FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE: TEACHERS TALK TO PARENTS

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Abstract

This study was designed to investigate the perceptions and experiences of rural middle school teachers’ communication efforts with parents. Research indicates that positive communication between parents and teachers is essential to students’ success during adolescence; however, parent to school communication declines as students’ transition from elementary to middle school resulting in negative effects on academic achievement, decreased motivation, and lowered self-esteem. Much of the research previously conducted derives from the effects of communication breakdowns, whereas the purpose of this research is to explore the impediments causing the interruption, or absence of communication practices between teachers and parents. Although there is an abundance of educational research focused on urban schools, there is little research on teacher and parent communication in a rural setting. Rural educators face a unique set of challenges as opposed to their urban counterparts. The primary significance of this study is that it provides an authentic, meaningful, and candid perspective to view the realities of the teacher-parent relationship, which can be transferred to other rural educators and families of the students being educated within the small town context.

Keywords: Communication, rural, adolescents, middle school, small town
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Positive communication between parents and teachers is essential to students’ success during adolescence; however, parent to school communication declines, as students’ transition from elementary to middle school resulting in negative effects on academic achievement, decreased motivation, and lowered self-esteem (Akos, 2004). Waller’s (1932) classical study of schools as an organization coupled with Powell’s (1978) work asserts that historically tensions exist between the professional educator and citizen participation, and finds instances of limited interactions between teachers and parents, while much of the contemporary research finds a direct correlation between student successes and home to school communication practices (Gonzalez-DeHass et al. 2005; Lam & Ducreux, 2013; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The issues surrounding parent and teacher communications are as important as they are complex (Wilson et al., 2001). Specifically, myriad reasons exist for the decline in communication conventions at the middle school level. Some research suggests it is the parents who begin to retreat due to the number of teachers now involved in their child’s education, as well as a fear in lacking an adequate knowledge base in the core subject areas (Wilson et al. 2001; Hill & Tyson, 2009). Other researchers claim that the deficit exists because teachers are increasingly fearful of parental interactions, or have too many students to make effective communication a possibility and function in settings where limited opportunity for parent interaction is offered (Lasky, 2000; Graham-Clay, 2005). Flynn (2006) asserts that the number one fear of teachers is talking to parents, coupled with a deficiency in training; there currently exists a barrier in communication (Graham-Clay, 2005). It would seem that in both instances, parents and teachers do not have an effective system in place to foster the necessity of productive communication (Price, 2008). Are
parents anxious of reaching out to teachers? Are teachers fearful of contacting parents? Whatever the reason, as students age out of the elementary grades and enter middle school parents and teachers stop talking. Some of this lack of communication can be explained by the pronounced physical and emotional changes in the student reaching adolescence making past precedence’s in communication ineffective.

Adolescence marks a stage of development where children no longer view parents as the only role model (Siegel, 2015). “If adults try to block the flow of adolescence, it is likely that communication, so important to relationships, will be tainted with tension and disrespect” (p. 17). Adolescence is a time filled with new experiences and a desire to challenge the status quo. During this shift, many middle school students begin to become their own advocates and mediators between parents and teachers. Not only is the environment and structure of middle school different from that of elementary school, the child is changing and developing too. As children simultaneously enter adolescence and middle school Siegel (2015) attests that parents and teachers are charged with an added intellect challenging what has previously been “...known, safe, and familiar…” (p. 23). Without an effective communication structure in place, coupled with an increase in student advocacy and participation, parents and teachers must denounce past procedures and find new ways to effectively reach out to support the adolescent learner.

The Topic

Adolescence is a unique period of development. Apart from infancy, there is no other time in life when one goes through a more rapid and dramatic change (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Adolescent learners spend the majority of their waking time in school and parental involvement is vital in both academic and social-emotional development. According to a neuroscientific study, communication between teachers and parents has a direct impact on student achievement.
Further research suggests that effective teacher and parent communication facilitates healthy adolescent development (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Although there are many benefits to teacher and parent communication, many parents retreat from involvement with the school community as children enter adolescence and transition from elementary to middle school (Weiss, 2010).

In today’s dynamic and ever-changing culture, teachers and parents alike are responding to amplified expectations, social-emotional pressures, economic hardships, and increased time constraints (Graham-Clay, 2005). Positive communication between parents and teachers is essential to students’ academic success during adolescence; however, according to a national poll, the number one fear of teachers is talking to parents (Flynn, 2006). This fear could be explained when considering the lack of attention paid to this area in teacher preparation programs. According to research looking at communication strategies, lack of training, specifically, the ability to practice proactive communication with parents, is the leading barrier to effective communication (Graham-Clay, 2005).

**Research Problem**

As children transition from elementary to middle school, there is a decrease in teacher and parent communication (Weiss, 2010). Limited communication between parents and teachers can be a significant hindrance when trying to successfully educate and support middle school students. The purpose of this study was to explore the experience and perceptions of middle school educators about communication practices in order to determine which strategies teachers use to elicit and maintain communication commitments after the transition from elementary to middle school has occurred.

**Justification for the Research Problem**
Seminal author and educational researcher John Dewey (1938) posits that when considering social interests in the area of education, one will encounter practical struggles. Such a struggle currently exists in the area of parent and teacher communication. Dewey (1938) aims to illustrate the importance of this social interaction in education. “If we took instances of cooperative activities in which all members of a group take part...the individuals are a part of a community, not outside of it” (p. 54). If parents and teachers are not a part of the same educational community, the student views each as a separate entity with opposing viewpoints. Research will look to garner teacher and parent communication strategies, investigating specifically the need for fostering a positive parent-teacher relationship during the middle school years. It is important to recognize that students need consistent support during formative years, particularly as they develop through adolescence. Teachers and parents alike cannot accomplish this task in isolation. Parents and teachers must place an emphasis on interacting with one another.

During the middle school years, parent involvement decreases from that of elementary school (Weiss, 2010). Much of the available research repeatedly correlates parent involvement with student achievement, yet during adolescence, many parents retreat from involvement in their children’s education (Weiss, 2010). This study looked to transform teacher and parent engagement strategies that are intentionally aligned with supporting students at the middle school level. Students with involved parents are more academically motivated and have a greater commitment to learning (Storm & Storm, 2003). A recent study asserts that the amount of parent involvement is the reason schools that face challenges have the ability to outperform those that are more privileged” (Gallup, 2001). In a meta-analytic assessment of the strategies that promote adolescent achievement, Hill & Tyson (2009) conclude that parental involvement is positively associated with achievement, although parental involvement declines during middle school. The
research goes further to articulate that without cooperative parental participation, middle school students will not achieve their full potential, achievement gaps will widen, and academic talents will be squandered. “In the current context of increased demand for parental involvement in education...without effective parental involvement, adolescents’ opportunities are often foreclosed…” (p. 760).

This research explored how teachers currently engage in school to home communication practices. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that there is an increase of teachers who are increasingly apprehensive to communicate with parents, subsequently leading to a rise in classroom misbehavior (Gallup, 2001). This increase in misbehavior can lead to a decrease in learning and an increase in frustration, both at home and in the classroom. Teachers and parents need to effectively communicate, particularly during the formative and often challenging middle school years. This research maintained a teacher-centric focus of communication opportunities with parents and aimed to discover strategies of how to increase the amount of effective parent and teacher communication practices during middle school.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Much of the research previously conducted derives from the effects of communication breakdowns, whereas the purpose of this research was to explore the impediments causing the interruption, or absence of communication practices between teachers and parents. A significant obstacle to parent and teacher communication is the idea that parents will become argumentative if a teacher contacts them about an issue. This conflict then discourages teachers to take initiative in contacting parents and further issues go unresolved.

The current research focuses on the necessity of communication, whereas this research explored the functionality of communication practices looking specifically at how teachers can
learn to navigate social barriers, dispel fears, and begin reaching out and supporting a collaborative effort of communication practices with parents of adolescent learners in a rural community. Rural communities educate 20% of the students in the United States (Kettler, Puryear, Mullet, 2016) and 70% of the world’s poor (UNESCO, 2016). With the majority of educational research being done in urban settings (Arnold et al., 2005), and a limited number of scholars exploring rural educational issues, research into this demographic is necessary and timely. Most recently, UNESCO (2016) has created the Education for Rural People (ERP) action committee encouraging adequate data collection focusing on issues affecting rural groups. Rural educators can face a unique set of issues. As a professional educator, it can be challenging at best to navigate the complexities of small-town life highlighting the need for research in the rural context. Although helpful in urban schools, much of the current research on teacher-parent communication practices is not a viable option in many instances for small town educators. What constitutes a successful teacher can be different than what urban schools perceive as ideal qualifications. One of the exemplary traits rural teachers need is an ability to adjust to the community (Collins, 1999). This adjustment is really the ability to effectively traverse and negotiate complex social issues centered on talking to parents in a small town. Often times, parents and teachers are living and interacting within the same faction. Each is a part of the community and many have relationships beyond that just of strictly parent and teacher.

Relating the Discussion to Audiences

Situating this research in a rural setting provides a current resource for pre-service and practicing educators to utilize as a guide to understanding not only the importance of teacher and parent communication but how to best facilitate and foster a positive and professional relationship to help support the adolescent learner. Specifically, this research aimed to support
rural middle school teachers’ endeavors when looking to successfully build and maintain rapport with parents living in rural communities.

This research is of equal importance to pre-service educators as they transition to the field as first-year teachers, particularly if their teacher prep program did not effectively address parent communication strategies. The research is vital to educators, both seasoned and new; however, it is also important to parents and students alike. Given that adolescent learners begin to take a more active role in facilitating communication between teachers and parents, all three entities will benefit from an understanding of how to communicate with each other. As a result of more teacher preparedness in effective communication, school officials and building administrators could benefit from the research when making systematic decisions that could affect communication efforts. All parties working together to create procedures and strategies to effectively communicate will increase the support being offered to students.

**Significance of the Research Problem**

It is essential to support students as they make the transition from elementary to middle school. Parent and teacher communication is a vital component in making a successful shift and maintaining both academic and social/emotional health for adolescents. Parents and teachers must equally participate in effective communication efforts and continue to reach out, creating positive rapport concurrently building a supportive educational community. Teachers need to strive to establish a collaborative partnership with parents to support student learning. Parents need to reach out to the school community as children transition from the elementary grades to the middle school setting. The evidence supported in the current research shows a direct correlation between family and school interactions and student achievement levels (Henderson &
Mapp, 2002). In order for students to be optimally successful, parents and teachers must learn to positively and effectively communicate.

Middle school and adolescent development are crucial times in a child’s formal education. It is understood that middle school learners experience more rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive change not experienced since infancy (Siegel, 2015). It is during this time that teachers and parents should remain committed to supporting the learner; however, each party begins to withdraw from one another and interact less. Parents cite frustration of being demeaned by teachers, or not knowing how to navigate the complexities of the middle school structure, whereas teachers discuss the unreasonable parents who make unrealistic demands, or simply have too many students making communication a daunting task (Lasky, 2000; Hill & Tyson, 2013). This crucial time in development, although challenging, is when active involvement and participation is vital to the child. When parents and teachers are equally involved in the school environment, middle school learners are more likely to develop positive habits including more time spent completing homework, more engagement in academics, and positive relationship building strategies (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). Parents and teachers must learn to communicate in order to successfully support the child.

**Positionality Statement**

Home to school correspondence should be valued in education, particularly as learners transition from elementary to middle school and enter the often challenging developmental phase of adolescence. As a middle school educator, I feel that current and traditional communication practices often alienate both parents and teachers. Being a practicing educator, I know that parent and teacher communication can encompass, but is not limited to: conferences, e-mail, telephone conversations, grade reporting, written correspondence, and in-person dialogue. In the current
educational system I think these communication efforts are often thwarted and met with
trepidation and apprehension. In order for students to be successful both socially and
academically, parents and teachers must equally participate and collaborate to support the
developing adolescent learner. Collaborative skills and making consistent efforts to
communicate is necessary to successfully support students as they transition from elementary to
middle school.

I have a vested interest in the parent/teacher relationship since I currently function in both
roles. I am a seasoned middle school teacher and the parent of a 7th-grade child. As far as I am
concerned, parents and teachers are the two most important influences a child will have, and if
there is not a relationship between the two it can have negative consequence on the learning and
development of the child. I believe that parents and teachers can learn to talk to one another if
they are given the time, space, and strategies to do so. This collaborative relationship is what will
support students, schools, and communities.

As a current rural middle school teacher for the past 9 years, and a parent to a current 7th-
grade student, I have experienced and participated in each role of parent and teacher. As a result,
I possess an inside perspective from both viewpoints on the topic of parent and teacher
communication. Therefore, I was accepting of the participants’ perspectives and experiences
when communicating with parents without allowing my professional or personal background
bias my findings or interfere with my research and data results.

As a rural participatory researcher, I am a part of the teacher and parent community. I
experience the anxieties of reaching out to parents. I feel the stress of reaching out to other
teachers. I want to support teachers and the community. I want teachers’ voices to be empowered
and to celebrate the work that teachers do. I want to hear and represent their voices and
experiences of what it is like to communicate with parents in a rural setting. I have lived and worked in a rural community for most of my life and I think that many people have assumptions about what living in a small town is like. I believe there is a mythology surrounding rural places and schools and through my research, I aimed to demonstrate that rural schools face the same challenges surrounding parent and teacher communication as urban institutions, but the practices and ideologies differ based on the complexities of small-town life.

Living in a small town, and like most people in small communities, the word rural is reserved for those trails in the woods that snowmobiles and 4-wheelers use or the old back roads that only folks with trucks drive on in the spring when it’s muddy, and in summer as a leisurely activity to pass the time. What others call rural, we call the small town, and life here has its advantages. It’s a wonderful place to raise and educate children. My kids have chickens to chase and an old barn to build forts in. Our dog sniffs and wags about on the six acres of woods and fields behind our Cape Cod home and I sit enjoying it all from the front porch. While grading papers in the spring and fall I wave to each car that ventures down our one-lane dirt road taking the shortcut from the new center to the old and I can recognize the vehicle by the sounds of the exhaust before I even see it. Sometimes they will stop and ask when conferences are scheduled, or what time the school dance is on Friday. I know all the people who live on my road. I know most of the people in the upper village, one of the several historic categories we divide our small town into. In reality, I know almost all of the people who reside in this town. This type of small-town life certainly has its benefits of safety and respite, but growing up, living, and working in the same small town can pose challenges not yet considered in the research of teacher-parent communication.
One such challenge exists in the complex web of how students, teachers, administrators, and parents know or are related to one another. Preconceived notions and rumors can determine someone’s thinking about an individual before those two have actually been introduced. The lines of professional and personal lives are constantly blurred, making many social situations uncomfortable, and often placing teachers into unchartered territory as professionals. Imagine a situation where a teacher’s ex-spouse rents an apartment from the assistant superintendent and begins dating the mother of a current student who has significant behavioral issues. Or getting an invite to a class reunion during a parent-teacher conference from a current student’s mom whose husband is the brother of another teacher in the district who used to date the teacher’s best friend. The pre-existing relationships can be confusing at best and to be navigating them even more of an uncomfortable challenge.

Smaller issues such as being mindful of where to go for dinner if I am going to consume alcohol can be an issue since at least one parent is most likely on the wait staff, or is the restaurant owner. Grocery shopping can be a lengthy experience as parents who are either patrons or employees take the opportunity to hold impromptu parent-teacher conferences in the produce section. Attending a BBQ at a friends house is sure to bring about many students and parents who want answers to their questions about the school, and the gossip about another teacher, because so-and-so said they saw something on social media or heard it at so-and-so’s house.

As a professional educator, it can be difficult to navigate the complexities of small-town life highlighting again the need for research in the rural context. Although helpful in urban schools, much of the current research on teacher-parent best practices is not a viable option in many instances for small-town teachers.
Previous Knowledge & Personal Background

As a middle school student in the early 1990’s I never considered the importance of my parents and teachers communicating. Looking back, I did not want my mom or dad talking to my teachers at all. I enjoyed the separation of who I was at school and who I was at home. This disconnect allowed me to try on new behaviors and step out of my comfort zone; however, as an adolescent, these new choices were not always appropriate. From an adolescent perspective, it seemed efficient for my parents to attend a school open house, wander the classrooms, smile and nod in acknowledgment of the teachers, and wait for the first quarter report card arrives in the mail. If the grades were satisfactory, then there was no need to talk to a teacher. From a student perspective, I didn’t see the need for my parents to talk to my teachers. I thought home was home, and school was school and the less my parents interacted with the school, the better.

In my first year of middle school as an 11-year-old 6th grader I made two new friends. These two girls, like me, were attempting to fit into this new school setting of changing classes and having more than one teacher. At some point, early on in the school year the three of us wrote a Mad-Libs in science class using less than appropriate words to describe our science teacher. We were caught and all of our parents were called. This was the first contact this teacher would make with my parents. What I had not considered at the time was that this teacher and the other 6th grade educators now had a negative opinion of who I was as a student, and my parents were shocked that I would have behaved this way and questioned an already angry educator. From my recollection, the conversation was not productive. Not being aware then, I now see the benefit of reaching out to families prior to having a negative interaction with a student. Having a system in place where parents and teachers interact before entering into the school year would have perhaps created a positive and open line of communication.
Although this was my first time being in trouble in school, it was also my first impression in this new setting and unfortunately, it became easier and easier to live up to this new reputation I had inadvertently created. The middle school years proved challenging and unsettling for me. I was walking this new path of being the “naughty” student. I struggled through adolescence and worked hard to keep my parents and the school separate. The last thing I wanted was my parent talking to my teachers and learning the truth.

For reasons unclear to me, there was minimal communication home. I can only speculate that perhaps it was due to the initial negative contact. To successfully transition into adolescence and middle school, I needed the adults to communicate. I believe I would have had a more successful and positive experience with the collaborative guidance of home and school working together to support me. I was not aware of the need then, but as a teacher, I am fully aware of the urgency.

Professional Background

My desire to create new ways to communicate with my students’ parents commenced my first year teaching. I was hired as the 6th-8th grade English and science teacher in an alternative education program in one of the lowest socio-economic communities in a rural town in the state of New Hampshire. All of my thirteen students were thoroughly disengaged from learning, and had the district been able to afford an alternative placement, this group of thirteen boys would have been outsourced to schools dealing with severe emotional behaviors. Since this school operated in an isolated, rural location, outsourcing would have meant a move out of their homes and community.

Even though placement into this new program was evidence that a traditional approach to educational practices had previously proven unsuccessful, I was naïve and initially started the
year with what I knew from my own experiences and the limited ideas my pre-service teacher program offered me for how to contact parents. Early in September, I participated in the school’s parent-teacher conference evening. What I was unaware of is that most of my students’ parents were extremely uncomfortable coming into the school. I knew that I wanted to talk to the parents, but unfortunately, I really didn’t know how to reach them.

As the school year progressed, my ignorance as an educator was highlighted almost immediately and I struggled to create an environment where these students could find success. Students often shared the same sentiment that “school was useless.” This narrative thread seemed to be perpetuated in their homes. I began to realize that I had to think outside of the box and reach out in different ways. If this were to be an alternative program, I would need to use alternatives to the traditional style of parent and teacher communication practices. I made the conscience decision to shift and revise my limited knowledge about communication strategies. If outreach and information were always given from the teachers’ perspective, then I would do the opposite. Instead of holding a conference in the school, I would meet parents at home, where they were most comfortable and invite them to share ideas and perspectives. This proved to have its own set of challenges and safety concerns. I tried to email, but given the rural location and socio-economic status of the parents, consistent internet was intermittent at best. The same was true of telephone calls. If I could not go to the homes of my students and e-mail and phone calls went unanswered, I had to get creative. Around December, I piloted what I was calling the “meet and eat” program. First, I contacted a local community college organization that could help sponsor the purchase of pizza and beverages for students and their parents. I would then invite the parents as a group to avoid them feeling singled out. This style of communication became the norm in my pedagogy for the entire school year, with monthly meetings. I had shifted my role
from alien to ally and in turn disengaged parents shifted to communicators. At year's end, this group of students who started the year with major deficits in reading and writing skills had made significant gains in each subject. I was able to reach this population, who were originally unmotivated learners with behaviors that prevented them from learning in a traditional school setting to engaged learners with a decrease in negative behaviors. I strongly believe this was possible because of the relationships that were forged between their parents and me. For the first time since these children had started a formal education, this group of parents felt welcomed, complicit, and not judged. They had a voice. I believe this group of parents’ perceptions of teachers, school, and formal education shifted from a negative to a positive. This shift, in turn, fostered a change in their children's’ perceptions too. My new communication practices were a success.

Upon loss of funding for the alternative program, I was facing unemployment but was soon hired for the following school year as an 8th grade English teacher in another rural school. Going from 13 to over 100 students, my previous communication practices proved unfeasible. However, since I was no longer an alternative teacher, I assumed the traditional communication practices would suffice, and for several years the standard model of parent-teacher conferences proved effective. If there were issues or student misbehaviors, an occasional email or brief phone conversation was an acceptable way to chat with a parent and resolve the issue. I mostly felt that parents respected me as an educator, and in turn, I respected them as my students’ parent; however, as of late, there has seemed to be a shift in the climate of our school and educational community. In fact, communicating with parents has become to most stressful part of my job and many colleagues would concur.
More recently when I reach out to parents I am met with excuses for poor behavior, enablement for poor grades, and an expectation that if a student is having a problem, it must be due to the relationship with me, or my teaching. Many of my colleagues are experiencing the same challenges and have significantly retreated from reaching out to parents. Knowing it is a best practice to communicate with families, there is a frustration in being torn by wanting to do what is best for the students in my charge, yet at the same time feeling as though it is too stressful to do so.

Having a career as a middle school educator, I serve as a primary source to the challenges faced when communicating with parents. Another such challenge exists based on the high number of students I teach in conjunction with a daily rotating schedule and forty-seven minutes class times. Fostering a positive and in-depth relationship with students proves challenging given the aforementioned issues. Reaching out to parents is even more of a struggle given additional time constraints. Another pressing issue is the underlying fear that parents won’t help solve the problem, or that the issue being addressed will become a personal execution toward one individual teacher.

It is also important to note that I function as an adjunct professor of education, teaching pre-service educators at a private, liberal arts college. I encouraged my students to find ways to reach out to parents, particularly making the first communication home positive; however, I am reluctant to share the pitfalls associated with the teacher to parent communication because I do not have a viable solution of how to resolve the issue. My hope is that this research will uncover new ways to effectively communicate with parents in a productive and efficient manner.
Parental Background

As the parent of a middle school child, I make every effort to have consistent communication with my child’s teachers. It is a unique position since I work in the same school my child attends, so communication is accomplished with minimal effort. I do, however, notice that many parents will reach out to me requesting information since I have a preexisting relationship with them as friends and acquaintances. More often than not, these parents do not know how or whom to contact otherwise. They frequently mention that having a child in middle school is so different from the elementary school setting and they often feel unwelcome in the school building.

My perspectives are influenced by my differing roles. I have the unique opportunity to conduct research where I currently function in both roles being explored from a parent and teacher viewpoint. Furthermore, living and teaching in a rural community give me an added perspective of the struggles that many families face within this context.

Research Question

There is one research question this narrative study explored: What is the experience of teachers’ communicating with parents of adolescent students in a rural middle school?

Theoretical Framework

Miles and Huberman (1994) defined a theoretical framework as a visual or written source that supports and frames research. The framework within research functions to include ideas and beliefs about the phenomena being studied, as well to help assess and refine research goals and relevant research questions (Maxwell, 2005).
Social Learning Theory

In order to successfully frame the research of teacher and parent communication practices and approaches, the social learning theory is being employed to help guide and support the research process. Bandura’s social learning theory posits that human behaviors are a result of observing other humans through imitation and modeling (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Using a psychological approach will help foster an understanding of the complexities of teacher and parent interactions. According to Anfara Jr. & Mertz (2006), the effects of the theoretical framework on the research will provide an explanation and should stimulate further research. “A useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon...gives new insights, and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon (p. xvii). The social learning theory will facilitate the storytelling and "restorying" of field texts and narratives between the researcher and participants.

In order to successfully frame the research of parent-teacher communication, the social learning theory will help guide and support the research process. Utilizing the social learning theory predicts and frames the motivations of how humans behave (Bandura, 1971). The social learning process places emphasis on the context in which both the teacher and parent are situated. Moreover, it focuses on the participation and collaboration within the collaborative and communicative context. The conceptual structure of the social learning theory states that new patterns of behavior can be acquired through a direct experience or by observing patterns of behavior in others (Bandura, 1971). “Human functioning would be exceedingly inefficient…if behaviors were only controlled by directly experiencing consequences...people can profit greatly by the experience of others (p.24). In this research, the social learning theory supports the notion that parents and teachers can successfully learn communication skills from one another. Both
parties will observe the repeatedly observed behaviors of appropriate communication and each can learn to regulate and shift their own behavior based on those interactions.

The social learning theory model as outlined by Bandura (1971) states that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context. Teacher and parent communication is very much a cognitive operation. Learning can occur by observing the behavior of others and noting consequences from those behaviors in a process called vicarious reinforcement. As teachers and parents practice communication strategies, each can learn from the direct result of those communication practices. This is accomplished through observation and observational learning, also known as modeling. If teachers are able to model effective and appropriate communication strategies then parents can learn through the observed behavior of the teacher, and vice-a-versa. Although this can be done in isolation, the process of reinforcement is not entirely responsible for the learning process to occur. The communication would need to continue with productive communication practice. Additionally, the parent is not viewed as a passive recipient of information, but rather the environment, behavior of the participants, and metacognition all mutually influence each other, also known as reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1971).

Within the social learning theory exists the motivational function of reinforcement claiming that most human behavior is not controlled by an external motivator, but rather by prior experiences (Bandura, 1971). As a result, actions are therefore regulated based on the anticipated outcome. Human beings function and make decisions from what past precedence dictates. Given this logic using Bandura’s framework, as students transition from elementary to middle school, parents would continue to function based on results from communicatory practices that proved effective during elementary school. “Man’s cognitive skills thus provide him with the capability for both insightful and foresightful behavior” (p. 3).
Conclusion

Bandura’s social learning theory will support the narrative field texts and data interpretation illustrating parents’ behavior based on past interactions with teachers and provides educators with an increased ability to understand, adapt, and elicit parents’ views on how to support learners in middle school.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Research from a variety of sources and perspectives make the same claim that there are significant academic and social benefits from parental involvement at the middle school level (Robinson, 2015; Bassett, 2009; Siegel, 2015; Hill & Chao, 2009). Parents and teachers are two of the most significant contributors to a student’s education (Hill & Chao, 2009). When they function in the process together, the direct result is a supported learner who transitions between school and home hearing a similar message about learning, and educational expectations. According to the research of Hill & Chao (2009) parents and teachers seek out solutions in order to build connections in the hopes that adolescents will reach their full academic and emotional potential, but although there are a common goal and interest, many teachers and parents alike are unsuccessful in effectively collaborating to support achievement (Hill & Chao, 2009).

Much of the current climate of educational debates is centered on the urban school setting. (Tieken, 2014). Rural educational communities are often left out of the academic conversation since the inhabitants are perceived as less educated and live in higher levels of poverty than that of their urban counterparts (Roberts & Green, 2013; McCulloch & Crook, 2008). As is true of many academic institutions, rural schools face pressures of increasingly diverse student populations with alternative learning styles, needs, and backgrounds (Arnold et al., 2005). Parents and teachers living in rural locals are not insignificant. According to the 2010 United States Census, 51 million people live in rural communities. Within these rural schools expanding expectations coupled with dwindling resources and in many times geographic isolation from urban resources means that teachers and parents need to develop opportunities for
collaboration and open lines of communication. Communication efforts are important in all school settings, including those that encompass rural spaces and populations.

**Rural Education**

Understanding rurality is challenging and rural inhabitants are often perceived as less educated and live in higher levels of poverty than that of their urban counterparts (Roberts & Green, 2013; McCulloch & Crook, 2008). Qualitatively rural settings are different than urban locals (Kettler et al., 2016). For many individuals, what qualifies a setting as rural is subjective. Small town or country life is often a description used to classify a rural context. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Rural School Community and Community Trust (RSCT; McCulloch & Crook, 2008) claim there are six qualitative characteristics that define rural education:

1. Education must take place, not near large urban areas.
2. The environment has historical connections to farming.
3. There are fewer educational resources.
4. The schools are considered small.
5. The school aims to meet community needs based on the local economy.
6. Education is rooted in the lives of the student families.

These small schools are facing many of the same challenges of their urban counterparts, including an increase of diverse student populations with alternative learning styles, needs, and backgrounds (Arnold et al., 2005). This multifariousness can be a significant hindrance to communication efforts with each of these different geographic locals having varied demographics, compositions, histories, and social contexts making up almost one-third of schools in the United States, educating a fifth of American students (Tieken, 2014). As cited in
Kettler, Puryear, and Mullett (2016) rural students encompass 20% of the population in the United States according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NECS). Within these rural schools expanding expectations coupled with dwindling resources and in many times geographic isolation from urban resources means that teachers and parents need to develop opportunities for collaboration in order to successfully support students.

According to Benenson & Steinbeck (1994) research on school, culture places a focus on changing shared values and encouraging cooperation and respect. Tieken (2014) makes the claim that stereotypes and assumptions exist in relation to rural settings and are continually perpetuated by the media, yet a third of America’s public education system is made of rural institutions, with community members relying on the school system to support not only academic, but also social, political, and economic ideals. If parents and teachers do not effectively communicate in rural settings, much of these efforts and ideals will not be accomplished and the communication gap will widen and the overall school culture will suffer.

With a focus on rurality as a setting, an additional challenge parents and teachers face is the increased physical and emotional change happening within the child as he/she transitions from elementary to middle school. Adolescent development can place new and unfamiliar objections on parents and teachers as they aim to communicate. With rural communities lacking in outside support resources, it is imperative that parents and teachers construct a support system for the adolescent learner during this transition.

**Adolescent Development**

No other time since birth do children experience as rapid of a change than during adolescence (Eccles & Harold, 1993). These marked changes encompass shifts from a trifecta of instances including biological, cognitive, and social shifts. These changes are all happening...
congruently with the transition from elementary to middle school. On the surface level students being to grow, having the largest growth spurt since infancy (Hill & Chao, 2009). With this pubescent change and hormonal shift, there are significant alterations to the students’ moods and behaviors. The cognitive changes allow for greater negotiation skills, increases in decision-making, and making sound judgments position these learners on the path to emotional maturity and improved self-regulation (Richards, Miller, O’Donnell, Wasserman & Colder, 2004). Although there is increased cognitive ability, academic achievement declines at the middle school level (Hill & Chao, 2009).

Medical doctor and author Brian Siegel has developed the E.S.S.E.N.C.E. acronym that some middle schools, including The Blue School, are utilizing to help further support adolescent learners. Siegel (2015) claims that Emotional Spark, Social Engagement, Novelty, and Creative Explorations (ESSENCE) are the driving forces in the adolescent brain. Siegel reiterates that the adolescent brain experiences the most rapid growth during the middle school years since the ages of 1-3. These traits are most effectively explored when parents and teachers work collaboratively to support the young developing minds of adolescents. As these students transition from elementary education to secondary settings, it is important to recognize the systemic differences from K-5 to that of middle school.

**Middle School**

Students find success when parents and teachers understand one another and the school’s functionality can systematically create an atmosphere more convenient for communication (Redding, 1998). However, several factors contribute to making the middle years of education unique. “Middle school” is defined in Merriam-Webster’s intermediate dictionary as “a school usually including grades 5 to 8 or 6 to 8.” (p. 495). One of the biggest challenges is that during
these grade levels students are typically ages 10-14, a time of great physical and emotional development. Dr. Daniel Siegel (2015) states that the key to discovering the positive aspects of adolescent learners’ changing brains is working together to support their needs (Siegel, 2015). When parents and teachers are available to practice effective communication practices, the adolescent learner benefits. Siegel describes being present and available as “...being open to what is.” (p. 218).

The transition from elementary to middle school has been associated with several negative effects on the adolescent learner including a decrease in self-esteem and a decrease in motivation resulting in lower academic achievement (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Epstein & Sanders (2002) assert that it is the structure itself that hinders parents’ ability to remain effectively involved with their child's’ education. Middle schools tend to be larger than elementary schools and teachers have more students, making it difficult to reach out to students’ families. Unlike the elementary school environment, students have many teachers who can offer differing perspectives. This lack of one person as a point of contact can be a challenge for parents as they look to engage and build a relationship. Additionally, as the curriculum becomes more complex, many parents retreat in fear of not knowing how to assist or converse about a subject matter (Hill & Chao, 2009). This fear increases when parents have had previous negative experiences within the school setting with minority and low-income parents being even less likely to be involved with their child’s education (Price, 2008). This lack of parental engagement stems from previous negative interactions with teachers, lacking the time, or simply lacking the confidence to reach out. Hill et al., (2004) claim that regardless of socioeconomic status, families often retreat from school involvement when their children enter the middle school setting. Regardless of the
aforementioned challenges, it is of vital importance that parents and teachers communicate with each other; however, a definitive solution of how to do that remains slightly elusive.

**Parent & Teacher Communication**

Researcher Karyn E. Schweiker-Marra (2000) posed the question: Can a focused effort to increase parent-teacher communication strategies succeed, in spite of teachers’ initial negative attitudes about communicating with parents” (p. 12)? The research focused efforts on defining the parameters of teacher and parent communication as well as aimed to improve communication endeavors. The researcher claims that although parents and building administrators influence the school to home connections, teachers are perceived as “having the main responsibility” (p. 12). This two-way process of communication relies on the teacher being a willing participant and responsible for creating a forum of comfort and accessibility for parents (Hoerr, 1997). There is significant pressure on the educator to communicate with parents. The challenges when communicating with parents are multifaceted and several issues can arise. One trial, in particular, is that parent and teacher communication can be emotionally loaded. When discussing one’s child, many parents can become defensive. Teachers often retreat from this confrontation, subsequently leading to an increase in negative classroom behaviors and a feeling of fear in addressing the issues. Some of these issues stem from a communication breakdown. The act of communicating encompasses not only speaking and listening but reading and writing too. These are skills that teachers must be well versed in to communicate with parents effectively (Schweiker-Marra, 2000). If communication is reciprocal and defined as a two-way process, teachers and parents should maintain equally collaborative efforts. The aspiration should apply to both entities in order to support the developing child, but parents have the favorable occasion to begin this process very early on.
Exploring Joyce Epstein’s (2001) Framework of Six Types of Involvement provides one example of how parents and teachers can communicate. The type 2 framework can provide assistance in framing challenges, redefinitions, and anticipated results of how parents and teachers interact. The design of this framework supports the school-to-home communication processes beginning with sample practices, challenges, and redefinitions, results for students, results for parents, and results for teachers.

Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE 2</th>
<th>COMMUNICATING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.</td>
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**Sample Practices**
- Conferences with every parent at least once a year, with follow-ups as needed.
- Language translators to assist families as needed.
- Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for review and comments.
- Parent/student pickup of report card, with conferences on improving grades.
- Regular schedule of useful notices, memos, phone calls, newsletters, and other communications.
- Clear information on choosing schools or courses, programs, and activities within schools.
- Clear information on all school policies, programs, reforms, and transitions.

**Challenges**
- Review the readability, clarity, form, and frequency of all memos, notices, and other print and nonprint communications.
- Consider parents who do not speak English well, do not read well, or need large type.
- Review the quality of major communications (newsletters, report cards, conference schedules, and so on).
- Establish clear two-way channels for communications from home to school and from school to home.

**Redefinitions**
"Communications about school programs and student progress" to mean two-way, three-way, and many-way channels of communication that connect schools, families, students, and the community.

**Results for Students**
- Awareness of own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades.
- Understanding of school policies on behavior, attendance, and other areas of student conduct.
Informed decisions about courses and programs.
Awareness of own role in partnerships, serving as courier and communicator.

Results for Parents

- Understanding school programs and policies.
- Monitoring and awareness of child's progress.
- Responding effectively to students' problems.
- Interactions with teachers and ease of communication with school and teachers.

Results for Teachers

- Increased diversity and use of communications with families and awareness of own ability to communicate clearly
- Appreciation for and use of parent network for communications.
- Increased ability to elicit and understand family views on children's programs and progress.

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Parental Role in Child Development

Parents have the opportunity from their child’s birth to become one of the most influential teachers before the traditional school environment begins. This pre-teaching of sorts is of great importance and should continue throughout their child’s formal education. Teachers often cite improving parental support as a top three issue that needs to be addressed during opportunities for professional development (Storm & Storm, 2003). Some of the issues in parent and teacher communication arise as parents begin to feel excluded from the education process as their children transition from elementary to middle school. This feeling can often result in a retreatment, as parents are unable to successfully navigate the new setting. This withdrawal can have significant consequences at varying levels of academic and social success in middle school. Research presented by Storm & Storm (2003) highlight results from a 2001 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, claiming that a lack of parental attentiveness to school coincides with a rise in student misbehavior in the classroom. Teachers attribute this misbehavior to lack of power in certain areas of student development and many teachers agree that it is parents who possess the ability to guide the social and emotional development of their children.
(Hyman & Snook, 2000). This is prompting teachers to develop relationships with parents to help foster a collaborative approach to education and development. Moreover, highlighted in the research is a 1998 report from the United States Department of Education which claims that many school reforms will not succeed without the commitment from parents and the vital role they play in education (Storm & Storm, 2003). The research demonstrates the need for the relationship; however, even when both parents and teachers alike are interested in creating this rapport, often times each side cannot successfully make the connection due to several ancillary impediments.

Dr. Ken Robinson, an internationally recognized leader in education asserts that there are increased pressures by peers from the incessant demands that social media brings, and from the relentless demand of creating a sense of identity at a young age (Robinson, 2015). These can be challenging ideas for parents to respond to. Often parents struggle to create an environment where there is sufficient and appropriate support of their adolescent child. Although Robinson (2015) states there are not universal traits, guidelines, or rules to follow in child-rearing, there is confounding evidence to support parent and teacher collaboration. The University of Chicago as cited in Robinson (2015) reports that parent support in education is one of the “five essential supports” for success (p. 211). Although parental support is vital to the success of the learner, it is often a communication breakdown that impedes this success strategy as many parents and teachers think differently, often unintentionally creating a stressful environment for the student.

**Communication & the Brain**

According to a recent neuroscientific study, communication between parents and teachers impacts the quality of the students’ learning environment (Wardlow, 2014). The impact on the learning environment has a direct correlation between students’ academic success and the brain’s
capacity to make neural connections—simply described as learning. Much of this research supports the idea that a student who does not experience stress in the home or at school is able to learn more efficiently. When a student’s brain is stressed, the release of the hormone cortisol impedes the ability of memory formation and decreases the brain’s plasticity (Wardlow, 2014). These results demonstrate a strong need for a consistent support system at both the home and in the classroom. When parents and teachers function as a unified front, students experience less stress from the clear and consistent message of support from both their teachers and parents. This is best accomplished when parents and teachers have built a successful and ongoing rapport with one another.

**Communication and Families**

How and when parents and teachers communicate can have a significant impact on developing and fostering a continued relationship throughout the school year. According to scholar-practitioners Wong & Wong (2001), there are several methods to engage parents and set up successful communication strategies, including sending a note home to parents before the school year begins. More than just a welcome back to school letter, this message can include further opportunities to engage in conversation. Providing parents with this information as a point of the first contact can set the precedence that as a teacher, there is an interest in communicating going forward. The authors then go further to suggest that teachers can send invitations home to parents encouraging them to reach out via telephone if they have any questions. This can help parents better prepare their children and start the school year off with open lines of communication already established (Wong & Wong, 2001).

Masten (2001) asserts that parents often underestimate their own potential to be influential in the learning process. Whereas much of the research places the communication
power in the hands of teachers, some research encourages parents to take the first step in establishing rapport. Some research looks at how often parents’ and teachers’ communicate.

Douglas Powell, a researcher at the Merrill-Palmer Institute explored the communication frequency and diversity in his (2001) study. The aim of the study was to determine how often teachers and parents communicate, and what type of communication is happening. The quantitative data suggests that the two themes are linked. When the content of the communication changes, so does the frequency. Ultimately, the amount of frequency increases the diversity of topics being communicated, garnering a more productive relationship between parents and teachers.

When looking to understand the sociology of teaching and reaching out to parents, seminal author Willard Waller (1932) claims that “Difficulty arises because the aims of the school and the community are often divergent. It is very well to say that the school should serve the community, but it is difficult to decide what opinion should govern when school and community differ.” (p. 33). Parents and teachers function in differing roles. Teachers as professionals make up a large portion of a school community, whereas parents function as a large population of the general community. Both entities have a responsibility to the student. When either role is in conflict with the other, the student functions from a place of confusion.

Hill & Chao, (2009) make the assertion that although parents and teachers want to support students and see both academic and social success; both entities are often unprepared to collaborate, particularly when students reach the middle level. The transition from elementary to middle school shows a marked decline in academic achievement (Barber & Olsen 2004; Eccles, 2004; Gutman & Midgley, 2000). It would seem that given the change in setting, many of the strategies used by parents and teachers of middle school students is no longer feasible.
The Blue School, an independent school in New York City, claims that the partnership between family and school is a core value that sustains their progressive educational mission. Throughout the entire school year, parents work closely with their child and their child’s teacher to help develop and support the curriculum. The head of the school, Allison Gaines Pell (2014) states that as a school they aim to, foster interactions and building the relationship as an essential part of the school life for students (Pell, 2014). The Blue School is also highlighted in Robinson’s work (2015) claiming that at the core of the school is a belief system that “…the partnership between family and school in raising and educating children…[is an] essential part of school life.” (p. 215).

The National Parent-Teacher Association (NPTA) have released a framework to increase the family to school partnership claiming that this parent-teacher-student connection is vital in allowing students to prosper. The standards consist of: welcoming families into the school community, communicating effectively, supporting student success, speaking up for every child, sharing power, and collaborating with the community and through the research of Mapp & Kuttner (2002) affirm that parent and teacher communication and relationships increase the chance that students will find both academic and social success.

The United States Department of Education (2013) acknowledges that the interconnectedness of families and teachers is vital to student success. The research states that regardless of ethnicity, gender, educational background, or socioeconomic status, the provided framework demonstrates that all parents can support and advocate for their children while serving as positive academic role models in creating supportive and collaborative relationships with the school. While this framework promotes home to school communication and relationship
building for students’ academic success, it does not factor in the systemic issues in place that hinder the outreach from schools.

Edutopia.org, a website designed for educators to celebrate and encourage learning in the K-12 sector released a resource guide to help facilitate effective teacher and parent communication practices. The main theme that ran throughout asks teachers to meet the parents where they are. If parents are more comfortable using social media or social networking sites then teachers should encourage that interaction. A progressive shift suggested by Edutopia is to flip the traditional parent-teacher conference and have teachers visit the homes of their students and interact with parents in a more comfortable setting, going further to suggest that students lead the conference for both teachers and parents. “If you create a culture in which parent involvement is part of the curriculum, you create an environment in which parents feel welcome, free to ask questions, and make suggestions.” (p.14). This candor can be facilitated when trust is established between the parents and teachers.

**Trust**

Trust between teachers and parents are a crucial component of creating and maintaining the school to home relationship. Improving instances of school to home communication are identified as a primary factor in creating and enhancing trust between parents and teachers (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Ideally, when building the relationship, two-way communication will be utilized to focus on collaboration and not simply communication. Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) as cited in Adams & Christenson (2000) hypothesized that trust is constructed of three levels of progression: being predictable, being dependable, and having faith. Predictability is created when a teacher or parent demonstrates behavioral evidence using the same patterns of communication consistently over time. Essentially, parents and teachers behave in a manner that
is anticipated and expected. As the relationship progresses, dependability eventually transitions to the formulation of a trust that patterns of behavior will continue (Lasky, 2000). From a psychological viewpoint, the element of trust causes a transition to a personal attribute where both parents and teachers feel safe in communicating with each other. Continuing to build positive rapport can further support communication.

**Supporting Communication**

During middle school, communication is important to develop collaborative and positive relationships. The more personalized the relationship between the teacher and a parent, the more of an increase in social support of the student. An article in The Middle School Journal (Upham et al., 1998) reported findings that both teachers and parents feel that communication is the key to unlocking a successful working relationship, that face-to-face communication was the best way to communicate and alleviated any misinformation from a written document. The article goes further to represent the ideals and perspectives of parents. Many parents suggested that if a teacher and parent meeting did not occur early on in the school year, the parent was almost certain to hear from the teacher about an inappropriate behavior or issue as the initial point of contact. Reaching out early on supports building the parent and teacher relationship. Even though benefits are outlined from parent and teacher involvement at the middle school level, much of what keeps parents out of the equation is still elusive in many cases. As identified in Deslandes & Bertrand (2005), motivations on parent and teacher communication are dependent on several factors: parent level of education, family structure, family size, parent gender, grade level, and academic performance (Jordan et al. 2001). Results from Deslandes & Bertrand’s (2005) study highlight not only the importance of parental involvement in school but parental involvement at home and not examining it as global involvement. Parent perception has a
significant impact, and the research further suggests that to improve parental involvement in school, a focus should be placed on parental involvement at home too; however, even when the desire for involvement exists, some communication strategies prove more effective than others.

**Communication Strategies**

When communication is positive in nature, many middle school teachers struggle to reach out to parents in the current system in which communication strategies are structured. Often, e-mail lacks the ability to note inflection, tone, and conversational nuances. Phone calls can alleviate these concerns; however with many parents working it is challenging to find the appropriate or most convenient time to reach out. The current practice of parent-teacher conferences are typically scheduled and only held once or twice a school year. These conferences are typically teacher-led and do not support a collaborative conversation. Even though there are challenges posed, communication between parents and teachers can positively impact student learning, increase engagement, and support students’ social and emotional development through adolescence.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been shown to increase parental communication with teachers, but the research into CMC raises some important questions that critically evaluate this method and style of communication practices. While many types of research have been quick to point out the benefits of this style of communication, including the frequency and convenience of it, research by Thompson (2008) delves into the complexity associated with this style of communication, looking specifically at the elementary and middle school levels. According to Walther (1992), using email as a communication device can be convenient and allows both the parent and the teacher to complete the task of communication efficiently; however, there are some pitfalls associated with this level of convenience. First, the
communication is labeled as asynchronous and restricts non-verbal cues (Walther, 1992, 1996). Second, the interpersonal impressions and relationship take longer to form (Thompson, 2008). The qualitative, exploratory study employed by Thompson (2008) used an interpretive lens to uncover the characteristic based on patterns discovered in the data. Topic frequency showed that grades proved to encompass nearly sixty percent of teacher and parent e-mails, while advice/suggestions and solutions to misbehaviors encompassed less than half of a percent citing that both parents and teachers were reluctant to reach out using e-mail due to not being able to regulate tone when discussing sensitive issues. Third, the findings offer the suggestion that parents and teachers alike should consider the differences between synchronous and asynchronous communication when deciding how to best communicate a topic and not simply basing the decision on convenience.

E-mail communications can often lead to further miscommunications amongst parents and teachers (Reilly, 2008). These miscommunications can lead to both parties feeling frustrated and angry. “If handled incorrectly, such negative exchanges can derail any hope of building strong parental involvement” (p.44). Adversely, if the e-mail exchange is handled correctly, it can manage to be a step in furthering open lines of communication. A more traditional approach to communication can be meeting in person to avoid any miscommunications resulting from electronic communications.

The Parent-Teacher Conference

Lasky (2000) explored the cultural and emotional politics of teacher and parent interactions using Hargreaves’ framework, which is based on the emotional politics of teaching. Walker and MacLure (1999) as cited in Lasky’s (2000) study found that parent-teacher conferences as a communication strategy compared to a conversation that might happen between
a medical doctor and a patient. Essentially, the teacher retained the knowledge, power, and control of the interaction. The teacher chooses the topics to be explored and tends to dominate the interaction. This influence over the conversation places parents in a position of fear and they are less likely to ask clarifying questions, and thus creating a relationship where the parent is no longer willing to communicate (Bernhard & Freire, 1999). The parent-teacher conference is a deep-rooted and enduring social and institutional practice that many schools still adhere to (Hargreaves, 1998). The school as a social institution develops a sense of community from within. Most public schools in the United States do not offer opportunities for parents and teachers to interact outside of the parent-teacher conference (Lasky, 2000). However, some authors argue that parents often underestimate their own potential to be influential in the learning process. One way to highlight the effectiveness of parent influence is to change the format of the parent-teacher conference. Some middle schools are now practicing the student-led conference format. Parent attendance improves when the student is in charge of conducting the conference (Edutopia.org). These conferences can highlight strengths and weakness and parents, teachers, and the student can collaboratively develop a plan for success and support. Although conferences can prove successful in opening the lines of communication of grades and standardized test scores and classroom behaviors, these conferences tend to be academic in nature, avoiding any conversations about misbehaviors and overall emotional health.

**Communicating Emotions vs. Academics**

A contemporary study (Warner, 2010) discussed the importance of parents’ school involvement on academic success; however the research goes further to assert that student emotional health is of significant importance to parents of middle-class learners. The data highlights the idea that teachers may not perceive student’s anxiety in the same way as parents
do. Whereas teachers are traditionally concerned and are responsible for student’s learning, parents are equally as invested in the emotional health of their child (Warner, 2010). This disconnect of academics vs. emotions may cause an impediment in communication amongst parents and teachers because of the differing focus. Going further, Reilly (2008) claims that parent and teacher involvement can be divided into two separate categories: parent involvement in the home and parent involvement in the school. Schools have always functioned with some form of collaboration and communication, but given societal changes as well as educational reform movements, changes exist in the relationship between parents and teachers, further segregating the home and school climates (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Even if home and school partnerships are forged, there are still some communication challenges that parents and teachers will face.

**Obstacles to Communication**

There are several obstacles blocking parent and teacher communication and collaboration efforts (Reilly, 2008). One such obstacle can be a language and/or vocabulary barrier. Reilly (2008) argues that teachers should avoid jargon and make attempts to elicit parental perspectives, not simply share a teacher-centric perspective. An additional obstacle faced is that although parents feel comfortable visiting elementary schools, they tend to not visit once the transition is made to middle school (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Even in optimal circumstances, maintaining parental involvement at the middle school level is a challenge (Greene & Voiles, 2016). There are fewer opportunities for parents to become involved participants. Field trips do not often require parent chaperones, children are gaining more independence, and instruction is different as students’ progress into the middle grades, limiting conversations about the school day at home. Another hindrance can be experienced when parents have had negative experiences with
teachers or school authority figures (Greene & Voiles, 2016). Much of the interference is based on personal experience and developed expectations including observations and memories (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). Adversely, an additional obstacle can exist when parents become over-involved.

**Helicopter Parenting**

Many schools find greater success in making positive changes within the school, but knowing collaboration can provide success does not mean all school communities create an environment where parent and teacher collaboration can happen. Additionally, some researchers assert that there can be negative outcomes to parent involvement. The term helicopter parent commonly refers to parents who constantly hover over their children, stepping in at the first occurrence of struggle or discomfort. Patrick F. Bassett, the president of the National Association of Independent Schools sites this phenomenon as over parenting. This constant hovering can be detrimental to the child’s educational setting. He argues this style of micromanagement parenting is most dangerous when parents begin placing demands on teachers. He demonstrates the point with three examples: lobbying for improved grades when it is not valid or warranted, making excuses for their child’s misbehavior and even threatening legal action when they feel the school is not providing enough to support their child (Bassett, 2009). When children are not given the space to struggle and process through issues on their own, they lack the ability to problem solve later in life. Moreover, a child who never experiences a struggle can develop an unnatural fear of failure, leading to an inability to take risks, which can increase instances of depression and anxiety in school-aged children (Robinson, 2015).
**Summation**

Research from a variety of sources all makes the assertion that significant academic and social benefits exist from parental involvement during adolescence (Robinson, 2015; Bassett, 2009; Siegel, 2015; Hill & Chao, 2009). In spite of the abundance of research demonstrating the positive effects of parent and teacher communication, several scholars also claim that although parents and teachers want to support students and see both academic and social success, each party are often unprepared to collaborate, particularly at the middle school level (Hill & Chao, 2009; Price, 2008).

In many instance parents and teachers aim to successfully communicate; however, they are often unsuccessful in doing so. The trend of disconnects between home and school grows as students transition from elementary to middle school. This transition is notably marked by a decrease in student self-esteem and the desire to learn (Akos & Galassi, 2004). Adolescent learners experience rapid change, both emotionally and physically. No other time since birth is there such a marked change (Eccles & Harold, 1993). This alteration coupled with the systemic changes from elementary to middle school makes the case for increased parent and teacher communication needs. In order for parents and teachers to successfully communicate, they must have a system and strategies in place to support their efforts.

A marked deficit in the literature is that of rural locals. Although rural students encompass 20 percent of the population in the United States, (NECS, 2016) researchers argue that this demographic is often left out of the academic conversation and there is little to no funding for educational research (Tieken, 2014; Arnold et al., 2005). To explore the pitfalls in an underserved research population a qualitative narrative approach is purposed. Gaining several
teachers’ perspectives that currently function in a rural middle school setting will allow for an exploration of common themes and trends as well as firsthand experience of the participants.

Rural school districts face a unique set of challenges when it comes to community outreach and school to home communications. Many rural schools are geographically isolated and high-quality research is lacking from rural settings making it difficult to identify interventions (Arnold et al., 2005). According to Kettler et al., (2016) what defines a rural community in relation to educational research is inconsistent, making generalizations across studies discrepant; however, a 2016 report from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), asserts that rural populations encompass seventy percent of the world’s poor and defines the term rural as settlements with fewer than ten thousand people where the space is dominated by either farmland, wooded areas, water, mountains, or deserts (UNESCO, 2016). The organization aims to help support rural education through a focus on streamlining curricula, providing better pay incentives for educators of rural school districts, and encouraging adequate data collection to help improve support systems for rural educational facilities. An area that is not addressed is supporting educators’ communication efforts with parents. Rural communities tend to be diverse communities encompassing an assortment of residents who differ culturally, socially, and economically (UNESCO, 2016). These variances may create impediments when teachers are attempting to communicate with parents in rural settings. A limited number of scholars study rural educational issues, and little to no funding exists (Arnold et al., 2005).

The research of Kettler, Puryear, & Mullet (2016) explored empirical studies with an objective to identify the definitions of rural within others’ research. This systematic review offered operational definitions from several different government and national agencies and
highlighted seven of the seventeen studies reviewed failed to include a functional definition of rural. Findings included the idea that there is no unified approach to classifying a school as rural; however, population density and proximity to an urban setting provides the most rational definition when exploring rural research in education. Approximately 9 million students in the United States attend public schools classified as rural according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NECS).

Many schools have and continue to reduce supportive services for students (Lam & Ducreux, 2013). With this reduction in support, the importance of the teacher and parent relationship is increased. According to Hill and Chao (2009), the middle school setting is often complex, making parent navigation challenging. Many parents are uninformed or ignorant of how to become effectively involved with their child’s education. With fewer support services in place, often times, it is up to the teachers to navigate the complexities and make the first attempt in reaching out to parents. When parents are left to navigate the middle school setting and relationship building on their own, they receive less information and guidance of how to be involved and participate in their child’s education (Lam & Ducreux, 2013).

The parent and teacher relationship is a crucial component of successful and productive education at the middle school level. According to a study by Gonzalez-DeHass et al. (2005) as cited in Lam & Ducreux (2013), parental involvement and communication is positively associated with higher academic success, particularly in regard to higher standardized test scores, overall better grades in school, and more successful social interactions. This positive increase is thought to stem from a general attitude that parents who communicate with teachers place a higher value on education. When students are exposed to this environment, their motivation in school is increased and they are more academically engaged.
There are several themes present in the research of parent and teacher communication practices. A prevalent and overarching theme is outlined in Lasky’s (2000) research on the cultural and emotional politics surrounding teacher and parent interactions. Parents and teachers alike shape their perceptions of what the relationship and interactions should look like from their social, political, and institutional beliefs (Lasky, 2000). This can pose a significant challenge as parent and teacher roles continue to be in flux and are often redefined as political, social, and cultural shifts occur. Lasky (2000) proposes that teacher perceptions of parents who come from a different socio-economic background can impact the relationship. Adversely, parents’ interactions with teachers can prove equally as bias when parents do not value education in the same regard as the educator (Lam & Ducreux, 2013).

To combat these issues, Flynn (2006) proposed ten principles and six strategies to effectively create an opportunity for open and continued dialogue between teachers and parents. Using these strategies, the research goes on to articulate the benefits in building an alliance alongside parents with a report of overall stress reduction among teachers, a feeling of empowerment, and an increase of effective teaching. It is well documented that parent and teacher relationships have a significant impact on academic achievement. Much of this success can be traced back to the emotional standpoint of having had a positive school experience. According to Lam & Ducreux (2013) parents, teachers, and students benefit when the interactions are nonjudgmental. Fostering these relationships will predict students’ future attitudes and beliefs about themselves, their relationships, and education. This cultural capital is vital to the success of becoming educated and participating in the cyclical process going forward.

This research will look to explore the school’s efforts to engage with parents, looking specifically at three to four middle school teachers in a rural setting to explore their
communication techniques when reaching out to parents. Research will look to discover what influences the level of parent and teacher communication during middle school. More specifically, research will look to explore how teachers can increase parent communication and involvement at the middle school level.

**Conclusion**

As children transition from elementary to middle school, there is a decrease in teacher and parent communication (Weiss, 2010). Limited communication between parents and teachers can be a significant hindrance when trying to successfully educate and support middle school students. Although there is increased cognitive ability, academic achievement declines at the middle school level (Hill & Chao, 2009). The purpose of this study is to explore the experience and perceptions of rural middle school educators about communication practices in order to determine which strategies teachers use to elicit and maintain communication commitments after the transition has occurred.
Chapter III: Research Design

Methodology

This study employed qualitative methods to uncover the experience of teacher communication with parents of adolescent learners in a rural middle school setting. Through the collection of interviews, this narrative study aimed to discover understandings about what influences the level of communication between teachers and parents during middle school, and how teachers can effectively increase the occurrence of effective communication. As proposed by Clandinin & Connelly, (2000) “Narrative inquiry is the study of experience, and experience as John Dewey taught, is a matter of people in relation contextually and temporally” (p. 189).

Qualitative studies are often made up of people, processes, and behaviors (Rocco & Hatcher, 2011). The narrative approach allows for the collection of stories and accounts of teachers’ experiences around parent communication. Qualitative research is used when there is a group of participants to study with measurable variables (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative methods can be effective as a research method because data is often collected in the participants’ natural environments. Creswell (2009) lists out the key characteristics encompassed in qualitative research: the researcher is a vital component, several sources of data may be utilized, thematic or inductive data analysis is employed, the focus remains on the meaning of the data, the data may be emergent, it may use a theoretical lens from which to view the study, and it takes a holistic approach to complex social issues (p. 38-39).

Research Design

Narrative inquiry is the study of the experience. Participants and researchers are in relation to one another and the purpose of retelling offers the possibility for relieving, offering new directions and a new way of doing things (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study was conducted through the lens of the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm, the aim of which is
clarification and understanding (Ponterotto, 2005). When looking to uncover a truth, differing perspectives attribute to its composition. The differences in background and perspective compose different realities and versions of truth within research. In order to sift through the layers of reality, this researcher used a qualitative approach conducting interviews, observations, journaling, and storytelling; ultimately becoming a co-participant within the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). Since the parent and teacher relationship is a communicative process supported further by collaboration, this researcher examined the differing perspectives of teachers in order to understand the varying communication processes utilized across educators in a rural middle school.

The purpose of this doctoral thesis was to explore the teacher perception of communicating with parents of middle school students. A narrative interpretation can yield categories of analysis concerning teacher realities of parent communication. The selected approach for this qualitative study was a narrative inquiry as a way to uncover the human experience through a reflective practice and note the realities of educators currently practicing in the profession. The use of interviews, observations, journaling, and storytelling was used in looking to critically examine the methodological approach of narrative research through a qualitative lens.

**Research Tradition**

The philosophical underpinnings of narrative research take its roots in early educational philosophies. Seminal author, John Dewey explores the intersection and overlaps that exist between narrative inquiry and reflective inquiry. Narrative inquiry can be understood as the human experience as an unfolding history to be explored (Dewey & Ratner, 1940). More recently, narrative research has transitioned into a form of qualitative research where data
collection consists of stories, which are told in a particular sequence of events that are present in one single individual person (Creswell, 2009).

Narrative research is grounded in the idea that stories from lived and imagined experiences are categorized as valuable data in the field of qualitative research (Downey, 2009). The method of storytelling as a form of data collection has become increasingly accepted and is often described as “restorying” or “retelling” (Creswell, 2009). Educational author Sarasa (2015) summarizes the idea that narrative research encompasses the ability to uncover identities and personal practical knowledge. Author Susan Chase (2011) argues that the field of narrative research is still in its infancy and is in the process of evolving, but beginning to flourish (Chase, 2011). Goodson et al., (2012) report that this relatively new field of narrative research is a valid qualitative approach since it brings about specific themes of understanding data through storytelling and illuminating ideas of culture, context, and identity.

Narrative inquiry is increasingly used when studying educational experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). When looking to refine the concept of narrative inquiry further, the reconstruction of teachers’ social stories the researcher becomes a character within those stories. In connecting the research of teacher stories and perceptions, narrative research is suggested as teachers tell about their lived and imagined experiences and will share their practice and experiences when communicating with parents. Further claims by Connelly & Clandinin (1990) assert that the use of narrative research in education places the focus on the human experience due to its holistic qualities since humans are natural storytellers who lead storied lives. Boje (2002) has been credited with his work of scholarly accounts of narrative methods and how his exploratory stories encompass internal dynamics in the teaching profession. Some proponents of narrative research claim that narratives provide cognitive benefits to the reader and help them to
understand the character of the individual. This understanding comes in the form of field research. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) illustrate the various styles of field texts that the narrative researcher utilizes, including the importance of teacher stories, interviews, and conversation. In order to make meaning from these texts and experiences, the researcher must then transition from field texts to research texts (p.119).

Recent contributions to the field of narrative research include multiple approaches and addresses methodological issues all looking to make social change possible. One approach is to look at the story of life with a focus on stories and quality of life experiences. This approach maintains a focus on what the stories are about. Narrative research focuses on gathering everyday experiences and then looks to identify a new possibility within that reality (Chase, 2011).

Other researchers gain an understanding of data through narrative research by studying stories as a lived experience. These researchers are looking to answer how people narrate their own lived experience, while others focus specifically on the relationship between stories and environments. Chase (2011) goes further to discuss some of the methodological issues that may arise when using the narrative approach to research stating that when using the narrative approach, the relationship that is fostered, as well as ethical concerns, all need to be addressed and although many methodologies can be utilized for data collection, in-depth interviews have shown to be the most common source (Chase, 2011).

Moving beyond just the story itself in narrative research, Trahar (2009) asserts that the narrative inquiry paradigm can both support and challenge the researcher to explore different realities and knowledge. The author goes further claiming that position, location, interpretation, and personal experience can also continue to be examined through the voices of the stories being
collected. This premise is based on the idea that human beings give meaning to their lived experiences through stories. The narrative approach is grounded in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology and that the gathering of narratives in both the written, oral, and visual methods gives the researcher the opportunity to understand how the story was constructed, for who and why it is being told, and any cultural relevance it draws from (Trahar, 2009).

Critiquing Narrative Inquiry

Although a proponent of narrative research, author Trahar, 2009, outlines three areas of criticism, which some authors argue are prominent in narrative research. The first critique is established in the idea that a storyteller and story analyst encompasses two differing results, with the first being cathartic, while the latter is analytic. The second critique is that of legitimacy and authenticity. When providing evidence through narrative research, the data is presented as a reproduction of the original data produced giving room for error and misinterpretation of the original data. The tertiary concern in that when looking to garner an understanding of how the individual represents themselves as people, confusion may arise in both the wider social and historical backgrounds in which they are situated outside of the research context (Trahar, 2009).

Researcher’s Role within this Paradigm

Merriam’s (1991) work highlights the understanding that the knowledge a researcher brings to the activity is dependent upon the assumptions of how the researcher views the world. Ponterotto (2005) further denotes that the perspective of the human participants’ lived experiences often flaws research. There exists a humanistic aspect of research and demonstrates how design and methods of research are often altered by differing perspectives, and according to the constructivism-interpretivism paradigm, data analysis can often not be “truth.” Ultimately, a researcher's worldview will have an impact on the knowledge gained from the research. Merriam
(1991) makes some of this clear in that the knowledge produced is based on the questions the researcher asks, and the questions are dependent on the methods that frame the research. Ultimately, the reality or “truth” from the research is influenced by the context of the situation, as well as the interactions between the researcher and the research participants.

The process of narrative inquiry provides the ethical frame as a negotiation of shared narrative unity amongst the researcher and research participants (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Due to the collaboration, which occurs in narrative inquiry, the stories are continually revised and explored as further data develops. Connelly & Clandinin (1990) determined there are three very different aspects of narrative interpretation that can be attempted: broadening, burrowing, and restorying. Broadening occurs when the researcher generalizes the participant's character based on a comment and can appear as a character or social descriptor. Burrowing focuses on the events emotional, moral, and aesthetic qualities looking to discover their perceived origins. Restorying looks at present and future considerations to discern meaning from an event and its significance on the participant's life story.

In summary, the narrative tradition aims to discover the lived experience of the participants in collaboration with the researcher, intended to create meaning and insightful stories to analyze (Creswell 2009, Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This approach was beneficial to this study as it supported the natural style in which teachers already communicate and aimed to understand the lived experiences of the participants.

**Participants**

The population for this study is practicing educators who hold a valid and current teaching license. Four teachers were interviewed for this study and all are currently working in a middle school setting encompassing grades 6, 7, and 8 located in a rural community. Within this
research process, Creswell (2007) maintains the researcher focus should include what the participants hold about the problem or issue. Having identified specific research criteria including location, licensure, and employment status, the non-probability purposive sampling criteria is was used in order to gain insight into current experiences of teacher communication practices. The rationale for this group of participants is outlined in the traditions of narrative inquiry when exploring the experience of people in relation to context and experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to Creswell, (2012) the small sample size is appropriate given that qualitative research is intended to explore extensive details of the participants. A larger number would void for depth of exploration.

**Recruitment and access**

After the Northeastern Internal Review Board (IRB) approved the Doctoral Thesis Proposal (DTP), the recruit of participants for the study commenced. Because the research questions are limited to middle school teachers, only those who met the qualifications of this study were contacted. This researcher had access to the gatekeeper of the school district having a pre-existing professional relationship with the superintendent of the school administrative unit (Cresswell, 2012). This interconnectedness provided a system from which to conduct research with limited hindrances.

The research criteria were presented to each participant in order to be part of the study. In order to qualify, participants must have been teaching for a minimum of 3 years in a rural middle school and must currently be practicing and hold valid teaching certificates and credentials. Identified participants must interact directly with parents in their role as educators. Teachers that met the above criteria were invited to participate via e-mail, which clearly stated in writing that participation is voluntary and will have no impact on their professional standing within the
school and district. Additionally, the recruitment e-mail included all information regarding the protection of participants’ confidentiality and anonymity of the parents and students discussed.

**Data collection**

According to Creswell (2007), the initial process and procedure for a narrative study are to capture the detailed stories of one person, or a small group of individuals where the researcher spends a significant amount of time with the participants to record, observe, and explore their stories in depth. The stories then need to be analyzed and “restoried” into a framework with common themes. The research typically occurs in a four-step process, starting with the determination of the question and participant(s). The second step is to determine which approaches will be best suited to gather the stories and life experiences of the individual(s). Step three is the collection of these stories, known as “field texts.” Finally, the researcher is responsible for analyzing the participants’ stories and then “restorying” them, with both the researcher and participant collaborating throughout the process.

The data collection process or step two in narrative research consists of gathering information to then discern themes, ideas, and conclusions through storytelling. The researcher is then responsible for creating a narrative from the experience of others. Many different methods of data collection can be utilized including individual interviews, orally told stories, written stories, journaling techniques, letters, and observation of settings. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) describe the process as being a collaborative effort of mutually constructed stories of both the researcher and the participant.

Within the context of this research, participants were asked to tell their stories of interaction and communication with parents through a guided and in-depth interview process. Long-term observations of the participants were not necessary because this researcher was
looking to garner perception of past experiences of communication with parents. Journaling by each participant was employed as a way to gather thoughts and perceptions about parent communication as they happen in context and within the time frame of this research. Participants discussed the journals with the researcher, providing any anecdotal evidence and stories. This researcher kept a journal of interactions as a key reference point, noting inflections, mood, and conversational nuances from the interview process.

**Data storage**

All data collections were stored in a password-protected computer, cellular communication device, and locked filing cabinet. Once the study was complete, all data points were destroyed. All participants were offered the opportunity to explore and re-verify the dataset they provided, to ensure the validity as well as the security measures in place for the data collection. This researcher looked to uncover and interpret knowledge through the active listening of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured in order to help facilitate and guide the conversation. This researcher was responsible to gain the trust and confidence of the participants.

**Data Analysis**

When analyzing the stories gathered within the data collection process, the first step was to organize the data into groups based on common traits and themes. This was achieved through a coding process where all narrative accounts were transcribed and key words, phrases, and body language were explored and marked. As Chenail (1995) points out, the method of data analysis should be simple, because the real complexity is in the data itself. Miles & Huberman (1994) strongly recommend an early analysis approach and this research employed it as it offered this
researcher an ability to cycle back and forth between the existing data. Additionally, a direct tape recording was utilized to work from in addition to this researcher’s field journal.

A strongly recommended approach to data analysis is to use what Miles & Huberman (1994) call a contact summary sheet. This process allowed this researcher to recall the people and situations involved in the research process, note any themes or issues in the process, discern any variables, and formulate any new hypothesis going forward. It was further recommended to focus on the primary concepts, questions, and issues within the research. Chenail (1995) maintains the idea that a level of openness must exist when analyzing data, as it not only involves both participants in the process but also can build trust between the researcher and the participant thus making the results more valid.

**Presentation of Findings**

Chenail (1995) provides a structure that can allow for findings to be displayed and the data to be re-presented. The following is a chart that was used to “restory” the data from the participant interviews that allowed a rhythm within the this researcher’s writing that provided a pattern to follow when looking at the data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section Heading</th>
<th>Major Theme Garnered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present Finding</td>
<td>Narrative to finding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Data Exemplar</td>
<td>Quotes from the transcription and audio recordings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment on Data Exemplar</td>
<td>Commentary to support data and assertion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Transition to Second Data Exemplar</td>
<td>Transition to next quote and follow this same pattern for each theme being presented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display the Second Data Exemplar</td>
<td>Continued transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment Further on the Second Data Exemplar</td>
<td>Continuation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although the narrative approach is a relatively new process in the field of qualitative research, learning through the lived human experiences of others can garner authentic results from myriad data points within the research experience. Utilizing a narrative approach for this qualitative study supported the process in uncovering the human experience through a reflective practice and note the realities of educators’ communication strategies with parents.

**Trustworthiness**

All research participants were assured that every effort was made to maintain confidentiality in regards to their identity. Pseudonyms were crafted for all individual participants as well as the location where the research took place. No real names, titles, or locations are presented in this study. Any identifying information has been altered to protect the identity of both the school district as well as the participants. These pseudonyms are used in all aspects of the research process, including the notes and data collection materials to help support and maintain the fidelity of anonymity.

**Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability**

Narrative research is a valid qualitative approach since it brings about specific themes of understanding data through storytelling and illuminating ideas of culture, context, and identity. Roberts (2010) suggests that the trustworthiness in qualitative research is dependent upon the researcher’s competence in discovering and exploring concepts. To help ensure the validity of this research, trust building between this researcher and the participants remained a focus while the informant feedback provided internal validity to the study. The continuous stories and accounts of teacher perspectives delved into the discrete event of talking to parents and this researcher applied the qualitative technique of member checking in order to ensure this researcher’s interpretation of participant stories was accurate.
Protection of Human Subjects

All research participants were assured that every effort was made to maintain confidentiality in regards to their identity. Pseudonyms were crafted for all individual participants as well as the location where the research took place. No real names, titles, or locations are presented in this study. Any identifying information was altered to protect the identity of both the school district as well as the participants. These pseudonyms are used in all aspects of the research process, including the notes and data collection materials to help support and maintain the fidelity of anonymity.

Informed Consent

Each participant in this study was provided a guarantee of anonymity. Participants were asked to share stories and experiences as they relate to communication with parents. There were no anticipated risks with this research. Teachers were asked only to share personal experiences and input regarding communication with parents. Throughout this research process, participants were given the opportunity to ask for clarification of the goals of the study, ask questions about statements within the data collection process, and/or are withdrawn early from the study.

Internal Review Board Approval

Before beginning any data collection or site visits, this researcher submitted a Doctoral Thesis Proposal (DTP) and “Application for Approval for Use of Human Participation in Research” to Northeastern University’s Internal Review Board (IRB). Additionally, this researcher submitted all additional documentation to Northeastern’s IRB, including all appendices.
Chapter IV: Presentation of the Findings

This chapter records in detail the complexities surrounding parent and teacher communication practices and documents the essence of the lived experience of four rural middle school educators. The social learning theory framework where the complexities of human behaviors and interactions are observed through the imitation and modeling of others support these involved interactions. This chapter is also where the broader professional and personal stories of rural teachers’ interactions with parents are explored and the interconnectedness of small-town life is personified. These ideas and perspectives are the culmination of experiences of four rural educators who function within the tangled web of relationships with students and parents in both personal and the intricateness of rural professionalism.

The following summarizes this researcher's time spent recording and documenting the stories and lived experiences with this researcher becoming a co-participant within the data collection process (Ponterotto, 2005). According to Creswell (2007), the process and procedure for a narrative study are to capture the detailed stories of individuals where the researcher spends a significant amount of time with the participants to record, observe, and explore their stories in depth. The information documented here is based on this researcher’s interpretations from stories and conversations as a part of the formal interview process.

The teacher portraits documented here are a result of significant data analysis and a “restoried” approach of common themes and essential understandings from the participant interviews (Creswell, 2009). The themes, ideas, and conclusions stem from a direct result of capturing the lived experiences and stories of practicing educators who currently teach in a rural middle school setting. This researcher's interpretations took into consideration the sensitivity of topics encountered when speaking about parents and students. Much of what was shared is
personal in nature. Personal experience and participants’ emotional responses were examined through the voices of the stories collected. This researcher’s approach was grounded in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology and that the gathering of the teachers’ stories gave this researcher the opportunity to understand how the story was constructed, for who and why it was being told, and any cultural relevance. The stories shared by each educator are chronicled individually within this chapter with researcher commentary interwoven for depth of understanding. This researcher wanted each narrative to stand on its own as each has its own individual personality. Nearing the end of the chapter, common themes and connections are highlighted.

**Gail: Longevity and Change Over Time**

As a seasoned educator, Gail has been a middle school teacher since 1998, having just completed her 19th year. I interviewed Gail during the last week of the school year; five days before the start of summer break. With the school year winding down, the timing of the interview allowed for a natural timing and process of reflection over the span of her career. Gail has always taught either 7th or 8th grade. She has spent nearly two decades supporting adolescents and their families as either a social studies or math teacher. More specifically, Gail is and has been, an advisor and school to home liaison for roughly 20 students per year. Gail is well versed in communication practices with students’ parents. Gail has always worked in a rural school. She holds an advanced degree with a master’s in education, plus an additional twenty credits beyond her M.Ed.

To begin each of the interviews I asked the participants to share with me their philosophy of communication with parents. Gail’s response was not immediate, guarded with significant hesitation as she began. “I believe that- I hadn't really thought about it. [A long pause with a
perplexed look enveloped her face] I believe the parents should be notified when things are
going unusually. I think that they have access to grades now, which they did not have earlier. I'm
not really sure what else to add right at the moment.” Knowing how many years Gail has been a
teacher, coupled with her experience in communication efforts with parents, I was surprised she
didn’t have more to say. Being a co-participant in this interview I followed up with a simpler
form of the question, perhaps less intimidating than the word “philosophy,” I asked Gail to share
what her feelings were when talking to parents. Gail immediately went into a specific story about
an e-mail she sent to parents.

Let's see. In a group email last fall, I was trying to reach out to parents as a group for the
entire seventh grade because a lot of students hadn't had an assignment done. Now, these
were all blind copies and it was written in general terms and I was telling the parents that
you know, 'your child may not have this done. Could you please ask them and check?
And for those parents that you know that your child's gotten it done, thank you for having
a great student.' Well, one parent decided to take offense to, ‘Thank you for having a
great student.’ Because she said it implied that the other students were not great, which I
found very puzzling. It's made me very gun shy about connecting with parents.

What really stuck out from her response was the idiom that she is very “gun shy” about
connecting with parents. I also picked up on the word “connecting.” It appears that the idea of
communication goes beyond the exchange of information, but deeper into a personal or human
connection between the teacher and the parent. Gail went on to share the personal hurt she felt
from the negative parent response. I explored this idea with Gail and what we discovered is that
essentially, her feelings were hurt when this parent circumvented a further conversation with her
and instead went straight to Gail’s principal. For Gail, an element of fear set in and this
emotional response affected her communications with other parents going forward.

Shifting toward an abstract thought process I asked Gail to provide me with a metaphor
that represents parent communication to her. This response was provided without reservation or
hesitation; the response was direct and immediate. Gail looked right at me and stated, “Putting
your hand in a hole in the wall...does it bite? Or does it not?” This loaded statement gave me hope that Gail was becoming comfortable with me. I used this opportunity to encourage Gail to be candid, reassuring her that her anonymity would be protected. I then asked Gail to share a story with me. I gently asked her to talk about a time that sticks out in her memory when communicating with a parent.

This child, it's a boy, he's the youngest of four or five children and his older siblings are very accomplished academically, sports wise and things like that. He is probably five years younger than his next sibling...but he is someone that is very disruptive in a class setting and the mom and the parents, the sister, the aunt and the parents, were feeling that everyone was picking on this child.

Gail specifically mentioned the siblings because she has taught all of them prior to this. Gail described her school as “small,” and has taught all of the siblings; she wasn’t anticipating any issues with this child or family.

...and it was never his fault [misbehaviors] and is saying that when he goes home that he was feeling suicidal and telling his mother that he was suicidal and we [the teachers] were making everything worse. The mother wasn't talking because she wasn't feeling well and she was just there, kind of quietly dripping tears. He was threatening suicide and the mom spoke up saying, ‘Yes, and I go in there a couple times a night just to feel if he's still breathing.’

I asked Gail to clarify where this conversation was taking place and she stated that it was during a parent-teacher conference earlier in the fall of the current school year.

They [the student’s parents and aunt] were coming in demanding a lot of different things that were, this was a non-identified child, but he is identified now, but he wasn't identified then, but the aunt was demanding that he get an iPad right now. He has to have new teachers; he has to have this entire one-on-one help with someone right next to him the whole time. And aren't we despicable with some of the things that we were asking him not to do?

Not wanting to disrupt the flow of this story I noted in my journal that a new set of teachers was requested. Noting the size of the school, I wondered if in this small rural educational facility if
perhaps Gail was the only social studies teacher within this grade level. Having had all of the siblings, it seemed my inference was correct. This idea is explored later on.

She [the mother] was particularly, angry with me because I sent an email home saying something about, "Is he ill? Because he has this really, deep, odd cough that he's been doing." You know, when you think of someone who might be smoking a cigarette for the first time where they’re hacking really loudly. And he was doing this a lot in class. I mean, like during every minute of instructional time, when you're trying to give instructions. And I said, "You know, and it's funny that some of his friends are doing the same thing." And she was furious with me saying that "He was sick and you were choosing to pick on him?" And I said, "Well, I did offer to let him go down to the nurse's office and he said he didn't need it." Everything that we did, everything that we said, was all twisted and this screaming went on for 45 minutes and the principal didn't say a thing. Not a thing. Just let them vent and it wasn't the mother that was doing as much venting, it was the aunt literally, yelling at us and even when I looked over to another teacher across the table, this person was diagonally across and the aunt was over there about three feet away from me, on the same side of the table or at the end of the table and I was looking over to the other person and she's saying, "And don't you roll your eyes." I didn't even say a thing. I was looking over here, but that one will be historic for me for a very, long time.

Gail ends the story here, with her head and eyes pointed downward. It is almost as though she does not want to make eye contact with me. Her body language is resigned. After further conversation, I discovered within this story is again the emotional response to an interaction with a parent. When I asked Gail about the coughing e-mail communication she stated that she knew the boy was trying to be provocative and purposefully disruptive in class, but she wasn’t comfortable telling the parents or being straightforward about the misbehavior. Instead, she attempted to deliver the idea in a questioning fashion, where the parent could then hopefully have a conversation with the child. What resulted was a firestorm. I asked if this affected her communication practice moving forward and she said yes, it did. When sending e-mails Gail now spends a lot of time crafting words sent home...“Very tailored. Very tailored. Very skeletal.” Exploring the idea of communication strategies, I probed Gail to get a clear picture of other communication methods she has utilized. Although parent-teacher conferences are mentioned, I
wondered what role e-mail plays in miscommunications, particularly since so much time is spent on crafting the message. Since e-mail has become so time-consuming for Gail, she explained the ways in which she has made adjustments over the past few years.

"It's [e-mail] too easy for someone to misinterpret." Gail explained her process for using the telephone as a preferred communication method. "...Most the time, the parents aren't home, so I end up leaving it on a message. I mean I do keep track of my phone messages as well. If someone says, "Well, she's never contacted me." Or "When did you send that?" Or, "When did you leave that message? That's the only reason because I'm just more conscious about what people say than I used to be.

The theme of carefully crafting and documenting parent communications seems daunting and I sense the frustration coming from Gail as she leans back and shakes her head in resignation. Since Gail has spent her entire career in a rural context, I was curious if this had anything to do with her communication practices, and I wanted to revisit the parent request for new teachers. I asked Gail to share her ideas about this.

You have a smaller number of students or a fewer number of students and it is a very small community. For example, you're the only social studies teacher at this grade level. There's something about having a different teacher of a different school type of thing, but we don't have those available. In the larger school, if they don't like it, they can go to a different school within that school district. Well, there is no choice here. There is not even a choice of a different team of seventh graders, so they're pretty much stuck with us.

Moving through this idea of rural schools, I asked Gail if she had anything else she wanted to share about communication in this setting. She said that sometimes it’s a challenge because of geographic limitations and isolation.

The mom really likes being up in the isolation type of peace and he [the dad] was saying they don't even have electricity except for by solar panels. They also have had a generator and stuff like that, but I think that this parent likes to be isolated. They've gotten divorced, which is why most of the kids are now in public schools. But, the father is now remarried and he just has a total, completely different view that he and his new wife have of the whole situation. So, they've come down from the mountain. It's very isolated up there and they have to have four wheel drive and stuff like that, to get up there.
I should point out that Gail was reluctant to share this story because the name of the road and mountain would give away the identity of the student and family. I reassured her again that all documentation would be held in strict confidence. She explained that in such a small town, people would know who this child was right away.

Each interview concluded with the same question about what advice would be given to a first year teacher about parent and teacher communication practices. Gail’s response offered a summation of much of what she had discussed with me prior.

Just be very cautious and even though they may talk to you friendly, I am now very formal...it's to remind me that they're not my peer. Even though they may say things in a joking manner to me, they don't like it when you're responding in kind. So, I just try to keep it cut and dry.

It would seem that the connection with parents that was present in Gail’s early career is no longer something she looks to obtain. There is also a clear divide of not being equals. In Gail’s words—parents are not her peers. I wondered how this disconnect was playing out in this small school and town, so I pushed on with more questioning about support from parents.

I feel attacked by the parents. I just don't feel supported in that respect...I think that I see more and more, that parents are- it's hard to say, it's more on believing their child is right and the adult is wrong and I can understand it in some ways, I can, but if you've been having trouble with your child at times, don't you think that maybe the teacher might be as well?

Based on the stories Gail shared with me, I wanted to discover her response to these interactions and where her ideals on communication practice is now. When discussing the idea of how often Gail chooses to reach out to the parents of her students she asserts that it happens much more infrequently now.

I communicate far less. I was one of those people that used to send a lot of emails, ‘this is what we're doing.’ but, it's a challenge. If they [parents] want the access they can have it. You know, when it comes to this type of stuff, but those are the parents you don't
normally have to say something to. It's the ones that they don't do anything unless somebody is poking them that I feel that, those are the ones that need it, but those are also the ones that seem to take offense over little things, I guess.

Even though I had asked the final question of the interview, Gail seemed engaged in our discussions so I continued on. I asked Gail to share one more story with me. She proceeded to describe an incident of a school dress code violation and how she handled it, and ultimately due to both the parent and administrative response, how she will handle the same situation going forward.

There's a young lady in my advisory. She's a very attractive young lady and she has a very attractive, young mom and the mom leaves pretty early in the morning, so she doesn't always see what her child is wearing. And I kept on sending her down to the nurse to get the tee shirt and it was always a battle. The child was always furious about it and I had emailed the mom earlier in the year saying, ‘This is what your daughter is wearing and it doesn't fit our dress code and she's a lovely girl with intelligence and it's nice to be valued for her intelligence or personality rather than on her physical appearance.’ I was trying to speak as a parent of daughters. And that was fine, but she emailed me back saying, ‘Well, I'm not home when she leaves. That's not what she's wearing when I see her.’ That was pretty much it. And then, later on in the year, every time I asked the child, ‘Well, mom knows what I'm wearing.’ That type of thing. So, when it came to something in January, it's like, I felt I was doing the parent a disservice saying you know, I'm listening to the child and I probably shouldn't be. So, I emailed the parent and saying ‘you know, I think I've done you a disservice.’ And I actually used that language. And she got very angry. Very angry about the whole thing. About the whole thing being even mentioned, but her child was wearing things that were showing cleavage, very low cut, the whole nine yards, everything that was against our dress code. Low cut, high cut, you name it, she was doing it. Sometimes, all at the same time. So, she got very angry and there ended up being a conference with the principal. With the entire team about what her daughter was wearing or not. I just wish that I wasn't the only one that actually mentioned it. I mean, I've stopped. When it came to the change of weather, I have stopped because they can walk right passed any administration in the hallway and they don't say a thing and the kids say that. ‘Well, Mr. [principal] he didn't say anything.’ And I work on a team that has mostly males on it and they don't want to say anything because they don't want to be accused of ogling the child, which I honestly can see, but also having even a younger female on there, that doesn't seem to happen either. It's like well, ‘It doesn't look so bad to me.’ That type of thing. I've just seen too many girls that, that is the only thing that the boys pay attention to and I just wish it was something else that they were valued for.

I asked Gail if she felt supported by the parent in asking the student to adhere to the dress
code policy.

Not at all. And I still don't, but I have stopped saying anything because I don't feel supported by the administration about it either. The nurse sure, she'll just give them a tee shirt, but if you're going to have a dress code that says something, please uphold it. I mean, there are lots of girls that are running around here with too much of their butt cheeks showing.

During her final thoughts and reflections Gail sat back in her chair, in a classroom that is vibrant and full of end of the year projects, Gail’s eyes shown a weathered stare, resigned to her new reality of communication practices that encompass carefully crafted emails barren in nature. A personal connection with her students’ parents is not something to strive for, but rather keep at bay for fear of judgment and retaliation. I also could not help but ponder some details from her last story and the principal not supporting a school policy, and more importantly, supporting the teacher looking to enforce it. I thanked Gail for her participation and candidness and encouraged her to enjoy her summer respite. It is apparent she needs it.

Julie: Glass Half Full: Glass Half Empty

I entered Julie’s art classroom with excitement and smelling the tempera paints reminded me of being in elementary school. Julie’s classroom is alive with color, vibrant and bursting with adolescent creativity. We sat together as sunlight poured in and reflected off of clay pinch pots. If people’s appearance can reflect their jobs, Julie looks like an art teacher. Her tie-dye shorts and paint-stained fingernails give her away. Julie has taught in the middle school unified arts department for 17 years. She is currently the 6th-8th-grade art teacher but has also functioned as the school’s family and consumer science teacher, also known as home economics. She chuckles as she shares that she’s always taught wearing some sort of apron. Julie holds a bachelor's degree with an additional twenty credits beyond that. She does not have an advanced teaching degree. All of her teaching experience has been in a middle school classroom, ranging from grades 6-8.
Julie is eager to share that she instructs several after-school clubs, is the yearbook advisor, and has been a student advisor off and on depending on administration and systemic shifts.

Perhaps it’s the art room, oozing its color onto us, but Julies philosophy of communication practices with parents begins with such positivity my initial reaction is that perhaps Gail is jaded, and Julie isn’t. I push this idea as I know it’s not productive and/or accurate, simply human nature to wonder. Perhaps I am simply buzzing from Julie’s energy. Refocused, I ask Julie to share her communication philosophy with me. She provides her ideals and boasts about a recent accomplishment.

Well, I try to reach out positively, and I'll do that through good news cards or through an email. Right now I have 15 kids that are going to be in a Blackfly art show, so that's positive communication for parents. When kids are misbehaving I write them on a list that I have, and once I notice that they've been on the list a couple times I'll email home and say, 'This is becoming a problem in class,’ and I kind of wait for a parent to get back to me.

Encouraged by this positivity, I ask Julie to share a story about communicating with a parent.

Her unanticipated narrative is what followed.

The very first phone call [to a parent] I ever made in the school, I was yelled at and swore at, and they told me that my class was not important, that their kid was not going to make up their work. I was so scared to call parents after that. I would, but very rarely. Only if I thought the kid quote-unquote ‘had hope.’ Like, if I thought their parents would get involved I would call, but if I knew that they're not doing anything for anyone else I wouldn't bother. Once we got email better under control and more parents had email, I was much more apt to email parents, because of that phone call.

Once again, the emotional response to the challenging parental interaction shifted the way that a teacher communicated going further. Considering this was back in the year 2000, I wondered if Julie still uses this alternative strategy of preferring email as opposed to phone calls and if it proves an effective strategy. I could not help but think how Gail feels the opposite way about email. This could be attributed to personal preference perhaps.
Either I wouldn't get any response or I would get a response. Sometimes it was an angry response, but it was easier for me to take when it wasn't right in my face yelling and swearing at me. But it was a better conversation back and forth through email.

I asked Julie to share her metaphor of communication with parents and was curious to what she would say. Again, Julie shifts back to a positive image after a long reflection and a smile. “At first, I kind of thought of maybe a two-lane highway, but then I thought maybe one of those spiraling intersections of the highway because sometimes it comes back to you and sometimes it doesn't.”

I begin again with questioning but Julie interrupts me with the statement, “It doesn't always lead to where you want it to go.” I am beginning to understand that Julie has had experiences from both ends of the spectrum. I also think her personality tends to lean toward the positive aspect of things. I will try to capture both. I ask her to share a story with me about communicating with a parent and she returns the question with, “A positive one?” I tell her to choose. “Whatever sticks out to you,” I say as unassuming as possible. I don’t want to lead her.

Well, that first story, for sure, is one I remember the most. The second one is last year when a picture in the yearbook was printed incorrectly, and I had students in my room, and the mom was yelling so loud that all of the kids could hear everything she was yelling, and screaming, and swearing at me. And this kid did not take pictures on day one, or day two of the picture takes, and did not send me his picture, which is why it wasn't correct. So, I made little pictures for kids to stick on their yearbooks, and I gave them to him and I put them in all the books I had left. Not a word [from the parents]. Not a thank you, not an anything. He took them and walked away. Yeah, then [principal is named] said, ‘Because this happened we're not doing this again.’ Even though I've been doing the yearbook for several years, and that's the first big mistake we made.

Julie went on to explain that students could choose to use a different picture in the yearbook as opposed to the one from school picture day. After this accident in omitting the boy’s image, even though a sticker picture printed corrected it and every effort was made to amend the issue, the principal changed the policy to allow only school pictures going forward. Although
this was not teacher-initiated change, once again due to a negative parental interaction, an
alternative approach occurred. I could tell by the look on Julie’s face that she was frustrated by
the new policy and felt unsupported by her administrator. When I asked her about my hunch, she
shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. Clearly, she didn’t want to speak badly about her
principal, but her body language said enough.

Moving forward with the interview I asked Julie what advice she would provide to a first-
year teacher when communicating with parents. “I would definitely say to send out positive as
well as negative because if they're all negative then it becomes a chore and nobody wants to do
it.” Again, she is loyal to the positive and the negative side. Going back to Julie’s first experience
when the parent was yelling and screaming, I wondered how she would recommend a first-year
teacher respond to that type of communication. “Keep a calm voice. Act like it's not affecting
you. And definitely take a second afterward to just relax, and know that it's not your fault and it's
not about you. Even if it sounded like it was, something else was going on that made them do
that.” Unlike Gail who seemed personally affected by the negative experience, Julie seems to
have a quiet confidence in knowing it was not her fault.

Since Julie also works in a rural school, I wondered how she felt about teaching in a small
town. “I've never lived in a big city, so I wouldn't know [if it is different]. But I would think that
the parents should know their kid's teachers, almost by name. And I know a lot of parents know
me and I don't know them. I seek to clarify this idea, when Julie interjects.

I've thought it was interesting that several kids that I'm dealing with right now have
parents that work in the district, so I'll email their district email and get no response. And
that'll be the email that's listed on their web to school [school’s contact system]. Probably
half the time I get no response from an email that I sent. Not even a thank you or
understood, or anything. Usually, if that happens and I have to talk to the parent again, so
I did the email and there was no response, then I'll call. And generally I have to leave a
message because nobody's there, and then it'll end there and nobody will call me back.
Julie and I chat about this idea of parents not responding, particularly since many of them work within the same school building and district and all the while her tone remains more on the positive side. It is clear she does not want to speak disrespectfully of someone, particularly a colleague. I begin to wonder how I can get Julie to demonstrate true candor. It seems as though she is holding back. Perhaps another story will encourage deeper candor.

There's one kid this year that mom was upset that he had a C in my class, but he often threw tantrums and didn't pass in his stuff, and just refused to answer some of the questions because he didn't want to. So, he got the grade because that's what he answered. She [the parent] has two other students that have come up through, one of whom was fine. She had a little attitude, but she was a really good student. The other one has failed my class every time he's been in it. Never have I gotten an email, or phone call, or anything, though I have emailed her, and I have called home.

Again here, since this is a small school, and Julie is the only art teacher, she has had the siblings of a current student. She goes on to share more.

The other one [current student], who is in special ed. and was having a meeting, and the parent wanted me there pretty much to yell at me. So I was like, ‘I feel uncomfortable being at this meeting.’ And they [special education team] said, ‘Don't worry, we're going to make sure that she's not focused on that,’ and the meeting went fine. I explained what we were doing, she said okay. Then afterward it was like we didn't even have that meeting. Even though we explained things and special ed. said, ‘this is what he's capable of doing. He's going to do these things for art,’ and she said, "Okay. And don't grade him on anything he doesn't do." I said I wasn't already. Anything he wasn't here for, he didn't do, and I don't put it in. I don't know. Oh, and she also just, in an email to me when she was saying she needed to meet with me, said that I destroyed her kid's love for art.

As Julie relived this experience, her body language provided me the candor I was searching for. She shifted in her chair often and banged her hand on the table. When she spoke the words, “I destroyed her kids love for art,” her eyes shifted and became fixated on mine. I could see the anger and hurt. Just as Gail had felt personally attacked, so had Julie. Although these two middle school teachers differ in personality, negative parental interactions affected them as human beings and caused them to change not only the way each teacher reaches out but the frequency as well. I thanked Julie for her time and with a smile, she leads me out the door.
Shannon: Fear and Loathing in Middle School

On the last day of the school year, I received an email message from Shannon. I had previously interviewed her two weeks prior, but she was now reaching out to me requesting a follow-up interview. I happily agreed and met her that afternoon. Shannon provided several moments of candor, but what resonated the most was her desire for me to know the level of discomfort she experiences when speaking with parents.

Like Gail, Shannon has strictly taught 7th and 8th-grade math and social studies. All 17 years of Shannon’s career have been within a small rural middle school. Shannon has an M.Ed. with additional credits, claiming she has lost count at this point. She is a veteran educator with longevity in her district. She holds an advanced degree. She is kind, warm, and welcoming as I sit down. What I quickly discover is she is afraid of parents.

Shannon’s initial interview began with what I felt were scripted answers from someone who knows a lot of educational jargon and best practices. I believe she was telling me what she assumed I wanted to hear. Her philosophy of communication practices with parents sounded like it was pulled from education 101 textbooks.

I try to keep them [parents] informed of their child’s progress. I also make an effort at the beginning of the school year to reach out as an informational strategy, with a friendly tone, an update on what the class is about, on how often I should be contacting them and if they have preferences for communication. I try to make the first contact with parents a positive one, so that if I need to contact them for a behavior issue or missing assignments, I've fostered a positive rapport, hopefully.

I then asked Shannon to tell me a story about a moment that stands out when communicating with a parent. I was hoping for an authentic answer.

I guess, every time that I open my inbox, I feel a little bit panicked that there's going to be an angry parent email and then I guess that must stem back years. I got a really grumpy email from a parent who insisted that I didn't like their child and their child was miserable as a result of my interactions with the child in my class and I was completely blindsided. I had no idea. The child was smiling and friendly in class. I thought we had a
good rapport. I responded back in email and then another response came in, in an email. It makes me very leery, gun-shy of responding or corresponding via email or being very, not vague, but not providing lots and lots of narrative or dialogue in an email. I don't know if that answers your question.

Shannon did more than answer my question. She gave me a glimpse of an underlying something being suppressed. She is the second participant to use the idiom ‘gun shy’ when referencing parent communication. I am sensing a theme. Wondering how the metaphor question would be answered, I smiled and reminded Shannon of her anonymity and my desire to hear her personal experiences. Shannon then provided the following thoughts about communicating with the parents of her students. “It's terrifying. It's like the keyboard is on fire and if I hit enter, it's going to zap me and I'm going to burn to death. It's awful. I hate it.” Looks like the textbook response method has ended. Shannon has opened up.

It's never super comfortable. I always feel on the spot and I'm searching for the correct words and making sure that I convey accurately, information about their child that they won't misconstrue as a put-down or as a criticism and then if it is a criticism, am I putting it in a positive sandwich. Unless I know the parents from previous siblings, then it's really uncomfortable. It's never fun. I don't look forward to it. If there's a parent who is calling me from the office or an email or in person, I'm stressed.

Shannon’s speech pattern has become rapid. It is almost as though no one has given her permission to discuss this topic before. I then asked Shannon to share her ideas of what she would tell a first-year teacher about communicating with parents.

Try to reach out early and try to establish a positive rapport. That parents are your friends and they're part of your team and everyone is working together for the benefit of the student. That's what I'd tell a first-year teacher.

And we are back to offering best practices with the same sentiment that could be delivered from a professor in an undergraduate teaching course. Nervously, since I do not want to be too forward, I press Shannon and ask if she believes in her answer to be the truth.

Well, I wouldn't want to terrify them, so that's correct. That's what you would want to establish and then I would just add, maybe, nobody really wants honest feedback about
his or her kid. The kids are somebody's babies and parents can't separate their student at the school from their baby. They're not receptive to actual feedback.

Deciding to change directions, I ask Shannon to talk about what it’s like to communicate with parents in a rural setting. What is it like to teach in a small town?

If you have an issue with one student or one family, you can be sure that everyone at soccer knows about it by the weekend or there're a lot of siblings in families and I've taught here forever. Yeah, we're a rural setting, there's not a lot for the kids to do, so I think, maybe, issues at school become a focus at home or neighborhood discussions. I wish that it wasn't so scary. I wish I had a strategy that would ensure a positive interaction and that it didn't end up being a back and forth via email or telephone. The email is so tricky because others are always cc'd on it, so parents are like, I have a question, but they make sure they've cc'd the principal or the special ed. coordinator too. It feels like a setup sometimes.

Shannon went on to share some other concerns she has had over her 17-year tenure. Two particular stories I found shocking. Shannon confessed to altering student grades and accepting plagiarized work in order to avoid confrontations with parents. I asked her about the plagiarism.

“It's so evident based on what comes from home and what they're able to accomplish in school. This year, I've seen one of my students ... She'll stall, not do the work in class, quietly, not disruptive and then ask, ‘Oh, can I finish this at home? Can I borrow the classroom resource or the book?’ Then she comes back and it's beautiful.” Shannon then had this to say when I asked her to clarify what she meant by her self-preservation grading system. I asked her if she would ever change a student's grade to avoid any fallout.

Yes. Yes, I would. Just make it easier. The administration doesn't really support me; they just want the parents happy. The parents just want the grades. Yes, I would change a grade. I would have never done that when I started. I had much higher standards. I'm just beaten down. It's easier. Yep, here's the A. Is that what you want? I'll give it to you. Yes. I've done it.

To summarize, Shannon has changed a student's grade to pacify a parent (more than once), she knows that often parents are completing their child’s work at home, but she accepts it anyway, and then she shared her final thoughts about communicating with parents.
I just feel under a microscope and under attack on all fronts. Admin wants you to make the parents happy. The parents want you to make the kids happy. Teachers want to make everyone happy and work with their colleagues. It just sometimes feels thankless or impossible, especially at the end of the year. It's hard.

When Shannon wanted to follow up with me I was not only intrigued, I was excited to hear what she wanted to tell me. Upon our second meeting, the school year had ended. Shannon began by thanking me for coming back, which I found odd since she was volunteering her time to me, again. I was, however, appreciative. She started in straight away.

I'm glad that I have this opportunity. I did feel like it was really negative, and I'm sorry for that. It's still kind of a negative overtone. It's nerve-wracking to communicate with parents. I did want to give you a couple more examples of how the small town or the rural setting impacts my decisions. For instance, the end of the school year, we have to send a letter to our new students in our homeroom or in our advisory. I debated and carefully crafted and then erased part, and then did it again. I was concerned about listing every qualification. I didn't want it to seem like I was bragging about expertise or how long I'd worked here, or the professional development I participated in. I've had kids in the past who share openly, "My parents, they say the teachers here get paid too much." It makes me cognizant of the vehicle I choose to drive into the school parking lot. The community is a buzz I think. They know what the teachers are doing in a way that I think there's not a level of anonymity that you might have in an urban setting, I think.

I asked her to clarify why she felt parents would not appreciate a highly educated or skilled teacher for their child.

Well, I think some people probably are grateful to have teachers. White collar, college educated people who are concerned about continuing their education and improving their craft. Certainly, a lot of our parents are shift workers, blue-collar workers. They're struggling week to week, and I think sometimes they perceive that we're lofty or out of touch or snobs, snobby a little bit. They see a difference between themselves and the teaching community. Just like shopping in town. I'm always hesitant. It's so much easier to stop at our supermarket here in town than it is for me to go past my house to the next town. I wonder whom I'm going to run into and if it will be a positive experience.

I asked Shannon to explain the most challenging aspect of teaching in a rural school. "Well, in this particular small town it's the lower socioeconomic situation that many of our constituents live in and seems to be perpetuated generation to generation. They're poor and angry
sometimes.” Shannon continued to provide information about her perceptions, struggles, and challenges working in a small town school.

I'm sometimes hesitant in how I might communicate a classroom concern like, ‘Your child is finding is challenging to regulate their behavior.’ They don't even understand what I'm saying, like, ‘Your kid won't stay in his seat, and he's throwing pencils at peers.’ Sometimes it has been that direct, but then that feels inelegant and not a professional correspondence. It's tedious. All of the backspacing or back-stepping. I feel like I just can't be authentic and direct. There's not a trust there.

Thinking back to Gail’s email about the coughing student and based on this idea of directness, I asked Shannon what she thought would happen if she was direct with the parents she communicates with, even going back to what might happen if she did not change the grade, or discussed the parent plagiarism issues she has encountered.

They are angry, dislike me and then their siblings or the neighbors or everyone at soccer hears that I'm a mean teacher, or my assignments are too hard, or I give detentions for no reason. I never give detentions. I feel like it tarnishes my reputation.

Again, there is this pervasive fear that seems to direct the decision-making of teachers when they reach out to parents. Shannon seemed to be reading my thoughts as she shared, “I wish that I could come toward my parent communications with less fear, but I just don't know how to repair or how to be more comfortable.” I asked her if she had always been so fearful, or if this feeling had been a progression. She shared her thoughts and I was reminded of both Julie and Gail’s issues with the yearbook concern, dress code violation and the administrative response to each.

Well, in the past, I was less fearful, and we had a wonderful administrator who would come to me if a parent had a concern and say, "Hey, how could we respond to this parent?" We would craft it together. Our current administration really seems to bend to the will of parents, whether it's best for the classroom, for the student, for the learning community. He just wants to keep parents happy, and sometimes it's outrageous. Yeah, he just doesn't stand up for me. If I get into a spot with a parent, there's no backup. There's no support.

Support. This word hung there as Shannon thanked me for coming again to chat with her. As I spent a significant time reflecting on the stories she shared, I found myself fixated on the idea of
what it would be like to function from a place of constant fear. If nothing else, at least Shannon
has the summer off.

**Dave: Cool and Confident**

My final interview broke the gender pattern thus far. Dave’s teaching experience and
background are the most varied of all the participants. Currently teaching 7th-grade science, he
has taught grades 5-8 in the disciplines of special education as a case manager, math, alternative
education, and science. Dave has taught in both the private and public sectors, as well as in a
public alternative middle school program for a total of 21 years teaching experience. He has a
bachelor's degree and credits beyond, but he is unsure of how many, claiming to be “maxed out.”
He seems content sitting next to a classroom fish tank and what I assume to be literally a class
pet. Science classrooms seem to have a certain smell, but the turtle doesn’t seem to mind. Dave
is comfortable and seems at ease. I begin with the question about his philosophy of
communication with parents. He had a lot to say.

If you keep things small, they stay small. If you let them build up, then it's hard to fix,
because there are anxiety and angst. I really don't have the time or the inclination to deal
with an angry parent, I'd rather be the one that is calling and talking all the time. Having
them say, ‘I'm good.’ And know they're good. And let them back down on the emails or
the phone calls than me back down. If they start to back down and say, ‘I think we've got
this.' Then I'll slow down. If I think the kid's in a pickle, I'm not going to stop. If I see the
grades aren't improving, or the behaviors aren't stopping, I'm going to keep that circle of
communication between home and school, because it keeps the kids centered. He's at that
point, or she is at the center point of the conversation, and they're not going to be able to
play Mom/Dad at home. ‘I don't have homework, well mom said I didn't have to do it.’
That he said, she said. You don't get that. For those kids that need that support, it might
be a single mom or a single dad at home. They're not getting the communication from
somebody else. They rely on that, unfortunately, a lot of the ones we need to talk to, are
the ones that are the hardest to get ahold of.

Dave’s communication metaphor answer was simple, “It’s a circle. That's my philosophy. If you
don't have a circle, then it's like a chain. The weakest link is what you've got to get rid of. You've
got to make that circle and keep it constant.” There is a patient aggression evident in Dave’s
tone. It sounds like arrogance. I proceed with questioning. I asked Dave to share a story that
sticks out for him in regards to communicating with parents. As with his philosophy, Dave has a
lot to share.

Yeah. I think when I was a special educator, there was a legally oriented parent that was
more adversarial, like when they came to school meetings, and they'd have an advocate. It
was fairly frightening. It made me work hard, not avoid. Because I wanted them to realize
that I was on their side and that we couldn't be a team if they weren't going to be a
player. It turned out to be one of my best relationships. Like the advocate went away, the
lawyers went away. That's in two cases. The parents were just so involved, they wanted
what they wanted, and they didn't know how to communicate it, so they brought somebody
else into the scene that was more aggressive. It made everybody feel ... Really kind of
horrible and on edge. Like where you were afraid to say anything. It just gets to the
point where you have to show through actions, 'you know what? I'm not going to stop. You're
not going to intimidate me. I'll work for you; I'll do whatever we can do. But this isn't
necessary. That bringing your pit bull, or whatever you want to call it, to meetings. You
don't need it. We'll do what needs to be done without that adversarial threat.' Both of them,
within I would say a month of school starting, backed out. They were fine. I still get
Christmas cards from them.

It would seem that although Dave describes the interaction as “fairly frightening,” he shows no
signs of fear or intimidation when recalling the communication. I note this in my journal. I ask
him to clarify what he means by “frightening.”

When they have a lawyer in the room or their advocate, and they're saying, 'so you mean
this?' And it's like, 'No. That's not what I'm saying. We're having a conversation.' When
you feel like you're in court and they're Judge Judy. I don't like going to a meeting and
feeling like I need my union rep there.

I circle back, no pun intended, to the idea Dave shared within his metaphor. I ask him what if the
parent is the weakest link in that communication chain? He is stoic in his response.

That's where we [teachers] step up. I'll send the emails; they don't have to answer me
back. I'll leave voice messages. They don't have to answer me back, but they're hearing it.
They're hearing me and know, even though they don't want to care, or they don't have
time to care. At least they've heard and they know the deal.

Dave’s candor and ability to show dominance over the communications is a stark contrast to all
three of the women I spoke to. This intrigues me. I ask him questions about teaching in a rural
middle school and what he thinks of communicating with parents in that setting. His answer is simple, “I know a lot of them or I've taught them.” I wonder if perhaps this preexisting relationship has any bearing on his attitude toward it, so I ask.

Yeah, or because it's a small town, I know their circumstances more than you would elsewhere. There's somebody I know that knows you. Somewhere in my chain of friends, we have a connection. I think that my reputation as being here so long, I do things that need to be done, I'm gonna follow through. Just the years of that has built trust. People will ask, 'What about that Dave guy?' I like it when people request me as their advisor. It makes me feel good. When I have a full house of requestees. I ask Dave to clarify that the request is for his homeroom, and he does tell me that he is the only 7th-grade science teacher.

I feel unsettled in this interview, unlike the others. His overall presence and demeanor are so different than the others and his voice in powerful. I settle myself and continue. I ask Dave to share a story with me. Anything he wants to talk about in reference to talking with parents. He does not disappoint.

When I was running the alt program, one of my ... I guess a parent had to decompress me. We had a class pet that was a tegu gecko that are kind of aggressive, in the classroom in a tank. It ate mealworms. They would feed it, and this one individual ... Of course, this is an alternative program, so they're a little edgy anyway, put one of the meal worms down somebody's shirt. The kid obviously got upset. I go, ‘How do you like it?’ And I pretended to put one down his shirt, and he ran out of the room. Well, he called his father and said that I had put my hand down his shirt. His father came to school, and he was a rugged guy, and he came in and started to scream. And I gave him both barrels and told him what happened. He goes, ‘Where is he?’ And he's calling me back, because I'm dragging him to the office to find out where his son had called from. It was like, once he saw, we had a relationship [Dave and the student], but he was angry because his son did what kids do, knew he was in trouble from messing with somebody, then twisted it around like I did something wrong to keep him out of trouble. Once the parent realized that. That's the only time a parent has had to physically de-escalate me from being so wound up. You just drove, left work, to get here, for that being angry. Then he realized it was nothing to be angry about. I'm talking a 350-pound gentleman that lifts cement blocks for a living. Comes stomping in my room, gonna throttle me, and he sees that my eyes are wide and I'm ticked. He's calming my voice down, ‘You need to slow down.’ Just like really deescalating me, because I was so angry that the student that I had spent an amazing amount of time with turned him around. Because he was in trouble, went back to his old ways and hid somewhere in the school and had made a call to his dad to throw me under the bus. In a sense, my feelings were hurt.
His story engaging, I found myself on the edge of my seat and his last sentence felt familiar. Although Dave’s demeanor is different than the other teachers I spoke with, the sentiment is the same. His feelings were hurt, only this time it was because of student misbehavior, and not the direct interaction with the parent. It seems as though Dave’s intense student-centric approach changes his perspective on communication practices with parents. He is not afraid. I thank Dave for his time and with a nod and firm handshake grip he walks me to the door.

**Thematic Analysis**

After sitting with the transcripts and quietly reflecting as I poured over my scribbles and notes, several themes became evident. Teachers are uncomfortable fostering relationships with their students’ parents. This discomfort is a direct result of previous negative interactions. In short, teachers are afraid to talk to parents. This fear drives teachers to either retreat from communication activities altogether, or to make adjustments in content and frequency using self-preservation strategies. This includes avoiding interactions, calling home when parents are not there to answer, or sending skeletal e-mails as to minimize electronic conversations. Although the negative parental interactions feed this fear and retreatment, lack of administrative support has a significant role to play as well. Much of the unrest due to parental communication is tied to a lack of support from building level administration.

While reflecting on the above-referenced themes, the participant longevity was also considered. These are not new educators. To begin, each teacher has at least 15 years plus in experience—and all of those years in a middle school. This is encouraging to me. These are educators who have done this for a very long time. I thought about each of them as individuals: Gail’s silent resignation, Julie’s quiet frustration, Shannon’s trepidation, and Dave’s almost
fearless tenor. Although differing in personality and delivery, each teacher shared many of the same challenges when communicating with parents of their rural middle school students. Even though the research clearly indicates the positive benefits of the teacher-parent connection for adolescent learners, these veteran educators are significantly retreating from fostering this relationship.

**Fear & Communication Strategies**

Shannon shared several times over the amount of fear she feels, reiterating time and again how uncomfortable she is to send a parent email or even grocery shop in the small town where she teaches. These negative interactions not only affect her professional environment but her personal life choices as well. It is not surprising, though, since all four educators have taken some form of verbal abuse from parents. Gail notes several times that a parent or family member of a student screamed at her, misinterpreted emails are used against her, and she now primarily uses the telephone in the hopes that no one will be home to answer. Dave asserts that a parent was on the verge of becoming physical with him after a misunderstanding, and Julie shared how email is often her weapon of choice when reaching out to a parent so that the swearing and screaming do not have such a strong effect on her. Additionally, when teachers are communicating, they are not being candid or truthful in the correspondence for fear of parent retaliation. A culture of fear has set in and for most of these teachers; it is a daily struggle resulting in an amendment of how often they choose to reach out.

Fear is a challenging emotion to regulate. It invokes the flight or fight response and rational, logical thinking retreats, being traded in for reactionary behavior. Teachers are afraid of talking to parents. Each educator shared moments of parental hostility and how the fear they felt caused them to shift their communication efforts going forward. Julie shared how a negative
phone call with the mom of one of her students led her to avoid other parents, “I had a list of 15 parents to call and that was the last one I did that day. I was so scared to call parents after that. I would, but very rarely.” Shannon claims that she is often stressed when she has to communicate with a parent, “I guess, every time that I open my inbox, I feel a little bit panicked that there's going to be an angry parent email. It's never super comfortable. It's never fun. I don't look forward to it. I wish that it wasn't so scary.” Gail goes into details about how the fear makes her feel, “You remember the ones that you're stomach cramps about.” And although Dave remained the least fearful, there was an uncomfortable parent meeting, which he states, was “fairly frightening.” A response to fear is to either retreat or retaliate and being professional educators, all four of these individuals choose to retreat. This is the antithesis of forming a communication partnership to support the learner. In addition to fear, there is also a definitive lack of respect towards teachers from parents. None of the teachers shared any indicators that they have been disrespectful towards parents, although plenty of stories came to fruition when claiming disrespect on behalf of the parent. Given the longevity of the teacher-participants, it is a safe assumption that they maintain composure and professionalism, even when being berated.

**Small Town Schools**

Being a teacher in a rural district poses certain challenges due to the number of teachers available in a subject area, geographic isolation of students and parents, as well as maintaining an untarnished reputation within the small town. In all four participant interviews, it was noted that parents do not have the option of requesting a different teacher when encountering struggles. Often times a personality conflict can occur, yet the parent, student, and teacher must continue to work in conjunction with one another, even after the relationships have been damaged.
When a teacher has had siblings of a student, it is often a challenge to being a fresh relationship. A teacher's reputation can be tarnished if parents feel as though their child did not have a good experience, yet younger siblings will also have the same teacher. Conversations at home may tarnish the teacher's reputation. There is a level of anxiety on the part of the teacher when having siblings of challenging parents. Shannon talked at length about the fear of parents talking at a soccer game about a negative encounter. This anxiety has caused her to change grades, and accept plagiarized work in order to avoid being labeled and used as fodder at community events where other students and parents would hear negative things about her as a teacher and person. In a rural school, teachers do not often get a fresh start with new students.

**Administrative Support: Principles of Principals**

A theme that developed in a few of the participant interviews is the idea that some of the fear in communicating with parents come from a lack of administrative backing. Gail shared that while being berated by a parent and family member of a student, the administration did not speak up, rather sat passively and allowed the “screaming” to continue for up to 45 minutes. Additionally, Gail pointed out that when trying to enforce a dress code violation, which resulted in a negative interaction with both the student and the parent, the administration did not support her in backing up the dress code violation. The parent and the student saw nothing wrong since the principal was allowing the clothes to be worn in school. Gail felt unsupported by the principal and is now reluctant to enforce school policies or meet with families.

Shannon also reiterated the sentiment that she does not feel supported by her administration when it comes to negative or challenging communications with parents. Shannon claims that while a previous administrator would support her in crafting responses to parents, the current principal seems to “bend to the will of the parents.” Shannon feels this taking sides
behavior takes place regardless of whether or not it is what is best for the entire learning community, including the tripod of people: parent, teacher, and student. Shannon asserts it is due to the principal’s desire to “keep the parents happy.”

**Summary of Teachers’ Stories**

Although adolescence is a challenging time, it is not student misbehaviors that challenge these middle school teachers the most. It appears that fear is driving the bus, and teachers are not wearing seatbelts. According to the three of the four teachers interviewed, fear is the number one impediment of establishing a successful relationship between teachers and parents. This level of extreme anxiety is stemming from a pervasive lack of respect for teachers. In every participant interview a level of fear was represented and with every negative teacher and parent exchange, the teacher, in turn, adjusts his/her communication efforts going forward. This shift results in changes to communication type, frequency, and willingness to reach out. Overall, the same underlying story read through; teachers are retreating from talking to parents, mostly because they are afraid.
Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the stories of four middle school teachers’ experiences when communicating with students’ parents. The study also sought to understand the styles of communication utilized and the perceptions each teacher carries in relation to feelings and ideas about reaching out to parents in a rural setting.

The guiding research question for this study was:

What is the experience of teachers’ communicating with parents of adolescent students in a rural middle school?

As this research navigated through the literature and the stories of these educators it aimed to understand any challenges or hindrances within the parent and teacher relationship. Qualitative research was conducted through the formal interview process with guided and recorded narratives of teachers who shared stories and experiences with this researcher as the co-participant. Creswell (2007) writes that a narrative study will capture the detailed stories of a small group of individuals where the researcher spends a significant amount of time with the participants to record, observe, and explore their stories in depth. These stories were analyzed and “restoried” into personal and connected narratives with common themes. This chapter analyzes and discusses pertinent themes discovered within the teachers’ stories as they relate to the seminal literature and the theoretical framework. This chapter also outlines the implications of the findings for rural middle school teachers. It concludes with suggestions for future research and final thoughts on this researcher's role as a scholar-practitioner.

Key Findings

Three themes were evident within this narrative study: fear of parental interactions, communication change strategies for self-preservation, and a pervasive lack of administrative
support affected teacher and parent communication and relationships. These overarching themes coupled with the challenges of teaching in a rural setting have veteran educators not only avoiding parents but also feeling unsupported on all fronts. This level of teacher discomfort subsequently challenges ideals of what is best for students, and what is required to emotionally survive the school year.

The Fear Narratives: Avoiding Parental Interactions

Just as teachers prepare to manage and direct the learning environment of their classrooms, teachers must also be prepared to communicate with parents; however, the National Center for Educational Statistics reports that there is an increase of teachers who are increasingly apprehensive to communicate with parents. While reaching out to parents is an expected role to be fulfilled, many teachers have little to no training in the area of school to home communication practices. Positive communication between parents and teachers is essential to students’ academic success during adolescence; however, according to a national poll, the number one fear of teachers is talking to parents (Flynn, 2006). This fear could be explained when considering the lack of attention paid to this area in teacher preparation programs. According to research looking at communication strategies, lack of training, specifically, the ability to practice proactive communication with parents, is the leading barrier to effective communication (Graham-Clay, 2005). It is not surprising then that for many educators, these communication efforts supply an intense amount of fear and discontent in their professional, and at times personal lives. The four teacher-participants all claimed to have experienced some level of stress during the communication process, whether it be before, during, or after the communication has taken place. Shannon candidly articulated several times where speaking, emailing, or even thinking about talking to a parent caused her significant anxiety. It is a shared theme that a level of panic
exists when reading and composing emails, making phone calls, or sitting with families at parent-teacher conferences. The teachers asserting that they never know what is going to happen, and often times the end result is a negative interaction jading all future interactions going forward. This level of fear coincides with Waller’s (1932) classical study of schools as an organization coupled with Powell’s (1978) work. Both seminal authors assert that historically tensions exist between the professional educator and citizen participation, and finds instances of limited interactions between teachers and parents. It would seem that in 2017 much of the same tensions still exist, and teachers are still retreating from fostering relationships with their students’ parents. This level of fear is resulting in teachers making changes to past practices of communications with parents. Often making adjustments to the frequency of communication efforts.

**The Change Narratives: Self-Preservation Strategies**

Given the level of displeasure teachers’ experience, the obvious conclusion gathered from these teachers is to withdraw from the activity causing the distress. Most of the teachers interviewed commented on how the negative communication experience alters their efforts moving forward with all families. Gail made the assertion that with each negative parental experience her communication ideals shifted resulting in self-preservation mode. Julie, Gail, and Shannon all shared the ways in which adjustments were made to the type of outreach utilized as well as the quantity of messages going from the teacher to the parent.

The teachers suggested the initial contact be positive in nature, but to be cautious of which parents are contacted. Often these teachers are simply reaching out to check the proverbial box that the activity is complete as it is a school expectation that they communicate. Julie and Gail suggest using the telephone, knowing most parents are not home to answer, thus being able to
leave a message in the hopes the parent does not call back. This communication effort allows the teacher to document an effort in reaching out, without having to actually communicate directly with the parent. Shannon painstakingly composes emails, careful to not give too much information; while Gail reiterated this sentiment stating what she writes is “skeletal.” While email provides the teachers with documentation, it also provokes a back and forth digital conversation where nuances are lost and tone and inflection are misunderstood. In spite of knowing it is a best practice to develop and foster positive relationships with students’ parents, teachers find ways to minimize or avoid the interaction based on past negative experiences. This retreatment means that future students will not obtain the benefits of having a collaborative school to home support system. Much of this retreat stems from a lack of administrative support for the teachers. The teacher-participants shared on several occasions when they felt alone in their communication endeavors.

**The Support Narratives: Principles of Principals**

The change in school to home communication frequency and diversity originates not only from fear and previous negative results, but also the idea that each teacher is left to his/her own devices with limited support from school administrators. Three of the four teachers shared the same sentiment that the school administration did little or nothing to help them in their communication efforts, additionally, several of the participants felt as though the principal was much more parent-centric in the decision making process, alienating and frustrating the teachers. Within the social learning theory exists the motivational function of reinforcement claiming that most human behavior is not controlled by an external motivator, but rather by prior experiences (Bandura, 1971). As a result, actions are therefore regulated based on the anticipated outcome. The teacher participants anticipate not being supported by the administration, thus change their
behaviors towards building a relationship with parents. Human beings function and make decisions from what past precedence dictates. Shannon, Gail, and Julie all function from this past precedence where the principal supported the parent and not the teacher. Gail’s experience of being berated while the principal sat idle changed Gail’s communication efforts moving forward. Shannon’s communication style also shifted with the changing of administrators. Julie felt slighted by the principal who made changes to the yearbook picture protocol based on a negative parent experience. Given this logic of working from past precedence coupled with an understanding Bandura’s framework, teachers, parents, and administrators are continuing to respond to behaviors and interactions without any foresight to changing the patterns of past behaviors.

**Implications for Practice**

This research recorded the perceptions and realities of the teacher and parent relationship in a rural middle school setting and the way each teacher-participant self-articulated the need to feel supported by the administration in their communication efforts. Teachers cannot control the response and behavior of parents. Although with support from the school principal, many teachers could forge on and seek to build a more positive rapport with parents. The social learning theory posits that human behaviors and patterns are a direct result of mimicking the interactions observed in others (Bandura, 1971). If teachers and parents have stronger consistency in communication frequency, perhaps each participant could benefit, learn, and grow from one another’s positive behaviors. Teachers might be more willing to practice these efforts if they feel supported by the leadership within their building. Administrators do not need to be pro-teacher or pro-parent, but rather pro-relationship. All parties should feel respected in order to foster a positive, symbiotic relationship that will ultimately benefit the student. This research
may serve parents as well. Although many parents want to have a positive communication experience, many may lack the ability to accurately present that desire. School to home communications would be dramatically improved if each entity had the skill set, resources, and time to develop the relationship. School leadership could aim to create the opportunity for parents to not only interact more with teachers but also offer tips and ideas on how to best communicate.

Further Research

Studies like this may provide pre-service teacher programs a view into the necessity of teaching the skills of how to best implement school to home communications. Delving into the research of colleges’ and universities’ teacher education programs could yield findings that demonstrate the need for more authentic practice while student teaching. Additionally, the need for a curricular approach within coursework in teaching new educators not only the value of school to home communications but how to appropriately develop and foster it once they have their own classrooms.

The narratives in this study are limited to four teachers with significant longevity within the profession. Future research could look at new teachers, with less experience. While longevity has its benefits, it can also hinder the research process with jaded views and time passed since from coursework.

Lastly, this study discovered that rural schools pose a unique set of relationship challenges for both teachers and parents. Further research could delve into the psychology behind blending personal and professional relationships, particularly when the teacher both works and lives in the same community.

Final Thoughts
Research has demonstrated that teachers are afraid to talk to parents; however, research has also demonstrated the benefits for the adolescent learner when teachers and parents communicate. As a teacher, my goal is to support my students. As a scholar in practice, there is a sense of obligation to continue increasing school to home communications in my own setting. Having the unique position of teaching, working, and parenting in a small, rural town gives me all perspectives required to enact significant change at every level.

Focused on what the teachers said and how they said it, it is evident teachers need support in fostering positive relationships with parents. It is also clear that administration plays an important role in this effort. As a scholar-practitioner, I will seek to first reach out to the administrative team in an effort to begin conversations around what the school’s philosophy is on school to home communications. The teachers need support from administration and in professional learning communicates this goal could be accomplished.

As I endeavored to understand my biases, I viewed the parent and teacher relationship from all sides. My expertise in teaching middle school students and currently being the parent of one allows me to challenge the biases I hold as a teacher, and vice-a-versa. Each of my roles challenges the other and provides insight otherwise not available from one individual. In aiming to reach out and help support parents in fostering a positive relationship with teachers, I can be both an ally and adversary.

Aware of the criticism of the narrative approach to research is the idea that a storyteller and story analyst encompasses two differing results, with the first being cathartic, while the latter is analytic (Trahar, 2009). In spite of my desire to tell good stories, I resisted this urge in order to gain a true understanding of the participants’ ideals in order to present an analysis-based narrative. I plan to continue this approach of highlighting communication issues and highlight
any misunderstandings between the parties involved. As a scholar in practice, I will continue to offer support for teachers who want what is best for their students, for parents who want what is best for their children, and for students who deserve the best from both.
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