gaps in technology and resources as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, (Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds), families began to stand on more equal footing when it came to schooling. Maine allowed more nutrition program funding so that any child, regardless of economic status could access school meals free of charge. Many families with parents facing the loss of work found themselves accessing this help for the first time. The ongoing pandemic and its ripple effects were felt everywhere. The silver lining in this time was a collaborative approach to helping all families have their basic needs met. Something as simple as free hot lunch for all students is an unexpected positive consequence of the pandemic that remains in effect because it is a positive program for families and students. According to [legislature.maine.gov](https://legislature.maine.gov) LD 1679 "An Act to Address Student Hunger Through Expanding Access to Free School Meals" was passed on April 25, 2022. The question I sought to answer wondered what other silver linings could become permanent regarding parent and school communication and interactions.

While schools eventually returned to brick-and-mortar buildings in the fall of 2020, COVID changed schools as we once knew them. As new variants of the virus continued to spread, most schools in Central Maine did not allow physical entry to school beyond students and staff. When the students returned, families remained behind computer, phone, and tablet screens for face-to-face conversations with educators. New options for remote participation in meetings and a hybrid of remote and in-person learning were prevalent. In the fall of 2021, schools in Central Maine began the second school year in a row with continued safety protocols and precautions as the virus continued to produce new strands. While some aspects of the safety

protocol lessened as pandemic experts followed the science (for example, relaxed cleaning and sanitizing protocols, mask-wearing guidelines, and physical distancing of students), the most significant barrier remaining in place was no physical entry into school except for the students and staff. We still had to communicate and hold conferences with parents not physically in the same building as the teachers.

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way elementary educators needed to connect and develop relationships with their students' families. It was an unprecedented time in education in which safety guidelines and procedures in most schools only allowed students and staff into physical school buildings at any time. This study involved elementary educators and families from rural Central Maine schools, where there was and still is a high percentage of families in areas without a strong internet/connectivity infrastructure and with a high poverty level. Learning how this demographic population handled this situation in difficult circumstances has shed light on potential, new expectations moving forward in education. A broad research question with three sub-questions guided this study:

How do elementary-grade educators and parents perceive their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID pandemic?

- a. What modalities, devices, and technology were educators using to communicate with parents?
- b. What are parents' and educators' views about these different forms of communication?
- c. How did these remote modalities impact the frequency and perceived quality of educator/family communications?

In an anecdotal conversation, an elementary teacher shared an experience with me during her fall 2021 parent-teacher conferences. In the past, if a parent did not attend the meeting at school, the opportunity was usually lost to discuss their child. A diligent teacher might follow up with a phone call or a note the next day. In the pandemic period, this teacher reached out on a social media messaging application to remind the parent, who had indeed forgotten the meeting. The parent apologized and quickly joined the Zoom meeting on her phone as she cooked dinner. The teacher reported this as a successful conversation with the parent, albeit very non-traditional. They were able to have a good conversation about the progress report and goals for the student. This study sought to capture the larger-scale perceptions of such interactions and what expectations teachers and families now have for each other.

With modern technological and social media options newly available and now even encouraged, it was important to understand how educators and families were using these options and how they felt about the overlapping of the digital and physical worlds of education. Specifically, I wanted to understand the role of communication and connection in a no physical-contact world and the surrounding perceptions. For over two years, teachers had to be creative not only in their teaching methods but also in how to interact with parents. With the inception of one-to-one digital devices for students and the availability of borrowing internet hotspots for connectivity in rural areas without strong broadband, all families could connect virtually.

### **Significance of the Study**

We stand at an educational crossroads where significant changes have influenced how schools interact with parents and families. We could choose the familiar, somewhat ineffective path of the past or forge ahead, creating a new way forward. The broad research question to be answered by this dissertation study asked how elementary-grade educators and families perceive their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The review of the

literature showed that teacher-parent interaction has been studied in the past regarding connecting via traditional face-to-face situations, requiring visits to the school or sometimes home visits by the teachers. In a rural context, physically getting to school can be a challenge.

When schools closed in March 2020, we began an unprecedented time where being physically together in person posed a health threat, and education has continued through the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years without change to that fact. As we enter the post-pandemic world of education, we can bring significant lessons to our work with families. The social world has embraced technology in new, creative ways that make us work smarter, not harder. We need to be more thoughtful about fostering and developing relationships with families and schools.

Parent voices need to be heard and explored now that many of the previous barriers to school and family interactions have been somewhat neutralized. By this statement, I refer to groups of parents marginalized by prior experiences with schools or their lack of resources. Teachers learned to communicate in various ways and follow up if there was no response. The pandemic's unintended impact on education is the development of resilience in adults with elementary-aged students, because communication and engagement could not happen otherwise. Somewhere there was a shift in teacher and parent willingness to accept the adage, "Oh, well I tried," to now "I try harder." A sense of urgency and purpose seems to have become a catalyst for a change in the parent-teacher dynamic.

### **Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The second chapter presents a review of the literature in the field of parent involvement and family engagement, along with the introduction of digital technology as modes of communication. These topics were reviewed pre- and post-COVID-19 Pandemic. The third chapter presents the methodology used to



collect and analyze data. This is followed by a presentation of the findings in chapter four, where the use of technology and digital modalities, along with the perceptions of the interactions between families and educators, will be described. The final fifth chapter discusses the findings and their implications for home-school communication practices, policies and recommendations for future research in this relatively new area of research.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The following literature review covers a wide range of research on parent involvement with schools and explores the concept of parent involvement versus parent engagement. The literature review is organized into three distinct sections according to the time frame of the COVID-19 Pandemic. The first section focused on research before March 2020, including the topics of parent voice and empowerment. It focuses on exploring how parents communicated with schools and if there were communication barriers. That section also considers the origins of using digital methods for communication between home and school. The second section focuses on similar research conducted during the pandemic school years of 2020-21 and 2021-22 and addresses the reopening of schools under safety guidelines and procedures. It reviews the use of technology and social media during the pandemic by parents and teachers for communication purposes. The final section addresses emerging research post-COVID-19 pandemic and discusses the theoretical and conceptual framework for the study's design and discussion of findings.

#### **A Review of the Literature on Home-School Relationships**

The idea of families and schools communicating with each other dates back to the early organization of education. For purposes of this study, research into family involvement and engagement was reviewed through the lens of parent perception and recent changes in modalities with the arrival of the internet. Technology began to play a role in these communications approximately thirty years ago with the introduction of email and messaging applications.

#### **Research Before March 2020**

Research from the past twenty-five years has focused on student achievement as the outcome of involving families in schools' education of children. Hattie (2009) synthesized this research in his book, *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to*

*Achievement.* Beyond just increasing student achievement, parent involvement has been shown to have longer-lasting effects on the student's future. Henderson & Berla (1994) stated, "The evidence is now beyond dispute. When schools work together with families to support learning, children tend to succeed not just in school, but throughout life" (p. 1). Teachers and schools may lay blame for lack of student achievement on a perceived lack of parental involvement (Baker et al., 2016). The research also indicates that there may be legitimate barriers to communication between home and school, which should be explored (Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot-Lawrence, 2003).

### **Parent Involvement vs. Engagement**

In education, the concept of parent involvement versus the concept of parent engagement has been researched and analyzed extensively. Goals 2000 (1994) "included parent involvement as one of eight national goals and includes research funding for Family, School, Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University and the Office for Educational Research" (Hiatt Michael, 1994). Family involvement has a thread throughout the historical perspectives of education in America but remains a somewhat delicate subject at school and home. It is acknowledged as important but often not well implemented in schools. Ferlazzo (2011) distinguished between the two concepts of family involvement versus family engagement:

One of the dictionary definitions of *involve* is "to enfold or envelope," whereas one of the meanings of *engage* is "to come together and interlock." Thus, involvement implies *doing to*; in contrast, engagement implies *doing with*. Parent involvement might include being part of the PTA or a classroom parent raising money for and following the wishes of the school and teachers.

Assisting with homework and reading are also ways parents can be involved. Attendance at open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and concerts also demonstrates involvement with the school. However, a school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears- listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners. (p. 11)

Garbaczk and colleagues (2016) demonstrated one way that schools can be engaged with families. The authors created a Conceptual Model of Family Engagement within Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). They emphasized creating a family advisory group using a data-based, problem-solving framework and recommended three domains to focus on: practices at home, practices at school, and practices to enhance home-school communication. They conceptually organized family engagement with universal planning and problem-solving at a systems level with a family-involvement leadership team. This team can look at practices at home and school and establish enhanced outcomes for teachers, families and other stakeholders.

To gain partners, a key component of PBIS is families and schools working together for the best interest of the student. Bailey (2016) explained the benefit of this model as combining both a student's academic and behavioral/social-emotional needs as codependent on each other. It allows families and schools to utilize a problem-solving approach to improve both areas through intervention. The school's role then becomes to educate parents not only about their expectations but to also make sure communication is open and problem-solving is done in collaboration.

Many educational initiatives similar to PBIS have family engagement as a core component of their framework including student assistance teams (SAT) and the responsive classroom. The Student Assistance Team Guidebook suggests a four-step planning process that

involves families through multiple meetings on an on-going basis which are intentional in making families feel welcome and respected. It states that “families must make note of reasons families may not become engaged with schools and be intentional in its strategies to reduce these barriers” (p. 50).

The Global Family Research Project Family Engagement Carnegie Report (2018) positions family engagement through an equitable lens on the families of today and what differences educators and schools need to honor in their approach to working with families. We define next generation family engagement as moving from where we are now- a scattered, marginal, and unaligned set of programs and policies- to more strategic and systematic approaches to family and community engagement in and out of school and from birth through young adulthood. (p. 4)

Focusing on the relationship between the teacher and families is vital because this is the connection point for engagement to occur. Engagement happens when we co-create opportunities for family engagement with the families, and to do this we must also begin to shift our mindsets in education about what engagement is and be mindful and tolerant to factors such as culture and race, economic and educational status (Weiss, Lopez & Caspe, 2018).

### **Parent Voice and Presence**

McKenna & Millen (2013) conducted a grounded theory qualitative study where parent engagement was defined this way:

Parent engagement as we define it encapsulates both parent voice and parent presence. Parent voice implies not only [those parents] have ideas and opinions about their children, but also that educators are receptive to this voice, allowing for an open, multi-directional flow of communication. (p.9)

Parent presence refers to the actions undertaken in response to what a child needs to be successful in their education. In their research, McKenna and Millen utilized views from a parent focus group consisting of mothers and another focus group consisting of teachers. The result was the creation of a four-part Contemporary Parent Engagement Model (2013). Parent voice and parent presence combine to create parent engagement that is: active and deliberate, communal and personal, culturally sensitive and develops over time. Their conclusions demonstrated that there must be mutual respect between families and teachers with an understanding of the importance of hearing what the parent is saying and noticing what the parent is doing for the success of their child.

### **Social Capital**

Parents who exert their efforts and beliefs through their involvement and interactions with schools are doing so to influence the educational trajectory of their children. This results in parent engagement where parents leverage their position- social, cultural, or economic- in such a way as to gain an advantage (Addi-Racah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008; Lareau, 2000) Hanifan (1916) was a state supervisor of schools in West Virginia and is credited with creating the phrase *social capital* in education, where there is value found in making connections among people, particularly regarding engaging parents:

I am firmly convinced that the supervisor and teachers whose achievements I have described have struck bedrock in community building. It is not what they did for the people that counts most in what was achieved; it is what they led the people to do for themselves that is really important. Tell the people what they ought to do, and they will say in effect, "Mind your own business." But help them to discover for themselves what ought to be done, and they will not be satisfied until it is

done. The more people do for themselves the larger will community social capital become, and the greater will be the dividends upon the social investment. (p. 138)

This sentiment is echoed by an idea presented by Ferlazzo (2011), where tension exists between parental involvement and parental engagement, and whether we are "doing to" parents or "doing with" parents to foster relationships and connections. McKenna and Millen (2013) suggest that parent engagement can only exist if both parent voice and parent presence are holistically intertwined, "The conditions for parent engagement to flourish include a two-way understanding for both families and educators." It must be cultivated over time and provide meaningful experiences, not just perceived "one-and-done" meetings or events.

### **Barriers to Parent Engagement**

A common theme in research on family engagement across the decades shows an awareness on behalf of both school and family regarding the perceived barriers to connecting, but lacking momentum to overcome these barriers (Epstein, 1995, 2004, 2006; Ferlazzo, 2009, 2011; Henderson, 1987, 1994, 2006; McKenna & Millen, 2013). It is essential to read the research carefully for any study's geographic and demographic characteristics. However, a comparison of themes that do emerge shows commonality in the barriers: overcoming parents' own personal negative school experiences, balancing perceived power, providing more broad opportunities for engagement, welcoming families into the building, and showing empathy for family dynamics.

As human beings we may seek to avoid situations that evoke unpleasant feelings or thoughts. When a parent remembers their own time at school as a student in an apprehensive or unpleasant way, it is less likely the parent will think that it will be any different as an adult. If the parent felt belittled or embarrassed by teachers and administrators as a student, engaging in communication with the school on behalf of their own child can be difficult. Parents may feel

that the school wields the decision-making process and they are powerless to change it. This may result in choosing not to attend school events and meetings. Much of the research discusses opportunities to bring parents into the school without judgment, first for events that are fun and family oriented, not tied to student behavior or achievement. A common fear is that if a child is struggling the parent will feel blamed and see their parenting as marginalized. Schools and teachers that strive to understand how a parent might be feeling and ask what the parent needs from the school can pave the way for some of these barriers to be removed.

Garbacz et al. (2018) conducted a study where they interviewed parents and teachers to identify the barriers to family engagement in schools. A perceived lack of willingness to participate was identified as the second most prevalent barrier to engagement according to teachers. Yet when parents were asked what the school was not doing to facilitate family engagement, communication was listed as the number one barrier. The perpetual cycle of the school stating the parent was uninvolved while the parent claimed not to know due to lack of communication continued the perpetual cycle of ineffective family engagement.

### **Perception of Power**

The perception of power can be a barrier to building relationships between home and school. When parents perceive the school holds the power by telling them what they need or ought to do, they see the school as not open to listening to their point of view. Schools must develop a culture of listening, in addition to respect, to send a different message. As Ferlazzo (2011) surmised, "One way to begin this process is for teachers and other staff members to make prearranged visits to students' homes" (p. 11). The idea of somehow overlapping school and home environments prior to the pandemic remained a tenuous and somewhat uncomfortable



choice. A perception of the teacher or school as the expert leads to an imbalance of power where the parent is perceived as being a less knowledgeable other, leading to a feeling of disrespect. "When parents find themselves in this role, they often feel very unprepared, afraid, and angry. Parents have described this feeling as one of helplessness devoid of hope" (Murry et al., 2013)

### **Social-Psychological Barriers**

While some barriers are more visible, others are not easily seen (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2020). These are referred to as social or psychological barriers, which are obstacles possibly derived from fear, lack of confidence, background, language, ethnicity or past experiences. Teachers identified other areas they felt were barriers for parents, such as overcoming negative school experiences and being nervous about engaging with their child's school. The researchers found that both parents and teachers were aware of the barriers, but that often they were just accepted and not addressed adequately. It was acceptable for all involved to be able to say they simply tried without the effort to overcome the barrier completely.

Sara Lightfoot-Lawrence (2003) found similar tones in her interviews with parents about their perceptions of education in her book *The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn from Each Other*. In Chapter 1, "Ghosts in the Classrooms," she describes how past adverse experiences had a powerful hold on adults who had children in the educational setting and this was palpable in the words of the individuals being interviewed. Their perceptions of how the educational system treated them and how they remember their parents and families responding to past situations left indelible impressions on the psyches of these parents with their children. These past experiences also influenced how parents chose to react to situations with their child's teachers or school. Strong feelings and emotions rose to the surface, often catching everyone by surprise.

In her interviews with teachers, Lawrence also discovered that their strong memories from their educational experiences, which were not always positive, still lingered. Often, teachers reported not feeling prepared in their teacher preparation coursework for working with parents and families. They cited the lack of a conceptual framework to deal with what she termed the "ghosts in the classroom." One teacher referred to "constructions of capitalism" that "shape the values and behaviors of parents and that influence the goals they set and the ways they advocate for their children" (p. 34).

### **Other Barriers**

Lareau also discovered that schools and teachers wanted parental engagement but did not always facilitate it effectively. Epstein (2011) found that ineffective and poorly designed home school engagement could have a negative effect worse than not having any communication at all. Lareau found a mismatch between teacher perceptions of parents being not involved as not caring, and parents who were simply not confident to read or work with their child at home or who have busy work schedules impacting time during the week.

Scheduling conflicts are another barrier identified in the research. Baker et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative research study searching for answers to what both parents and teachers felt were barriers to involvement with the school. At the top of the parent list was the difficulty with the timing of events and following a school week schedule rather than a work week schedule. For example, parents often had to take time off during the day for events or were working at night and had other children to feed or bring to meetings without childcare available. All participants did want to have a good relationship with the school, but their lives were not always conducive to making it work within the school timeframe.

In prior research studies, parents have also cited poor or late communication about events as a barrier (Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot-Lawrence, 2003; Baker et al., 2016). Schools and teachers addressed concerns around communication by describing the many ways they disseminated information to parents, but admitted not always following up to ensure parents knew how to access online portals, had internet, or checked email. Written notices were also sent home, but without follow-up to determine that they had indeed been seen.

Finally, transportation was identified as a barrier for some parents to get to the school physically, both in urban and rural contexts.

### **Pre-Pandemic Use of Technology**

Until the advent of the internet, school-home communications were typically in the form of printed or hand-written notes sent home to parents, phone calls and in-person meetings at the school. According to history.com, the Internet became readily available for home use in the early 1990s, with broadband becoming a public policy issue in the early 2000s. Educational research began to follow using the internet to engage parents. Schools constructed websites and webpages to communicate about events, school schedules and other information with parents and their communities. Technology advances also allowed for more personal communications with individual families or parents through email (Tobolka, 2006; Connelly & Waterhouse , 2017).

### **Email**

Even before the pandemic forced schools to communicate remotely with parents, email was a common method of school communication from the early 2000's. Thompson (2007) conducted exploratory dissertation research into the characteristics of parent-teacher email communication. The findings of that study found that email communication between parents

and teachers was beginning to be utilized more frequently by teachers but not by parents. Only a small number of parents appeared to initiate email communication with teachers. Suggestions for future research included studying the advantages and disadvantages of email communication and when it might be the chosen method of communication.

Within the last decade or more, the practice of text messaging by cell phones increased with the widespread adoption of cellphones. In 2018, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) conducted a snapshot into a "communication upgrade for parents" which explored the 2016 *Speak Up Research Project for Digital Learning*.

Eighty-seven percent of surveyed parents indicated that personal email is the most effective vehicle for communicating with parents, an increase of thirty-six percent since 2010. Similarly, with emphasis on timely and easily read information, fifty-five percent of parents would like their child's teacher to simply "text them" when they want to communicate information. (p.6)

Schools were encouraged at that time to upgrade their home-school communication methods so that parents might be more able to engage and support their child's learning.

Fleming (2012) found that "digital technology is providing a growing variety of methods for school leaders to connect with parents anywhere, anytime -- a tactic mirroring how technology is used to engage students" (p.2). Other themes from that study highlighted the inequities that existed at that time between families who had home internet which allowed access to web pages, digital grading platforms and email, and those who did not have access to the internet. Forward-thinking districts made it a priority to use digital technology with parents and provided training and access through organizations such as Technology Goes Home to bridge the inequities between home and school.

We have parents from all walks of life. The feedback we have from families has told us we can't provide a single communication means to engage them, so we provide a “menu of offerings” they can pick and choose from. Our goal is relating these family engagement offerings to how we work with students in a differentiated manner. (p. 4)

The organization often witnessed how leveraging technology can help to repair relationships between schools and parents. Parents who felt the school saw them as apathetic suddenly felt more empowered to participate when the school provided them with technology and "enlists them as part of the solution" (Fleming, 2012).

### **COVID-19 Pandemic Influence on Parent Engagement Research**

The first phase of the pandemic in March 2020 saw families and schools thrust into a reactionary situation they were completely unprepared to handle. Society as a whole was sheltered in place at home. By the return to school in the fall of 2021, some pieces of communication were resolved thanks to the influx of ESSER federal funding. In the fall of 2021-22, a return to normalcy was not yet complete for some parents and schools, but prior experiences were helping to shape and revise educational planning and communications.

### **Silver Linings in Communication**

In the report *Solving for X: Unknowns and Possibilities of School, Family, and Community Partnerships*, Epstein (2021) and associates discuss what they term "silver linings in the storm of COVID-19," What started as reaching out to parents regarding immediate needs such as food and meal delivery, determining device and internet needs and understanding distribution schedules, laid the groundwork for reaching out to parents to set up school schedules and talk about student work and assignments. Once a relationship was established and the effort

was made to continue a schedule of communication, teachers, parents and caregivers responded positively to the changes. Immediate physical needs seemed to be more urgently addressed and schools and families responded to each other quickly, most often without judgment.

In 2021, the Maine Educational Policy and Research Institute (MEPRI) conducted a survey study (Lech & Johnson, 2021), *How Students with IEPs and their Teachers are Faring in Maine Schools during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Teachers were asked about the challenges they faced trying to communicate with students, parents and caregivers. This study found that,

Five out of six teachers (84%, n=117) had at least one student family not responding to communications. Sixty-three percent of teachers had students with parents or caregivers who were not able to assist students or respond to teacher communications during the normal school day. Parent and caregiver characteristics that were seen as communication challenges to teachers are low levels of caregiver technical literacy (64%, n=89), caregiver literacy (33%, n=46), and non-English speaking caregivers (9%, n=13). Internet connectivity was again noted in this question. Over a third of teachers (39%, n=54) said their student caregivers' lack of home devices or adequate home internet services presented a communications challenge. Ten percent (n=14) said teachers or Ed tech's lack of devices or adequate home internet service presented a communications challenge. (pp.27-30)

In an open-ended question, teachers responded to what *did* work for them in communicating with families. The teachers strongly identified the development of relationships with families, parents and caregivers. Making home calls and checking in weekly in multiple formats were all felt to be "crucial" for remote learning to be successful (Lech & Johnson, 2021).

This was also true in the small survey I conducted with Maine literacy intervention teachers.

One teacher found that:

at [first] I didn't think I could do it and only sat in on Zoom sessions with the classroom teacher and all the students. Then I thought, I can contact these parents and set up times to meet and talk or read with students. So, then I did it and it worked! It was hard, but it worked! (Jordan, 2021, p.10)

It is important to listen to the word "hard" in this teacher's comments. Just having the new format of distance communication did not make communication easier, but this quote does reflect a parent's and teacher's comfort level and resilience to wanting to connect.

### **Parent Voice and Presence in the Digital World**

The University of Michigan's Education Policy Initiative published the report *Historic Crisis, Historic Opportunity* in June 2021. The authors stated that "families played an oversized role in children's learning" during the early period of the pandemic (p. 8). I would argue they also played an oversized role in engaging with educators and schools as well. The authors offered the following advice:

*Continue with Virtual Options:* A wider menu is now available for facilitating the home-school connections so critical for young children's development and learning- a silver lining of the pandemic. There is not yet evidence on the effectiveness of these new approaches. (p. 27)

The emphasis was again on a silver lining of the pandemic-- leveraging what has worked, being creative in our approaches to engage families and not sliding back to traditional, complacent methods of communication that often shroud family and school relationships.

In *The Distance Learning Playbook for Parents: How to Support Your Child's Academic, Social, and Emotional Development in Any Setting*, Fisher et al. (2020) advised parents on their role during distance learning. While most of this book addresses student learning and achievement and how parents can help, the authors are vocal that the intent of the book is for parents to learn to partner with the school and educators on a deeper level. Some of these recommendations reflect what Lareau and others discussed in their work. Families saw themselves taking care of the physical needs of students at home but left the educating to the teachers. Fisher et al. (2020) recognized the different situations for parents who are working outside of the home, working from home or not working at all. Families and caregivers needed to have our support individualized to their particular situation during the pandemic.

Parent voice (Makenna & Millen, 2013) needed to be heard and explored since many of the previous barriers to school and family interactions had become less of an issue. Considering Epstein's (2011) six principles for family involvement, the pandemic created conditions conducive to making several of the principles more easily possible. Families were required to be active participants who helped with their children's learning during periods of remote and hybrid learning. Teachers learned to communicate in a variety of ways and follow up if there was no response. In an anecdotal conversation, an elementary teacher shared with me that families with previous barriers to communication appeared to be most willing to use newer, more technological modes of communication such as email or video conferencing. Using a tablet or cell phone and various messaging applications made finding transportation to a school meeting and childcare unnecessary. If a parent worked evenings, they usually had a break at which time they would respond or ask questions via email or messaging. In this manner, the parent presence from home was not influenced by "ghosts in the classroom" (Lareau, 2000).



## **Federal Funding to Leverage Technology**

The leveraging of federal funds from the Coronavirus Relief Fund (CRF) and Elementary and Secondary Emergency School Relief Fund (ESSERF) to assist with cost-related expenses to allow education to continue in the best way possible during the pandemic also played a role in improving communication between home and school. In Maine, local school boards had the autonomy to create back-to-school plans which included options for in-person or remote learning and also a hybrid model using both these modalities. Lech et al. (2022) found in a study from the Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) that "states and school districts across the US initially used new federal relief funding during the pandemic to tackle the existing digital divide, by obtaining additional technology hardware and improving internet access to support students' remote and online learning." For example, the administrative team in my school decided to invest in developing the infrastructure that would allow every student and family a way to connect with their teacher virtually for classes, meetings and conferences when deemed necessary for remote or hybrid learning and connecting.

While recent research was initiated during this time focusing on the teacher-student relationship and interactions during remote or hybrid learning, and the shift to remote modalities for communication, research is still emerging through publications about how these changes were perceived by parents and teachers.

## **Emerging Research on Communicating Post Pandemic**

There were two distinct periods in remote learning: March 2020 until the end of the school year in June 2020 which was disorganized due to the sudden closure of school. The 2020-21 school year saw the infusion of state and federal funding and more organized remote instruction and in-person learning and the 2021-22 school year saw the vast majority of students

returned to school. While the March 2020 move to remote learning caught everyone off guard and was more reactive in nature, the second and third remote learning periods were more organized attempts at education. Many of the organizations and researchers referred to the shift to remote instruction as "pivoting" (Fischer & Frey, 2021), where schools adjusted their practices to the new norms and available technology supports for post-pandemic education.

Pivoting occurred yet again with the full return to school.

### **Parent Engagement**

In all three time periods during the pandemic, engaging parents to help with their child's learning as well as being able to communicate meant that schools and teachers needed parents as partners in education. Parents also felt an increased need to connect with the school and engage with teachers closely.

When the pandemic forced remote learning on schools, Epstein (2021) and the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) continued their main mission:

In the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University, our mission did not change. We aim to help schools use research-based approaches to strengthen school and family connections and improve results for students. However, COVID-19 increased the importance of engaging all families to ensure the education of all students. This is always a challenge, but it is even more difficult when students are learning from home. We wanted to know if, how, and how well districts and schools in NNPS were responding to COVID-19 challenges to strengthen and sustain their partnership plans and practices. (p.1)

With the start of the 2022-23 school year, the COVID-19 safety guidelines and restrictions from the pandemic timeframe had been lifted completely in most schools. The

physical school buildings opened to parents and the public as they were before the pandemic. Looking at parent engagement as communication between the teacher and the caregivers is a developing field of research. The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research conducted a series of six parent and educator focus groups partnering with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and community-based organizations. In the research brief, the researchers stated,

Our six focus groups with parents and educators revealed a diverse mural of experiences and perspectives with remote schooling. We used the insights shared by our focus group participants to draw seven communication lessons that emerged during all-remote schooling—and that remain salient as in-person learning resumes. (Orta & Gutiérrez, p. 5)

The seven lessons learned included: parents and teachers embracing meeting through virtual means as a more convenient and flexible option and increasing the rate of parent participation. The use of various mobile applications also allowed for barriers to be broken down.. One such example was that families of English Language Learners (ELL) were able to use dictation translation applications for improved communication. Understanding family dynamics and home life also helped schools develop and reach out differently to each family. Building and maintaining ongoing relationships was a key factor in successful communication procedures.

### **Parent Voice and Presence Post Pandemic**

When Logan et. al (2021) explored parent voice in education as a result of the COVID19 pandemic, they found that parents were less reluctant to reach out to their child's teacher in the wake of societal changes. Parents had always understood the value of communication with the school, but it was not until the pressures applied to social constructs, as a result of the loss of in-

person interactions, that they developed the confidence to interact more meaningfully. Being required to ask questions, attend meetings and use digital means to do so increased and improved their interactions and conversations with schools.

Before the pandemic, barriers-- both visible and invisible, interfered with parents coming to school to participate in conferences and meetings. Research into the phenomenon of being comfortable behind an asynchronous modality has created the term "online disinhibition" (Suler, 2004; Garrison, 2008; Rose, 2014). This refers to a lessening of restraint an individual feels by communicating online rather than in person. While most of the research refers to social media posts,

Benign disinhibition is seen as when people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly. (Rose, 2014)

Parents, who before the pandemic felt uncomfortable with the traditional ways of communicating with the school and teachers, fit into the description of benign disinhibition as they more readily adopted the remote forms of communication, because:

[When people] fear disapproval or punishment, people are reluctant to say what they really think as they stand before an authority figure. However, whilst online, in what feels more like a peer relationship with the appearances of authority minimized, people are much more willing to speak out or act out. (Suler, 2005)

The future of school-home communications will likely be more digital with mobile apps and texting as the primary channels. Educators want more two-way communication options and the ability to engage with all parents and families. According to Fleming(2021),

They want to know that the messages and notifications are being read by families. They also want the volume of messages to be streamlined and prioritized so that it's easier for families to focus on the most important messages. Paper communications, voice calls, and website notifications top the list of channels schools want to stop using. (p. 9)

### **Continued Use of Technology**

As schools move out of the recovery phase of the pandemic into ongoing proactive structures around technology, they do so with an infrastructure already in place from leveraging the ESSER and CRF federal relief funds. Orta & Gutiérrez (2022) remind us that using technology in education to communicate is not a novel idea but one which has not shown equity among use with families. An increased comfort level with using technology post-pandemic more readily addresses these inequities.

### **Email**

Email remains an asynchronous mode of communication that takes place frequently between schools and parents. With this modality, participants do not need to be present simultaneously to communicate. The school-family engagement platform, ParentSquare, sent surveys in the Winter of 2022 to both their customers (administrators and teachers using ParentSquare) and also to non-customers (administrators and teachers not using ParentSquare) for a total of 1,316 completed surveys. Specifically, they were looking for what modes of communication were used the most to connect and communicate with families. The survey results found that ninety-three percent of the respondents reported email as their number one mode of communication during the pandemic, but that multiple modes of communication were preferred. The other options were texting, phone calls and social media platforms.

## **Video-conferencing**

Video-conferencing is a synchronous form of communication requiring all participants to engage in real-time via a digital platform on a device. Edtech magazine (October 2022) reviewed major lessons learned across the United States for using video-conferencing for parent-teacher meetings.

Attendance at parent-teacher conferences skyrocketed during the pandemic," says ISTE [International Society for Technology in Education] Chief Learning Officer Joseph South. "It wasn't because parents suddenly became interested in the success of their children; it was because suddenly those conferences were a lot more accessible to parents with obligations that weren't flexible. (Hayhurst, 2021)

Using whatever technology works best for them, parents and teachers have a close replica of the in-person meeting without the barriers of distance and time. Emerging research discusses using video-conferencing as a mode of remote learning with students as more school districts see it as a viable option for engaging with parents.

I think what we've seen is that the past few years have permanently changed the face of parent communication, says Mario Milano, Orange County Director of family engagement and digital outreach. We've learned that we need to be where parents are, not where we want them to be. (Hayhurst, 2021)

## **Rebounding from the Pandemic**

Fisher et al. (2020) authored the book *Rebound: A Playbook for Rebuilding Agency, Accelerating Learning Recovery and Rethinking School*. The authors stated: "If we want to survive and thrive, we need to rebound from these experiences. We need to redefine and reinvent.

The time is now. The opportunity is ours" (p. 184). While most of the post-COVID education research has investigated the effect the pandemic disruption had on student achievement, there are also glances into the roles that parents and caregivers played, and what we can also learn from those experiences. In some of the recent research, school administrators, teachers and parents expounded on the positive connections that were made because of remote learning situations. They voiced the belief that we can move forward by continuing to help parents navigate the language of education, including more student-led conferences and rethinking traditional paper student report cards or progress notes (Logan, 2021; Gandolfi, 2021).

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

This phenomenological study regarding educator and parent interactions and perceptions explored case studies from three Central Maine Schools through an interpretive approach. "Interpretivism stands in contrast to positivism and holds that reality is subjective, socially constructed, and a composite of multiple perspectives. Through this lens, research is inherently shaped by the researcher, who brings their subjective view of observed phenomena based on their personal experience" (Rogers, 2020). As an educator myself, living the same experience as the participants, I brought my lived experience and perceptions to the study. I found unexpected positive consequences in communicating remotely with parents and families during this timeframe, so I sought to hear and understand a broader context. The use of focus groups from three different schools ensured that I gained a wider perspective from which to draw my conclusions and to compare and contrast with my own lived experience.

### **Framework for Parent Involvement**

It was important to enter the study with an understanding of existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks regarding family involvement with schools. Joyce Epstein is a well-

known voice in the research of schools and parental engagement, having created the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) in 1995, at John Hopkins University. The website <http://schoolsinpartnership.org/> remains active today, working with schools and offering support and models, backed by research into effective practices. Epstein has conducted research into family engagement and created a framework for schools to use. (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Epstein & Sanders, 2006) The six elements included in in her framework are:

**Parenting** to support children's education.

**Communicating** with the schools.

**Volunteering** in children's schools and extracurricular activities.

**Assisting** with homework and learning opportunities in the home.

**Participating** in decision-making within the schools.

**Collaborating** between the school and community.

Epstein had over eight hundred schools connecting with her partnership within two years of establishing it at John Hopkins University, demonstrating the interest and desire to learn more about working with parents and families. The partnership's goal has been to provide districts and schools with knowledge and assistance to create better partnerships using the framework.

Epstein also developed a conceptual framework of overlapping spheres of influence (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Epstein & Sanders, 2006) that surrounds the child by school, family and community and explores how their influences intersect and overlap with each other. The conceptual framework of overlapping spheres of influence is one conceptual framework guiding this dissertation study. Epstein presents her spheres of influence as intersecting circles of the same size. The result is the child in the shared middle space where all the spheres connect.



During the COVID-19 pandemic timeframe these circles shifted in relation to education and parent engagement. During remote periods of learning, the parental sphere was greatly expanded as the school and learning entered physical home and school became virtual. The home and school were influenced by the guidelines set by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and by how the state and local governing bodies enforced them. How well the student accessed connectivity depended on the technology and resources available to the home. A student could take a school issued device such as an iPad or laptop home, but without internet it would fail to make the virtual connection to the teacher and school. Cellular companies and community resources made it possible to provide hot spots or free internet for students learning remotely.

All three spheres- family, community and school- interacted in new and creative ways to keep communication flowing and keep schools engaged with parents and students. This model of overlapping spheres works theoretically prior to March 2020, slowly shifts during the 2020-21 school year and presents itself in a new way going forward into the 2021-22 school year. The common factor is the continuing support of the community and school engaging with the home for a positive educational experience for the child. Each time there was a pivot from in-person to remote learning and finally a return to school for everyone including parents and community in the 2022-23 school year, the idea of spheres overlapping in their influence helps explain the findings from this study in Chapter four which is discussed in Chapter five.

### **Ecological Systems Model**

The second conceptual model informing this study is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model, which purports five levels or systems at play in the social environments that influence an individual. Three will be discussed in the context of parent and school communication. The microsystem is the smallest system of influence surrounding a child, consisting of home, school and community. The microsystem is closest to the child. The

mesosystem is comprised of the interactions among the groups within the microsystem. At the macro level, the broader influences of cultural, political or social class exist and are furthest from the child (Bertolini, 2012).

A global pandemic affects all systems at the micro and macro levels of a child's world and his or her educational experience. We know as educators we will see the ripple effects of the disruption in the micro-level world of children as a direct result of the trickle-down from macrolevel societal changes or policies, such as a global pandemic. How a child's home, school and community collaborate and engage has been changed by the insertion of technology and digital modes of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic (Porrás-Hernández & Salinas-Amescua, 2013).

If the home and school provide context for the child's microsystem, how these two factions communicate can be broken into asynchronous (distant or offline) and synchronous communication (online in real-time) in the child's mesosystem. Epstein (2004, 2006) suggests overlapping spheres of influence whereas Bronfenbrenner has concentric circles within their conceptual frameworks. The interpretive approach of this study builds upon prior and emerging research into family engagement and communication, as well as the research on technology use for remote communication, and applies these two conceptual models to interpret the study's findings.

In the microsystem we have the immediate setting around the student- home, community and school existing with each other. This occurred in the mesosystem where we see relationships develop and connections in and amongst the groups overlap and influence each other. During the pandemic and the immediate school years following, these relationships occurred in both synchronous and asynchronous communications.

The exosystem is where events happened to the participants in the microsystem without their direct involvement, but where they were affected by the current events. The overlapping spheres of student, home, school and community were affected by the COVID-19 safety protocols of masking, social distancing, remote learning and school closures.

Next, the macrosystem of larger cultural contexts and values. The world-wide pandemic in 2020 set off a plethora of individual viewpoints on the role of science and how it informed the practice of safety protocols. Individual opinions and feelings created a cultural crisis which shrouded all the systems in the ecological model. Schools and community businesses needed to create new norms and structures to adhere safely to the guidelines at the state and federal level. This ultimately affected the students, parents and educators and how they communicated.

The final outer layer is the Chronosystem representing the role of time. This level acknowledges the influence that events, personal experiences and life transitions have on the individual. During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic time shaped and influenced many things as guidelines, procedures and vaccinations changed. How technology was viewed and used in March 2020 was vastly different than in the 2021-22 school year. During that transition time the comfort level of the parent's relationship with technology is important to this study. In the next chapter, the study's research methods will be outlined.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of educators and families regarding their communications during the period of the COVID pandemic. As the literature shows, family engagement with PK-12 schools is crucial to student achievement; however, it remains an area that needs improvement in practice. This research was guided by one broad research question with three sub-questions: How do elementary-grade educators and parents perceive their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID pandemic?

- a. What modalities, devices, and technology are educators using to communicate with parents?
- b. What are parents' and educators' views about these different forms of communication?
- c. How do these remote modalities impact the frequency and perceived quality of educator/family communications?

This chapter outlines elements of the research design, including a rationale for the use of an interpretive approach and qualitative research methods, the recruitment of participants, the interview process, and data analysis methods for this qualitative study.

#### **Research Design**

##### **An Interpretive Perspective**

This study sought to understand how elementary-grade educators and parents perceived their communications and relationships through remote modalities during the period when schools implemented COVID-19 safety protocols and guidelines, specifically the protocol preventing physical access to schools beyond students and staff. Educators and parents may have experienced this phenomenon differently and may have diverse views about how well the

remote modalities worked for their communication. An interpretive perspective with qualitative methods was chosen as the most appropriate approach for the study's research design. Creswell and Poth (2018) state, "Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." My goal at the outset of this study was to understand what meanings educators and parents gave to their lived experience of using modern technology and other modalities as communication tools during the COVID pandemic. As an educator myself, I wanted to study this phenomenon in relation to my reality of working under the same conditions. Specifically, I wondered how other educators found their experience, and if parents and educators experienced or viewed their remote communications differently.

Creswell and Poth (2018) describe an interpretive, phenomenological research study "as having the ability to explore the experiences of a group of individuals around a specific phenomenon." In this study, the phenomenon of interest was the remote modes of communication that were happening during the pandemic, often for the first time for educators and parents who had formerly interacted primarily in person or through written communications. It was clear that some effort would be involved to understand the meaning parents and educators gave to their experiences. I wanted to ask educators how they communicated and connected with parents, when access to the physical building was not an option, knowing that building a relationship with families is a crucial part of a student's school experience. As the educators worked this out on their end, I wanted to then ask parents separately how they found ways to connect and communicate with their children's teachers, when going to the school was not an option. Knowing that both teachers and parents were having the same experiences was not enough for me to be able to understand the phenomenon. I needed to talk with both educators and

parents about their lived experiences to find out how they viewed this communication process. An interpretive, phenomenological research design was optimal for this study to uncover the feelings and insights of two distinct groups sharing the same experience in a novel situation.

For over two years, teachers have had to be creative, not only in their approach to teaching during the pandemic, but also with how they interacted or communicated with parents. The COVID-19 safety measures and guidelines changed the way people interacted in the workplace, and some of these new work guidelines remained. I was interested in finding the lessons we learned from engaging parents and families within the new guidelines in education. How did we accomplish relationship building when physical access to school was prohibited? Simply learning *what* modalities educators and parents used to communicate and *how* they accomplished making connections was not enough. I wanted to understand the more complex underpinnings of *why* parents and educators went to extra efforts to keep connected. Was there something both sides were feeling that promoted being proactive to reach out to the other side? Another goal of this study was to empower parents who rarely had opportunities to outwardly share their voices and opinions. The study also afforded educators this same opportunity for reflection and transparency.

### **Interviewing**

Seidman (2013) discusses the purpose of interviewing as “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.” Using this method of data collection allowed the participants to develop their opinions through clarifying follow-up questions. Since the goal of the study was to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants and their views about those experiences, qualitative research methods and interviews specifically were the best approaches for this study. Seidman (2013) says, “I interview because I am interested in other people’s stories. Most simply put, stories are a

way of knowing.” By contrast, a quantitative method such as surveys would fail to allow for dynamic interaction and exploration between participants and the interviewer. A survey can tell us how much the participant agrees or disagrees with a list of views provided but is not ideal for identifying what the range of views might be. Open-ended survey questions allow for more in-depth responses, but the researcher sees this information after the fact and the opportunity for follow-up and probing questions is not possible.

When interviewing in real time, the power lies in the ebb and flow of the conversation and the researcher must be listening carefully for opportunities to probe further and build off from the participant's comments. I was interested in the narrative that parents and educators had to share with me about this new experience. The interview method was best suited for fully exploring participants' varied perceptions and allowing them to describe their experiences in their own words.

### **Rationale for Focus Groups**

The participants in this study shared a similar phenomenological experience of using a variety of modern modalities to communicate remotely during the pandemic. Focus groups were selected as the interviewing method for the purpose of efficiency, to hear from a larger number of participants, and to allow participants to make meaning through their reflections and conversations with other participants. In a focus group setting, participants can gain a sense of comfort from hearing others who share their experiences, and participants can build upon each other's responses. A comment from a participant has the power to elicit a more engaging conversation and extended comments rather than being asked a question in an individual setting. Cyr (2019) suggests focus groups as a means for exploring a new topic of interest, but also to empower or give more voice to participants in research.

Focus groups can be useful for researchers embarking on a new research agenda, especially when little is known about it (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). This is because the researcher can rely upon focus group participants to do the heavy lifting concerning revealing what might be important or salient about a particular research question. Focus groups are empowering for participants precisely because they have control over what is said. In this case, researchers can use that empowerment in their favor: In letting participants take the reins, researchers can pinpoint or isolate what might be noteworthy about a new topic of interest. (p. 23)

Given the novel occurrence of the pandemic and the variety of remote modes of communication used by schools, research on school practices during that period is still emerging, making this a new phenomenon to study. While there is data on how schools and educators communicated with parents and families remotely during the initial shutdown to help complete schoolwork using various technologies, not much has been published to date on the continued use of these technologies and platforms for replacement of traditional in-person meetings and how parents and educators felt about it. Focus groups are well suited for exploratory research on new questions or topics, where participants can help identify the salient issues.

Focus groups also tend to be more open-ended unlike an individual interview format, so they allow for conversation within the group, reducing the domination of the researcher in the interview and allowing participants more control to bring up topics important to them. This can help participants to feel empowered and can give more voice to groups that may not often be asked for their views. It feels validating as part of a group to hear others with similar perspectives



while also allowing other viewpoints to emerge. The opportunity to talk about one's feelings without fear of repercussion is possible in focus groups where opinions are being freely sought and encouraged.

### **Group Dynamics**

The decision to utilize focus groups in this study allowed two distinct groups involved in the same situation to share their perspectives in a controlled setting with other participants who shared the same experience. Separating the educator and parent groups allowed for authentic conversations and sharing of perspectives. Parents participated with other parents in their focus groups, while educators participated with other educators in their focus groups. Further separating the focus groups also by school allowed for a comparison of the two different perspectives within different school settings.

Findings from this research will provide valuable information for future practice for family engagement across all the settings selected for the study. Participants were not in mixed groups across the three study schools. This decision allowed for a comparison of the phenomenon across the three schools. Having school-specific focus groups and parent-only groups may have allowed the parents the opportunity to talk more freely and build upon each other's responses in a way that felt more comfortable without school personnel present. Likewise, educator-only groups allowed for free discussion without administration or parents present for the discussion.

### **School and Participant Recruitment**

#### **Criteria for Schools**

The study drew upon focus group interviews conducted between June 2022 and September 2022 in rural Piscataquis and Penobscot counties in central Maine. Purposeful

sampling was used to identify Pre-K through grade four schools with a high percentage of economically disadvantaged families, as determined by the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES) data. The chosen schools received significant federal funding as part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and received further substantial federal funding through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSERF) during the pandemic. The ESSERF funds provided districts with funding to address the needs in education because of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on education. For these counties in Maine, it was an opportunity to provide items such as devices and online platforms for teachers and students that were lacking, in addition to other needs such as sanitation equipment or extra staffing. Before the pandemic, this central Maine area already lacked infrastructure and accessibility for broadband connectivity via the internet in many homes due to the rural location. While the internet was available at school, it became necessary for schools to provide hot spots to connect to the internet for some families. Overcoming this connectivity issue was important to the study. It removed the lack of technology as a barrier to communication in a rural context.

Another consideration for the schools in the study was the higher-than-state average poverty levels. Demographically, these schools have many students living at or below the poverty line. This also determines the rate of funding through ESEA to provide supplemental support in math and literacy and requires family engagement activities, if schools receive more than \$500,000 in Title IA grant money. This demographic includes families in a lower socioeconomic status than in other areas of Maine and as high-impact Title IA schools it increased the chance that some parents experienced school negatively as students themselves. Research from Lightfoot-Lawrence (2003) and Lareau (2000) underscored the impact negative school experiences had on parents' ability to engage with school for their own children's education, particularly for parents in lower socio-economic or high poverty groups. It is an emotional barrier

to overcome rather than a tangible one. For this study, the opinions of parents and educators in an already challenged geographic area were chosen to highlight what was possible despite the possibility of existing tangible and emotional barriers. If perceptions were positive, it could demonstrate that the use of technology for remote communications can help to remove the stigma of location, funding, and demographic and socio-economic status as barriers to communication.

The three selected elementary schools, from three rural school districts in central Maine, provided summer programming for students between June 2022 and September 2022. The summer programs provided an opportunity for parent participant recruitment for the focus groups. The timing of the start of the study coincided with the end of school and the beginning of the summer programming. This made choosing schools with ongoing learning in the summer important for connecting immediately with families and educators. A list of schools offering summer programming utilizing Reallocated ESEA Title IA FY 22 funds was obtained from the Maine Department of Education. All three elementary schools selected for this study vastly limited face-to-face contact with parents during the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years, such that other modalities were necessary to communicate with parents. Schools remained closed to the public other than students and immediate school staff members. Safety protocols continued to remain in place for summer programming as well, with limited access to the buildings for anyone other than staff and students. This provided a seamless transition into studying the ongoing context of engaging and communicating with barriers in place for in-person interactions.

## **Participant Recruitment**

I first contacted the central administration in the selected districts to describe the research study and asked for their assistance in the timely distribution of recruitment materials. My contacts included two superintendents and one summer program coordinator. All three individuals agreed to help distribute invitation letters describing the study to teachers (Appendix A) and parents (Appendix C) through digital and written modalities. The administrators posted the information to the school website and used email addresses through their central information system to send a copy of the recruitment letter out to all parents and teachers of PreK-grade four students. I provided paper copies of the recruitment letter directly to the school summer coordinators and these were handed out directly to parents and teachers participating in the summer program.

Participants were recruited from Schools A, B, and C with PreK-grade four parents and educators responding to the letters of recruitment via my email. I then shared the informed consent letter by email with interested parents (Appendix B) and educators (Appendix D) who contacted me. Due to the small number of parents and educators who agreed to participate in the focus groups, I accepted all who responded into the study. When asked, participants all agreed to a preference for using Zoom rather than trying to organize an in-person meeting at a set time. I used the Zoom platform for online video conferencing to conduct and record the focus group interviews and any follow-up interviews to adhere to school safety protocols in place and to increase the chances of arranging interviews quickly, rather than in in-person meetings. I emailed three choices of dates and times for parents and educators and organized each group by the preferred times. One participant was interviewed alone because she could not make any of the dates and was extremely interested in the study.

Her information was examined along with the other focus group data from her school.

Participants agreed for the Zoom meetings to be recorded for the creation of a transcript for data analysis. They understood the audio and video recording would be deleted after the conclusion of the transcription process.

### **Data Collection**

Eight focus groups and one individual interview were planned and conducted in the summer and fall 2022. There were three or four participants in each group. School A had one parent and two educator groups, while School B had one parent and one educator group and School C had two parents and one educator group. An interview protocol (Appendix E) was utilized with teachers as they discussed how they interacted with families, which digital modalities they used, and how they felt about this mode of connection. A similar interview protocol (Appendix F) covering these topics was utilized with parents to explore how they were introduced to the new modes of communication and how they felt about these new modalities for communicating with their child's teachers. Interviews were conducted with parents first and then with teachers, one school at a time. This allowed a clear focus on a school's process for communicating remotely with parents during the pandemic from both sides of the equation. It helped me as the researcher view each school as a unique case.

After I reviewed the data near the end of August 2022 with a committee member, I decided to reach out to parents and educators who had been interested during the summer but could not participate on any of the dates. I was able to arrange one more parent and one more educator focus group when school started in September 2022. This increased the participant sample size to strengthen the validity and trustworthiness of the conclusions from the data analysis and resulted in a total of five parent groups, five teacher groups, and one individual

interview for this study. The focus group discussions lasted forty-five to sixty minutes in duration with a mean of fifty-two minutes. The school settings and focus groups are further described in the findings in chapter four.

### **Data Procedures**

Participants agreed to the recording of the Zoom session. I used the initial Zoom transcript to create an accurate transcript immediately following the conclusion of the interviews, by listening to the audio recording and watching the video recording while making corrections in the transcription as needed. I spent time after each interview writing notes and my initial perceptions about the interview. I assigned individual participants numbers (i.e., speaker 1, 2, etc.) to identify their comments in the written transcripts for de-identifying the data.

### **Field Notes and Memos**

Bogdan and Biklen (2016) encourage researchers to be accurate, organized and careful with field notes. This is accomplished by having a good system. They explain, “Fieldnotes can provide any study with a personal log that helps the researcher keep track of the development of the project, to visualize how the research plan has been affected by the data collected, and to remain aware of how he or she has been influenced by the data” (p. 116). My notes about social interactions among participants in a focus group, body language and verbal expressions complemented the written transcript. I used a systematic approach for writing memos in a time-sensitive manner between each focus group interview. Charmaz (2006) discusses using memos to capture thoughts and initial findings, and with the number of participants and focus groups, it was important to memo and journal and keep each group distinct in my mind.

As I completed more interviews, my memos began to also list commonalities and differences in the use of technology and platforms I heard mentioned. I began to keep lists

where I could tally various modalities and oft-mentioned applications. As ideas coalesced, I could keep track of possible coding categories and themes emerging. When all the focus group interviews were completed, the de-identified transcripts, researcher field notes and memos were kept on a secure laptop using protected passwords and encryption software. The transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose, an online software platform for coding and analyzing qualitative data. Only the dissertation chair or committee members were granted access to examine the de-identified data and coding progress in Dedoose.

### **Coding and Data Analysis**

Charmaz (2006) describes coding as the process of defining what the data are all about. Coding is a process of taking a large text of words and organizing them into smaller pieces, eventual categories and themes. Interpreting what is being said by the participants is an inductive process, whereby I derived the codes from my data from the ground up in a process referred to as “open coding.” As each focus group concluded, manual coding was utilized to generate an initial list of codes that were generalized first to modes of communication and platforms used. These were organized into a unified code list that I constructed within the Dedoose software platform. I was then able to read transcripts again for the addition of child codes or to collapse initial codes into one code with a more succinct label.

In Dedoose, my code list reflected the coding from parent and educator transcripts together. For example, the code “convenience” included excerpts from all transcripts and referred to both parent and educator excerpts. When I looked at the code count charts in Dedoose for frequency, I found it helpful to manually make a table outside of Dedoose reflecting codes by parent and educator groups separately. I found using two different summary coding tables outside of Dedoose useful for identifying patterns in the parent and educator focus group codes. These

tables helped me decide how to focus my analysis. Because transcripts were named by each school focus group, I could easily review themes among the same groups or between the two groups within a school district in Dedoose.

Saldana (2008) presents a code-to-theory model of analyzing data from the transcripts by uncovering initial codes that are synthesized into broader, more conceptual categories. These categories can be organized so that overarching themes become apparent which will lead to the discovery of theories and assertions using real data. Using the features within Dedoose, I conducted open coding systematically with each transcript. Cyr (2019) quotes Stewart et al. (2007) on this topic, “you may find it helpful to establish a set of instructions regarding how you coded and classified your data and which verbal and non-verbal factors you took into account as you analyzed and interpreted the results” (p.123). Analyzing the data promptly helped me craft revisions to the subsequent interview protocols to refine the questions for the next group. I also refined the code list early in the process as I went along. The software allowed me to reshuffle, analyze and re-label codes, as necessary.

In the first cycle, open coding produced very specific codes about the mode of communication or technology used. This aligns with the sub-question: (a) What modalities, devices, and technology are educators using to communicate with parents? During the second cycle of axial coding, I focused on looking for patterns and adding child codes to further develop each area of technology. I grouped some codes and assigned them to a broader category. An example of this was creating the category of synchronous communication and initial codes of video conferencing and phone calls moved to this category, rather than being stand-alone codes. Synchronous communication was then housed under the Technology category.



I began to code as well for perceived positive benefits and negative concerns which spoke to the sub-question: (b) What are parents’ and educators’ views about these different forms of communication? The final code list produced six major categories: Technology, Quality of Engagement, Voice, Boundaries, Barriers, and Continuation. Within each category, subcategories of individual codes addressed the benefits and concerns of both traditional in person and remote/digital modalities. Parent benefits and concerns occasionally differed from educators. It was important to explain this in a memo for further exploration when I saw this happen. Table 3.1 shows the alignment of the broad coding categories with research questions.

Table 3.1. Alignment of Coding Categories with Research Questions

	Technology	Quality of Engagement	Voice	Barriers	Boundaries	Continuation
(a)What modalities, devices, and technology are educators using to communicate with parents?	X					
(b) What are parents’ and educators’ views about these different forms of communication?		X		X	X	
(c)How do these remote modalities impact the frequency and perceived quality of educator/family communications?			X			X

Figure 3.2 below shows the major categories and subcategories for the final code list used for both the educator and parent interview transcripts. The complete code lists with more specific codes are found in Appendices G and H.

Figure 3.2. Major Categories of the Code List

Technology-Uses, Benefits, Concerns

Communication-Types, Benefits, Concerns

In-Person

Remote-Synchronous

Video conferencing

Phone calls

Remote-Asynchronous

Text Message

Email

Quality of Communication and Engagement

Frequency

Time

Voice

*"We try harder"*

Advocating needs

Continuation

Listen to us

Fear

Boundaries

Cross-referencing or comparative analysis in Dedoose also took place to ensure quotations represented the breadth and depth of the participant pool, rather than one or two particular participants. Conversations around analysis and organization with other researchers helped reduce researcher bias and strengthen the validity of the findings and conclusions.

After coding was completed, I read coded excerpts first by the school and focused on one group at a time. For example, I read the parents' views on quality and engagement in School A. I continued this protocol with the other two schools looking at the parents' views on this same topic, then synthesized the overall impressions into a memo in Dedoose where I could link excerpts to use for quotes. My focus was on analyzing the data at the school level first and then I compared and contrasted it to the other schools for both the parents' and the educators' comments

within the broad categories. I repeated this process with the educator groups by school first, then across the schools by larger categories. In the analyze section in Dedoose, I used the code presence table, which allowed the codes to be shown at the top with the transcripts along the side. It was easy to see when a code might apply at the school level only or for parents only by its lack of presence in other transcripts from other schools. This is when I considered whether an emerging theme should be set aside.

My final analysis for each broad category compared the final memo from the parent focus group with the final memo from the educator focus group. I used the word cloud feature in Dedoose to compare the schools and groups, as well, more out of curiosity to compare with my thoughts about each group with what words stood out the most in the transcripts. The code frequency features in Dedoose assisted me in narrowing the degrees of freedom in the codes to focus directly on the perceptions and thoughts that were similar between the two distinct groups. A lack of code presence in a group or school helped me highlight differences between the two district groups. I will discuss the findings in Chapter four with schools as: 1) individual schools, 2) combined parent perceptions from all three schools, and 3) combined educator perceptions from all three schools.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of this study is that the participants were self-selected to join the focus groups. Therefore, they were willing to share their opinion and experiences in a non-private forum. Because this was a self-selected group of participants, it can be assumed that they wanted to discuss the topic and it was of interest to them. Listening to both the educator and parent groups provides valuable information for future in-service teachers and their training and comfort level with family engagement. However, it cannot be known what views nonparticipants hold on these topics. Further, this study had a relatively small sample size. Further studies could be

conducted in similar demographic settings or different settings to see if parent and teacher experiences and views with remote communications using technology are similar or not. Finally, educators within schools had prior existing relationships through their work in the same schools and some parent participants within the same schools knew or may have known each other. These relationships may have impacted what participants were willing to share in the focus groups. Participants were also reminded about confidentiality regarding conversations in the focus groups and not to share information after the interviews were concluded.

### **Researcher's Role**

The researcher may also have been known to some participants from working in another school fifteen miles from School A in Penobscot County.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the research questions were presented as well as the rationale for an interpretive research approach and phenomenological perspective with qualitative focus group interviews that allowed for a comparison of educator and parent views of the modes of remote communication they experienced during the COVID pandemic. The criteria for selecting the schools and recruiting participants were described, along with the data collection and analysis procedures. More information describing the participating schools and their communities will be shared in the chapter which follows, along with key findings related to the research question and sub-questions.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings from the qualitative study exploring the broad research question: How do elementary grade educators and parents perceive their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID pandemic? In addition, the study sought to answer the following sub-questions: (a) what modalities, devices, and technology are educators using to communicate with parents?; (b) what are educators' and parents' views of these forms of communication?; and (c) do these remote modalities impact the frequency and quality of educator-family interactions? This chapter first describes the school and community sample demographics and then describes participation in the focus group interviews across the three schools. Findings related to both the type of communication used and perceptions about the pros and cons of those modes are described in terms of the forms of communication (asynchronous and synchronous) and then by the specific technology used. After that, broad themes are described related to educators' and parents' views about the impacts of remote modes of communication.

#### **School Sample**

Three schools in three separate school districts in Maine met the purposeful sampling criteria outlined in Chapter three .They were de-identified in this study as School A, School B, and School C. All schools had a PreK to grade 8 population within regional school units (RSU), but only PreK-4 classroom teachers and parents of PreK-4 students were contacted for this study. For each school, students from four or five neighboring villages were brought to the centrally located school within that school's regional unit. All schools were located in small, rural communities in central Maine, and all had significantly higher rates of student poverty than the statewide rate.

## **Demographics**

School A was located in a rural Central Maine town, which is the county seat and where the hospital, court offices, and corrections center are located. Students come from four to five area towns. In 2021-22, the elementary school had approximately three hundred seventy PreK-8 students with an economically disadvantaged rate of fifty-two percent, which was the lowest in the study but still lower than the statewide rate.

School B is located thirteen miles northeast of School A and had close to one hundred and sixty students in a PreK-4 building with an economically disadvantaged rate of ninety-two percent. Students also came from four area towns to attend this school. The town had lost employers due to mill closures in the past several years and had the highest economically disadvantaged rate in the school sample of ninety-two percent. School enrollment had vastly decreased over the past several years and restructuring of schools within the district closed some school buildings.

School C is located 12 miles west of School A and had about two hundred and seventy PreK-4 students, with an economically disadvantaged rate of sixty-four percent. Like the other sample schools, students came from five area towns to attend this school. It also had mill closures in the past several years, but one mill remains the largest employer in the local area. School enrollment was reduced in the past several years as well, and this resulted in a number of school closures and restructuring. The economically disadvantaged rate was in the middle of schools A and B, at sixty-four percent.

All three schools had economically disadvantaged rates significantly higher than the State of Maine's rate of 38% percent for the fiscal year 2021. Two of the highest poverty counties in the State of Maine are located in this region of Central Maine where the schools are located. In all three districts, several small towns bus to a central school location, and all three have had

restructuring in recent years, closing school buildings to consolidate into one new building. Schools A and C have recently had school construction projects that significantly updated their buildings and technology infrastructure. There is a lack of widespread internet access and broadband readily available for internet connectivity in the area towns and communities. Towns may bus students over twenty-five miles to get to the school.

School A had the most connectivity options within the town limits where the school is located, due to its location being the county seat. Schools B and C were located in smaller, rural areas that did not have businesses or local government agencies, such as School A. Cell towers were positioned so that each of the three schools had cell service from more than one mobile provider. Internet providers were most often accessed through the cellular phone company. The schools were fifty to sixty miles from the largest urban center. In all three school districts, the schools are one of the largest employers in the town. Most families have to drive out of town for work, with few opportunities in each community beyond small local stores, grocery stores, or local restaurants.

Schools A and C were located in Piscataquis County, the second poorest of Maine's sixteen counties based on the 2021-22 Maine Monitor Website with a poverty level of 17.3 percent. School B served students from towns in both Piscataquis and Penobscot counties. Penobscot County was the fifth poorest county in Maine with a 13.4 percent poverty rate. The State of Maine's poverty rate for 2021-22 according to <https://www.census.gov> is 11.5 percent. Table 4.1 outlines the demographic information of the participating schools.

Table 4.1 Demographics of the Study Schools 2021-22

School	A	B	C	State
PreK-4 Student Enrollments	358	161	268	--
% Students Economically Disadvantaged* (poverty rate)	52%	92%	64%	38%
# Students Economically Disadvantaged*	186	148	171	64,449

\*Data obtained from the National Center for Educational Statistics.

### Composition of Focus Groups

Schools A and C each had two educator groups and two parent groups, while School B had one focus group with educators and one with parents. School B had a much smaller enrollment than the other two schools, with less than half the enrollment size compared to School A, so the possible participant pool was smaller. Table 4.2 outlines the focus group participation numbers.

Table 4.2 Number of Focus Groups and Participants from the Study Schools

School	A	B	C		School	A	B	C	
Parents					Educators				
Group 1	3	4	3		Group 1	3	4	3	
Group 2	4	0	4		Group 2	3	0	4	
Total	7	4	7	<b>18</b>	Total	6	4	7	<b>17</b>

### Technology Used for Communication

The first sub-question A guiding this study explored what modalities, devices and technology educators were using to communicate with parents during the COVID-19 pandemic. This question was investigated through educator and parent focus group interviews to compare perceptions from the two groups. The conversation spanned the 2021-22 school year specifically, but participants also referred to experiences and practices during the 2020-21 school year as well. During both school years, schools followed the State of Maine safety guidelines and protocols for



a safe return to school following the March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic shutdown. Each school board had created these guidelines which limited the access to the school building to staff and students only during these times. Therefore, parents and families spent two years not entering the buildings where their children were learning.

By the spring of 2022, some of these limitations had been lifted, allowing for minimal, controlled entry to the school building in one of the three schools. During the pandemic period, schools shifted to primarily remote communication with parents, and a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication. Parents and educators described what kinds of tools and platforms were used for parent-teacher communication, and also discussed their feelings and perceptions about connecting remotely using these modalities. They also compared their experiences with traditional, in-person communications before March 2020. In the sections which follow, findings related to the use of asynchronous forms of communication are described followed by synchronous forms of communication. Participants' views about these forms of communication are presented separately, later in this chapter.

### **Asynchronous Communication**

The term asynchronous refers to communication that is not occurring in real-time, where individuals can select a time of their choosing. Educators began to utilize this mode of communication more regularly to disseminate information, share student work and answer parent questions with the school safety procedures in place in the 2020-21 school year. Examples of asynchronous forms of communication mentioned by both educators and parents across all three schools included email, text messages and the use of school-adopted or teacher-selected web-based platforms. Each of these is described in turn.

## **Web-based Applications**

Google Classroom, Seesaw, the school website, and information portals are examples of web-based applications used asynchronously in the three study schools. All three schools in the study used these specific platforms to some degree. In a few cases early in the Spring 2020 pandemic, Facebook Groups were created by classroom teachers which were closed to parents only. These were not sustained as schools created more standard safety guidelines and adopted school-wide platforms and communication practices. As more educational-based solutions, such as Seesaw and Google Classroom, were made available, Facebook did not remain a viable option. Both parents and educators expressed a level of discomfort with using Facebook as mixing personal and professional lives when needing to request friend status to join the group. The use of Facebook for communication will not be discussed further because it was phased out prior to the 2020-21 school year. The Seesaw website describes its family engagement ability as follows:

Teachers share photos, videos, links, and files in private messages or whole class announcements. Perfect for newsletters, weekly recaps, and reminders. Enable connected family members to like and leave encouraging comments on their child's posts. Engage parents as partners. Student motivation soars when they have an authentic audience for their work. (<https://web.seesaw.me/family-communication>).

This application was downloaded onto devices such as cell phones or tablets or accessed via web login. Students were able to access Seesaw at school on their individual one-to-one laptops or devices. Educators substantiated this claim, "It was so great to just put announcements up once in See Saw or to remind parents what they needed for the day. And also, just to show the kids showing their own work is fun." Parents noted,

I loved See Saw for my little ones when they were in, you know, PreK and K. To see the work was really helpful it allowed me to stay part of the classroom I felt like because there were pictures and updates and things that were pretty immediate, so I could still get a feeling of what her day was like and things like that were important.

Google Classroom is a web-based platform that can be personalized by educators to organize and share work using applications from Google Suite such as Google Mail, Google Docs, Google Sheets, etc. In this study, parents and educators indicated that their students in upper elementary classrooms used this platform as the students were more advanced in using the applications for creating and completing their work. "We had to learn two different things to use with my son being older, but he could also be more independent in using his Google Classroom" (note here where the quote came from—a parent or educator focus group?). More platforms existed, but for the purpose of discussion in the findings of this study, these two platforms were referred to the most by participants .

### **Email**

The three schools in the study were utilizing the Google Suite (Gsuite) of educational applications and students were assigned a school Google Mail (Gmail) account. Not all grade levels utilized this pre-pandemic. With the infusion of federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funding (ESSERF), the three schools were able to provide one-to-one devices to all students, notably PreK-grade 4 students in the study. Previously to the pandemic, these grade levels did not have access to one-to-one devices. The devices parents used spanned cell phones, iPad, tablets, or laptops. A limited number of cellular hotspots were also available for families to sign out who did not have internet access at home on a limited basis. All students were then accessing their student email accounts.

Email appeared in the findings to be the most increased and popular mode of communication for the study participants since the beginning of the pandemic. Most parents had emails, and if not, utilized their student's school Gmail. The participants in this study did not indicate that having an email was a barrier to communication anymore because the students all had one assigned to them. The move to using video-conferencing for school conferences required an email and teachers reported using the student's school email if the parents did not have one. One parent remarked,

Everyone has that [email] on their phone now it seems like, so you don't need anything extra, like all the students have emails from school, and the teachers, so as long as the parent knows how to get a Gmail, [Google Mail] they can use it, or just use their kids. Before the pandemic, parents did not seem to use email as a mode of communication with the schools and expressed feelings that they would be "bothering" teachers if they did email them. I will say I think it's easier to get ahold of other people in the schools, not just the teachers so like nurses and secretaries and things like that. It has been a lot easier than in the past. I never thought I could bother them with an email. I feel like that has changed a little bit where like just emailing has become the norm.

### **Text Messaging**

Some participants reported using text messaging on their cell phones to communicate regarding school information, but it was not as prevalent as email. In the small communities where teachers and parents might know each other outside of school socially or if they had a previous child in the teacher's class, the comfort level was higher to allow for sharing of phone numbers and communication in that manner. Text messaging was described as an immediate, quick, and easy way to connect and share information. It did require a more personal relationship than merely a traditional teacher-parent relationship. An educator remarked, "I did give my cell

number out to a few parents that I knew outside of school. I didn't feel comfortable giving it out to everyone though, cause it is, like my personal phone."

### **Synchronous Communication**

Synchronous communication occurs in real time and requires all individuals to be present at the same time they communicate. The information is actively shared back and forth.

Videoconferencing platforms, such as Zoom and Google Meets, are examples of platforms used for synchronous communication. This modality replicated in-person conversations with face-to-face options available on the screen with video conferencing options. Besides video conferencing, phone calls were another synchronous form of communication that educators and parents mentioned using during the pandemic.

### **Video Conferencing**

Video conferencing is using a live, visual connection between two or more remote participants over the internet that simulates a face-to-face meeting. Video conferencing joins people who would not normally be able to form a face-to-face connection in person. While there are many platforms available to meet synchronously, participants indicated that Zoom and Google Meets were the most frequently used platforms for video conferencing across the three schools.

#### **Zoom**

The Zoom website invites schools to "bring virtual visits to the point for IEP meetings, parent-teacher meetings and guidance sessions" and to "enable flexible phone communications with availability on any device" (<https://explore.zoom.us/en/industry/education/solutions/k12/>). It is available free for up to forty-five minutes at a time, otherwise, it requires a subscription for unlimited access and enhanced options. To access Zoom, parents received an email invitation or a meeting code for web-based access without an email. Again, access to this platform requires

that parents have access to an email account (either their own or a child's), as well as internet access and a device that can connect to the internet (computer or mobile devices such as a smartphone or tablet). There was no fee for parents to download or join the Zoom meeting. Zoom offers safety features such as passwords and the ability of the host to screen who is entering the meeting.

Two of the three schools in the study had purchased school licenses for Zoom, allowing the most flexibility for educators to meet with families. After the 2020-21 school year, Zoom no longer provided free access to schools for the platform and returned to offering only forty-five minutes only without purchasing the license. School B in the study did not choose to utilize purchasing a district Zoom license. The teachers from School B who used Zoom accessed the free version with the forty-five-minute limit.

#### Google Meets

Google Meets was available as an application for video conferencing and was part of the educational Google Suite platform. If schools purchased the Gsuite, it is a free option within that platform and can be accessed through student or parent emails. It provides safety features as well and one school in the study used this platform only. All three schools reported using Gsuite at grade levels three and above.

#### Phone Calls

Standard phone calls were also used in place of video conferencing to communicate with parents. As one educator expressed it was *"better than nothing."* In all three schools, parents were required to fill out emergency information cards that included phone numbers. In Schools A and B there were times when formal conferences were made by phone calls in early 2020-21. Parents and educators both expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional phone call.

## **Perceptions Regarding Communication Through Technology**

Sub-question B explored educators' and parents' views of the different forms of communication during the pandemic. This section presents findings related to participants' views about the forms of communication (asynchronous or synchronous) and specific types of technology used to communicate. In the coding process, I initially sorted participants' comments using the terms positive and negative perceptions, but eventually, I chose the words benefits and concerns as less polarizing. Some about the use of technology were shared in non-verbal ways, through body language or emotional emphasis. Body language and excitement for the new ways of experiencing connection were sorted into benefits, while expressions of what did not work for them were sorted into concerns. For both the asynchronous and synchronous communication practices, the perceived benefits are described first followed by the perceived drawbacks or concerns for both educators and parents.

### **Asynchronous Communication Modalities**

Both parents and educators emphasized the benefits of using various kinds of asynchronous modalities. It was reported as convenient and flexible by both groups. Participants reported using this form of communication on a more frequent basis to share daily or weekly informal information. While some educators had previously used this form of communication, they reported a more structured use of the modality during the pandemic restrictions and an expansion in using more of the features available. Participants' views about the use of web-based applications, email and text messages as remote forms of communication are described in the following section.

### **Web Based Applications**

As mentioned previously, a web-based application is one where the users need internet or cellular service to access the application (app). Educators reported using these apps, many for the

first time, as a direct result of the school safety public entry closure protocol. Parents learned to access and use these apps on their computers, tablets or phones. For PreK-4 participants in the study, See Saw was the most referred-to application used for web-based communication in all three schools. Parents mentioned Google Classroom mostly referring to their older elementary students, above grade three. These are the two web-based apps that will be discussed in this chapter.

### Educator Perceptions

One educator confirmed that the increased use of daily or weekly web-based apps increased the rate of communication interactions. "It really upped the pace of communication using these things now." Many educators in the study used See Saw the most frequently as their web-based application of choice. School A purchased a school license for teachers to use, while in Schools B and C, educators could only access the free version on their own. Before the pandemic, some educators had created standard websites for their classrooms to share information about routines, structures and upcoming classroom events. They reported it did not provide the level of both student and parent interaction that See Saw offered.

I gave more attention to using See Saw that way than in the past. I just used it for kids' work and close-ups of them, but we began doing videos of here's the math corner, here's our classroom library, etc., so it helped visualize a lot.

In School A, the educator participants all taught in the PreK-2 range and did not use Google Classroom themselves but referred to other teachers of upper elementary using it.

I think that the best thing has been our consistency, I think. Beforehand, we were all using different platforms before COVID happened, and so it was really probably super confusing for parents to have to be on one platform for one child and then another for



another. So, we're really consistent, and I think it's good. It is seesaw grades K-2, and grades 3 and up is Google Classroom. So, I think that is good for parents, I'm sure.

Another educator in School C confirmed the benefits of using See Saw for communication: Over the last three years with the Pandemic, that [See Saw] has become the best way, I guess, to connect with students and parents. So, they download a family app for Seesaw, and like I said, they connect and then we can message, and they can see kids' work. While educators saw benefits to using web-based applications, overall, they did not share many concerns with using it as a mode of communication. One educator mentioned it could be tricky getting parents set up at the beginning of the year as a personal code was created for each child in the classroom. Parents then needed to go and accept the See Saw login. Finding out what email parents used and getting them signed in could be a process depending on the level of comfort each parent had with technology. Because there was a messaging option within See Saw that parents could use, educators also felt the need to check messages sent outside of school hours which led to increased usage at home, or their personal time. "I'm one of those that I'll check it all the time and I'll respond all the time and I've got to set better boundaries."

### Parent Perceptions

Parents of students whose teachers used web-based applications reported appreciating the always-open connection to their child's classroom and work.

See Saw for my littles, when they were in, you know Pre-K, and to see the work was really helpful it allowed me to stay part of the classroom. I felt like because there were pictures and updates and things that were pretty immediate, so I could still get a feeling of what her day was like and things like that were important because I definitely couldn't volunteer so I liked feeling her day a little bit.

Some families preferred direct messaging in See Saw because it kept school communications confined to a school application and not a parent's personal or work email. Parents expressed a preference for notices and information regarding the larger school community being shared within See Saw or Google Classroom, eliminating paper handouts being sent home in the traditional way.

I'd love to see See Saw or a version of it all the time with every class. It's kinda Facebooky feeling, so your older elementary students could post themselves and share. I think they could engage a lot with their own families that way, versus just Google Classroom or the school information system. Put announcements on there, papers get lost you know.

While educators spoke about the positive ability to post student work or to show the classroom areas and routines, parents expressed appreciation for these features and the time teachers took to upload them to the platform.

You know, like, getting pictures and all of those things during the day from See Saw, I think that's pretty fabulous. You kind of feel more connected, I think, in a way, because you're getting those pictures or videos or upload, however, the teacher is uploading to kind of be more involved in the day-to-day things in the classroom.

Parents, like educators, did not share many overall concerns with the web-based platforms, but parents did feel frustrated when there was not a whole school plan or common expectations with these applications. In Schools B and C, where individual teachers were left to choose what to use, it led to comparisons among parents about which teachers used the platforms and which did not choose to use them.

### Summary of Web-based Applications

It appeared from the participant comments in both educator and parent groups that web based applications were a positive addition to the classroom communication and work-sharing process. Whether it was used for messaging, notices or classroom work and assignments, both participant groups in all three schools appreciated these options. Neither group expressed significant concerns beyond setting boundaries for teachers outside of school and parents wishing for consistent implementation.

### **Email**

There appeared to be a message-receiving and message-sending synergy in how participants viewed this type of communication which did not require a live, real-time connection. It was an easy way to connect frequently, even multiple times in a day. While educators checked email on school technology such as laptops, at night when they were home or outside of school hours they referred to using their cell phones. Parent participants referred to using their phones for email sending and receiving of messages.

### Educator Perceptions

When asked about which was their most used mode of communication during the pandemic period, educators responded in all three schools that it was email. An educator from School A said,

I think email. Everyone has that on their phone now it seems like, so you don't need anything really extra. Like all the students have emails from school, and the teachers so as long as the parent knows how to get a Gmail, I think that's upped the pace of communication a lot.

One area that email appears to have made a large impact on is working with parents of students who are struggling academically or behaviorally. With the increased use of email, teachers were able to work on incentive plans and give parents feedback once or even twice a day.

Explanations of any incidents that might have happened during the day, for example, playground incidents or trips to the nurse, could be easily explained as well.

A lot of those parents wanting behavioral plans, I would just say, all right. I'm just going to message each day [about] how your kiddo did. So, some interactions that I did find, I think, I liked it that way, just keeping my parents, you know, in the loop, sending them a message. But my parents were pretty good about having that on their phone and just checking it.

From the educators' perspective, parents had access to email more easily during the pandemic. They may have needed it now for work purposes, and their students now had email accounts that could be used by parents of younger students especially. Educators expressed they felt an increase in the use of email and thought of this in a positive way. "Yeah, I'm thinking this year I had a couple of parents that really this was the main form of communication, through email and it just worked really easily. But that's because I check and answer all the time." This educator also underscores the concerns educators felt concerning boundaries between home and school. They felt the pressure to check email and provide replies and answers, "all the time."

### Parent Perceptions

Before the pandemic, parent participants in this study did not indicate they used email as a form of communication with teachers. They expressed worry that they would be bothering the teacher. By contrast, during the pandemic, without access to physical school and the influx of technological support, parents felt comfortable directly emailing. "I didn't think I was bugging the teacher by emailing - I didn't think she'd think I was a pain; you know?" Another parent

commented, "Email is a godsend for sure, I think. No one wants to answer phones anymore and it just goes round and round. Email you can go right to the person you want." One parent also discussed feeling a comfort level with emailing other staff members such as administrators or the nurse. "I love the ability to just share info quickly. My son's teacher was amazing. We would email constantly back and forth any time there was anything going on." This perceived benefit by parents also showcases a concern felt by educators- fear of oversharing information. " But I felt, like, I felt like I could tell her some things in email that I might not have told her otherwise, stuff about why my daughter might be acting or feeling- I might not have called, you know, but I can just quietly email, and she will see it and know what is going on."

#### Summary on Email

Teachers and parents both commented that they felt a more personal connection sooner in the school year by emailing each other. It allowed for follow-up on various situations that might be related to students' schoolwork or behavioral concerns. During the pandemic, something shifted the comfort level and willingness to use email. Before 2020, parents were worried they would be bothering the teacher and teachers reported using phone calls or written notes more often. The pandemic forced more families into having email accounts because so many other things were accessed remotely in the world, like work video conferencing. The availability of cell phones and having access to email on the phone increased the use of email. Parents may have become more comfortable with the modality, and this paired with the increased acceptance of using email by the school.

#### Text Messaging

Text messaging was not widely discussed by the study participants. This might be because teachers must be comfortable sharing their cell phone numbers with parents. In the cases

where it was discussed in the study, the teacher and the parent had a personal relationship outside of school or through having siblings previously in class.

### Educator Perceptions

One teacher in School A discussed sharing her phone number with parents who were in her social circle: "I did give my cell number out to a few parents that I knew outside of school. I didn't feel comfortable giving it out to everyone though, 'cause it is, like my personal phone."

Other teachers did not discuss using this as a communication tool.

### Parent Perceptions

Only one parent discussed texting with the teacher, and it again seemed due to outside-of-school relationships. Like with the educators, it was more for organizational purposes and not for communicating about student achievement or classroom reasons. "I could text the teacher whose kids were in soccer with mine, I had her phone number already, so I could say, hey is it gym day and things like that."

### Summary of Text Messaging

The use of text messaging seemed to rely on a prior personal connection or relationship before it was used for communication purposes. It was the one modality that teachers seemed comfortable not sharing and not using with parents and it might be where the line in the sand is drawn for educators. Parents did not discuss text messaging as a formal means of communication and it can be assumed they did not expect the teachers to share their cell phone numbers. Similar to educators' views on sharing their Facebook information to create class groups, text messaging parents by educators was kept to a minimum and only if the parent was present in the personal area of their lives outside of school.

## **Asynchronous Communication Summary**

While flexibility was one of the benefits frequently mentioned about asynchronous communication, participants also discussed the characteristics which they saw as impediments or concerns. Web-based modalities, email, and texting lack face-to-face interaction and the ability to interpret conversational moves and body language. Misunderstandings of tone in the message receiving and sending happened occasionally. Parents reported waiting for responses was hard sometimes and they were not sure if their message had gotten through. An educator's concern was that she felt obligated to respond immediately, even if it was after school hours . She felt being able to be constantly connected also felt like a burden.

Educators also discussed that while they felt they were able to make relationships with parents and families using the convenience and flexibility of asynchronous communication, it also led to some parents oversharing personal information. Educators explored the need for setting boundaries regarding responding to parents during work hours and maintaining a professional working relationship.

## **Synchronous Communication Modalities**

Synchronous communication requires real-time interaction and both educators and parents preferred this modality to asynchronous communication for important discussions, such as parent-teacher conferences or other meetings about student academics or behavior. Being able to hear the other person's voice or see their face allows for an easier interpretation of social moves, tone of voice and body language. "Really the Zoom was as close as we could get to a regular way to talk, a regular way to see people," remarked one educator. Participants' views about video-conference platforms and phone calls, both synchronous modes of communication, are described here.

## **Video Conferencing**

The two platforms discussed in this study by participants were Zoom and Google Meets to a lesser degree. Schools A and C were able to use Zoom as part of whole school licenses, which allowed for unlimited meetings. School B educators used Zoom as well but had to utilize the free version with a limit of forty-five minutes. School C also had the option of using Google Meets. All three schools during the 2021-22 school year used video conferencing for parent-teacher conferences and formal meetings such as Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meetings, and Student Assistance Team (SAT) meetings.

### **Educator Perceptions**

Zoom was the most referenced video-conferencing application utilized for face-to-face interaction. Educators also had much freedom and flexibility with the platform and when they used it, had their own code. One teacher remarked about having better attendance at conferences in this format, "I would think that maybe my attendance was better the last couple of years, just because I was able to connect with some of those families who might not otherwise come in."

Also, teachers used it for more informal interactions,

I'm thinking of one student that it was almost weekly at the beginning of the year. Can we help on Zoom real quick? Can we do a Zoom real quick? And it was easy to do because I had my own code, and she could just sign on and we could chat. I agree with Susan. I think that was more involvement for some parents.

Because educators were in control of their video-conference schedules and timing, they used the waiting room feature which allowed for longer conferences without feeling that the next family was waiting at the door. It replicated meeting in person the most closely of all modalities. Educators also felt that seeing families in their own homes helped them understand the dynamics



of how families interact with one another or what their home situation was like and felt that this gave them empathy and brought understanding to be more flexible for families, especially with young children in the home.

I do think that I didn't realize what it is like at home, especially with lots of kids and schedules. I might've thought a no-show parent was just not being responsible, but connecting through Zoom I think I developed empathy for all that and how time could just slip away.

Educators saw many benefits to using video conferencing as a mode of communication during the school safety protocol and lack of entry to the building, such as a calmer conference experience, more attendance, and gaining empathy for families. One educator expressed the decision to try to use it moving forward as well,

Yeah, it's helpful, not only for the parents, but also for the students. So, I think that's been a huge change. That is a good one. I think that I will definitely use it more. And I'm communicating with parents more than I was before.

Educators did share concerns when using video conferencing. While they appreciated getting to know families, it could be uncomfortable to see everything in the background of a conference, and parents could also be multi-tasking. "And when we were doing the parent teacher conference, she was cutting vegetables and working in her kitchen and stuff." If parents accessed the platform via cell phones in public places, teachers were uncomfortable at times with the loud background noise and lack of privacy. They also worked beyond scheduled nights to accommodate their parents' schedules, sometimes from home.

It was nice, I think for working parents, I'm pretty flexible with my scheduling, so if they couldn't do it the night that we had set aside for parent-teacher conferences, we could do it another time over Zoom. I had a single father. It was easier for him to do it over Zoom

at a different time, thinking he probably would not have been able to had he had to schedule at a certain night in person.

While Schools A and C mainly expressed positive experiences with video conferencing, School B educators expressed more connectivity concerns. They were also the only school that did not provide an option for the entire school, so teachers were using it sporadically on their own.

What I found was the parents that would zoom were the parents that had a child device at home. They didn't often zoom with their phone to meet with me, at first. Some of them, not all of them. But they knew I was using it on my own, so we figured it out.

Educators also explained that it can be difficult when a student has estranged parents or there is another need for separate conferences. Zoom made this a bit easier to schedule parents separately.

### Parent Perceptions

Parents enjoyed not having to leave home to talk and meet with the teacher for a variety of reasons. Parents who work, whether during the day or at night, joined the conference on a break. Parents could join a meeting easily, using the Zoom application on their phone, without much time lost from work. Because of the rural composition of the three school districts, not finding transportation was helpful. Some school drives were up to thirty minutes, without the availability of ride share, taxi or public transportation. Parents often joined the video conferences in their cars to have a quiet space, or to join from wherever they were at the time of the meeting.

I actually liked the zoom conferences. I liked the flexibility of it because my husband and I both work, so a lot of times we weren't both able to attend conferences, because of commitments at different schools, so the zoom did allow us both to attend conferences, just because of the flexibility, you can do it anywhere. And we didn't have to be in the same place, which worked for my husband. And actually, not finding childcare was great, I just put them in front of a movie and found a quiet spot.

The parents realized that the school and teachers were trying to have various ways of communication and recognized the work that was done to replicate in-person interaction. Utilizing the video-conference platform beyond scheduled formal conferences and meetings for things such as informal connections, and showing school or class events over Zoom was perceived as reliant on individual teachers.

Really, Zoom was as close as they could get to a regular way to talk- to meet. Anything that can be shared showing pictures of events at the school or in the room was really good for obvious reasons, but I think the communication and I think it's probably pretty teacher dependent on how much they do it.

The parent participants discussed Google Meets as a video-conferencing option when they had older elementary students, typically above grade three. They expressed the same benefit of not feeling rushed when this was used for conferencing.

I think too that we actually had more time in the Google Meet than in person though when I think about it- that's a positive, it didn't seem as rushed and there wasn't another parent breathing down your neck at the door and the teacher rushing.

While parents cited convenience and flexibility as definite benefits to communicating with teachers, they also identified that it did not replace person-to-person meetings. That was still preferable for some parents, but, for other groups connecting with video conferencing, it was an acceptable mode of communication that they hoped would continue.

It's really hard for me, working, taking care of my younger kids to get into school, and I kinda, kinda felt like, you know, it worked for me to talk to the teacher that way. I could just use my phone and do the meetings and stuff and she has a lot of meetings it feels like, and I could just be wherever I was. But no question it did feel a little disconnected at

times, I'm like it's nice to get in and see the teachers and the room and school, to see what's happening.

### Summary on Video-Conferencing

Video-conferencing became the most used application for formal meetings, run by educators themselves as they could generate log-on links and control the entry into the meetings. It also brought the home right into the classroom and as a result, educators developed empathy for families who worked, had young children at home and had busy activity schedules. Educators felt compelled to make sure that they rescheduled or reached out to parents who did not make a conference time and, as a result, felt they were working harder.

When talking with parents, there was an underlying tone that could be described as a contradiction in their feelings about connecting in person. It seemed to be presented as a preferable response but follow up comments by parents expressed everything they liked more about having other choices, such as video conferencing. Flexibility and choice were preferred over being assigned a traditional meeting time which often had people waiting in line behind them. For specialized meetings, like IEPs, parents appreciated being able to join from where they were and not take time off from work, for example, to go to a one-hour meeting. Some parents therefore seemed compelled to acknowledge that in person communication is a more desirable way to interact but were very appreciative of what using video-conferencing could offer for flexibility. Parents also found a voice when their child was struggling and video-conferencing did not feel like a viable option.

I'm coming into the school because I want to know what's going on in person, not over the phone or Zoom at that point. I'll wear a mask; I'll stand six feet apart. I mean, they are in school! And they were great about it once I demanded that, but it wasn't an option in my mind if that makes sense. If your child is struggling, I just, I just felt like we can get

together and be safe to figure this out. [laughter] But, like I said I really didn't offer any choice about it.

### **Phone Calls**

A standard phone call from a teacher was another means to communicate remotely in real-time. One finding in the study was just how prevalent owning cell phones was, even among economically disadvantaged families, thus making it an easy and convenient way to connect. It was perceived as preferable to paper correspondence, such as notes and progress reports, but both groups talked little about a standard call being used at different points in time. It appeared to be an option when nothing else was available.

### **Educator Perceptions**

Educators expressed frustration with standard phone calls because sometimes the numbers changed or were outdated on the school information system. If there were missed calls, the parent also sometimes returned a call when a teacher could not take the call and it became a back-and-forth situation. "Well, at least you do talk but, phone calls are just.....stilted I guess." School B offered only phone calls for conferences, while School A let grade-level teams make the choice.

So, you didn't see their face-to-face reactions. You didn't even know what the parents sometimes look like because you weren't able to meet them. So that was really hard to kind of read parents and really get an understanding of their home life.

### **Parent Perceptions**

In much the same way as educators, parents felt that a phone call was better than not communicating, but it was not a popular choice, especially when it was the only option. I didn't like that as much it felt much more impersonal, although the information was very good and I do feel like the teacher had a wealth of information to share the fact that you

couldn't see the person did it feel very impersonal. It just took away a layer that could've helped.

Parents expressed frustration with the lack of school-wide structures for communicating and thought some educators chose the least uncomfortable mode of communicating and that educator personality and temperament affected these choices.

Right! It should have been all the same I think- The homeroom teacher was the only one that connected with me for parent-teacher conferences. So that was kind of frustrating, actually, because I wasn't as concerned with what was happening in science as I was with math, for example. And I didn't have any contact in the traditional parent-teacher conference sense and not even the ability to Google Meet.

### **Synchronous Summary**

Students from families with divorce or separation of parents or caregivers are sometimes sensitive to joint meetings during in-person traditional conferences. Teachers reported a benefit to the digital modalities was that parents could separately meet with the teacher easily through Zoom, and could individually see the work, announcements, and messages within Seesaw, making it less complicated when there were parents who were estranged from each other. This was an unexpected benefit discovered during the school safety protocol closures. Although video conferencing had many advantages, it did raise concerns regarding feeling stilted and awkward until families and educators developed a relationship. For some educators and families, there was also a learning curve to understanding how to join a video conference and utilize the features in the application, such as the camera and audio. In a few cases, connectivity was an issue, but most participants solved the issue by using their cell phones and cellular data.

Educators also found some homes chaotic, with background noise from others in the house along with pets. Occasionally a parent would join on their cell phone from a location wherever they were and the teachers were uncomfortable with the public background or had a hard time hearing the parent. It was both a benefit and a concern for educators when students joined the conference. If the teacher needed to talk about sensitive matters or behavior, it was more difficult to do so in front of the student. Teachers also felt they were sometimes in an uncomfortable position where parents overshared personal information and the lines between professional and personal relationships were blurred.

### **Perceptions of Impact on Communication**

Sub-question C explored educators' and parents' perceptions about the impact of the use of remote forms of communication on both the frequency and quality of educator-family interactions or engagement. Several common themes resulted from both the educator and parent groups around flexibility, choice and consistency when using technology for communication.

#### **Improved Frequency of Engagement**

Parents did feel that they met or communicated more frequently with their child's teacher when various remote modalities were used. The web-based platform Seesaw was often checked and engaged with daily. Using email, parents also communicated information with the teacher much more frequently than pre-pandemic. Depending on the situation at home, there might be daily or weekly contact to share information with the teacher. Other times, it might be less frequent if things were going smoothly. The teachers in the study felt the need to be actively involved and respond to the families promptly, much more than previously. Schools that had leveraged federal ESSER funding for whole-school licensing and had developed detailed plans for teachers to use during the 2021-22 school year had more frequent communication with

parents. As a result, Seesaw and Zoom were the most often mentioned and preferred platforms that increased the frequency with which parents and educators connected.

Because educators felt more of a sense of responsibility to make the meetings happen and felt more obligated to reach out to parents who might have missed their time, educators felt they were in contact more frequently. If a child was struggling with academics, behavior or social issues, there might be daily or weekly informal emails or messaging within See Saw. I do find that I'm checking my See Saw more often throughout the day, which I don't necessarily care for, that it's taking away from instruction time or that I'm hopping on during my lunch break or what it may be. It just seems I guess, in a way, what's changed is that in other ways we are always connected it seems like, or always addressing things. I learn to look during the day too, because some families, even though they are not supposed to, they will message me in See Saw with a bus change or whatever! They are supposed to call the office.

More formally, one educator expressed that parent-teacher conferences took place over a week, rather than one or two nights as traditionally happened. Some teachers Zoomed in from home on different nights than the scheduled conferences to be more flexible for parents or to make up for missed meetings. By placing the availability of a format such as video conferencing in the educators' hands, they now had a way to have an in-person conversation with parents when the schools were closed to visits.

### **Improved Quality of Engagement**

One quote by an educator was particularly striking concerning communication during this period of safety protocols. "We just ultimately need to make that connection. I think it's changed my interaction with my parents." Parents echoed this sentiment, "And just, communication is great, I don't want to have to be so pushy, but I think regular messaging at the very least once a week, is good. That's an improvement." Parents expressed that video conferencing helped to



improve the quality of their interaction with teachers as they could see the teacher and read facial experiences and body language, and thus parents indicated they preferred video-conferencing over a standard phone call but relied more on email for frequent interactions of a less formal nature.

At first, these video meetings felt stilted and prone to the glitches of talking over each other and telling the other person to go ahead first. As educators and parents became more familiar with this communication method, they indicated they became more comfortable with it. Overall, parents felt the video conferences were less rushed and that the conversations had more depth than meeting in person, because of the less rushed atmosphere or scheduling. "It didn't seem as rushed and there wasn't another parent breathing down your neck at the door and the teacher rushing."

### **Developing Empathy**

Educators expressed empathy toward their parents when seeing their homes and lives in the background of the Zoom call. Educators developed a new understanding that navigating the needs of young children at suppertime and bedtime was often a juggling act for parents and the time of many night conferences fell during this self-described "busiest time of the day". "I just really didn't realize how busy home at that time of night can be, especially with littles!" Thinking about families with multiple students who had to maneuver through various parts of the school or even among more than one school in a district opened some educators' eyes to the parent's perspective. Educators discussed also that they had better attendance or felt that they connected with each family when there was a variety of choices being offered. The responsibility seemed to shift ever so slightly from the parent needing to arrive at school at the designated time to one where the educator felt responsible to follow up and make sure that a connection happened.

## **Empowerment of Families**

There was also a shift in the balance of power in the video conference whereby the parents felt more a part of a natural conversation rather than the conference being something that rendered them to a passive role of message receiving. As educators developed empathy for families at home it seemed to enhance the overall respect that educators felt for parents. Their relationship with parents improved and the choices they made as a teacher were informed how to work with a student once they understood the home influences. In the words of Lareau, from Chapter 2, the ghosts in the classroom seemed to dissipate during the pandemic for some parents. It might be due to the fact they did not physically enter the school building or classroom, a potential trigger for some past negative school experiences. There was more of a sense of being together in this new situation. Families seemed empowered to communicate more deeply with their child's teachers and trust to share information that would benefit their student's relationship with the teacher.

But I felt, like, I felt like I could tell her [the teacher] some things in email that I might not have told her otherwise, stuff about why my daughter might be acting or feeling- I might not have called, you know, but I can just quietly email, and she will see it and know what is going on.

Having a variety of ways to communicate also empowered families to reach out when they did not understand something and wanted further clarification, such as with a report card. "If we didn't understand the report card, we just tried to figure it out before, but now I don't feel bad at all sending a message in email or See Saw for help." Educators noticed this change as well.

They would share a lot of things that probably they wouldn't have shared with me because we'd only have parent-teacher conferences once or just a conversation on the

phone. But I did spend a lot of time on the phone connecting with parents when they called because they had so many questions about what they really could do or couldn't do.

### **Finding a Voice**

Two parents (School A and School C) discussed their need to advocate for their children whom they felt were struggling. Both spoke with determination and passion when recounting these experiences. They did not feel that meeting virtually had the same effect as meeting all together in person to discuss the needs of their children. One student was struggling academically, and one was struggling emotionally, but both parents phoned the administration and insisted to be allowed to come to school and have an in-person meeting, following the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) masking and distance guidelines at the time. They described the experience below,

We did the same thing. We were able to go in for my son with his whole Middle School team because he was having some significant problems, okay, and my husband and I did go into the building because it was important you know to discuss those things in person. After feeling pushback from the administration about whether meeting in-person could be a possibility, They both made their points strongly enough to successfully schedule the in-person meetings. "But I was demanding, this is what's happening. I'm not going to push this under the rug kind of thing." Both parents expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of the meetings. Both sets of parents worked with determination to advocate for their children and felt in these tricky cases that remote communication was not an option. These parents attributed feeling empowered by the pandemic situation to speak up, feeling more of a partnership with schools so that they could actively advocate. One remarked,

I talked to the vice principal a couple of times over the phone when we were discussing me coming into the building, and they were great. I just needed to do it in person, it had to be that way.

### **Balancing Personal and Professional Boundaries**

Using technology such as email and messaging school platforms allowed parents to reach out to teachers at any time. Teachers, however, felt an enhanced pressure to be available whenever parents reached out, even at night, and responded, "I'll be like, I'll answer them really quickly. Sometimes I'm good about personal boundaries, sometimes I'm not, but that's pretty great to be connecting, but it never stops." Phones made connecting to web-based applications convenient, but teachers also felt that it put them on call outside of school hours. The concern for educators was how to balance what was perceived in many cases as enhanced engagement with wondering where the boundaries were. Some educators reported connecting much more from home in the evenings or the morning before leaving for school. Educators new to the profession worried about appearing rude or uncaring if they did not respond quickly or offer alternatives. I guess, like, the last two years you almost, like, wanted to be there for the families if they didn't know what to do or had questions. So, you, you felt like it was a hard balance to shut it off and not answer.

Parents appreciated the effort educators were making, "I think the younger teachers try harder to reach out to us parents. I saw it." As more time is spent communicating with families in these various modalities, educators are beginning to set personal boundaries for themselves.

I definitely have seen that I have really had to make myself make sure I'm giving myself personal time and after a certain time throughout the day, like four [o'clock] or five [o'clock], I try not to answer messages because I do see that families are being able to

answer or ask questions in the evening time more frequently. So, unless if it's really an emergency, I try not to answer them.

### **Hope for Continued Strong Communications**

Based on the largely positive experiences and perceptions that parents had about how teachers had communicated with them remotely during the pandemic, parents across all three schools hoped their schools would continue to use some of the same modes of communication going forward for the 2022-23 school year and beyond, rather than going back to traditional, pre-pandemic forms of communication only. However, parents also wanted to be included in the decision-making process for their schools and to be allowed more flexibility and choice in how to communicate with teachers and administrators. One parent described her comfort level by emailing other school employees like the nurse or a specialist teacher directly.

I definitely feel like it is more acceptable to email now, you aren't bugging them. I will say I think it's easier to get ahold of other people in the schools, not just the teachers, like nurses and secretaries and things like that. It has been a lot easier than in the past, where you had to call all the time. Now, I feel like that has changed a little bit where like just emailing has become the norm.

Where a Zoom conference was preferable, parents want that choice to remain available, rather than being required to attend an in-person meeting with teachers. There was a collective fear that schools would return to the pre-pandemic status quo which would also shift the balance of power back to the school and the teacher.

Like, I can do that [email] quickly versus like oh I can't forget to call the school so like I hope that continues. I'm just like those kinds of pieces; I hope schools don't just go to one modality that they choose and then you either make it or you don't. I also think schools need to think about what works best too- not just leave it up to teacher choice because you

always have people who want to stay in a comfort zone, so if Zoom is an option, it shouldn't be just teacher choice.

Parents felt that offering a hybrid of meeting options that allows for an ongoing line of communication during the entire year might lead to a more balanced relationship between families and educators. Educators expressed similar thoughts,

So now, when I start the school year, I definitely am pushing them [parents] to be more involved from the get-go, so that they know the expectation that they need to be involved. I can show them what to use and how to use it.

### **Summary**

Educators and families shared their experiences and perceptions about communicating with each other during the pandemic and enforcement of public safety protocols willingly and sometimes eagerly. Their views were largely positive, citing increased frequency, improved quality and sharing their questions and concerns. Using email and the See Saw app messaging made daily or weekly contact a viable way to keep in touch. Video conferencing, such as Zoom, made formal meetings and conversations flexible. It came with the price of blurring personal and professional boundaries and for educators an increased use of their time. Chapter Five discusses the importance of these findings in relation to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model and implications for future school practices related to family engagement with the school as well as potential school policies and areas for future research. School communication practices during the 2022-23 school year for the schools in this study are also briefly described.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter will discuss this study's findings concerning the research questions and prior research on family involvement and family engagement. The key findings from chapter four will be revisited and further developed. I will explore themes and patterns that emerged in family and educator perceptions of engagement and communication during the COVID-19 public safety protocol guidelines using the concept of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model and Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence conceptual framework. As this is a relatively new research area, emerging research on the topic will be summarized as it relates to this study's findings. The chapter includes a discussion of the implications, limitations of the study, and some final conclusions.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore one broad research question and three sub-questions through the use of focus groups: How do elementary grade educators and parents perceive their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID pandemic?

- a. What modalities, devices, and technology are educators using to communicate with parents?
- b. What are parents' and educators' views about these different forms of communication?
- c. How do these remote modalities impact the frequency and perceived quality of educator/family communications?

In seeking answers to these questions, educator and parent focus groups from three PreK-eight schools in Central Maine were conducted. The schools were located in two of the poorest counties in Maine and each school received significant federal funding to support family engagement and student achievement. Additional federal Elementary and Secondary School

Emergency Relief Funding (ESSER) was also provided to assist with needs directly related to the pandemic. Sixteen parents and seventeen educators participated in ten focus groups, with one additional parent participating in an individual interview. Choosing these schools from Central Maine was significant because the lower socio-economic status and higher poverty rates which existed before the pandemic had created some barriers to communicating with schools already. Therefore, when the study shows positive parent perceptions of remote communication through technology, it should be a strong indication that this format could also work in other districts across the state as well.

### **Review of Broad Findings**

Both parents and educators expressed an enhanced sense of needing to find ways to communicate with each other when students returned to school in the fall of 2020, while buildings remained closed to the public. As one educator explained, “Ultimately, we just needed to connect,” while a parent said, “Communication is key.” While exploring in the interviews how asynchronous and synchronous modalities were used during the pandemic, it was clear that using a variety of ways to communicate was important to both parents and educators, but the face-to-face availability of video-conferencing was highly preferred for important and more formal conversations. Having the human connection to see and hear social cues, facial expressions and body language enhanced the interaction and diffused the possibility of misinterpretation of tone or meaning in the written word alone.

### **Value of Flexibility and Convenience**

Using messaging applications such as email was preferable for quick, informal and more frequent communication. Parents found positive effects from the flexibility and increased choice of communication when utilizing new modalities and platforms. They seemed empowered to initiate conversations and communicate with educators through email and messaging



applications, feeling more assured that they were not being bothersome. Educators saw an increase in their interactions with parents during the pandemic, and also preferred being in control of scheduling their contacts with families, such as at conference time. However, educators also expressed concerns about increased difficulty in establishing boundaries between personal and professional time in their daily lives.

Parents developed a stronger comfort level with being assertive and utilizing their voice to communicate with the school and advocate for their students through the various synchronous and asynchronous modalities. Educators observed this phenomenon and felt a responsibility to always respond in a timely fashion to parents' inquiries. More experienced teachers recognized that they were choosing to answer emails or messages outside of school hours. They reflected upon whether they were or were not setting boundaries with their parents. Newer teachers did not discuss setting limits for answering emails and messages, they simply discussed feeling the need to answer so that parents would not feel ignored or that they were not important. Many of the educators said they developed increased empathy for the families of their students through video-conferencing and this led them to respond quickly, even outside of school hours, so that parents could have their questions answered, or acknowledge that the information being shared had been received. Educators were aware they were making the decision to communicate during non-school hours, and this contributed to their difficulty in setting boundaries around this issue.

### **Access to Technology**

Access to the technology itself was not a barrier to communication during the 2021-22 school year for participants in this study. The schools acted quickly to provide devices and connectivity assistance from March 2020 to June 2021. The three schools in the study had already leveraged ESSER funds to purchase individual devices for students in the form of iPads or laptops. Early in the safety protocol timeframe of the pandemic, some parents reported using

these devices for conferencing when students brought them home. But as the safety protocols continued and the 2021-2022 school year began, this appeared to have changed. The overwhelming majority of parents in the study in all three schools used their cell phones to download apps for video-conferencing, email and, to a lesser extent, text messaging. Educators used their school-issued devices, mostly iPads and laptops, to connect and communicate with families.

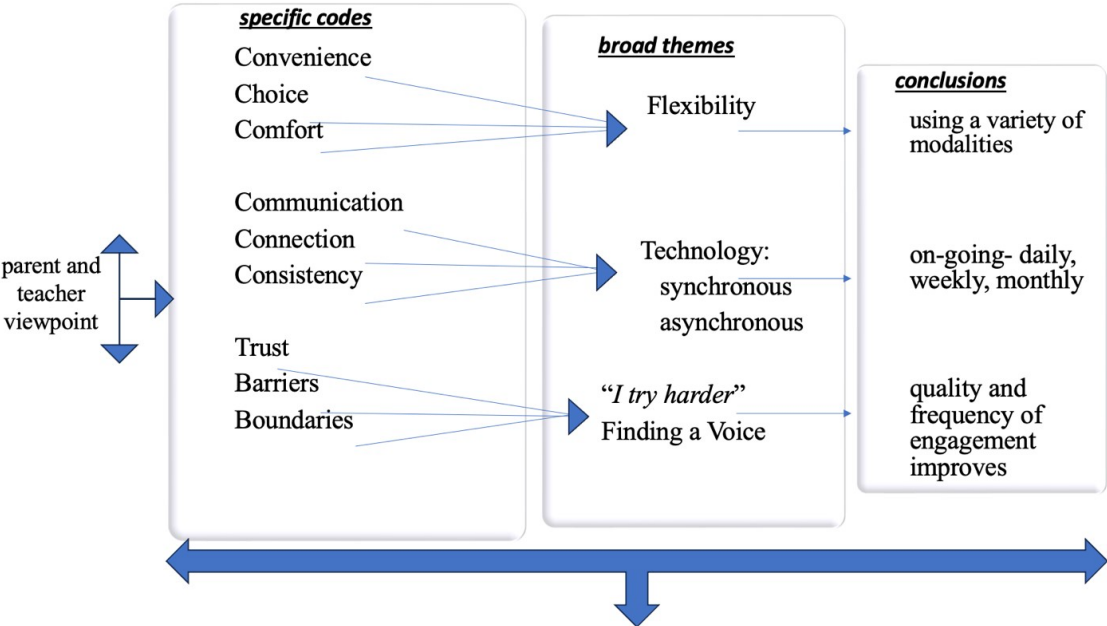
However, educators also found that when at home, having the same apps on their cell phones, with notifications enabled, made it hard to ignore messages received after school hours. While the parents may not have expected immediate answers, the educators felt the need to reply. In other cases, they were doing their work on the laptop and saw the emails or messages come through. In both parent and educator cases, leaving notifications on was a personal choice that led to engagement during non-school hours. Some tension in parents' preferences for communication was revealed as parents appreciated the increased flexibility and variety of communication modes during the pandemic, but also valued face-to-face interactions. Educators appreciated the increased communication that was a result of technology but felt their day never ended sometimes when answering parents' messages and emails at night.

### **Communication as a Collaborative Process**

Both parents and educators reflected upon communication as a collaborative process that flowed back and forth through varying modalities. Whether it was a parent or an educator who initiated the communication thread, there was a back-and-forth synergy in daily communication. This replaced the traditional note sent to the school as a way to disseminate and share information. As a result, there were several exchanges and clarifications during the back-and-forth emails or messages. Exploring the early specific codes about perception and use of technology led to broader themes addressing the quality and frequency of engagement. During

the pandemic, communication increased between parents and educators. This collaborative process is outlined in Figure 5.1 Specific Codes to Broader Themes for Parent/Educator Engagement. The result is that communication is a collaborative process that needs to occur as an equal partnership with continued flexibility of timing and choice in modality

Figure 5.1 Specific Codes to Broader Themes for Parent/Educator Engagement



Communication between Families and Educators is strengthened by the use of technology in a variety of ways.

Parents' and educators' initial thoughts and feelings about communicating through remote, digital and virtual modalities are indicated in the first box. How they accomplished this is indicated in the second box where the specific codes turn to broader themes. A conclusion is that when a variety of modalities are used, digital and virtual, the quality and frequency of engagement, relationships and communication improves between parents and teachers.

**Connection to Prior Research**

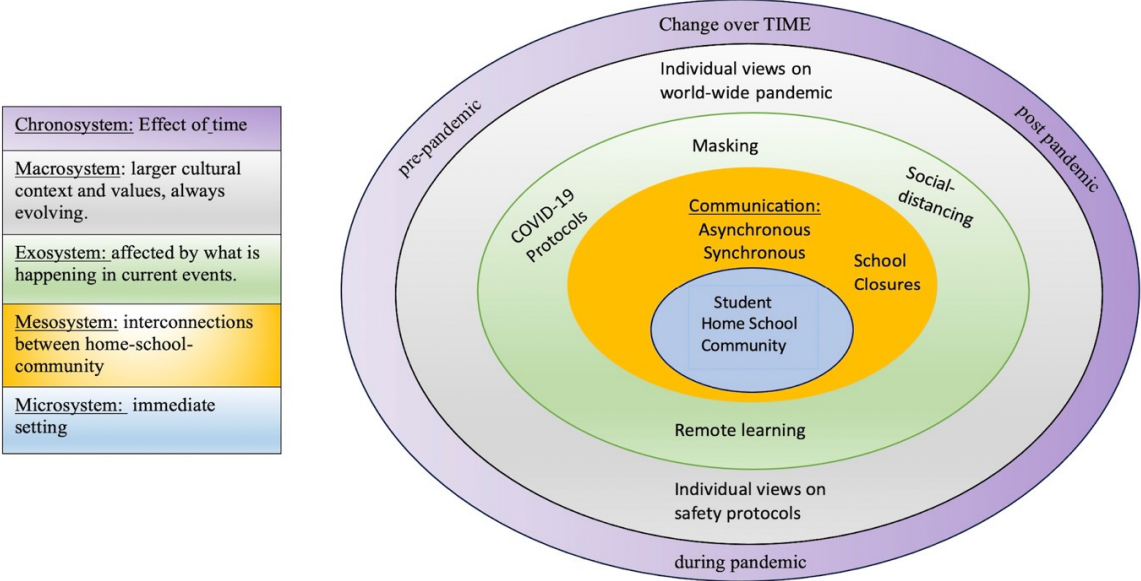
**Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model**

In Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theoretical framework, key systems are identified that influence student development. The student’s microsystem consists of a school and family

environment, whereas the students' mesosystem reflects the interaction between the microsystems. Family involvement is a key component in the microsystem, where school and homework together to support student success. Working in tandem, parents and schools support each other's efforts. Garbacz et al. (2015) and Sheriden et al. (2012) identified the importance of improving parent-teacher relationships and establishing consistency across home and school to support children. The COVID-19 pandemic and return-to-school protocols put family engagement and involvement at the forefront of education. According to Epstein (2022), parents and educators developed an appreciation for each other as partners in a child's learning and educational experience.

Figure 5.2 depicts the influence of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems on the evolution of family engagement practices throughout the timeframe of the pandemic. While this study talked with focus groups at the end of the pandemic, the chronosystem shows the change over time where using technology to communicate pre-pandemic was almost non-existent, to the evolution of embedding technology in the very fabric of parent engagement. Parents gained comfort and assurance with the process and educators became more tolerant of the increased flow of communication. During the 2020-2021 and 2021-22 school years, the macrosystem influenced the parental choice of how to access education and whether to send their child to school upon reopening. Change over time also created shifts within the exosystem, where individuals in home, school and community are affected by the current events around them. As safety protocols lifted, individual views on the pandemic lessened the influence on the mesosystem. Home and school had new ways to engage and connect albeit in a differing context. Synchronous communication modalities could continue now due to convenience and flexibility.

Figure 5.2 Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Influence on Family Engagement Using Virtual and Digital Modalities



This study confirmed that when there was a struggle with a child due to social, emotional, behavioral or academic concerns, parents and educators reached out more frequently than before the pandemic and used a broader range of communication modalities to speak out strongly and sometimes advocate for meeting time together, in person. Technology helped to overcome previous barriers in communication before the pandemic, where parents were reluctant or not able to go to the physical school building during the scheduled conference times offered.

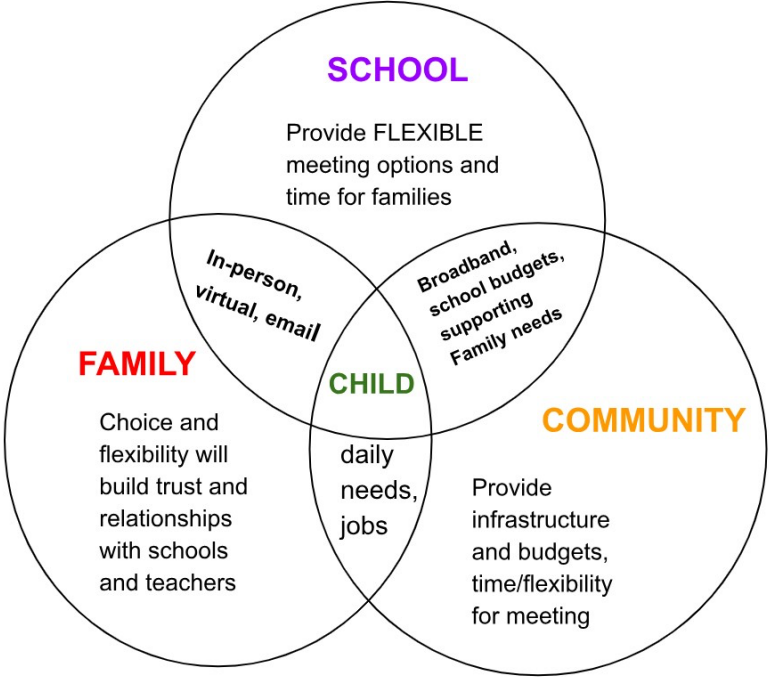
Parents indicated that before the pandemic, they had felt more unsure about reaching out directly via email for fear of overstepping their role. At that time, an inequity in the balance of power existed, whereby the school was perceived to be in charge of communication and engagement. Society has seen how social media emboldens individuals to speak out and share their thoughts when they would not have done so in person. A similar phenomenon took place with parents and educators where interactions occurred more frequently and situated the parents and teachers as partners in problem-solving on behalf of the students. Orta & Gutierrez, (2022)

also found that parents were comfortable speaking up and advocating for their students using the communication platforms established with educators. Hayhurst, (2021) discusses that families appreciate schools making engagement easier through tools like video-conferencing and messaging. Weiland et al., (2021) supported the finding that family engagement evolved into a more family-centered approach, where parents felt they were collaborators in the student's education rather than passive participants.

### **Overlapping Spheres of Influence**

Epstein's overlapping spheres of influence for optimal student support model (2006) places the child at the center of the three overlapping spheres of community, family and school. Depicted in a Venn diagram, each of the three spheres intersect with each other-. All spheres influence the child, while also influencing each other. Figure 5.2 adapts Epstein's original model to show overlapping spheres of influence during the pandemic in relation to family and school engagement, based on findings from this study. School and family engaged more frequently during the pandemic using digital modes of communication, which in turn influenced the child's school and home experiences. More interaction and more discussion appeared to take place. Community influence played a larger role in shaping school policies on safety protocols for a safe return to the classroom and making decisions for leveraging federal relief funds (Epstein, 2022).

Figure 5.2 Overlapping Spheres of Influence for Family Engagement Using Virtual and Digital Modalities



When parents and families engage in positive ways (e.g., through email, text, direct messaging, and classroom apps), it can lead to more trust and positive relationships. Through video conferencing, the interactions were further strengthened by an additional layer of visual support where verbal and non-verbal cues were more easily shared and understood. Tapping into the human connection, video conferencing was often referred to as the closest replication of being in the same room. These communication options offered the sharing of major and minor information in the daily life of the student developing patterns of communication. This idea was presented before the pandemic (Fleming, 2012), finding that forward-thinking districts at that time were already exploring how to use the existing technology for communicating with parents and families.

Hattie (2022) found that parental involvement has the potential to accelerate student learning with a high effect size of 0.42. The relationship between student learning when parents are supportive and engaged is important to student achievement. Because there are many components to parental involvement, such as the type of involvement and the frequency it occurs, it is not enough to just recognize the effect parent involvement has on student learning. For example, one type of involvement that raises the effect size higher is when parents listen to their child reading. This has an effect size of 0.51 on student achievement. When parents show and communicate high expectations for student achievement with their children, the effect size increased to 1.42. While this study didn't explore questions about student achievement, it is important to understand there is a strong correlation between student achievement and family engagement. This study demonstrated how technology improved communication and parent engagement, and it is possible there may have been positive impacts on student learning and achievement as well.

### **Revisiting Spheres of Influence in 2022**

In 2021, Epstein continued to utilize research-based approaches to strengthen homeschool connections. The National Network of Partnership Schools surveyed school districts, teachers and parents to determine how schools in the partnership were responding and pivoting during the pandemic with their family engagement. The survey discovered some best practices which included making sure all families had access to email, providing devices and internet hot spots if needed and working with community agencies to support struggling families in their daily needs. They found that eighty percent of schools surveyed had one or more best practices in use at their schools (NNPS Annual Report, 2022).

During the pandemic, the community played a larger role in influencing families and schools. School A and School C saw their communities develop a partnership between civic



organizations and the school to provide food boxes and lunches to families at home. School buses ran routes for drop-off points and home delivery for food, lunches and homework. The following school year, this new connection opened the door for continued conversation about a return to school and remote or hybrid learning when necessary. Parents and teachers now understood how to utilize technology and leverage it for enhanced communication and maintaining relationships. The greater community makes decisions and casts votes about local funding sources and needs to understand what is required for this communication to occur. Another facet of community involvement is allowing parents and caregivers time during the day for digital meetings with teachers and school teams (Orta & Gutierrez, 2022; Epstein, 2022).

### **Overcoming Barriers to Parent Involvement**

As discussed in the literature review, although much research on parent involvement has been accumulated over a long period, there are visible and invisible barriers that often get in the way of allowing that to happen.

#### **Visible Barriers to Communication**

Because of the rural location of the three schools in this study, lack of public transportation is a concern when a family does not have their own vehicle. Because towns in regional school units can be over twenty miles from the school, the cost of gas can be a financial burden in lower socioeconomic areas such as Penobscot and Piscataquis counties. This question was not asked specifically during the focus group interview however it is reasonable to think these conditions provide valid reasons as to why a parent might not appear involved with the school. Work schedules and finding childcare are other visible barriers parents needed to resolve to participate in school. (Epstein, 2004; Ferlazzo, 2011). Digital technology assisted in overcoming the visible barriers by connecting home and school virtually (Orta & Gutierrez, 2022).

## **Invisible Barriers to Communication**

Additionally, as Lareau (2000) and Lightfoot-Lawrence (2003) found in their research, parents can carry the negative baggage of their childhood schooling and interactions with teachers. It can be intimidating for an anxious parent to anticipate hearing what the teacher or school may say about their child or parenting style.

Before the pandemic, many parents did not come to school to participate in conferences and meetings. A variety of excuses could legitimately be made, for visible barriers such as lack of transportation, childcare or simply forgetting (Baker et al., 2016). This study found that technology can overcome not only the visible but more importantly, the invisible barriers. An increase in daily or weekly communication using email or messaging was comfortable for parents and teachers to share important information, give quick messages or ask questions. Research into the phenomenon of being comfortable behind an asynchronous modality has been used by Suler, (2004) to create the term “online disinhibition.” As discussed also by Garrison, (2008) and Rose, (2014), this refers to a lessening of restraint an individual feels by communicating online rather than in person. While most of the research refers to social media posts,

Benign disinhibition is seen as when people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't ordinarily say and do in the face-to-face world. They loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly. (Rose, 2014) Parents, who before the pandemic, felt uncomfortable with the traditional ways of communicating with the school and teachers and were often reluctant to engage fit into the description of benign disinhibition because:

Fear of disapproval or punishment, people are reluctant to say what they think as they stand before an authority figure. However, whilst online, in what feels more like a peer

relationship with the appearances of authority minimized, people are much more willing to speak out or act out. (Suler, 2005)

Suler's assertion of developing a comfort level when the authority appears minimized happened for parents and teachers in the study when they used digital and virtual means to communicate. Emailing more frequently and using messaging apps or text messaging can lay the groundwork for a more amicable, informal relationship rather than one of unbalanced power.

### **Increased Flexibility for Communication**

Flexibility was important to families for a variety of reasons. For some, it allowed the comfort of home as the setting for the parent-teacher conference, without the difficulty of finding childcare, leaving one parent at home, or bringing the children to the conference. A surprising revelation was that access to an internet connection played a negligible part in being able to connect for communication. Multiple participants discussed the ease and convenience of cell phones and appeared to connect in that way, rather than by a laptop, computer, or tablet. Being able to see the teacher visually was important to parents, putting the traditional phone call lower on the list of preferred modalities.

For participants in this study, there was positive support for the flexibility and freedom that meeting virtually or directly messaging. They were more willing and able to join meetings that occurred for specialized purposes, such as Individual Educational Plan (IEP) meetings or Student Assistance Team (SAT) meetings. Parents who joined these meetings were relieved not to miss work or have to travel to school for a short meeting. If they did not physically go to the school in the past, they could listen only from a conference call which rendered them a passive participant in the past. Prior to the pandemic, school expectations put the burden of attendance on

the parent to come to school at a designated time, with very little flexibility for the parent. It should be pondered whether the issue previously was getting to the physical building.

Baker et al., (2016) found that staff noted a lack of involvement when parents did not have a car and/or were single parents and sole breadwinners. Also raising children not their own such as foster children, nieces, nephews and grandparents added to the perceived lack of involvement. Including parents in meeting structures was also not enough. Garbacz et al., (2018) assure us that parents needed to feel welcomed and that their input mattered and would be heard. The finding that parents were attending teacher conferences at higher rates during the pandemic, suggests that offering the flexibility of using video conferencing increased the parent-teacher engagement and interactions and overcame some of the aforementioned barriers.

### **Parent Empowerment- Discovering a Voice**

In her study, Lareau (2000) found that principals sometimes viewed a lack of parental involvement as a reflection of parental values. “They don’t value education because they don’t have much of one themselves.” This study supported findings from other studies showing that parents want to be involved with their children’s teachers and school (McKenna & Millen, 2013; Addi-Racah & Arvi-Elyasiv, 2008). Parents did value education a great deal and were not afraid to speak up for their children. Hayhurst, (2021) found the use of technology, specifically email, messaging and video-conferencing helped parents keep in frequent contact with the teachers and bolstered their confidence to reach out to the administration for situations that they felt required in-person communication. Logan et. al (2021) found that parents developed the confidence to interact more meaningfully as a result of the loss of in-person communication during COVID-19 and the shift to other modes of communication.

The perceptions in this study reflected the experiences of a small area of rural Central Maine where the families involved in the study came from schools with higher than state-average

poverty rates. Fleming (2021) showed that paper communications, voice calls and website notifications top the list of what communication tools schools wanted to phase out after the pandemic in favor of streamlined and prioritized communication options for parents using digital and virtual modalities to which parents would respond more immediately. Schools saw this as a way to increase the engagement with families by providing options they learned the parents would use and respond to in a timely fashion.

Being willing to communicate and participate in supporting their child's school progress amid the school safety protocols shows a dedication and desire for student success. The benefits of frequent communication between educators and parents are supported by a Harvard Study on the effect of teacher-family communication on student engagement: "We find that frequent teacher-family communication immediately increased student engagement as measured by homework completion rates, on-task behavior, and class participation" (Kraft & Dougherty, 2013)

When referencing the early pandemic, parents in the study spoke of student work and helping students know their expectations and know how to reach out to teachers for assistance when needed. When faced with their child struggling academically or emotionally, parents strongly advocated for different meeting structures or changes in programming. Educators reported that this effect appeared to continue when students returned to school as well. Parents were more likely to make weekly or more frequent contact when a messaging or emailing option was available. The uncomfortableness of reaching out was overcome through early remote instruction but paved the way for continued comfort in connecting with teachers.

The Global Family Research Partnership shared examples of parent empowerment and voice demonstrating what family engagement looks like. In one Texas school, parents tackled a high teacher turnover rate by building trust and strong relationships with teachers. They

advocated for what they needed and demonstrated empathy for the teachers. Another district in San Diego addresses the equitable factor of English Language Learners and their families by having them share stories in their native tongue and providing English translations for school personnel to listen to at school. Acknowledging the language barrier and providing an alternative sharing structure left families being heard and seen and left educators with a better understanding of students and their families (GFRP 2018 Executive Summary, p. 2).

### **Establishing Personal Boundaries with Families**

Educators, while seeing benefits to communicating with parents through email, Zoom or platforms like Seesaw and Google Classroom, also felt a need to advocate for their personal time moving forward. Teachers felt a conflict of competing needs where they wanted to maintain strong communication with parents and encourage the use of virtual and digital modalities for more frequent interactions. However, a result of a growing relationship seemed to diminish the boundaries of space between home and school. One teacher decided she was going to give her future families a disclaimer in her newsletter home about when she would not be available or responding to emails or messages at night. Given human nature, she was worried that she was not going to be able to stick to her own boundary.

Another concern of educators centered on parents using this new way of communication to overshare sensitive information and the professional boundaries became too blurred. As mandated reporters, teachers did not want to be privy to information that might require further action. Using the preferred modalities of video-conferencing and emailing regularly developed trust between parents and educators, but being viewed as an adult friend rather than the child's professional teacher led some teachers to worry about these lines of communication. If a difficult situation in class arose, teachers worried they would have difficulty talking with parents about it in the future.

## **Establishing School-Wide Professional Expectations for Communication**

Most educators recognized that they needed to seek an opportunity to advocate with the administration to produce consistent meeting platforms and expectations. The preference was for school-wide guidelines and access to the platforms through the school, rather than personal choice. The educators in this study did not discuss feeling pressure from the administration. Instead, they were given flexibility and freedom. While they appreciated this choice, it caused discontent with coworkers whose expectations were lower than their own. There were certain guidelines set by the schools, such as holding required conferences with parents, but the modality was left up to teacher choice. The result was a mixed bag of options that frustrated parents and teachers. Orta & Gutierrez, (2022) found having coordinated approaches and goals for family engagement at a systems level enhances the likelihood of a strong family involvement policy.

With guidelines set by the administration for all teachers, professional expectations which are more standard allow parents of multiple children to have the same experience across grade levels. It also assists teachers by giving them language which could include appropriate expectations about communication. It is much easier for a teacher to cite school expectations as the reason why they need to do something, making it feel less like a personal choice. School leaders have a responsibility to cultivate a mindset supportive of family engagement by creating clear norms and expectations (Auerbach, 2009).

## **Lack of Consistency in Technology Used**

School B had the least organized system whereby teachers were allowed the most choice as to how they communicated with families. The district did not purchase school or district-wide platforms. The teachers in the focus group from School C took advantage of free platforms, which often came with restrictions, but they felt it was important to offer the choice. Their concern was seeing other teachers choose less time-consuming ways of communicating, such as

sending a letter or scheduling a phone call if the parent asked. This lack of consistency was frustrating for the teachers and at times uncomfortable. One teacher reported a parent sharing negative thoughts about her other child's teacher who did not offer the same choices for communicating as she did, and it was uncomfortable to hear a colleague being discussed. Orta & Gutierrez, (2022) encourage school leadership to establish structures in a school that would help with this lack of consistency by providing a set of expectations to follow along with access to needed technology and tools.

### **Increased Work Expectations**

Teachers used phrases such as “*work harder*” and “*try harder*” during this period when referring to making connections with families for communication. Some teachers shared that their school had a plan for expectations for teachers, while others did not. School B for example did not require a standard way of communicating with parents and did not fund school-wide platform subscriptions, while Schools A and B had a more organized plan for communication expectations set down by the administration. School A left it to a grade-level decision, while School C purchased a Zoom license and there were school-wide expectations to use for meeting with parents.

In their study, Smith et al., (2021) discussed having support from the administration made a difference in the teacher's feelings of being overwhelmed. School A educators seemed driven by a sense of work ethic and duty for what they felt the parents were entitled to from them and were given professional development to learn what they were expected to use. During a study of listening to teachers' voices during the early pandemic, Jordan (2020) explored the feeling of things being “hard” for educators. One teacher expressed a resiliency to keep trying despite the increased effort because the payoff of connecting positively with families was worth it. Almost a year and a half later, this was confirmed in this current study where teachers used the phrase “try



harder” about reaching out to families because they valued the interactions they were able to have with families.

### **Consistency Across Grade Levels**

Families with multiple students across grade levels or schools in the same district felt frustrated when there wasn’t a standard mode of communication. One parent shared that one of her child’s teachers went out of her way to communicate, using video-conferencing, web-based platforms, and email. Communication was easy and flexible. However, in the same school, she shared that her son’s teacher only communicated through written communication or phone call. There was a feeling on both the side of parents and educators that the administration should have a role in setting a standard for expectations for communication. This echoes the educators’ requests for a standard mode of operation school-wide for using digital and virtual technology in this and other studies. (Kyzar & Jimmerson, 2018; Epstein, 2021; Orta & Gutierrez 2022).

### **Continuation for Future Communication**

While both educator and parent groups found strong positive benefits to communicating using technology through asynchronous and synchronous devices or platforms, several key factors for successful future implementation should be discussed.

### **Frequency and Quality of Communication**

It can be surmised that increasing the frequency and quality of communication helped parents understand the importance of educational goals and support, such as reading at home, and educators helped parents become more self-aware of how to communicate and work with their children. Teachers could replace the traditional paper handouts that often get lost in the abyss of student backpacks. By virtually posting notices and information in addition to students displaying their work on the digital platform, parents have an archive to look back at and teachers can supply valuable information in a variety of modalities. Parents who were using email

sporadically before the pandemic have become more comfortable using email to share or gather information about their children.

In a report for the Carnegie Corporation, Mapp, (2021) discusses the “shift in tone and intent” of conversations between families and schools. Families do not want to see this change as the quality of their relationships with educators has improved as a result. As part of what she refers to as a “capacity building framework” this improved quality of communication is a result of viewing families as collaborators instead of the problem.

As with the parents, the educators appeared to view communicating through digital modalities as having benefits and something they hoped would continue in the future. With students being back in the physical classroom, teachers continued using Seesaw on a daily and weekly basis to help the parents physically see the classroom and student work. Videos of students working or of teachers explaining and demonstrating for parents were easily uploaded to these platforms. Teachers reported more frequent interactions consistently than pre-pandemic levels. They felt more engagement from all families on a daily or weekly basis, but especially with those families that previously were more difficult to reach out to and receive a response . They wanted to keep the lines of communication open for this to continue while using digital and virtual modalities.

In an Education Week article, “Pandemic parents are more engaged. How can schools keep it going, Klein (2021) cites a Rutgers University survey of more than one thousand parents with household incomes below seventy-five thousand dollars per year, less than the national median income. In this study, parent communication and engagement among some of the most vulnerable demographics had increased. Fifty-six percent of families below the federal poverty level reported feeling more comfortable helping students than they did before the pandemic.

**Current Communication Procedures in 2022-2023**

The interviews for this study occurred in the summer and fall of 2022, and parents and educators were reflecting backward on policies and practices before that point. It is interesting to look at how the school policies or practices may have changed as the pandemic was winding down in the 2022-23 school year. Specifically, I wondered if the schools asked or listened to the parent and educator voices that requested a continuation in choice over modalities for parent and teacher meetings. Data were obtained from follow-up emails to participants in spring 2023. Table 5.1 outlines the options for parents and teachers in Schools A, B and C from the study in 2022-23.

Table 5.1 2022-23 School year meeting options for parents

School	Zoom License-Teachers	Funding Source	Parent Teacher Conferences	Funding Source	IEP/504 Meetings	Funding Source
A	Yes	F**	Choice- In-Person/Zoom	F**	Zoom	S***
B	No	NA	In person only	NA	Google Meets	S***
C	Yes	F**	Choice- In-Person/Zoom	F**	Zoom only	S***

Funding Sources: \*General Budget-G; \*\*Federal Funds-F; \*\*\*Special Education Funds-S

**General Education Setting**

The results are mixed for general education engagement. Choice of video-conferencing or in-person is being offered in Schools A and C but paid with the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Emergency and Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds for parent-teacher conferences. School B did not continue to offer a remote communication choice but decided to return to in-person parent-teacher meetings on certain nights. Funding in the local general budget was not utilized for platforms.

## **Special Education Setting**

Interestingly, all three schools **only** offered a remote choice for Individual Educational Plan (IEP), or 504 meetings paid for with special education funding using Zoom or Google Meets. In-person meetings for IEPs were not an option at this time. Funding specialized for Special Education was used for this purpose. None of the schools were using general education funding to pay for the licensing of any digital platforms at this time.

## **Implications for School Communication Practices, Policy and Future Research**

A resonant concern among school communication centers around practice and policy. Educational leadership at the local, state and federal levels need to listen to the voices of educators and parents for sustained, structured communication supports and future research into how this should be done is needed.

## **Research on Use of Technology**

Future research studies are needed to follow the influx of new technology in schools during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. Watching how schools continue to leverage the use of technology for instruction and for communication and engagement with parents will be important. If parents continue to utilize their cell phones this could be less of a problem for connection for communication. Whether or not schools continue to allow choice and flexibility when federal relief funding ends is important to follow as well. Yearly parent surveys would allow a platform for parent voices to continue advocating for their preference for flexibility and choice. This study could not look at the issue of communication broadly across equitable scenarios such as race and ethnicity and English Language Learners (ELL). The Global Family Research Project prepared a 2018 report for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, *“Joining Together to Create a Bold Vision for Next Generational Family Engagement.”* One area discussed in the report addresses digital media and technology offering unprecedented

opportunities for students and families to stay connected in new ways moving forward. Creating hubs in the communities such as libraries, cafes and after school clubs helps move the technology conversation forward and also addressed the issue of equity for all families.

### **Funding Systematic School-Wide Technology Structures**

To create a systematic, effective plan for meeting structures, schools need to leverage the funding for these options. School budgets are governed by the school board in most public schools and approved by the voters of the community. It is necessary for the community and larger governing bodies, such as the Department of Education, to understand the importance of sustaining funding in the general education budget for applications and platforms necessary to the cause. Relying on federal funding makes the infrastructure of any family engagement plan unstable for implementation long term. Future research into community partnerships, state Department of Education initiatives and other sources of funding is needed to aid school boards and their members to find acceptable ways to balance the local school budget.

The Maine Education Policy Research Institute (MEPRI) (Lech & Johnson, 2022) found that “states are also using ESSER funds to increase meaningful family engagement with their public schools and to support stronger educational outcomes for students in certain content areas” (p. 52). The schools are relying on emergency, temporary money to fund the digital tools needed to continue communicating effectively. As relief funding fades away, it will fall to the larger community, the school board and civic groups to understand how to continue with technological support through the local budgets. Schools must demonstrate the positive outcomes of having the additional technology and structures so that value is placed upon continuing the financial support locally, such as district licenses and applications. Parents, as members of the community, can advocate continuing support for these initiatives in their hopes for continued flexibility and choice in communication.

## **Establishing Consistent Communication Policies and Practices**

Participants in the focus groups were also advocating for more consistent policies and practices within their schools related to a) the technology platforms or tools to be used and b) when communications would happen. School policy could discourage communications during non-school hours for example or not before 7:30 am and not after 5 pm. By setting clear boundaries, educators have something to fall back on in their practice with families. Rather than a personal choice, it is a school policy. Use of technology platforms needed to be consistent and parents expressed the need for training and limiting the number of platforms they needed to learn. In *Promising Partnership Practices*, Joyce Epstein, (2022) shares success stories and examples of real schools implementing practices around family engagement to help support and mentor families with school practices. “New Tech System: Parent Awareness and Support” is an example of learning how to navigate using technology, (p. 54).

## **Teacher Mentoring Programs**

In this study, teachers new to education in the focus groups discussed their desire to work harder and establish connections with the parents, who often noticed the effort. Mentoring programs for new educators that address parent engagement as part of student teaching are areas for future practice. Findings showed that being in touch on a more regular basis, for example, a weekly connection, led to trust and increased comfort levels on the part of the parents. Policy and funding are not the only factors that will determine if educators and parents continue to have a choice in remote meeting structures, such as Zoom. Teachers’ knowledge about how to use these recent technologies in ways that enhance and strengthen the bond between home and school will also be important. Orta & Gutierrez, (2022) suggest training teachers to use these tools effectively, and to develop tools for parent engagement in conjunction with higher education and supporting organizations.

Parents were perceptive when a teacher made an easier choice for themselves and did not offer face-to-face conferences through a modality such as Zoom. We need to explore how to help schools work with teachers and set expectations and support and provide scaffolding and training for teachers who may feel uncomfortable with the technology or the situation.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The review of the literature showed that parental engagement with schools has been linked to increased student attendance and achievement, yet it also shows the barriers that exist to making this happen. When the world stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, every factor of society from education to the general workplace, was forever changed. The home was brought to the forefront in schools through the use of remote communication technology. Education sits on a precipice where it may move backward to a status quo or possibly to forward to continue to use these wider range of modalities and tools to communicate with families. The findings from this study supports the theory that both families and educators do not want this backward slide. A closer look at the findings from the study supports the hope for continued flexibility and options in communication and engagement. It finds agreement with most of the past research into family and educator perceptions which have been mostly conducted through surveys. Consistently both groups advocate wanting to keep the “silver linings” of communicating through technology during the pandemic.

Changes in how we work with our in-service teachers and how schools support those new to education need to occur to create a new normal using digital and virtual modalities to communicate with families. The establishment of the PTA in 1897 could never have envisioned meeting through Zoom where all the homes were connected to the school using technology. Hanifan (1916) was astute when he assured us that families did not want to be told how to do things. There is greater power in developing social capital empowering people to think for

themselves. By continuing to offer other ways to engage parents, it may help increase parent engagement and attendance in conferences if they feel more comfortable not meeting in the school. It can also avoid other barriers in their lives (schedules, transportation, childcare, etc.) In all totality, we have increased our social capital by engaging parents more actively through technology.

While there must be structures and supports in place to ensure consistent implementation, we sit in a fabulous place of possibilities if we listen to the voice of the families. We should also help our educators not feel overwhelmed and burdened by expectations they place on themselves or perceive that others have placed upon them. A quote from Henry David Thoreau (1854) seems an appropriate description for the current educational narrative. “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them” (p. 243).

A great deal of energy, time and funding has been spent to improve upon traditional education structures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The ripple effect will be felt for many years, but there is an opportunity to make changes to traditional communication structures that do not work for the world we find ourselves in now. More studies are needed on topics similar to this study to continue closing the gap in research regarding the use of technology for communication and meeting with parents and families. The shared viewpoints from both sides of the communication partnership should be explored deeply. Follow-up studies are needed to determine whether schools continue to use digital and virtual means of connecting with parents or whether they shutter these options.

When federal relief funding runs out and technology becomes outdated, will schools continue to meet the challenge of using technology to communicate? There is foundational evidence that parents want to use their cell phones, email and have the option of



videoconferencing when in-person meetings are not feasible. The stress placed on educators should not be discounted but researched further for changes in teacher preparation programs to include digital and virtual communication. Finally, those in leadership roles need to envision what professional development and mentoring of new and veteran teachers need to occur to support using technology to engage with families.

This study addressed the void in recent research studies by seeking to understand the viewpoints of educators and parents on the shared experience from two specific years of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020-21 and 2021-22, when schools were mostly closed to outside visitors, including families and parents. It supported prior research embracing emerging modalities such as email for communication purposes in education. However, despite earlier research findings, it took a worldwide pandemic to cause real shifts in educational practice. By using this study and others similar in nature, the hope is for education to change its outdated and stale ways of communicating with families and embrace the technology available to us today.

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## APPENDICES

### **Appendix A: Email Recruitment Message for Elementary Educators**

Dear Elementary Educator,

You are invited to participate in a research study. The research is being conducted by Anne Marie Jordan, a Prevention and Intervention Doctoral Student at the University of Maine, College of Education and Human Development, Orono, Maine. Email addresses were obtained through the NEO dashboard at the Maine Department of Education. This research is being conducted to understand how educators and families connected through virtual and digital modalities during the COVID 19 pandemic. Many schools prohibited meeting in person due to closing the physical school to outside individuals beyond essential staff, workers and students. What digital platforms you chose to use, your thoughts and perceptions on using these modalities and how they affected your connections with parents will be topics of discussion. You will be part of a focus group of four to six elementary educators from the Central Maine area. The focus group will be recorded via Zoom after July 18, 2022, but prior to August 31, 2022.

The focus group will take place via Zoom for forty-five to sixty minutes. Additionally, you may indicate your willingness to participate in a follow up individual interview at a different time. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [annemarie.jordan@maine.edu](mailto:annemarie.jordan@maine.edu) or 207249-4307. Please click the link below to learn more about the study and to indicate interest in participation.

Thank you for your time,

Anne Marie C. Jordan

## **Appendix B: Informed Consent for Elementary Educators**

Dear Educator,

You are invited to participate in a research-project conducted by Anne Marie Jordan, a Doctoral Student in the Prevention and Intervention program in the Department of Education at the University of Maine, Orono. Jim Artesani, Assistant Dean of Education and Susan Bennett-Armistead, Associate Professor of Literacy, are the faculty sponsors for the project. The purpose of the research is to understand how educators are interacting with parents and families during the COVID 19 pandemic. Many schools restricted entry into physical school buildings as part of their safety protocols. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you decide to participate, and agree to be recorded, you will be asked to participate in a forty-five-to-sixty-minute zoom focus group interview with five or six other elementary educators. At the end of the focus group time, you will receive a follow-up email thanking you for your time and asking if you would be willing to participate in any follow-up individual interviews. Sample questions might include:

1. How has this experience changed how you view reaching out and connecting with parents and caregivers?
  - a. Are you more likely to reach out now?
  - b. Is it more/less comfortable connecting with parents this way?

If you want to volunteer to be part of any further confidential individual interviews as a follow up, you will be directed to email [annemarie.jordan@maine.edu](mailto:annemarie.jordan@maine.edu) to express interest.

### **Risks**

There is minimal risk in participating in this study, aside from your time commitment.



## **Benefits**

While there are no direct benefits for participating in the study your shared perspective will help inform how to connect with families most effectively in the new educational realm we are entering as a result of COVID 19. The study will be one of the first of its kind during this unprecedented time in education and provide a catalyst for future research.

## **Confidentiality**

You may know other participants in the focus group. The zoom session will be recorded for the researcher to transcribe the conversation for future data review. The zoom recordings are deleted within 48-72 hours of the meeting and then stored on a password protected computer until December 2023 and will then be destroyed. The de-identified recording transcripts will be kept on a password protected secured laptop in the researcher's private office indefinitely. No identifiable information such as teacher name or school name will be presented in any of the final reports. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed since it is a group setting but you will be asked not to share information outside of the session.

## **Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this process, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

## **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [annemarie.jordan@maine.edu](mailto:annemarie.jordan@maine.edu) or 207-249-4307. You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study at [arthur.artesani@maine.edu](mailto:arthur.artesani@maine.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207-581-2657 or email [umric@maine.edu](mailto:umric@maine.edu).

## **Appendix C: Email Recruitment Message for Parents and Caregivers**

Dear parent or caregiver of an elementary student,

You are invited to participate in a research study. Your school was chosen based on the geographic location within Penobscot or Piscataquis Counties which received Reallocated Title IA funds for summer programming. The district was asked to send invitations to parents on behalf of the researcher. The research is being conducted by Anne Marie Jordan, a Prevention and Intervention Doctoral Student at the University of Maine, College of Education and Human Development, Orono, Maine. This research is conducted to understand how educators and families connected through virtual and digital modalities during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Many schools prohibited meeting in person due to closing the physical school to outside individuals beyond essential staff, workers and students. What digital platforms your teachers or schools used, your thoughts and perceptions on connecting through these modalities will be topics of discussion. You will be part of a focus group of parents and caregivers with an elementary aged student from the Central Maine area. The Focus Group will take place via Zoom recording for forty-five to sixty minutes after July 18, 2023, but prior to August 31, 2022, and consist of four to six participants. Additionally, you may confidentially indicate your willingness to participate in a follow up individual interview at a different time.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [annemarie.jordan@maine.edu](mailto:annemarie.jordan@maine.edu) or 207-249-4307. Please click the link below to learn more about the study and to indicate interest in participation.

Thank you for your time,

Anne Marie C. Jordan

## **Appendix D: Informed Consent for Elementary Parents and Caregivers**

Dear Parent or Caregiver,

You are invited to participate in a research-project conducted by Anne Marie Jordan, a Doctoral Student in the Prevention and Intervention program in the Department of Education at the University of Maine, Orono. Jim Artesani, Assistant Dean of Education, and Susan Bennett-Armistead, Associate Professor of Literacy, are the faculty sponsors for the project. The purpose of the research is to understand how educators are interacting with parents and families during the COVID 19 pandemic. Many schools restricted entry into physical school buildings as part of their safety protocols. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in a forty-five-to-sixty-minute recorded Zoom focus group with five or six other parents/caregivers between July 18, 2022, and August 31, 2022. You must agree to be recorded. At the end of the focus group time, you will receive a follow up email thanking you for your time and asking if you would be willing to participate in any follow up individual interviews. Sample questions might include:

**1.** How has this experience changed how you view reaching out and connecting with your child's teacher?

- a.** Are you more likely to reach out now?
- b.** Is it more/less comfortable connecting with parents this way?

**2.** Talk about any specific examples or experiences you had during your meetings with teachers during virtual meetings. Do you perceive a change in the culture and climate around Home-School interactions?

If you want to volunteer to be part of any further confidential individual interviews as a follow up, you will be directed to email [annemarie.jordan@maine.edu](mailto:annemarie.jordan@maine.edu) to express interest.

### **Risks**

There is minimal risk in participating in this study, aside from your time commitment.

### **Benefits**

While there are no direct benefits for participating in the study your shared perspective will help inform how to connect with families most effectively in the new educational realm we are entering as a result of COVID 19. The study will be one of the first of its kind during this unprecedented time in education and provide a catalyst for future research.

### **Confidentiality**

You may know other participants in the focus group. The zoom session will be recorded for the researcher to transcribe the conversation for future data review. Zoom recordings will be deleted within 48-72 hours and then stored on a password protected computer until December 2023 and then destroyed. De-identified transcripts will be stored on a password protected computer indefinitely. No identifiable information such as teacher name or school name will be presented in any of the final reports. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed since it is a group setting and you will be asked not to share information outside the session.

### **Voluntary**

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this process, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me at [annemarie.jordan@maine.edu](mailto:annemarie.jordan@maine.edu) or 207-249-4307. You may also reach the faculty advisor on this study at [arthur.artesani@maine.edu](mailto:arthur.artesani@maine.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, University of Maine, 207-581-2657 or email [umric@maine.edu](mailto:umric@maine.edu).

## Appendix E

### Educator Focus Group Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this focus group interview today. I would like to introduce myself as Anne Marie Jordan, a doctoral student at the University of Maine, Orono in Prevention and Intervention Studies. I am interested in learning about how you connected with parents, caregivers and families during this unprecedented time in education. I am hoping to learn what procedures you had to follow at your school for meeting and connecting with parents, what digital and virtual platforms you might have used and how you perceive these changes. May I first ask you to please introduce yourself with your first name and what grade you teach?

Pre-K	Kindergarten	First	Second	Third	Fourth
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1. Please talk about how the Pandemic, starting in March 2020 changed how you interact parents, families and caregivers.
  - a. Describe any restrictions due to safety protocols and procedures that affected meeting with parents or families?
2. What did you feel your role as a teacher was in regard to connecting with families?
  - a. Did this change over time (school years 20-21 - 21-22, are there any differences?) (academic, behavior, routines)
3. Describe the platforms that you used for connecting with families-
  - a. Examples: See Saw, Class Dojo, Google Classroom, Nearpod, Facebook, texting, email, others:
  - b. How often did you use them? (daily, weekly, monthly)
4. Were there any benefits to the ones that you used? Were you allowed to select on your own or did the school require you to use certain ones?
5. Were there any drawbacks or limitations to the platforms you used?
6. How often did your parents or families connect with you using these platforms?
7. Did you conduct any meetings face to face using a virtual platform?
  - a. What kind of meeting: parent teacher conferences, informal meetings, academic focused like IEP, 504, SAT/CST meetings?
  - b. How many parents joined? Was this more or less than traditional in-person meetings?
8. How has this experience changed how you view reaching out and connecting with parents and caregivers?

- a. Are you more likely to reach out now?
  - b. Is it more/less comfortable connecting with parents this way?
9. Do you perceive a change in parents now?
- a. Are they more or less likely to be in contact?
  - b. How do you perceive they feel about face to face in person or face to face virtual meetings?
10. Can you wrap up in a few words how you feel about the pandemic and its impact on working with and connecting with families?

**Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses. Is there anything else you would like to share with me? If you would be willing for some follow up individual interviews you may respond to a thank you email that will come in the next few days.**

**Appendix F Parent/Caregiver Focus Group Interview Protocol**

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this focus group interview today. I would like to introduce myself as Anne Jordan, a doctoral student at the University of Maine, Orono in Prevention and Intervention Studies. I am interested in learning about how you connected with your child’s teachers during this unprecedented time in education. I am hoping to learn what procedures you had to follow at your school for meeting and connecting with teachers, what digital and virtual platforms you might have used and how you perceive these changes. May I first ask you to please introduce yourself with your first name and what grade(s) your children are in?

Pre-K	Kindergarten	First	Second	Third	Fourth
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2. Please talk about how the Pandemic, starting in March 2020 changed how you interacted with teachers.

a. Describe any restrictions due to safety protocols and procedures that affected meeting with teachers?

3. What did you feel your role as a parent was in regard to connecting with teachers?

a. Did this change over time (school years 20-21 - 21-22, are there any differences?) (academic, behavior, routines)

4. Describe the platforms that you used for connecting with your child’s teachers-

a. Examples: See Saw, Class Dojo, Google Classroom, Nearpod, Facebook, texting, email, others:

b. How often did you use them? (daily, weekly, monthly)

c. Were there any benefits to the ones that you used? Do you know if your school required c certain platforms or could teachers choose?

5. Were there any drawbacks or limitations to the platforms you used?

6. How often did your child’s teachers reach out using these platforms?

7. Did you conduct any meetings face to face using a virtual platform?

a. What kind of meeting: parent teacher conferences, informal meetings, academic focused like IEP, 504, SAT/CST meetings?

b. What time of day did the meetings occur? Did this work for you and your schedule?

8. How has this experience changed how you view reaching out and connecting with teachers?

a. Are you more likely to reach out now?

b. Is it more/less comfortable connecting with teachers this way?

9. Do you perceive a change in teachers now?
  - a. Are they more or less likely to be in contact?
  - b. How do you perceive they feel about face to face in person or face to face virtual meetings?
  
10. Can you wrap up in a few words how you feel about the pandemic and its impact on working with and connecting with teachers?

**Thank you for your time and thoughtful responses. Is there anything else you would like to share with me? If you would be willing for some follow up individual interviews you may respond to a thank you email that will come in the next few days.**



**Appendix G:**  
**Coding List for Teacher Perceptions**  
**Broad Research Question:**

How do elementary grade educators and parents perceive their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

<b>Teacher Perceptions-Benefits</b>	<b>Teacher Perceptions-Concerns</b>
<b>In-Person Interaction-<i>Quality and Engagement</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• some teachers had higher attendance rates at conferences before pandemic</li> <li>• see parent’s personalities, engagement with their children</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “No-shows” were not made up usually</li> <li>• more written notes home if meetings missed</li> </ul>
<b>Remote Interaction- <i>Quality and Engagement</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• more options for families to choose what worked for them-</li> <li>• a feeling of “<i>working harder</i>” to connect because of the pandemic disruption teachers</li> <li>• felt more “<i>obligation</i>” to find time to work if the parent couldn’t make the original conference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• missed seeing physical interactions sometimes distractions from home lessened quality (pets, children, etc)</li> </ul>
<b>Remote Interaction-Synchronous -<i>video (i.e. zoom)</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• seeing the physical home environment allowed insight into the dynamics</li> <li>• some teachers had higher attendance rates at conferences during remote</li> <li>• attendance at other meetings (IEP, SAT) increased</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• some by parent choice- did not see face-to-face all year hard to read</li> <li>• the expression, body language by the tone of voice</li> <li>• “<b>stilted</b>” meeting from atypical places (car, restaurant, someone else’s house)</li> </ul>
<b>Remote Instruction-Synchronous -<i>phone call</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easy to do- most everyone has cell phones</li> <li>• “<b>better than nothing</b>” Can call from anywhere or anyplace and not worry about “being seen”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• some by parent choice- did not see face-to-face all year</li> <li>• hard to hear the expression, body language by the tone of voice</li> <li>• couldn’t “see” home life</li> <li>• “<b>stilted</b>” meeting from atypical places (car, restaurant, someone else’s house)</li> <li>• Chasing phone numbers that are out of service or have changed</li> </ul>

<b>Remote Interaction-Asynchronous -text/email</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“upped the pace of communication”</b></li> <li>• easy to connect with parents/students</li> <li>• <b>“everyone has cell phones”</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teachers felt they were expected to be available <b>“24/7”</b></li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• even economically disadvantaged families had a phone with data to access email, if not zoom</li> <li>• See Saw direct messaging easy increased email</li> <li>• communicating more frequently</li> <li>• sharing positive work, comments easier with</li> <li>• See Saw “real-time”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ by their sense of duty</li> <li>○ by the increase in communication from parents asking questions, giving information</li> </ul>
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<b>Communication- Quality, Engagement, and Consistency</b>	
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increased over the two years of pandemic influenced guidelines</li> <li>• developed <b>“appreciation”</b> for families' struggles and complexities, what they are dealing with</li> <li>• <b>“try harder”</b> to get in touch with families</li> <li>• <b>“want to be there”</b> for families</li> <li>• <b>changed</b> communication modes and frequency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “hard conversations” need to be engaged in person, or face to face</li> <li>• hard to balance and not feel guilty for not responding immediately</li> </ul>
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<b>Technology- Use and Flexibility</b>	
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improved with districts that provided “hot spots” for connectivity for families</li> <li>• families used student’s 1-1 devices when allowed to bring home felt families found a way to connect and teachers were more likely to reschedule conferences if necessary</li> <li>• saw divorced/separated/foster families individually more easily and comfortably</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• connectivity issues- either rural location or economically disadvantaged not having internet or devices</li> <li>• not continuing to provide “hot spots” and devices as the pandemic went on was <b>“unfortunate” (21-22)</b></li> <li>• <b>“confidentiality”</b> concerns with some schools using internet for private conversations</li> <li>• mixing personal info with professional responsibilities uncomfortable (private cells, texts or Facebook)</li> </ul>
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<b>Advocacy- Teacher Determination</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• purchased or obtained free individual licenses for “needed” platforms if not school provided (See Saw)</li> <li>• convincing administration of need for consistent procedures</li> <li>• Parents seem more comfortable or willing to advocate or share information (i.e. problems with other students, changes in schedule, etc)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feel like they are dealing with “everything” and need to respond immediately to these advocacy connections</li> </ul>
<b>Future Hopes- Shift in culture</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• need for support for themselves as teachers (emotional health)</li> <li>• Protocols <b>consistency</b>- grade/school</li> <li>• Options/<b>choices</b>/devices to continue and not “fade away” we want to keep what we’ve learned, especially with families who were</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• need to set “<b>boundaries</b>” and create personal space and time</li> <li>• notifications on devices silenced at night, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>contradictions</b> feel they have more connection with choices for parents to connect but prefer themselves) in person</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p>difficult to connect with prior and increased or reached out more during pandemic  <b>“we just ultimately need to have that connection”</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>“it makes us more empathetic”</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not returning to business as usual</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	

**Appendix H:**  
**Coding Table Parent Perceptions Broad**  
**Research Question:**

How do elementary grade educators and parents perceive their interactions through remote modalities during the COVID-19 Pandemic?

<b>Parent Perceptions-Benefits</b>	<b>Parent Perceptions-Concerns</b>
<b><i>In-Person Interaction-Quality and Engagement</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical Face to face human connection</li> <li>• See the physical environment</li> <li>Easy to visit multiple teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sometimes feels rushed</li> <li>• Limited time frame</li> <li>Feeling scheduled</li> <li>• Teacher-led/controlled</li> <li>• Evenings difficult timing with children</li> </ul>
<b><i>Remote Interaction- Quality and Engagement</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seemed to last longer</li> <li>• More comfortable setting</li> <li>• Easier with childcare- at home</li> <li>Felt more “equally” led</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Miss seeing the physical environment</li> <li>• Too impersonal by phone</li> <li>Teacher personality/comfort sometimes influenced modality (phone vs. remote)</li> </ul>
<b><i>Remote Instruction-Synchronous -video (i.e. zoom)</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both parents/guardians can attend, from anywhere (i.e. work/home) when remote</li> <li>• <b><i>“I think too that we actually had more time”</i></b></li> <li>Ability to arrange meetings at other times if slotted</li> <li>time does not work with remote</li> <li>Cell Phones are easy to use to connect even with zoom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harder to interpret the tone feels awkward sometimes- i.e.</li> <li>• teacher/parent not talking can feel impersonal</li> </ul>
<b><i>Remote Instruction-Synchronous -phone call</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both parents/guardians can attend, from anywhere (i.e. work/home) when remote</li> <li>• Ability to arrange meetings at other times if slotted</li> <li>time does not work with remote Cell</li> <li>• Phones are easy to use to connect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• least favorite mode of communication more</li> <li>• impersonal seems to be a</li> <li>• “preference” for teachers not comfortable with technology</li> </ul>
<b><i>Remote Instruction-Asynchronous -text/email</i></b>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity for many interactions, daily, weekly easier to connect when a sensitive issue from family or school behavior is discussed</li> <li>• Available immediately with a phone</li> <li>• Email comfort to use anytime</li> </ul> <p><b><i>“I love the ability to just share info quickly”</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harder to interpret the tone of written correspondence</li> <li>• Sometimes leads to “over” communicating</li> </ul>
<b>Communication- <i>Quality, Engagement, and Consistency</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved during remote</li> </ul> <p>Both sides worked more to connect during remote</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More willing to reach out, interact remotely i.e., email at any time</li> <li>• More opportunities to connect, more willing remotely</li> <li>• Parents felt more <b><i>equal</i></b> remotely In-person</li> <li>• easier-to-read body language, conversational moves</li> <li>• In-person human connection valued</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harder to read body language, facial expressions, or tone remotely</li> <li>• Fewer opportunities when you can physically go to school</li> <li>• More barriers/rules/ to visiting in person to talk (scheduling, time only during the day)</li> </ul>
<b>Technology- <i>Use and Flexibility</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Whole school structures preferred (i.e. all teachers used the same format)</li> <li>• Cell Phones are easy to use to connect</li> <li>• Email comfort to use anytime</li> <li>• See Saw application preferred for ease of use, seeing physical pictures of room and work, direct messaging of teachers</li> <li>• Both parents/guardians can attend, from anywhere (i.e. work/home) when remote</li> <li>• Ability to arrange meetings at other times if slotted</li> <li>• time does not work with remote</li> <li>• Quicker meetings (SAT, IEP) can be done from work without missing time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frustrating when teachers, and grade levels all use different modalities Learning</li> <li>• “how” to connect</li> <li>• Rural connectivity poor</li> <li>• If a student is struggling, parents want to bring everyone together in one room</li> <li>• Sometimes feel a teacher’s comfort level affects the quality/choice of interaction</li> </ul>
<b>Advocacy- <i>Determination</i></b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face-to-face interactions are preferable for difficult conversations- allow direct interaction with multiple people involved</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not easy to have difficult conversations in remote modalities with multiple people</li> </ul>
<b>Future Hopes- <i>Shift in culture</i></b>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Choice</b> of modality to continue</li> <li>Organization of schools- prepared for option of choice</li> <li>• Feelings of change in <b>culture</b> toward equality, the balance of power with remote choices</li> <li>• <i><b>“I will say I think it's easier to get a hold of other people in the schools, not just the teachers so like nurses and secretaries and things like that. I feel like that has changed a little bit where like just emailing has become the norm.”</b></i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Contradictory</b> feelings</li> <li>preferring remote over in-person</li> <li>• Fear of schools embracing remote communication without parental input</li> <li>• Fear of schools not offering a choice</li> </ul>
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## BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Anne Marie C. Jordan was born in Exeter, Maine, and graduated from Dexter Regional High School in 1986. Anne Marie attended Bates College in Lewiston, Maine earning her Bachelor of Arts in English in 1990. Upon graduation, she entered the Master of Reading Program at the University of Maine, Orono at the suggestion of a Bates mentor and secured a Title IA Educational Technician job at the Asa Adams School in Orono. In 1992, with an M.Ed., in hand, Anne was set to head out into the world, but met a guy.... and now thirty years later he is a superintendent of schools and Anne Marie continues her work as an interventionist at the Ridge View Community School in Dexter, Maine. They have two adult children and two golden retrievers, none of whom have followed them into education.

Anne Marie is proud to be a lifelong Maine resident who possesses both roots and wings. She has worked for over thirty years in the same school district where she grew up and graduated, trying on many roles: teacher, principal, reading specialist, ESEA Federal Grant Programs Coordinator among others. A rolling stone, she has gathered no moss during her tenure at MSAD #46 in Dexter. Anne Marie serves on multiple committees at the local and state level in education.

A lifelong learner, Anne Marie earned her CAS in Educational Leadership from the University of New England in 2003 and her CAS in Literacy from the University of Maine, Orono, in 2006. She enjoys working with adult learners as an adjunct instructor at the University of Maine in the Master of Literacy program. Anne Marie is a candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy in Education in Prevention and Intervention Studies from the University of Maine in August 2023.