Finding Joy in Communication with Families

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Abstract

Family engagement is a strong predictor of children's academic success and communication is a key component of engagement (McWayne et al., 2016). Yet, little research has focused on families' and schools' communication practices. Using a lens of literacy as a social practice, communication is described as social and cultural and not a universal skill-set. That at a basic level, literacy is effective communication. This inquiry focused on the three K-12 teachers and considers the joyful opportunities afforded in their home-school communication. By engaging in Narrative Inquiry, we unravel the participant teachers' experiences and preferences in communicating with families through a lens of joy and consider the barriers faced when maintaining joy. Key moments of joy were sparked when providing positive communication, developing systems/strategies for continual communication, and in building relationships.

Keywords: joy in teaching; two- way communication; home-school partnerships; teachers communication preferences

Scholarship on home-school partnerships is robust with scholars documenting effective ways to engage families in partnership with schools. This work has shown that family[1] engagement is a strong predictor of children's academic success (McWayne et al., 2016). It has led to federal and state-level policies and recommendations aimed to increase family engagement within the school community. For example, The U.S. Department of Education (2005) created a parental involvement section within the Title I legislation which stipulated schools had to meet parent involvement requirements in order to receive and keep funding. In Michigan, the *Michigan Family Engagement Framework* (2020), is a resource intended to integrate family engagement into school and program improvement.

Informing these policies is the notion that home-school relationships are reciprocal—schools learn from families about learning practices in the home and families learn how to increase their repertoire of learning activities in their homes. Communication is consistently identified as a key component for creating successful family engagement (Avari et al., 2022; Higgins & Cherrington, 2017). Yet, literacy is a social and cultural practice and not a universal skill-set for all families and communities (Rogoff, 2003). Literacy is language and how individuals "convey ideas with purpose and nuance"

[1] 'Family' within this field may include parents, extended family, caregivers and other support networks caring for the child (Edwards et al., 2019).

(Qarooni, 2024, p.10). Literacy is how people reach a common understanding together and, at its most basic, is effective communication (Qarooni, 2024). But literacy, as social practice, is embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles that guide the ways in which people address speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Street, 1984, 1995). Adams and Christensen (2000) noted at both elementary and secondary levels of education, communication was vital to developing and maintaining trust between schools and families. Bi-directional communication—or two-way communication—involves both participants feeling empowered to initiate and/or respond within communicative acts. This means that both teachers and families feel empowered to begin conversations or honestly answer questions. Yet, individuals from different social contexts are socialized differently and this socialization in children develops a "sense of what is comfortable or natural" (Lareau, 2015, p. 3)—including communication. Regardless, two-way communication is central to building relationships since effective dialogue develops from trust, mutual concern, and an appreciation for contrasting perspectives (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). When two-way communication is open, clear, and values all participants involved, stronger teacher-family relationships are formed, which also leads to improved family engagement and child outcomes (Marvin et al., 2020).

At its core, teaching is a profession built on relationships (Danielson, 2007; Johnson et al., 2015). Much attention is paid to building relationships within the classroom (e.g., MAISA, 2016) and there is a healthy body of literature focused on home-school partnerships (e.g., Caspe & Hernandez, 2023; Edwards et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2009). Less attention is paid to communication preferences and expectations between teachers and families. Communication, particularly in service of relationship building, is a good place to consider joyful possibilities as teachers and families work together to develop the whole child. In keeping with this special issue, this paper considers opportunities for joy in home-school communication. In presenting three focal teachers' communication practices, spaces of joy are identified and expanded upon in nuanced ways to consider how home-school communication can be a happy occasion.

Background

On Joy

"How do we cultivate not only the genius of students and educators, but also their joy"
– Gholdy Muhammad, 2023, p. 19

Merriam-Webster defines joy as "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires." Yet, the official definition does not feel sufficient in capturing the essence of joy. Gholdy Muhammad (2023) expanded on this and described joy as "social-emotional intelligence and knowing how to make ourselves smile. Joy is the embodiment of sustained happiness and having knowledge of the world—centering wellness and the gifts that may or may not be captured in traditional school assessments" (p. 14). Ultimately, Muhammad explains, joy is "the embodiment of, learning of, and practice of love of self and humanity, and care for a help

for humanity and the earth" (p. 70). In step with Muhammad, Hibbert et al. (2018) conceptualized joy as "that that feeling of great pleasure and happiness - as a means to build resilience, reduce anxiety and strengthen relationships; as a means to change the way we interact with one another, care for one another, and engage in community; and as a way to ensure schools are places that we want to be spending time together, learning, and laughing" (p. 3). More succinctly, Meidl et al. (2018) proclaimed, "Joy is happiness. Joy is satisfaction. Joy is contentment. Joy is fulfillment. Joy is measurable" (p. x). Taking these lenses, this paper views joy as happiness, fulfillment, pleasure, knowledge, and the grounding for relationships—the care for "humanity and the earth" (Muhammad, 2023, p. 70) as a means to strengthen relationships.

On Home-School Communication

"Teaching is a human endeavor, built on innate curiosity, creation, and collaborative spirit"
—Meidl et al., 2019, p. xviii

While teaching is human, schools alone cannot meet the needs of all students (Caspe & Hernandez, 2023; Weiss et al., 2018; Zeichner, 2023). Schools must consistently work with families and communities "across contexts [to share] responsibility for student outcomes and well-being, with educators who are well-prepared to co-create and uphold these trusting bond" (Caspe & Hernandez, 2023, p. 369). The fundamental reason home-school partnerships have been legislated stems from literature documenting how strong family involvement increases students' academic achievement (Sheldon, 2005, 2007). Fields of scholarly work have been dedicated to understanding how families support their children's learning in homes prior to school entry. The field of Family Literacy, for example, focuses on how children are acculturated into literacy as parents and other family members engage in various literacy activities and events as part of daily life (Anderson et al., 2023; Heath, 1983, Taylor, 1983). Literacy use vary across different racial, cultural, and linguistic factors in that not all families draw from the same literacy practices to support children's language and literacy development (Rogoff, 2003). Mathematics has also been examined, albeit to a lesser degree than literacy. Researchers in this field have documented the role families have in children's self-perceptions of ability and achievement in math (Frome & Eccles, 1998; Parsons et al., 1982). Others have shown that family involvement strongly influences math achievement, with positive involvement leading to higher achievement (Desimone, 1999; Ma, 1999; Valdez, 2002). Legislation draws from these fields in an attempt to level academic opportunity and encourage families to actively engage with their children in school-like learning (Anderson et al., 2023). Critics of this perspective are aplenty (see Auerbach, 1989; Reyes & Torres, 2007), but academic success for all students is often the rationale provided for this type of legislation. Research on home-school partnerships has documented how partnerships decline across grade levels, that affluent communities tend to have more positive involvement, and that schools in more economically depressed communities tend to make more contact about difficulties and problems (Connors & Epstein, 1994; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Epstein et al., 2009, Sheldon, 2005, 2007; Van Voorhis, 2003).

Communication is often characterized as the most effective type of family involvement activity (Herrell, 2011; VanValkenburgh et al., 2021), which has led to work focused on removing barriers to communication, such as minimizing language barriers with translation or by employing cultural support works in schools (Schneider & Arnot, 2018, p.45). However, research has shown teachers and families reach out to communicate for different reasons. Studies showed teachers tended to contact families when there were concerns, issues or problems; however, families contacted teachers when things were going well (Epstein, 1996; Herell, 2011; Minke et al., 2014). Smith (2017) found families' perceptions of parent involvement was connected to how the school communicated with families. For example, participants in Smith's study did not initiate conversations about their concerns with teachers, instead they waited for the school (teacher or administrator) to contact them. This leads to questions about how schools evaluate their communication practices and design communication channels based on families' wants and/or needs. This discrepancy may have implications for students, as demonstrated by Smith's work: although Smith's participant parents may have been concerned about an issue, if teachers did not contact the parents first, the issue was not discussed.

The rise of digital communication has led to scholarly work focused on modes of communication, such as how schools use websites, email newsletters, and digital communication applications (apps, e.g., Remind app) (Gu, 2017; Olmstead et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2015). Studies investigating this phenomenon have found that digital communication is now the most frequently used mode of communication between home and school (Thompson et al., 2015; VanValkenburgh et al., 2021). Despite the availability and ease of use of digital communication, it has not automatically led to two-way communication. VanValkenburgh et al. (2021) examined parents' and teachers' perceptions of involvement of families with middle school students. They found 91% of participant teachers believed their use of digital communication created two-way communication between them and their students' families. However, only 79% of parents felt the communication was two-way. Stratigos and Fenech's (2021) literature review has provided insight into how digital communication can increase communication between early childhood educators and the families of the children in their care; however, the authors acknowledged little research has highlighted how digital apps impact the work of educators, the lives of the young children documented, and the families who participate in the communication.

More recent research has begun to explore teachers' preferences in communication or parents' hopes for communication. Avari et al. (2022) examined early childhood educators (ECE) teachers' preferred communication strategies. The study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic which allowed participating ECE teachers to reflect on their preferences and how they adapted during the pandemic. Ultimately, Avari et al. found teachers preferred in-person communication as some teachers felt it was difficult to develop reciprocal communication using digital apps.

Researchers have routinely noted that home-school engagement requires respect and reciprocity, a removal of deficit thinking about families, and to truly value families as children's first teacher (Geller & Perry, 2023; Ishimaru, 2019; Yosso, 2005). However, implicit biases held by schools and families about one another can negatively impact how successful these relationships can become (Pineau et al., 2019). Rather than framing

consistent home-school communication as yet another task for teachers, we present three stories that may help educators consider the joy that can emerge from communication with families.

Methods

This paper uses Narrative Inquiry methods to focus on three teachers' perspectives of home-school communication. Narrative Inquiry involves a shaping or ordering of experiences that gives participants and researchers a way to understand experiences by organizing them into a meaningful whole (Chase, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The inquiry is taken in four directions: *inward* (e.g., teachers' internal feelings, moral dispositions), *outward* (i.e., teachers' external conditions or contexts); *backward and forward* (i.e., past, present, and future); it opens room for questions and puzzles. Narrative inquiry involves a shaping or ordering of experiences that gives participants and researchers a way to understand experiences by organizing them into a meaningful whole (Chase, 2008; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The knowledge gained from this inquiry serves as a knowledge base for teachers and administrators to consider how joy might center home-school communication and how schools interact with families.

Theoretical Lenses

This study situates literacy as a social and cultural practice and not a universal skill-set for all families and communities (Rogoff, 2003; Street, 2003). From this perspective literacy is embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles that guide the ways in which people address speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Street, 1984). Additionally, literacy is "connecting with people through art, body language, facial expression, and sound" (Qarooni, 2024, p. 10). To reiterate, literacy is effective communication (Qarooni, 2024) and communication is consistently identified as a key component for creating successful family engagement (Avari et al., 2022). Two-way communication involves both participants feeling empowered to initiate and/or respond within communicative acts. This means that both teachers and families feel empowered to begin conversations or honestly answer questions. Yet, individuals from different social contexts are socialized differently and this socialization in children develops their notion of comfortable (Lareau, 2015)—including communication. This socialization will influence how people comprehend body language, tone and sound, and/or facial expressions. In school engagement, socialization influences how families reach out to schools (e.g., Lareau, 2003; Smith 2017) and whether individuals recognize how language use changes according to context (Bakhtin, 1986).

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) bio-ecological theory that posits that children's development and learning are influenced by different systems or spheres and the bi-directional nature of these spheres. The microsystem, consisting of family, neighbors and teachers, most directly influences development and learning. However, the macrosystem - the "belief systems, resources, hazards, lifestyles, opportunity structures, life course options and patterns of social change…" (p. 149) of the larger society - also affects development and learning. Likewise, at the macro-level, the policies of governments and

educational authorities, institutions and organizations may influence home-school communication patterns through formal legislation, recommendations, or dominant ideologies about family engagement (held by the wider society) indirectly influence the child's microsystem.

Also relevant for this study is Epstein's (1992, 2009) spheres of overlapping influence. Three spheres—school, family, and community—are involved in complex interpersonal relationships with the student at the center. The theory operates from the perspective that most families want to obtain better information from schools and that teachers and administrators want to involve families. In order to successfully develop school, family, and community partnerships, Epstein's theory describes six types of involvement that are required for effective partnerships. Central to this study is 'communication', defined as "design effective forms of school-to home and home-to-school communications about school programs and their children's progress" (Epstein, 2009, p. 16).

Context of the Study

Data presented in this paper is part of a larger multi-case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The purpose of the larger case study was to examine communication patterns and communication preferences of teachers and families. Embedded within preferences are the expectations teachers and families have with respect to communication. The following research questions guided data collection:

1. How do teachers and parents/caregivers perceive "two-way communication"? What does this look like for each group of participants?
2. What are teachers' expectations of home-school communication? How frequently do teachers expect to communicate directly with parents and caregivers?

Teachers and families were invited to participate in the qualitative study by engaging in semi-structured interviews and by providing artifacts related to home-school communication (e.g., newsletters, anonymized Remind messages, anonymized emails, etc.). Six teachers participated in two semi-structured interview. The first interview was conducted at the start of the school year and the second was completed after the school year had ended. All teacher participants were employed in the K-12 public education system in a midwestern state in the U.S. None of the focal teachers worked for the same school district. In this paper, we center on focal participants Hannah, Sam, and Charlotte, whom we purposefully selected based on the distinct richness of their stories in relation to our conceptualizations of joy.

Participants

Hannah[2] was an early career teacher. Hannah was 24 years old and identified as a Black woman. In the two years since she graduated with her Bachelor's degree, Hannah

[2] To honor the privacy of my participants, I used pseudonyms for all individuals and schools referenced in this paper.

had taught second grade at an elementary magnet school[3] in a small city school district. The school was diverse with 43% of students identifying as Black, 27% identifying as white, and 14% as Hispanic. **Sam** was also an early career teacher. He was 26 years old and identified as a white man. He had been teaching middle school for three years. He was a Spanish language and drama content area teacher, predominantly teaching sixth grade students. Sam worked in a small suburban school district. His school was not diverse, with 83% of students identifying as white. However, the school district was becoming more diverse as more multilingual immigrants settled into the community. This had led Sam to pursue his Masters in TESOL. **Charlotte** was a veteran teacher and identified as a white woman. Her 15 years of elementary classroom experience ranged from small rural school districts to large urban city centers and included multiple elementary grade levels. For the past eight years she had taught first grade in a diverse small suburban school located in a small city school district. She reported majority of her classroom was composed of working class families and multilingual learners. She had recently completed a Master's degree in literacy education and was part of her school district's literacy leadership team charged with selecting a new district-wide literacy curriculum.

Data Sources and Analysis

As two authors of this paper, we came to the narrative with our own experiences that coloured our lenses of interpretation of our participants' narratives.

Laura. I was the primary investigator on the study. I was an Assistant Professor of Literacy Studies and my research background focused on early literacy and family literacy. In addition to research, I had previously worked in Canada at a private elementary school and as an early literacy specialist.

Valerie. I was in my senior year of a Bachelor of Science in Psychology in the Lee Honors College. I had previously worked as a graduate assistant in the Psychology department and was writing my honors thesis which examined discrepancies between the communication skills emphasized in university education and the communication skills employers expect from recent graduates.

Data sources were limited to Hannah's, Sam's, and Charlotte's two interview transcripts. Each teacher participated in two audio recorded semi-structured interviews. These interviews were then transcribed. Data analysis consisted of reading through the transcripts and creating margin notes to form initial codes. These codes were collapsed into categories and emerging themes. To aid with interpretation, inductive codes and deductive codes (i.e., based on research questions; epiphanies within stories) were used to capture the salient points in the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). During initial coding, we engaged in coding the data independently. We then engaged in discussions to reconcile our coding differences until we achieved 100% agreement. We followed the same process when forming categories and crafting the themes for each of our participants. Table 1 provides an example of our coding.

[3] The term "magnet" refers to how these schools attract students across traditional school boundaries with innovative curricula to desegregate racially isolated schools or to reduce racial isolation in a district or consortia of districts (Walton et al., 2018).

Table 1
Interview 2 Coding Examples

Participant	Transcript Data	Category	Sub-Category	Code(s)
Hannah-Interview 2	Or when we talk about their kid, other than just being a student, when that family told me about their kids baseball game and when I could go and, you know, we're sharing pictures and stuff like that.	Communication practices	Communication preferences	RP4- Connectedness with Family
Sam-Interview 2	I very much value quality time and spending time with people, that's something I've kind of figured out a bit more explicitly about myself recently. I like spending time with people I like that is very much just like a really great part of the human experience for me is like that quality time piece. And so being able to spend time with students, being able to spend time with their families, and, you know, have a conversation about the great things that they're doing, and like how awesome their kid is.	Communication Dynamics and Engagement	Teacher's Response to Communication	TR1- Positive Response
Charlotte-Interview 2	When people respond to my FlipGrids or they say, for example, that first Flipgrid that I did was really, really hard, and the parents came back with the acknowledgement of, 'Wow, that was hard to watch, but I appreciate you for it.' It fills me with an understanding of: okay, I'm in the right place at the right time.	Communication Dynamics and Engagement Communication Impact and Assessment	Parental Response to Teacher Communication Evaluating Communication Effectiveness	R1- Positive Response EC2- Direct Feedback

Finally, for the focus of this paper, the data was reviewed for notions of joy, with the guiding question, *where are the joyful possibilities in this story?* centering the data analysis.

Findings

In early analyses of the teachers' interviews two themes were identified: communication preferences and two-way communication. These two themes are briefly introduced in order to contextualize communication practices amongst teachers more broadly.

Communication Preferences

Communication, as a form of literacy, is not a universal skill-set across people. The data from participants in this study demonstrated that as there were no clear patterns amongst teachers with respect to preference. Multimodal tools were cited (e.g., Remind, Class Dojo) as well as preferences for in-person communication. Phone calls were polarizing. Some teachers preferred them while both Hannah and Sam abhorred them. Phone calls through personal mobile phones was also interesting as using personal mobile phones was the one practice school districts discouraged. Interestingly, none of the school districts participants worked in required specific communication practices beyond reporting grades. As Hannah explained it, "Honestly, I don't think there's any requirements. I've never been told of any requirements." Despite this, all participants engaged in communication practices beyond grades, but also meant communication practices were grounded in teachers' social literacy preferences, or what they believed were typical ways to communicate, which did not always match other teachers' literacy practices or families' literacy practices.

Two-Way Communication

While all teachers described two-way communication using some version of 'back-and-forth interaction,' there were stark differences in how communicative elementary, middle school, or secondary (HS) teachers were with families. Elementary teachers relied on multiple sources for communication while HS teachers only reached out for failing grades. Unsurprisingly, HS teachers reported communicating directly with students. Therefore, students acted as the conduits between home and school. However, this meant HS teachers had given home-school communication less thought. This also meant that literacy as effective communication was not met since important people needed for effective communication, namely caregivers, were not included in the messaging. Another key insight came from the tensions described by participant teachers whose communication practices were perceived as 'above and beyond' by their colleagues, particularly when administrations began suggesting the 'extra' practices for all staff. A disappointing finding given that schools are social institutions and communication as literacy practice cannot be enacted if it is not initiated.

In echoing Cissi et al. (2024), "it's nearly impossible to measure 'joy' empirically" (p. 259). Therefore, in the next section we present co-constructions of focal participants' narratives in their experiences communicating with their students' families. We focus their stories of communication and identify practices that may be a source of, or cause of, delight—something that gives rise to joy. We tell their stories individually to highlight the differences in their journey and note practices that may bring joy. For each individual story,

we spotlighted actions from each participant's lived experiences and included quotes to capture each participant's voice in our narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Joyful Possibilities for Teacher Communication

Hannah's Account

Aim for Joy from the start. Hannah's elementary school hosted an ice cream social each summer as a way to usher in the new school year. This allowed Hannah to "meet them [families] in person" a week before school began. Hannah recounted that not all families were able to attend so she created,

> a 'meet the teacher' paper on the first day of school that I sent home. and they have like, yellow communicator folders. So, the left side is left at home, and then the right side is 'bring right back to school.' So, I put it in all of the kids folders for the first day of school.

She also described how "the first week of school, I call every family just to introduce myself. And I also tell them there in case they didn't see the paper or anything like that." The goal was to establish a connection and let families know how to 'get in touch' with Hannah.

Hannah also took a lot of care to develop informative newsletters each week for her students' families. These newsletters provided information but also expectations for families.

She hoped,

> They [families] read them because on every one I put a snack calendar that's attached to a kid's name, so I need them to read it so they know when to bring snack for the class. I'm hoping for them to have their kid prepared for, whatever important dates I have on there, you know, picture day or Chromebook distributions. Just to keep up with any important dates or fundraisers for the school. And then also for them to, keep working with their kids academically-- I say what we're learning in each subject and I say, what sight words they should be working with their kids on per week. And what else do I talk about? And then I just do like important notes: I need your kids to bring water bottles, or I need you to pack extra clothes because they're getting wet in the snow or something like that.

Possibilities for Joy. The first communication practice Hannah described that might be interpreted as joyful were "yay notes." As she described it,

> I do something called yay notes. It's basically just a note home, but we just call it a yay note and that's what it would say at the top. I was teaching summer school and, because it was only six weeks, and there were not that many children, I would try to send home one, yay note per week, but then that just became really time consuming. So, but I still try to do that and keep a log.

The purpose of the yay note was to provide the family with positive communication from the teacher. Hannah wanted to share in her students' accomplishments, and not just concerns. Hannah fondly reflected that some of "the kids will come back and say, my parents saw it, and you know, they're happy."

Another communication practice Hannah described was her weekly sight word test note. She explained,

> My kids take a weekly sight word test. And when so at the end of every sight word test, I will send a note home to parents with, like, how many they got right, prior or like last week, and then how many they got right this time, what words they're still working on. There's like a special note if they get 100%.

As with the yay notes, the sight word test notes were "intended to be this positive communication between rather than, like, the negative behaviors, or we're concerned about this." Hannah also noted how she sent home certificates, such as Lexia certificates as students progressed through the early reading program, and provided families of students with IEP plans daily updates, "I just emailed to update the family like, they had a good day, they had a bad day."

While these practices did not always elicit a response from families, for those families that did respond, it reaffirmed to Hannah that these things were an important use of her time. She explained,

> Families will just send positive emails, or, always respond to the newsletters, or whatever I send out just letting me know that they received it. Very prompt, they'll let me know if their child is absent, and send a doctor's note, so it can be excused stuff like that … There is a family who has really strong communication-- they'll even come up to the school and, walk their kid in and just talk to me face-to-face, which is nice. So, you know, we don't have to wait for responses.

One example Hannah provided of strong communication focused on the back-and-forth nature of her and the student's mother. Hannah described it this way,

> I would say, the child from last year who got the IEP, I think there was strong communication with his mom, because I would call quite often, but she would always answer. Sometimes she would even offer to come to the school without me even saying anything. She would always ask, like, what else can she be doing at home, and she would sometimes talk with him on the phone.

Joy Stymied. Unfortunately, not all of Hannah's families were this responsive and this supportive. In general, unresponsiveness was the greatest 'joy-killer' for Hannah. She lamented,

> I don't really like to call home anytime that there's problems with behavior or you know, concerns of any reason. Because in my experience, most parents are not supportive. Most times they will take their child's side.

Instead, Hannah scheduled in-person meetings to talk about inappropriate behaviour, but, as she put it,

> None of those have been pleasurable, they [parent's] usually get mad and hostile with me. Or they'll tell their kid, 'It's okay, just come home, it'll be fine.' It's usually not, 'hey, you [student] need to change this' or, you know, 'that's not what you do at school.'

Hannah referenced a number of small examples of unresponsiveness; however, one particular experience was the most deflating for her. She shared,

> A girl cussed at her classmate and pushed them and I told the mom, and the mom's like, 'oh, okay, I'm not sure what the problem is?' Yeah, almost every parent, I've reached out to when there's been some type of problem, they are not very supportive.

The Utopian Ideal. The desire for response featured most prominently for Hannah. When describing her ideal communication modes, she vehemently wished to exclude phone calls, as she found them

> Very frustrating, either taking my plan time, or my instructional time to talk with somebody when it's unplanned. It's just very time consuming. And a lot of times, it's not even productive.

She said she would prefer to have more in-person meetings instead, which led to her description of her ideal communication system,

> In my utopian society, or my utopian world, the parents would come, instead of telling me and then I schedule time out of my day, and then they just don't show up. I would definitely still have what I want to say-- the emails, and I love that I have like a just a template that I follow every week, it helps with time. More responses from parents. And, I think, grace when I do reach out to parents, just trying to understand, I'm trying my best, but it's a lot of work.

In her second interview, when asked directly how she found joy in communicating with families, Hannah said, "It's nice to realize you can relate with families." At the time of the study Hannah had only been teaching for two years and therefore had less experience interacting with families in the role of teacher. She explained that after multiple negative interactions, she was "kind of scared to reach out to families" but that it was "always relieving to meet someone who, the parent is the same age as me, or we can just talk and be regular people." To not feel like,

> I'm coming for you or I'm making you feel badly about your kid, or whatever. That I really do like sharing their successes. That's why I do the 'brag tags' and when parents would respond and say 'oh my gosh! I'm so happy that my kid grew like that' I really do enjoy those times. Or when we talk about their kid, other than just being a student, like when that family told me about their kids baseball game and when I could go and we're sharing pictures and stuff like that. Or some families even knew my family.

At the end of the day, Hannah wanted to feel validated as a professional and stated, "It's always relieving when I feel supported" because she did not always feel supported by families.

Sam's Account

Building Relationships-Recognizing Transition. Sam taught middle school. Even though he was only three years into his career, he had noticed the challenges families experienced as their children moved to middle school. He reflected,

> It's interesting because one of the feedbacks that I've heard specifically from sixth grade parents, and some eighth grade parents (who by eighth grade, parents are a little bit more hands off with their child's education just due to age and kind of where things are at developmentally). But sixth

> grader, sixth grade families are coming from elementary, this is a very strong transition for them almost more jarring than high school, in my opinion, because they're just kind of thrown into the wolves. And so, and one thing across the board that I have heard from families was, I really appreciate that you communicate this these things with us, because I do not feel nearly as involved with my child's education. And that bothers me.

This challenge had led Sam to create and distribute weekly newsletters for his students and their families. He explained,

> I send them [students and families] a weekly newsletter to each one of each of my classes-- my two Spanish classes and my drama class. What I do is I will write every Friday. I send it out at 2:30pm. I will give a description of what happened what we did in class this week. What's coming up next week. Any other important information coming up, whether it's 'I'm going to be gone on a day.' I think we have a test or something coming up or a project, I will kind of put a little tidbit there. Then I'll give a list of any important upcoming dates that are coming up. That could be due dates for assignments, anything school wide, have an early release half day, or no school on Monday, all of that kind of stuff. I send that out too. I send that out every week for each of my classes.

Sam also used the Remind app but avoided sending paper forms and newsletters because "anytime I try to send something home on paper, it never comes back, or it never gets to where it needs to go."

Active Joy: Intentionality for Connection. Sam described himself as someone who "Very much values quality time and spending time with people" and that it was "something I've figured out a bit more explicitly about myself recently." When asked what brought him joy in interacting with families, Sam reflected,

> I like spending time with people, that it is very much just a really great part of the human experience for me-- that quality time piece. And so being able to spend time with students, being able to spend time with their families, and, you know, have a conversation about the great things that they're doing, and like how awesome their kid is. It's just, it brings a lot of positivity to the table. So being able to, sit down and have a really good conversation and connect and get to know people and find out their stories. It's just a level of human interaction that is just so engaging for me, and that's kind of where I find joy in it.

Sam's school district only required teachers maintain updated gradebooks and sent progress reports at the end of each trimester. However, given Sam's enjoyment in human connection, he wanted to do more than that so, as he explained, he was "just trying to be intentional about communication." He noted that other teachers sent progress reports home to show grades but did not know if other teachers included information to the same level he did. He felt that including "what's happening in class, what's coming up" in his newsletter supported his students and his families beyond knowing grades and "what was missing." He acknowledged that "parents [were] definitely very appreciative of that, because [middle school was] a jarring transition." Beyond information distribution, Sam felt the weekly newsletter established a connection with families. As he explained,

> It's also just kind of nice too because it makes me feel very connected to the families, even if nobody reads it, or response or anything like that. It just makes me feel very, like I am reaching out and being 'this is what's going on.'

In addition to the weekly newsletter, Sam had distributed a survey at the beginning of the year to all his students' families. The survey focused on,

> Tell me about your child, what's their strengths, their personality? What motivates them? And you know, I only have like, maybe 30 families fill it out, because of course. But honestly, 30 … I'd love to have 120, but 30 is not terrible. It could have been two.

Working for the Same Goal. Ultimately, Sam viewed his communication with families as foundational. In order to best support his students, he needed to work in tandem with their families. For example, he described his back-and-forth communication with a student's mother. The student was entering sixth grade Spanish and was nervous. Many of the student's classmates had taken Spanish since kindergarten and this student felt nervous about being in class. Sam explained,

> He was new to the district. He was very nervous. He never had Spanish at his school. So, he's coming in and just feeling very nervous and insecure about coming in with all these people that have had Spanish. But I know what's going on because mom told me that in that survey. Knowing that really allowed me to, when I saw successes, be very intentional about it. I could say, 'Hey, you did a really, really nice job on it,' you know, just being positive about it.

Therefore, for Sam, communication with families supported his teaching. The information he gained through the survey was not just because he was curious, it was something he could "actually use moving forward." He described communication as "super foundational to how I teach, in my pedagogy. Because I do not want to come across as being like I am against you, we're really working for the same goal, right?"

Joy Stymied: 'My Bad.' An interesting element to Sam's story was the joy the newsletters brought him. He felt connected to families and believed he was support his students and their families transition to middle school. He held a desire to relay that joy to his school administrators and colleagues; however, the outcome was not as ideal as he had hoped. He explained,

> The kids did really well. So, I just wrote a positive note home to all the families saying 'hey, they did a really good job.' I cc'ed my principal and vice principal. And I said, I'll send out– that it was a Friday– to set up some other weekly newsletter later today. And I think my principal saw that and was like, 'Oh, I'm really glad you do that. You know, we've been hearing feedback from parents.' Then my principal sent an email out to the whole staff and said, 'Hey, you should do this [send weekly newsletters]', to which some of my colleagues were not particularly super thrilled to see that. So, my bad.

Regardless of his colleagues' attitude towards his newsletters, Sam said "I like doing my weekly newsletter." He felt it was essential, even if it was not part of most middle school teachers' repertoire of practice. He offered,

> This is how I communicate with students and families. I would definitely love for them to read it. Like know that, I know that they read it. And I know that they're responding. And I know that, you know, they understand the information. I'd love to hear more feedback. I'd love to hear all of that. But I honestly do feel like that I'm doing everything that I can at this time to help support the positive communication.

Charlotte's Account

The 'A-ha' Moment. As a veteran teacher, Charlotte had plenty of experience interacting and communicating with families. She had worked with many students from many different backgrounds which provided a different lens from which she viewed communication. However, she told this story when asked how she shaped her attitude towards home-school communication,

> I had the mom who I knew could not read. I didn't know how to—I can't talk to this mom all day. But this mom would literally call me all day, and I can't do that either. During the school day, I will text families. If I have to call I will, but I'm much more apt to text, because it's easier for everybody. Well, it's easier for me and the kids. But this mom literally was calling me halfway through the day going, 'I wonder about this and the other' because she couldn't text. And so, I can't. And I explained her, I can't, this is not, I can't do this. But she was calling school all day, every day. And they were forwarding her down to my room. And I was like, can we not do this? At that time, it was a different principal. And he just always said, 'send it down to [Charlotte]. I had eight phone calls every day from one student's mom. And I thought I'm not doing this again. I tried really hard, I would talk to that lady every day for about a half an hour after school, just to let her know what was coming so that she stopped calling. But it was a lot.

This experience left Charlotte exhausted but also determined to find a suitable structure for all families she interacted with.

Designing a System. Charlotte summarized her system as "Newsletters go out on Monday, Flipgrid is on Friday. Newsletters sort of tell you what's coming, Friday sort of tells you what happened and looking forward." However, that does not provide her system justice. Charlotte has dedicated time and effort into creating a student-centered, family-centered approach to communication. At the beginning of the school year, she asks parents "tell me what shift you work … so that I know the best time to reach out." When asked which form of communication do you prefer, Charlotte described how she differentiated communication practices for her families. She reasoned that, "If I want them to participate with me, then I need to participate with them how they want to be participated with, if that makes sense." Charlotte had a colour-coded spreadsheet with every family listed and which method of communication and what time of day for communication was best for them. For example, families that "don't want to text" or which parents "want me to directly call them." The time of day was incredibly important to Charlotte. Many of her students' families worked the third shift at a local manufacturing plant. She explained that,

> We have parent teacher conferences at night. If you're working third shift, you're not gonna come because they're really strict, you'll lose your job if you go to your

> [night time] parent teacher conference. And so, I make-- I cannot tell you the amount of times that I sent notes home, that I texted families during the day, even though you're not supposed to text during the day, in the morning. If I know that they work thirds, I'll text them in the morning, because I know I can get to them better and faster that way.

Parent-teacher conferences was "a big deal" and her "chance to get to know that family" and, more importantly for her, a "chance for them to see me and get to know me." She circumvents the typical late afternoon and early evening conference slots by telling parents,

> If you want to meet me at seven o'clock in the morning, I will meet with you at seven o'clock in the morning. I usually get to school at 6:30. Text me, I will let you in this building you. I don't care. If I can meet with you, I will meet with you.

Charlotte repeated multiple times that this system was not time consuming and that it. She explained,

> If I'm careful about when I do the things, it's not that much more time with the work. And because I already have it set up from previous years, it makes it really easy to just put the new kids in. And sometimes I don't have to change much. Sometimes I've changed all of it. But because I started that way, I think it's just become part of my daily routines.

Charlotte stands Alone. Like Sam, Charlotte lamented that her system, her routine, was isolated to her classroom. She explained that it's "not the general. That's not my [school] building" and rather "that's me." She had introduced her communication practices to her school, "I always talk to my school too. That it's a choice and that's a choice that I do" but her principal and other teachers were not interested.

Making it Joyful. Charlotte viewed her students' families as a partnership that needed to be nurtured. She viewed her system as a "triple dip" of weekly newsletters, Flipgrid Friday, and Classly. She took many videos of her first grade students and posted them in the app, Classly. She wanted parents to "see their kids doing" things and Classly allowed her to post "action shots of what we're doing in class. So families can see that we do." She believed that seeing their children engaged in learning empowered parents and hoped it would open lines of communication because parents could talk about what they saw.

Charlotte's student-centered classroom was highlighted in her Flipgrid Fridays. She explained her Flipgrid Friday process,

> My students are involved. So, we do Grows and Glows on Fridays-- what's one thing academically and behaviorally (like in terms of our socializing with each other), that we did well with? What's an area that we feel really good about? What's an area that we feel like we need to work on for both? The class as a whole does Grows and Glows with me, then the kids help me. I usually pick two kids, it doesn't matter. I don't care about gender. I don't care about anything else, just two kids who want to do it. And they sit with me in front of the computer, and we do Flipgrid Friday, and I hit record and the kids kind of deliver the message. We obviously practice first. I don't just let them go. But we talk about what like what do we what do families need

> to know and then if there's dates coming up, I can fill those in. But I do give them a good basis of what we're doing and what's going to come home in the newsletter.

In addition to fun, Charlotte described a humanness to her Flipgrids. She explained,

> I also I do think that my Flipgrids help because they can see me. And I think because of that, they can see I have done Flipgrids where I was like, 'I should not have done a Flipgrid because I looked like I was tired. I was worn out. It was not a good video.' But they still see that I put that effort in to make sure that they get it. And I think that when they see me, I don't want to say that I'm vulnerable, but that I'm open. Like today was a rough day and here's why. Or this week was rough. And the kids have identified why and here's what I think is why. A lot of times those parents will be like, 'okay, at least we have a teacher who's willing to do the things.' And because of that, I think it does help them feel more welcome.

Discussion

Literacy is not only about words on a page. Literacy is the language people use for ideas, communication, and reaching common understanding (Qarooni, 2024). Literacy is how people connect through art, body language, facial expression, and sound (Qarooni, 2024). Literacy is effective communication (Qarooni, 2024). In schools, effective communication requires two-way communication which involves both participants feeling empowered to initiate and/or respond within communicative acts. In school engagement, socialization influences how families reach out to schools (e.g., Lareau, 2003; Smith 2017) and whether individuals recognize how language use changes according to context (Bakhtin, 1986). Teachers and families are hopeful that communication is pleasant and respectful, even when the conversations are difficult. To situate this discussion, I characterize the teachers' experiences through a lens of joy. Then I move to discuss what impeded joyful opportunities and what might support teachers in finding joy in home-school communication.

The Joy

Joy is not solely about happiness. Joy creates spaces "to observe and experience beauty, aesthetics, art, self-fulfillment, and solutions to societal issues" (Muhammad, 2022, p. 14-15). Joy is the grounding for relationships through the care for "humanity and the earth" (Muhammad, 2023, p. 70) as a means to strengthen relationships. Joy is active and focuses on both the self and the community (Amaro & Priske, 2023). For educators, this means joy in teaching and joy in connecting with students and their families. Hannah's, Sam's, and Charlotte's stories about home-school communication offer an opportunity to consider how joy might shine in a home-school space, between teachers and families.

For all three participants communication was the central method of building relationships with families. They were engaged in many communication practices that placed students and their families at the center and tried to show their own openness to collaboration. They sought to engage with families through language

and "convey ideas with purpose and nuance and reach common understanding with others" (Qarooni, 2024, p. 10), namely, to support their students' learning growth and share those moments with their families. There was a happiness in this purpose—a self-fulfillment-- particularly, when they described their positive communication activities, such as Hannah's 'yay notes' or Charlotte's 'grows and glows.' Experts recommend routine positive communication from the school, rather than only reaching out for poor academic performance or behavior concerns (Pineau et al., 2019). The goal is to create positive interactions between the school and families and build the relationship in the event that difficult conversations need to be had. Typically, these recommendations focus on what positive communication does for the family; however, for the teachers in this study, the opportunity to share their students' growth, accomplishments, or the fun activities taking place in the classroom brought teachers a sense of pleasure and fulfillment. In essence, it was joyful for them.

Qarooni (2024) argued that teachers need to recognize that "every school and community are different when it comes to experiences around family engagement" (p. 22). This can be extended to not just experiences, but also needs for family engagement. Case in point, Sam recognized the challenges his families experienced as their children transitioned to middle school. He noted the drop in communication families often experienced as their children moved from elementary school to middle school. It may seem that providing communication to families through the student acts to support adolescents' autonomy over their learning, yet experts recommend transition programs (e.g., MDE, 2020). Sam extended this type of transition to weekly newsletters and family surveys. He wanted to get to know both his students and their families. In addition to strengthening his connection with students and their families, this work brought Sam joy. He found beauty, aesthetic, and self-fulfillment in sending his newsletters. He viewed the knowledge he gained through the surveys as something he could use in his teaching. It was intentional and worthwhile and ultimately made him happy. In essence, it was joyful for him.

Charlotte developed a sustained communication system that allowed her students and their families multiple pathways for interaction with her. Communication was not limited to teacher-family conferences or negative interactions, which aligns with Pineau et al.'s (2019) recommendations that communication occur more frequently than semi-annual conferences. Qarooni (2024) suggested teachers could craft "literacy-rich moments with children—for all families—[that] should feel deeply rooted and sustainable" (p.27). Charlotte captured this with her 'trifecta' of weekly communication through email newsletters, Flipgrids, and Classly. Charlotte knew family engagement was a shared responsibility and of the importance of reaching out in meaningful ways (MDE, 2020). For example, she knew many families worked the third shift (i.e., 3pm to 11pm) and could not meet during typical school events so she made herself available to families when they were off work. There was a playfulness to her system that brought her joy. She promoted her Flipgrids and systems with her colleagues, even if those practices were not taken up by others in the school. She

saw value and purpose in this work because it supported her families. She cared for her students, for their families, and the humanity within all of them (Muhammad, 2023). In essence, it was joyful for her.

Challenges to Joy

Nair (2018) reflected that "teaching evokes feelings and memories" (p. 46). These feelings and memories may be tied up in exhilaration and joy, but Nair also cautioned that they can create feelings of "inadequacy and diffidence in being given so much power over another's learning" (p. 46).

Isolation. Sam felt more confident in his resolve to consistently communicate with the families of his middle school students, regardless of his colleagues' attitudes towards his practices. In reflecting on his interviews, he seemed to exude Muhammad's joy as a "sustained sense of fulfillment and happiness" (p. 85) in connecting with his students' families. However, Sam was isolated in his practices. His 'my bad' in embarking on practices to maintain weekly communication was families was not shared by his colleagues. They viewed newsletters as additional work in a profession already overburdened with responsibilities. School, however, is a social institution, and, as Qarooni (2024) asserted, "shares all of the shortcomings of the society in which it is situated" (p.23). When communication is viewed as 'too much work' it limits the ability to reach common understanding with others. If literacy is tied to identity and place (Muhammad & Mosely, 2021; Qarooni, 2024) then schools need to recognize the social context in which they are embedded. Whether intentional or not, Sam's colleagues' lack of communication sends a message about what they value, or in this case, we may argue, who they do not value.

For Sam, he might feel empowered to recruit colleagues into his practices with the knowledge that experts stress the need for schools and parents to maintain consistent communication throughout the year and not limit it to open houses, teachers conferences, or academic and/or behavioural problems (Pineau et al., 2019). In a perfect world, this message would come from Sam's leadership team and not burden him with the task of shifting the perspectives of veteran teachers.

Family Response. Nair (2018) explained that the first step to finding joy in teaching was to develop "a reflective self-awareness, looking inward for the experiences that shaped your learning but also acknowledging the characteristics of your way of learning" (p. 53). This can be extended to communication. Teachers need to be aware of how their communication shapes experiences and how preferences differ from families'. Teachers need to continually update their methods and respond to families' feedback. As Qarooni (2024) noted, "*what* we communicate and *how* we communicate it can send hidden messages about what we assume and what we value" (emphasis in original, p. 31). Therefore, teachers who seek to build strong relationships with their students' families must be reflective and self-aware when communicating with their families and

consistently reflect on their biases of what they believe to be 'normal' (Qarooni, 2024).

The crux, however, as described by all three participants, is that families do not always respond. All three participants wanted to hear from more families and to increase the number of responses to their communication activities (e.g., newsletters, Flipgrids). According to Cunningham (2019) "Happiness research also shows us that as humans we don't want to be fixed. We want to be *acknowledged* (p. 114, emphasis added). Despite their efforts to communicate and engage with families, all three teachers wished for more response, more interaction from the families they worked with. They wanted to be acknowledged for their efforts and commitment to their students. This was most clearly articulated by Hannah. Hannah was a novice teacher and wanted to feel validated as a professional through support from families. Cunningham (2019) wrote of perspective-taking and that it was more than empathy, that perspective-taking was "understanding the goals and intentions of others" (p. 41). Research has shown that a misconception exists that home-school partnerships will come naturally to teachers because they care (Pineau et al., 2019); however, the reality is that the skills needed to build relationships and partnerships can be developed and refined over time. By framing home-school partnerships, and the requisite communication between these spaces, as developing or unfolding, novice teachers, like Hannah, might feel strengthened in their abilities and minimize their moments of inadequacy. This aligns with conceptualizations of joy as active (Amato & Priske, 2023) and ongoing.

Ultimately, belonging comes when relationships show "you are valued for who you are and where you value others" (Cunningham, 2018, p. 31). The teachers' stories shared in this paper demonstrate educators who carefully and intentionally reached out to families as a way to show they valued them. To call back to Muhammad (2023), joy as pursuit, "like identify, skills, intellect, and criticality—because it should change and evolve over time" (p. 70). Their communication efforts may not have always been effective or well-received, but Hannah, Sam, and Charlotte present examples of how teachers might build communication systems that seek to build common purpose and nuance with the goal of building common understanding. This then creates space for stronger relationships and trust. They pursued ways to engage their families and build a partnership. It was not perfect in the moment but something all three teachers were continually working on and improving over time.

Conclusion

Through this inquiry, we learned that communication preferences are personal choices and may be why school districts do not require specific systems. However, this lack of requirement can also cause tension. Teachers who engage in practices that are perceived by their colleagues as extra may be ostracized when principals suggest all staff engage in those practices. Teachers not engaged in those practices might perceive these tasks as additional work in their already overloaded schedules. This leads to questions about two-way communication and teachers'

beliefs about family engagement. Additionally, teachers face barriers when families do not interact or interact negatively to teacher outreach efforts. This limits the joy they can experience when communicating with families. Though this study is limited in scope, we hope the stories presented provide a glimmer of hopeful joy that teachers can hold onto when interacting with families. A hope that teachers can learn from Hannah, Sam, and Charlotte's stories and view communication as a pursuit to joy that shifts, changes, and evolves over time (Muhammad, 2023).

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