



Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

This may be the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

Mann, Glenys, Gilmore, Linda, Robertson, Ainsley, Kennedy-Wood, Lynsey, & Maia-Pike, Lara
(2024)

Little things mean a lot: parent perspectives on positive teacher-parent communication when students have disability.

Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 30(1), pp. 102-115.

This file was downloaded from: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/242063/>

© 2023 The Authors



This work is covered by copyright. Unless the document is being made available under a Creative Commons Licence, you must assume that re-use is limited to personal use and that permission from the copyright owner must be obtained for all other uses. If the document is available under a Creative Commons License (or other specified license) then refer to the Licence for details of permitted re-use. It is a condition of access that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. If you believe that this work infringes copyright please provide details by email to qut.copyright@qut.edu.au

License: Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

Notice: *Please note that this document may not be the Version of Record (i.e. published version) of the work. Author manuscript versions (as Submitted for peer review or as Accepted for publication after peer review) can be identified by an absence of publisher branding and/or typeset appearance. If there is any doubt, please refer to the published source.*

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2023.2241020>

Little things mean a lot: parent perspectives on positive teacher-parent communication when students have disability

Glenys Mann ^a, Linda Gilmore ^a, Ainsley Robertson^b, Lynsey Kennedy-Wood^a and Lara Maia-Pike^a

^aCentre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, QLD, Australia;

^bCommunity Resource Unit, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

ABSTRACT

Productive teacher-parent partnerships are important to successful student outcomes and rely on positive teacher-parent communication, particularly when students have disability. Through semi-structured focus group and individual interviews, 17 parents of students with disability provided first-hand accounts of teacher communication that facilitated successful teacher-parent partnership. Key findings include the importance of the 'little things' that teachers say and do, for example, welcoming, day-to-day interactions that are foundational to effective teacher-parent communication. Other important contributions include examples of how teachers operationalise constructive communication, and contextual factors that enable positive teacher-parent interactions (for example, location, time). It was concluded that, despite extensive evidence in the literature of communication difficulties between teachers and parents of students with disability, many successful practices are being used by teachers. The findings reported here provide authentic insights into positive, productive teacher-parent communication strategies.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 23 December 2022

Accepted 20 July 2023

KEYWORDS

Teacher-parent partnership; teacher-parent collaboration; teacher-parent communication; inclusive education; students with disability

Positive teacher-parent partnerships are important to successful student outcomes (Pushor, 2015). Described as a relationship in which both partners are equally valued for their knowledge, experience and skills (Gascoigne, 1996), the concept of partnership goes beyond less meaningful forms of parental involvement such as volunteering at school events (Berkowitz et al., 2021). Goodall (2018) argued that the work of educating children must be shared by teachers and parents. Similarly, Smith and Sheridan (2019) advocated collaborative decision-making and stressed the positive impact on student outcomes when parents work towards educational goals in partnership with teachers rather than alone.

Teachers and parents both play pivotal roles in children's learning (Povey et al., 2016; Yotyodying et al., 2020) and must work together systematically to enhance student achievement (Pushor & Amendt, 2018). Parents are lifelong educators of their children

CONTACT Glenys Mann  glenys.mann@qut.edu.au  Centre for Inclusive Education, Queensland University of Technology, Victoria Park Road, Kelvin Grove, QLD 4059, Australia

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

and have a critical place alongside teachers in educational decision-making (Pushor & Amendt, 2018). Numerous student benefits of teacher-parent partnerships are cited in the literature, including increased socio-emotional competence and academic achievement (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Smith & Sheridan, 2019), better attendance and school retention (Povey et al., 2016), and improvements in behaviour (Goodall, 2018). In addition to the extensive benefits to students, Sucuoğlu and Bakkaloğlu (2018) concluded that partnerships also benefit parents and teachers themselves; for example, parents feel more competent, and teachers gain insights and understanding about student needs.

The question of how to develop and sustain productive teacher-parent partnerships becomes more complex when students have disability, particularly in mainstream schooling which is the context for the research reported here. For example, teachers and parents can hold differing views about disability and inclusion which can cause tension between them (Rusnak, 2018). Nonetheless, partnerships between teachers and parents of students with disability are 'crucial' (Solvason & Proctor, 2021, p. 472). Solvason and Proctor (2021) contend that when students have disability, educational experiences are 'substantially less positive' (p.472) so constructive working relationships between home and school are important for parent and student wellbeing. Similarly, Burke et al. (2020) found that parent stress increases in relation to poor teacher-parent partnerships. Teacher-parent partnerships are also critical because of parents' expertise regarding their children with disability and the important contribution parents make in fostering inclusive school cultures (O'Hare et al., 2021). Not listening to parents puts schools at a disadvantage (Bennett et al., 2020).

Despite systemic efforts to facilitate positive teacher-parent partnerships, both in Australia (Australian Government, 2018) and internationally (for example, Education Scotland, 2021), it is a relationship that continues to be difficult (O'Hare et al., 2021). Insights into how teachers can partner more effectively with parents, particularly those whose children have disability, remain a priority. One area that holds promise for facilitating better partnerships is the communication between teachers and parents. Teacher-parent communication is consistently highlighted as a critical element of effective partnerships (for example, Yotyodying et al., 2020) and is therefore important to understand more fully. Effective communication is key to cooperation between teachers and parents (Leenders et al., 2019), is 'instrumental to family engagement' (Smith & Sheridan, 2019, p. 129), a means for preserving relationships (Mann et al., *in press*), and a key conduit for parental involvement (Epstein et al., 2018). Communication features routinely in parent-teacher frameworks (for example, Australian Government, 2018) and also in the academic literature on parent-teacher partnerships. For example, the themes of communication and collaboration were highlighted as key by Ryan and Quinlan (2018) in their analysis of parents' perspectives on health and education services, and according to Leenders et al. (2019), two-way communication is foundational to trust between teachers and parents. It has been well established that communication is a critical component of teacher-parent partnerships, however, just what effective communication means, and how it is implemented in a practical sense, is not so evident. If teachers are to partner effectively with parents of students with disability, a comprehensive, detailed picture of what positive communication entails is important.

The literature on teacher-parent communication when students have disability is dominated by a focus on the fractious nature of interactions (Solvason & Proctor,

2021) including evidence that teacher-parent exchanges are beset by poor communication (O'Hare et al., 2021). Opportunities for meaningful dialogue between teachers and parents can be rare (Rusnak, 2018) and negative aspects of communication such as teachers' use of confusing or unfamiliar language and jargon are a feature (Goodall, 2018). Knowledge of how to interact with families can be superficial (Pushor & Amendt, 2018) with teachers feeling 'unprepared to effectively communicate with families' (Smith & Sheridan, 2019, p. 129) and parents feeling talked down to (O'Hare et al., 2021) or not listened to (Ryan & Quinlan, 2018). While not denying reported tensions in the communication between teachers and parents, or perhaps *because* of how pervasive these reports are, we take a strengths-based approach and argue that much can be learnt from the positive communication that teachers currently use. Our research investigated parents' perspectives of teacher-parent communication, and in this article, we intentionally report on data that illustrate *effective* teacher-parent interactions. Our aim is that this information will be used by other teachers in their own communication with parents of students with disability.

The research reported here was guided by the following research questions:

- (1) What features of teachers' communication (verbal and non-verbal) do parents identify as facilitating positive, productive teacher-parent partnerships?
- (2) What contextual factors facilitate positive communication between teachers and parents of students with disability?

Method

Study design

To meet the study aims, an interpretivist paradigm was implicated; we were interested to explore participants' insights into the everyday circumstances of communicating with teachers (Beuving & de Vries, 2015). A qualitative research design enabled participants to share their experiences and views in depth and to offer rich insights into the research topic (Flick, 2018). Our aim of identifying positive examples of teacher-parent communication aligns with Appreciative Inquiry which searches for 'the best in people, their organisations, and the world around them' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). We focussed on 'what works' with a vision for 'future initiatives based on best practice' (Shuayb et al., 2009, p. 2).

Participants

Eighteen participants were recruited in Queensland, Australia. As is often the case, all the parents who volunteered to participate were mothers (Knight, 2013). Ten lived in the capital city of Brisbane and eight came from regional cities/towns. Among the group, 12 had a child attending primary school, four had a child in high school, one had children with disability concurrently in both primary and high school, and one parent's child had recently completed high school. All children attended mainstream rather than special schools. Inclusion in regular schools is increasingly the expectation for students with disability, and, as Solvason and Proctor (2021) pointed out, mainstream environments

can mean more complex and difficult parent-teacher communication. It is key then to better understand parent-teacher communication in this context. Participants selected the way they participated in the study, either in a focus group ($n = 7$) or through an individual interview ($n = 11$).

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured focus group discussions or individual interviews. This choice offered greater flexibility regarding when, where and how parents could participate. The interactive nature of the focus groups facilitated the exchange of ideas, feelings and collective responses to questions about teacher-parent communication (Barbour, 2018) while the individual interviews offered a medium through which participants could reflect more deeply on their own unique experiences and perspectives (Roulston & Choi, 2018). Combining the data from the focus group and individual interviews offered well-rounded insights into the research topic.

Data collection procedures

After obtaining ethical clearance from Queensland University of Technology (#2021000449), participants were recruited through two Queensland community organisations that work with families of children with disability. Invitations to participate were disseminated via email and each organisation's Facebook page. Participants were also recruited, via email, through the researchers' own networks. Information flyers outlined the voluntary, confidential nature of the research and signed consent forms were returned to the researchers prior to data collection commencing. Two focus group interviews, approximately 2 hours long, were held during 2021. The first focus group ($n = 4$) included mothers whose children attended either primary or secondary schools while the second focus group ($n = 3$) included mothers whose children attended primary school only. Focus group interviews began with a discussion about confidentiality and other ground rules. Individual interviews took place either in person or via Zoom and were approximately one to one and a half hours long. All interviews were audio recorded and deidentified when transcribed.

Interview questions

During the interviews, parents were asked to share their experiences of positive communication with their child's teacher. The discussion was guided by a graphic that illustrated different communication areas: verbal and written communication, nonverbal communication, and specific contextual features that might influence communication (for example, venue, seating). This graphic tool was informed by Barnlund's model of communication-as-transaction (Barnlund, 2017) whereby meaning is created via the channels through which messages are conveyed and also through the contexts in which communication takes place. Participants were asked for examples of ways that teachers' communication had facilitated positive partnerships. Finally, participants were invited to remember or imagine a perfect meeting with their child's teacher, and to describe that meeting.

Data analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed and sent to participants to ensure that the recorded conversations were accurate reflections of their views and experiences. Eight participants checked the transcripts. All agreed they were an accurate representation of their views, with one participant making minor adjustments to her comments.

The data were first separated into the areas under investigation: verbal and written communication, non-verbal communication, and contextual factors. NVivo software (version 12) was used to organise and store the data under these four areas.

Each area was then analysed inductively for themes. The six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. That is, the data were read and reread to establish familiarity and initial notes were made about the topics that were evident in the data. Topics were then analysed for patterns, and themes emerged in each area. All thematic analysis was reviewed by the researchers and when there were discrepancies, these were discussed and resolved as a team. Once all the transcripts had been analysed, topics were again examined, and themes were further refined. In the final analysis, the data in the areas of verbal, written and non-verbal communication were collapsed under an overarching 'content' heading, with written and non-verbal communication becoming sub-themes under this heading.

Findings

The findings are presented in two sections: 1] content of teacher-parent communication, including *what* is communicated and *how* content is conveyed, and 2] contextual features of teacher-parent communication, that is, the conditions that influence teacher-parent interaction.

Content of positive teacher-parent communication

Parents indicated that partnerships were impacted by the content of teachers' communication: 1] 'what' was communicated, for example, constructive topics, information sharing, informal topics and teachers sharing their vulnerability and 2] 'how' content has been conveyed; that is, as a two-way, collaborative process that is warm, open and non-judgemental.

Constructive topics

Constructive topics included positive, solutions-focused and student-centred content. Positive comments from teachers were 'crucial to having good communication' (Mother 14 - hereafter, Mother is represented by 'M'), for example, about student achievements, successes, progress, and anecdotes about the day.

I think just finding something positive to say first, to build that rapport, and get the meeting to be sort of at ease, because I think parents of children with disability always assume that there is something negative coming our way, so I think we go into a lot of these meetings on the defensive. (M11)

Participants were also more comfortable when teachers did not always focus on problems: 'It was a really solution-focused conversation ... the way she brought the problem to me was really respectful'(M16). There was a positive impact on partnerships when teachers shared goals, possible supports and a vision for the child: 'Being able to have strategies, being able to articulate them, being able to genuinely think about ways to support him and educate him, demonstrates for us how much they care'(M6). Participants valued teachers discussing strategies with them, trying to get to the bottom of an issue, coming up with ideas, and being willing to try different approaches.

Another consistent example of constructive communication was student- rather than teacher-centred conversations. For example, when teachers showed they knew, were noticing, and had an interest in the child: 'They might be sharing a funny story, or they might be sharing a challenge that they're having in the classroom, and they give us hints, in those stories, that they actually understand our child'(M1). Participants valued teachers 'seeing' the child rather than the disability, knowing the child's interests, and wanting to know about what was happening at home.

Information sharing

Many participants appreciated knowing what was happening at school. Parents were keen to get feedback about their child's progress, strategies that had been tried, what was being taught, what was going well and what was not, work to do at home, who their child was playing with, and practical day-to-day information: 'The teachers have been on board, and helpful, and really, really specific with what they were teaching'(M10).

Informal topics

Informal conversations about topics unrelated to school enhanced the quality of the teacher-parent partnership:

The teachers will always take that time to chat and have a little hello ... so that's really nice that they do that. Just that regular stuff ... It's not always about your child and what's happening with them that week. It's just everyday talk. (M18)

Conversations do not always have to be about disability or the child. Just saying hello and using a parent's name—polite greetings—were important. Participants described topics like the weather, simple niceties, and small talk—the same as teachers would have with other families.

Teacher vulnerability

Several participants spoke about how the relationship changed when their teacher was willing to show vulnerability, for example, times when teachers shared their own challenges, and acknowledged they did not have all the answers:

She actually apologised to me for being unprofessional and letting her emotions show in that way. I said to her, 'you know, that has made me see how much you're on my side, and you're on (child's name)'s side, and you're fighting for us.' It was her stepping almost out of her professional box, which I found so encouraging and helpful. (M9)

This vulnerability enabled parents, themselves, to express their own feelings and open up to more honest and collaborative partnerships. Indeed, one parent described how a moment like this turned her relationship with the teacher completely around:

She was just very vulnerable and very honest ... that was a complete turning point in our relationship ... We just got all out on the table ... those moments of vulnerability actually ... make people connected ... at the end of the day, the teachers are human beings the same way as we are. (M11)

A collaborative process

Partnerships were impacted not just by ‘what’ was spoken about, but also ‘how’ content was discussed. Participants appreciated having questions asked of them: ‘like “What do you think?” “I just wanted to get your opinion” “just checking in” any of that kind of language that promotes a discussion, as opposed to someone talking at you’(M11). Participants felt like valued partners when teachers asked them about their child and about what was happening at home.

Several participants specifically referred to teachers’ use of ‘we’ language rather than ‘you’ or ‘I’: ‘When they’re using words like “we, us”, you know, like “What are *we* going to do about it? What can *we* do?” rather than “*Your* child did this, what are *you* going to do?”’ (M22). When teachers used ‘we’ language, it felt like teachers and parents were ‘in this together’: ‘I found almost on every occasion that the teachers that refer to the journey as a “we” journey are usually ones where the experience is much more positive’(M2).

Parents’ perceptions of teacher attitudes

Parents’ perceptions of teacher attitudes during interactions impacted their partnerships. For example, teachers being welcoming, reassuring and open to new approaches were important: ‘She was willing to try things, so I didn’t have any negative meetings with her ... she was always very lovely, friendly, helpful, willing to discuss it’(M17).

Partnerships were more effective when teachers were accepting and non-critical: ‘They’re polite, they’re respectful, and they are open to hearing what I’ve got to say’ (M7) and ‘There’s just no ego. They’re not expecting me to be the perfect parent, I’m not expecting them to be the perfect teacher, and we’re going to work stuff out together’(M1). Participants valued communication that was honest, and teachers who were relaxed, warm, and genuine. One participant appreciated working with a teacher who was not affronted in difficult conversations:

She can say things to me, I can say things, and neither of us are going to take offence. It’s just like, we’re talking about the situation, we’re not talking about the person ... and that makes you feel at ease that you can sort of start addressing the issues. (M17)

Written communication

Parents were asked about written as well as verbal communication and described times when emails had been more efficient for busy teachers and parents:

That email ... sometimes it was just one line: ‘He’s had a great day today.’ End of story. And I do the same ... My agreement with that teacher was, if there’s been some heightened

behaviours, or he'd been upset before he went to school, or he was anxious, I would pop an email straight up in the morning. (M2)

Emails were discussed as particularly useful for regular, more general feedback and updates, for keeping in touch with teachers, sharing information and receiving reminders: 'The teacher was emailing me, "This is what the letters are this week, and this is what we're doing in class," and we felt like we were really connected to the classroom then'(M10). One participant appreciated the private nature of email communication; others valued the ease with which important information could be shared with all stakeholders. Some participants told of how photos of the day, shared through email and phone apps, had been an enjoyable and useful way teachers had communicated with them:

An image speaks so much. And if it's a pleasant image, and we get lots of those, thank goodness ... cos he won't be able to tell me what happens, so then we can at least share that a little bit through the photos. (M13)

Non-verbal communication

Words are not the only medium for conveying messages to parents and our interviews included questions about non-verbal communication. Participants discussed the small things:

Just smiling ... I really appreciated it when I used to see the teacher and she would just have a genuine smile and wave. And it wasn't 'Oh, there's that person's Mum, I'd better acknowledge,' it was just ... a smile ... I'm still a human, like we're people, you know, you can still greet me, just really small things like that, all goes a long way. (M16)

Participants spoke about eye contact that welcomed them into the room and relaxed body posture. A warm tone of voice was also helpful and body language that showed a teacher was listening: 'She's focused and acknowledging ... you can see it with the body language that she's taking it in. Nodding, commenting, asking questions'(M15).

Contextual features of positive teacher-parent communication

In addition to talking about content, parents were asked for their views on contextual features that facilitated positive partnerships, for example, place, timing, the people parents communicated with successfully, room set-up, and meeting process.

Place

Views on the best place for teachers and parents to talk varied. Perspectives about place depended on what the conversation was about. Some participants liked the casual nature of the classroom and the pickup/drop-off zone and felt more comfortable speaking with teachers there:

I really like that our teacher did them [meetings] in the classroom, and we would just sit on the little kids' desks, and you'd have all the kids' stuff around ... I really appreciated the informality of the setting. (M16)

Participants preferred, however, that difficult conversations were in private and behind closed doors, in a quiet space where the conversation would not be disturbed: ‘Trying to have a big conversation about a big topic in a space where lots of people around is never going to work as effectively as ... a separate conversation at a separate time’(M1).

Time

Participants appreciated both short, casual conversations with teachers:

Because I find that our quality relationship-making is done more over two-minute casual conversations than it is via email or dedicated meetings ... if we have a quick conversation and it’s not really anything major, then that’s the end of it. (M22)

and also adequate time allocation for more in-depth conversations. They valued the times when important stakeholder meetings did not feel hurried.

All participants valued regular communication with teachers, however the frequency with which participants preferred to meet with teachers varied from 3–4 times a year to every two weeks. One parent summed up the frequency issue: ‘I like it to be frequent enough so that I know what’s going on but not so frequent that I feel overwhelmed by it’(M22).

Regular frequent teacher-parent communication was essential when a child did not have the language to pass on information and details about the school day:

My daughter, who is seven, cannot come home and even tell me who she’s played with, let alone any valuable information about what’s going on at school, so if I’m not getting communication from the teachers, then I literally am cut off, not knowing what’s going on. (M22)

People

The classroom teacher was a very important communication partner to many participants, in both larger stakeholder meetings and also day-to-day exchanges:

Building that relationship with the class teacher ... is so valuable, and so important, that if it’s not cultivated, if it’s not managed, if it’s not given positive environments to grow and thrive, then none of the other meetings have a hope. (M4)

Partnering with special education teachers and other professionals was important to parents, however, the classroom teacher seemed to be a critical contact: ‘That open door policy, of being able to stick your head in and see the teachers is definitely one of the things that makes you feel welcomed at the school’(M7).

Room set-up

Participants appreciated seating which fostered a sense of togetherness rather than separation, and many referred to how they preferred round tables or sitting in a circle where no-one was at the head or on opposite sides: ‘When we’re sitting at a table it’s not like them opposite us, it’s sort of sitting more as equals, I guess around the table, rather than across the table. That’s always nice’(M17). Participants did not want to feel there was an obstacle between them and the teachers: ‘So they’re all present, we’re all on the same page, we’re all in a nice circle so that there is no barrier to communication’(M10).

Meeting process

Many aspects of the meeting process facilitated effective partnerships, for example, parents being informed, prior to meetings, about who would be there, the agenda, time allocation, the parameters of the conversation and objectives of the meeting:

What's important to me ... is when my time is really respected ... I really appreciate it when they say, '[the meeting] is going to take about this long, and we're going to discuss these things,' so I can think about things beforehand. (M9)

Some participants discussed the importance of a collaborative meeting process and described occasions when this had occurred:

It ended up as a fantastic strategy-sharing situation where we talked about things that have worked well in the past, things that haven't, what things could we progressively try over time to try to assist (child's name). And so that was a fantastic meeting. And I think every single person left that meeting that day positive. (M2)

Participants appreciated teachers who were ready for the meeting, took notes and followed up on the decisions that were made: 'She comes prepared ... she'll have anything she wants to show me or talk about, she'll have it there. Anything I've sent her, she's read it ... and if I say something she quickly scribbles something down'(M8).

Formal meetings were not necessarily considered the best way to develop partnerships. Other more informal ways to communicate were important to participants. One parent added that they felt more relaxed when an informal atmosphere had been created even in formal meetings:

I feel listened to ... they often come out and say 'Oh, that was really positive, fantastic, really nice meeting,' everyone's seemed relaxed, everyone's open, having a dialogue about what we're going to do here. (M17)

Discussion

While it is critical to understand the challenges of teacher-parent partnerships, it is equally important to identify good practice. Research by Solvason and Proctor (2021) focused on the positives in relationships between parents and teachers and our study expands on these findings. That is, while Solvason and Proctor investigated teacher perspectives in special schools, our research is located in the more complex environment of mainstream schools and uses first-hand accounts from parents to identify the positives in teachers' communication.

Some key insights emerge from the findings. The first of these is that little things mean a lot. Effective partnerships with parents are founded on informal, small day-to-day interactions, rather than formal, large stakeholder meetings. Warm greetings, casual chats, welcoming body language, an open-door policy, regular email updates, and relaxed interactions are key to effective partnerships. The findings indicate the importance of relationships with classroom teachers rather than just with special education case managers. These perspectives from parents provide key, practical insights into how teacher communication can facilitate genial relationships with parents, an important element of effective parent-teacher partnerships that is consistently highlighted in the literature (for example, Pushor & Amendt, 2018; Sucuoğlu & Bakkaloğlu, 2018; Yotyodying et al., 2020).

Second, teacher-parent partnerships thrive on positive, solution-focused communication and teachers' genuine interest in the child. This is not a new conclusion, and the current findings strengthen existing literature on this topic (for example, Leenders et al., 2019; Murray & Mereoiu, 2016). Our research contributes clear examples of what positive, solution-focused and strengths-based approaches might look like and describes how teachers have operationalised this advice. The findings are a reminder that it is important to parents that teachers see their child rather than the disability. This is a clear illustration of the conclusion drawn by Povey et al. (2016) that knowing and caring about the child is an important factor in positive teacher-parent partnerships.

Third, being included in collaborative decision-making is key to effective teacher-parent partnership. The literature provides extensive evidence of parents feeling excluded and unheard (for example, Bennett et al., 2020; O'Hare et al., 2021); here is evidence of times when teachers and parents *are* working effectively together and ways in which teachers demonstrate a collaborative approach. For example, teachers' use of 'we' language validated the expertise of parents and the importance of their input. Teachers who felt comfortable enough to share their own challenges might not have realised it but were helping to establish a relationship of trust that enabled parents, too, to express vulnerability. Although there were contradictions in the data, with parents valuing both confident teachers and those who were willing to admit they don't know all the answers, the findings confirm the conclusion by Leenders et al. (2019) that being non-judgemental is critical to teacher-parent partnerships. Both teachers and parents need to feel safe to be more open in their own communication. Our findings illustrate the Partnership Model that has been described as so critical to effective teacher-parent partnerships (Hodge & Runswick-Cole, 2018).

Fourth, aligning with Uitto et al. (2021), teacher-parent relationships are influenced by other school players and are not just the responsibility of individual teachers and parents. Contextual factors play a critical role in positive communication and there is much that school leaders can do to support the health of teacher-parent interactions. Pleasant, relaxed, private environments for talking are important as is the furniture layout of these spaces. Support for regular teacher-parent catchups is helpful, particularly adequate teacher release time for meaningful discussions. The development of a school culture that welcomes parental collaboration is critical, including an open-door school policy supporting day-to-day communication between parents and classroom teachers. The need for such a culture is pressing given recent descriptions of teacher-parent relationships as a 'huge issue' that must be addressed (Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2021, pp. 523,524).

In its qualitative design, this research focused on in-depth, experiential data to investigate teacher communication with parents of students with disability. There are several limitations that are inherent in this methodology, and these must be considered. For example, the sample size was small, and participants were self-selected volunteers with a keen interest in teacher-parent communication. Not all parents of students with disability will have the same capacity, interest, or experiences when working with teachers. Despite these limitations, our study has produced rich and valuable data, and makes an important contribution by drawing on authentic parental experiences to focus on the positives rather than the problems of teacher-parent communication.

Conclusion

Effective communication is foundational to productive teacher-parent partnerships, particularly regarding the inclusion of students with disability. Teachers require numerous skills to facilitate positive, productive communication with parents, and these skills will not necessarily come naturally (Pushor, 2015). It is true that frameworks have been developed for partnering with parents which typically include advice for productive communication (for example, Australian Government, 2018), however, both teachers and parents of students with disability continue to report communication difficulties, a problem which threatens productive teacher-parent partnerships. Our research contributes important information about teacher-parent communication through parental views on positive aspects of their interactions with teachers. Our findings provide comprehensive, detailed insights from parents' lived experience that can inform future teacher communication with their parent partners.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the QUT Centre for Inclusive Education (C4IE).

ORCID

Glenys Mann  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0883-3627>

Linda Gilmore  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4111-3023>

References

- Australian Government. (2018). *Family-school partnerships framework - Strategies*. <https://www.dese.gov.au/supporting-family-school-community-partnerships-learning/family-school-partnerships/family-school-partnerships-framework>
- Barbour, R. (2018). Quality of data collection. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection* (pp. 3–16). SAGE Publications.
- Barnlund, D. (2017). A transactional model of communication. In C. Mortensen eds., *Communication theory* (pp. 47–57). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315080918-5>
- Bennett, S., Specht, J., Somma, M., & White, R. (2020). Navigating school interactions: Parents of students with intellectual disabilities speak out. *Current Developmental Disorders Reports*, 7(3), 149–154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40474-020-00203-z>
- Berkowitz, R., Astor, R. A., Pineda, D., DePedro, K., Weiss, E., & Benbenishty, R. (2021). Parental involvement and perceptions of school climate in California. *Urban Education*, 56(3), 393–423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085916685764>
- Beuving, J., & de Vries, G. (2015). *Doing qualitative research: The craft of naturalistic inquiry*. Amsterdam University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048525522>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Burke, M. M., Rios, K., & Aleman-Tovar, J. (2020). Identifying child, parent, and school correlates of stress among parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. *Research &*

- Practice in Intellectual & Developmental Disabilities*, 7(1), 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23297018.2019.1647552>
- Cooperrider, D., & Whitney, D. (2005). *Appreciative inquiry: A positive revolution in change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Education Scotland. (2021). *Parental Engagement and Family Learning*. <https://education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottish-education/developing-the-education-profession/parental-engagement-and-family-learning/>
- Epstein, J. L., Sanders, M. G., Sheldon, S. B., Simon, B. S., Salinas, K. C., Jansorn, N. R., ... & Williams, K. J. (2018). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. Corwin Press. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119083054.ch26>
- Flick, U. (2018). Doing qualitative data collection - Charting the routes. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection* (pp. 3–16). SAGE Publications.
- Gascoigne, E. (1996). *Working with parents: As partners in special educational needs*. David Fulton Publishers.
- Goodall, J. (2018). Learning-centred parental engagement: Freire reimagined. *Educational Review*, 70(5), 603–621. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2017.1358697>
- Hodge, N., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2018). ‘You Say ... I Hear ...’: Epistemic gaps in practitioner-parent/carer talk. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Disabled Children’s Childhood Studies* (pp. 537–555). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54446-9_33
- Knight, K. (2013). The changing face of the ‘good mother’: Trends in research into families with a child with intellectual disability, and some concerns. *Disability & Society*, 28(5), 660–673. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2012.732540>
- Leenders, H., Haelermans, C., de Jong, J., & Monfrance, M. (2019). Parents’ perceptions of parent-teacher relationship practices in Dutch primary schools – an exploratory pilot study. *Teachers & Teaching*, 24(6), 719–743. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2018.1456420>
- Mann, G., Fleming, K., Specht, J., & Bobongie-Harris, F. (in press). Parents and teachers working together. In L. Graham (Ed.), *Inclusive education for the 21st century: Theory, policy, and practice*. Routledge.
- Murray, M. M., & Mereoiu, M. (2016). Teacher–parent partnership: An authentic teacher education model to improve student outcomes. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 40(2), 276–292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2014.971108>
- O’Hare, A., Saggars, B., Mazzucchelli, T., Gill, C., Hass, K., Shochet, I., Orr, J., Wurfl, A., & Carrington, S. (2021). ‘He is my job’: Autism, school connectedness, and mothers’ roles. *Disability & Society*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1976110>
- Povey, J., Campbell, A., Willis, L., Haynes, M., Western, M., Bennett, S., Antrobus, E., & Pedde, C. (2016). Engaging parents in schools and building parent-school partnerships: The role of school and parent organisation leadership. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 79, 128–141. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2016.07.005>
- Pushor, D. (2015). Walking alongside: A pedagogy of working with parents and family in Canada. In *International Teacher Education: Promising Pedagogies (Part B)*(pp. 233–251). Emerald Group Publishing Limited. eISBN: 978-1-78441-669-0. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S1479-368720150000025008>
- Pushor, D., & Amendt, T. (2018). Leading an examination of beliefs and assumptions about parents. *School Leadership & Management*, 38(2), 202–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1439466>
- Roulston, K., & Choi, M. (2018). Qualitative interviews. In U. Flick (Ed.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection* (pp. 233–249). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation of People with Disability. (2021). *Hearing 7*. Australian Government. <https://disability.royalcommission.gov.au/system/files/2021-10/Transcript%20Day%206%20-%20Public%20hearing%207%2C%20Brisbane.pdf>
- Rusnak, M. (2018). ‘The oversensitive, demanding parent’ vs. ‘the professional teacher’- the ongoing struggle for the common ground of parent-teacher collaboration in Poland. *International Journal About Parents in Education*, 10(1), 70–78. ISSN: 1973 - 3518.

- Ryan, C., & Quinlan, E. (2018). Whoever shouts the loudest: Listening to parents of children with disabilities. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*, 31, 203–214. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jar.12354>
- Shuayb, M., Sharp, C., Judkins, M., & Hetherington, M. (2009). *Using appreciative inquiry in educational research: Possibilities and limitations*. National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Smith, T. E., & Sheridan, S. M. (2019). The effects of teacher training on teachers' family-engagement practices, attitudes, and knowledge: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 29(2), 128–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2018.1460725>
- Solvason, C., & Proctor, S. (2021). 'You have to find the right words to be honest': Nurturing relationships between teachers and parents of children with Special Educational Needs. *Support for Learning*, 36(3), 470–485. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12373>
- Sucuoğlu, N. B., & Bakkaloğlu, H. (2018). The quality of parent–teacher relationships in inclusive preschools. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(8), 1190–1201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1261124>
- Uitto, M., Jokikokko, K., Lassila, E. T., Kelchtermans, G., & Estola, E. (2021). Parent–teacher relationships in school micropolitics: Beginning teachers' stories. *Teachers & Teaching*, 27(6), 461–473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2020.1863205>
- Yotyodying, S., Dettmers, S., & Jonkmann, K. (2020). Quality features of family–school partnerships in German schools: Measurement and association with parent–child communication about school. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 115, 105078. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105078>