Communicating Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
Lessons Learned from a Middle Grades Speech Therapist

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how communication occurred between parents and teachers. This autoethnography focuses on my experiences as a middle grades speech therapist during the 2020-2021 school year, with a specific focus on parent-teacher communication. Using a Funds of Knowledge framework to help me analyze, understand, and describe communication data gathered over the course of the pandemic, I found that (1) communication increased during remote learning as more parents were home with their children; (2) the folding of work and home presented unique communication challenges, and (3) I felt a yearning for more communication to continue, especially after students returned to school. Future research possibilities include finding if virtual communication methods continue beyond the pandemic and understand how and why communication might continue to change and develop.

Introduction

In March 2020, the world experienced a pandemic that hit quickly and ravaged the world; particularly hard hit at the onset of the pandemic were urban areas of the Northeastern parts of the US, where this present study took place. Schools and businesses closed with little notice and transitioned into the virtual world. Students learned remotely, teachers taught remotely, and parents worked remotely. For the first time, parents caught a glimpse inside the world of their children's classroom and services. Remote learning continued for the remainder of the school year. By the time some students were expected to return to school in September 2020, there were over six million cumulative cases and over 190,000 cumulative deaths from COVID-19 (WHO, 2020). This enormous loss struck fear and uncertainty in many people. Most questioned what the new school year would look like, and parents wondered if they should send their children back to in-person school learning or continue remote learning for the 2020-2021 school year.

In some school districts, such as in the Northeastern district where this study took place, fully remote and blended options were available for students. Due to a variety of circumstances, some parents chose to send their children back into school, while others opted to continue remote learning. Regardless of their choice, parent-teacher communication had to change because parents were not allowed to enter the school building, a luxury once enjoyed when scheduled meetings or appointments between parents and teachers occurred. Instead, all communication was forced to be remote. Virtual communication took place on agreed upon platforms, such as email, text messages, or communication apps. These virtual tools assisted in the continuation of communication between parents and teachers.

Parent-teacher communication is an essential aspect of the education system, especially for special needs students. According to IDEA (2004), parents have a right to communicate with their special education child's teachers about their education plan, services, support, and progress. Additionally, special education educators should be equipped with the tools and support to provide students and parents with all they need (IDEA; Koch, 2020). Communication between parents and teachers of special education students typically occurred during a small handful of times throughout the year: During the annual Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting, during scheduled Parent-Teacher Conferences, and possibly in passing during drop off/pick up in the schoolyard. Communication was often held in person, with the possibility of some notes or phone calls home from time to time.

Communication with middle grades parents has its own set of challenges but importance. According to Bishop and Harrison (2021), families need to be valued partners in their children's education. Middle grades parents that partner with schools give their children the best chances of success. This is demonstrated through academic scores, social-emotional

wellbeing, attendance, and behavior (Bishop & Harrison). However, this can be difficult when middle grade students are starting to gain small aspects of freedom and home-school partnership opportunities typically decrease (Bishop & Harrison).

Purpose and Research Question

My first two years as a speech language pathologist in a public elementary school presented me with many wonderful opportunities but also some challenges. As a new therapist, I was eager to grow, learn, and create opportunities for the best outcomes for my students. However, one area I found myself struggling with was parent communication. Parent-teacher conferences occurred on prescheduled biyearly days that gave parents the opportunity to meet with teachers and therapists to discuss the strengths and challenges of their child's academic performance. I expected that if I did not have much parent outreach prior to the conferences, then I would just see many of them at the scheduled conference times.

Unfortunately, that was far from the case. Out of the approximately 50 students I had each year, I had four parents speak with me the first year and seven parents the second year at parent-teacher conference. I did not know what to do. As a speech pathologist, I work with students on their receptive and expressive language skills. These skills carry over way beyond the school day, making communication with parents essential for their children's success.

The following year presented a new major challenge: COVID-19 pandemic. School learning went remote, and students received their speech services virtually from their kitchen tables or living room couches, with many of their parents within earshot. I talked to many of the parents during these sessions, listened to their triumphs or concerns, and offered strategies or guidance for support. By having parents in hearing distance of my therapeutic sessions with students, I felt like I was building a little more communication with families. This feeling deepened when, to my delight and surprise, 24 parents asked to speak with me during parent-teacher conferences. Over the course of one year, I had gone from communicating with 10% of my students' parents to over 50%; I wanted that number to continue rising.
The sudden rise in communication sparked my curiosity and interest in parent-school communication. I am in an interesting window of time right now where I have spent about the same amount of time as a public-school speech teacher inside a pandemic as well as outside of one. This balance gives me a unique perspective. Specifically, I am interested in parent-school communication regarding special education services and support. Research has been done with interviews and focus groups of parents and/or teachers. However, very few autoethnographic studies have been completed in this area of research, particularly with middle grades students and their parents. Accordingly, although I work with K-6 grade students, for this study I focus primarily on the interactions with parents of fifth and sixth grade middle school students. I ask the question, "How does one speech teacher view communication with parents before, during, and after virtual learning from the COVID-19 pandemic?"

Literature Review

The literature offers many differing viewpoints on parent-teacher communication.
In this paper, the term "parents" represents children's caregivers regardless of specific type of caregiver. Additionally, "teachers" include all educators in a school system. Lastly, "communication" refers to the act of exchanging information about a topic, specifically about middle grades special education students in this case.

Parent Perspective

Parental feelings of stress and frustration, especially regarding the special education process, emerged as a strong theme in the literature (Lalvani, 2015; Mueller & Buckley, 2014; Murray et al., 2013; Resch et al., 2010; Rios et al., 2020; Ryan & Quinlan, 2017; Stoner et al., 2005). Resch et al. identified that parents experience stress, depression, and become overwhelmed when they initially receive their children's diagnosis. After the initial shock and distress, the feelings did not go away, but instead shifted in focus from stress about the diagnosis to stress about the special education process and services. Parents noted that stress also stemmed from relationships with educators and professionals, which involved advocating for themselves and their child, involving themselves in the school conversation, and/or striving to obtain services they felt were needed for their children (Lalvani; Zagona et al., 2019). This stress led to exhaustion and feelings of

frustration, as if they must "fight for services" (Ryan & Quinlan, p. 205). Additionally, Mueller and Buckley noted that parents found the process "uncomfortable and spoke of the stress that accompany the meetings" (p. 124). Unfortunately, parent communication often decreases in middle school, which increases the stress that parents feel when trying to find ways to communicate with teachers (Wang et al., 2019). Gil (2018) acknowledged that fear and stress lessened when middle school parents and students learned new things related to the school community together.

The stress and frustration continue for middle grade parents regarding the type of communication they feel that they often receive (Butler et al., 2019; Hess et al., 2006). Parents felt like updates about their child were rambled off to them without taking a moment to ask how the parents felt or what they thought. One middle grade parent expressed that updates were only provided when his/her child was falling behind or in trouble (Hess et al.). Another parent noted similar findings of only being told when something went wrong. This parent also expressed how beneficial it would be to occasionally receive a positive message or call from the school about his/her child, not always negative ones (Butler et al.). There are so many possible areas of frustration for these parents, and sometimes parents just desire a little recognition or positivity to ease some of the frustration and stress.

Having a voice and role in schooling, especially in middle school, is a struggle many parents of special education children face. Parents highlighted the importance of finding their role in the system (Fish, 2006, 2008; Hess et al., 2006; Murray et al., 2013). They also noted the importance of developing a democracy with the team of support professionals (Fish). Murray et al. quoted one parent as saying, "You know, if you feel out of place because everybody has an M.D. or Ph.D. behind their names, write M.O.M. or D.A.D. behind yours" (p. 156). When everyone is treated as an equal, all voices are heard; when parents feel that they have a role and voice in their children's education, parents become more open to building and developing relationships with educators (Fish, 2008; Stoner et al., 2005).

As students transition from elementary to middle school, there is a shift in parental engagement, while parents begin to provide more opportunities of freedom to their children as they enter adolescence. These shifts can help develop more independence in these growing students; however, it is important for parents to still maintain a voice and role in the school community. Yavich and Davidovitch (2021) noted that the influence of parent involvement and parental interest in their child's schooling yields higher performing student achievement. Parental educational involvement and communication also resulted in higher levels of self-esteem and stronger peer relationships (Garbacz et al., 2018). This is especially crucial regarding middle grades students in special education.

Parents of special needs students yearn for more communication and stronger collaboration with educators and professionals (Butler et al., 2019; Lalvani, 2015; Resch et al., 2010; Rios et al., 2020). Parents want to feel like they can rely on their children's educators and can be seen as equal team players in the decision-making process (Zagona et al., 2019). Parents of children receiving special education services want to feel like they can trust and be understood by educators. Middle grades parents especially need to focus on the mental health of their children, thus communication with teachers is crucial (Wang et al., 2019). Additionally, middle grades parents feel that communication with teachers often occurs when problems arise, and rarely when there were triumphs (VanValkenburgh, 2021). According to VanValkenburgh, middle grades parents feel that "increased communication may lead to a better understanding of school programs/policies, more interactions with teachers, and more monitoring of student progress" (p. 36). This demonstrates the necessity of communication and collaboration between parents and teachers.

Teacher Perspective

Much of the literature on teachers' perspectives of communication turned on the idea that parents were over or under involved in their child's schooling. Teachers often developed specific perceptions of the parents based on their varying levels of involvement (Azad et al., 2018; Notbohm, 2007; Schultz et al., 2016). According to Schultz et al., teachers felt that the quality of communication differed according to levels of involvement. For example, methods of communicating with parents who were under-involved in their child's schooling were different from the methods for communicating with parents that were over-involved. Under-involved

parents were perceived as parents who would never show up, participate in conferences, nor attend school events. Over-involved parents were perceived as parents who participated "too much" in the school community, including frequent communication with teachers that could feel overwhelming. Additionally, teachers felt that there was a difference between being an aggressive versus an assertive parent, with an assertive parent having much stronger relationships than an aggressive one (Notbohm).

Teachers also had differing views on their role in communicating with special education parents. Some teachers felt like their role was specifically to keep parents informed and offer strategies for home use but did not stress any importance in collaboration (Schultz et al, 2016). However, other teachers felt their role was to listen and learn from parents who may be the experts when it came to their child (Collier et al., 2015; Koch, 2020). This role also develops differently when students transition into middle school (Yavich & Davidovitch, 2021).

Many teachers felt like they were not well trained or well prepared to communicate effectively with parents (Hindin, 2010; Koch, 2020; LaBarbera, 2017). Hindin found that preservice teachers who had strong training in parent-teacher communication were more confident when they entered the field. Teachers need to be given proper training and support to help them develop stronger relationship with families. Specifically in terms of the pandemic, Hodges et al. (2020) acknowledged that middle grades teachers felt traumatic stress over developing instruction and supporting students and families throughout the school year with little support for themselves.

While we have research highlighting and exploring parent and teacher communication from an etic perspective, what is missing is research from an emic perspective. This autoethnography is uniquely suited to fill this gap in the research literature. In this study, I present my perspective on parent communication, and grapple openly with what I perceived as my successes, failures, and emerging understandings.

Theoretical Framework

Highlighting and recognizing differences in the backgrounds of my students is essential for developing strong communication with families.

I chose to situate my study around a framework that focuses on family backgrounds. This allows me to approach my findings through a lens that acknowledges communication through lived experiences and background experiences. Funds of knowledge (FOK) refers to the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133). These funds of knowledge differ for every individual. FOK focuses on the lived experiences of students and their families. This allows educators to gain better insights into what their students/families need to be successful members of the school community. Moll (2019) found that the FOK, especially for working-class families, greatly generated the teaching and learning that took place in these families, demonstrating that home-based learning topics were formed through the families' FOK.

The concept of FOK involves teachers by having them learn from their students and their families (Hogg, 2011). The focus is not placed on what the teacher knows, but instead what the children and their family members can bring to the metaphorical table, with each family bringing their own "homemade dish." Moll et al. found that "the 'teacher' in these home-based contexts of learning will know the child as a 'whole' person, not merely as a 'student' taking into account or having knowledge about the multiple spheres of activity within which the child is enmeshed" (pp. 133-134). This carries over to the knowledge of parents as well. When a teacher discovers a parent's FOK, the teacher may begin to see the parent as more than just the parent of a student in their class. Instead, they will begin to see the other layers of the parent, which may help to bridge connections and enhance communication between parents and teachers (Moll, 2019).

Using an FOK framework helps me account for ways that the lived experiences of parents and students can impact my teaching and learning. As a researcher focusing on parent-teacher communication, it seems clear that by using FOK of my students' families, I can strengthen my communication and openness with them. However, there are some limitations to FOK that should be addressed. For one, FOK seems to specifically focus on the knowledge individuals gain only from home (Hogg, 2011). Also, although FOK centers on the lived experiences of students and their families, it does not account

for how teachers can use their own FOK to strengthen parent-teacher communication. I find this to be a gap in the research of FOK and an area I am interested in exploring in my autoethnography.

Methodology

In this study I use an autoethnographic approach to explore my experience as a speech teacher communicating with families before, during, and after the pandemic. Autoethnography, similar to ethnography, "has made a significant contribution to our understanding of participants' worlds, their cultures and subcultures, by offering in-depth insider accounts which cannot be gathered hurriedly" (Bhatti, 2021, p. 102). Additionally, autoethnographic research allows the researcher to "take a reflexive gaze toward themselves" (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018, p. 226). This approach to research gives the researcher a prominent, reflective voice in the study.

Researcher Positionality

I am a cisgender White woman in my late 20s. I do not have any children and do not help to take care of any children outside of my profession. I began my career as a special education teacher, and, following my master's program, transitioned to a speech therapist in public schools. I have worked as a speech therapist for four years in an urban school district. As I have previously mentioned, my first two years occurred prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and my last two years occurred during the pandemic. As an educator in the field of special education, it is my responsibility to communicate with parents about their children's progress and goals for speech. It is also my duty to be available to answer any questions or offer any advice/strategies to parents pertaining to their special needs children. My lenses as a classroom teacher and a speech therapist influence how I view my data. Having said that, I am also acutely aware that my data represents the feelings and emotions of the families of my students.

Researcher's School Community

I work in an urban school district. My school is considered a Title 1 school, meaning that many of my students come from low-income households and qualify for free or reduced lunch. They come from a variety of living situations: houses, apartments, shelters, and shared homes. My students also have different family make-ups: some living in a two-parent household, others in a single parent household, and some living with extended family such as aunts or grandparents as their primary caregivers.

Although I had detailed communication with all the families of my students, this study focused specifically on my communication with middle grades parents. I had 14 middle grade parents that I kept communication with during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of communication attempts varied, with some parents I would speak with weekly and others on a biweekly or monthly basis.

Data Collection

For this autoethnographic research study, I kept a reflection journal about my feelings and experiences following conversations with parents through texts, email, or phone calls. The journal was created electronically so that I could add to it whenever I had a moment in the day to reflect. I also attempted to link it specifically to the topic of parent communication. Additionally, I added reflections of conversations with parents during this year's Parent Teacher Conference. After phone calls with parents during their scheduled meeting time, I stopped to jot down reflections on my communication with these parents. As I continued to collect data, I began to code my reflections to help me better understand and acknowledge what I was feeling about my communication with parents.

Data Analysis

Once the data was collected, it was then organized and coded. Narrative coding and in vivo coding were used to analyze the data. According to Creswell (2013), narrative coding allows the researcher to use experiences and actions of daily life to understand a person, or in the case of an autoethnography, to better understand yourself. In vivo coding places emphasis on the participants' words, finding phrases or ideas that stand out (Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). I began to notice conflicting feelings in my codes; I felt fear and joy, frustrated and hopeful, overwhelmed and thankful, and excited and exhausted. I also pulled out words and phrases from my journaling and my conversations with parents

that resonated with me and helped acknowledge what I was feeling or experiencing. The coding methods facilitated the development of categories and then themes. While I analyzed the whole of my data, which included communication with parents of children from K-6, for the purposes of this study, I focus the findings and discussion section on parent communication with my fifth and sixth grade students.

Findings/Discussion

Across my reflections there were two broad themes that evolved: (a) the feeling of new roles developing, and (b) the yearning for more communication. Because this is so deeply personal, it did not feel right to separate findings from my discussion. Below, they are folded together.

"They didn't teach me this in grad school": New Roles

Schools shut down for the pandemic on an unusually warm Friday afternoon in March 2020, and by the following Monday morning, speech therapists were expected to be live streaming into the homes of all the students on their caseloads. Google Classrooms, Zoom-meetings, messaging apps, student email addresses...all of these were set up within a few days. The demand placed on educators in a short period of time was exhausting. In one reflection I noted,

> *Families are asking me all these questions and I don't know what to tell them. We are not given much guidance, and neither are they. I want to make my kids and their parents feel secure and supported during this crazy time, but it is pretty difficult when I could also use some of that security and support too.*

The parents and I began to bond over the constant changes and the unknown of the future. Communication began to increase between me and family members as we went through these changes together. I was communicating with most of my students' parents weekly, some even daily, which was never the case in the past.

Once the initial shock of switching to remote in a matter of days wore off, I began to get in the groove of working remotely. As the first month of quarantine continued into the second, my students and I developed a routine and schedule of meeting live for speech services, giving us a small sense of normalcy. Oftentimes, parents were within earshot of the interactions. They began becoming interested in what I was doing with their children and would chime in from time to time about the therapy sessions. Even parents who did not speak English would message me on my messaging app and I was able to translate their messages. Looking back at messages with parents where they asked questions or commented about strategies I presented during sessions, especially middle grade parents that I often would not have heard from in months, I reflected,

> *This is exactly what I have been missing! I have wanted this level of communication between myself and the parents this whole time. I did not expect the pandemic to be the thing that brought us together, but I am so thankful that it is a positive aspect coming out of these hard times. I hope that once students return to school one day, communication like this continues.*

Although I was finally receiving the communication I had been wanting, it came with some challenges as well. Live streaming into my students' homes opened me up to interactions between family members that were beyond my scope of practice. I was in the middle of arguments between parents, tantrums of children, and the regular interactions of family members. Messages I received from parents when discussing their children's speech services included difficulties with marriages and extended families (and my ability to interact with the correct family members), stressful jobs that parents had (such as working in the hospital ICU), loss of family members due to COVID-19, and frustration over having their children home 24/7. My job began to shift from a focus only on my students and their academic goals to a larger awareness of the day-to-day stressors and tensions felt by parents over the changes going on in their lives and the world. I felt myself trying to navigate my role in being part of their families without overstepping my role as their child's speech therapist.
I also struggled personally to find the time to separate work from home. Working from home was challenging already but finding the right balance of leaving my job "at work" was difficult when my workday was being held in my living room. Everyone knows that educators typically do not stop working when the school bell rings,

but this was a different level of taking my work home...literally. It started to become mentally draining. I was trying to find the balance between being there for my students and their families while also taking care of myself. Thinking back to those times, I noted my feelings,

> *At what point is it too much for me? I am in front of a computer screen live streaming for hours a day. My job wants me to schedule all my students to be seen as if it is a normal school year, but that's not the case; there is nothing "normal" about this. I wake up and go right to work (in my living room), I spend my lunch messaging parents about upcoming meetings, missed sessions, technological difficulties, and when the school day concludes, my job isn't over. I have paperwork to complete, upcoming sessions to plan for, all while learning how to make it all virtual. My living room couch where I used to unwind was now converted to my home office and did not give me the same feelings of relaxation at the end of the day like it used to.*

The rollercoaster of emotions perfectly summed up the many roles and responsibilities I was feeling during this time. It also connected back to the FOK I found myself consuming through these interactions. I was learning so much from my students' families, which was allowing my FOK to flourish, something I wanted desperately. It enhanced my teachings and as families began to feel more comfortable talking with me, I was developing a stronger sense of the homelife of my middle grades students. However, it also came with the cost of becoming slightly overwhelming. Livestreaming into homes daily exposed me to more of the "behind closed doors" conversations that were potentially increasing my FOK in some areas while being outside my scope of practice in others.

"Let's talk! How can I help?" The Yearning for More Communication

One of the few blessings of the pandemic was the increase in interactions between my students' families and me. I was happy that all the parents were eager to talk to me, but I quickly learned that although they said that they wanted to communicate, it often seemed to me that they struggled to focus on their children and their academics. One conversation I had with a parent

was around her sixth-grade son submitting completely blank work to his teachers. I continued to reach out to the mother to express how I was trying to help him not fail his classes by helping to complete his assignments. I asked for her assistance. While she continued to state that she would speak to him about it, no work was ever completed. I knew that she was exhausted, and it was taking a toll on her with all the responsibilities that she had, but I struggled to figure out what to do to help my student succeed. I also had many parents who were eager for their children to participate in speech sessions but no matter how many times I would contact them during the week, their child would not show up for the session. Looking back at those conversations, I noted,

> *What do I do at this point? I am finally at a place where parents are willing to communicate, but it is frustrating when they do not take my advice to help their children. I am not asking for much...just to not submit blank paper or just to show up to my sessions. I even offered extra help to make-up missing assignments or changing times to better fit their schedules. How else can I help? At what point is it no longer my "responsibility?"*

It was difficult for me to continue speaking with these parents weekly without jumping to judgment about their lack of participation in their children's academics. I knew these were trying times, but I was trying to place an emphasis on academics, whereas possibly these parents had more pressing concerns, like food or illness. I considered how education might have become a lessened concern during the pandemic because people were just trying to keep their heads above water. I wanted to be sympathetic towards these struggles. I knew there were bigger factors present beyond showing up to speech sessions on time or submitting assignments. But I also wanted to give these students a sense of normalcy in their schedule, and the only way I could do that was if they showed up. I reflected,

> *This pandemic has taken so much from all of us. I struggle to find the way to push my students to continue their academic journey while being conscious of the social-emotional levels of themselves and their families. I guess all I can do is continue to show up for these families and hopefully*

they will eventually, with time, show up for me too.

I felt myself torn between being happy about the increased communication while also feeling exhausted and frustrated. This struggle lasted for 18 months until the September 2021 school year brought the majority of students back to school full time again. I was thrilled to return to school full time, but I was apprehensive about the changes in communication. I worried that communication with parents would revert back to the small quick interactions less than a handful of times a year. In the beginning of the school year, I acknowledged to myself,

I don't want communication to go back to how it was before the pandemic. I enjoyed the increased interactions with families, and I don't want that to end. I hope I can find a way to have a balance between being overinvolved in the families while still having the communication I worked so hard to build and develop.

I started the new school year with the setup of a Google Classroom to promote the online community feel for my students and their families. I also continued to promote the messaging app I used with parents to continue the communication. Thankfully, the majority of my students' parents agreed to join as well. Since parents were still not allowed in the school building, for pandemic related reasons, the virtual aspect that was used during the pandemic's remote learning period continued into the following year. I found it to be beneficial because it gave parents the familiarity that they were used to for communicating, which I hoped would promote them to continue participating in communication exchanges with me.

I was fortunate that once the first set of parent conferences came around, the number of parents that signed up to meet with me was over 50% again. This was huge difference from the 10% just two years prior. I spoke to one parent about this; he mentioned that he appreciated the teachers who kept the virtual communication options opened after the pandemic. I agreed that it was so important to find a way to build connections and relationships with families, and if virtual means of communicating was the best way to do that, then I was all for it. Following the conferences that day, I journaled my feelings about the conversations with parents:

It is not perfect, but I have found a level of communication I am happy with. I love that these parents feel comfortable talking to me and discussing their children. I am glad that the pandemic brought a new aspect of communication and that it is working moving forward. I spoke to a mom that was just running out of work and catching the bus while talking to me, another parent who had two other children in the background that made time to accept my call, and a dad who said usually only his wife could attend these meetings in the past but was happy that he could participate now. If these new virtual forms of communication were not encouraged during the pandemic, I may have never had the chance to talk to them. It is much better talking to a mom running to catch the bus than not talking to her at all.

These new forms of communication helped build and develop my FOK for my middle grades' students. I was learning how to better assist my students through the involvement and participation of their families. I also deepened my understanding on the importance of my middle grades students' FOK through communication with their families.

Conclusion

This autoethnography highlighted my experiences with and reflection of communication with parents before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic presented challenges in the field of education, but it also revealed new ways for educators to promote and extend communication with families. I found myself taking on new roles during the pandemic and although it was stressful and overwhelming at times, I appreciated the increased communication and yearned for the communication levels to continue following the pandemic. I was so thankful that the increased communication developed during the pandemic continued once in-person learning resumed. I was also thankful for the experiences and opportunities I was given to learn about my students, their families, and myself during this difficult time in all our lives. I was exposed to more aspects of the daily lives of my students and their families than ever before. My understandings of their FOK skyrocketed as I live streamed into their homes each week. It helped me be a better educator,

which is the best thing I could have taken from this.

Lessons Learned and Implications

Through my reflections on my communication with middle grades parents, there are several lessons I learned as well as implications for other special educators and speech pathologists as it pertains to working with families. Below I outline the lessons I learned to help continue developing and increasing communication with middle grades families:

- Give parents a voice and a role in their child's education. When they feel like they are being heard and included, they will be less reluctant and more enthusiastic to participate.
- Communicate in any way possible. I have found that by giving parents choices for how to communicate with me (in person, virtually, phone call, text message), they are more likely to reach out or find a moment to speak with you.
- Don't look at communication as a "me versus them" approach with parents. When you include them on your team, parents feel included and are more open to hearing your feedback as well as sharing their own.
- Listen to families. Sometimes a parent just needs a listening ear. It is true that no one knows your students more than their families do, so by giving parents an outlet to speak about their children, through their FOK, you will learn more than ever about your students.

Lack of generalizability from this study may be seen as a limitation; however, the purpose of this autoethnography was not to create generalizability, but instead present the findings and experiences of one speech therapist before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings can possibly be used to better understand the feelings that many educators faced during this time or at least to note the various roles educators had to take on.

Future research possibilities may include sampling a larger population of educators and their experiences with parent-teacher communication during the pandemic. Additionally, it would be interesting to continue research to see if communication methods created during the pandemic continued beyond the first year back to school. Further research could look at how communication continued to change and develop as the world began to develop a new "normal." Lastly, additional research could also be completed from educator and parent perspectives. This study focused solely on an educator's perspective; however, including interviews, focus groups, or surveys specifically from parents could offer a different insight to the feelings of communication during the pandemic.

In closing, although this research was presented from specifically my reflections, I think the knowledge gained can help define the importance and necessity of increased parent-teacher communication. bell hooks (1994) stated that "just the physical experience of hearing, of listening intently, to each particular voice strengthens our capacity to learn together" (p. 186). This quote unifies the purpose and findings of this study by addressing the importance of listening and learning collaboratively. There will never be true communication and collaboration between parents and teachers if listening and learning does not occur from both sides.

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