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Keywords

Communication, Education, Technology Education, Family Communication, Adult Education



FAMILY COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT WITH DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY: APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This article discusses family engagement with digital technology in inclusive education focusing on the development of caring relationships, diversity of communication skills within family and educational communities, the integration of the classroom and home, and being a media mentor to families. It reviews research related to family engagement with media technology and seeks to provide a flexible guide which may be adapted to diverse environments to assist in developing technology-infused family engagement and communication strategies. The educational practices discussed consider the importance of the family in the technology hybridized classroom and consider socioeconomic, cultural, linguistic, and human diversity as factors that impact communication and family engagement in promoting positive educational relationships using digital technology. The article takes a holistic approach toward diversity in the use of media and technology to strengthen the home-school connection in inclusive education. It examines linguistically diverse communication across home, school, and community and the development of mentoring relationships using media and technology. The article emphasizes the importance of caring relationships, and that digital media are tools to assist creative human learning and not an end in themselves.

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Introduction

This paper addresses the following categories for communication and engagement with families: (1) Developing caring relationships with families; (2) skills for communicating with families and diversity considerations (3) bringing the classroom to the home and (4) being a media mentor to families. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it seeks to address research related to family engagement with digital technology as it navigates the four categories described above. Second, it seeks to provide a flexible guide for developing technology-infused family engagement and communication plans based on research. This paper is divided into two sections. Section I introduces an overview of research about family engagement and communication strategies involving technology. Section II provides digital technology strategies that can be used to communicate, collaborate, and engage with families.

Section I: Research

Family Engagement and Student Success

As this review navigates the literature and research related to family engagement and communication strategies involving technology, family engagement will be defined as "... a shared responsibility of families and educators for children's learning" (Lopez et al., 2016, p. 59). This definition highlights Donohue's (2016) research built on the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council (IMNRC) premises. The IMNRC suggests that educators

...need skills in communicating, working collaboratively, and developing partnerships with families. They have an important role in preparing families to engage in behaviors and activities that enhance development and early learning and to maintain continuity and consistency across home and out-of-home settings and learning environments for young children (Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council (2015), p. 291 as cited in Donohue, 2016, pp. 8-9).

Research has already established the "importance of family engagement in the digital age" (Donohue, 2016, p.10). Research has also determined that "technology can empower and engage parents, caregivers, and families, and the emerging role of media mentors to guide young children and their families in the twenty-first century" (Donohue, 2016, p.10). While the study of

the benefits of family engagement is not a new topic in the scholarly literature (Lowenhaupt, 2012; Redding et al., 2011), the discussion surrounding effective family engagement and communication strategies involving technology has been gaining momentum in the past years (Donohue, 2016), and in particular during the Covid-19 pandemic (Burgess & Anderson, 2020; Charania, 2021).

Research and practice suggest that family engagement is a key factor for school achievement (Boberiene, 2013; Kely & Wakabayashi, 2020; Burgess & Anderson, 2020; Charania, 2021). In this context, Pattni-Shah (2008) wrote that “It is through communication that teachers and parents can learn from each other and work together” (p. 86). Critically important, however, as educators evaluate the best and most effective ways to incorporate digital technology in the school environment and serve as media mentors to children and families, is to consider the cultural and linguistic differences as well as social-economic factors that may impact family engagement with digital media (Guernsey et al., 2016). Therefore, considering the significance and benefits of family engagement in children’s education, it is critical to examine research-based effective family engagement and communication strategies with digital technology that considers diversity. This information may serve to guide a holistic approach for technology-infused family engagement and communication plans in schools.

Section II: Strategies: A Holistic Approach

Effective Family Engagement and Communication Strategies Involving Technology

Developing Caring Relationships with Families. Guernsey, Clark, and Donohue (2016) suggested that “In early childhood, relationships matter most” (p. 25). They stressed the significance of fostering caring relationships with digital technology, articulating that “...young children learn best in the context of interactions and relationships with attentive, responsive, and caring adults, so technology should be used to support and strengthen adult/child relationships and promote joint engagement with media—using media together supports learning” (Guernsey et al., 2016, p. 25). Therefore, efforts involving family engagement with technology should center on human activities, and technology should be used as a tool to strengthen and promote positive relationships.

The development of caring relationships with families using digital technology can be accomplished in various ways, such as involving the community (Lopez et al., 2016). As part of

a pilot study, Buffalo Public schools, for example, involved the community at large by collaborating with Canisius College Early Childhood Center to create a school video with the purpose “to provide families with pertinent information regarding the school program as well as suggestions for families to help promote their young children's success in school” (Calabrese, 2006, p. 155). In the video, “All students, faculty, and staff members, as well as some parents, were featured. The findings of the pilot study suggested improvement of communication and relationships with families” (Calabrese, 2006, p. 155). Thus, involving the community with digital tools such as collaborative and informative videos can be another excellent strategy to engage families, maximize their participation and collaboration with schools, educators, and children, and open channels of a caring relationship.

Skills for Communicating with Families- Communication Skills and Considerations for Diverse Families. Research has already determined that “Teachers must have specific skills, knowledge, and dispositions to engage in collaborative practices, support home-based involvement, and engage in culturally responsive practices” (Smith & Sheridan, 2019, p. 130). Guernsey and colleagues articulated diversity and emphasized the significance of culturally responsive caring relationships, proposing a “holistic approach to diversity” when using technology as a tool to engage families (Guernsey et al., 2016, p. 25). According to Guernsey and colleagues, in the quest to “use technology tools to communicate and connect with parents, strengthen the home-school connection, and enhance family engagement, no one product or tool can effectively address all of these attributes” (Guernsey et al., 2016, p. 21). Thus, digital efforts and strategies that encourage representation of all stakeholders and are attentive to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice should be considered and seen as part of communication skills that must be developed to maximize family engagement with digital tools.

Rached, Elias, and Wilson-Jones’ (2020) study of parent-school relationships in a Title 1 Elementary School in Massachusetts suggested that educators seeking to develop culturally sensitive caring relationships with families should assess and seek to understand the families and communities they serve with a focus on the families’ communication preferences. Thus, assessing families' communication preferences is necessary before selecting digital tools that promote communication and engagement, and may be used as a tool or strategy that is suitable for one school context, but might not always be suitable to all school contexts. Without the

understanding of the families, the children, and the community, the educator may not become an effective media mentor for families, nor might they be successful in their quest to use technology to bridge the gap between home and school. Therefore, from a holistic perspective, it can be argued that parental engagement may take various forms. Technology-infused family engagement and communication plans should be designed considering research and the school's context to be effective and meaningful. For instance, in a diverse Title 1 ELL school, it would be important to assess the school's demographics, the district, and the community to best serve the families (Rached, 2015; Rached et al., 2020).

Bringing the Classroom to the Home. Baxter and Toe (2021) advocated for schools to rethink their communication strategies and adopt a more holistic approach to family engagement to “re-contextualise [sic] children's learning from being school-centric to occurring across home, community, and school contexts” (Baxter & Toe, 2021, p. 20). In a study of a “linguistically diverse community” in Australia’s primary schools, Baxter and Toe (2021) proposed “enhance families’ engagement in their children’s learning, through classroom teachers’ use of social media” (p. 01). The study's results suggested that adapting “social media posts to better support families to talk with their children about learning can contribute to parent knowledge and experiences” (Baxter & Toe, 2021, p. 20). Thus, digital efforts and strategies that re-contextualize the learning as happening within a broader context besides school and using videos as a means to communicate that engages the community may be one way to engage families with digital media. Videoconferencing among students and educators may be used to promote free expression in the hybrid and online classroom. It may also provide a multi-dimensional method of communication which assists educators in learning about and engaging the diverse learning needs of students.

Snell, Hindman, and Wasik (2020) explored texting to support family-school engagement in early childhood contexts. They suggested that “new technologies offer exciting opportunities for improving home-school communication, family engagement, and children’s learning in early childhood” (Snell et al., 2020, p. 447). The study explored the “nature of current communication (including texting) between school and home, openness among teachers and families to the idea of sending or receiving home-school communication via text, and beliefs among teachers and families about how texting can support various aspects of family-school engagement” (Snell et

al., 2020, p. 447). Their study's findings indicated "that many teachers and families are enthusiastic about using texting and view texting as a tool to further family-school engagement and communication and to enhance child outcomes" (Snell et al., 2020, p. 447). Thus, digital efforts and strategies that simplify communication and meet families where they are in terms of comfort with media may be a good start and another strategy for family engagement with technology.

Being a Media Mentor to Parents. In the quest for more meaningful family engagement in schools, Lopez and colleagues (2016) advocated for early childhood educators to assume the role of media mentors. A media mentor is defined as an educator "who supports children and their families in their media decisions and practices around healthy media use and who has access to and shares recommendations for and research on children's media use" (Donahue, 2016, p. 2). Lopez and colleagues suggested that in this mentorship role, educators should "adopt a systems framework for understanding the role of digital media within a larger early-education program that includes its leadership and management, staff development, and teaching and learning activities with children and their families" (Lopez et al., 2016, p. 58).

As educators consider assuming the role of media mentors, one strategy they may adopt at the onset is diversity assessment, and they should consider evaluating their contexts with diversity lenses. The next strategy is to look into approaches for change based on the analysis of the needs, cultural and linguistic factors related to families, and comfort levels with digital technology as it relates to communication. Once the data analysis is completed, a plan can be designed to influence behaviors. One way to drive change is to influence behaviors with theoretical and scholar-practitioner approaches based on positive psychology. Dossani and Auger (2016) suggested an approach using "nudges" as a strategy to influence behaviors. The authors defined nudges as "a brief suggestion or reminder of a positive behavior—is a small step that is typically inexpensive and a non-intrusive means of promoting behavioral changes" (Dossani, & Auger, 2016, p. 74). The authors proposed developing simplistic communication efforts using "electronic nudges", such as "text messages recommending a book to read with one's child" and similar learning practices with applications and social media suggesting that these actions "might subconsciously change behavior" (Dossani, & Auger, 2016, p. 74).

Dossani and Auger also articulated that social media and applications “might make nudges more effective than the one-way interactions that text messages represent. One key to success is for nudges to be simple enough not to overwhelm the recipient” (Dossani, & Auger, 2016, p. 83). While this suggestion aligns with Baxter and Toe’s (2021) research, some researchers caution that the practice should be mindful of cultural, social, economic, and contextual aspects. Thus, when using “technology (social media, Facebook, email, texts, tweets)” to engage families, educators should “not assume all have access or will use it” (Bartz, Collins-Ayanlaja & Rice, 2017, p. 7). Digital equity includes more than just access to technology, it includes equitable availability of materials and opportunities for learning (Holland, 2019).

Goodwin (2016) built on the concept of media mentorship to explore strategies for developing healthy media habits and introduced the idea of media management plans. According to Goodwin, “These plans ensure that children’s digital habits promote, not impede, their learning and development and allow children to develop healthy and sustainable media habits” (Goodwin, 2016, p. 115). The author suggested that these media management plans should be proactive and must include “learning experiences that consider what, when, with whom, where, why, how, and how much media will be used with young children” (Goodwin, 2016, p. 129). This is another strategy that may enhance educators’ digital efforts to use digital media for family engagement. Table 1 presents some potential digital strategies for technology-mediated family communication and engagement based on the research provided in this paper.

Category	Potential Digital Strategies
<i>Developing Caring Relationships with Families</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with the children and their families to define what a caring relationship with digital technology means in the school, district, and community. • Use the collaborative definition to drive and encourage the expected kind of digital engagement and select potential digital tools that can aid in this effort.
<i>Skills for Communicating with Families: Communication skills and Considerations for Diverse Families</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use qualitative and quantitative approaches to assess and understand the demographics of the school, the district, and the community at large and their comfort levels with digital technology.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider a “holistic approach to diversity” (Donahue, 2016) in selecting digital tools. The selection of digital tools should be culturally and linguistically sensitive. • “Keep messages short, clearly written, and aligned with standards” (Dossani, & Auger, 2016, p. 84).
<i>Bringing the Classroom to the Home</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the use of social media when appropriate. • Engage the learners as co-creators of communication. • “Incorporate content into the school day for alignment between the classroom and home activities” (Dossani, & Auger, 2016, p. 84).
<i>Being a Media Mentor to Parents</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider a “Systems Framework” (Donahue, 2016) as one approach to start the media engagement process. • Use the collaborative features of online learning management systems. • Use simplistic communication such as “electronic nudges” (Dossani, & Auger, 2016, p. 74) as a strategy to influence behaviors. According to Dossani and Auger, “one key for success is for nudges to be simple enough so that they do not overwhelm the recipient” (p. 83). • “Provide a weekly tip on how to incorporate activities in the home” (Dossani, & Auger, 2016, p. 84).

Table 1: Potential digital strategies for technology-mediated family communication

Discussion

Educators must understand theories and research on family engagement with digital media to make informed decisions on the planning process of technology-infused communication. They must also consider internal and external factors, such as diversity and context, as such factors may impact how the educator should approach being a media mentor to families and bringing the classroom to the home. When selecting digital tools to drive family engagement, educators should ground their decisions on data-driven and data-informed approaches as they use available research and local data analysis to guide their efforts and select the best suitable strategies for their context.

Donahue (2016) wrote that “As educators think about and use technology tools to communicate and connect with parents, strengthen the home-school connection, and enhance

family engagement, no one product or tool can effectively address all of these attributes. Instead of trying to address each attribute individually, there should be a holistic approach to diversity” (p. 22). There are several digital strategies for technology-mediated family communication and engagement. Developing caring relationships with families should be at the core of this effort. It is critical that educators define what caring relationships mean in their school, district, and community as they engage and/or collaborate with families using digital technology. As Lopez and colleagues (2016) eloquently articulated, “Digital media are tools rather than ends. As tools, they must be viewed in the wider context of an early childhood program’s family engagement goals and organizational capacities to achieve them” (p. 70). Thus, educators must then use information from this context to select digital technology and apply practices that encourage family engagement based on a holistic approach to diversity. In a culturally responsive approach educators must consider the multicultural and human diversity that provides meaning to the participants when selecting digital media and the practices to be engaged.

Developing skills for communicating with families while considering diversity is also paramount for implementing successful digital strategies for technology-mediated family communication and engagement. To this end, it is important to select digital tools to support the school's population, and factors such as culture and language should be at the center of the selection process. It is also critical that educators assume mentorship roles and use strategies grounded on positive psychology to drive change and influence behaviors. Electronic “nudges” such as text messages, and when applicable, using apps to deliver curated recommendations may influence behaviors and encourage positive family engagement. As educators consider being media mentors to parents, they can bring the classroom to the home by involving children and the community in the process. They should also consider social media to engage the learners as co-creators of communication, but not assume that all families use or know how to use technology.

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