

Teacher Candidates' Communication and Collaboration with Family and Community During COVID-19

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Abstract

After schools were closed in AY 2019-2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were expected to continue two-way communication and collaboration with their students' families without much guidance. In this study, we focus on how five teacher candidates navigated and continued their efforts of communication and collaboration with students' families and the larger community during the pandemic. Epstein's (1995) spheres of overlapping influence provided the conceptual framework for this study, and through storytelling during interviews, the five teacher candidates provided valuable insight that focused on communication during the pandemic. Findings indicated that these teacher candidates struggled with establishing professional boundaries with students' families, wrestled with the unforeseeable challenges of "being" in the homes of their students' families, and experienced a disconnect from the community. Implications of this study suggest that lessons learned during COVID-19 could transform how teacher candidates and Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) practice future two-way communication and collaboration with students' families.

Keywords: COVID-19; family communication and collaboration; teacher candidates; remote teaching

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Introduction

During the Spring of 2020, schools abruptly transitioned from in-person to remote learning environments due to COVID-19, and it was immediately obvious that the pandemic had severely affected various aspects of the educational environment. Unequivocally, the pandemic left teachers struggling to disseminate information not only to their students, but to their students' families. Adding to this very real dilemma, teachers were faced with the new reality of maintaining two-way communication with students' families during a time when in-person contact was prohibited (Varkey Foundation, 2020). To add to these complexities, teacher candidates were continuing their educational progress in these remote classrooms, a situation which demanded that they also keep the lines of communication open and alive.

As studies emerge of how the COVID-19 crisis posed unprecedented challenges and transformed the curriculum for both PreK-12 and Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) (Delamarter & Ewart, 2020; Hadar et al., 2020; Romero-Ivanova et al., 2020), few authors have taken into consideration the factors affecting teacher candidates' abilities to effectively communicate and collaborate with families and the community in the remote setting. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how teacher candidates navigated communicating and collaborating with students' families and the community remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given that candidates are evaluated based on professional teaching standards, we found it imperative to begin by reviewing the standards that specifically relate to teacher communication and collaboration with families and the community. We then framed our study through the lens of overlapping spheres of schools, families, and the community (Epstein, 1995) in order to interpret the data collected in the interviews of our teacher candidates to explore the research

question: what did school-community-family collaboration look like for students pursuing licensure during the pandemic? Ultimately, we found that teacher candidates (1) struggled with setting boundaries as they were inundated with questions, (2) maintained communication, and in some cases, increased communication with families as they navigated the technology of remote teaching, and (3) struggled to include the greater community amidst shut-downs and social-distancing. However, these findings led to possibilities for utilizing the more positive aspects that came out of communication during the pandemic.

Educational Standards Connecting Families and Schools

Educational standards define shared values in the field of education, and one of those values is family-teacher communication. In the United States, not only is family engagement reflected in federal educational policy under the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (US Department of Education, 2015), but also family engagement is embedded in many states' professional teaching standards.

The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) charges teacher educators to use a set of guiding principles to strengthen their impact in responding to the diverse needs of children in a rapidly changing world. This set of principles is used to evaluate and assess teacher candidates' effectiveness to work and collaborate with families. CAEP evaluation criteria includes an emphasis on respectful and reciprocal relationships (CAEP, 2018), maintaining that, "Candidates actively seek information from and about families and take primary responsibility for maintaining respectful, ongoing, open two-way communication" (CAEP, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, EPPs must provide teacher candidates with preparation opportunities that are aligned with these principles.

A similar standard is also found in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC, 2016) professional standards and competencies which sets the expectation that early childhood educators should "Collaborate as partners with families in young children's development and learning through respectful, reciprocal relationships and engagement" (NAEYC, 2019, p. 9). NAEYC acknowledges that early childhood education relies on strong partnerships between educators and the children's families. Comparable to the CAEP principles, NAEYC places responsibility for initiating and maintaining partnerships with families on the shoulders of the educators.

Developed by Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) International Association, the standards for Initial TESOL PreK–12 Teacher Preparation Programs are designed to be utilized by EPPs that teach candidates who are seeking their initial TESOL credential. Of the five initial TESOL teacher preparation standards, three of the standards specify how teacher candidates will be expected to understand and address family collaboration and communication (TESOL, 2019).

What is repeated in these standards is the idea that teachers should know their students and their families and initiate and maintain communication. However, many teacher candidates are so concerned with teaching and having their students pass standardized tests that they are unable to, or do not know how, to build and maintain those relationships. Since EPPs' curricula is oftentimes overcrowded, EPPs frequently rely on observation and reflective practices to mark these standards as having been covered (Baum & Swick, 2008; D'Haem & Griswold, 2017). This results in teacher candidates often feeling underprepared to communicate effectively with families (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Sutton, et al., 2021).

Educational Standards in Practice: Family and School Collaboration

Once in the classroom, it is apparent how educational standards have been written to influence the relationship between schools, family and the community to ensure student success. Most of the standards, as previously highlighted, include elements of two-way communication, ideas of community engagement, and charges that teachers understand diverse families. As teacher candidates graduate into their professional careers, they are encouraged to collaborate in more substantial ways. Opportunities such as family literacy programs (Brown, et al., 2019), family math nights (Skyhar & Nantais, 2020), community writing programs (Haddix, 2015), and community-led intergenerational bilingual classes (Housel, 2020) are examples of effective home-school-community communication strategies that extend the classroom into the community.

However, one of the most-encouraged strategies to increase school-family communication and collaboration is the home visit (The NEA Foundation, 2012; Stetson, et al., 2012). Home visits encourage teachers to physically go to the homes of their students to meet families and create relationships with intended outcomes such as increasing student academic achievement and attitudes (Ilhan, et al., 2019; Stetson, et al., 2012; Wright, et al., 2018), decreasing student absences from school (Finigan-Carr, et al., 2014), and discovering home literacy practices that can be used for differentiating instructional strategies in the classroom (Cornett, et al., 2020).

Many home visit studies find that there is nearly always measured or perceived success in student achievement or behavior after the visit (Finigan-Carr et al., 2014; Stetson, et al., 2012; Wright, et al., 2018). However, the logistical and practical nature of conducting home visits for every child in every class is often cited as an obstacle (Stetson et al., 2012). Additionally, home

visits can result in perpetuating deficit-oriented thinking around families when teachers are not properly coached or debriefed, thereby negating the potential positive relationship building aspect of the practice (Park & Paulick, 2021). Safety and language barriers are also concerns preventing some teachers from visiting the homes of their families (Burstein, 2020; Stetson et al., 2012). Specifically, during the early stages of COVID-19, amidst government-mandated “stay at home” orders, teachers were strongly discouraged from leaving their homes, let alone going to their students’ homes. However, as teachers became more comfortable with technology, they began utilizing video conferencing to connect with families—essentially turning all conferences into a “virtual” home visit.

While some technologies rose out of the COVID-19 pandemic, some online resources were already being used by EPPs to support teacher candidates’ practice with family communication. Unal et al. (2020) found that preservice teachers benefited from analyzing online case studies as a tool for understanding positive parent-teacher interactions. Kelley and Wenzel (2019) described the positive learning experience their preservice teachers were afforded when using an app that included realistic avatars to practice parent-teacher conferencing. Similarly, Dalinger et. al. (2020) engaged their preservice teachers in realistic virtual reality parent-teacher simulations through Mursion®, providing “authentic practice in a controlled environment with reduced risk of harm” (p. 1). These innovative practices have helped preservice teachers connect theory to practice in nontraditional ways in the education field. However, others caution that this type of instant access through technology creates a notion of “no natural boundaries” calling on teachers to be available to “persistent communications at all hours of the day or night via mobile devices” (Hansen & Gray, 2018, p. 1). Therefore, teaching

boundary setting along with communication is necessary if teachers and families plan to utilize these tools.

During the Spring of 2020, the Varkey Foundation (2020) set out to discover what parent-teacher-community collaboration looked like during COVID-19. They found the usual roadblocks including lack of reliable internet, broken devices, and distrust of schools. However, they also found that teachers around the world were building and strengthening the parent-teacher-community foundation through recording radio programs, writing letters to their students and families, leading online yoga and dance classes, and organizing community food and technology drives (Varkey Foundation, 2020). While Braun and Sayer (2020) described the “laborious task of reaching out to students and families to ensure they . . . had all the necessary information and technology available for remote learning” (p.3), Robertson (2020) stressed that “one of the most critical lessons from the spring is this: educators (and schools) who went into COVID-19 with strong . . . family partnerships were the most successful in reaching and teaching. . . after schools closed” (para. 4). Schools who had strong, pre-existing home-to-school relationships were less affected by the abrupt restrictions and transitions the pandemic imposed.

As we read about what others were doing, and as we watched teacher candidates navigate what the world was calling the “new normal” of the pandemic, we wondered what school-community-family collaboration looked like for this cohort of teacher candidates pursuing licensure during the pandemic. We framed our findings through a model of spheres of overlapping influence (Epstein, 1995) discussed in the next section.

Conceptual Framework

As demonstrated earlier, education standards focus heavily on the family-school-community relationship to varying degrees of success. In the mid-1990s, Epstein (1995) framed

this connection through a model of overlapping spheres of influence creating a conceptually clear way to see the overlap of “the three major contexts in which students learn and grow—the family, the school, and the community” (p. 702) with the child in the center. Epstein contended that the fundamental purpose of this collaboration is to support student success.

What gives this model the latitude to still be relevant is the sociocultural element of the model. Epstein emphasized the influence of the experiences, philosophies, and practices of families, schools, and communities and stressed that there is no one way to produce effective collaboration as long as there is caring and respect. In her original framework, she wrote:

Schools have choices. There are two common approaches to involving families in schools and in their children's education. One approach emphasizes conflict and views the school as a battleground. The conditions and relationships in this kind of environment guarantee power struggles and disharmony. The other approach emphasizes partnership and views the school as a homeland (Epstein, 1995, p. 709).

The model was intended at the time, and is still used, to highlight an approach that does not blame parents for not knowing the intricacies of school, but rather demonstrates ways to access schools that feel welcoming and comforting.

We chose this model to frame our current research because the visual image of the spheres seemed relevant as schools struggled to balance these relationships through COVID-19. The overlapping spheres of influence, now more than ever, demonstrated how communities' actions during this health crisis directly influenced schools. In March 2020, schools and families were forced into near-constant communication as they scrambled to move to remote schools, seeming to cause the spheres to collide. However, our visualization of these spheres also occurred during a time of school-closures and social-distancing, untethering schools,

communities, and families from each other. Epstein's spheres metaphorically collided and then (literally) moved apart.

During January 2021, when this study began, students, families and community members were not allowed in the schools used in this study. Teachers were either teaching remotely from home or from an empty classroom, and the earlier near-constant communication of the initial panic of the pandemic had subsided. The child seemed to be adrift and no longer nestled in the center of the spheres. It is within this context that we framed our understanding of this research. Ultimately, we wanted to know how teaching remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic affected our teacher candidates' communication and collaboration with families and the community.

Methodology

The current study grew out of our interest in family-teacher-community collaboration during COVID-19. We are both education professors who supervised teacher candidates during the Spring 2021 semester in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. How teachers communicated with families and communities to ensure student success was an interest to both of us prior to COVID-19, but as we observed our candidates' experiences in their fieldwork semesters, we decided to formally study their interactions. After formal consents were procured, we began making notes of our informal conversations and reviewing their reflective writing to frame the study. The study started with two data points, including interviews and a reflective piece, which asked our candidates to describe their experience specifically, how they "communicate and collaborate with the home and community for the benefit of students" as stated in North Carolina Standard NC-PTS-PC.2e.1.

Researcher Positionality

Author A and Author B have both supervised student teachers in elementary education and TESOL education, respectively, for over 10 years. Author A coordinates the elementary education program and Author B coordinates the post-baccalaureate TESOL licensure program. Both authors taught in public school prior to becoming university faculty and are deeply invested in teacher preparation and K-12 student success.

In beginning this research, we also felt the enormous pressures of educating our students during the COVID-19 pandemic and empathized with the difficulties of engaging students during a first-in-a-lifetime event for all of us. As both past insiders of the K-12 classroom, and current outside observers, we hold a constructivist view of educational research that simultaneously acknowledges shared elements while highlighting the individual, constructed realities of our participants. It is with this semi-insider, constructivist view that we approached our study.

Participants

We used convenience sampling to secure our five participants. Two of the five were traditional undergraduate students earning a bachelor's degree in elementary education and enrolled in a student teaching internship. Both of these teachers had a cooperating teacher in the classroom. The other three had earned a bachelor's degree in a field outside of education and were completing their final course for initial teacher licensure in ESL. Even though the three ESL teachers were the lead teachers in their classrooms, they had a mentor and, more importantly, these participants were all completing education preparation programs for the first time, which required supervising faculty.

All participants were female and were completing their licenses or degrees in North Carolina schools. Four were in remote settings, while one student teacher transitioned from

remote to teaching in-person. From this point forward, we will refer to the participants as teacher candidates, defined as “an individual in a teacher preparation program prior to obtaining his/her initial teaching license” (IGI Global, n.d.). because all five, regardless of prior teaching experience, were pursuing licensure in the Spring 2021 semester. Table 1 illustrates each teacher candidate’s characteristics. The names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Table 1

Teacher Candidate Characteristics

Pseudonym	Licensure Area	Grade Level	Teaching Location	Teaching Status	Teaching Environment
Brooke	Elementary Education	Kindergarten	Rural	Student Teacher	Remote Teacher
Rachel	Elementary Education	Kindergarten	Rural	Student Teacher	Remote/In-Person Teacher
Stephanie	Post-baccalaureate PreK-12 TESOL	K-5 ESL	Urban	Lead Teacher	Remote Teacher
Amanda	Post-baccalaureate PreK-12 TESOL	K-5 ESL	Urban	Lead Teacher	Remote Teacher

Candace	Post-	3-5 ESL	Suburban	Lead	Remote
	baccalaureate			Teacher	Teacher
	PreK-12 TESOL				

Data Collection & Analysis

After reading our teacher candidates' reflective writing, we conducted semi-structured interviews which we found yielded the most interesting information. All five of the teacher candidates participated in two, sixty-minute individual interviews during the Spring 2021 academic semester. The current study utilized the interviews as the data for our interpretations. Author A interviewed two participants, and Author B interviewed three participants.

While the interviews focused on multiple facets of teaching during COVID-19, for this study, we decided to explore the specific research question: What does school-community-family collaboration look like for a cohort of teacher candidates pursuing licensure during the pandemic? This study focused on the interpretation of the teacher candidates' words and how dialogue, transcripts, and subsequent themes are "constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). This yields storytelling that describes experiences (Crotty, 1998). Keeping this in mind, the data collected and findings interpreted are our understanding of our participants' words filtered through Epstein's (1995) overlapping spheres of influence model. Following a method of qualitative inquiry, we each interviewed teacher candidates via Zoom and subsequently watched each other's interviews and read the transcripts to explore ways in which the participants expressed that they were making, or not making, connections with the family and community (Hatch, 2002). Specifically, we used a methodology of analysis that relies on agreed upon typologies. In this case, we used the term

typology loosely, but in conjunction with our framework, to include the school, the family, and the community connections. By reading and marking our data using typological analysis, we could then “look for patterns, relationships and themes within the typologies; code our entries according to patterns identified; decide if our patterns were supported by the data; search the data for nonexamples; and finally select data excerpts that supported our generalizations” (Hatch, 2002, p. 153).

We then organized our findings into themes around these connections or non-connections to highlight their experiences with these overlapping spheres of influence when COVID-19 forced the school, the family, and the community to engage in remote instruction over the course of the Spring 2021 semester.

Discussion of Findings

Through storytelling during the interviews, the five teacher candidates provided valuable insights that addressed how teaching remotely affected their communication and collaboration with families and the community. Our study uncovered three themes: (1) Lack of Boundaries: The Blurred School Sphere; (2) “Being” in the Home: The Blurred Family Sphere; and (3) Community: The Missing Sphere.

Lack of Boundaries: The Blurred School Sphere

The teacher candidates’ communication and collaboration with families during COVID-19, coupled with their reflections of these interactions, strongly indicated that the candidates felt an overwhelming sense of lack of boundaries. One avenue of communication that appeared to exist at a much greater capacity than prior to COVID-19 was the use of text messaging. Stephanie indicated that there was a dramatic shift in how her students’ families were communicating with her during the pandemic. She explained that:

It's so weird because before COVID, phone calls didn't really feel so invasive, but now they do. It's insane. Just let me show you. [She holds up her phone to scroll through pages of text messages]. These are all of the conversations that I've had over the year, and they're all parents.

Stephanie further noted that she did not delete any of the text messages received from her students' families since COVID-19 started because she was worried the school may request that teachers provide logs of communication with families. Stephanie continued to scroll and say, "I mean, it just goes on and on." She continued by depicting the vast difference between prior to and during COVID-19, stating:

I had an office phone, and they [parents] would call. That would then take them to my extension. Or they would come up to the school and request to speak with me. That had to change because, well, I was going to say we got kicked out of school. Everybody's going home, and we're going to be out for two weeks. The two weeks turned into forever and we never went back [for the 2019-2020 school year].

By sharing her experiences communicating with families prior to and during the pandemic, Stephanie seemed to become more acutely aware of how invasive the new line of communication had become. She desired to provide supportive, educational responses to her students' families, but that meant boundless direct access to her.

Amanda validated Stephanie's concern about the drastic change during COVID-19, arguing that prior to the pandemic "...part of the school district's policy is that you [teachers] don't text or make cell phone calls with family members, but that went out the window with COVID." She referenced before the pandemic as being "normal" and alluded to the fact that there was a new norm, one that must be met with boundaries, explaining, "Boundary setting has

to be established. And I don't feel guilty about that. I have to draw the line.” Amanda realized the importance of setting boundaries, noting that otherwise, she would be too exhausted.

Rachel reinforced both Amanda’s and Stephanie’s argument that giving out personal cell phone numbers was unorthodox. Given her position as a student teacher, she stated that was “something she had never heard of teachers doing before.” She gave a quick example of how her cooperating teacher would receive messages at 7:30 a.m. about student needs for the day. Rachel highlighted the vast difference between her previous fieldwork experiences and her current student teaching placement. With prior experiences, she said, it seemed like there was a “hard stop right around five o’clock” where teachers did not receive phone calls or messages from families. In the same breath, she argued that “setting up boundaries is a big thing” arguing, “If you set boundaries, I feel like it would be way less exhausting. I mean it's still going to be challenging as a new teacher but having parents message you twenty-four seven would definitely drive me crazy.” As opposed to the other participants who were lead teachers, Rachel voiced the feeling of being in between being a student and a teacher. She was the only candidate in the study who relied heavily on her cooperating teacher to support her efforts in communicating with families. Rachel mentioned that “When I took over, she [my cooperating teacher] was able to answer messages.” However, Rachel was very aware that eventually there would not be an “extra” teacher in her future classroom.

Magnifying the concern over families contacting teachers at all hours of the day, Brooke sensed that as the kindergarten remote teacher, families expected that she was sitting at her computer and that she would be able to respond immediately to their communications. If nothing else, she expressed that families would “most likely know that she is going to see it.” She continued by describing how her in-person teaching colleagues were perhaps given more leeway

with families and timely responses, indicating that families understood that the in-person teacher “...shouldn’t see it [message] at that particular moment” and that the families were more likely to send a message to the office.

While Stephanie, Amanda, Rachel, and Brooke shared that they felt the families were invading their personal lives through the various forms of communication, Candace suggested quite the opposite. In fact, stating “she has loved” the communication, citing the use of email, Class Dojo, and the ability to communicate with parents remotely while she was teaching their children. She was pleasantly surprised by how easily she could reach out to families, explaining, “This has been the strongest part of remote learning because I can say, [names student], can you just ask mom to come to the screen? I’m going to ask her a question. And everything gets resolved there.” Candace expressed her satisfaction with teaching remotely and communicating with families and argued that she thinks “that’s the way to go in the future,” referring to using all technology available to communicate with families remotely.

Although the teacher candidates’ aspirations to keep parents informed about their child’s education was well noted in the excerpts above, it was evident that COVID-19 blurred the lines between professional teaching time and personal well-being. The candidates’ comments revealed that communication with families during the pandemic provoked a sense of lack of boundaries and prompted the desire for future boundary setting.

“Being” in the Home: The Blurred Family Sphere

As with the first theme, this second theme emerged from the complication discussed in the interviews concerning the overlap of the home-school environment. Teachers were no longer able to control the environment in which their students learned each day. Amanda described a typical day in one of her online classes:

I mean, it was like a zoo going on behind him, mayhem, chaos. He had to stay on mute all the time; sometimes wherever he would sit, I guess that's where they put the baby. I'd see a baby's foot, like a little baby foot in the picture [computer screen].

She went on to describe the children roughhousing and “dragging each other around by the legs.” She attempted to call an adult over to discuss the behavior, but she explained that “he would always say nobody's here.” Amanda was able to eventually speak with an aunt, although the child had to translate as his aunt did not speak English. The student explained to Amanda that his aunt watches multiple children during the day. Amanda elaborated:

I never got the mom to contact me. The aunt—she was just too harried and frazzled so we muddled through. We had to keep it on mute. . . he could write but there was no paper or pencil to be found so we didn't work on writing. So there was just his listening skills.

In this sense, Amanda was given a view into the home of her student, but with no parent to communicate with, she found the glimpse into this student’s learning environment discouraging and unproductive. In contrast, Amanda described a more positive communication with a Russian family in which she was able to meet the mother of the child to encourage and promote additional English language skills for both.

Candace was also given a window to her students’ homes. She described the ability to see parents as “the strongest part of remote learning.” She described teaching remotely and communicating with parents as “enlightening.” She continued:

But the main thing for me is that. . . I feel like I’ve put faces to parents’ names, and I’ve connected parents' faces with the child. We've had conversations, you know, just about. . . what day are you seeing them, and can you connect me to whatever program, like, the music program. You know, before [COVID-19] they don't really get to ask me

[questions] because they run into school and run out, or they drop the kids off, and very rarely will they show up for parent teacher conferences.

Candace also used the time she had during remote teaching to accompany her school counselor on home visits. She was concerned about “their welfare,” she explained, “so around Christmas time we bought a bunch of gifts and took them around.” Candace was surprised to find that when they visited a particular trailer park, “half my kids were living there. And I didn't even know.” She continued to describe the conditions as “quite bad,” but said she was so grateful for the experience. She described one mother who confided in them during the home visit about not having heat in the home:

And I thought this is great, because you know we can fix these things for her and she probably wouldn't have shared it with us if we hadn't come out and done this. . . [it's] something I want to start doing again, but also with COVID it was limited.

She had not visited families prior to COVID-19. She explained that her teaching schedule had never allowed it, and, in fact, her former principal had discouraged the practice. She said that after visiting that particular trailer park, she was able to help the mother navigate the district's support for basic needs. Additionally, several students who had been missing from class did “get back online as well for a few weeks; they went off again, but they came on for a few weeks after the visit.” Candace's experience supported her greater understanding of her students' home-lives and resulted in an increase in student participation in remote learning—at least for a while.

Like Candace, Brooke used opportunities to talk with parents through her online classes. She explained that she now, more than ever, had “access to parents because they are right there, and I can talk to them after class.” In her interview, she stated that she was “concerned about going back to the way things were” in terms of parent communication--or lack thereof. However,

Brooke also spoke about her struggle to help her students become independent as parents always seemed in the wings waiting to help out. She explained:

They're [parents] sitting right there the whole time. I can see them [parents] or it's not even the seeing, I know they're there. They're [students] five and they can't be independent [because of parents helping]. Now in the first month or so, yes, but now there should not be any parents.

She saw her kindergarteners relying on their families to support them through their lessons which would not be the case in traditional face-to-face classes. At a certain point, the parents became a crutch for their children and not a support for them or for her, and she wondered if she was “assessing the parents or the children.” Rachel had a similar experience with overzealous parents and exclaimed that “many parents sit by the students and try to spoon feed them answers,” suggesting that she made it clear that it was not necessary to sit with their child.

Interestingly, Amanda, Candace, and Stephanie all had concerns about students being left alone. Candace described a moment when she asked to speak with a student’s parents and the child responded that he was by himself. She expressed her concern, stating, “I mean, the kid’s only eight,” and when asked who was with him, he said his ten-year-old brother. Stephanie also encountered a similar situation, stating one parent “has a son in kindergarten and a son in second grade, and she's had to leave them by themselves. Well, she goes to work and I’m like oh my gosh, that’s scary, you know.”

In home visit ideology, parents invite teachers to their homes to establish relationships and build two-way communication (Finigan-Carr, et al., 2014). However, emergency remote teaching connected families in a different way than traditional schooling. While in some instances these teachers and the parents they encountered were able to begin building the trust

with each other that is so important in a two-way school-family communication, in other encounters, teachers were left with feelings of frustration or concern.

COVID-19 created an odd blend of overlapping the school-family spheres in a way that neither families nor teachers seemed able to control. Teachers were in essence in the homes of families that had not invited them in, and therefore these teachers were hesitant to solve problems they were not asked to solve. In some ways, our participants used the portal into students' homes as a way to create communication, while in other ways the glimpse into the homes only heightened their concerns with the home environments; without a typical home visit protocol in place, Stephanie, Candace, Amanda, Rachel and Brooke were left to their own devices on how and whether to intervene.

Community: The Missing Sphere

While the family and school spheres were colliding and blurring, the community in Epstein's (1995) model seemed to be completely untethered. This is partly due to the complex nature of the school-community dynamic. Many teachers think that it is their job to establish community partnerships and the standards, and consequently EPPs, sometimes fail to define how the community and school should overlap.

However, Epstein and Sheldon (2016) emphasized that schools with "strong support from principals and...district leaders were more likely than other schools to have higher-quality programs of family and community involvement" (p. 205). As such, it should not be the sole responsibility of a classroom teacher, or even teams of teachers, to create community access points. Nevertheless, when questioned about how she thought COVID-19 affected her ability to collaborate with the community, Rachel answered from the perspective of inside the classroom rather than thinking more holistically about the school-community connection. Her answer

included a description of a formerly in-person farm experience that had to become remote due to COVID-19. She explained:

Years before they said that they would bring the cows and everything to the school. But with COVID we couldn't really do anything at the school with animals. But we did . . . like a virtual field trip. . . We thought it was going to be them actually showing us the live animals, but it was just a picture of the animals.

Rachel equated community collaboration with the connection of the rural community in which her school was located and the influence of this on her class curriculum. Clearly, she and her cooperating teacher were trying to continue to connect students to their community, but what they thought was going to be a virtual field trip wound up just being images of farm animals which she felt “they already taught.”

Brooke echoed the feeling of having no community engagement when she also referenced the farm field trip that students had experienced prior to COVID-19. In the same way, she circled the conversation back to the classroom and curriculum, stating:

As annoying as it can be, [eliminating] the field trip and hands-on activities. . . they're struggling. Not only did you make it remote, it's remote without stuff and it's in person without stuff and you have to throw a mask on with it.

The “stuff” Brooke referred to was what she saw partly as community engagement. These field trips then blurred into “hands-on activities” and the question about community engagement ended in her discussing the difficulty of teaching phonics to students wearing masks.

While in Rachel’s classroom small attempts were still being made to engage the community, and Brooke alluded to ideas of field trips prior to COVID-19, Stephanie responded to the question with a completely different perspective. Because of the nature of her work and

her fluency in Spanish, Stephanie saw the “community” as the Spanish-speaking community. She explained:

I was definitely collaborating with the community before COVID, but it was more like face-to-face interaction. During COVID, I think that collaboration accelerated to like 1000 miles per hour. I definitely established relationships with parents that I didn't necessarily know before and not just like new families either. Kids that are not ESL. . .I don't know the kid but you know the teacher needs something pertaining to the kid and the parent doesn't speak English. That's where I would step in, so I'd say that the collaboration—the community—I mean, it just grew exponentially.

Her perspective of “collaboration accelerat[ing] to 1000 miles per hour” was referenced earlier in this study when she spoke about the multiple text messages she began receiving as a result of the change in communication structure with parents.

Similarly to Stephanie, when Candace answered questions about the community, she also discussed the community in terms of her students' families before and during COVID-19. While she thought family communication improved, she said it was more difficult to establish any kind of community events. She explained:

I think that's been really difficult because before [COVID-19] we were having events at the school. We would have groups of parents coming in for certain celebrations in the classroom. We definitely did that. That definitely has been affected for sure.

For her, community meant inviting family members to the school for purposes other than conferencing. For both, the term “community” ultimately circled back to parents, and specifically the parents who formed the community surrounding their ESL students.

As Epstein and Sheldon (2016) alluded to, community engagement is most successful when principals and districts are involved. In Amanda’s case, her principal was the one, she felt, who was saying to ignore the community during this crisis. Amanda admitted that community engagement was not even “on [her] radar. . . on any level during the pandemic.” She continued:

There was sort of a feeling, an attitude, you know, from the top down: Let's just get through the year. Whatever we have to do to get to the finish line day by day. Do what you have to to survive. The community part is nice too. That's gravy, but we can't even go there right now.

Amanda explained that prior to the “chaos” of the pandemic, she was trying to learn about community organizations, such as “Hispanic resources and groups in the area” and even spoke briefly about joining Facebook communities, but realized quickly that doing so was not a priority at that time:

And all that went to the wayside. I want to prioritize that in the upcoming school year, but there's already some talk within our school that it's still mayhem so maybe let's just get in and see what the fallout is.

Amanda felt strongly that community engagement would support her culturally and linguistically diverse students, but as a new teacher in a second career and without the support of her administration, she felt the need to focus more on the school part of the overlapping spheres of influence. However, Amanda was the only participant to allude to what is traditionally thought of as community engagement—even though it was to say that she does not “do” it.

This discourse demonstrates the difficulties of school-community collaboration. Given the unexpected new demands that these teacher candidates were facing, the lack of community collaboration could have entirely been a result of being overworked. The teacher candidates in

this study seemed to include community as an add-on after everything else was taken care of, and this may be because of the way community collaboration is taught, or not taught, even in our own college of education.

Discussion and Implications

We began this study because of COVID-19 which upended education and pushed teachers into a frenzy of remote teaching that had never been experienced before. As we observed our teacher candidates throughout the semester and interviewed them, we found the resilience that defines teaching. These teacher candidates were able to find so many positives that resulted from remote teaching. However, as expected, not all experiences were successes.

An observation gleaned from this study is that post-pandemic communication with families necessitates teachers setting boundaries. It was quite evident that many of these teacher candidates' personal lives were being affected by the additional demands of teaching during the pandemic. One only needs to look at Stephanie's overabundance of text messages to see how this results in overwork. The data from this study indicates that EPPs should begin assisting their teacher candidates in a curriculum of learning to balance setting boundaries with families and actively communicating with families in a way that neither blames families for communicating too much nor admonishes them for a lack of communication. Although many public schools already have regulations in place for how and when teachers communicate with parents, it is the EPPs' responsibility to guide our teacher candidates in exploring how to balance communication in a way that is effective and supports the family while respecting the time of both teachers and families. Ways to effectively utilize new-to-education technologies should be discussed in EPPs in order to coach teachers in how to set and maintain boundaries, which could prevent teacher burnout. We propose that teacher educators task their teacher candidates with critiquing the tools

that are used for family-school communication and, more importantly, how to leverage these tools to support work-life balance and healthy boundaries rather than eliminate boundaries. We recognize that often when teachers discuss parent-communication--and this was evident in this study as well--that there is frustration that occurs with too much communication as much as there is with too little.

Perhaps another important lesson learned is that teachers need to reflect on, and define with support from families, what healthy, two-way communication practices look like. Based on the findings discussed in this study, we recognized that boundaries were very unclear during remote teaching. As teachers gained access into homes, they glimpsed their students' lives in a way that is usually reserved for scheduled home visits. While these teacher candidates were in the midst of triaging education, they did not have the time to work with their schools on protocols that would create intentionality of, or goals for, home visits (Stetson, et al., 2012). With the added stressors of a global pandemic and teaching online, the teachers in this study, perhaps unintentionally, succumbed to deficit-thinking about the home lives of some of their students. They were instead viewing their students' home environments, via Zoom, with little knowledge of how to intervene, or even if it would be appropriate to intervene. This sometimes created tensions between the teacher candidates and those who were residing in the students' homes.

These study findings suggest that teachers can be encouraged to use video conferencing in addition to home visits to create the two-way relationships encouraged throughout the education standards. The overlapping spheres framework can be used as a post-pandemic view of the potential connections that can be made via technology between schools, families and the community. As Candace said, "that's the way to go in the future." Using video conferencing for

home visits and parent-teacher conferences can create a more equitable space for teachers and families to dialogue. Parents no longer must drive to schools during their busy days and teachers no longer have the “home turf advantage.” Instead of being places of contentious or nerve-inducing meetings, school spaces could be reserved for family and community collaborations, following Epstein’s (1995) goal of making the school an approachable space. Conversely, there are families and teachers who prefer to meet in person and feel that this offers a different connection that should not be ignored.

Epstein and Sheldon (2016) emphasized that teachers should make efforts to reach out to parents, but they should not alone be responsible for looping the spheres of family and school. Yet, that is what our teacher candidates perceived that they were being asked to do. COVID-19 was an anomaly, but what was not was the feeling of teachers being left on their own to make sure that their students were supported. As faculty create early courses and field experiences, they should require additional spaces for teacher candidates to gain “competencies in working as team members, sharing responsibilities for leadership, and working as partners with families in diverse communities” (Epstein and Sanders, 2006, p. 87) rather than completing individual reflection assignments pertaining to the community. A more substantial project that extends beyond “reflective writing” prior to the student teaching/clinical intern semester could create added understanding of what successful community-school collaboration could be. This type of project could be modeled after studies such as those presented in the literature review (e.g., family literacy programs, family math nights or community-led writing programs).

Our study also reinforced that during a time of the greatest need, teachers were tasked with communicating with students’ families, handing out computers and take-home packets of work, and eventually being the liaison between schools and families. As this study uncovered,

the teacher candidates were able to successfully, albeit stressfully, tether two of the spheres back together—school and family—but were ultimately prohibited from physically bringing in the community due to mandated protective measures. As we stated previously, at times community members were prohibited by state mandates from physically entering school buildings. However, as the Varkey Foundation (2020) suggested, some teachers were making those community ties virtually during the pandemic. In our study, we found that as these teacher candidates were struggling to engage with their students, community was either ignored or conflated with family communication.

Given that the pandemic brought with it many new norms in education, one approach to resurfacing the post-pandemic community engagement sphere is by “facilitating remote community engagement activities” (Fedorowicz, et al., 2020, p. 5). The convenience of video conferencing can be used to create spaces of community collaboration that were previously logistically difficult to attain. Using these spaces for community literacy events or even more social events like online yoga, teacher candidates can merge their interests with the community, leading to “enhanced engagement [and] strong collaborative partnerships among families” (Housel, 2020, p. 185) which, in turn, leads to more children succeeding in schools.

Ultimately, EPPs want teachers to succeed, and teachers want students to succeed. The more overlapped schools, families, and the community are, the more students are supported. However, we recognize that the school-community-family collaboration that Epstein describes, and that we use as the framework for this article, has been critiqued as placing the agency in the hands of schools rather than families. As Stefanski et al. (2016) explain, “the roles of parents and families in school–community partnerships evolve along a continuum from being *served* to being *empowered*, with involvement and engagement falling in the middle” (p. 154).

This study has not thoroughly explored this continuum, and certainly not from the perspective of families. We hope to do this at a later date which we describe further in the following section.

Future Research

Given that communication should be “open two-way” conversations (CAEP, 2018, p. 9), we need to be cognizant of how these communications affected the other major stakeholder: family members. This study could be enhanced by research conducted with family members (e.g., caregivers, parents, guardians) who could possibly offer divergent stories and experiences about communication and collaboration with their child’s teacher during COVID-19. Furthermore, conducting research with home and the family members could illuminate how they believe the communication and collaboration benefitted their child.

We also would like to further study the role of EPPs in preparing teacher candidates using video tools and teams for both parent-teacher conferences and community collaboration. Are remote home visits as effective as in-person visits? Even in this study, seemingly the most effective home visits were conducted by our outlier, Candace, who did visit her students in person. Are remote visits more effective than not visiting at all? These are the questions that we would like to continue to explore.

Conclusion

Epstein’s (2016) spheres of overlapping influences offered a conceptual framework to examine how teaching remotely because of COVID-19 affected our teacher candidates’ abilities to effectively communicate and collaborate with families and the community. This study provided readers with broader considerations of the support teacher candidates need to communicate and collaborate with family members and the larger community with specific attention given to applying what was most effective in remote learning environments. While the

pandemic forced our teacher candidates to abruptly learn new ways of communicating and collaborating with families, the connections between the school and family remained a critical component for ensuring the academic and behavioral success of PreK-12 students. Although the community engagement sphere seemed to be an afterthought for these teacher candidates, listening to their stories of perseverance and tenacity, we can expect they will invite the community back into the schools. The larger community must also commit to support and collaborate with schools.

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