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Exploring Teacher-Parent Communication: A Qualitative Analysis of Secondary Early Career Educators' Experiences

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Dedication

To Dinah Konda: You sacrificed your formal teaching career to be the greatest teacher of all—my mom. You taught all seven of us kids that education is the only thing that can't be taken away, and for that, I am forever thankful.

Abstract

Teacher-parent communication (TPC) is considered a professional responsibility for all teachers, yet it is most often associated with teachers of elementary-aged students; comparatively less is known about how secondary teachers communicate with parents or how they learn to do so. The qualitative study conducted in May 2020 used semi-structured interviews to examine how South Dakota secondary early career educators (ECEs) learned to communicate with parents and their experiences with TPC. The research questions focused on the definition of effective TPC, experiences from teacher preparation programs (TPPs) with TPC, experiences from in-service years and TPC, recommendations for preparing secondary ECEs for TPC, and the final question explored impacts on TPC during distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study's findings advance three arguments. First, secondary ECEs perceive they are underprepared for TPC when they enter the profession. While participants reported that their TPP stressed the importance of TPC, they had little, if any, experience with TPC with the exception of mostly observing parent-teacher conferences while student teaching. Second, a disjuncture exists between how secondary ECEs' discuss effective TPC and their actions when communicating with parents. All participants reported using email most often when communicating with parents, even when other modes, such as telephone calls or face-to-face, were perceived to be more effective. Third, the participants believe that forming positive relationships with parents and students is key for effective TPC, whereby the ideal is a tripod communication framework including the student, parent, and teacher working together for student success. Within this framework, ECEs emphasized the importance of proactive communication in terms of building relationships and maintaining those

relationships, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to distance learning across South Dakota in the spring of 2020.

The findings lead to practice and policy implications for better preparing secondary ECEs for effective TPC in TPPs and school districts alike. TPPs' curriculum and student teaching expectations as well as professional development for in-service teachers may be revised to include skills-based communication training and application. In particular, trainings focusing on active listening skills and written communication skills are needed for effective TPC, and participants recommended experiencing TPC in the form of simulations and role playing. In-service years could target further development of TPC skills and emphasize the value of TPC through the implementation of formal mentorship programs in addition to administrative support.

Keywords: teacher-parent communication, teacher preparation programs, secondary educators, early career educators

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Chapter One: Introduction

Stacked among the piles of Little Golden Books, flash cards, and dolls grew a little girl's dream of being a teacher. She heard her father say, "I'm going to school," a statement he said for 40 years as he left to fulfill a daily calling in his high school science classroom. Soon those children's books turned into murder mystery novels, college textbooks, and peer reviewed journal articles. Now, her high school students know that girl as Mrs. KV (hopefully Dr. KV soon).

I firmly believe that we are called to our professions, and the communicative nature of teaching attracted me to the classroom. Even with my formal teacher preparation program (TPP) experience and years in the classroom, I continually question how to be a better teacher. One of those questions revolves around effectively communicating with parents of secondary students. Being immersed in education was how I was raised, and I am passionate about this field of work. Once I was in my own classroom, the reality of the job's challenges hit hard even though I thought I was ready—I grew up in a family of educators, I excelled in the TPP, and I put in countless hours on curriculum and grading outside of the contracted school day.

As a secondary educator, I have experienced firsthand the paralyzing anxiety of responding to a parent email that attacked my character and teaching choices. This anxiety was especially crippling as a young teacher without tenure. I have also received messages of thanks at parent-teacher conferences and through email. While the positive messages outnumber the negative ones, the complaints left me with sleepless nights, questioning my life choices, and feeling nervous around students. The feelings of inadequacy remind me of a poster that hung on the wall of my 8th grade classroom. The poster displayed an adage saying people do not remember what you did right, but instead

remember what you did wrong. In an effort to assist other education professionals from being remembered for poor communication, I aspire to add to the conversation between pre-service teachers (PSTs), in-service teachers, and educational leaders about how to better prepare and support secondary early career educators (ECEs) for effective teacher-parent communication (TPC). For the purposes of this dissertation, I chose to lead with the term *teacher* instead of *parent* in TPC because my focus is on how secondary (ECEs) learn to communicate with parents and not vice versa.

This dissertation advances three major arguments. The first, and most overarching, is that secondary ECEs perceive they are underprepared for effective TPC. Communicating with parents is a professional responsibility that teachers are expected to know how to do effectively. TPPs do include TPC in their programs, but the application of that teaching is absent and/or does not carry through to in-service teaching. The absence of participants discussing listening speaks volumes, pun intended, to what secondary ECEs emphasize in the communication process. The second argument is the apparent disjuncture revealed between what secondary ECEs think about effective TPC and their actions. One example of this is when participants shared that they know they should call parents especially when delivering negative news, but they would rather communicate in an asynchronous format (considering face-to-face is not available). Although scholarship surrounding TPC often focuses on face-to-face communication (such as parent-teacher conferences), the reality of secondary ECEs' experiences emphasizes the frequency and preference of asynchronous written communication. The final argument this dissertation advances is the important role that relationships play in effective TPC. Effective TPC hinges on teachers' ability to establish positive relationships with students and parents. I now frame the issue of secondary ECEs and

TPC within the fields of education and communication studies with the intention of establishing the need for this study.

Statement of the Problem & Purpose

Popular media often portrays public schooling as a spectacle, with *Glee*, *Friday Night Lights*, and *A.P. Bio* being well-known examples. Each one focuses on a different aspect of stereotyped high school culture—*Glee* centers on show choir, *Friday Night Lights* is more about high school football than education, and *A.P. Bio* revolves around a reckless teacher. Behind these popular culture examples exists another world—one where teachers, administrators, and families work together for students' greater good. Although *A.P. Bio* is (hopefully) far-fetched, it does bring to mind questions about teachers' preparation for their professional responsibilities.

Teaching is built on relationships—relationships between ideas and relationships between students, teachers, and parents. Relationships cannot form without communication. The third level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs depicts love and belonging needs following first and second level physiological and personal safety needs. Love and belonging needs describe how people connect with others through friendship, intimacy, and family. Overall, the love and belonging step in Maslow's pyramid relies on communication to form and maintain these relationships. In our daily lives, effective communication is necessary.

The importance of effective communication extends beyond one's personal life and into the workforce. The ability to communicate valued in the majority of professions (Alshare et al., 2011; Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Crosling & Ward, 2002; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2014; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016), however, one profession in particular is unique when it comes to

communicating—teaching. Teachers spend the majority of their days interacting with their students, and these interactions, both verbal and nonverbal, are forms of communication. Although teachers spend the majority of their contracted hours in-contact with students, they have numerous duties outside of directly working with students, and contact with additional key influencers—parents and community members. The relationships between teachers and parents are unique in their focus and complexity. "In this case, parent-teacher relationships differ from managerial-subordinate relationships based on the power differential; managers need to worry about losing face with subordinates when the valence is negative whereas parents' and teachers' primary concern is having as much communication as possible to better assist the child" (Thompson & Mazer, 2012, p. 154). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004) asserts the need and complexity of parent-teacher relationships:

> To parents their child is the most important person in their lives, the one who arouses their deepest passions and greatest vulnerabilities, and the one who inspires their fiercest advocacy and protection. And it is teachers—society's professional adults—who are primary people with whom the parents must seek alliance and support in the crucial work of child rearing...All the parent's expectations and fears, as well as their own memories—
>
> positive and negative—of school experiences, get loaded on to encounters with teachers. (p. 27)

Just as Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004) implies, teachers play roles in students' lives that go beyond teaching content, and the way parents interact with teachers is influenced by their own educational experiences. Communicating with parents can be especially challenging

when teachers are not familiar with their parent population which is likely true for ECEs as they enter a district for the first time.

Today's technology affords teachers many avenues to communicate with families, including online learning management systems (LMS) such as Schoology, Google Classroom, and Blackboard. My current high school uses Schoology as an LMS and Infinite Campus as an online gradebook, attendance tracker, and one method of TPC. Depending on an individual's preference and school policy, some teachers utilize social media outlets such as Twitter and Facebook as ways of communicating with stakeholders. Apps like SeeSaw and Class DoJo are targeted for elementary, but they are additional communication tools for teachers.

Digital communication resources such as email, student information systems (SISs), LMSs, apps, and more provide opportunities for communication, but the question of "how" a teacher learns to communicate effectively with parents is not answered. An artist can have top of the line paints and brushes, but until they know how to paint, the art will not be a masterpiece. Just because paint is on a canvas does not make the painting "good." The same is true with communicating. Just because a teacher sends an email to a parent or updates the LMS gradebook does not mean the communication was effective.

Research suggests that working with parents may be more difficult for secondary educators. Primary school teachers have an advantage over secondary teachers when talking to parents about their students because primary teachers generally spend more time teaching multiple subjects to the same students, whereas secondary educators typically focus on one subject (Gartmeier et al., 2016). In some instances, teachers are formally evaluated on their TPC. The South Dakota Framework for Teaching follows Charlotte Danielson's four domains for effective teaching (South Dakota Department of

Education [SDDOE], n.d.-c). The Framework recognizes that more family participation and involvement is typical at the elementary level but asserts that regular communication with families of adolescents is valuable too (The Danielson Group, n.d.). At its core, teacher communication with families shows caring: "A teacher's effort to communicate with families conveys the teacher's essential caring, valued by families of students of all ages" (The Danielson Group, n.d., p. 91). A teacher's effort toward TPC is in addition to a teacher's responsibility to meet standards, attend meetings, grade, plan, advise, and more. Even if teachers are not formally evaluated on TPC, it is still an inherent part of a teacher's job. Some may argue that TPC is even more important if part of a teacher's effectiveness score relies on the administrator's perception of a teacher's TPC.

So how do secondary ECEs learn to effectively communicate with parents? Teacher preparation programs (TPPs) are a logical starting point. Feuer et al. (2013) report that TPPs are the foundation for pre-service teachers (PSTs) to learn pedagogy and content as well as some hands-on practice in a real classroom, but scholars argue that TPPs have a limited focus for preparing future teachers for working with parents (De Coninck et al., 2018; Lazar et al., 1999). In addition to TPPs, teachers learn by what the participants of this doctoral study refer to as "trial and error." Informal learning is common on the job (Hoekstra et al., 2009), but the "duality between what the workplace affords learners in terms of opportunities and support, and how individuals engage with these affordances as they learn through their experiences" (Billett, 2008, p. 1) may differ. This means that the experiences ECEs encounter during their in-service years are bound to vary. Some ECEs may work in districts that have mentors, one-to-one technology, and a low rate of poverty in their student body. These differences are just a few that can change a teacher's experiences. "Although competence in teaching, as in all professions,

is shaped significantly by on-the-job experiences and continuous learning, the programs

that prepare teachers to work in K-12 classrooms can be early and important contributors

to the quality of instruction" (Feuer et al., 2013, p. 1). This may also be true of TPPs and

how they prepare PSTs for effective TPC.

SUB The focus of TPPs seems to be on instruction in the classroom (Feuer et al.,

2013), yet a teacher's reach and responsibilities go beyond instruction. TPPs state in the

name that they are to prepare teachers, but do they purposefully prepare teachers for

communicating on the job particularly with parents? When teachers face conflicts with

parents, what skills from their teacher preparation programs can they draw upon? How do

teachers make the decision to contact parents for both positive and negative situations?

When administrators evaluate teachers for effective TPC, what does that entail?

SUB SDDOE (n.d.-a) piloted the Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching as the

state-wide recommended teacher evaluation tool in 2013, now a staple in districts.

Danielson's Framework for Teaching includes four domains: 1) Planning and Preparation

2) The Classroom Environment 3) Instruction and 4) Professional Responsibilities (The

Danielson Group, n. d.). Domain 4 subsection "4c: Communicating with Families"

includes the components of "information about the instructional program," "information

about individual students," and "engagement of families in the instructional program" (p.

91). Since districts can choose which components are included in their teacher

evaluations, not all South Dakota teachers are evaluated on component 4c, yet it is an

important component of professional responsibilities regardless of the evaluation

component.

SUB To further complicate teachers' professional responsibilities, an upheaval to the

traditional education system occurred in 2020. While I was preparing for my dissertation

proposal, the COVID-19 global pandemic hit the United States causing a major disruption to everyday life. On March 13, 2020, South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem encouraged schools to close to mitigate the spread of the virus, but she left the decision up to individual districts. Less than a month later on April 7, Governor Noem recommended that online learning continue through the end of the academic year (Conlon, 2020).

The pandemic exposed numerous disparities among socioeconomic divides such as access to technology, instruction modes (synchronous vs. asynchronous), and distribution of school work (Herold, 2020). Because the physical school buildings were closed for learning, TPC took place by phone or computer-mediated communication (CMC). The pandemic forced students, teachers, and parents to engage differently with education. When districts transitioned to distance learning, students were required to learn in a method foreign to traditional k-12 education. Herold (2020) reported that email was the most prominent method of communication between teachers and students in both low and high-income districts, but districts with more than 75% low-income students had to rely more on text messages, personal phone calls, physical communication handouts, social media, and mail than districts with less than 25% low-income students. Since learning was all online, the reliance on CMC for TPC most likely increased. I believe the transition to distance learning and the uncertainties surrounding the fall 2020 reopening of schools fuel the importance of my study because positive relationships between students, parents, and teachers are needed now more than ever.

Positive relationships between schools and families are undoubtedly helpful for students, and understanding how teachers learn to effectively communicate with parents is a step toward fostering those positive relationships. The purpose of this study, which is

supported further in this chapter, is to investigate how ECEs at the secondary level learn to communicate effectively with parents.

Definitions

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define the following terms: communication, pre-service teacher, early career educator, secondary education, teacher preparation program, student teacher, cooperating teacher, and parent.

Communication: According to the National Communication Association (n.d.) communication is "how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry" (para. 1).

Pre-service teacher (PST): a post-secondary student enrolled in a TPP

Early career educator (ECE): an educator in his or her first to fifth year of teaching

Secondary education: education pertaining to traditional high school students grades 9th-12th

Teacher preparation program (TPP): college or university track resulting in certification or degree in classroom education

Student teacher: a PST that is completing a TPP's field placement in a cooperating teacher's classroom

Cooperating teacher: the in-service classroom teacher that the PST/student teacher is assigned to during their field placement

Parent: I am using McNaughton and Vostal (2010) definition: "Because many family members play important roles in providing care for a child, the term *parent* is used

throughout this column to describe the family member or guardian who most typically communicates with teachers" (p. 251).

Overview of Previous Research

The theoretical framework for the study draws upon the works of communication scholars and education scholars. The concept of effective communication in relation to teacher-parent relationships will guide my findings.

In Chapter Two, I delve into three areas of literature: effective communication, effective TPC, and finally, TPP. The first body of literature includes scholarship from both the communication and education fields. Scholars report that effective communication relies on making meaning of messages (Symeou et al., 2012, National Communication Association, n.d.) which cannot be done without effective listening (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010; Walters et al., 2009). While the definition of communication remains unchanged, the modes of communication have changed tremendously in the past decade thanks to technology, and in return, so have the ways teachers and parents communicate (Thompson, 2008; Thompson, & Mazer, 2012; Thompson et al., 2015). Regardless of technology, engaging in dialogue, meaning speakers are actively participating in the conversation as opposed to receiving information in a one-way format, is important for effective communication (Graham-Clay, 2005; Kraft, 2017).

The second body of literature explores the nuances of TPC. Research supports the value of TPC (Barge & Loges, 2003; DesLandes & Bertrand, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Epstein, 2013). Teachers and parents engage in communication for a variety of reasons, but most often it is aimed at academic concerns (Barge & Loges, 2003; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The final body of literature focuses on TPPs in relation to preparing PSTs for parent communication. Research from the past three decades has called for more focused instruction on TPC for PSTs (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Bartels & Eskow, 2010; Walker & Dotger, 2012; Conus & Fahrni, 2019). Additionally, research on TPPs shows that parental involvement is mostly directed toward early childhood and special education teachers (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Epstein, 2013), and the views held by primary school educators toward family school partnerships is more positive than those of secondary educators (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Willemse et al., 2017). Issues related to teacher preparedness when working with parents are documented internationally (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Epstein, 2018; Willemse, et al. 2017).

Research Questions

My research questions focus on the perceptions of ECEs toward their TPPs and in-service experience of TPC. To guide the study, I asked the following research questions:

1. How do secondary ECEs define effective teacher-parent communication?

2. What experiences from TPPs, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as having contributed to their ability to communicate with parents?

3. What experiences during their in-service years, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as having contributed to their ability to communicate with parents?

4. What, if any, recommendations do ECEs have for improving teacher preparation for TPC?

5. How did secondary ECEs employ TPC throughout distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Paradigm & Design

To address the research questions, I conducted a basic qualitative study guided by an interpretivist paradigm. I bring an interpretivist lens in which I view knowledge as being socially constructed. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) assert that "all qualitative research is interested in how people make sense of their lives and their worlds" (p. 25). In my study, I seek to understand how secondary ECEs perceive they learn to communicate with parents. I look to their stories of being a secondary student, completing a TPP, and teaching in their own classroom. As a co-learner beside my participants, we shape the findings.

The qualitative nature of the study allows for interpretation of participants' experiences. Recruitment followed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. In order to be eligible in the study, participants met the following requirements: completed a TPP in the state of South Dakota and currently teach at the secondary level in South Dakota in their second, third, fourth, or fifth year of teaching. I followed a semi-structured interview guide to draw narratives from participants. Data interpretation followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis.

Significance of the Study

The influence from lawmakers, administrators, and others outside of the educational arena impact teachers' daily lives, yet they often do not get a voice in educational decisions. Through this dissertation, I intend to add secondary ECEs' voices to the scholarship surrounding TPC. Research limited to secondary educators' classroom experiences is rare, especially when focused on a subset population—ECEs—and how they learn to communicate with parents. ECEs' attrition rate adds urgency to the study; the Economic Policy Institute reports that 30% of college graduates that hold a teaching

degree leave the profession within the first five years (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). By researching the perspective of ECEs, I validate their experiences. These experiences may give voice to future educational decisions regarding TPP, professional development, and scholarship.

As nationwide teacher shortages continue and our reliance on electronic communication grows, it is vital that we as leaders in the education field understand how ECEs view and conduct TPC. Without understanding the "how" of teachers learning to communicate with parents, efforts at improvements in that area may be fruitless. With this study, I sought to contribute to educational leaders' knowledge of possible gaps that secondary ECEs experience when communicating with parents. This study may lend itself to opportunities for shaping TPP and professional development alike. It is my intention that this study will inform stakeholders of the critical component of TPC in teachers' lives.

Overview of the Research Context & Positionality

Research for the study was conducted in South Dakota. The whole of my education experience as a student and teacher, with the exception of my Ed.D., has been within the state of South Dakota. As a current educator in South Dakota, I am interested in focusing on my home state's teachers' experiences. My experience in South Dakota's education system likely lended itself to greater accessibility among administrators and educators. The teaching population in South Dakota is small with the South Dakota Department of Education's State Report Card (n.d.-b) reporting 9,701 employed teachers during the 2018-2019 school year. Opening the study to all of South Dakota allowed me a greater opportunity to recruit diverse participants whether that diversity is recognized as school size, preparation program, or subject area.

I acknowledge my experiences as a researcher approaching this subject. Like many researchers, I was drawn to my topic because I struggle with TPC. I want to learn alongside my participants. As a teacher, I value the adage "You don't know what you don't know." That was very much me as a PST. My good grades, supportive faculty, and well-rounded student experience made me feel like I was ready for the title of teacher. Looking back, I am not sure if anything can prepare someone 100% for working with parents, but I do believe that educational leaders, whether that is at a school, district, university, or state level, can better prepare teachers for the realities of communicating with parents.

Limitations

Several limitations exist within this study. Although specific research limitations are discussed in Chapter Three, I identify them now as a preview for upcoming chapters. While writing this dissertation, the world was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created some barriers for completing research. Although in-person interviews were preferred, I had to conduct interviews via Zoom to maintain the health and safety of all involved in the study.

By studying only secondary ECEs in South Dakota, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population. Although the findings are not generalizable, I gained insight into a new population and enhanced scholarship in the fields of communication studies and education.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the overall research topic of how secondary ECEs learn to communicate with parents. I also explained the problem and purpose of the study before providing five guiding research questions. Related literature was briefly previewed

in this chapter. In the next chapter, Chapter Two, I frame the study in three related areas of literature. Then I describe the basic qualitative methodology in Chapter Three. In Chapter Four, I report suggested improvements for preparing PSTs for TPC in their TPPs, the disjuncture between what teachers believe is the most effective way to communicate with parents versus their actions, the role of relationships in TPC, and recommendations for educational leaders to improve their in-service teachers' TPC skills. Finally, Chapter Five includes conclusions drawn from the current study's research and its implications for practice and policy as well as research within the fields of communication studies and education.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The importance of collaborative teacher-parent relationships is evident in their correlation to positive student learning outcomes (DesLandes & Bertrand, 2005; Kraft, 2017). In order to collaborate, facilitative communication must take place between teachers and parents. However, TPC is a potential source of tension for both parties (Graham-Clark, 2005), and a cited "fear" among teachers (Flynn, 2006, p. 12) and particularly, minority parents (Conus & Fahrni, 2019, p. 251). Flynn (2006) states that teachers' fears are understandable because "less than 4% of our nation's teacher programs train us to effectively communicate with students' families" (p. 12).

Teachers' professional communication skills are generally viewed as crucial because teachers and parents work together to promote students' success (Dotger, 2009). While the purpose and mode of teacher-parent communication (TPC) may vary, most communication is due to students struggling (Thompson, 2008), and it is suggested by scholars that some TPC may hinder students taking responsibility for their role as a student (Epstein, 1996; Thompson, 2009). In one study on TPC, Thompson (2008) found the majority of the email communication between teachers and parents "focused on students who struggled academically, behaviorally, socially, and even mentally" (p. 210). Additionally, effective communication skills are necessary for professions that involve problem solving and/or decision making (Keyton et al., 2013; Malikiosi-Loizou, 2000, 2001), which teachers do frequently. Keyton et al. (2013) states that "*communication competence* is communication effectiveness" (p. 154), and the researchers reference Monge et al.'s (1982) point that "competent communicators are those who are effective at achieving their goals" (p. 506).

Despite the importance of effective communication, scholars report that teacher preparation programs (TPPs) lack an emphasis on teaching preservice teachers (PSTs) communication skills for teacher-parent interaction (Caspe, 2003; De Coninck et al., 2018; Epstein, 2001; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; Lazar et al., 1999; Walker & Legg, 2018; Willemse et al., 2017). Coffelt et al. (2019) sought to be part of "closing-the-gap scholarship" in business communication when they researched the nuanced understanding of what employers meant by the term "communication skills" (p. 419). While Coffelt et al. (2019) stated that their qualitative study results are not generalizable, they do, however, support the argument that blending employers' perspectives into communication courses can be beneficial. The similar idea of blending in-service teachers' views of effective communication into teacher preparation programs (TPPs) and professional development is a goal of this dissertation.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine scholarship on teacher communication with emphasis on TPPs and their role in preparing teachers for TPC. Within this literature review, I examine literature both nationally and internationally as TPC and parent engagement is of worldwide interest. In addition to TPC specifically, the literature review begins with a section dedicated to effective communication skills in the workplace, effective TPC, and a final section on the role of TPPs in preparing pre-service teachers (PSTs) for TPC.

Effective Communication

I argue that communication has become a catch-all buzzword in education signifying that communication is viewed as necessary while not being well understood. While some teachers may argue that updating the gradebook is a form of communication, the National Household Education Survey specifies communication as more direct

interaction (memos, newsletters, e-mails, phone calls, or notices to all parents) (Noel et al., 2016). Just because an email or phone call took place (i.e. communication), does not mean that it was effective. Bartels and Eskow (2010) assert that "effective communication" is a recurring term in scholarship named as a vital component of school-family partnerships, "but the specific speaking and listening skills that comprise effective communication are often not delineated" (p. 61). The definition of communication is nuanced depending on the scholar and context, but at its core, communication is defined as "how people use messages to generate meanings within and across various contexts, and is the discipline that studies all forms, modes, media, and consequences of communication through humanistic, social scientific, and aesthetic inquiry" (National Communication Association, n.d.). Generating meanings is the essence of communication and is reflected in Symeou et al.'s (2012) recommendation that "The aim should be for teachers to be able to talk *with* parents instead of only talking *to* parents in order to cooperate and be in true dialogue" (p. 82).

Regardless of our career paths, education, race, religion, sex, gender, etc., communication connects our personal and public lives. The National Communication Association (n.d.) asserts the following:

> Communication cuts across contexts and situations; it is the relational and collaborative force that strategically constructs the social world. Knowledge and understanding of communication and strong communication skills allow people to create and maintain interpersonal relationships; employers in all sectors seek employees with strong communication skills; and society needs effective communicators to support productive civic activity in communities. (para. 5)

This bold statement by the professional communication community underpins my desire to understand how early career educators (ECEs) learn to communicate with parents.

Communication occurs in two ways: one-way communication and two-way communication. While the types of communication occur across contexts, Graham-Clay (2005) provides the following definition for one-way communication in a school setting:

> One-way communication occurs when teachers seek to inform parents about events, activities, or student progress through a variety of sources, such as introductory letter at the beginning of the school year, classroom or school newsletters, report cards, communication books, radio announcements, school Web sites, and so on. (p.119)

Graham-Clay (2005) goes on to provide a definition of two-way communication: "Two-way communication involves interactive dialogue between teachers and parents. Conversations may occur during telephone calls, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities" (p. 119). According to this definition, the most effective dialogue is when teachers and parents converse together as opposed to parents only receiving information (Graham-Clay, 2005). The mutual influence and audience-centered interaction are key components of two-way communication. Teachers change their messages based on their audience and the messages they are receiving. Even though two-way communication is preferred because of its interactive nature (Graham-Clay, 2005), forms of one-way communication like a notification from a learning management system (LMS) or an updated score in an online gradebook serve as an efficient way to inform parents about students' school performance. Emails, phone calls, newsletters, and general online updates aside,

understanding how ECEs learn to communicate is vital for improvement and/or stability of TPPs and professional development training alike.

Since the classroom is a place of work, looking to fields such as business communication may open opportunities to better understand TPC. Keyton et al. (2013) sought to identify verbal communication workplace behaviors as opposed to the attitudes about communication so "we can move closer to a descriptive, and potentially predictive, model of workplace communication work behavior, which can be used to develop meaningful skill-oriented training and performance evaluation" (p. 154). The scholars are clear that while communication skills are valued, they are behaviors and not tasks— tasks are the jobs someone is paid to do. The intersection of communication skills and tasks comes when an employee is asked to use their skills (behavior) as a task (Keyton et al., 2013).

The importance of listening as part of communication cannot go unnoticed because active listening skills play a role in effective communication (O'Shea et al., 2000). "The goal in active listening is to develop a clear understanding of the speaker's concern and also to clearly communicate the listener's interest in the speaker's message" (McNaughton et al., 2007, p. 224). Active listening goes a step further by including an empathetic element. The term "active empathetic listening" is defined in psychology and managerial literature as "a form of listening practiced by salespeople in which traditional active listening is combined with empathy to achieve a higher form of listening" (Drollinger et al., 2006, p. 162). Drollinger et al. (2006) argues that the active empathetic listening scale has the possibility for sales people to form better relationships with clients. The same may be true for teachers because they, too, are trying to form working relationships with other adults. The frequency of listening in the workplace is worth

noting too. In Keyton et al.'s (2013) study where they identified 163 verbal communication behaviors, the participants reported the most common workplace communication behavior being heard or observed to be listening at 84.13% closely followed by asking questions at 81.75%. The importance and frequency of listening led Kristinsson et al. (2019) to conclude that organizations should verify that those leading are "competent active empathetic listeners" (p. 144).

Teacher-Parent Communication

In order to prepare for parent interactions, teachers must understand what parents want and need to talk about as well as what modes they use to communicate. "They [preservice teachers] need to understand that parents are interested in their child's education whether they are a single parent, a gay parent, a foster parent, a grandparent, or a traditional parent" (Ferrara, 2009a, p. 141). This understanding seems to be missing as overall trends from the past ten years imply that little progress has been made in terms of frequency and quality of communication between teachers and parents (Kraft, 2017).

While Graham-Clay's (2005) article on one and two-way communication was published only 15 years ago, the world of communication has drastically changed. For example, the ubiquity of smartphones has likely changed how teachers and parents communicate (Thompson et al., 2015). Parents in Thompson's (2008) and Thompson and Mazer's (2012) studies reported that emails have replaced most face-to-face communication with teachers because of its convenience—an exception to this is when discussing more complex topics because of the essential nonverbals that accompany verbal communication. To reach this conclusion, Thompson and Mazer (2012) conducted a two-fold study which involved the development of a parental academic support scale (PASS) for parents of elementary, junior high, and secondary level. Four major

categories of parental academic support were established: 1. academic performance, 2. classroom behavior, 3. child welfare, and 4. scheduling meetings; of the four categories, parents most often discussed academic performance with their students' teachers even though the frequency of TPC is less than "popular press and educational literatures have boasted" (Thompson & Mazer, 2012, p. 152).

The second part of Thompson and Mazer's (2012) study utilized the PASS to measure actual supportive interactions: frequency, importance, and modes of communication between parents and teachers. Findings supported previous findings that parents value TPC. Frequency from the studies report that weekly TPC is rare (Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Thompson (2008) reported that the elementary and secondary teachers in his study received weekly emails from two to five parents per semester while secondary teachers communicated once or twice a semester with approximately 20 parents. Even if communication occurs infrequently between parents and teachers, "this communication is still vitally important in assisting students in the academic context" (Thompson, & Mazer, 2012, p. 152).

Barge and Loges (2003) investigated the perceptions of parental involvement through three different groups: parents, students, and teachers. They argued that previous research has an implicit assumption that parents, students, and teachers agree upon "the appropriate type and form of communication associated with parental involvement" which then leads to the assumption that a general consensus among the three parties exists "regarding who should talk to whom, about what, where they talk, how they talk, and with what consequence" (Barge & Loges, 2003, p. 142). The most prominent theme from the parent group was the importance of keeping track of their student's academics in addition to building a personal relationship with their child's teachers. The teacher data

had four emergent themes of helpful forms of parental involvement: 1. Communication with both the child and the school, 2. Participation in both child's school and life, 3. Basic parenting duties including supervision, and 4. Discipline, more specifically, approval of punishments given by the school. Because all students, parents, and teachers in the study agreed that high-quality parental involvement and communication includes 1. Building positive relationships with teachers and 2. Staying up-to-date with a student's academics, I argue that these findings should serve as a starting point for what TPPs can focus on in terms of teaching effective TPC.

Evans and Tribble (1986) conducted a study over 30 years ago and concluded that beginning teachers prioritized assessing student work and working with parents higher than PSTs. The researchers concluded that this was most likely due to the realities of the profession that the PSTs had yet to experience. Reality shock in teachers is a concept that Kim and Cho (2014) researched in connection to teaching efficacy in PSTs. They report that "This discrepancy in the sense of teaching efficacy between in-service teachers and PSTs implies that in-service teachers' sense of efficacy may have plummeted as a result of experiencing obstacles in the reality of the teaching profession" (Kim & Cho, 2014, p. 68). This supports Denessen et al.'s (2007) claim that if teachers have successful collaborative experiences with parents, they are more willing to invest in quality TPC and avoid TPC if they have experienced negative interactions.

Within each teacher-parent interaction, the quality of communication is influenced by the educator's skills. Once teachers are in the field, they are expected to apply their learning to the workplace. After all, any professional development is only as beneficial as the extent to which it is applied in the workplace (Bartels & Eskow, 2010). Bartels and Eskow (2010) advocate for communication skills to be taught to teachers, but

they acknowledge that teachers employing these skills does not mean parents will be involved. It is likely though that the absence of quality communication skills will hinder parent involvement (Bartels & Eskow, 2010).

In addition to teachers employing skills, communication competence needs to be examined. How confident are teachers in their ability to communicate with parents? Gartmeier et al.'s (2016) goal was to quantitatively evaluate secondary teachers' self-report of parent communication competence. Their research was influenced by previous scholarship exemplifying the need for teachers to be competent communicators with those outside of their classroom, yet these same scholars argued that little time was dedicated to communication skill development for PSTs in TPPs (Walker & Dotger, 2012; Denessen et al., 2009). Likert scales were created to measure nine items (three questions per facet: 1. interpersonal relationships, 2. structuring the conversation, and 3. problem solving). Results concluded that 25% of participants rated themselves as highly confident in their parent communication competence. While the other participants were not extremely low in their self-esteem when communicating with parents, this important aspect of the teaching profession should be a goal that all TPPs strive to improve (Gartmeier et al., 2016).

While communication competence was rated high for 25% of Gartmeier et al.'s (2016) secondary math teacher participants, TPC can be challenging due to the personal nature for both the teacher and parent. Data from Lasky's (2000) research on culture and emotional politics in teacher-parent interactions concluded that the feelings teachers emoted during parent interactions were a combination of "personal and cultural beliefs, largely shaped by the professional norm-based discourses and values they appropriate within the culture of teaching" (p. 857). Teachers must also take into account the culture

of their students' parents. Conus and Fahrni (2019) concluded from their Swiss study that teachers must be better trained to foster reciprocal communication as a means of building teacher-parent relationships with all types of parents, especially minority parents who are disadvantaged due to structural and socio-psychological obstacles, as opposed to bonding with only those aligned with "school culture" (p. 252). Although the role of culture in communication is not the focus of this dissertation, communication is multi-faceted and culture does influence how teachers' and parents communicate.

Lasky (2000) is one of the few scholars in the literature that referred to TPC as an exchange of interactions as opposed to a relationship or collaboration; a relationship infers depth and trust according to Lasky, but most interactions between teachers and parents were occasional and prompted by "student achievement or behavior" (p. 857). Similarly, Thompson (2008) reported in his interpretive study that very few parents developed a relationship via email due to the infrequency of the communication, but the parents' (and teachers') main goal was to help the student succeed, so developing a relationship was secondary in nature. Other researchers, such as Bartels and Eskow (2010), chose to use the term relationships when referring to teachers and parents interacting even though Lasky (2000) may disagree with that word choice.

Regardless of the label—interactions or relationships—put upon TPC, "Too often [educational] professionals assume that because they are familiar with families, building relationships with them will be natural, easy, or automatic" (Bartels & Eskow, 2010, p. 62). Kraft (2017), an education professor and former teacher, concludes from his research and personal experience that three primary factors contribute to subpar TPC from in-service teachers: "implementation barriers (including outdated or difficult-to-access contact information), the absence of schoolwide communication policies, and

teachers' lack of non-instructional time" (p. 60). The demands of the teaching profession seem to influence poor TPC.

Taking the initiative to contact parents prior to a student concern occurring is proactive communication and an act that teachers are encouraged to practice (Graham-Clay, 2005; Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004). Even though proactive communication is viewed as beneficial, it requires dedicated time to communicate "even without an explicit need to do so" (Gartmeier et al., 2016, p. 210). Thompson and Mazer's (2012) mixed-methods study for the development of the PASS supports proactive communication too: "...parents emphasized that teachers who are proactive in communication about potential problems and simply available to communicate across modes are embodying important supportive behaviors that assist students during their elementary through secondary education" (p. 153). Gartmeier et al.'s (2016) results of German secondary teachers' self-reported data concluded that training for PSTs should not only include training specifically about being a competent communicator but should also include training on how to effectively use one's time with parents. This includes how to establish a good interpersonal relationship and problem solve with parents by practicing "behaviors like summarizing or involving parents in formulating goals" (Gartmeier et al., 2016, p. 214).

Results of communication-focused training

Research suggests that actively training PSTs and in-service teachers in communication skills, particularly interpersonal communication skills, can be beneficial. After trainings specific to TPC, participants reported having more confidence and wanting others to experience the same type of training (Walker & Dotger, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018; McNaughton et al., 2008; Symeou et al., 2012). Symeou et al.'s (2012)

study was inspired by Greek-Cypriot teachers' concerns that they were not adequately

prepared, and in some instances not prepared at all, in both college studies and previous

in-service trainings for TPC. In order to collect data, 111 teachers ranging from preschool

to secondary educators took a questionnaire at the first meeting and last meeting fulfilling

a pretest/posttest experimental design of the five, three-hour training sessions. The bulk

of the questionnaire included a framework of 48 communication skills broken into seven

dimensions: "1. Setting the meeting's context, 2. Nonverbal communication, 3.

Appreciation of parent's pace, 4. Verbal and nonverbal tips for encouraging the parent to

elaborate, 5. Paraphrasing, 6. Reflection of feelings, 7. Summarizing and closing the

meeting" (Symeou et al., 2012, p. 75). The researchers concluded that if schools want

stronger connections with parents, then they need to train their teachers in

communication skills. Even teachers who initially reported that they doubted the value of

the tested communication skills did express usefulness after implementing the skills

during parent discussions (Symeou et al., 2012).

Gerich et al. (2017) recently conducted a quasi-experimental survey in Germany

to investigate the effectiveness of a 9 week, 100 minutes each session, PST training

program aimed at improving PSTs' counseling competence when talking with parents

about their students. The need for this study resulted from a lack of research on

developing and evaluating training programs or other interventions focused on helping

pre-service teachers counsel parents in hopes of improving students' learning. Results

from the pre/post quasi-experimental design in which participants self-assessed their

competence indicated that participation in the training program led to improvements in

pre-service teachers' counseling competence and self-concept in the counseling role,

knowledge of counseling and learning strategies, and confidence when facing future

teacher-parents interactions in day-to-day professional duties. The researchers concluded that PSTs can acquire the knowledge and competencies needed to counsel parents in an effort to improve student learning through teacher-parent collaboration. Gerich et al.'s (2017) adds to previous scholars' conclusions (Dotger et al,, 2008; Epstein, 2005; Ferrara, 2009b) about the importance of preparing teachers for the realities of the job.

The Role of Teacher Preparation Programs

Teachers are expected to communicate effectively with parents, yet little time, if any, is spent on developing the needed skills, strategies, and tools in preparation programs (Benson & Ogletree, 2012; De Coninck et al., 2018; Epstein, 2013; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Lazar et al., 1999). Additionally, involving PSTs with parents can be challenging because "Questions of power, boundaries, and the 'right course of action' arise when parents, colleagues, and PSTs interact to discuss a given student" during a TPP experience (Cil & Dotger, 2017, p. 244). While Cil & Dotger (2017) believe in the importance of PSTs learning how to interact with parents, they feel it is best to do so in settings where PSTs can get the support and guidance they need.

Kim and Cho (2014) contend that PSTs experience a reality shock that reduces their optimism toward the teaching profession. What PSTs feel they need is important for future improvements to TPPs, but an important voice is given less consideration—ECEs that are experiencing real-life interactions with parents. Secondary teacher graduates of TPPs praise courses that taught them subject content, but they felt unprepared for "how to make their classrooms parent-friendly, how to inform parents about what is really happening in the classroom, or how to talk with parents without using teacher language" (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005, p. 77).

Helping PSTs become better prepared for parent communication is needed because parent involvement with their students' academics has been linked to higher academic achievement (Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Henderson & Mapp, 2002), and effective communication is the foundation for parent involvement. Epstein & Sanders (2006) and Epstein (2013) acknowledge that most higher education institutes offering TPPs that address school, family, and community partnerships are mostly directed at early childhood and special education teachers. Because of this focus on non-secondary general education teachers, a large group of educators are overlooked when it comes to preparing teachers to work in collaboration with the school, family, and community. This may be a missed opportunity on behalf of the TPPs because scholars like DesLandes and Bertrand (2005) assert that parent involvement appears to have lasting benefits even at the secondary level. The researchers concluded that the quantitative results indicate the value of personal teacher-parent interactions in order to build trusting relationships that lead to parent involvement at school. Both PSTs and inservice teachers may benefit from learning skills and background knowledge on how to effectively contact parents regardless of their students' age group.

Progress toward more effective family, school, and community partnerships has been made, yet Evans (2013) concludes after a comprehensive review of past studies that more must be done in preservice teachers' programs in order to prepare them for communicating with parents. Accredited TPPs adhere to the InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards which include 10 standards for PST development. TPPs have the responsibility to prepare PSTs for parent communication in Standard #10: Leadership and Collaboration: "The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other

school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth, and to advance

the profession" (Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2013). Even though

teaching PSTs how to work with families is a responsibility of TPPs, the approach to

teaching and assessing the standard is up to individual TPPs.

PSTs and Parental Involvement.

Since primary school teachers generally spend more time with their students

while teaching them multiple subjects as opposed to single subject secondary teachers,

primary teachers may be at an advantage when talking to parents because they know

more about each child due to the time spent with him or her (Gartmeier et al., 2016).

Attitudes toward family school partnerships vary based on grade level

certifications/degrees. Generally, primary educators and PSTs hold more positive views

toward family school partnerships than participants from secondary education (de Bruïne

et al., 2014; Willemse et al., 2017). While the reason for this was not discussed, de

Bruïne et al. (2014) did note that more focus on family school partnerships was apparent

in primary programs than secondary programs. Parents hold vital information about their

students, and "When the parent is viewed by the teacher as one with knowledge and

power with experiences and perspectives to offer rather than an individual to be coached

or changed the power dynamic within the institutional relationship is shifted" (Kroeger &

Lash, 2011, p. 270). When teachers approach parents in this manner, an "inquiry-based

relationship" can form (Gee, 2001, p. 270 as cited in Kroeger & Lash).

Now more than ever, involving PSTs in curriculum development, particularly

curriculum development surrounding family school partnerships, is an approach worth

considering because of the diverse family dynamics emerging in today's world (Epstein,

2011; Kroeger & Lash, 2011). Kroeger and Lash (2011) acknowledge that one of the

greatest challenges for educators teaching in TPPs is preparing PSTs for working with today's families: "Paradoxically, because families themselves 'defy standardization', working effectively with many families requires a tremendous range of knowledge and procedural skill within the particulars of working with each" (p. 270). Reflecting on PSTs' experiences regarding their views on their "understanding, opinions, and attitudes" of what was missing in their TPP is valuable because they will soon be in the classroom (Willemse et al., 2017, p. 794). Willemse et al. (2017) conducted an international study that followed de Bruïne et al.'s (2014) study, concluding that secondary PSTs "hardly consider it important to inform parents when their children do something well or improve, ask them to describe their child, or meet with them to set goals" (p. 795). Regardless of grade level focus, all candidates felt that holding conferences and involving parents was important when their student was struggling. While the reasoning behind PSTs' views was not researched, I suggest that the lack of communication preparation in many TPPs may contribute to the issue.

Communication Training for PSTs

Communication scholars Johnson and Roellke (1999) called for communication training in teacher preparation programs after conducting a national study involving secondary school teachers' and undergraduate teacher education faculties' perceptions on what made for the most effective secondary teaching. Johnson and Roellke (1999) asserted that perceptions are what truly shape behavior, policy, and content of teacher education programs. This study replicated Johnson's (1994) previous work in terms of research design but narrowed the participants to only secondary education professionals. Johnson and Roellke (1999) collected survey data about three areas of teacher effectiveness: "(1) Finding employment in a teaching position, (2) in-class teaching

performance, and (3) preparatory coursework" (p. 128). Results emphasized that communication was important in all three areas of teacher effectiveness, and therefore, the researchers called for more communication-focused courses for teacher candidates which may include a partnership between the Communication and Education disciplines.

Hunt et al. (2002) answered Johnson and Roellke's (1999) push for creating a communication course for teachers. Within their published article, they describe a communication course for pre-service teachers in all disciplines because "The grasp of core communication concepts provides a critical foundation for teaching; if that foundation is inadequate, students' learning may be put at-risk" (p. 82). Their course aligns with the national accreditation agencies for TPPs: National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NACTE), Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC), and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). Hunt et al. (2002) provides broad units including communication competence, instructional strategies, and communication impact. While this course creation answers the call for communication-focused education, no evidence of its implementation was found. Ten years after Hunt et. al's (2002) publication, Symeou et al. (2012) voiced that policy stakeholders need to take action on the issue of including communication training in teacher education programs because:

> Teachers' ability to communicate effectively, listen carefully when parents talk, end the conversation graciously, and summarize any agreements and understandings are crucial skills which need to be developed. What teachers and parents say to one another influences parental involvement in their children's school life and parental engagement in school affairs. (p. 82)

The impact of teacher communication with parents should not be taken lightly as it influences a students' education and beyond. How parents interact with teachers is influenced by their own educational experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004), so in short, a teachers' communication with parents influences the current parent and current student as well as possible future generations.

Preparation Program Differences

While TPPs vary globally, the need for effective TPC is shared internationally. de Bruïne et al.'s (2014) international study of three countries, including the United States, reports that communication is the main focus of family school partnerships, yet "candidates and educators requested even more training of communication skills, role playing and field experiences with opportunities to meet parents" (p. 420). Once again, communication with parents is an element of TPPs but the training of "how" to effectively communicate is lacking. Overall, the current educators and pre-service teacher candidates in de Bruïne et al.'s (2014) study called for more hands-on learning with real parents at school. This is no surprise as those same participants described "parents as frightening" (p. 420).

Changing the fear narrative is what Ferrara and Ferrara (2005) sought to do when they created a new course for a TPP that included elementary and secondary teacher candidates. The course grew from the need to change from teaching PSTs "reactionary strategies" which included "how to handle the 'difficult' parent; how to deal with the parent from a diverse culture, how to keep parents happy with meaningless information" to meaningful partnerships with parents (p. 78).

Besides a new course, some TPPs are bridging the gap from the PST classroom to the real classroom through simulations, a common learning strategy in medical school

training. Simulations are valuable because learning takes place during the simulation as well as during the reflection and analysis after the experience (Cil & Dotger, 2017; Dotger et al., 2008). Just like with learning pedagogy or content, PSTs in some programs are given a safe setting (i.e. simulations), to scaffold their experience from learning to be a teacher to having a classroom of their own (Cil & Dotger, 2017). Cil and Dotger (2017), both teacher educators, conducted a simulation of parent interaction for PSTs. They took their research one step beyond having PSTs experience parent communication; they found it valuable to gain an understanding of the PSTs' experiences. Some current teachers may have had simulations in their TPPs which "can help PSTs more authentically engage with scholastic situations, their roles, and responsibilities as novice teachers, and the emotional geographies that manifest within schools and classrooms" (Cil & Dotger, 2017, p. 244).

While TPPs intend to prepare PSTs for the classroom, TPPs vary in exposing PSTs to TPC. Some TPPs engage PSTs in simulations of parent interaction while others call for an authentic experience and others have no formal training for communicating with parents. While PSTs completed their teacher preparation coursework, they commonly requested more authentic situations with parents (de Bruïne et al, 2014; Willemse et al., 2017). Epstein's (2018) recent research focuses on Belgium, Netherlands, and the United States on interventions for pre-service teachers in order for them to have opportunities to practice communicating with parents. Epstein (2018) reports in Part I of the two-part study that PSTs in all three countries were inadequately prepared for school, family, and community partnerships. The practice activities, such as videos, simulations, and interviews, may help future teachers feel more prepared for their interactions with parents. Part II's results suggest that if future teachers practice

interactions with parents and become aware of tone and word choice, they will be better prepared for their professional work (Epstein, 2018).

In addition to simulations and trainings for PSTs, some programs purposefully incorporate parent communication. Kroeger and Lash (2011) expose PSTs to parents through an 8-week parent-teacher-child study. During this assignment, PSTs practice basic communication skills such as welcoming and non-judgmental body language and active listening. PSTs teachers individually conduct an interview with parents and use their interpersonal communication skills; afterward, the PSTs reflect on their experience of attempting to create a "mutually beneficial relationship with families" (p. 272). This type of project moves PSTs from theory to practice through real-life experiences. Kroeger and Lash (2011) specifically address communication skills, such as active listening and acceptable eye contact, when interacting with families and have PSTs practice these skills in their college classroom before they meet with parents. Like many other studies revolving around the importance of family school partnerships and parental involvement (de Bruïne et al, 2014; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Epstein, 2018), Kroeger and Lash's (2011) study involves early childhood education PSTs. I argue the need still exists for additional research to examine how in-service secondary teachers learn effective communication skills for communicating with parents.

While research on effective TPC has been documented, the effectiveness of directly teaching communication skills, particularly effective listening skills (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010: Symeou et al, 2012; Walters et al., 2009), to preservice teachers is limited (McNaughton et al., 2008). Research supports effective listening as an important part of communication, and a way for education professionals to reach an understanding with parents (Lasky, 2000). McNaughton et al. (2008) emphasizes that the

goal of active listening is to clearly communicate that one understands the other's

concerns, and that they are interested in the content. Conducting an experimental design,

McNaughton et al. (2008) tested PSTs' ability to effectively implement the LAFF ("(a)

listen, empathize and communicate respect; (b) ask questions and ask permission to take

notes; (c) focus on the issues; and (d) find a first step") active listening strategy (p. 224).

A unique part of this study that supported the study's validity was having parents of pre-

school and school-aged children pick which recording (pre or posttest) of each PST did a

better job of communicating with the parent and explaining the preferred differences. The

majority of the diverse sample of parents chose the post instruction recording, which led

McNaughton et al. (2008) to conclude that active listening can be taught efficiently and

effectively to PSTs, particularly to those working with pre-school and school-aged

children.

     While these studies that involve PSTs are important to the field, PSTs have yet to

experience the realities of being the sole responsible adult in their classroom. Research

exists for PSTs and their experiences with TPP, but a limited number of studies involve

in-service teachers, and more specifically, ECEs. This gap in literature is what I hope to

contribute to by investigating ECEs' experiences with TPC.

Conclusion

     The review of literature addressed three major areas of scholarly research:

effective communication, TPC, and TPPs. I foresee this study's contribution to be most

prominently in TPP literature, but I intend to further scholarship in the TPC area also as

the two areas are closely linked. Effective communication requires an audience-centered

approach and meaning making, and teachers accommodate their audience every day.

Because communication impacts students' academic success, the need for effective

communication between teachers and parents is apparent. Besides personal experience as a student and possible parent, PSTs have one formal step between their role as a student in the classroom and their role as an in-service teacher. That one step is the TPP. Numerous studies advocate the need for PSTs to be better trained to work with parents.

　　　　After reading the literature surrounding TPC, I conclude that in-service teachers perceive they are underprepared to communicate with parents. Even though they may experience fear or avoidance, they still have to fulfill their professional responsibilities and that includes working, in some capacity, with parents. The call for more communication training and/or communication courses for PSTs and in-service teachers has been addressed by scholars over the past thirty years, yet the message of the lack of preparation persists. There is a need for additional research to advance previous scholarship surrounding in-service teachers' knowledge of how to conduct effective TPC. More specifically, research is needed to understand how secondary ECEs learn and develop skills to communicate with parents and what they perceive as necessary training in order to do so. Research on TPC needs to extend beyond quantifiable measures in order to understand the human experience from teachers' perspectives on how to make meaning with parents. In this study, I sought perspectives from in-service secondary ECEs to address a voice that is missing from recent literature as many studies focus on early childhood or elementary teachers as opposed to those in the high school world.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In the previous two chapters, I detailed the need for understanding the "how" of teacher-parent communication (TPC). Teachers are expected to communicate with parents, yet most teachers have little, if any, formal training. The previous chapters supported the need for the study while this chapter details the method used to answer five research questions. A qualitative research design was used to investigate how secondary early career educators (ECEs) learn to communicate effectively with parents. This chapter includes an explanation and justification of the methodology.

Research Design

As discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two, I draw upon personal practitioner experience and research from a variety of disciplines, including communication studies and educational practice, to frame this study. With this framework, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do secondary ECEs define effective TPC?

2. What experiences from TPPs, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as having contributed to their ability to communicate with parents?

3. What experiences during their in-service years, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as having contributed to their ability to communicate with parents?

4. What, if any, recommendations do ECEs have for improving teacher preparation for TPC?

5. How did secondary ECEs employ TPC throughout distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?

From an interpretivist paradigm, I followed a basic qualitative research design that was influenced by phenomenology. A qualitative design, common in applied fields

of work such as education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), was best suited for this study because "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Phenomenological studies give meaning to individuals' lived experiences. Unlike studies that remove individuals from their experiences by quantifying set characteristics, phenomenology seeks to give voice to one's unique world (Benner, 1994). At the time of writing, research is limited on how teachers learn to communicate with parents, so gathering narratives from current teachers is needed before quantifying their experiences.

I followed a semi-structured interview framework which allowed for open conversations during the eight interviews. I aspired to embody Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) metaphor as a traveler looking to converse with others about their experiences. I brought an interpretivist lens in which I believe that knowledge is socially constructed and meaning is co-constructed in dialogue with participants, and ultimately, "all qualitative research is interested in how people make sense of their lives and their worlds" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25). Since each person experiences the world differently, I cannot shield my own interpretation of their experiences as I, too, construct knowledge alongside my participants.

Positionality

One trait of quality research is when the researcher provides one's own positions and personal contexts in relation to the research topic (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). I state my positionality to my research as a means of transparency and to strengthen reflexivity. I am a current secondary teacher at a large suburban high school in southeastern South Dakota. Being an educator was my childhood dream, and I was

greatly influenced by my father who was a high school science teacher and by my mother who worked in education. My siblings have influenced me as well. Of my six older siblings, two are secondary teachers and two others have worked in post-secondary education as instructors/professors. My personal and professional experiences have guided my interest in this research topic, and I suspect my current teaching position helped me establish rapport with participants. While my research was not siloed to my current school district, I did know some of the participants because of the tight-knit community of South Dakota educators. I strongly believe that there is a need for more training in the field of teacher communication, more specifically TPC, but I have acknowledged that my experiences inform my view of the study and structured my study in a way that limited personal influence. I am intrigued by qualitative methods and can see myself in Peterson's (2019) description of qualitative researchers: "In general, qualitative researchers venture into unexplored territory, make sense of participants' language and behaviors, make assertions based on findings, compare those with what exists in the literature, and suggest applications and new research directions" (p. 148). At the close of this study, I intend to influence how teachers are prepared for the professional responsibility of communicating with parents.

Research Ethics

To research in good faith, one must follow ethical practices. I followed my proposed steps in an effort to minimize any harm to participants, whether physical or psychological, which is an important consideration in ethical research (Fraenkel et al., 2019). In addition to protecting my participants, I avoided expressing mutual experiences with the participants during the interviews because my reactions to my participants' stories "can likewise affect interactions, follow-up questions, and data analysis"

(Peterson, 2019, p. 149). I respected the participants' perceptions as they are experts on their own experiences. Research in my home state, which Damianakis and Woodford (2012) would classify as a "small connected community," posed some ethical considerations (p. 709). For example, as a qualitative researcher I want to advance knowledge, but I must do so by following "research ethics, especially participant confidentiality" (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012, p. 714). During all stages of data collection and analysis, I had to be aware of what I was choosing to tell and how it might be identifiable to readers even though pseudonyms were used (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012). By following Damianakis and Woodford's (2012) expertise in relation to small, connected communities, I made decisions on what data to include in Chapter Four and Chapter Five in order to safeguard confidentiality.

When interviewing, I was aware of my inherent power. Kvale (2006) describes the power dynamics of interviewing by stating, "The qualitative research interview entails a hierarchical relationship with an asymmetrical power distribution of interview and interviewee" (p. 484). By communicating my respect for my participants' expertise, I intended to reduce the power differential. I viewed participants and myself as co-learners in the study.

Participants & Setting

The target population was seven to ten voluntary participants that met the following criteria: have completed a teacher preparation program in the state of South Dakota, currently teach at the secondary level (9-12th grade) in South Dakota, and be employed in their second, third, fourth, or fifth year of teaching. Instead of focusing on a specific number of participants, I had a range and kept in mind that "what is needed is an adequate number of participants, sites, or activities to answer the question posed at the

beginning of the study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 101). However, researchers may recognize saturation or redundancy if they are analyzing data alongside collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam & Tisdell (2016) recommend providing an approximate number of participants when proposing for a dissertation, funded agency, or oversight board with the understanding that the number can be adjusted.

I interviewed eight secondary ECEs for the study. I collected basic demographic information from each participant. Sample demographics are reported in Table 1, and participant information is reported in Table 2.

Table 1. Sample demographics.

Characteristic	Total (N=8) (%)
Gender	
Female, n (%)	7 (87.5%)
Male, n (%)	1 (12.5%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	7 (87.5%)
2 or more races	1 (12.5%)
Age (in years), M (SD, in years)	27.38 (2.56)
20-24	1 (12.5%)
25-29	6 (75%)
30-34	1 (12.5%)
Subjects Taught	
English	4 (50%)
Science	3 (37.5%)
Special Education	1 (12.5%)
Years of Teaching Experience	
2	0 (0%)
3	2 (25%)
4	3 (37.5%)
5	3 (37.5%)
School Size (# of high school students)	
0-499	0 (0%)
500-999	1 (12.5%)

1000-1499	7 (87.5%)
South Dakota TPP	
Public University	4 (50%)
Private University/College	4 (50%)

Table 2. Participant information.

Pseudonym	Subject Taught	Approximate Number of Students Per Semester
Ashley	Science	176
Jessica	English	154
Emily	Science	140
Michael	English	99
Hannah	English	95
Samantha	Science	85
Rebecca	English	80
Alexis	Special Education	17

Recruitment Procedures

Participants for the study were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Creswell & Poth 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015). According to the SDDOE's State Report Card (n.d.-b), 14% of teachers in the state of South Dakota (approximately 1,358 of 9,701) have three or less years of teaching experience. The median for years of teaching experience is 13.6 years. In order to help with recruitment, I created an infographic which provided a short overview of the project and contact information for participation. I had two recruitment strategies. For the first strategy, I sent my research information including the infographic via email to my current high school principal to share with his regional South Dakota high school principal contacts. The principals were then asked to share the email with their staff members. Potential participants were directed to my business Facebook page specifically created for the study. The second strategy was to recruit through my business Facebook page. Potential participants were asked to send a message through the business Facebook page. Once contact was made by

messenger, I confirmed eligibility of the participant and scheduled an interview. I completed interviews as soon after contact as possible to avoid withdrawals and no-shows. Once the interview was scheduled, I sent the informed consent and interview questions to the participant, so the participant had time to process the questions in advance.

Interview Process

Because of the desire to hear participants' experiences, interviews were conducted. "An interview is literally an *inter view,* an inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest," (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 2). This mutual interest of TPC served as the focus for interviews. Of the types of research interviews that Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) describe, I conducted a "semi-structured life world interview" which aims for the interviewee to share his or her view of the world while the interviewer interprets the phenomenon (p. 3).

The role of the interviewer is challenging because they help participants unfold their stories by making judgements about what to ask and when (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview is like chess—each player changes the game causing players to think several moves in advance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To aid in the organization of the interviews, I created an interview guide influenced by the major areas discussed in the literature review. I completed a pilot interview with a colleague in her fifth year of teaching, and she provided answers to the questions as well as feedback for improving the questions. The interview guide included nine open-ended questions that provided the structure of the interview with the freedom to ask follow-up questions as I saw fit (Appendix C). As an interviewer, I actively listened to what and how the participant responded in order to continue the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I followed

Kvale and Brinkmann's suggestion that the "expert interviewer" seeks to answer the research questions as opposed to "focusing all attention on the interview guide, on methodological rules of interviewing, or on what question to pose next" (p. 139). I attribute the additional questions posed to participants as support for active listening.

At the time of writing Chapter Three, the COVID-19 pandemic caused schools nationwide to close and many implemented online instruction. Since schools in South Dakota closed and social distancing was recommended by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), I conducted online video interviews using Zoom. Prior to participating in the interview, participants read the informed consent (Appendix A), and their continued participation in the study served as implied consent. Upon agreeing to participate, participants orally completed a demographics form (Appendix B) at the start of the recording. The demographics form included their preferred telephone number and email address, gender, race, current age, number of years teaching, approximate number of students they taught during the current semester, content area taught, certification levels, number of students in the high school, and university or college attended for TPP. After the interview, the demographics were transcribed into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that was password protected and saved in an encrypted folder on my computer. Interviews were recorded and the files stored in a password protected, encrypted file on my personal computer. Each interview was recorded on two recording devices and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Audio was recorded using SoniClear on my personal tablet and the audio and video was recorded using Zoom, a video conferencing platform. In addition to the recording, I took minimal descriptive field notes during the recordings so as to not get distracted from the interview itself. At the close of

the interview, I asked participants to share the study's information with other possible participants. After the participant left the Zoom platform, I wrote reflective field notes.

Participants were eligible to win one of four $25 Amazon gift cards, and participants were notified after all data was collected. Upon completion of interviews, a random selection formula was entered into Excel to randomly select four gift card winners. Participants were initially contacted via email and then a follow-up phone call three days after the email if they did acknowledge receiving the email. Once they acknowledged their win and gave approval to send the gift card, I emailed it.

Data Analysis

The next step after data collection was data analysis where I made meaning of the participants' experiences. Prior to analyzing data, I transcribed the interviews using a combination of Otter's transcription partnership with Zoom and SoniClear software. The audio files and transcribed documents were stored in encrypted files on my personal computer. Paper copies of the transcripts were secured in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed after this dissertation is passed. Data was labeled by date and pseudonym as a way to ensure confidentiality.

I conducted thematic analysis which is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) "as a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 103). Using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, I read and reread transcripts to generate codes. This process was iterative and continued until all themes were clearly identified and supported with participant quotations.

To increase credibility of the research, I partook in member checking. Birt et al., (2016) explain the importance of member checking when they state:

> The credibility of member checking rests not in the 'doing' of the procedure but
> in the reporting of the outcomes, for it is only through good quality reporting that
> others can make judgements on whether the methods have enhanced the
> credibility of the results. (p. 21)

The Synthesised Member Checking technique allows for participants to co-construct knowledge as they "engage with, and add to, interview and interpreted data" with me as the researcher (Birt et al., 2016, p. 2). The goal of member checking with synthesized data is to explore if results reflect participants' experiences (Birt et al., 2016). Participants should be able to recognize their experiences in the analyzed data and can give additional feedback to improve a researcher's analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I emailed participants a copy of their interview transcript along with a document listing the research questions and potential themes and subthemes for each question. Participants were allowed to rescind parts of their interview or add additional information after reading the transcript and related thematic document.

Quality Criteria

The knowledge I gained from this study comes directly from the participants and how they have been influenced in their lives. I evaluated rigor using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is the internal validity, transferability is the external validity, dependability is for reliability, and confirmability is for objectivity (Guba, 1981).

Credibility

In my study, I increased credibility by reflecting on my own assumptions especially since I have experienced the phenomenon that I am researching. I also

transcribed the interviews verbatim (Minton et al., 2017). Member checking further

enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Transferability

To address transferability, I have provided a detailed explanation of my process

with the intention that others could conduct a similar study. Lincoln & Guba (1985) state

that transferability is possible if the description is detailed enough to replicate the study.

Dependability

Lincoln & Guba (1985) describe an auditing process to ensure dependability. My

dissertation advisor served as an auditor of the product to ensure that the interpretations

and conclusions aligned with participants' direct quotes.

Confirmability

Lincoln & Guba (1985) define confirmability as "the extent to which the data and

interpretations of the study are grounded in events rather than the inquirer's personal

constructions" (p. 324). Just as Minton et al. (2017) did in their qualitative research, I

shared the data with experts in the field—my dissertation advisor and committee

members. The feedback gained from the experts further enhanced this study.

Limitations

The participants in the study were all employed at large, public high schools

within South Dakota. All participants taught in a high school with one-to-one technology

for students. In schools where students do not have instant access to a computer or iPad,

the teachers' modes of communication may be different. Additionally, teachers from

rural areas may have different perceptions of TPC. Another limitation was the high

percentage of female participants in comparison to male participants. Hearing more

voices of different genders may have provided more nuanced insight. The purposive

sampling strategy was a limitation because representation of core subject areas was not possible. Participants' experiences may have varied based on their subject area. No secondary ECEs in the core subjects of math or social science participated.

Because this study focused only on secondary teachers from South Dakota, the findings cannot be generalized to a larger population, but I believe the recommendations made in upcoming chapters may be applicable beyond South Dakota. The contribution to the disciplines of education and communication studies is worthwhile because a study examining *how* teachers learn to communicate has not been conducted within the population of secondary ECES in South Dakota. The themes found from ECEs' experiences may guide curriculum changes at the university level, professional development, and mentorship. Findings from the study can be used as a foundation for future studies as well.

Conclusion

Chapter Three has detailed the study's methodological component. This chapter focused on research design and data analysis methods. I provided my positionality and ethical responsibilities as a researcher. In the upcoming chapter, Chapter Four, findings of this research are reported and interpreted. The final chapter, Chapter Five, presents conclusions based on this study's contribution to practice, policy, and scholarship.

Chapter Four: Findings

Chapter Four includes comprehensive findings from the data collection, using participants' quotes to support and develop the themes and subthemes, for the five research questions. Eight secondary early career educators (ECEs) from South Dakota participated in interviews. Of the eight, seven identified as female and one as male. Three content areas were represented: four English teachers, three science teachers, and one special education teacher. Two of the participants were in their third year of teaching, three were in their fourth year, and three were in their fifth year. Five post-secondary institutions' teacher preparation programs (TPPs) in South Dakota were represented; four participants attended private colleges and four participants attended public state institutions. The insights gained from the study are organized by theme and subtheme, if applicable, for each of the five research questions. In the final chapter, Chapter Five, I discuss implications of the findings and recommendations for practice, policy, and scholarship.

Research Question 1 Findings & Analysis

The first research question asks how pre-service teachers (PSTs) define effective teacher-parent communication (TPC). Participants shared experiences of ineffective and effective TPC, and from those responses, three major themes emerged: 1.) "The Good Kid" Disadvantage, 2.) Message Formation, and 3.) "The Tripod," which are examined in further detail below.

"The Good Kid" Disadvantage

As stated in previous chapters, I bring an interpretivist lens to the research. When applying an interpretivist lens, it means I view the world as socially constructed—each person is influenced by his/her own experiences. I believe that effective teacher-parent

communication (TPC) is influenced not only by participants' current in-service years, but

also by their experiences as a student. The one male participant had a mostly negative

experience with TPC when he was a high school student. The seven female participants

categorized themselves as good students who had little, if any, communication from the

school besides parent-teacher conferences.

Jessica recalled the positive experiences she had with TPC when she was a

student:

> *I was a really good student. So like I didn't, my parents didn't get contacted ever. I liked when they went to conferences, because they would bring me with and I could sit and listen to how wonderful I was and be like, "See?" So like, I remember that positively because we would go to conferences together and my mom would be annoyed when I made her go to conferences, and she like had better things to do—and just sit and listen about how you have good grades and you're well behaved, but I liked to hear it. So like, that's all I really remember is enjoying dragging my parents to conferences. But I'm sure that is not the case with some of my students. They do not like their parents going.*

Hannah reported that her student experiences with TPC were limited to parent-teacher

conferences and the minimal communication beyond conferences was not connected to

her growth as a student:

> *Well….parent-teacher communication when I was in school, I definitely was not a part of it. Because in thinking about it, I'm very absent from that topic entirely. Because I remember my parents going to parent teacher conferences. That was not a thing students went to at least at my school...So my experience with it was basically mom was going to go to parent teacher conferences, mom or dad or whatever. And that was it. Like, my parents never got like an email or anything like that. They—there was a couple times where they would email if they had a question about something or if it was, like, going, we had a vacation or something like that, but it was never—it wasn't like, connected to my learning at all that I remember with me anyway.*

A result worth noting is that while the vast majority of participants said they were good

students and recalled few instances of TPC beyond conferences, they also said they did

not really need TPC since they were good students. This finding is aligned with Palts and

Harro-Loit's (2015) study on Estonian parents' attitudes toward school communication,

wherein they referred to the parenting profile that believes that communication with a

teacher or school should only occur if there is a problem. Samantha classified herself as

"self-reliant" and "self-sufficient" in high school, but she now realized that just because

her parents were not being contacted did not mean that was true of other students'

experiences:

> *Really, no, I, I think for the most part, I was self-reliant, self-sufficient. However,
> as a teacher, I now realize there are a lot of communications going on maybe with
> other students who maybe are struggling or falling through the cracks or maybe
> don't have parents support at home. And so that communication piece is going on.
> I just didn't see it as a student.*

In Samantha's example, when she says she was "self-sufficient," her parents probably

agreed. Samantha's comments reinforce the perception that students who struggle need

the most TPC. Similarly, Thompson's (2008) study found that the majority of email

communication between teachers and parents was because of students' academic,

behavioral, social, and mental struggles. The participants' responses that when they were

high school students teachers only contacted parents when students were in trouble fuels

the negativity related to TPC. Rebecca's response echoed Samantha's:

> *When I was in high school. My parents were very—had different sort of
> perspectives on communicating with teachers. My dad, I remember once bringing
> home a syllabus that he was supposed to sign and he refused to sign it. And he
> was being really stubborn and annoying about it because he's like, "You're in
> charge of your class. I'm not in charge of what you're doing in class. I'm not
> signing that because it has nothing to do with me." And my mom, I remember
> having an AP class where we were supposed to read this thousand page book in
> 10 days. And so I was complaining about it at dinner time my mom was like, "Do
> you want me to call your teacher?" And I was like, "No, do not call my teacher.
> I'm fine. I'll deal with it myself. That would be mortifying! Don't call my teacher."
> So and then how that compares with me now? I don't know, I guess just because
> my parents didn't really—they only talked to my teachers at conferences. And but
> then again, they didn't really need to talk to my teachers very often because I
> didn't really have any problems in school.*

In Rebecca's example, her dad fits the parent profile of passive-positive since her dad

believes that children should not rely on parents for school (Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015).

Parents often compare their own experiences from being a student to their child's school experiences. Emily classified herself as a good student too, and in the passive-positive profiles, those parents believe that no communication shows they have "good children" (Palts & Harro-Loit, 2015, p. 145). She was asked how, if at all, her experience as a high school student with TPC influenced her perception of TPC now that she is a teacher, and she responded:

> *Just because I was honestly a really good student, and I never—my parents never talked to my teachers on the phone. So okay, maybe I should say it influenced it negatively because I didn't know how to do that because I'd never had a situation where that was true in my life.*

Ashley recognized that during her time as a high school student contact from the school typically meant she was in trouble, and this influenced her to want to change the meaning attached to TPC:

> *Ah, so definitely, as a student, I felt like any time my parents got a phone call from school, I was going to get my butt chewed.* [laughter] *So like, that's where I'm hoping that things have changed a little bit and like, the parents aren't like, "Oh my goodness, the school is calling again. What did my kids do now?" Like, that's why I kind of want to break that mold and kind of get more of the positive things in there because I mean, parents here, left and right, like that's the first thing they're going to hear is what their kid did wrong. They don't hear a ton of the positives like, yeah, they might hear it every once in a while, but you're going to hear what your kid did wrong way before you hear what your kid did right. So, I hope that's something that I've— districts and things like that have kind of been hopefully changing from when we were in high school or elementary to now.*

Ashley's response calls for a cultural shift that positively involves parents in secondary schools. Research supports that teachers want parent contact often and not only when there is a problem (Barge & Loges, 2003). In Michael's experience, TPC was because there was a problem. He shared a few experiences of negative TPC when he was student:

> *My mom talked to the school quite a bit when I was in school. My situation is also a little bit different. I happen to be one of three of the African American students at my high school. And that's not to say that we were targets or anything. We were just a lot harder to miss doing things than anyone else. But I do, I do have very ugly memories of parent-teacher communication, admin-parent communication*

because I would get pulled into the office for things like wearing baseball socks, like the long like neon socks. I'd wear those to school. We don't have a dress code. And they pulled me in. Questioned me about gang activity. All right, I wear a bandana to keep my waves down not a do-rag—like a bandana like a biker would wear. Right? And then they pull me into the office and they're asking me about gang activity. And then shit goes missing in the school and they pulled me in. They asked me if I stole the mouse from a computer once. And I was like, like at the time I was coming from art class, so I had safety scissors in my pocket. So then they're like, "Well, why do you have scissors in your pocket?" So it's just like these—and my mom would come in just absolutely fuming but they, then they like, the further I got into high school, the more everybody realized that like, I'm not running around with Crips and Bloods and banging heroin and doing all you know, all this unnecessary stuff. But like, it took my mom four years of calling people racist for like that to change. So my experience with school communication at home wasn't always great. But then, like I said, when I got into high school, it got better.

Michael stated that his experience with TPC did improve later in high school, but he

attributes some of the improvement to his involvement in sports:

But then I got in trouble and like, I got busted at prom freshman year for drinking, so like, like the second time I got in trouble for drinking in high school, like the admins knew who I was. Like I was an athlete in every sports season, and it's not like that got me out of trouble, but what it did was ease that sort of tension...But it was like the more, the more trouble I got in and the longer things lasted the better communication ended with parents, and I ended up graduating like in NHS and French club and you know, all these other nerdy things, despite the rough patches of junior high. But yeah, throughout all of that, the communication and any time that my mom had to communicate with the school always meant bad news for me. So I would go out, you know, to every length I could to hope that there was no communication going back and forth, but that's also because I was a little badass kid. So the less communication, the more I could get away with, I guess.

I found the responses to this question about familial influence to be particularly

interesting because it is impossible for an individual to remove themselves from the

influence of their past experiences. Their experiences as students contribute to the

foundation for how ECEs define effective TPC. The theme "The Good Kid"

Disadvantage highlights how teachers that viewed themselves as good students have little

if any experience to draw on as models for effective TPC. Later in the findings section

for research question 4, I discuss the second disadvantage—minimal exposure as a

student teacher to TPC. This means that many in-service teachers begin their careers with

limited second-hand (seeing their parents communicate with teachers and vice versa) and

limited first-hand (practicing TPC as a student teacher and/or in TPP coursework).

Message Formation

The second theme, Message Formation, further develops secondary ECEs'

definition of effective TPC. This theme includes the act of communicating and the

thought process behind the who, what, when, where, and why. When teachers initiate

contact with a parent, they must first identify to whom they are communicating, what

they are communicating about, when they will communicate, where they will

communicate as in which mode of communication, and the why which is the purpose for

the contact. Hannah explained why initiating contact with parents is part of effective

communication:

> *As teachers, we are patient when teaching students to be effective communicators because we aim to meet students at their varying levels of understanding; however, we do not always remember to have the same patience for parents. Not all parents have the same communicative skills and understanding, so oftentimes I think parent-initiated communication with teachers tends to lack a certain personable tone. Therefore, I think it best when the teacher, who should be the skilled communicator, consistently initiates frequent communicative opportunities that focus on student growth. By reaching out to parents in advance, we set a communicative tone for parents that shows we are present, caring, and confident in their child's learning.*

Based on students' ages and purpose for contacting parents, Michael calculates whether

or not he initiates TPC:

> *I've been with mostly juniors and seniors. But I did have a few years ago, I had that freshman [specific] class that was an absolute nightmare. And part of that I did spend a lot of time emailing back and forth, just in regards to more behavioral things, trying to set the precedents for the next few years to come and things of that nature. And I think when students are younger, the parents are much more receptive. I think when they kind of hit that junior-senior age, there's always that "Well, we want to start fostering some autonomy because they'll be gone, so we don't really pry too much," or, you know, "They're, they're old enough that they can handle some of this stuff on their own." So I do see, I did see a lot more communication in my [specific class] and [specific class], going back and forth, sort of, with just less severe general notes and things like that. But with the senior*

class, I'm really only in communication now with parents—I try to send good messages when I can, especially if a kid turns in a really sentimental project or something. But for the most part, it's, again, sort of those behavioral communications or check-up communications or coming up with a plan. But the— that's the other part of it is too. I think the older kids are a lot less responsive because of their newfound maturity and push for autonomy. So there's a lot more pushback and I think a lot less parental control the older they get.

He perceives that upperclassmen parents and students are less responsive to TPC, so that influences his decision on whether or not he communicates with parents. The examples from Hannah and Michael begin the conversation about message formation. More granular are the two subthemes of Message Formation: Communication Skills Application and Mode Selection.

Communication Skills Application

When asked to share a successful example of effective TPC, six participants provided a face-to-face conversation or phone call conversation as their example of successful communication while the other two participants identified an example of written communication. Several participants that specified their successful example as verbal communication proceeded to share that they continued to stay in contact with the parents via email to follow-up on progress and student support measures. Overall, participants reported email as their most used mode of communication even though the majority identified the two communication modes that rely on verbal and some nonverbal communication, face-to-face meetings and phone call, as examples of effective TPC.

When asked to share a time when they felt they were unsuccessful at effectively communicating with a parent, the majority cited an email conversation. This finding highlights a significant disjuncture between teachers' beliefs and daily practices. Even though the majority of participants shared an email conversation as their example of unsuccessful TPC, they continue to use email more often than other modes of

communication. Hannah was an outlier and cited a face-to-face example for both the

successful and unsuccessful responses. If face-to-face and phone call communication

were examples of successful communication, then why do these teachers use email? A

disconnect exists between what some ECEs think is effective for TPC and their

implementation of TPC. Hannah's reasoning regarding email communication may be

why she chose to share her conference experiences to highlight a successful and

unsuccessful exchange with a parent:

> *We only have conferences once a semester at our school and so the face-to-face is limited. So I do communicate more often via email. But I just, I guess I don't think of those communications as they're not as, like memorable for me because they don't involve as much like emotion and interaction. Instead, it's just more like task oriented. Like, "Hey, my kid, you know, has this question, could you answer it?" Or I'm like, "Hey, did you see this assignment? Could you do it?" You know there's a specific motive where some—usually for conferences, I feel like, or if a parent wants to schedule a meeting, it's, it just seems more like conversational, and there's more small talk involved.*

Participants spoke of their communication skills in generalities and focused more

on the content of the message than the skills they used to craft the message. Speaking and

writing with an appropriate tone and word choice were the closest examples of

communication skills. Participants briefly spoke of the importance of tone when

communicating in writing. The tone of voice is important, so the message stays true to

the author's intent, but that is a challenge when nonverbals and voice inflection are

absent. Michael pays close attention to his tone in emails and reflected on his ability to

fine-tune the message:

> *Being an English teacher, I can be a little more delicate with situations and framing things a little bit better, and make sure that tone and context are coming through appropriately with email and things like that. Plus, you can always put a little optimistic, cheery message at the end right before your sign off to make it seem like you're, you know, skipping around your room at the time.*

Rebecca spoke of her ability to adjust tone as needed and how English teachers may have

an inherent advantage due to their focus on reading, writing, and speaking skills:

> *I think maybe just making sure that everyone is super aware of the tone that they're conveying if they're, if they're doing written communication since it can be so ambiguous to interpret what someone is trying to say in an email. I think it's possible though, if you're aware of the like, what words you're using and how they're conveying a certain tone….. I feel like English teachers probably are just better at having a well-constructed email in general. Just with good grammar and all that.*

Ashley is not an English teacher, and she used her mentor's guidance on how to craft

emails:

> *So she* [mentor] *gave us a list of some of the positive emails she sent. So like, "Hey, your kid is doing really great with such and such and such" and, and then with some of the negatives, she just kind of told us like how to word things that way it doesn't sound like you're hounding on them, and it sounds like something more constructive. Instead of just saying, "This is what they're doing wrong. This is what they're doing wrong." Well I basically just copy and paste over and change it to how it fits to my situation. So I'm not the best with my words or wording. So I definitely steal things from that. Just to better, or ease-ify, some of the things that I need to say.*

Teachers are also challenged with deciphering parents' tone in emails. Alexis said that

she usually would read body language to gauge a parent's response, but since that is not

possible in emails, she relies on emojis, punctuation, and word choice:

> *But if it comes from a text or email, you can't always necessarily read that. Is it*
bad to
> *say sometimes I base it on like emojis? So like, when I get a thumbs up, I feel like that's like, that's good. Or a smiley face is good. Even in an email sometimes when they do emojis, I feel like, "Okay, good. That was a good thing." Or if they added a little humor—LOL or HAHAHA, you know, I feel like that that's good.*

Emily reinforced the importance of tone when talking with parents and how it could have

a lasting effect on the relationship:

> *But when you actually are having the conversation, making sure your tone, and your approach is really not aggressive. I think that once you start to blame and be aggressive, you get really defensive parents, and especially if that's one of your first interactions, you're probably not going to recover. Like I'm just going to be really honest.*

Emily's bold statement emphasizes the importance of each interaction because teachers

either help or hurt their teacher-parent relationship with each interaction (Perl, 1995).

When TPC is put in an either/or lens, the importance of it seems greater. Graham-Clay

(2005) echoes this assumption of TPC by stating that "every positive interchange will

serve to increase trust and build stronger relationships, not only with individual parents,

but ultimately with the broader community as well" (p. 124). Later in the interview,

Emily shared her belief that one's tone will come across appropriately if the speaker's

intention is to improve student performance:

> *I guess as far as tone* [in a phone call] *or this could even be in person too, I guess. I think that you mentally have to be in the right place as well. Like, that's why I said kind of, like, make sure you're mentally prepared for it. But once again, like kind of starting out with maybe a little bit of small talk just like, "Hi, how are you?" and, and just being genuine about things. And that doesn't mean you're like, not telling the truth. It just means that you're trying to, I try to soften the blow. Let's put it that way. Like if I'm going to say like, it's, it's about how you say it. And you're saying it out of a—once again, I feel like when your perspective and your goal of the conversation is correct in that you're trying to make your class better, you're trying to make the student better, then it will come across correctly and the tone will be good. But if your goal is to get a kid in trouble or to get on these parents, I don't think the tone is going to come across well. So I think that like having those goals in mind helps to try not to be defensive. Once again, like your goal is not just to defend yourself, your goal is to like, be effective in communicating to get the child on the right track, whether that be in grades or in behavior.*

In relation to Emily's tone comments, Jessica said that while the tone of a specific

parent conversation via phone was not confrontational, she perceived the follow-up

emails from the parent as "a little heated" and questioning her professional authority.

Jessica shared what happened that led to the phone call and the follow-up emails:

> *So she* [the student] *copied and pasted all of her answers off of a Quizlet that a past student had made of this exact study guide. She didn't have to read it, she did not have to analyze the text, she didn't have to learn anything. She just copied and pasted off of that Quizlet, and the dad was like, "I really think that's fine." So that was a little frustrating, but they were being nice and respectful over the phone. And when she emailed me back, she just said—Oh, they requested me to send them the Quizlet, and send them their daughter's study guide so they could*

compare and make a decision. "Well, you can make any decision you want. I'm not changing her grade, but you can take a look and see." So I sent it, and I also said like I'm going to forward this on to the administration because if you do decide that you think that she didn't cheat, and you want to press the matter, I'm going to have the administrators make that decision because I am confident in what I decided, and I don't put in a zero and cheating lightly. I have to be very sure before I do that. So I just alerted them that I would—I said "Your daughter is not in trouble. She's not going to have anything on her record. There's nothing wrong. It's just the administrators are taking care of these situations during the COVID stuff."

Jessica perceived the email response from the parents as "a little heated" because it included statements that asked if they did the right thing by directly contacting Jessica and questioned if she handled other people's students the way she handled their child. Without interviewing the parent, there is no way to fully understand the intended tone, but to Jessica—the email's recipient—she felt the tone was not respectful when compared to the phone call she had with the same parent earlier regarding the cheating situation. Just as Jessica perceived the tone as heated, the parent may have perceived the tone and content of the message to be contrary to the phone conversation. Jessica believes that digital communication provides an easier mode to be rude:

> *So like talking to them on the phone, we were all very respectful and saying what we thought, and then we get into email, and it's just so much easier for her to speak her mind when it's not my voice that she's having to listen to, I guess. And I've had that situation with other parents, that email just doesn't go well. And a lot of them like don't want a phone call and don't want to meet in person because it is easier to be rude to me over- through a screen.*

Throughout the interviews, tone and word choice were discussed, but like many references to "effective communication" in school-family partnerships, "the specific speaking and listening skills that comprise effective communication are often not delineated" (Bartels & Eskow, 2010, p.61). For example, zero participants addressed listening as a component of effective TPC. The closest example of listening came in

Emily's response of needing to be understanding of parents and students. Her response is

an example of empathy:

> *One thing I've learned is just try your hardest to be understanding of where the parents could be coming from. And then I think it's important that you can even say that to the parents like to be understanding of where the teacher is coming from. And I think when you try to, like, meet each other with that, that really and I think it's like being personable with that to like being personable with the parents. I think is really important too.*

Research supports the essential role of listening in effective communication

(Brownell, 2010; Keyton et al., 2013; Lasky, 2000) and more specifically, active listening

(Spataro & Bloch, 2018). The participants undoubtedly have to hear their students'

parents, but the act of listening requires more effort than just hearing. Leaving that crucial

component of communication out of the interview makes me wonder how ECEs view the

role of listening in effective communication. Besides not thinking of listening during our

interviews, another possibility is that since participants most often communicate with

parents via email, they do not "listen" in the psychological sense. Regardless of the

communication mode, teachers should work to show empathy and understanding, which

are necessary for active listening (Rogers, 1951; Weger et al., 2013). Further implications

of the lack of listening are addressed in Chapter Five.

Mode Selection

When considering the past decade and the current COVID-19 pandemic, the use

of computer-mediated communication (CMC) will likely increase within the education

system. In 1992, Walther created Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT)—a theory

of "how we develop impressions and social relationships with one another, over time,

online, and without recourse to nonverbal cues" (Walther, 2008, p. 393). Although SIPT

posits that relationships take longer to develop through CMC, CMC is no less effective

than face-to-face interpersonal relationship development (Walther, 2008). As discussed in

the subtheme Communication Skills Application, email was the most common mode for

teachers to communicate with parents. In Thompson et al.'s (2015) study on the changing

nature of parent-teacher communication, they found that parents of P-12 students

preferred email over five times more than any other mode for three reasons: 1.)

convenience, 2.) easy access due to smartphones, and 3.) time to craft more effective

messages. Parents' preference for email increased from 2:1 (Thompson & Mazer, 2012)

to 5:1 (Thompson et al., 2015) in just three years. The reasons why parents choose email

are very similar to why teachers in the study chose email. Common responses included

saving time, documenting with ease, and crafting one's message on one's own time.

One of those time saving strategies that participants reported was sending

automated emails through a student information system (SIS) like Infinite Campus for

class-wide announcements or updates like a missing assignments report. Hannah utilized

a student information system (SIS) to send information to students and parents. She

learned about this strategy late in her second year of teaching when her mentor showed

her:

> *I started using the automated—I don't know what I want to say with this, but like the automated message feature for missing assignments through [SIS]. And so just like that weekly email of like, "Hey, here's what you're missing." It doesn't need a response, but just a heads up, and I felt like that was—that was really helpful this year, and just being more consistent. And I know the first time I sent that, parents were like, "Whoa," and kids were like, "Oh, you know, I got that done!" You know, but after doing it each week, then parents were like, "This isn't a panic thing. It's just a reminder."*

During the COVID pandemic, Rebecca started utilizing automated messages more often.

She shared how she decided which parents received the automated message versus a

more personalized message:

> *If, I guess, I've been definitely at the end of every week sending the message through [SIS] about missing assignments, or if I feel like it's maybe, maybe it's a parent that I've been communicating with a lot, then I don't send them that*

message, but I'll maybe do a more general update. I've been sending a lot more emails just saying, "Hey, just remember, I'm available on Zoom. If you need help, you can schedule a time." So I guess it just depends on the nature of the message. If it's just a quick reminder, "Hey, you have a couple missing assignments" or if it's more serious, it'd be more individual.

In addition to the time savings that automated emails provide, a primary choice

for email is because of the paper trail. Samantha discussed her reasoning for email:

I prefer email as a mode of communication because emails allow me to keep a record of my parent communication. I can document date, time, and what was said in the message.

Michael recalled his first "disgruntled parent," and that he has learned to CC

administration for two reasons: paper trail and transparency:

My default when I realize the situation has gotten a little intense is to CC the admins on it, and not a blind CC, like a very overt CC, and then explain how—I believe what had happened was I had left an explanation somewhere and the parent did not really understand the explanation correctly. So they had done this sort of over my head go to the office thing to try to figure out what I was thinking. So then I was left defending myself on something I wasn't prepared for, and it ended up just being a pretty exhaustive email back and forth. And like I said, once you kind of CC the admins in on it, and defend yourself and take, you know, screenshots. Screenshots have been very helpful in a lot of my explanations for things so I could say I was simply pointing it here and here saying, you know, this and that had nothing to do with whatever the hell you guys were talking about. So I'm not really sure where the confusion is coming from. So again, those, the digital paper trail has kind of come through and helped a few times with that as well too.

Participants agreed on the benefit of transparency in email communication. Michael CCs

administration and finds that in doing so the response from parents changes:

And like I said, I rely pretty heavily on that CC. And usually when that happens, the tone shifts a little bit. And I don't know if that's like an accountability thing. Or, like, accountability is not what I'm looking for—a transparency thing, you know, like, "Oh, okay, clearly this teacher isn't hiding anything if they're willing to say this to the, you know, in front of their admins and things like that."

Ashley uses CC or BCC for administration to stay informed in situations that she feels

have or will escalate:

So, like, if you can tell that a parent's starting to get a little frustrated or annoyed with how, how things are going always like either carbon copy or CC or BCC my, my principal on there just so they know kind of what's going on and things like that, and they're really good about if, if something is getting a little hot, they'll step in and keep, keep things cooled down and kind of assist in solving the situation.

Another reason for email as the primary mode is because teachers can take the time to craft their message instead of having to respond in real time. In Rebecca's first year, she prepared for phone calls much like she would craft an email:

I would sit and write it out. Here's what I want to say. I don't know that that's necessarily the best thing to do, though, because I think it kind of builds—honestly it probably contributes to the anxiety over it making that this huge, big deal that you have to prepare for, rather than just doing it and just letting the conversation happen.

Samantha had mentioned earlier in the interview that she prefers email because she can *"ensure that my main points are clear, direct, and punctuation/grammar is correct prior to sending."* This was another common response email preference.

Even though email was the most frequently used communication mode, a few participants placed phone calls. Initiating TPC via phone was recommended by Rebecca's administrator in her previous middle school position:

The principal at [school name]*, he always said phone calls are better than emails. He said that all the time. Every, every time we talked about parent communication.*

Emily said that her administrators are adamant about telling teachers to call instead of email parents in certain situations:

I can't remember when this happened, but there was something in the middle of the year that happened at school or whatever, and I remember the principal—we were, we had a staff meeting and he just said, it, this is his words that "When you are having a discipline problem, you need to call the parents, not email them because things will be taken the wrong way." And he was like, "I know it's uncomfortable and it's going to seem weird, but it's super important and like that's how we reach them."

Jessica's first year of teaching was in a middle school, and her school had a policy that

required phone calls:

> *So, I was communicating with parents constantly because the policies were like if a kid got sent out of my room, or if I needed to keep what after school, obviously, I had to make a phone call to parents to make sure that was okay and arrange a ride and that happened pretty frequently.*

She found a difference in the response to phone calls of parents of different age groups,

but she also changed districts. Jessica recalled what she was taught at her middle school

position:

> *I felt like something that they did teach us and encouraged us at* [middle school] *was to make positive parent contacts as much as possible, especially with our kids that were more troubling because then not all of my phone calls were to tell them negative things. And then eventually the parents stopped answering their phone calls. So, we were told to make as many positive phone calls as possible. So I did a lot of that which was kind of fun. The parents like those a lot better. So I know that was something that was like successful that I learned, but I, when I switched over to high school because that was sixth grade and I switched over to teaching 10th and 12th grade and I tried to do that because that is what I was used to and what I had learned and the parents thought I was crazy. They did not—They were very confused and did not take it very well. So I kind of stopped doing that, because they were like, "Why? If my kid is not in trouble, why are you contacting me?" Basically, because it didn't happen as often. So it wasn't like they were yearning for a positive parent phone call from their kid's teacher. So I don't know, like that was really successful with keeping the relationship with parents positive when I was there* [meaning middle school].

Jessica did note that she was encouraged to make positive phone calls because parents

were oftentimes expecting the negative phone call, but when she switched schools, she

perceived the parents to be less responsive to positive phone calls. She applied her prior

experience of what was successful to her new position only to find it was not well-

received. Jessica went on to say:

> *I definitely think that my most effective method is over the phone. In person is not as effective for me because they just want to talk the whole time about how I don't look old enough to teach their students. So they get super distracted by what I look like. So like parent teacher conferences, half of the time is just discussing how old I am, and if I'm old enough, that I look like a high schooler. So over the phone, they have no idea that I look like a child, and they listen a little better. And*

> *then emails, emails always get misconstrued it seems like when it's like more serious situations.*

Jessica noted that parents listen better when they cannot see her, but she did not address her own listening ability. Even though Jessica said her most effective method is over the phone, later in the interview she said she does not make phone calls often:

> *Really…no phone calls. I don't. I don't contact parents very often, unless there's something...yeah, I guess. I mean, I have email exchanges with that group of parents that like want to be updated pretty frequently. But I don't know. I think other teachers make more parent phone calls because they have more issues with kids in class, or like it takes a really, it really takes a lot for me to be upset with a behavior to the point where I'm writing a referral, and they're [the student] getting in trouble. I think that's a shorter jump for some of the other teachers.*

In Rebecca's middle school experience, she made phone calls per her administration's push for phone calls, but now that she's in a high school position, she does not call as frequently. Rebecca shared when she makes phone calls:

> *I did if I knew that I absolutely had to. I didn't do them probably as frequently as—I definitely didn't do them as frequently as other teachers did, but I did them more frequently than I have at the high school.*

Alexis, a special education teacher with fewer than 20 students, also does not place phone calls often even though she prefers face-to-face or phone conversations. She makes an exception and calls parents if she needs clarification on a previous written communication (text message, email, etc.). One thing that makes for effective TPC, in her opinion, is to accommodate parents' preferred mode of communication. With her class size of under 20 students, this is more realistic in comparison to the average 118 students per day of the general education ECEs that participated in the study. Alexis does accommodate many modes of communication including the most commonly requested of her students' parents—texting. Alexis acknowledged that her class numbers are more manageable than a general education teacher, but she also emphasized that TPC in her position is essential especially for students who are non-verbal:

So I think communication in my, my area is like, over the top, just because we're, you know, we're texting back and forth. We're emailing back and forth. We've got a communication log that's going back and forth. It's really personally ideal for those who are non-verbal or can't go home and tell mom and dad exactly how their day was. That log is really helpful.

Teachers' preferences for TPC mode selection are influenced by administration, personal preference, and past experiences. The teachers with middle school experience spoke of their administrators recommending phone calls as the preferred mode. Only one participant spoke of her high school principal saying to call parents instead of emailing, and that principal specified that whenever there is a behavior issue the teacher needs to call parents. This perpetuates the perception that phone calls are for negative situations as opposed to a phone call to praise a student's success. Granted, teachers could still call for a positive note, but if their administration identifies that behavior issues require a phone call home, that may influence how they view calling parents. Also, parents in that district probably expect phone calls for behavior issues if that is the administration's expectation. Participants' anxiety was also a cited factor in selecting email over phone calls. Additionally, the ease of documenting and transparency with parent communication via email was viewed positively. Lastly, personal experiences influenced how teachers selected TPC modes.

"The Tripod"

Relationship building was reported as an integral part of effective TPC which aligns with Barges and Loges' (2003) finding that students, parents, and teachers agree that the top two components of high-quality parental involvement and communication include having positive relationships with teachers and staying informed on students' academics. The relationship between a teacher and student may influence the effectiveness of TPC, so participants focused on building relationships with both students

and parents. Hannah referred to a "tripod" as part of effective student-teacher-parent communication:

> It's essential [TPC], but I think of it as kind of, if you think of education, like the ultimate, like what we hope to achieve with it, I think that it takes, like, obviously, the student being actively involved, obviously the parent being actively involved, and obviously the teacher, so I kind of think of it as being a tripod. And so if I think of the role of parent communication, it's equally as important as student and teacher. And if you think about a tripod and how much more balanced something would be with that more solid foundation as opposed to like a two wheeled thing you know, that's going to fall over. So just that, that third leg to help sturdy and provide a solid foundation.

Hannah advocated for involving the student in TPC because they are the center of the discussion. As high school students, she feels they have a responsibility for their learning. She furthered her reasoning for student-teacher-parent communication:

> I think students should be included in those conversations. Because something that bothers me face-to-face is if a parent comes in with their student, and they talk about their students as if they're not sitting right next to them. You know, like, "Well, he, he just doesn't get it. I try to, I try to help him." And it's like, "He's right there, and he has a voice." And so I think, if we were, we were practicing and teaching this parent communication in a way that involves the student, because there really shouldn't be—I mean, I realize there's some things you might say to a parent that you wouldn't say to a student. But most of mine, when I'm typing to a parent, I CC the student because it's like, there's no reason that you shouldn't see what I'm telling your mom or your dad, you know. Like, there's just no reason that they shouldn't be a part of it. And so I think the inclusion of students and instead of parent teacher communication, making it like parent-student-teacher, as effective—because I realize like you don't need to CC your kindergartner on your email.

Although kindergarteners may be too young for email, involving students in their own learning, which include TPC, may be beneficial for all parties. Hannah's viewpoint echoes Kroeger and Lash's (2011) focus on preschool PSTs creating a "mutually beneficial relationship with families" (p.272). The researchers have preschool PSTs conduct an 8-week inquiry-based assignment called the "parent-child-teacher study," and they emphasize the name of the assignment because "the title reflects the importance of multiple perspectives in the care and education of young children, acknowledging parent,

child and teacher as equally important" (Kroeger & Lash, p. 272). Even though the

assignment was in TPP for preschool PSTs (Kroeger and Lash, 2011), secondary teachers

may benefit from striving for mutually beneficial relationships with families. Teachers

and parents can serve as models for healthy collaborative relationships and advocacy;

students can learn to advocate for themselves prior to starting their post-secondary

journey to college or career.

The subthemes of "The Tripod" include Proactive Communication and The

Value of Parental Partnerships.

Proactive Communication

Participants repeated that early contact with parents is essential for effective TPC.

Participant after participant spoke of the importance of reaching out to parents prior to

problems in the classroom. Without naming it, they described proactive communication.

Proactive communication includes early contact, consistency, and frequency all focused

on one aspect—

student success. Parents also view proactive communication about potential problems as

an important supportive behavior for students (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). In Ashley's

school, she contacts parents prior to the start of the school year:

> *I definitely think like just starting out the year on a good note. So I always like a couple days before school starts, I'll send an email saying like, "Hey, this is who I am. This is like an overview of the course," and just making sure that you keep those lines open and you tell your parents and your students that it's anytime, you can contact me. You can send me an email and I'll do my best to reply within 24 hours or 48 if it's a weekend or something, but just making sure you have those lines of communication open right from the get go. It's a lot easier to deal with situations if you've started that communication early then mid-year or towards the end of the year or something like that.*

One of the most commonly reported ways to build a relationship was to be

positive which begins with proactive steps. Teachers spoke of the importance of knowing

one's students and reflecting on the positives instead of the negatives. When Hannah

contacts a parent, she does so from a place of positivity because she believes that it "sets

the tone" for how parents will respond:

> *A lot of like, I was, I've often been met with support by parents, and I tend to initiate parent communication with a level of positivity. And so I feel like if I initiate it that way, I'm usually reciprocated the same way. So most of my parent-teacher communication scenarios have been positive.*

Emily likens TPC to a banking system:

> *And another piece of advice that I've received that is very good is to point out good things at the beginning of the year. So it's kind of like putting in, like, money—there's something about a bank, you can't take out what you haven't put in. So trying to like really build that positivity as soon as possible would be important.*

When working with others, the positive intention is not always received though.

For example, Jessica reported that she sent emails on the first day of school to parents of

students she thought might cause an issue later in the semester, following her practice

when she taught middle school. While Jessica viewed this as a way to elicit a positive

interaction early in the semester, her targeted approach was met with mixed feelings:

> *So then one of the senior girls came back the next day and she was like, "Why did you email my mother?" And I said, like, "Oh, that's just kind of what I do. Like I like to keep in contact with parents and make sure they know what's going on. And I just picked a few kids and sent out an email to start off the year." And she's like, "My mom told me that she doesn't think you like me very much because you're sending out emails" or something like that—something like "My mom came to me and said, I don't think your English teacher likes you very much. She sent me this nice email about you" [laughter] That doesn't make any sense!*

Even though the senior parent's reaction was unexpected in Jessica's opinion, she had a

more positive response from a sophomore's parent:

> *So I think I like more accurately identified problem kids with these 10th graders because they're [parents] like, "We're so glad to hear that you like him. I hope you continue to."*

Jessica is not alone in the practice of targeting students with possible behavior issues by contacting parents early in the semester. Emily also said that she found this strategy to be helpful.

Michael's experience echoes other participants' in the importance of contacting parents first and maintaining an air of optimism even if the news is negative:

> *That in regards to communication, even if it's bad news, I think if you get it to them sooner, they are much more appreciative because that I think, is what I get thanked for the most often is "Thank you for responding so quickly, or thanks for the quick response." Because I think usually by the time the parents are sending us emails is because they've got a bunch of—so many questions built up that you know, the kids, they're probably not answering very well. And they're trying to get to the bottom of something or, you know, figure out if I need to pay for a graduation party or not. Things like that. So I think haste is one thing that definitely helps. But then keeping it light even when you're being super critical, but not hiding any of any of those critiques as well, like, I'm very blunt with, like, where we're at and what we're doing. But then again, it's never really the end of the world. So, optimism seems to help too.*

Ashley also sees the early contact as a benefit because she can begin to form an interpersonal relationship with the parent for if and when she has to contact them regarding something negative:

> *I tried to like, I tried to send out as many positive things as well. That way when I do have to send something that's a little more negative, I do have that nice relationship built with the parents. So an instance of that would be, I had a student that was kind of messing around during lab and ended up breaking something. So just making sure that I had that positive setup of feedback and interpersonal relationship with that parent. That way when something like this happened, I was able to kind of ease into it because she knew me more, in a better aspect than just "Oh, my student talks about this teacher every once in a while kind of thing."*

Contacting parents "early and often" was repeated numerous times as was "be consistent and frequent." In Samantha's experience, effective TPC comes from building a relationship and frequent communication:

> *I would say continuation of like building a relationship and not just, you know, like, out of the blue, you know, I think constant communication or at least giving communication early enough that it's not a surprise to parents, "Hey, your kid is*

*failing" or you know, just expressing concern early on, I think is probably what I
would say is my biggest thing that I found to be effective. If I kind of start seeing
red flags with a student like I'll reach out through email. I find it—I find email
works the best just for me personally because they can read it and then respond at
their own leisure rather than a cold call, or, you know, texting. I've tried texting, I
did that a lot in [district]l. And then I just found you get a bunch of like, "Hey,
who is this?" So you know, so and then it's also kind of weird to give out your
personal phone number too. So just for me, I find email works the best and with
the way our school district is set up with weekly emails, parent communication
through students I feel like that mode of communication is received really well
through parents because they're used to it.*

Ashley's best advice to fellow ECEs regarding effective TPC is to take a proactive

approach:

Communicate, communicate, communicate. Now, like I said, just start early. Start
often.
*It's way easier to overload on emails at the beginning, and then kind of like back
off a little bit just so they know what's going on in your classroom, and you can
kind of avoid some of those tougher situations just if they, they know your
expectations, they know kind of the things that are going on. It definitely solves so
many problems of, "Well, why are they doing this in class? And why and blah,
blah, blah?" and it just, it's a lot easier if you've kind of front loaded that stuff.
And then you don't have to, you don't have to kind of justify every decision you're
making because they know why you're doing it. And you're not sending out 15
separate emails, you're just sending one mass email of what's going on and why.*

Ashley's quotation about not having to "justify every decision" exemplifies proactive

instead of reactive behavior, and in return minimizes the number of emails from parents

to her regarding her decisions. By frontloading her communication and being able to craft

the message she wants to send to parents, she saves time later and sets the tone for future

communication.

Additionally, Hannah shared that by contacting parents early and doing so in a

positive manner may begin to change the stigma attached to teachers communicating with

parents outside of the typical parent-teacher conference format:

So being consistent with how often you communicate with parents and also doing
it
*frequently so that way, it's not like this blind side, this blind-sided encounter
where they're just like what is, you know, because I feel like a lot of parents that*

maybe are older or their experience with parent emails, it would always be bad. It'd be like, "Oh no, if a teacher has to call home that's bad." And I think we're trying to get away from that where it's like, "No, it's good to communicate home. It's not, it's not a bad thing. You're not in trouble. It's, it's good to just all be on the same page." So consistency, frequency, and also I think it should be growth or progress focused, so the communication whether it's face to face or email, it should be focused on and the student's improvement, not necessarily what they have done or haven't done, or what they should do or will do but like focused on the student's growth.

Hannah mentioned a key component of effective TPC communication is to keep the communication focused on student success (student growth, student achievement, etc.). Jessica shared strategies for effective TPC which included keeping her emails concise and focused on the academic issue:

Yeah, I think, mostly just keep it very short, very to the point. Say, like, incorporate positive things about their student as well or like giving their students, seeming like you're giving their students the benefit of the doubt and making sure that the parent doesn't perceive it as like me attacking their student or there's always like, "Well, you just don't like my daughter. That's why you're behaving this way. You don't...you like other students, you just don't like her." So like making sure they know that it's not a personal attack, and I still like them as a person. It's just an academic issue. Um, and then I also usually try to send the specific documents, or if it's an assignment issue I'll like download a PDF of their assignment and send like, "Here's your daughter's work. Here's the internet version of what it was. You look for yourself what's going on."

The Value of Parental Partnerships

The final subtheme in defining effective TPC includes the outcome of TPC which ultimately hinges on a parent's involvement and influence on their student. Participants spoke highly of parental partnerships and how parents play an integral role in student success especially for struggling students. Parental involvement has been cited numerous times as an indicator of student success (DesLandes & Bertrand, 2005; Epstein, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002),

Participants perceived parental involvement as a catalyst behind positive student change, which is what most participants viewed as effective TPC. If a change for the

better occurred, effective TPC took place. Emily explained her definition of effective

TPC:

> *If the student goes in and completes their assignments, does better on their*
> *assignments. If the student then emails me, if the student's attitude changes in my*
> *class, like if it was not during a pandemic—like let's go back to regular classroom*
> [for an example]-*if I communicated with a parent about behavior and the student*
> *changes that around. To me that's effective communication.*

She did note that a teacher's effort to communicate with parents does not guarantee

change:

> *I think that it* [communication] *needs to be both sides also, and so if there is no*
> *response from the parents, then that—even if the teacher is trying to*
> *communicate, that doesn't mean that the student is going to be more successful.*
> *Like, I don't think that it's always like, how much effort the teacher puts in is what*
> *grade the students going to get because that's not how it really works.*

Hannah had a similar experience about a parent's attitude toward her subject:

> *It was very one-sided. I didn't feel like it was a conversation. And that was one*
> *where, you know, this, despite this communication we were having that was very*
> *one-sided, like the student's behavior and academic performance did not change.*
> *And so I think that shows that like good communication or not good*
> *communication is—it like directly impacts the academic progress you're going to*
> *see. Um, and so with this particular student, it was frustrating because while I, at*
> *the time, this would have been my first year, I thought that communication was*
> *adequate. I was like, "Well, we're communicating," you know. Now I realize—it*
> *was very one-sided which makes sense with how I felt. I felt like I couldn't really*
> *be a part of it and I wasn't. And so with that, it was frustrating to me because I'm*
> *like, wait a minute, I'm communicating with parents, which is what I was taught*
> *to do. And this kid is still failing and his motivation is low and his attitude is low*
> *and work he's turning in?—well, there isn't any.*

Michael concluded that parental involvement is necessary especially for students

who struggle. He suggested changes that could be implemented through the LMS as an

avenue for more effective TPC:

> *Well, that's one thing, like I think that gets ingrained in a lot of educators early is*
> *that if the parents aren't involved, then you are going to have one heck of a time*
> *with any sort of intervention or deeper connection to material at home and things*
> *like that. So and if parents are out of the loop, in my opinion, are just as useless*
> *as parents who aren't participating. So I mean, it's, I wish that more parents*
> *would be on our learning management system, or if our learning management*

system had some sort of feedback mechanism for a parent. So they could come in and look at these assignments and be like, "Oh, that's cool, or Oh my god, you did your grandma's story!" You know, something along those lines, to sort of open up that LMS to the entire family versus just the student and then mom and dad can come in and, you know, they can look through stuff. But then again, there's no, there's no easy way to get that feedback there other than assuming they're having conversations at home. But I have noticed without parent involvement, my difficult cases only become more difficult. So that's only more evidence that parent involvement is still like at a premium for student success.

Rebecca's opinion matched Michael's when she said:

I think parents are probably one of the most important factors in a student's success. Like if their parents aren't supporting them, then they're definitely not going to be as successful. So I think making sure that parents are aware of how their students are doing is really important because if they're not, then they're not going to know that they need to check in with their kids, they're not going to know that they need to maybe push their kids a little bit more, so I think it's super important to have parent communication.

Alexis and Ashley both spoke about how teachers spend a lot of time with students, but parents know their children best. When teachers view parents as valuable sources of student information, the focus is no longer on changing or coaching the parent which can cause power issues in the relationship (Kroeger and Lash, 2011). Alexis strongly believes that parents are essential for a team approach to student success:

Oh, it's huge. I don't think, I don't think kids could be successful if there wasn't parent teacher communication. I mean, teachers, we have them for a long period of day and we do a lot with them during the day, but their parents, they're the ones who kind of know them the best. And if that, yeah, you would, you'd want to be a team. And I guess that's huge in special education. We have a team, everybody's a team, we all work together to do what's best for the child.

The general education teachers' responses about the role that parents play aligns with Alexis' perspective as a special education teacher. Jessica referenced the team approach too, but from her viewpoint as a general education teacher:

It's like such a kid to kid basis like sometimes reaching out to their parent makes the situation worse because they don't want their parents to be involved, and they want to be independent since they are teenagers. But then there are other students that, like they need their parent to be informed by me, and we're both like teamed up to make sure everything is getting done and turned in and what our

> *expectations. So I definitely have a handful of parents every year that I'm in constant contact with usually through email because those are the ones that are wanting to be supportive. And it's not like a situation that we're trying to deal with. So the email mode is fine. So I don't know like those specific students that require more of that team support helps them be very successful.*

In another example of teamwork, but in this case a more formalized approach, Samantha shared her experience with Teacher Assistance Teams (TATs):

> *Those* [TATs] *are really effective too where we bring the parent into those meetings, and*
>> *the student, and then all the teachers kind of like an IEP [individualized education plan], but like more addressing behaviors—certain—those are really effective. Those help a lot. And when we can sit down face to face, talk about some of the things we're seeing in terms of work, quality of work, behavior, it almost always changes like the next day because then the parents go home, they have the conversation, they take something away have some sort of conversation at home about it. That helps...I've found that they are really, really effective, especially with communication with parents.*

Ashley agreed that parents play an important role in student success and went on to say that parent comfort levels are a part of effective TPC:

> *So I think it's really, really important to make sure that you are communicating with your parents and that they feel comfortable communicating with you as well.*

Parents feeling uncomfortable when communicating with teachers may be an obstacle in effective TPC. Using parents' preferred mode of communication, being appropriately proactive in one's approach, and building the relationship between student, teacher, and parent may contribute to effective TPC.

Research Question 2 Findings & Analysis

The second research question, "What experiences from TPPs, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as having contributed to their ability to communicate with parents?" allowed participants to address their training or lack thereof in TPPs. Teachers agreed that TPC was a part of their TPP, but it was addressed in varying degrees. All participants reported that they remembered very little about parent communication from

their coursework and student teaching experiences. This finding aligns with past research

that I will discuss further in this section. The two major themes are broken into the TPP

components of coursework and student teaching: 1.) "It's important. Do it" (TPP

coursework) and 2.) Student Teachers & Role in the Classroom (TPP student teaching).

"It's important. Do it." refers to the message sent by the five TPPs represented in the

study. The TPPs made a point to teach students that they need to communicate with

parents, but students were rarely, if at all, given the opportunity to apply their skills.

Hannah recalls what she learned about TPC during TPP coursework:

> *Like I literally remember writing like "Consistency. That's important." I've got it.*
> *Like, oh, um, and, you know, communicating with parents is important. Like we*
> *were drilled to know that it was important, but I do not feel like it was ever like,*
> *"Here are examples of what you can do. Here is modeling what effective parent*
> *communication looks like. And here is a chance for you to practice it before*
> *you're just in the real world."*

The lack of application was echoed by Alexis:

> *They* [the TPP] *gave you an overview. They did a nice job of just saying this is*
> *how you could communicate* [in terms of modes] *with parents, but then I don't*
> *think we applied it.*

When asked to further her response, she did recall writing a mock newsletter:

> *I remember we wrote one fake newsletter, but like there wasn't, it wasn't really*
> *like you did a good—you know, "This is right, this is wrong. These are the three*
> *points you should put in every time." It wasn't really in a template. They* [TPP
> educators] *kind of let you have the freedom to do as you please, I guess. Even*
> *emails—like we weren't really, I guess, I don't know if they were required to teach*
> *us that. I think it would be helpful, at least to teach you how to write an email—So*
> *no, I don't, I don't think they specifically showed you the right way, the wrong*
> *way, which maybe they decided just open-ended where you kind of did trial and*
> *error because you are able to, for the most part, run a classroom how you want*
> *to, so you could probably write your newsletter how you wanted to, but they didn't*
> *really say, "You should always put this information in there. You should always*
> *put this information in there." That, no, I don't think I ever was taught that.*

No participant shared specific communication skills they were taught in their TPPs. The

message sent from TPPs about TPC seemed to be on frequency and positivity. In

Samantha's TPP, she was also told about the importance of over communicating:

> *I would say the biggest thing they taught us in preparation program was to, I guess, over*
> *communicate and don't assume that students know anything or what your*
> *expectation is like. Put it in writing, put it in verbal, you know, make sure that if*
> *you have a deadline or due date or something, you know, point to it, have it*
> *written out, make sure that students know where to access that information, as*
> *well as parents.*

Michael recalled a popular strategy that was referenced in several participants'

interviews:

> *I was taught very little about parent teacher communication outside of the*
> *compliment sandwich idea where you want to start off with something nice about*
> *the child, and then bring up your concern or critique, and then finish with another*
> *compliment about the child. That's obviously a little basic when you're emailing*
> *back and forth with parents, but that general format still kind of holds true.*

The gap in experience from a TPP and an ECE's classroom may lend itself to the

avoidance and negative emotions associated with communicating with parents. Research

supports this claim—if teachers have successful collaboration with parents, they are more

willing to work for quality TPC (Denessen et al., 2007). On the other hand, if teachers

have negative experiences with parents, they are more likely to avoid TPC. Teachers rely

on their past experiences to inform how they navigate their profession. Having positive

interaction with parents as a PST is vital for fostering effective TPC as an in-service

teacher. The fact that TPC skills applications were nearly absent from all participants'

preparation is alarming because they are missing practicing a professional responsibility

that teachers encounter daily. PSTs are taught how to structure a lesson—a skill they

have to use every day, yet TPC receives minimal training.

Student Teachers & Role in the Classroom

Student teaching, also referred to as a field placement, is typically the final semester of a TPP with most students seeking their first teaching job after graduation. A major part of TPPs is student teaching, and "initial experiences in the classroom may considerably shape a pre-service teacher's future outlook on his/her teaching career" (DeMauro & Jennings, 2016, p. 123). The student teaching experience has many variables such as the cooperating teacher, school district, and students. A commonality among the participants was that they had very little, if any, contact with parents during student teaching. Now that they are in-service teachers, they report email as being their most frequently used mode of TPC, yet they sent few, if any, emails during student teaching placement due to a variety of reasons. Reasons included no access to the gradebook, learning portal, and/or email. Others reported they did not communicate with parents due to their cooperating teacher's preference and/or school-site policy.

The most direct parent contact PSTs experienced during student teaching was parent-teacher conferences. One participant was an outlier in the amount of experience because her cooperating teacher was on a trip during conferences, and she was able to conduct the conferences by herself. The other participants reported that they only observed or briefly commented on student performance. Student teacher placements vary in direct experience with parents, much like TPPs vary in curriculum and coverage.

When Hannah was given the opportunity to conduct parent-teacher conferences by herself, she felt that her age and lack of credentials hindered her in establishing credibility with parents:

> *So I definitely was kind of thrown into the hot seat with like, these parents of juniors and seniors coming to talk to their, you know, their senior teacher before they're going to college. And it's like, "Hey, guys, I'm actually just 19" and I'm, well, actually, I was 22. But it was just like, very awkward because it's like, you*

know, I'm a student teacher. So, I did, I did, I was forced into that face-to-face teacher-parent communication, but I didn't do a lot with emails.

In her in-service years, Hannah prefers speaking face-to-face with parents because she can read non-verbals, and she said that the interactions usually go well. While a causation cannot be made, her experience while student teaching did expose her to interacting with parents in a one-to-one face-to-face setting, which is unlike the other seven participants' experiences.

Rebecca struggled to recall her role in parent-teacher conferences:

> S*o I don't know if this is 100% accurate, but I feel like I just said, "This is what I've seen in class." Like, I feel like I was more involved at that time with the teaching and so it was more just, "Here's what it's been looking like in class for this student."*

Ashley's experience as a student teacher only involved parent communication at conferences:

> *When I student taught, the only communication I had with parents was parent-teacher conferences. I did not..I didn't, I didn't send emails or anything like that. They probably didn't even know I was in their kid's classroom at that point in time.*

From analyzing the data, it appears that at the time of student teaching PSTs focused on instruction and classroom management while cooperating teachers handled TPC. Alexis captures her student teaching experience with TPC when she said:

> *I didn't really communicate with parents when I student taught....We're not in a small town, but I never really communicated with parents. I did make in my student teaching, I did make a newsletter just kind of explaining that I was student teaching in the classroom, but the teacher took care. The classroom teacher took care of communicating with parents, and she even took care of like even putting grades in. So then there wouldn't have been any, I mean, really, truly any communication needed that way. We did form an email. Now that I'm thinking back, we did form an email when I first started, um, and then we did send a couple of them just kind of explaining what I was doing for lessons and how we were grading it and things like that so that they the parents understood, but other than that the, the general ed teacher took care of the communication.*

Much like Alexis, Michael said that he did not have a purpose to contact parents when student teaching because he did not have grade-related materials to send to parents. He also believed that school politics played a role in him not being able to contact parents:

> *And part of that I think was distrust with the very small [private school] that I had wiggled my way into through social context. So I, I'm not sure that they wanted me as a voice on their, on their platforms based on some conversations with some people who are held in pretty high regard there that are no longer there due to various other things, but so that was a little bit interesting and not really getting to talk to parents until you're actually in a classroom. So my first you know, real experience with you know, maybe a disgruntled parent would have definitely been my first year legit teaching.*

Michael's experience highlights a commonality in TPPs especially during the student teaching portion. Communicating with parents during student teaching does lend itself to some challenges. In particular, when PSTs get involved with a student's parents, "questions of power, boundaries, and the 'right course of action'" come to mind, which is why simulations are recommended in place of authentic experiences (Cil & Dotger, 2017, p. 244). The extent to which PSTs are allowed to interact with students and parents varies too. In Samantha's student teaching placement, she did not have access to the SIS which limited her digital communication:

> *So I student taught in [district] so a smaller school. Students do not have a ton of student parent communication in my teacher prep program. Student parent teacher conferences, I would say was about it. A lot of—my mentor teacher, I think she took the brunt of it or took most of it. I didn't have access to their [SIS] or parent emails, so I guess I didn't do that a lot. Just in the student parent teacher conferences, I think would be the biggest thing.*

Michael and Samantha's experience of not communicating with parents outside of conferences was shared among the participants. A student teacher's cooperating teacher as well as school and/or district policies may inhibit a student teacher from experiencing authentic TPC. Even though Hannah led conferences by herself due to her cooperating teacher's absence, she does not credit her positive student teaching experience to her

university's TPP because some cohort members had poor experiences; instead, she credits her cooperating teacher who provided her with autonomy.

Overall, participants reported minimal experience with TPC in coursework and student teaching. Consensus was that TPPs taught that TPC is important, but the instruction was mostly about TPC and fell short of application. During the participants' student teaching experiences, they recalled attending parent-teacher conferences, but outside of conferences, their cooperating teachers took responsibility for TPC.

Research Question 3 Findings & Analysis

The third research question, "What experiences during their in-service years, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as having contributed to their ability to communicate with parents?" explores participants' professional experiences. The participants' average number of years teaching was four, and when interviewed, participants shared examples from their first year to the present. Their experiences were divided into three themes: 1.) First Year Frenzy, 2.) Teacher Becomes Student: Personal Growth of ECEs, and 3.) It Takes a Village: Support for ECEs.

First Year Frenzy

Participants spoke of their in-service years as the greatest teacher for learning how to communicate with parents. From their first-year trials to reflection on their years of service, teachers shared what contributed to their ability to communicate with parents. A teacher's first year is a unique time that cannot be replicated. I view the first year as separate from the theme Personal Growth because there were few, if any, experiences to reflect upon—this means that the first year is like experiencing everything for the very

first time. Personal Growth, a theme discussed later, comes from reflection upon

subsequent years of service and allows for application of prior experiences to novel ones.

ECEs reported their first year as overwhelming. It is common for ECEs to get a

job at a district different from their student teaching placement. Because of this, there is

much to learn about the culture of the school in addition to the traditional teacher

workload. The various emotional responses are common for new teachers. "Novice

teachers experience excitement and anxiety early in their first few months of teaching.

These feelings turn into disillusionment near the end of the first marking period, a time

during which novel teachers may question their decision to become a teacher and their

adequacy and efficacy" (Killion and Harrison, 2017, p. 93). Hannah describes why she

felt overwhelmed:

> *If you think about your first-year teaching, there's so many new experiences
> already going with it. And so I felt very overwhelmed with a lot of it. And since
> parent communication, you know, yes, it was taught that it's important, but it
> wasn't necessarily prioritized in my coursework. And so that first year teaching, I
> didn't prioritize parent communication. Instead, it was like "Gradebook-grades-
> instruction- lessons. What am I doing? Ah!" So that first year I learned that I had
> to do it.*

While Michael did not outwardly state feeling overwhelmed his first year, he did say:

> *So I feel like my first year was doing a lot of grasping at straws and just hoping
> that it made sense. Now, it's more me rationalizing my personal decisions after
> gaining lots of experience.*

Seven of the eight participants had some form of mentorship, but even the best intentions

can be lost on a first-year teacher. Emily did have an assigned mentor, but she relied

more on the next-door neighbor teacher "because we were closer in age, and it was just

easier to have a female sometimes." Specific to the first year, Emily remembered feeling

overwhelmed and not knowing what to ask her mentor:

> *So there'll be certain things that I remember him* [mentor] *addressing, but I think
> the hard part about it when you're first going into teaching is that there is so*

much and you're so overwhelmed that even if you were told something on the first day of school, you might not remember it on the fifth day when you actually need to do it or the 50th day. So I think the toughest part about that, and the fact that it's not super structured, is that there's certain things that you might not need the first day that you get told the first day, and then you need it later on. And I don't know, maybe you don't know how to ask or whatever. And so I kind of wish I would have asked some of those questions. Maybe sooner maybe that was on me a little bit.

Emily's experience is affirmed by work devoted to instructional coaches and their role as mentors (Killion & Harrison, 2017). Too often the process of on-boarding, which is defined as "the process of helping a new employee understand the rules of the road, such as the schedule for the school day, where to find answers to questions about employment benefits, or procedures for performance reviews" is conducted in a large-group or online format, and the new employee "may be too overwhelmed to ask questions or not know where to go to get their questions answered" (Killion & Harrison, 2017, p. 92).

In addition to not knowing what to ask, ECEs did not prioritize TPC in part because of the workload. Ashley likened her communication during her first year as a teacher to what she experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Um, I feel like a time I haven't been so hot with my communication is probably more recently [during the pandemic] *or when I was first starting out, because like, especially as a like a first or second year teacher, you don't really I mean, you have so much stuff being thrown at you, that's kind of the last thing on your radar is, "oh, shoot, I try make sure I'm communicating with my parents as well."*

When individuals feel overwhelmed, they learn to cope. A coping strategy Hannah employed was avoidance:

After my first-year teaching, I like finally went through my emails. Like my email inbox, I know this is going to be embarrassing, but I— because I got so overwhelmed towards the end of the year. I don't want to say like I wasn't opening them, but I was like I just, I had so many, and they weren't all emails that were important, but like I was getting these ones from [name of learning management system], *and then from my first year I was still getting ones from* [school] *like I was getting so many emails that like I just—I was overwhelmed, and I kind of ignored them for a while.*

Even though Emily did not have a resource from college to rely on in regard to TPC, she

referenced the coping strategy of seeking information:

> *I think especially being so nervous and having so many things coming at you the*
> *first year to have some of like, some tools, you know, to like pull from, and even,*
> *like, maybe research that you can, like, you're in your second week, and you're*
> *like, "Oh, where's that notebook from college?" And like, here's some things I*
> *wrote down or like, whatever just so you got some reference.*

Two participants confessed to another coping strategy—spiritual comfort. Both

participants said they were not sure if they should share that they have prayed prior to

contacting a parent. Alexis said:

> *Yeah, no, there were many times I did* [pray]. *"Oh, please, Lord, let me get*
> *through."*

The final coping strategy utilized by ECEs was seeking assistance. Assistance

came from mentors, administrators, and colleagues and is discussed in-depth later as its

own theme because "seeking assistance" is more than a coping strategy in this study.

Teacher Becomes Student: Personal Growth of ECEs

Teacher Becomes Student: Personal Growth of ECEs refers to the comparative

journey from becoming a teacher to the ECEs' current year in the field. In a sense, an

ECE is a student because they are learning to be a professional teacher. Participants

spoke positively of self-reflection and having experiences that ground them in their

profession. This includes trial and error. ECEs' mindsets were reframed from viewing

TPC as task-oriented and having to be done to an opportunity to build a better classroom.

TPC used to be a cause of anxiety and fear, and while it may still occur, participants

reported higher confidence in their abilities as their in-service years increased. ECEs

experiencing anxiety and low self-efficacy is not new. Sometimes anxiety can be

channeled as a way for improving focus and energy toward a task (DeMauro & Jennings,

2016), but generally, teachers' increased anxiety leads to lower efficacy (Jamil et al.,

2012). First, it is important to understand the participants' perceptions around the

emotional connection to TPC.

> Alexis vividly recalled the fear of TPC she felt her first year of teaching:

> *Oh, I was afraid of getting yelled at or like not—I, there would be no reason I would, but I always feared like that some—I might just make that phone call be the last straw in a parent's day, and they might take it out on me, and I would not know how to handle it. Like I feel like that's probably the most—why I was so scared because I wouldn't know what to do. And then you have to respond, but how would you respond appropriately? And not just want to hang up and run, you know? That's not an option. And then it got easier as the years went on. And I think you'll always grow because you'll have one situation that maybe you were really afraid to call— I'm thinking of a couple in my mind—and then you later on may have the same, but it's not so scary because you kind of know how to approach it or go about it. Because the first time you're like, I don't want to ever do that, again.*

Jessica's anxiety surrounding parent phone calls is still present even though she's beyond

her first year. She has found from her experience that she prefers email, regardless of

what her administrators recommend, because she can take the time to think before

responding:

> *And I say that phone calls are better than emails, but I never make phone calls because they are so anxiety producing, like, I would almost rather take a scathing email than to call. Like, I can ignore the rude emails easily. And at least I can slowly craft a response and make sure that I'm saying everything that I need to say, but over the phone, like I did not even contradict that dad, when he said, like, I think it's fine that they're copying off of the internet. I didn't say a word, because I just don't have like, I'm very much someone who needs to plan what I say. And I don't I have to think before I speak and a lot, nobody in conversations gives me enough time to think they just like overpower me. So yeah, parent teacher conferences and parent phone calls are very anxiety producing for sure.*

Alexis said that with repetition, she gained confidence in calling parents. When I asked if

she would share a fearful TPC experience from her first year, she said:

> *I had a male parent who was very old school, and he was a farmer. And he was just very intimidating. And so I was, I was very afraid to call about his child. And so I remember being so afraid, but then as time went on, it got a little easier. It got a little better. We created that, like relationship connection, you know, to where it wasn't so intimidating. You know, we were able to work as a team, but our—the first initial call—and then it never helps—I'll be honest—it never helps*

when past teachers have had the student and they add in their two cents that never is helpful because then it just makes you more like, "Oh, great, I'm going to mess up or I'm not going to say the right thing," or "I'm going to upset them more and make them mad or whatever." So I do think if you could try to avoid listening to those others...

Sometimes the fear is not from the act of communicating with parents, but in how teachers perceive parents and their power. Jessica shared her fear:

So our parents have a lot of power in our district. If parents really, really band together and don't like you, you can get fired—easy. "You have to keep the parents happy to keep your job safe," is what I was taught from other teachers and from my mentor. So as I was developing how I was going to do the transition to high school, and what I was—my methods of teaching, and she like very much drilled into me, "You have to have safeguards to keep the parents happy."

The emotions of feeling afraid and anxious when communicating with parents reportedly subsided with an increase of experience, but they do present themselves sometimes. The emotions teachers felt manifested in different ways both physically and mentally. Looking back, Rebecca said she would not write out a script before a phone call because it added to her anxiety:

I think I would try to just do it, just pick up the phone and just call and just say what I need to say. The only thing is I know how I would sound, and I'd be very self-conscious of that. Like, if I'm nervous, my voice shakes a little bit. And so, you know, I never want that over the phone, really. But…

In Hannah's case, she avoided communicating with parents by ignoring her email toward the end school year. In her first year she also had an emotional response to a student situation where she felt she did all she could, but she still internalized the student's poor performance to her teaching ability:

It was frustrating to me because I'm like, wait a minute, I'm communicating with parents, which is what I was taught to do. And this kid is still failing, and his motivation is low and his attitude is low and work he's turning in—well, there isn't any. Um, so it was frustrating but admin, and you know, as a first-year teacher, you're like, I'm, you automatically internalize that as like, "You're a bad teacher."

Samantha reflected on how she felt about TPC as a new teacher compared to her current

year:

>Like I mentioned earlier, I think early on in my career, I was still just building
>confidence, like totally intimidated by parents and wanting, and you know not to
>upset or rock the boat or just feeling like, you know, if a student was failing or not
>doing very well, like it's my fault. I took a lot of it on my shoulders that I, you
>know, maybe wasn't doing something right and that the parents would get mad at
>me. So I would almost—I would say I would almost avoid parent communication
>a little bit and just be like, overwhelmed or intimidated, and so I wouldn't reach
>out. But then now in the second semester after my first-year teaching, I got over
>that and kind of started reaching out more and realizing that the parents want to
>see their students succeed, and they want to know what's going on. And so that
>communication piece is vital to my job and just being successful in getting
>students the help they need.

Ashley spoke about her perception of TPC. Initially, TPC was something she had to do,

but her mindset has changed from her first year to her current year:

>I'm like, "Oh, this is another thing I have to do." Add this to the checklist, but I
>feel like now it's actually one of like, I love being able to communicate with my,
>with my parents, because we learned so much about your students, just being able
>to talk to their mom or dad you like, wow, this makes sense now and things like
>that. So I mean, I actually enjoy sending out emails, or like, I mean, usually when
>I sent the good ones, I guess not so much as when I send the bad ones, but I feel
>like it's definitely something that's super important to teaching. Because, I mean,
>they're trusting us with their kids at this point in time, so it's not something I feel
>like is a hassle anymore. It's one of my more enjoyable parts.

Michael emphasized that ECEs and veteran teachers alike need to keep their
emotions in check:
>Be patient. Don't snap. Because that's, that's the one thing as soon as you feel
>like, or I guess for me, as soon as I feel like I've snapped, then anything else that
>follows after that snap is like, I hate to think about it, but there is—a—a couple of
>my older colleagues that tend to snap even in professional settings, and when that
>moment happens, like you feel the entire room change, and I feel like the same
>thing happens, whether that's digital communication, phone communication, you
>know, email tag. If you're going through the third person, the moment that that
>snap is put on public display, then I just feel like all control is lost and like,
>nobody's going to trust you for the remainder of that interaction because you
>just—now it seems like you're more worried about that, then you know, whatever
>it is we're here to accomplish. So keeping the chill I think is so clutch even when
>you're pissed. And when you're pissed, be pissed in a funny way.

It Takes a Village: Supports for ECEs

The theme It Takes a Village: Supports for ECEs refers to the support for ECEs from mentors, colleagues, and administrators. Much like the African proverb's message that a community is needed for children to grow, these essential individuals in a teacher's professional life provide guidance and mentorship—formally and informally—to help ECEs grow in their profession. Mentors serve as resources that help with pedagogy, curriculum, school culture, and difficult situations. Colleagues can be positive influences in terms of camaraderie and problem solving. Administrators assist in handling difficult situations for teachers and may give advice on how to improve one's practice.

Of the three groups, mentors were highly praised for helping ECEs maneuver the challenges of a first-year teacher, and in some cases, when an experienced ECE switched districts, they also were granted a mentor because they were new to the district. Samantha had a formally assigned mentor, but she learned more from her informal mentor whom she knew from high school and was in the next-door classroom. An unexpected commonality was that the mentors helped ECEs understand their emotions. Samantha's mentor encouraged her to remember that she is a human being and cannot be perfect, which Samantha said she needed:

> *She* [mentor] *really just kind of took me under her wing and was like, helped a lot with my anxiety about, you know, some of the inadequacies I felt my first year teaching and just made me realize that no, you don't have to be like, perfect or you know, things are not going to go 100% as planned, and just kind of help build my confidence as a as a teacher and just realize that, yeah, you know, we're all human and sometimes showing that human side of you is beneficial to students for students to see. And then as well like your parents, yeah.*

Much like Samantha, Hannah put a lot of pressure on herself her first year. In a follow-up interview, Hannah said she is "not used to being bad at things," so to have challenges as a

teacher was difficult for her to acknowledge. She sought validation and found that in her

mentor:

> *She* [mentor] *validated that, and as a new teacher being validated is huge because you just feel like you suck at everything. Um, and so to have somebody say, like, "Yeah, you're doing great, and this is a problem everybody encounters and here's what you can do." And not feeling like I was being judged for not already knowing that. So that was a really positive thing.*

Michael credited his district's mentorship program for being a tool his first two years of

teaching:

> *So I feel a lot more confident, first of all, and I'm sure that just comes with time...So if you have a parent who writes you an insane email and you don't know how to respond, you can take this to that mentor, who isn't an admin in your building. They're, you know, just there for you. They're there for curriculum mostly, but I thought it was a very, very nice tool to have, to be able to ask your mentor, "Hey, I'm not really sure I'm confident responding. What do I do from here? Who do I talk to? What's a good way to approach it?" and having those teachers who have been in the game for years, you know, that's where I got the idea to CC people in, you know. CCing the admin so that way, there's a better paper trail. Or they can tell you temperaments of people even in the district. You know, if you get somebody who's been well known in the district, and it's your first or second year, several teachers might know, you know, "Hey, heads up for this," or "Here's a really good way to respond to those kids."*

Much like Michael's reference to an experienced mentor giving insight into

temperaments, Jessica asked her mentor, who is a parent and veteran teacher, for help

with an instance of TPC from a colleague:

> *This year I got a rude email from another teacher whose daughter is in my class. So that was really strange. Like we're colleagues, but he sent an angry email because she was gone that day. And she had been gone several days. So when I checked for attendance, I said out loud, "Oh, she's gone again today. She's been gone a lot lately"—just like thinking out loud. And one of her friends told her that I said that, and she was very offended. [laughter] But you have been gone several days. I wasn't saying that negatively. It's just the truth. And I got a very angry email from a colleague that said like, "I would appreciate you not talk about my daughter when she's not in the room." Woah! Ok. Um, so like that was something that I filtered through my mentor for sure. Like, how do I deal with a colleague who's also a parent who's angry about a true comment that I made?*

Handling situations like the one Jessica found herself in can be challenging, and having a mentor like Michael's can help in a variety of ways:

> *I think just being there as a source is huge. I mean, you're* [mentor] *a living reference, especially like for an early career educator to have that Mr. Miyagi that they can go to is just super clutch, I think. So even if you don't have those, I, I would like to, like, lean on admins to be there as that role, whatever it is, like a smaller school district or, you know, even do like we did when it was early, we had one teacher covering, you know, K-12 for a little while, even though she wasn't specified in my content, and I didn't get a ton of content specific help, I did get, you know, endless advice on the changes of the seasons and you know, the, how everything settles in that first year and how to deal with those emotions and things like that.*

Mentors serve a purposeful role of guiding and helping teachers in a judgement free way. Outside of mentors, ECEs spoke with colleagues about TPC. Sharing experiences with colleagues can benefit ECEs; "the level of teachers' conversation competencies is related to the degree to which they communicate with colleagues about their interaction with parents," and those with higher confidence and problem-solving profiles discuss with colleagues more about parenting issues than those with low confidence (Gartmeier et al., 2016, p. 214). Samantha experienced informal work-place learning, which is an important strategy for professional competency development in teachers (Grosemans et al., 2015; Hoekstra et al., 2009), by communicating with colleagues. Since Samantha worked at other districts, she was able to compare her experience of being isolated to having a shared office with teachers to collaborate:

> *But in terms of communication, I do feel that having shared office spaces, like what we have in the* [location]*, or in the* [location]*, where we have—that helps a lot too because I can kind of bounce things off of* [name of colleague] *or* [name of colleague] *and say, "What would you do for this situation?" And like a more experienced teacher or just even another body, like another person, like a sounding board is helpful in terms of how to, you know, establish communication or address a situation...But like, when I had my own classroom, in my own room all day, I felt a lot more isolated and not as easy for me to go pop over to somebody else and say, ask for, you know, guidance or clarification on anything.*

Additional participants spoke of how they bounce ideas off of colleagues in passing.

Alexis warned against gossiping with colleagues though, and stressed that colleagues

should intend to help ECEs, especially first year teachers, navigate TPC:

> *I do think like, if for some reason you come to somebody and you say, "I'm having a problem with* [name]*, she's not doing what she's supposed to. She's disruptive, blah, blah, blah, blah." That colleague should say, "Did you call her? Or like, did you contact their parents?" Or well, first, you probably should start with talking to the student because sometimes you may be able to solve problem that way." But if you're a first-year teacher you might not know. You might not know to just—have you had the conversation with the student? Have you had the conversation with their parent? And maybe their parent isn't going to be helpful to you, but at least you attempted, and at least you tried rather than doing nothing at all. And then just repeating the fact that [name] isn't doing her work or she's being disruptive, disruptive during class, or I can't get her to do anything but play games on her computer.*

In addition to mentors and colleagues, administrators can serve as support for

ECEs. ECEs shared experiences that identified how they felt supported. These

experiences have shaped how they communicate with parents.

Rebecca stated that her administrators are willing to take over some of the parent

communication. She shared a recent experience:

> *So um,* [administrator] *caught me in the hall and said that he had gotten, they gotten a phone call from her parents. And now he had set up a meeting. He told me when that was going to be, and said that he would have someone come in and cover my class because it was like during the day, and I was really nervous about it because I did not know what to expect. I thought these parents were angry at me and whatever. And maybe they were, but when I got there, they were really calm. He had already been talking to them for a little bit. I kind of wish I would have gotten to say more. He kind of did all the talking, and I didn't really get to say much about anything, and then he had me leave .He stayed and talked to them more after that.*

But by the administrator taking over the situation, she felt like her side of the story was

not heard. A similar situation happened to Hannah regarding a difficult student-parent

relationship:

> *My administration did a really great job of like reminding me that like, "It's not your fault, you're doing what you can, and this particular student has struggled*

before with other teachers. He's struggling in all of his classes. And, you know, we've dealt with this parent before," and so I felt supported. But I also don't feel like the problem was fixed. I do feel like it was more addressed of like, "Hey, we support you. We just need to get through this." And so maybe a little bit more— less focused on improving the communication and therefore improving the kids academic success—and more focused on let's just get through this. So let's just get through the motions. Let's just get this kid through high school like it's not going to change. So as I'm talking through that I felt really supported, and I feel like admin did what they could to support me. But I don't think the focus—I don't think everybody had the same focus for what should have been done to solve that problem.

In Hannah's case, she said she was supported, but moving forward she would like

difficult cases handled differently. At the end of Hannah's first-year evaluation, she had

additional support from her administration in how to improve TPC:

So after having that meeting with admin and kind of making that mental commitment of like "Yeah, I can grow here. I can do better." [name] helped me set up the folders that admin recommended. And when I finally organized and cleaned out that inbox, it just kind of was like a mental like, "I'm ready to do this now. I'm ready to commit to keeping this clean. Keeping it organized." And do this because—it because I can.

In Ashley's school, her administration has an open-door policy for helping with TPC, but

the teacher needs to reach out to the administrators:

I have also had, whenever if I feel like there's—like a threatening email or like a conversation or something, all I have to do is forward it on to my administrator. They're on it pretty much right away. If I feel like, you know, I want to make sure that there's all of us meeting together, they're more than willing to do that. So I feel very supported and like the different— they also give me advice and how to handle situations if I need it. I think try not to take advantage of that, but I think they know that. And so, it's been a pretty good system, I would say.

The same is true with Alexis' principal. He wants to be kept in the know about

communication:

Our principal is really great about that he always wants to know, you know, like, so if we had a situation with a parent and the conversation just didn't go very well, he would like to know because in case they call him then he kind of has the already story of what happened and can then assist in putting out the fire, if you call it that. He prefers you to either email him because he checks his email constantly. You can call down to his office, you can call down to the secretary and say, "Hey, I just got off the phone with blah, blah, blah, blah. And I think they'll

be calling blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And you know, so I think he does a really great job of that. Um, because, I mean, he's had my back a few times. I've had conversations that haven't gone great. They never called, but he was ready if they did, you know.

The ECEs interviewed perceived administrators as supports for TPC when working with challenging parents. Again, much like the perception that parents are only contacted when something bad happens, participants perceived administrators as supports for handling difficult situations involving parents. In nearly all the instances when participants spoke about administrators, they were referenced as being there to shield or handle difficult situations. Teachers need administrative support but changing to a more proactive approach to administrative involvement may facilitate healthier relationships between school and families. Identifying the possible underlying reasons for needing administrative guidance with negative TPC is a step in the right direction for changing the perception of administration's role in TPC.

Research Question 4 Findings & Analysis

The fourth research question, "What, if any, recommendations do secondary ECEs have for improving teacher preparation for TPC?" elicited participants' professional opinions, which were mostly directed at TPP improvements. Three themes emerged: 1.) Less Talk, More Action, 2.) School and/or District Communication Practices, and 3.) Times are Changing. The most prominent theme was Less Talk, More Action which addresses recommendations for TPPs.

Less Talk, More Action

Based on the experiences shared when asked what TPPs taught about TPC, the theme Less Talk, More Action seemed fitting. All participants proposed applying concepts of TPC in addition to being told teachers should communicate with parents and that it is important to do so. The emphasis on needing practice was repeated by all

participants. The recommendations for improvement included written and verbal (face-to-face and phone) communication in a range of mock and role playing scenarios. Scholars in the education field call for simulations as a way to better prepare teachers for communicating with families (Dotger, 2009; Dotger, Harris, & Hansel, 2008), however, these simulations covered face-to-face parent teacher conferences, which is just a fraction of a typical teachers' communication with parents.

While parent-teacher conferences occurred twice a year for all participants, which is infrequent compared to the frequency of written modes of communication, many spoke of the possible benefits of role playing a conference. Samantha emphasized how practicing helps her when she encounters the situation in real life:

> *Yeah, maybe, I, we never did this but like a mock parent teacher conference where you have two students or to mentor or two aspiring teachers, one, take the role of parent one, take the role of the teacher, how, you know, give a situation or a scenario and then play it out. I don't know. I'm all for practicing. And if I don't, if I practice something once I feel I'm a lot more—and I think this goes for anybody. I'm a lot more—like I feel prepared in what I want to say, if I'm thrown that same curveball a second time.*

Jessica likened her experience with a mock interview to a possible mock parent-teacher conference:

> *Um, this might seem outlandish, but we did mock interviews. It might have been nice to do mock conferences. It would not be a bad idea. Because my first conference, I had no idea what to say. So they'd sit down and like sometimes I would forget to introduce myself. I don't let them introduce themselves. I've had a parent, and I got through the whole, I just rambled through the whole conference, and he goes, "My name is John, by the way." Oh, sorry, I don't, I'm not going to remember that—we're focusing on your student, but I'm sorry, John, but I did not shake your hand. Maybe like, more preparation in, like how to structure a conference, like where, where should I start?*

Since Jessica referenced how her TPP conducted mock interviews but not mock conferences, it is important to note that teachers will be communicating with parents more often than interviewing. Because of the applicability of mock conferences, the focus

of exposing teachers to mock scenarios—conferences or otherwise—with parents would

be a more purposeful use of instructional time for TPPs. Emily pointed out that for PSTs,

they might not see the applicability of TPC until they are in their own classroom:

I mean, anything with pre-teaching, you don't understand until you fully are a

teacher.

Samantha held a similar belief when she was a PST. Now that she has several years of

experience, she has perspective on what was needed and/or would have been helpful.

PSTs have a cooperating teacher to rely on while completing their student teaching

placement, but the reality of being a solo teacher is not possible until one's first year as a

certified teacher. While her TPP did not have them construct an email, she stated the

following in regard to the task of constructing an email and being the sole responsible

adult in a classroom:

> *...how would you construct an email? How, what are some things that you would*
> *address? And I know it seems, I guess, from my experience, it seemed like overkill*
> *at the time to go through some of the things that we went through…Or just some*
> *of the other things that we would do seemed like overkill at the time. But looking*
> *back on it, it would have been way more helpful. Because I don't know. And once*
> *you're thrown into it, it's always just like, ah, what am I trying to say? Like, you're*
> *it. It's you and nobody else.*

Hannah felt similarly in regard to communicating with parents. She suggested providing

a hands-on approach in the TPP as well as initiating an administrator's guidance for new

teachers contacting parents:

> *And as I mentioned earlier, [college], or at least my classes, did not provide me*
> with an
> > *opportunity to like, like a scenario where I would have to respond to a negative*
> > *parent, or give me an opportunity to type a pretend parent email to a student*
> > *that's doing great, so I can initiate that. So I would say if anything, allow*
> > *opportunities for new teachers to practice this, you know, have them send the*
> > *parent email to their admin—to their principal, you know, like, "Is this good?*
> > *Would this be appropriate?"*

Her reasoning continued as she compared the Praxis test required for teacher certification

to practicing writing emails to parents. She enjoyed the test because she had to apply her

knowledge. Hannah stated:

> *I think scenario types of lessons would be a really great way to teach parent*
> *emails because every parent is different and every situation is different. So*
> *practicing the good, the bad, and the ugly [laughter-laughter] before you get*
> *there.*

Teachers acknowledged that training future teachers how to communicate with

parents is difficult and impossible to address every scenario, but that does not mean the

content should be skipped or skimmed. The outcome of students not practicing their

communication skills with parents could be detrimental to an ECE's career according to

Emily:

> *Like just because you're not going to be able to cover every single parent teacher*
> *communication doesn't mean you shouldn't do a couple and give them some like,*
> *give them some examples like so they don't, you know, or whoever knows what*
> *else, like ruin their career in the first year because they didn't respond correctly.*

Likewise, Jessica experienced fear for her job security because of TPC:

> *I feel like it would be important to circle back to like, young teachers are afraid*
> *that we're going to get fired because of parent communication that we make.*

Preparing for written communication such as emails was a common response.

Since all participants reported that they use written communication most often with

parents, this recommendation aligned with what would help them on a daily basis. Even

though participants spoke of the importance of positive communication with parents now

that they are in-service teachers, the suggestions for improving TPPs focused heavily on

practicing how to handle difficult situations. During the interview, Michael recommended

a hot-seat style approach:

> *So I, even if it's not, if you don't give them the time to sit down and do formal*
> *responses, you could do a hot seat thing where you put them in the middle of the*
> *room and say, "Hey, you just got this email from this parent, how do you*

respond?" and then do that in front of, you know, everyone in the class and then you guys can workshop and feedback on that response which might actually be pretty beneficial in getting prepped for some of those hardcore emails.

He went on to explain that standing up for oneself can be challenging, so practicing responding to a critique from someone outside of education is a worthwhile activity:

Have some sort of, like, mandatory response to a harsh critique that isn't a professional in your field. You know, basically, like get you prepped for, for some parent who has very little idea about education, you know, and have them just lambaste a project that you've worked on or something before you get to the point where it's your job, and you're no longer learning, but you're now doing.

Michael identified the reality that Samantha mentioned earlier. Once you are the teacher, you are the one person in direct contact with the parent. He continued by concluding that a "harsh critique" can manifest itself in different ways:

I wish I would have had a wider range of samples for the types of responses that you can get from parents anywhere from the angry response to the sort of entitlement "Well, you know, why aren't you, you know, doing this and that for my kid?" and that sort of thing. So, but a lot of that I feel like comes like with the job, but also with maturity. So I don't really know that many, many kids when they're fresh out of college are in a place where their communication skills with much more apparently mature adults you know who have a lot of stake in the job that you're doing. It would have just been nice to nice to get some practice defending your practices and things like that.

Ashley also referenced practicing how to de-escalate a situation through the use of effective communication:

And I feel like they should have like a mock, like how to disarm a situation, like mock emails or something. And then you have to, like, effectively email back or so or communicate back.

Reflecting on her in-service years, Hannah purports that realistically TPC is ongoing and should be taught as such in a TPP. This approach is similar to learning how to prepare corresponding units in a class. Hannah explains her reasoning:

I also think maybe even doing it like, like a continued assignment. So not just like, "Hey type one parent email." But if it was an ongoing, like throughout the semester, you have to follow-up, you have to respond, you have to keep it up

because I don't think parent communication is a, like a one-time experience. It's a process throughout, and it should be taught that way and practiced that way.

Of the recommendations from ECEs for better preparing teachers for the realities of the job, the most challenging would be a TPP redesign. The course requirements in TPPs could change to include a course on TPC. About two decades ago, implementing a communication course for teachers was promoted (Hunt et al., 2002; Johnson & Roellke, 1999), but the course was more encompassing of communication than just TPC. Hannah shared her reasoning for the including a communication course:

> *So thinking about some of the specific classes, I did not have, I did not have a specific class that focused entirely on communicating with parents, which is like— upon reflection with what I just said about education being a tripod, and that being equally important, I'm shocked that they wouldn't have an entire course dedicated to that. Because if I had an entire course I can remember about, like educational technology tools and methods of instruction. It's like why would I not have parent communication? It seems like just another category that should have been a class.*

If a course addition is not possible, a dedicated portion to TPC could be added.

One of the many challenges associated with teaching TPC is how families "defy standardization" (Kroeger & Lash, 2016, p. 270). Emily acknowledged that TPC is difficult to teach, but the difficulty of it does not mean it should be minimized:

> *I would say to for the teacher prep program, just like making it [TPC] a section of the program. I mean, I know it's, it's funny, because these college professors are like, "Well, we can't teach time management or we can't teach student management because, like, it's going to be different for every kid." It's like you could still give us some takeaways, you know, so like. You know, it's like one of those things where it's like I could see how universities would be like, "Well, we don't have time to fit that in." It's like, but it's crucial. So find a way to fit it in, you know?*

School and/or District Communication Practices

Participants described the value of school and/or district-wide guidelines for established modes of communication as another way to communicate with parents. Several ECEs spoke to an initiative in their schools that connects students, parents, and

teachers on a weekly basis. Hannah reflected on the benefits of the weekly student-

initiated email:

> *But I really like the expectation that all students are supposed to send home a weekly parent email, and they're supposed to CC all of their instructional teachers and some kids even include their zone or study hall teachers, just to the goal of it, at least communicated in my understanding from the district, is to keep kids actively engaged with what they're learning, because if they know what they're learning, you know that that just means that they had to be attentive that they have to know what they're learning. If they can explain that and put that into language, they're internalizing that learning, and it just feel like it manifests easier. So I like that they do the weekly parent emails. And I also like that, it puts the responsibility on the students. You know, I've been I've mentioned earlier in the interview that like, consistency, consistent and frequent teacher-parent emails are great, but if you can get the student to initiate that, and the teacher is CC'd and the parents are CC'd, I think that is like that ultimate tripod, those three, those three units coming together in a communicative space where people can respond as needed. So I love the weekly parent emails.*

Samantha has experience from previous districts that did not have a weekly check-in

between the three parties: student, parent, and teacher. In comparison, she found the

practice in her school to be beneficial because the communication is happening on a

regular basis:

> *But* [name] *school district definitely has established or helped establish routine and consistent parent teacher communication just through the weekly parent emails. Just by kind of enforcing that with students. That, that helps tremendously with parent teacher communication on my end because I can kind of follow up with the student parent emails.*

While Michael stated that the communication coming from the school may be a lot, he

perceived that may have been a downfall in the past, so by asking students to send

weekly student-parent-teacher emails, the district is ensuring another way of reaching

parents. Michael said:

> *We have our students send weekly emails on Fridays where they gather up their progress from the week from their teachers and see what's missing, and then send that home. So as long as kids are doing what they're supposed to be doing, mom and dad are getting even that extra communication from their kids in addition to what's already coming from teachers who are sending, you know, reports and things like that when we need to as well. So I, I think we [district] over*

communicate. But at the same time, I think in the past, depending on people's ability to reach certain platforms, they felt that we didn't do that. So now I think we just try to cover every single base we can.

Weekly student-parent-teacher emails was one school and/or district-led way of communicating with parents. Another way was through newsletters. Half of the participants referenced how their schools and/or districts have a digital newsletter or newsletter-esque publication that teachers can add content to prior to it being published. Alexis spoke about her school's publication which used to be sent daily but is now distributed once a week:

> *It's kind of like a newsletter, but it tells like the major announcements like there's a choir concert this week, you can donate blood on this day, whatever, whatever might be happening in the school. We've gotten some really good feedback from that especially going from constant communication of like, kind of constant communication too much in some ways to kind of not very much. So we've done that as a change. And then our principal always sends out an email to us saying, "If you want to add anything to the announcements, it's going out at this time."*

Participants did identify the gradebook as another way of communicating with parents. Guidelines for updating gradebooks varied among participants. Some were required to update on a weekly basis by a specific day while others were just told to update each week. When asked if there were specific policies that she had to follow in regard to TPC, Ashley said:

> *I don't know if there's really any, like, policies that we have to follow. Because I don't know, especially with Infinite Campus and things like that, too, so long as our gradebook is updated. That's basically our communication that we have to follow. But there's nothing besides that that is required....We're supposed to put in at least one assignment a week. Preferably two, but ah, yeah. So and then you're just supposed to like, if a student turns something in, we're supposed to have it in the gradebook within two days.*

Emily spoke highly of her school's assignment log which is visible on the district website. Each week she follows the template provided by the school. She sees it as a way to aid in transparency, yet not all of her colleagues agree. When asked if she found it

beneficial for parents to have all the teachers' assignments listed in one place, she

responded:

> *This is a debated topic. I think it's easy, but that's because I work it and this is—like I have everything on there. But I have heard that not all the teachers always have updated them as well as they maybe should have. And so I think parents get frustrated with that and also they have to go to each teacher's which is just how it is.*

The debate on whether or not the assignment list is worthwhile aligns with Hannah's

frustration toward colleagues not following through with weekly student-parent-teacher

emails. Even though colleagues may not find value in a standardized process, Hannah

believes that it is necessary:

> *Because I can already make—I hear so many people being like, "Why the heck do we have to get together and learn how to send a parent email? Like these parent emails are stupid." And I know I have a lot of colleagues that like, don't do it. And I honestly my first year, I didn't do it because I was like, these are dumb. But now that I understand the purpose for them, and holy cow, like, if the student sends an email, I don't have to! I really got on it this year. And I feel like it helps my, my year go so much more smoothly. I'm just—because I had less. I had less* [meaning negative parent responses]. *I really didn't have a lot of negative, like parent responses at all because most of the responses from the parent would be like replying to the student parent email being like, "Hey, you need to get this grade up." And it's like, "Okay, we're on the same page." Cool. So when I say it* [discussing a standardized process] *sounds lame, I just know that not everybody would be down for that. Maybe they don't see the benefits.*

From emails to newsletters to assignment logs, schools and/or districts may benefit from

implementing policies, procedures, and opportunities for TPC. For those that are

currently proactive and for those that implement future changes, making sure the staff,

students, and parents see the value in TPC is essential. Teachers must also be trained in

"how to effectively communicate with parents" in whatever changes are made; For

example, in Hannah's comment about colleagues thinking learning how to send a parent

email is not valuable, her colleagues are missing the value and possibly the "why" of the

school's initiative.

In addition to school and/or district-wide communication practices already addressed, incorporating a mentoring program was highly recommended by ECEs. The mentorship program would be an additional level of formalized communication practices. Even if a school district is small, administrators could serve as mentors, which Michael said when he spoke about the value of having mentors for ECEs. He discussed how mentors aid teachers through the emotional aspect of teaching as well as guiding one without judgment:

> *So, I honestly think if you don't have some sort of mentorship program in place, you definitely should. And if you don't, and can't get that going, then I would look to the admins to have some sort of, you know, team time maybe once a month, that's only your first-year teachers. The downfall of that is you have to talk about your insecurities and personal incompetencies with the people who are ultimately going to be judging your performance later. So that's why I think having the mentor associated with the district, but not necessarily your building is a really nice touch because you can ask your dumb questions and not feel afraid. And I know it's unfortunate that that's the case that people won't ask questions out of insecurity sometimes, but, you know, and without that I, I feel like I would have— without having a mentor provided I would have latched on and probably just taken the advice of whoever was closest enough when I was going through my crisis at the moment, and that's nice for varying perspectives, but it's nice when you can see the layout of, you know, effective programming.*

Times Are Changing

While the youngest participant in the study was 23 and the oldest 32, the common feedback that times have changed since they were high school students was clear. TPP faculty, administrators, and in-service teachers cannot rely solely on the way they were taught about TPC because the world is evolving. Examples include how some started student teaching and/or their first year by sending home a paper copy of a syllabus. That is not realistic anymore according to Emily and Samantha. Samantha spoke about the differences in modes of TPC and its effectiveness of use in different districts:

> *One big thing that I've seen change just in—I know due to the amount of technology incorporation that* [district] *does a lot of parent communication when I taught in* [district] *or* [district] *was paper—sending home a paper getting a*

signed copy. And then students bring it back which was just a headache. And so we would try different things. I can't remember what one of the apps was—Remind? Have you heard of Remind? I did that quite a bit in [district]. *I tried it in* [district]. *I didn't get a ton of participation in* [district]. *So I think district wide, some things stick and some things don't. But here in* [district], *email is very widely used and effective for student parent communication.*

In addition to using technology for email, grades are online, so parents have instant access to student progress. With that being said, the communication contexts may change, but participants' responses reveal constants of effective TPC: student-focused, positivity, frequency, consistency, and empathy.

The increased access and use of technology since the participants were in high school was repeated. Hannah specified that online gradebooks became accessible to her as a high school student:

> *And I think when I was, when I was in high school, I think I was a sophomore maybe. Our school had adopted this—they were attempting to, like have an online gradebook. And so like, I think my junior year would have been the first time where like, if parents wanted to, they could log on. But parents didn't get those login codes and instead students did. So it was like, we'd have to login. We didn't. No one knew what was going on.*

Hannah's experience was over five years ago, but the rapid change of technology may have influenced the rate at which teachers have adapted. Online gradebooks aid in transparency, but as Ashley stated below, technology can influence the frequency of parent interactions:

> *But the fact that like, parents will email you and be like, "Why isn't this updated yet? Did this kid turn this in?" And it's like, you know, teachers before never really had to worry about that, so I think there's, there's something to that too, and how you're going to handle that.*

Along with the change in technology access may be parental attitude. Alexis stated on multiple occasions how important it was for special education teachers to work with parents, yet she perceives that parents complain more than they did when she was in high school. She told the following story to illustrate her point:

But I think when I went to school is a lot different. Like, I'm going to be honest, parents kind of complain a lot more than they, you know, they did back then. My parents would never go to school. There was one teacher she was mean and not nice at all, and I wanted my mom to go and talk to the principal so badly and she said, "Nope, just suck it up. You'll be fine. Be respectful. She's your teacher." And I appreciate that now as a teacher, but I do just feel like parents complain a lot more than they did when I was growing up.

Even though Alexis perceives that parents complain more, she is adamant that finding what mode of communication works best for parents is necessary. The follow-through of catering to parents' communication preferences may vary based on a teacher's workload, but it is a recommendation worth exploring especially with the wide range of digital platforms.

The recommendations by secondary ECEs were plentiful and are discussed further in Chapter Five. The three themes (Less Talk, More Action; School and/or District Communication Practices; Times are Changing) reflect the need for the education system's responsiveness to today's growing reliance on CMC. Teachers experience novel TPC situations early in their career, yet they recommend training, professional development, and supports for PSTs and in-service teachers may remedy these novel situations.

Research Question 5 Findings & Analysis

Teachers in South Dakota started distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic after Governor Kristi Noem's announcement on March 13, 2020, which encouraged schools to physically close. The teachers in the study shared their experiences with distance learning in relation to TPC, which answered the final research question, "How did secondary ECEs employ TPC throughout distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?" Teachers said it was important to communicate with parents during the

pandemic. Three major pandemic-related themes emerged: 1.) More Proactive

Communication, 2.) Human Connection, and 3.) What We've Learned.

More Proactive Communication

The findings showed that teachers were being more proactive in their

communication during distance learning. Teachers were also increasingly intentional with

their frequency of contacting students and parents. A few teachers sent daily emails while

others sent weekly updates and reminders. Since the South Dakota Department of

Education (SDDOE) allowed each district to decide what was best for their needs, each

district set their own guidelines regarding distance learning expectations for students and

teachers. Per their district's guidelines, participants were to maintain an LMS and post

assignments each week, but that was their only expectation regarding what

communication parents could expect. The most common interviewee response was that

teachers sent information via email once a week which provided an overview of the

week's assignments. Two teachers ended the week with a missing assignments report,

which they sent using the automated message function on an SIS. Proactive

communication may have relieved some stress, but the challenges posed by the COVID-

19 pandemic were greatly noticed. Ashley spoke about the added stress on teachers and

parents during this time, and because of that, proactive communication was even more

important:

> *The biggest thing I can say is we're* [teachers] *stressed out, but the parents are*
> *probably like higher than we are. So just making sure that you're positive and not*
> *waiting till the end of the road. Like we hit crunch time about two weeks ago. So*
> *you don't, you want your parents to know if things are starting to fall through the*
> *cracks early on. You don't want to wait until "Oh, grades are due on Friday" and*
> *it's Wednesday like, "Hey, you got to start moving!" So just make sure your*
> *parents know what's going on and know due dates and things like that. It's going*
> *to save so much stress and heartache at the end.*

Additionally, Alexis emphasized that parents had little, if any, experience teaching their

students in a distance learning format, so she had to provide more support than usual:

> *Okay, so for my classroom, I would have to say that the communication has, like it was over the top. The state required us to make two calls every week to parents just checking in making sure that parents were doing okay. Students were doing okay. And then because we had general ed classes that needed to be completed, we did like Zooms on—we had a—I created scheduled Zooms—And then there was a lot of communication with the parents. One to make sure that they were supported, that they didn't need anything or that they received everything that they needed to be successful because it was a new role for a lot of the parents, right? And then, yeah, some parents got extra communication just based on their child's needs. And then other parents or guardians got lots of communication because their child went on summer vacation. So, so we had to figure out how to help them be successful when they checked out.*

A parents' educational experience influences their role in their student's

educational life. In relation to TPC, how parents interact with teachers is influenced by

their past schooling experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004; Palts & Harro-Loi, 2015).

Hannah shared what she perceives as parents' influence on students' educational

involvement. The realization and/or reinforcement that parents are vital players in

secondary students' lives emerged in participants' responses. She said:

> *I just realized that my students aren't, they kind of share the same attitude about their learning as their parents do. And so if their parents are confused, or they're not involved, or they're not being like reached out to, they probably aren't motivating their kids to do anything, and so I feel like the students don't.*

When asked if she felt this parental influence changed during the pandemic, she

responded:

> *I don't necessarily think it's different. I think I just realized it more because it was, you know, whereas going to school each day, if I have a student that's not producing work, I can pull that kid aside, and I can make that human connection with them. And I think that's something like me as an individual teacher, um, that's something that I do thrive with is building that relationship. And that relationship, just, I don't want to say it became insignificant, but if it was just like, not—like I can't pull them aside and tell them to get their homework done, I have to rely on the parent to do that.*

Ideally, teachers were already communicating with parents prior to the pandemic, but the

need for TPC was heightened because teachers lacked direct contact with students.

Teachers could no longer address student concerns or provide praise in the physical

classroom. As discussed several times by participants, parents play an important role in

students' success, but teachers also rely on directly communicating with students in class.

Without physical classroom interaction during most of the fourth quarter, teachers had to

rely on other communication modes and parents more than usual. Samantha sent more

emails than before and anticipated whom she needed to check-in with:

> *I'd say obviously, I send way more emails now. Just individual, back and forth. Daily, I can almost anticipate every week like who I'm going to need to check in with very early, or you know, and be like, "Hey, how's it going this week? Let's get on Zoom." I think that the Zoom piece has been the biggest piece of communication that's changed. I see a lot more parents on Zoom.*

Samantha also experienced the difficulty of removing oneself from the physical

classroom and having to rely on digital communication. She found over communicating

to be beneficial. In doing so, fewer students missed the updates she posted:

> *I just, I feel like I send a lot more individualized emails. A lot of my day has been spent sending individual emails, CCing parents, pretty much copying and pasting the same email, changing the student name and parent name, and then sending the same thing 100 times because we don't have that direct instruction or that direct communication line that we would in the classroom. So email has been my big go to for parent communication. I find especially with my [specific course] kids, they still are struggling, even though we've used it all year with accessing certain things on [LMS] I think a lot of them miss updates that I post. And so what I ended up doing is send—posting the updates, but also posting my updates to an email and sending those out to a group message. And that seemed to work too. So just again, posting things in more than one spot and over communicating. I think that's been helpful for the pandemic.*

Teachers were more proactive in their communication during distance learning

and plan to carry some of their strategies into the next school year. At the time I was

writing Chapter Four, states nationwide were preparing plans for safely reopening

schools in fall 2020 amid the pandemic. Depending on districts' decisions, teachers may

find themselves as distance learning teachers once again.

Human Connection

Along with proactive communication, the theme of Human Connection emerged.

Ashley felt that her communication during the pandemic lacked a personal touch, but she

attributed it to the increase in emails:

> *I definitely think it's a little—it's harder, because, I mean, you're trying to not only teach via Zoom and like, things like that. I feel like I don't get to spend enough time with communicating with my parents. Like if they send me an email, I'm like, "Oh, I just got to answer this real fast and move on to the next one" because we're getting like 100 emails a day. So I don't feel like I'm putting as much effort into sending back like thought out replies than what I am now. So I feel like they're kind of getting the autopilot replies instead of me like, this is a detailed [email], which I try to do during the school year. So I just feel like I don't have the time to give really effective feedback and effective communication as I would have before.*

While Ashley viewed her communication as less detailed, she stated several times in the

interview how important it is to form relationships with students and parents early

because it is more difficult as the year progresses. SIPT confirms that relationships do

form through CMC, but it takes more time than face-to-face (Walther, 2008). Because of

teachers' increased use of CMC, starting early in the school year is essential for

relationship development with parents. Even though her messages may have been more

of an "autopilot," she responded daily. Since the pandemic closed schools in March,

Ashley already had nearly three-fourths of a school year behind her. If she did not have

positive relationships set prior to the pandemic, her distance learning experience may

have been more difficult.

Ashley's example showed how the pandemic negatively affected her ability to

send her preferred level of detail in an email. Others discussed a change in their typical

behavior as well. Jessica tried to incorporate a personal touch by adding a joke in her

emails which was well received by her students' parents, especially fathers:

> *And then I include a joke of the day every day because I didn't think—like I really thought we were only going to be out of school for two weeks. I was like, "This is cute. I'll include a joke every day." And now it's been so many days and I am way out of jokes. [laughter] I'm so tired of trying to find some. It's a mess. But for one thing, I get so many parent emails, just laughing at my joke. Like, they'll just respond to me individually. Like, "Ah, that was a good one." Like, you don't need to do that, sir. Thank you for appreciating it. But I get so many emails from random dads like, "Oh, that was a good one."*

Jessica's daily joke is a personable addition intended to help build relationships. Prior to

the pandemic, she said she had never sent a mass email because she did not see the need

for it, but now it is a daily part of her routine. Emily also added a personal touch because

she believes that teachers need to be the example for how to manage difficult situations:

> *I also think that during a pandemic, one thing that I think is super important as a teacher is to remain calm and to remain hopeful. And so like, a couple of weeks, I've added quotes onto my emails. Just because I noticed that when the principal did that with us, I felt encouraged by that, and knowing that people are going through so much stress and whatever. I, it is my personal opinion that if kids are freaking out, we like need to be their steady, like, calm, you know, even if we're not even if our lives suck, like it's just goes back to teaching like you need to be their like steadiness, especially if their parents aren't either. And so like, I feel like it's really important to be that good example of that. And to just like really soften the, the way that you communicate and make it personable too. Like with the quote, or with like, "Hey, we're in our last week. Great job so far," like as much encouragement with it as possible. Those types of things.*

Hannah also sent positive messages, but she was not consistent as she would have liked:

> *And then by five o'clock 5:30* [on Friday]*, I would send out, a missing assignments message. And then also for kids that weren't missing anything just like a, "Hey, you're not missing anything. Great job!"—I wasn't consistent with the positive ones until like the last two weeks. So just because that was like, I didn't really think about it. Um, but I did receive some positive parent response from that.*

Even though Hannah and others expressed the importance of communicating both

positives and negatives to parents, she defaulted to the perception that TPC means

something needs to change. In this instance, it was students needing to submit

assignments. When she did send positive emails, parents met her with positivity. Hannah

stated that she did not purposefully choose to not send positive emails consistently during

distance learning, but it was because she did not think about it. Her reasoning may be

along the same lines of teachers contacting parents only if something is wrong. The

teachers' perception is that something needs to change in order for the student to be

successful, which warrants TPC, but a positive communication is not weighted with the

same urgency.

During the pandemic, Samantha witnessed parents working with their student on

course content. This team approach highlights yet again the value of parents, teachers,

and students working together.

> *Yeah, I've seen quite a few parents just like—I have a couple of students who don't like to share their screen like this. And so, but I can kind of hear the parent in the background. Actually, that—I just got done with the Zoom meeting where I could hear mom. She was saying, like, you know, you're trying to help them and yeah. But that seems to help too, just because we are distant—being able to see a face, I think that helps a lot.*

In Samantha's case, she would not have witnessed first-hand a parent assisting a child

prior to COVID. She may have heard about parents working with their students, but it

was not visible in a traditional classroom setting.

As discussed in the first research question, teachers emphasized the importance of

relationships between students, teachers, and parents. Relationship building was so much

more difficult, but I argue even more important, during a pandemic because of the lack of

physical shared space, asynchronous learning, health and safety concerns, and other

unique circumstances. At the end of the day, we are all humans first and our titles of

student, teacher, parent come second. Establishing relationships early in the school year

may have helped when schools had to transition to distance learning.

What We've Learned

Distance learning due to the pandemic exposed issues in the educational system,

one of which is related to TPC. Pandemic or not, comprehension of how to use a school-

wide LMS should be a minimum expectation of teachers. Promoting the incorporation of

technology that schools have access to is another area that should be expected. Hannah

expanded on her explanation of why districts need to do a better job of training their staff.

In particular, her district eliminated semester tests which required a grading calculation

change in the SIS. Hannah reiterated that teachers need to feel confident in their ability to

incorporate the required, as well as optional, technology in the classroom:

> *I know when* [administration] *was like, "Okay, we're not doing a semester test, we're*
>
> *going to, you know, just delete your semester test. Change it* [the semester grading calculation] *to 50/50. It'll be fine." People lost their bologna! So it's like, well, that should not be something that we are freaking out about. So LMS, your grading system, like you should know how to use that in and out, not just so—as far as messaging if you need to send out a message, if you need to adjust something—crazy that people don't know that. I would also say things like Zoom. And I know right before the end of the year we were trying to cram with like EdPuzzle and you know, Nearpod and all that these different educational apps. I think, um, there was a slight push before the pandemic to like, you know, use these, explore these, use them in your classroom. But once the pandemic hit, then it was like, "Okay, crap, you can't just lecture to your kids all day. You actually do need to use these things, or, you know, find different ways to implement this learning." So maybe effective training with different apps like that because if you don't know how to use it, you really can't communicate to a parent how to use it or a student. And so I would say just being knowledgeable on every app you use, every communicative tool you use, so that way if you had to, you could explain it front and back to somebody else who doesn't get it.*

My research suggests that training teachers to use the tools common in their

school may help them be more effective communicators. For example, teachers should

know how to send automated messages through SISs and update LMSs. Hannah was

adamant that districts need to do a better job of training staff and doing so prior to

"needing" the information:

The pandemic really puts the necessity—It really puts like, an importance on knowing how to use technology. And so I think that might have been something that a lot of parents struggled with because now it's all digital. And so maybe recommendations would be to train your staff. Um, well train your staff—train— just train your people in the technology programs that would be used in a pandemic like this. So like, I know, Zoom has been really helpful and really user friendly. I did not know how to use Zoom prior to this pandemic, and I would assume most people didn't. And so if it was something of like, you know, in case this were to happen again, or whatever, I think your school's LMS like, you've got to know how to use that. The fact that we were making your transition to e-learning, and we had teachers at our school saying that they didn't know how to use [school's LMS]. It was like, "What? That's a problem." That is a problem. I don't know who dropped the ball on that, but you should have known how to use that way before this.

Ensuring that teachers know how the school's technology works is of utmost importance, but an important leg of the tripod is missing if students and teachers know how the systems work but parents lack the user knowledge or access. In Emily's experience, the pandemic exposed the issue of parents not knowing how to or becoming frustrated with how to access teachers' assignment pages. Emily suggested that students and parents should also receive training:

If we were to put all the teachers [lesson plans] on one Excel sheet, it just wouldn't work. So I think it's, it's tough because I—we've had a little feedback during this the pandemic that parents are confused where to go, and it's like, "You go to that page and every teacher is right there. You just have to go to each one." So I don't know if there's a—but I don't really think there's a better way to do it. Because you can't put all that on Excel. Like I said, there's 60 teachers like, right? How would you sort through that? So I, I think it's a—it does help when I give them the link directly to my sheet, and they don't have to go online and like, go to contact teachers. But I think it's just a matter of like, maybe training the parents at the beginning of the year better. I'm not really sure. Training the students to train the parents, I guess.

Another suggestion for educational leaders and teachers is to maximize message content while limiting the frequency. Michael said the following in response to TPC and district communication in general:

I think it is important to provide enough information, but again, keep it limited because—do it in a regimented dose. Like on—have the one o'clock announcement or the one o'clock update, just so that way, like from our end—I'm

sure you've seen it too—just the emails that come in so often from so many sources, and it's just like, which one do I need to look at for the next, you know, day and a half to get through what I'm doing right now.

Michael's experience of an overload of emails and the age of his students informed his

approach to TPC during the pandemic:

Um, it's—I had thought that maybe, you know, I should be doing some more to push out, you know, info to parents and things like that. But then again, I think of the 75 different platforms that parents are getting blasted, and even in our own, like in the staff communications, the COVID emails that come, I mean, every frickin fifth email, and especially that first week about upcoming changes, and here's what to do, and here's where you can be and where you can't be and all those sorts of things. So I really tried to limit my parents communication to finalizing [grades]. *I do have a couple of juniors that are a little bit behind but the rest has been focused on finalizing these seniors. So it's been a lot of—with distance learning—making sure that these kids—because a good majority of my kids aren't looking to come back to high school next fall. They're looking to go to college next fall, so while they're also transitioning out of distance learning/high school, they're transitioning into this weird jumble of the things different colleges are doing this fall.*

Emily reiterated that teachers needed to be communicating during that pandemic but to

keep in mind that it can be too much:

So I think one of the things that I've really taken away from just the trial and error that we've gone through is the balance of it. Not too much, but make sure that you're communicating, which is like the worst advice ever. Because it's like, well, what does that even mean? To me that means once a week because what I've heard is that when teachers send out emails every day—super overwhelming, like, they have so many classes, and they're getting an email from every teacher every day, that's just too much. The other thing is, obviously, if you never communicate, that's not really good either.

During the pandemic, Emily found a new strategy for tracking TPC. This method covers

two strategies: documenting communication and relationship building. She plans to

incorporate this in the future too because it was a way for her to follow-up with parents:

During the pandemic I actually started, something that I think I might keep going to the future. I started these note cards. Where I, how do I find one that doesn't have a name on it?— But like, so essentially, like, this kid [shows notecard] *I like wrote down everything that I talked to his mom about. And then like the dates of it, I did. It's kind of really messy right now. But it, I, it's actually been really good because I'm like, okay, I can look back. And like, I can just find their note card.*

> *And I can just say, "Hey, like, this is what we talked about. And this is like what they said. And then that way, I'm like taking notes. And I don't lose it because like, I just have note cards. So I guess it for me, it's like an organizational tool. And then it's kind of showed how much and I've, I don't have it with everyone. But it started during the parent teacher conferences, and then it's kind of carried over. So, I think that is something that I want to do in the future.*

Emily formed her opinion around frequency of communication with influence from her administration. At the start of distance learning, Emily's administration pushed for more communication from teachers to parents but then changed their directive:

> *Well, first we were like—[administration] were like, "Email your parents all the time!" And then they were like, "Don't email them!" And I'm like "Ahh!", so I guess what I've kind of tried to do is like, do a positive in the email. And then like, here's a couple of really important things. I don't send out the whole list of assignments that they can do.*

At the time of interviews, the school year was within weeks of ending. Teachers were looking to the future and how to better prepare for the fall—pandemic of not. Alexis shared advice that all teachers and educational leaders may find insightful during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *So what would I tell people during the pandemic? Reflect. You really have to reflect how you communicated. Was it effective? Was it not? What could you change? What would you want to try? I love summer because we can try things. Like I can group a group of friends together and be like, "We're going try something! And did it work? Did it not work? Nope. Didn't work." You know, I think that's important, and I do think you could poll people. Like take a poll of, you know, your child was going through the e-learning process. Did you have really good communication? Did you have really bad communication? I do think there's value in that. Like, I don't have any kids of my own, but I have a lot of friends who have kids of their own and sometimes it's just nice to hear like what their child is experiencing. Could I make it better for my class?*

Alexis brought up a unique point that is true for many ECEs—she does not have kids. PSTs in Ferrara and Ferrara's (2005) "Child, Family, School Connections" online course struggled when asked to interact with the first of six parental involvement frameworks founded by Epstein et al. (2002). The first framework, parenting, was difficult for childless PSTs to grasp because they agreed that "parents must be very careful not to lose

themselves emotionally, physically, and mentally as they seek to wear the many different hats needed to meet all the demands of their children in school" (p. 79). Parents of secondary students most likely have more teachers to interact with, so even if they were involved when their child was younger, the switch from a main classroom teacher to subject specific teachers may heighten the difficulty of involvement. Instead of interacting with one second grade classroom teacher, a parent now is interacting with the core subject teachers (science, math, English, and social studies) in addition to elective course teachers. Secondary teachers typically have more students per day than a traditional elementary teacher too, so both the secondary teacher and the students' parents have more potential for TPC.

Teachers and educational leaders have the opportunity to start fresh each year. The challenges and successes from years prior will influence how one moves forward, but the profession's traditional timeline with a couple months off during academic years provides time for reflection. Alexis acknowledged that teachers must keep trying to improve. The pandemic highlighted earlier findings in the study—proactive communication may alleviate future issues, parents play a vital role in student success, and strong relationships are the foundation for effective TPC.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided findings in the form of themes and subthemes with in-depth examples from ECEs sharing their TPC experiences. From the transcribed interviews, I conducted thematic analysis and structured themes according to research questions. The participants spoke candidly about the challenges and successes they have had in their short teaching careers. The findings bring to light the need for more

exploration related to ECEs' experiences with TPC and particularly the disconnect

between what they think they should do and how they act.

Chapter Five: Discussion & Recommendations

Chapter Five discusses implications and recommendations for practice, policy, and future scholarship. This study, guided by five research questions, focused on exploring how secondary early career educators (ECEs) learn to effectively communicate with parents. A significant finding from the study is that all participants felt they were underprepared for TPC and called for TPP reform. Participants' recommendations included simulations, role playing, and a more significant change—a communication course specialized for PSTs. All of these recommendations target InTASC Standard #10: Leadership and Collaboration: "The teacher seeks appropriate leadership roles and opportunities to take responsibility for student learning, to collaborate with learners, families, colleagues, other school professionals, and community members to ensure learner growth, and to advance the profession" (Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), 2013).

The fifth research question was added during the proposal because of the current COVID-19 pandemic. This question examined how secondary ECEs employed TPC during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is still active and schools nationwide are in the midst of developing reopening plans for fall 2020. The pandemic is a catalyst of change exposing issues in the current education system that reach beyond the focus of this study. During the forced distance learning of spring 2020, TPC remained a constant. Even if the nation did not experience a crippling pandemic that forced school closures and distance learning, technology changes and generation differences would continue to evolve. Because of this, TPPs and educational leaders like administrators and mentors must be innovative in their approach to teaching secondary ECEs how to communicate effectively with parents. PSTs will continue to be

educated in TPPs, so these programs are a starting point for improving PSTs' perceptions and abilities related to TPC. Of all the topics covered in TPP, TPC is a pillar according to Hannah: "If you think about the key words you hear in college, like the chapters you cover, I knew parent communication was one of those pillars, but I did not realize until later that it is one of the main ones," and those pillars support our students. TPPs are the start of PSTs' formal educator training, but the informal training from being a K-12 student and watching how one's teachers communicated (or did not communicate) with parents also influences how PSTs perceive TPC. To better prepare ECEs for effective TPC, I recommend an interruption to current practice and policy.

Implications & Recommendations for Practice in TPPs

The study's implications for practice start with the participants' unanimous call for application-based TPC training in their TPPs. Participants recommended applying relevant TPC examples instead of stopping at the concept level, which tells PSTs that TPC is important and teachers need to do it. Adding skills training in listening and writing may be a valuable addition to TPP coursework, so PSTs have exposure to TPC prior to an authentic experience such as student teaching. The point is not that TPP educators need to teach *about* effective communication, instead, PSTs and in-service teachers, alike, may benefit from practicing effective communication, which includes active listening. Scholars have largely contributed to face-to-face TPC (de Bruïne et al., 2014; Kroeger & Lash, 2011; Walker & Dotger, 2012; Walker & Legg, 2018) which is undeniably important, but in today's world written CMC is more common for TPC (Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Thompson et al., 2015).

Listening Skills Training

Since zero participants spoke about their own listening during TPC, this highlights a key opportunity for improvement. Participants may not have spoken about listening because most of their TPC is written, but the absence of participants discussing listening reveals fundamental questions about what they value in communication. Formal listening training is integral in many programs, including medical training (Boudreau et al., 2009; Kubota et al., 1997), so adding a focus of listening to TPPs could emphasize this important interpersonal communication component. Author Stephen R. Covey in his bestselling book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* contends that, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply" (p. 239). Covey's section on empathic listening highlights that individuals want to be understood, but they approach communication by either speaking or preparing to speak. Communication scholars also emphasize that listening is the foundation for effective communication (Brownell, 2010). Brownell (2010) argues that being an effective communicator comes from being an effective listener. Traditionally, the focus is on the speaker and message formation instead of on the listener and their reception skills (Brownell, 2010). My work with secondary ECEs' perceptions of TPC relates to the belief that communication is "listener-defined" meaning that "a message means whatever the receiver thinks it does" (Brownell, 2010, p. 141). ECEs' perceptions of TPC, how they learned to communicate with parents, what experiences influenced how they communicate, etc. are all reflections of them as listeners. Even though the receiver ultimately holds the power to determine a message's meaning, the sender can work to craft an effective message.

I recommend that TPPs approach listening in two ways. The first is by applying the HURIER model, a model focused on a listening-centered approach to communication, developed by management communication and organizational behavior expert Brownell (2010). HURIER stands for hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. This model includes self-assessments and discussion questions that TPP educators can integrate into their curriculum. The HURIER model is a research-based foundation for developing effective listening skills because it is a "cluster of interrelated components that can be identified, assessed, and improved" (Brownell, 2010, p. 141).

The HURIER model could be implemented as the foundation for listening before moving to more situational strategies. Another listening-focused communication strategy more aligned with TPC is called LAFF don't CRY which emphasizes active listening (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010). LAFF stands for "Listen, empathize, and communicate respect; Ask questions and ask permission to take notes; Focus on the issues; Find a first step" (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010, p. 252). The elements of CRY should be avoided, and the acronym stands for "Criticize people who aren't present; React hastily and promise something you can't deliver; Yakety-yak-yak" (McNaughton & Vostal, 2010, p. 252). The research suggests that focusing on improving listening skills, whether taught in TPPs, in-service professional development workshops, and/or mentor-based trainings, may contribute to a teacher's ability to effectively communicate with parents.

Written Communication Skills Training

A complement to skills training for listening is skills training for written communication. With the increase in parents and teachers most frequently using email to communicate with one another (Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Thompson et al., 2015), this

area has significant potential for research and training. Participants reported they had no experience writing an email to a parent prior to their first in-service year. This lack of experience may contribute to ECEs anxiety and stress related to TPC. When teachers communicate with parents, it will most likely be via email due to the convenience, yet these same teachers completed a TPP including student teaching without executing a task that is considered a professional responsibility. TPPs would not eliminate lesson planning or classroom management from their curriculum because both of these are fundamental for teaching, however, so is TPC. Exposing PSTs to the realities of TPC during coursework and student teaching is another opportunity to better prepare them for the classroom.

Participants identified word choice and tone as important factors to consider when communicating with parents, especially when communicating through email. The majority of participants preferred email because they could craft their message instead of responding in real time. They felt the extra time helped them find the best words and communicate the tone they wanted the message to reflect. An additional benefit is that an email automatically creates a paper trail for documentation. In regard to the message content, several participants spoke about the "compliment sandwich" which is a strategy where a positive comment is followed by a negative comment and followed by a positive comment. The format is seen as a way to approach an issue with positivity initially and then end on a hopeful note all while "sandwiching" the issue in the middle. The compliment sandwich strategy was positively referred to, but a training on what to say and how to say it when addressing student issues with that sandwich may be beneficial. Additionally, basic grammar lessons may be ideal for PSTs that struggle with the written word. The message that is sent—typos, emojis, and everything in between—is a

representation of the teacher and, ultimately, a reflection of the school. Emily noted that

administrators should especially want their teachers to be effective communicators

"Because schools, you would think, would want to cover their backs too. They don't want

their teachers looking bad for them either."

Experiencing TPC Through Supportive Means

Several participants spoke about how they participated in mock interviews during

their TPP, but they wish they would have experienced simulations or role playing for

TPC. Simulations for face-to-face communication with PSTs and parents have been

viewed as a powerful teaching option because PSTs can be supported in the learning

process (Dotger, 2009; Dotger et al., 2008); however, simulations for written

communication with PSTs and TPC is an understudied area. Since participants reported

that most of their TPC is through email, a logical conclusion is to focus on written

communication skills. Experience with crafting written messages, both positive and

negative, for a variety of parental personalities may contribute to PSTs' perception of

their classroom preparation for TPC.

Simulations for face-to-face TPC such as parent-teacher conferences and phone

calls could be included too so teachers have a wide variety of applicable experiences to

reflect upon when they become an in-service teacher. Some participants spoke about not

knowing how to structure a parent teacher conference or what to talk about during

conferences, so role playing a conference after a lesson on what to include, how to

approach conferences, etc. could give ECEs a starting point for when they hold

conferences in the future.

Simulations serve as a safe middle ground between no application of TPC as a

PST to the new experiences with TPC as an ECE. This is especially true for conflict

situations where PSTs may feel uncomfortable with how to respond or how to reach a parent. Because of this, learning about conflict resolution and then applying it in a simulation would most likely aid teachers. Several participants stated that they included administrators in conversations when TPC became heated, so if PSTs have conflict resolution as part of their TPP, they might avoid these situations altogether or at the very least, have a reference point for how to approach conflict in the future.

The Role of Cooperating Teachers for Student Teaching

Traditional student teaching experiences follow the master-apprenticeship model of teacher preparation where "classroom teachers are positioned as experts and preservice teachers are expected to reproduce the practice of their mentor teachers" (Canipe & Gunckel, 2020, p. 80). When implemented, the natural hierarchy in this model heightens cooperating teachers' roles and diminishes opportunities for PSTs to connect coursework to the field (Canipe & Gunckel, 2020). This means that if a PST's cooperating teacher is effective at TPC, the PST will probably see that in their cooperating teachers' work, but if the cooperating teacher does not believe in contacting parents or communicates poorly, the PST may leave their placement with minimal positive TPC experiences. If cooperating teachers instruct their student teachers the same way that they were taught in a TPP, participants' recommendation for improved training on TPC can be expected because the cooperating teacher most likely was not trained on effective TPC either. Canipe & Gunckel (2020) contend that even though PSTs and cooperating teachers may appear to work together well, it "is actually mentor teacher control of the group sense-making process" (p.89) which makes disrupting the traditional master-apprenticeship model in TPPs even more challenging. A recommendation for shifting this traditional approach is to have TPPs redesign the cooperating teacher role and train potential

cooperating teachers and PSTs in a co-teaching model. In a more minimalistic approach, TPPs could guide cooperating teachers toward modeling effective TPC for PSTs.

Implications & Recommendations for Practice in School Districts

The perception that TPC at the secondary level is reserved for only students that are in trouble or need to change is a barrier to a positive home-school partnership. In secondary schools, educators strive to prepare students for life beyond high school. Students move from elementary to middle school with an expectation of parental involvement with schools because of the students' ages, but once students reach high school there appears to be an expectation that students can manage their own schooling. Participants did specify that they try to work directly with the student prior to involving a parent. When secondary teachers exclude the student out of the direct teacher-parent conversation, a teaching opportunity is missed. In high school, the student may benefit when teachers, parents, and students (the tripod) work together, so when students graduate and pursue college and/or career, they feel more confident navigating the next step. If teachers and parents eliminate secondary students from their educational decisions, adults are essentially removing them from an experience that could teach them how to communicate in the future. When at all possible, prioritizing student inclusion in TPC is recommended. After all, the reason for TPC is because of the student. If these tripod relationships can be forged, a cultural shift that positively views TPC as part of secondary education may evolve.

Training Teachers & Parents

School districts have the power to choose professional development topics that are of interest and need for their staff. TPC is a topic that applies to all teachers regardless of experience or content area. Whether or not a district has specifically addressed school

culture surrounding TPC, it exists. The way teachers and administrators perceive TPC

fuels school culture. Teachers need improved training in order to have two-way

communication that builds a positive relationship with all parents (Conus and Fahrni,

2019), "not only those close to school culture" (Walker & Dotger, 2012, p. 252).

Involving parents begins with communicating and forming relationships. Lazar et al.

(1999) concludes that until teachers, both preservice and in-service, get the training and

support needed to involve parents, "parents will remain a valuable, yet underutilized

resource for the entire school community" (p. 9). The research suggests that secondary

ECEs perceive relationships as a vital component of effective TPC. To support in-service

teachers, professional development could focus on effective TPC. Approaching this topic

for in-service teachers may meet resistance because when Symeou et al. (2012) held a

TPC training course for in-service teachers in Cyprus, participants "appeared hesitant in

adopting skills that might threaten or cast doubt on their professional expertise, power,

and status" (p. 81). Much like when participants spoke about certain areas in TPPs as

"overkill," in-service teachers may feel the same way since TPC is an everyday part of

the job. Hannah spoke about how some of her colleagues do not find value in the weekly

student to parent emails mandated by her school and would push back if they had to be

trained on the task. While this attitude may be present in some teachers, the value of TPC

cannot be ignored. If teachers can see the value of TPC, then a shift toward more positive

relationships with parents may result. Teachers could participate in simulations of TPC

and reflect upon their actions. Involving administration in this professional development

could provide an opportunity for teachers to see what administration values in TPC.

Ultimately, teachers, administrators, and parents have the same goal: to support students.

A key component in supporting students though is knowing how. If parents do not know what to say, how to contact teachers, or how maneuver the LMS or other communication platforms, the breakdown of communication may prevent them from supporting their student to the best of their ability. Hannah expressed an important point that teachers are patient with students, but teachers oftentimes do not afford that same patience with parents because they are expected to know how to communicate with other adults. Educating parents on how to use the school's technology, especially the LMS and other communication platforms used by the school and/or teacher, should be a priority every year, but it is of utmost importance during crisis times like the COVID-19 pandemic. With today's technology, holding Zoom conferences, recording screencasts of communication tools, and promoting school information on a variety of platforms are all ways that parents could gain a better understanding of what is happening at the school and how to contact teachers. Districts could also provide more opportunities for parents to interact with teachers. Some participants' districts hold open houses that welcome parents into their students' classrooms; additional opportunities could be explored. Educating parents on the learning and communication platforms employed by the district as well as effective communication skills may help promote stronger relationships between home and school.

Teacher Evaluations

This study's findings have implications for the practices of building-level educational leaders as well, including the need to better address the South Dakota Framework for Teaching Domain 4: Professional Responsibilities, component 4c: Communicating with Families (SDDOE, n.d.-c). Teachers may be evaluated on this component by their principal, thus they need to know what is expected of them from their

principal(s). Components within the framework guide principals when evaluating teachers; each component is scored unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, or distinguished. Administrators could improve the vague criteria listed within the component and define what each level looks like as a way to help teachers better understand what makes for effective family communication. If districts emphasize the importance of frequent two-way TPC that actively involves the student and is responsive to parent and student needs, then most teachers would rate as "distinguished" for 4c: Communicating with Families.

Preparation & Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

At the time of writing Chapter Five, school leadership is deciding reopening plans for the 2020-2021 school year amid the COVID-19 pandemic. While challenges such as health, safety, funding, and more abound, the participants' responses resulted in implications for TPC practices during this time. While the recommendations I share are extremely pertinent to the current pandemic situation, they are relevant practices in any state.

The greatest implication is to proactively communicate. This is easier said than done in a pandemic, but basics like training teachers on how to utilize the school's LMS, SIS, and other learning and communication platforms should be a regular part of professional development. Since departments' and teachers' needs may vary, training videos or small-group breakout sessions during a professional development might address the gaps. Simple tips like how to send an automated message through a SIS were mentioned by several participants. They appeared frustrated that they did not know about that feature until years into their career. Teachers can also be proactive by teaching their students how to use the various platforms. For example, prior to COVID-19, some participants said they had never used Zoom. Although I did not survey students and

parents, I anticipate that students and parents also had limited knowledge with this video conferencing software. Teachers and students, and possibly parents, were forced to learn this technology remotely. Zoom, or a district's similar video conferencing software, likely should be an integral section of technology training. Video conferencing software has many opportunities moving forward for effective TPC such as an alternative to traditional parent-teacher conferences, phone calls, or face-to-face parent meetings. Teaching parents how to access and use the various platforms could be offered online, in-person during an open house, or through printed materials sent to homes. Providing the information in a variety of ways is needed for more equitable consumption.

Another aspect of being proactive is to have a standardized practice of when, where, and how to post communications. For example, one participant said her district requires teachers to post assignments by Sunday at 5p.m. to an online platform that is public. The district was already doing this prior to COVID-19, but the need for it became greater once students no longer were in teachers' physical classrooms. By having some minimal standardized practices, parents and students may benefit from knowing when, where, and how communication will occur instead of searching through email, LMS pages, and/or district websites. If teachers choose to supplement the minimal practices, they can if needed for effective communication with certain students and parents.

Implications & Recommendations for Policy in TPPs

In order to better prepare ECEs for TPC, policy changes to curriculum and/or instructional practices may be considered for coursework and field placement components of TPP. The first change would not necessarily add time to the already dedicated curriculum, but instead would answer the question, "How can PSTs apply what is being taught about TPC in an authentic way?" Instead of having students write a

newsletter introducing themselves, they might make a video introduction or an infographic about themselves that is actually sent to parents during the PSTs' student teaching. The second option is to readjust the time frame for lesson requirements during student teaching. This means that PSTs may have an extra week of learning about communication, particularly building communication skills and observing their cooperating teachers' communication with parents, prior to taking over in their student teaching classroom. If shortening PSTs' instructional time as a student teacher is too great a sacrifice, TPP coursework during student teaching could take a more direct focus on TPC for weekly assignments (i.e. reflecting on an example of TPC or interviewing an administrator about their role with TPC). More time cannot be made, but it can be allocated differently.

If a full communication course is added to a TPP, its focus would include more than TPC. Besides the obvious time commitment of a communication course, the danger of the course being a "one and done" mentality may limit its effectiveness. One course does not make a person an expert communicator, but it can build one's skills and self-efficacy. If PSTs are inundated with developing communication skills—written, verbal, and nonverbal—and then not purposefully practiced again, if at all, until student teaching or their first year in their own classroom, the course's value may diminish. To incorporate Hannah's recommendation that TPC should be ongoing in TPP just like it is in a real classroom, a portfolio style approach to teaching TPC could be explored.

Implications & Recommendations for Policy in School Districts

School and/or District Communication Policies

Based on the participants' responses regarding school and district communications, recommendations suggest that having an established school district

and/or building communication plan may reduce potential barriers that inhibit TPC. Conus and Fahrni (2019) boldly state that "as long as schools and teachers remain unaware of the potential barriers to parent initiative and do not tackle these obstacles by adapting their communication practices and role conceptions, communication between schools and families will continue to disadvantage parents from minority groups" (p. 252). A workshop model of teachers, parents, and administrators working together to design a communication plan (Plevyak & Heaston, 2001) could be implemented at the secondary level. When schools do not have established family-school partnerships, a cultural shift must occur to bring families and schools together. After all, "Communication with families and communities must be viewed as a dynamic process— two-way and mutually beneficial" (Gary & Witherspoon, 2011, p. 49). When schools have established a two-way communication network, the gap of misinformation or lack of information is lessened (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005).

The participants' recommendations posed for the district and/or schools' communication plan deserves consideration. Participants recommended a set time for district communications to be sent. This would require meaningful preparation in order to get all the information needed gathered by a certain time, but the consistency in the message delivery was cited as a positive by some participants. Additionally, a variety of platforms should be used to send the same message, so parent preference is reached. The final recommendation is for students to send weekly communication to their parents via email with their teachers CC'd.

Onboarding of Student Teachers

When schools allow PSTs to serve as student teachers, they must have an understanding that PSTs' experience at the school will influence their career whether that

be positively or negatively. TPPs and predominant districts where PSTs complete their

student teaching may be able to standardize the access part of student teaching with the

understanding that contexts will vary. Since TPPs create the curriculum, they could

partner with districts in their region to create a student teaching manual with a section

specifically addressing TPC. Considerations for the manual include expectations for

PSTs' communication with parents in addition to identifying opportunities for TPC set by

the district (i.e. open house night and parent-teacher conferences). Cooperating teachers

would be encouraged to model how they communicate with parents as well as have

student teachers practice composing emails, holding face-to-face conversations, and

phone calls with parents. If student teachers had their own district-created email address

and access to digital platforms such as the district SIS and classes' LMS, this would set

the foundation for PSTs to experience TPC during their field placement. Without digital

access to the platforms currently used for TPC in the student teacher's field placement,

opportunities for authentic TPC is greatly reduced.

One possible concern for districts is the intersection of students' privacy and

student teachers. Some school boards may not want student teachers to have access to

any student information or only access through their cooperating teacher's login. Other

districts may not allow a student teacher to have their own district-created email address.

If TPPs promoted the reasons why it is important for student teachers to have access to

email and digital platforms, districts may be more open to accommodating those requests.

These reasons include more realistic representation of their future classroom, and it

allows opportunities to get student information (parent phone numbers, email addresses,

etc.) for TPC. To help minimize concerns to student privacy, student teachers and

cooperating teachers could discuss the expectations for TPC set by the TPP. Setting the

expectation that any communication sent by a student teacher must be approved by the

cooperating teacher may be a way to support PSTs in authentic experiences. While school

districts may only provide student information to hired professionals, the downside is

reduced authenticity for student teachers. A reasonable solution is for TPPs and districts

to work together to give student teachers realistic experiences related to TPC as well as

keeping secondary students safe. Administration, in particular, may support increased

opportunities for student teachers to experience the realities of teaching, so when the

student teacher becomes an in-service teacher, they will likely be more prepared. Ideally,

this preparation serves as a proactive approach to reducing conflict for ECEs and parents

as well as teaching PSTs about the value of TPC.

Mentorship

Participants unanimously said that mentorship was a positive for their teaching

career. Some participants had a combination of formal and informal mentorship, but they

agreed that having a mentor, regardless of formal or informal status, was helpful as an

ECE. In South Dakota, a mentorship program exists for first and second year teachers.

Mentorship may also be beneficial for ECEs that are new to a district but in their third-

fifth years of teaching. Because of the participants' positive response to mentorship, I

recommend that schools prioritize mentoring programs in their district for new hires

especially for teachers with less than six years of experience. Schools should also be

aware that participants preferred mentors that did not have evaluative power over the

ECEs' job. This means that although an administrator could act as a mentor due to

limited personnel, it is not ideal because the administrator serves as an evaluator to an

ECE's job. As Michael disclosed, he would not have felt as comfortable admitting to an

administrator that he had questions and needed help. As a guide, mentors that are not

administrators could implement Killion and Harrison's (2017) confidentiality approach of

the "four Ts" that is recommended for school coaches, such as instructional coaches,

when meeting with administrators to discuss their work. The four T's stand for "**T**eachers

with whom they are working; **T**opics that they are discussing; **T**ime that they are

spending with each teacher; **T**asks that they are doing" (Killion & Harrison, 2017, p.

184).

Future Research

   With new knowledge comes more unanswered questions. The value of

understanding how secondary ECEs learn to effectively communicate with parents is a

starting point for future research. Research opportunities exist within TPPs, secondary

schools, and the communication discipline. Future studies involving parents are

undoubtedly warranted, but in this section I focus on secondary PSTs and/or secondary

ECEs because of the existing TPP structure and opportunities for change within the

education system. Parents are absolutely an important part of TPC—without them, it

would not exist. The landscape of TPC will continuously change, but teaching and

supporting PSTs and in-service teachers will remain a pillar of education. I have

narrowed a long list to the top priorities for future research into two categories; the

greater of the two is focused toward ECEs.

Research on TPPs & PSTs

   The first area of research pertains to participants' reflections on their student

teaching experience. Since they reported minimal experience with TPC during student

teaching, cooperating teachers could be interviewed to see how they perceive their role in

preparing PSTs for TPC. Questions surrounding their own TPC practices could inform

their teaching of TPC to PSTs. An interesting addition to this research would be to

compare the cooperating teachers' responses to those of their student teachers.

The second area of research would be to conduct simulations of communication

modes beyond face-to-face. This might include phone call and email simulations. At the

close of the simulations, PSTs' perceptions of the simulations would be collected. A pre-

posttest experiment could be created to measure communication competency prior to the

simulations and after the simulations. Interviews or open-ended surveys asking what

parts, if any, were the most beneficial and least beneficial to their learning could drive

future simulations.

Research on ECEs

One area of research specific to South Dakota, which is where this study took

place, is partnering with the South Dakota Statewide Mentorship Program. The program

is a two-year cycle where a new teacher is paired with a fellow South Dakota teacher who

has completed at least five years of classroom teaching. Researchers could form a

partnership and track ECEs' perceptions of TPC from before their first year as a teacher

to the end of their second year in the program. If a partnership is formed, data about

ECEs' TPC competencies could be gathered at the start and end of their first and second

years of teaching. Another opportunity would be to train mentees on TPC skills, as well

as train mentors on effective TPC. Understanding how, if at all, mentors support their

mentees with TPC would be a valuable insight for developing future training programs.

Another future research study could focus on ECEs that become teachers through

alternative certification. Investigating this subset of ECEs and how they learn to

communicate with parents may provide an avenue for better equipping these future

teachers. When teachers pursue an alternative certification route and bypass traditional

TPPs, including a student teaching experience, they are most likely not exposed to TPC. While their previous degree or employment may lend itself to a comparable TPC experience, alternatively certified teachers are most likely underprepared in this vital professional responsibility. Additionally, these teachers are most likely experiencing a new field as opposed to a PST that is exposed to classrooms throughout their TPP. Being an educator is overwhelming and anxiety-producing for many traditionally prepared ECEs, so it is quite possible that an alternatively certified teacher may have an increased level of anxiety toward TPC. The data may also prompt the South Dakota Department of Education to review their alternative certification process to better prepare teachers for the classroom.

An additional area of future research is to investigate the disjuncture between what secondary ECEs believe is effective communication practice versus what they do in their own classrooms for TPC. Participants spoke about how they know a phone call is better than an email, and in some cases their administrators called for it, but the participants still preferred email. Understanding where the perceptions for what is best come from and how those may influence a teachers' mode of communication is worth investigating.

A fourth area of research is to create a scale intended to measure a secondary educators' written communication competence with parents. Since the majority of TPC is done through CMC and more specifically, email, understanding where teachers' rate themselves in written communication competence could provide a valuable starting point for professional development. The scale could be implemented for the quantitative part of a mixed methods study while focus groups and/or interviews may lend to more rich discussions about effective written TPC.

Along with written communication competence, future research could explore how teachers listen when using CMC for TPC, specifically in written communication like email. As addressed in Chapter Four and earlier in Chapter Five, participants did not mention listening as part of effective TPC. Because of the increase in technology and CMC, I expect teachers will continue to communicate with parents primarily via CMC especially email. Because of this, understanding what it means to listen when communicating through written words would be an additional element for better preparing teachers for TPC.

Since participants spoke of the value their mentors had in shaping their teaching experiences, an additional area of research is to explore how mentors and administrators support secondary ECEs in regard to effective TPC. Investigating how mentors support teachers in relation to TPC could help promote more productive mentor-mentee relationships. Since administrators were referred to as being supportive and "being the shield" for negative interactions with parents, I am interested in exploring what role administrators perceive that they play in TPC and how they support teachers, especially ECEs.

The final area of research is the well-researched topic of teacher burnout, but I recommend that teacher burnout be studied in comparison to ECEs' experiences with TPC. Since 30% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching (Garcia & Weiss, 2019), an applicable study is to understand how, if all, TPC played a role in teacher burnout.

Conclusion

The topic of TPC will continue evolving with changes in technology and the education system. The education landscape is rapidly changing as districts nationwide

make decisions on how, if at all, to reopen schools during a global pandemic. Regardless of the changes, TPC will remain a significant component of K-12 education. By making the current generation's experience with TPC in secondary classrooms positive, the needed cultural shift toward higher-quality teacher-parent-student relationships will begin. Parents and classroom teachers influence their students every day, and each day we have the opportunity to better prepare ECEs for TPC.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent
Participation in Research Project
Concordia University St. Paul
St. Paul, MN

Department of Doctoral Studies in Education
Project Director: Kama Konda-Varilek   Phone Number: (605)290-6970
E-mail: kondavak@csp.edu

Please read the following information thoroughly:

1. This is an invitation for you, a current secondary teacher in South Dakota, to participate in a research project under the direction of Kama Konda-Varilek, an Ed.D. student in Educational Leadership from Concordia University St. Paul.
2. The project is titled "Exploring Teacher-Parent Communication: A Qualitative Analysis of Secondary Teachers' Experiences"
3. The purpose of this study is to investigate how early career educators at the secondary level learn to communicate effectively with parents.
4. Your participation is voluntary. You can choose to participate, or you may stop your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study during the interview, the data collected will still be used unless you request that your interview be deleted and removed from consideration. If at any point you wish to withdraw from the study, inform the project director immediately. If you have any questions, you may contact the project director at the contact information listed above.
5. If you consent to participate, you will be involved in a video-recorded interview over Zoom. The interview will take between 45 and 90 minutes of your time. Your participation in the study ends after the project director receives feedback from you regarding the interview transcript and themes.
6. Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of your personal information. The interview will be recorded. All recordings will be destroyed after they have been transcribed. The transcribed text will be kept in a password protected folder on an encrypted file for three years as required by IRB policy. Only the Project Director will have access to the secured interview transcripts and demographic data. The demographic data collected will be transcribed immediately after the interview. Demographic data collected about you will not be used or shared for future research. When the data is analyzed and published, a pseudonym will be selected by the Project Director for each participant to further protect confidentiality. Only the project director will know which pseudonym belongs to your name, and this information will not be disclosed.
7. There are minimal risks to your participation in the study.
8. You will not benefit directly from participating in this study.
9. After completing the interview, you will be entered into a drawing for one of four $25 Amazon gift cards. If you are selected to receive a gift card, you will be notified via email. The gift card will also be delivered via email.
10. As a research participant, I have read the above and have had any questions answered. I will receive a copy of this consent to keep.

You may ask any questions you have now or at any time.

For questions or concerns about this study, contact the Project Director at: 605-290-6970 -OR kondavak@csp.edu.

For questions about your rights as a participant in this study or to discuss other study-related concerns or complaints with someone who is not part of the research team, you may contact Concordia University, St. Paul's Institutional Review Board at 605-641-8723 or irb@csp.edu.

Participant Agreement:
Participation is limited to those 18 and older.
Your consent is implied by completing the interview.

Appendix B: Demographic Questions

1. Preferred telephone number
2. Email address
3. Gender
4. Race
5. Age
6. Number of years teaching
7. Approximate number of students taught during the most recent semester
8. Subject(s) taught
9. Certification level
10. Size of school (approximate number of students in the high school)
11. University and/or college attended for TPP

The numbered items above were asked in question form after participants verbally agreed to the informed consent.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

RQ1: How do secondary ECEs define effective TPC?

1. I'd like to understand your thoughts on TPC. Tell me about a time when you felt you were successful and a time when you felt you were unsuccessful at communicating with a parent. Why did you feel this way?
2. What do you think makes for effective communication with parents?
    i. What examples from your own experience highlight effective communication with parents?
3. What role, if any, do you consider TPC to play in the success of students? Please describe.
4. How, if at all, has your definition of effective TPC been shaped during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 2: What experiences from TPPS, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as contributing to their ability to communicate with parents?

5. Consider the classes and student teaching requirements of your TPP. What, if anything, were you taught about TPC?

RQ 3: What experiences during their in-service years, if any, do secondary ECEs perceive as having contributed to their ability to communicate with parents?

6. How, if at all, has your approach to communicating with parents changed from when you were in a teacher preparation program to your current teaching experience?
7. How, if at all, has your district supported you in communicating with parents?
    i. What types of training have been held?
    ii. What type of mentorship is in place?
    iii. How does your administration assist you with difficult parents?
8. What initiatives, policies, or opportunities does your district and/or school follow in regard to TPC?

RQ 4: What, if any, recommendations do secondary ECEs have for improving teacher preparation for TPC?

9. What, if anything, could have better prepared you for communicating with parents?
    i. What recommendations do you have for educational leaders in TPPs?
    ii. What recommendations do you have for educational leaders in school districts?
    iii. What recommendations do you have for fellow ECEs?
    iv. What recommendations do you have for educational leaders and/or ECEs for effective TPC during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ 5: How did secondary ECEs employ TPC throughout distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?