Research Proposal:

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on parent-school partnerships

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Introduction

Parents serve as their children's first educators, and they share knowledge with their children through engagement in everyday activities and play, and they continue to support their children's learning once the children enter institutional settings, such as nurseries or child-care (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Once children enter institutional child-care or educational environments, the scope of their experiences and relationships with other people widens (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). At this point, it is key for parents to continue to be part of their children's education (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014), and therefore, developing effective parent-school[1] partnerships is crucial in early childhood education.

The terms "involvement" and "engagement" refer to or are components of partnership (Barton et al., 2004; Cottle & Alexander, 2013; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Parent engagement (also referred to as parent involvement and family engagement) is a complicated and broadly defined term (Hayakawa et al. 2013; Van Voohis et al. 2013). The USDE defines it as the participation of parents and educators[2] in "regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities" (United States Department of Education 2015).

However, these partnerships are constantly evolving and can take various forms, depending on different circumstances such as the methods of communication used. The Covid-19 pandemic has introduced many challenges to humanity, including the education sector. Despite preschools[3] resuming in-person instruction, parents are still not permitted inside the facility. This limitation has marginalized the traditional face-to-face teacher-parent interaction (Barnett et al., 2020; Chen, 2016; Decker & Decker, 2003; Epstein, 1995; Rogers & Wright, 2008) and as a result, this restricts parental involvement when parents solely rely on

other forms of communication: texts, emails, newsletters, childcare management applications. While numerous studies explain the importance and challenges of parent-teacher partnerships in children's learning, there is not much investigation into how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected these partnerships.

This research study hopes to explore the impact of the pandemic Covid-19 on the partnerships between parents of children aged between 2 years to 5 years old and preschools. Specifically, it will examine the communication practices centered around children's daily activities like eating, napping, playing & learning; how schools promote parent-teacher collaboration; and how the schools involve parents in the decision-making process involving children. The proposed mixed methods study would likely start by recruiting early childhood educators and parents using an initial survey followed by conducting semi-structured interviews. This study will not only be an integral part of the early childhood education journal but also hopes to draw the attention of a large audience to the Covid-19 impacts on the education system. The data arriving from the voices of various participants (parents, schools) could be further used in enhancing early childhood learning experiences through practice, policy, and training in the future.

Theoretical Framework

Several parent-teacher partnership studies have reflected upon the various circumstances influencing these partnerships like the challenges of teacher education (Willemse et al., 2018) and the importance of enhancing communication (Gelfer, 2012) to facilitate these partnerships. One of the most important aspects to implement this study will be understanding the key elements of family-school partnerships which Mcintyre, Laura & Garbacz, S. (2014, ch. 31) elucidate in the book- Best practices in systems-level organization and support

for effective family-school partnerships. These four elements for family-school work are based upon Christenson and Sheridan's framework (2001): approach, attitudes, atmosphere, and actions. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) indicate that a partnering approach extends beyond identifying the impact of individuals and circumstances in a child's life "to organizing these influences in a way that accounts for the reciprocal interaction among multiple influences" (p. 31). Attitudes held by school staff can shape interactions with parents. "A school's atmosphere is the tone of the school that is communicated to families." (Mcintyre et al., 2014, p.456) The atmosphere should relay that tangible partnerships between parents and school staff are appreciated. The last element in this framework is actions which emphasize the approach of the parents and educators to share responsibility.

Another important segment for this study requires us to explore Keyes's theoretical model to enhance parent-school partnerships. This framework is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems perspective, Getzels' social systems perspective, Katz's and Hoover and Dempsey's work on the role of parents, and Epstein's typology of parental involvement (Keyes, 2002). Keyes's model is multidimensional with four elements, focusing on various forces involved in narrowing the gap in parent-school partnerships. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective describes the parent-teacher ecosystem as that of "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Keyes, 2002, p.112). This ecosystem consists of parents, teachers as individuals; their relationships with their surroundings; values, laws, and culture which affect the individuals and the center of this ecosystem - the child who is not directly involved. Getzel's perspective underlines the vibrant and complicated nature of the parent-teacher partnership and the significance of recognizing the interactions among all the elements. The third aspect of Keyes's model emphasizes the significance of the child. Lastly, Epstein's typology involves six major components of parent involvement - communication,

parenting, volunteering, decision making, learning at home, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995).

While the Christenson and Sheridan framework (2001) provides a lens to develop a pre-questionnaire where researchers can build a comprehensive survey to assess how these elements elucidated in this framework function in the parent-school partnerships before and during the pandemic. Keyes' model will inspire the design of qualitative research by understanding participants' perspectives in-depth about the various dimensions elucidated here.

Literature review

Substantial empirical evidence exists to support how family-school partnerships are beneficial in enhancing children's academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005) and improving their school and home behavior (Sheridan et al., 2012). There are many studies that explain how to make these partnerships work.

CAFE model (Kambouri, M., Wilson, T., Pieridou, M. et al., 2022) which stands for Collaborative/Communicative (C), Active (A), and Friendly (F) Environment (E) rightly emphasizes how the partnerships need to be constantly evaluated and revised with given circumstances and time. It also acknowledges parents and schools as equal stakeholders in the partnerships, with the same end goal of the best outcomes for the children. It, however does not assess the situation where both partners do not engage in this model as desired or expected. There is also a lack of evidence on how this model will support partnerships in an educational setting that will have multiple families with different values and needs.

Another important study in early childhood education to facilitate teacher-parent partnerships done during Covid-19 emphasizes digital communication (Chen &

Rivera-Vernazza, 2022). It underlines the different modes of digital communication between the teacher and parents in preschools, the nature of their digital communication & its limitations, and using the child-care management application ClassDojo. But given the study had a smaller sample size (one teacher and three parents) and tackled only the communication aspect in parent-teacher partnerships, it lacks reliability. Additionally, the study has an underlying assumption that both partners are actively involved in digital communication and would be engaged in building partnerships digitally.

Thus, even though recent research considers the role of the pandemic Covid-19 in altering parent-school relationships in early childhood education, there is a substantial need for further investigation to evaluate the perceived experiences of parents and practitioners since Covid-19.

Research questions

While early childhood education has identified the different factors responsible for enhancing parent-school partnerships such as lack of time, cultural values, and communication there is not sufficient data on how the pandemic Covid-19 has been affecting these partnerships. Given that the pandemic is changing our lives in various spheres - remote work, blended learning, and food delivery. It will be worth evaluating how it is shaping parent-school relationships. In particular, what are the differences in these partnerships before and during the pandemic, what are the new themes generated in these partnerships since the onset of the pandemic, and how is the communication changing between the parents and schools?

The study aims to identify the challenges and opportunities the pandemic of Covid-19 has introduced in parent-school partnerships in early childhood education. The research questions that this study hopes to answer are the following:

(1) What were the parents' and schools' perceptions of partnerships in a preschool setting before the pandemic Covid-19?

(2) How has the pandemic Covid-19 affected the parent-school partnerships in the preschool setting?

(3) Based on the participant's own experiences, what features would they like to see in the parent-school partnerships in early childhood education?

The research questions were designed using the PICOT framework (Richardson et al., 1995) to address important elements of the study such as the population to be studied, the expected outcomes, and the timeframe of the study.

Researcher's stance

The researcher has a multicultural background, an immigrant from India settled in New Jersey. She has been in the education industry for more than 15 years and is a mother to a 4 year old. Given all the challenges the Covid-19 pandemic has introduced into the education system, she has experienced quite a few in the early childhood education system. This was the biggest motivation to launch this study.

While the researcher realizes the need to bracket her personal stance while conducting my research to avoid any bias(es), she also admits that the interpretation of the dataset will be largely based on her background. To address these limitations, the study will recruit another researcher. This study will help the researchers to understand the perspectives of the school

staff and caregivers by investigating the process of communication between the two parties, collaboration and community building opportunities.

Methods and procedures

To examine these questions, a mixed research method approach will be applied to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' (parent, school) perspectives. A mixed-method study helps researchers to gather more comprehensive data, generating findings with a wider perspective of the overall research problem (Cohen et al., 2011).

This sequential research design (Kaplan, 2011) will involve a quantitative exploration followed by a qualitative analysis to understand how the pandemic Covid-19 has affected parent-school partnerships and their recommendations for enhancing them. This will involve (a) an initial pre-questionnaire for parents and schools (b) a semi-structured interview based on the results from the quantitative dataset analysis. The pre-questionnaire will broadly include questions on the participants' experiences, perspectives, and recommendations.

Sampling strategy

The participants will be recruited using a combination of two sampling approaches. Convenience sampling (Marshall, 1996) will be the least rigorous technique in this research given the researcher has access to a large group of parents and educators through their personal and professional networks. The researcher also hopes to use the snowball sampling technique by accessing communities on the social media networking sites like Facebook, Slack, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn. Snowball sampling is used in this case because potential participants will be hard to recruit (Etikan, 2016) otherwise, especially educators.

This case study hopes to start with sharing the pre-questionnaire form (quantitative research method) with the participants which will include questions on demographics, location, type of educational facility, role in the early education system, Likert scale survey items based on the Christenson and Sheridan framework (2001) focusing on the impact of Covid-19 and a question on asking the participants if they can be contacted for further communication. And then, build qualitative research through the quantitative dataset. Recruitment for the interview phase of the study can be incentivized depending on the National Science Foundation Fund. IRB approval will be gained by the department of Early Childhood Education at NYU. Informed consent, anonymity, and participants' right to withdraw at any time were ensured. Due to ethical issues, there might be less participation from the school staff.

Data collection procedures and analysis

Data collection of the participants will be done using the university's online Qualtrics survey system, provided NYU students have easy access to this software at no cost. To compare the results of the impact on the parent-school partnerships before and during the pandemic, Google Sheets will be used to visually represent the data. Remote interviews will be conducted on Zoom software for sixty minutes with participants' consent on recording the session. Along with Zoom recording the sessions, remote recording services such as Squadcast will be used as a secondary source of the recording.

To understand the factors affecting the parent-school partnerships during Covid-19, participants will be asked open-ended questions - What is the current mode of communication by the school to inform the daily routine of your child? What are the changes you have experienced since the onset of Covid-19? How do parents communicate with school staff? Can you share some visuals of the written communication? How does your child's school facilitate

parental involvement in learning? What factors are affecting these partnerships, in your opinion? What would you recommend to improve them?

Possible probe questions may include: Can you elaborate on the last information you shared? What is working and what's not working with your current setting?

Storage of interview materials will be using a university email account. It will be transcribed and coded using NVivo. Open-ended coding will be used to generate codes from significant statements identified within the transcripts and a code book developed in Google Sheets. There will be primarily one code book for each of the three proposed research questions. Comparison will be done for experiences of parent-school partnerships before and during the pandemic. The discussion will include looking at the challenges and opportunities introduced in these partnerships by the pandemic from parents' and practitioners' perspectives.

Validation and Limitations

To validate the findings from this research, we will use the following three strategies. Investigators hope to provide a rich thick description of the settings where the participants will share additional information such as visuals giving a realistic view of the results. The researchers of this study will also clarify biases by self-reflection on how their background influences these interpretations. Finally, the member-checking strategy will allow the investigators to determine the accuracy of the findings by conducting a follow-up interview with the participants.

To ensure the reliability of the study, researchers will check the transcripts to avoid obvious errors and might also recruit an additional researcher using an intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2016) to cross-examine the codes generated from the findings

The design of this study has certain limitations, specifically the sampling strategy. Researchers have an assumption that the participants will be intrinsically motivated to participate, share their insights honestly and help in reaching out to a wider population by reaching out to their network. Another limitation is that "One Size Does Not Fit All", so the results from this study may be useful only in particular cases and additional research(es) might be needed depending on the context and the case. Lastly, the world is changing faster than ever given the factors - economy, climate change, technology, and of course the ongoing pandemic whose end date is yet uncertain. All these parameters largely influence human lives which might generate additional complexities in parent-school partnerships and thus, the scope of this study will need to be further expanded.

NOTES:

[1] Parents here can include mother, father, caregiver, guardian. While School includes-teachers, assistant teachers, administrators, owners.

[2] A teacher, also called a school teacher or formally an educator, is a person who helps students to acquire knowledge, competence, or virtue, via the practice of teaching. (wikipedia)

[3] Preschools - educational facilities for children aged 2 years to 5 years old.

[4] Practitioners include early years teachers or other professionals working with children in the early years.

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