

Teachers' Collaboration with Parents of First-Grade Pupils during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to enhance our comprehension of how first-grade teachers communicated and collaborated with the parents of their pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants' experiences of teacher-parent communication were gathered using semi-structured in-depth non-directive interviews, which yielded three patterns: pressure; positive, enjoyable communication; and communication difficulties. Recognizing the significance of maintaining ongoing communication with parents, especially for young children, teachers remained committed and attentive, taking the initiative to establish platforms that facilitated communication. The study acknowledges its limitations and suggests future research opportunities to further deepen our understanding of the two-way dialogue between teachers and parents of first graders, who often bear significant concerns as their children enter the education system.

Keywords: COVID-19 distance learning, first-grade pupils, long-distance teaching difficulties, parent-teacher communication

1. Parent-Teacher Collaboration

One of the most significant educational transitions for young children is the transition from preschool to primary school. This transition is gradual, and begins when children are being prepared to enter first grade school until the time when they have adjusted to school life (O'Kane, 2016). It involves negotiating and adjusting to a number of changes, including the physical environment, learning expectations, rules and routines, discipline, and concentration. The children are faced with the importance of being able to negotiate classroom life independently, and to develop good social, emotional, oral language, and physical skills (Hirst et al., 2011; Sénéchal & Young, 2008).

Good school adjustment can be linked with effective interaction and communication between teachers and parents of first graders. Such communication has been found to be a significant contributor to the quality of first graders' adjustment and academic skills (Cook et al., 2018). Parents' involvement in first grade improves children's basic skills in reading, writing, and math in the following years, and strengthens their literacy (McDowall et al., 2017). Collaboration between teachers and parents has been found to be a significant contributor to children's mental and social development (Leshtarova, 2017). Such collaboration was found to be positively correlated with children's self-image, academic achievements, enhanced motivation to study, intellectual skills, and reduced in-class-management problems and absenteeism (Al-Hail et al., 2021; Epstein, 2008; Kuhn et al., 2017; Mau Kasi et al., 2021; Ramanlingam & Maniam, 2020).

Parents' involvement in their child's schooling is determined by their beliefs about how effectively they can support their children's learning, and continues with their perceptions of teachers' openness to their involvement and the school climate regarding it (Walker et al., 2005). Hence the way parents perceive the school's approach toward their involvement, and the way they see its efforts to create parents' involvement (Kim & Sheridan, 2015), are closely tied to their motivation and ability to become involved in their child's schooling.

To create optimal cooperation, teachers are required to develop effective communication skills during their daily work with parents. Among other things, they must be ready to talk with parents, to share their educational and functional goals and consult with parents about them, to respond empathetically and positively in case of a dispute, to instill credibility and to propose solution-oriented questions that will yield new ideas. These skills are practiced to some extent, although probably insufficiently, in the framework of basic teacher training in universities or during

the on-the-job training period (Aich et al., 2017).

Along with the overall awareness of the importance of the relationship between teachers and parents, special importance is attributed to communication and the quality of the relationship between parents and teachers in the transition to first grade. Such communication is extremely important to children in their first steps in school, as a positive experience in this major transition, is a predictor of children's future successful social, emotional, and educational outcomes. Effective communication between teachers and first graders may contribute to a normal transition which affects the sense of belonging, learning, functioning in the changing tasks and the development of the children (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Dunlop & Fabian, 2007; Peters, 2010; Sayers et al., 2012).

1.1 COVID-19 and Interaction between Teachers and Parents of First Graders

The rapid – almost instant – transition to distance learning with the outbreak of COVID-19 was an emergency measure, applied without prior preparation. Total lockdowns of unknown duration in 2020 and 2021 affected the entire population. The lockdowns had a special impact on first-grade pupils and their parents, when distance learning was the only available way to connect with school teachers during several months of the pandemic (Pizarro-Ruiz & Ordóñez-Cambor, 2021; Sibley et al., 2021). First graders had little or no former classroom and technological experience, nor did they have the experience of time management. Therefore, having ongoing parental support at home was crucial, as the children had not yet acquired the foundations of classroom social engagement. Distance learning posed substantial difficulties for students, parents, and teachers alike. Although technological tools (such as personal computers, tablets, and smartphones) allowed online connections between students, parents, and teachers, socioeconomic differences dictated reality. The reality was that not every family had access to these devices or the conditions and background necessary to instruct and support the children at home, to enable concentration on the material taught online (Petretto et al., 2020).

Distance learning lacks teachers' hands-on assistance and guidance and face-to-face student-teacher interaction. It also entails long response time, all of which challenged its effectiveness, and especially challenged first graders, who had not yet acquired the skills to handle this situation (Kumar Jena & Devi, 2020; Saline, 2021).

Moreover, tensions grew in many homes due to financial, health, and occupational issues, rendering parents unable to provide the different kinds of support their children needed. As a result, as parents turned to school in their search for solutions, parent-teacher relationships became more complicated (Saline, 2021)

In light of these challenges, the aim of the current study is to deepen our understanding of the ways teachers handled their work with parents of first-grade pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic. It will expand our understanding of the specific issues teachers experienced in their interaction with these parents, and the way the teachers addressed these issues. Understanding the specific ways teachers experienced their interaction with the parents, might help improve teachers' understanding of parents' needs and outline a way to enable teachers to better support children in crisis or unplanned situations. Hence, the research questions were:

- 1) How did teachers experience communication with first graders' parents during the distance learning mandated by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 2) What were the teachers' main concerns in their relations with parents during this distance-learning period?
- 3) What did parents need most?
- 4) What helped teachers improve their communication with parents during this period?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

For this phenomenological qualitative research, we interviewed 16 teachers, all women, from five elementary schools in north and central Israel. The teachers volunteered to participate in this study. Their age range was 28-48, with 5-26 years of experience as first- grade teachers.

2.2 Research Tool, Ethics, and Procedure

Approval for this research was sought from and granted by the Ethical Committee of the Max Stern Academic College. The research tool was a semi-structured, in-depth, non-directive interview, conducted in Hebrew. With this type of interview, participants have the freedom to expand and clarify their answers. They can also add examples and elaborate on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Groenewald, 2004). For this article, excerpts were professionally translated into English. The 45-50-minute individual interviews were conducted over Zoom, from August to December 2020, and referred to the lockdowns that began in March 2020. Participants were informed they could withdraw at any stage, and that confidentiality was assured. The interviews were recorded

with participants' permission. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain anonymity.

A review of the literature on teacher-parent communication revealed little in way of pinpointing the issue of teachers' communication with parents of first graders, especially regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. To illuminate this issue, the interview questions were developed by the researchers specifically for this study. The four interview questions were:

- 1) Describe your communication experience with parents of first-grade children, under the COVID-19 restrictions and regulations.
- 2) What were the main concerns you experienced during this time?
- 3) What did parents need the most?
- 4) What helped you to improve your communication with parents during the distance-learning period?

Data analysis began with a complete reading of each interview, so that an overall picture could be obtained. Next, a thematic analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was conducted, seeking distinct themes and categories for each of the questions. Thematic reliability was established through the work of two researchers who separately began searching for systematic, recurring, visible, and direct content. During this search, the also engaged in informal peer debriefing, without discussing the specifics of the research, but seeking their experiences. Upon completion of this search, the researchers compared their results and identified mutually agreed-upon themes, which they then named.

3. Findings

The findings were analyzed according to their contents. Question 1, about the way teachers experienced communication with the parents of first graders during the distance-learning period, yielded three themes: parents' pressure, parents as partners, and little or no communication.

Theme 1. Parents' pressure. Teachers referred to pressure they felt from parents. Some parents were very involved in the teaching and learning processes, trying to give their children all the support they could. At the same time, those parents expected progress. They wanted to see their children read and write and were worried that the first-grade year would be wasted. Perhaps as a result, the teachers felt a lot of pressure. While wanting to help, they found themselves handling complaints, lack of appreciation, and even unreasonable expectations. Parents expected teachers to meet all their expectations, to provide answers, solutions and to be available to parents in relation to different kinds of issues like behavior and social relations - not just schooling. Here are few examples from the interviews:

Sometime due to technological issues, the lesson was not properly heard and that made some parents nervous. They needed to respond right away.

If I didn't go through every single page in the workbook, they asked why exactly we don't need this page or the other. I felt they were questioning my professionalism, but I understood that they were under a lot of pressure.

Sometimes they worked with their children on their homework and needed my help in the afternoon or in the evening. They used to call me right away, expected to get immediate support. But at times, I wasn't available.

A mother called me and consulted with me about a situation at home where her children fight a lot. She said it wasn't a new issue in their family, but it became much more severe.

Theme 2. Parents as partners. Some parents supported the teacher, offered help and were interested in ways they could contribute. The teachers appreciated these gestures. One said, "Two mothers turned to me and offered their help, suggesting that they act as my assistants." Another stated, "It's good that I can turn to parents in my class and get their help."

Theme 3. Little or no communication with some parents. Unlike the offers for help seen in Theme 2, teachers reported that some parents did not respond or communicate with them. It was important for the teachers to reach those parents and to see that they have everything organized for their children's distance learning. In some families parents could not provide the support, and in school solutions should have been offered to these families. It was challenging as most of these parents were still unfamiliar to the teachers.

Question 2 referred to the teachers' main concerns during the distance-learning period. The content analysis yielded three themes: health concerns, technological literacy concerns, and concerns over the schooling of their own children.

Theme 1. Health concerns. The teachers were asked to provide answers to parents while they themselves were,

like everyone else, overwhelmed with disinformation and uncertainty, occupied with their own worries, and processing lots of new information. Health issues were significantly central and worrisome to many people especially during the first stages of the pandemic, as the world faced a new unknown and feared of life threat, highly contagious disease. Keeping a professional façade at such a time – was significantly challenging to teachers. Here are few examples:

When it all started, I wasn't feeling well. I was in no position to be there for my students or their parents.

My own parents were very old, and naturally I needed to take care of them, I wasn't very attentive to students and parents in the first stages of Covid.

Because of dealing with personal stuff, I couldn't provide the stability and the routine my pupils and parents needed from me.

Theme 2. Technological literacy concerns. Teachers felt that they were not familiar enough with technology, and the rapid, instant switch to distance learning was difficult for them. They were not sure how to operate distance learning, and that made them feel uncomfortable, less professional in parents' eyes. They felt that the guidance they received about the use of distance learning and teaching was insufficient, and were not familiar with the various applications. For example:

I Didn't get enough guidance about using Zoom and some other application with it.

Operating lessons via Zoom was very sudden. I was far from familiar with it. How was I supposed to do it?

Theme 3. Concerns over schooling of their own children. The lockdowns called upon teachers to handle, simultaneously, communication with their pupils and their parents, and with their own children at home. Their attention was divided, at times at the expense of their attention to their own children, who faced the difficulties of learning at home, or even learning at all. As one of the participants said:

I have two kids, one in sixth grade, the other in eighth. They barely got up in the mornings and didn't do well, also in their studies. I had to discipline them, and at the same time to be in front of my own class.

Responses to the third and fourth research questions – What did parents need the most and What helped teachers improve their communication with parents during this period? Our content analysis yielded two themes – attentiveness and limitations to remaining in touch.

Theme 1. Attentiveness. Although teachers were handling a personal, complicated situation, they felt committed to parents and felt a need to be a source of support for them. Although in some cases they felt they were as disoriented as the parents, they still felt committed to accompanying them. For example, "Parents saw me as their person. They knew that I was attentive to them." "It was important for me to show the parents that despite the situation, I'm still on board." Similarly, "Although I needed a lot of help myself, it helped me to know that I was there for the parents."

Theme 2. Limitations to remaining in touch. Teachers believed that it was crucial for six-year-olds to succeed with distance learning. They knew they wanted parents as involved collaborators, and gave examples of way to do so. One of these ways was online meetings with parents on a weekly basis. In these meetings parents could share what they were going through, and get support from the teacher and the other parents. Another way were parent lessons – parents were invited to an online lesson in which a teacher demonstrated how they conduct the lesson and explain the subject matter to their pupils. One teacher opened a specific parents' WhatsApp group, and invited parents to ask questions and share their concerns. The teachers believed that creating a special platform to communicate with parents was important at that stage, and they found ways to do so.

3.1 Summary of the Research Findings

Teachers experienced parents in various ways – were pressured by them, enjoyed their cooperation, and worked hard to communicate with some of them. While suddenly faced with having to engage in distance teaching and its technology, they also dealt with their own health concerns and worried about their children and, as one teacher mentioned, parents. The teachers understood the importance of have constant communication with parents of children at such young age, and felt committed and attentive, even initiating platforms to ease that communication.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to deepen our understanding regarding the communication between teachers of first-grade pupils and their pupils' parents during the distance-learning period imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research focused on ways in which teachers experienced communication with these parents, their main concerns in their relations with parents, and on what helped them improve their communication with

parents.

The teachers reported that they maintained ongoing communication with parents as they believed it was essential for effective learning, achieving optimal learning outcomes, acquiring better academic and social skills, as well as acceptable classroom behavior (Aziz et al., 2022; Cook et al., 2018; Ekinçi-Vural & Doğan-Altun, 2021). Kasa Ayten and Ercan (2022) reported that during the COVID-19 distance-learning period, teachers found it more difficult to actively involve students in the online courses than they did in classroom teaching, and that teachers, students, and parents preferred in-person education to remote.

The teachers in the present study clearly stated that first-grade pupils whose studies were not supported at home, could not function properly on their own when faced with distance learning. These findings are consistent with those of other researchers. Thus, Aziz et al. (2022) and Rousoulioti et al. (2022), referred to the importance of parental guidance in families with children at their first stages at school, and Spadafora et al. (2023) note that it is impossible for children of this age to learn independently.

The children needed constant supervision and direction, especially when learning online. Hence, the teachers in the current study felt committed to fulfilling parents' expectations, were sensitive to parents' concerns, and made efforts to reach parents with whom it was hard to keep in touch. The commitment, sensitivity, and efforts were based on teachers' acknowledgment that they have to make extra efforts to enable the necessary optimal learning process for children by assuring that children get the extra guidance and presence of a parent. However in some families that was a major challenge: teachers were concerned about parental lack of access to technological devices. There were families without internet access, making it impossible for children to participate in remote instruction activities. Parents sometime could not support their children due to their low literacy – general or technological, which also affected their children's low participation in remote instruction, especially in low-income families (Pattnaik et al., 2023). In order to enable online learning, parents sometimes were interested in more interactive online learning activities to facilitate children's learning, and needed better learning support from schools, flexible work arrangements, and government subsidies (Lau & Lee, 2021). Teachers reported that the difficulty in engaging children in online activities, was often linked with inadequate support from parents for the learning activities (Hu et al., 2021).

According to Asha et al. (2021), teachers believed their work-life balance and mental health deteriorated as a result of trying to fulfill parents' sometimes unrealistic expectations, while worrying about how students and parents adapted to the pandemic. Teachers had to handle their own emotional exhaustion and feelings of stress due to health concerns, personal worries, and workload and yet be attentive to parents in their process of supporting the children (Hu et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Klusmann et al., 2023; Ozamiz-Etxebarria et al., 2021). In addition to these feelings, some teachers in the current research referred to their low digital literacy that affected their confidence in conducting online teaching. Like in other studies, teachers felt insecure and overwhelmed by the sudden need to perform online teaching using advanced technologies, and were facing problems integrating technology with pedagogy and subject teaching (Pattnaik et al., 2023; Sari & Saralar-Aras, 2022). Teachers claim that low online teaching proficiency, may have caused them high levels of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gutentag & Asterhan, 2022).

The teachers who participated in the present study indicated that while they were seeking to help parents and answer their questions, they were also struggling with their own personal issues. Nonetheless, they expressed high levels of commitment, were tolerant of parents' expectations (some of which they perceived as unrealistic) and used creative initiatives reach as many parents as possible. However, their attempts disseminate distance education of equal quality to all students, they found it difficult to reach the less advantaged ones due to the lack of infrastructure or parental indifference. This situation is echoed in other studies (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Güvercin et al., 2022; Tumin & Marvianita, 2021). The teachers, who faced substantial challenges due to the pandemic, noted that any support they could get from the school system contributed to their ability to support parents of children in the critical stage of first steps in school. At the same time, they emphasized that in routine days, not only in the emergency time of the pandemic, they are mindful of the critical role of parents in the process of transition to school (Besi & Sakellariou, 2019), and maintain the need for commitment, attentiveness, and initiative to ease communication with parents.

4.1 Research Limitations and Future Research

One notable limitation is the relatively small sample, and perhaps the fact that all participants were women, may have biased the results and not opened room for diversity. Additionally, hearing teachers only, yielded a one-sided picture. It would be difficult to achieve a complete picture, because interviewing parents now will only provide a retrospective view. Nonetheless, considering the high sensitivity level of parents when their children enter first

grade in routine times, the issue of the roles that teachers can play in easing the transition is worthy of future research. The findings and insights revealed here are an important contribution to understanding parent-teacher communication, with special emphasis on the crucial role of a two-way dialogue for the successful adjustment of first-grade pupils into the education system.

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