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Using a Teacher Website to Communicate More Effectively with Kindergarten Parents

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Using a Teacher Website to Communicate More Effectively with Kindergarten Parents

by

Laura Anne Williams Swanson

August 2008

A thesis or project submitted to the Department of Education and Human Development of the State University of New York College at Brockport in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education
Using a Teacher Website to Communicate More Effectively with Kindergarten Parents

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Figure 1: My classroom website.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

A few months ago I received an email from the parent of one of my kindergarteners who was concerned about her son. She explained that she was very alarmed that her son needed to receive reading support due to the results of his Early Literacy Profile from the fall. She expressed her frustration that she was not aware of the expectations of kindergarten or what her son would be assessed on at the beginning of kindergarten. I responded promptly to this mother but reflected on her email for many days afterward. I thought about how our district communicates the grade level expectations of our kindergarten program to the community.

What I discovered is that we provide parents with many "Parent Guides" and "Suggested Book Lists" that give summaries of what parents can do with their children at home to prepare them for the transition to kindergarten, but we do not explicitly share how children are assessed when they begin their educational journey with us or how the results of the assessments are used. We spend a lot of time putting together information for parents, but I wondered how often we formally ask parents what they would like more information about. I began to consider other areas that parents may not feel educated about and what questions they might have about kindergarten throughout the year. I started imagining ways to elicit parent responses about the information they would like to know more about and how I might communicate that information more effectively through my classroom website.
I have used a classroom website to communicate with parents for the past three years. When I taught fifth grade three years ago, I used my website to communicate with parents about homework expectations and assignments, in addition to sharing classroom news and upcoming school events. When I began teaching kindergarten, I considered the new audience I was communicating with and modified the content of the website accordingly. I added information I thought parents who were new to our school might find useful. I displayed contact information for the school and myself, descriptions of the procedures and routines they should be aware of, and posted pictures with the names of all the staff in our school building who work with the kindergarten students. I uploaded pictures of the children at work in the classroom and included questions they could ask their child to obtain more information from her/him about her/his time in school. I also added links to other websites I thought parents might find helpful to use with their child at home and I included a list of books that we have read and discussed in school. Over the course of three years, I have spent a lot of time writing, formatting, and designing my website to be a useful tool for parents. A screen shot of my website appears in Figure 1.
When I received the mother’s email that highlighted her concern and frustration about kindergarten expectations, I reflected on the kinds of information parents might like to know more about. It was at this time I realized that while I have worked diligently on my website for the last few years I have never asked parents—the site’s prime audience—what they would like to know or have included on the site.

The primary sources that I have used to inform my decisions about the website’s content are my colleagues and myself. I have had lengthy discussions with other educators in my building and in my district about the material that I share with parents via my website. Each week, I determine the things parents should know, such as upcoming school events, projects we are working on, units of study we are exploring, and ways they can support their child at home. My website, as I have come to realize, is a reflection of what I believe parents want to know.
Significance of the Problem

Significant research has been done to demonstrate that there is a direct link between student achievement and parental involvement. Parental involvement is defined as the communication that occurs between parents/guardians and the school system (Nelms, 2002). Research shows that children are more apt to be successful when parents are involved in their child’s education and aware of the grade level expectations and goals (Nelms, 2002).

The results of a study in a mid-size city in the Northeast that examined the experiences and involvement of parents in their child’s transition to kindergarten indicated that parents do not fully understand school expectations (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Digennaro & Wildenger, 2007). Researchers also found that many parents would like more information about kindergarten academic and behavioral readiness (McIntyre et al., 2007). In fact, more than 80 percent of parents surveyed indicated they wanted more information about academic expectations in kindergarten (McIntyre et al., 2007).

The researchers suggest teachers discuss academic, social, and behavioral expectations with families prior to the start of kindergarten. According to McIntyre et al. (2007), “ideally these conversations with families would occur within the context of a visit to a kindergarten classroom and/or a meeting with kindergarten teachers” (p. 86). They also highlight, however, that there are several barriers to implementing these successful transition activities and communicating the sought after information.
effectively, including class size, lack of summer resources, and the generation of class lists just weeks (or days) before kindergarten begins (McIntyre, et al., 2007).

Communicating with parents is one of the important responsibilities of an educator. Keeping parents informed of routines, procedures, scheduling, fieldtrips, assignments, in addition to performance expectations presents quite a challenge to educators and schools. Many schools systems use generic strategies in the form of phone calls, paper newsletters, calendars, and presentations to keep parents informed of pertinent information.

The problem with these strategies is that they are temporary vehicles for communicating information and it is often difficult for schools and parents to keep track of the information. Paper documents and verbal conversations have a limited lifespan. Information that is transmitted in this manner may become irretrievable. Some parents may have a difficult time managing and maintaining information that is sent home in the form of letters or packets. And schools often waste time, energy, and money reproducing information in an effort to keep parents informed (Hernandez, 2004; Tobolka, 2007).

Purpose

The parent who emailed me months ago sharing her concern about how we communicate kindergarten expectations caused me to reflect on four important questions that I addressed in this research study:
Is a classroom website a convenient tool for parents to use? Why or why not?

What information do kindergarten parents feel knowledgeable about regarding a kindergarten program?

What information do parents feel is important to know about a kindergarten program?

What information do kindergarten parents want to know more about?

The purpose of this research study, then, is to seek the parent perspective in order to optimize the effectiveness of my classroom website. I want to invite the voice of parents into the conversation, and in so doing, inform my decisions about the information that is posted on our classroom website. My goal is to create a website that accurately reflects information that parents want to know in addition to providing information that I deem important for parents to know about our classroom.

I surveyed my current population of kindergarten parents in the spring of this school year as a means to answer the research questions. I used the survey data to determine the information that parents found useful on our current classroom website, and information they would like to see included on the site.

While conducting this study, I researched the effects of communicating with parents, learned what information parents in other areas deem valuable, identified the elements of effective parent-teacher communication, and explored online tools that can be used to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of communicating through a classroom website.
Definition of Terms

Blog: According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary the term Blog, short for Web log, refers to “a Web site that contains an online personal journal with reflections, comments, and often hyperlinks provided by the writer” (2008).

Early Literacy Profile: Also referred to using the acronym ELP, this is the reading assessment that teachers administer to students in the fall and spring to determine if they will need reading support or AIS. The ELP was designed by our school district and is scored by teachers.

Edublog: blogs specific to education. It is an online tool that can provide fast, efficient communication between teachers, parents, and students (Ray, 2006).

Parental Involvement: the communication that occurs between parents/guardians and the school system (Nelms, 2002).

Transition Practices: Practices that provide opportunities initiated by the school to transmit information about the school to incoming families. They include, but are not limited to, orientation sessions, phone calls, letters, information packets, home visits, and open houses (La Paro, Pianta, & Cox, 2000).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Through this literature review, I justify the purpose of sustaining ongoing parent-teacher communication and examine and assess alternative types of communication tools. The review also includes studies that highlight parents' perspective of home-school communication.

Parent involvement and Student Achievement

Research shows that there is a strong connection between student achievement and parent involvement. The research highlighted by Nelms (2002) identifies several benefits for the children of parents who took an active role in their education. Parents who began communicating regularly with school, participating in school-related activities, and contributing to their child’s education had children who improved in several areas. Students were found to have “improved student behavior, increased student motivation, higher student attendance, increased community support, and improved student attitudes” (Nelms, 2002, p. 1).

The comprehensive anthology of research collected by Henderson and Berla (2004) found that “teachers have higher expectations of students whose parents collaborate with them; they also have higher opinions of those parents” (p. 5). The studies they examined allowed them to conclude that
the most accurate predictor of a student’s achievement in school is not income or social status, but the extent to which that student’s family is able to:

1. Create a home environment that encourages learning
2. Express high (but not unrealistic) expectations for their children’s achievement and future careers
3. Become involved in their children’s education at school and in the community. (Henderson & Berla, 2004, p. 1)

The evidence suggests that when schools and families work together, children succeed. The researchers also found evidence that demonstrates teachers and parents benefit, too. Teachers have been found to have increased morale, more support from families, and better reputations in the community. It has been discovered that when parents are involved in their child’s education they have more confidence in the school and more confidence in themselves as parents (Henderson & Berla, 2004).

**Parents and School Expectations**

Five members of the psychology department at Syracuse University surveyed parents of children enrolled in early childhood education programs transitioning to kindergarten (McIntyre et al., 2007). The intention of the study was to identify the experiences and level of involvement of the parents during the transition process.

The researchers mailed a survey to all families who had a child previously enrolled in early childhood education programs within the school district. The survey
was designed to investigate the family perspective of the kindergarten transition process. Parents responded to activities/services they had received, those they wanted to receive, and those they neither had nor wanted. The results indicated that of 132 parents, 59.8 percent wanted to receive written communication from their son or daughter’s future kindergarten teacher, 68 percent said that they wanted to know what they could do to help prepare their child for the transition to kindergarten, and over 80 percent reported that they wanted more information about the academic expectations of kindergarten (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Digennaro & Wildenger, 2007, pp. 84-85).

**Elements of Effective Parent-Teacher Communication**

Hernandez and Leung (2004) identified the Internet as a viable means of effective parent-teacher communication. They recognize that the most optimal communication occurs when parents and teachers can meet in person; however, they explain that while this kind of communication is the best form it is not the most practical.

Many families and teachers rely on phone calls or written notes to get messages across to one another. Hernandez and Leung found that “many teachers and parents have experienced frustration when attempting to communicate by telephone or through handwritten messages. At times, these forms of communication can be time-consuming and unsuccessful, with messages sometimes not reaching the parents” (p. 136). They suggest using e-mail to establish ongoing effective and
efficient communication between parents and teachers. Personal visits should, however, be used at times when sensitive issues such as possible retention, alarming incidents, or severe behavior issues need to be discussed.

Challenges of Parent-Teacher Communication

The importance of establishing a parent-teacher relationship has become clear in the last few decades, but schools and families still face many challenges in creating and maintaining open lines of communication. As Nelms (2002) notes, “factors such as teacher time constraints and a heavy workload make ongoing face-to-face and other synchronous communication difficult” (p. 2). Hernandez and Leung (2004) found similar conflicts and noted the difficulties parents and teachers had with communicating with each other in an ongoing manner.

Tobolka (2006) was also frustrated with the gap in communication between home and school. She commented on the challenge saying, “teachers are called on more every year to communicate with parents regarding academic progress, behavior and school events. In many households, both parents work, so calling home or scheduling a personal conference may not prove convenient” (p. 24).

In her research on the use of Edublogs, Ray (2006) notes the frustration of communicating using conventional models and encourages the use of a new online communication tool, stating, “whether posting class announcements for parents or providing schedule reminders for students, edublogs eliminate the ‘I didn’t know
Alternative Types of Communication

There are many online tools that promote cost-effective, convenient, and efficient methods of communication. Electronic communication is a growing field and has gained the attention of many educators.

The use of email and classroom websites are alternative modes of communication that have been found to establish efficient and ongoing contact between teachers and parents. Hernandez and Leung (2004) noted that “for many people, logging onto email is easier than checking voice mail and writing letters by hand” (p. 137). They also describe ways classroom websites can help teachers and parents save time and energy. For example, “teachers can set up links to post homework, general notes to parents, classroom rules and procedures, and grading policies” (p. 137). These tools can enhance communication and boost collaboration to improve parent involvement and increase student success.

Nelms (2002) conducted a study of how a teacher website could impact parent communication. In a rural primary school located in the southeast region of Georgia, 68 parents were invited to participate in the study, of which 10 chose to participate. The participants were the parents/guardians of ten second-grade students from the school. The school was a primary building offering kindergarten through second
grade and had a population of 778 students at the time the study was conducted. Of the school population, approximately 59 percent qualified for free lunch. The racial background of the participants consisted of eight Caucasian families, and two African-American families.

The participants were protected through written consent forms, website access codes, and guaranteed anonymity. The parents/guardians were surveyed before and after using the site for the duration of four weeks. The findings concluded that all participants found the website to be helpful and felt that it improved their communication with the teacher and raised awareness about assignments and classroom events. Nelms (2002) also concluded that many parents chose not to participate in the study due to a lack of computer skills, and/or lack of access to the Internet. Overall, she found that “web-based communication does have a positive effect on parent communication...and is certainly worthy of additional research” (p. 4).

Ray (2006) has used edublogs to effectively communicate information to parents. She explains that an edublog can be used as an instructional resource to help with homework and reduce confusion. Ray notes “when used as an electronic bulletin board, an edublog provides a fast, efficient means of communication” (p. 176). She cautions, however, that teachers need to determine students’ online accessibility before expecting them to log on because the most recent census statistics reveal inequitable access at home.

Nearly 70 percent of White (Non-Hispanic) and Asian-American
children have both computers and Internet access at home, while fewer than 40 percent of American-Indian, Hispanic, and African-American children have both computers and Internet access at home. (p. 177)

Richardson and Mancabelli (2007) found that including a blog on a classroom website is a helpful tool that keeps parents informed. Teachers can choose to post information about their classroom with parents or with other educators. They also have the option of allowing students and parents to post questions and responses using the blog. Richardson and Mancabelli explained that these new technologies are not difficult to begin using in professional practice and in classrooms. Teachers all over the world are beginning to use blogs to communicate with parents, share students’ work, and bring authors and other primary sources into their classrooms. (p. 18)

After implementing a classroom website, Tobolka (2006) recommends holding a tutorial in the school’s computer lab to teach parents how to access and navigate the classroom website and how to send e-mail messages. The more teachers and schools can guide parents to use these online tools, the quicker and more confidently parents can begin taking advantage of this form of information and type of communication.
Chapter 3: Methods

A goal of this study was to elicit parent feedback about the content that they would like to see included on our classroom website. I asked parents for their input through an anonymous survey of four open-ended questions.

Participants and Setting

I teach kindergarten in a suburban elementary school in western New York. There are approximately 520 students in our school with instruction that ranges from kindergarten through fifth grade. The school’s racial makeup is 91 percent Caucasian, 2 percent African American or black, 2 percent Hispanic or Latino, 4 percent Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander and 1 percent American Indian or Alaska Native. Two percent of students are eligible for free lunch, 2 percent are eligible for reduced-price lunch and 1 percent has limited English proficiency.

The kindergarten program at my school follows a half-day model. Students are divided into morning and afternoon classes and each session spends approximately 2.5 hours in school each day, five days a week. There is one classroom teacher in the room and one reading teacher and one teaching assistant are shared between two kindergarten classrooms.

The students in my kindergarten classes range from four to six years old. All students in my classroom turned five on or before December 1, 2007. I work with a total of 40 students, 21 in the morning kindergarten session and 19 in the afternoon.
session. In total, there are 25 boys and 15 girls in my classes this year. In the morning and afternoon sessions combined, 36 students are Caucasian, 1 is Asian American, 2 are American Indian, and 1 is African American. Overall, there are 3 students who speak English as a second language. Their primary languages are Russian, German, and Korean.

I currently have sixteen parents who volunteer in the classroom monthly for two hours each visit. Opportunities to volunteer for class fieldtrips and celebrations are posted on our classroom website and are usually filled within 48 hours of being posted. Parents have expressed to me on many occasions that they enjoy volunteering in the classroom and are enthusiastic about helping out anyway they can.

Forty sets of parents currently have their child enrolled in one of my kindergarten classes. Ninety-five percent of those parents are married and five percent are divorced. All of the parents who are divorced are involved in the school and have requested that information be sent to the addresses of both parents. One parent requests that information continues to be sent home but does not attend parent-teacher conferences with the other parent. One hundred percent of families send a parent representative to each of the parent-teacher conferences. Ninety-five and one half percent of the kindergarten parents speak English fluently. Tow and one half percent are currently learning English and bring a family member to interpret for them at parent-conference time. The population of kindergarten families that has one parent who stays at home full-time is 47.5 percent. Fifty-two and one half percent of kindergarten families have both parents working at least part-time.
I currently communicate with parents using a variety of methods. I send and receive information through handwritten letters, emails, phone calls, conferences, and a classroom website. I provided parents with my contact information at the beginning of the school year at a Parent’s Only Curriculum Night presentation. I introduced our classroom website and demonstrated to parents how they can access and navigate our site on the same evening.

Data Collection and Analysis

I collected data to inform my decisions about the website through the use of an open-ended, anonymous parent survey. I sent the survey (see Appendix B) home with a cover letter (see Appendix A) for participants authorizing me to publish their responses should they complete and return the survey. I provided self-addressed stamped envelopes to guarantee participants’ anonymity and the easy return to the survey. Based on the return rate of previous items sent home, I anticipated that 85 percent of parents would complete and return the survey.

The process of reviewing surveys involved reading and re-reading the responses to identify trends, patterns, and commonalities. I created categories for each response and tallied the responses from each question. I then analyzed the results of the parents’ responses and considered implementing/integrating the most common responses/topics.
Procedures of Study

I sent home the parent survey with a cover letter for participants explaining their participation in the study was both voluntary and anonymous. The cover letter explained that by completing and returning the survey authorized me to publish their responses for the purpose of this study. I sent the documents home through students’ school mail the last week of June. I asked parents to return them one week from the date they were sent home.

A total of forty surveys were sent home to the parents of students from my kindergarten classes. Of those surveys, 18 were returned by the due date. A second note was sent home to parents the day before the surveys were due reminding them of the deadline. Within the next seven school days, 6 more surveys were returned for a total response of 24 surveys. I anticipated a response rate of 85 percent, but found it to be 60 percent (24 of 40) at the time the survey was conducted. This may be attributed to the fact that the survey was sent home later in the year than was first anticipated. In the original timeline I predicted that the surveys would be sent home to parents the last week of May. As a result of increased processing time the surveys were not available to be sent home to parents until the second week of June. The number of responses received was 25 percent lower than projected. The busier schedules and increased mail flow during the month of June may have affected the response rate.

I began reviewing surveys as they were returned to school and looked at each survey again carefully the day it was due. After I reviewed each survey individually, I
looked across the surveys for more information. I analyzed the results of the surveys over the course of one week. By the end of June I had collected and analyzed the data from the surveys to inform my decisions about the website.

I determined which areas of the website parents currently find useful and concluded that those sections remain on the site. I then brainstormed ways those sections can be further enhanced knowing parents find them useful. I considered all parents’ suggestions about the information that would be helpful to include on the website and determined the feasibility of implementing it. In addition, I determined how often I needed to update the website in the future using the input from the parent survey.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited in some aspects due to small sample size, the group of participants and the method of data collection used. These factors affect the authenticity of the study and impact conclusions made from the data.

I received 25 percent fewer parent responses than I had anticipated creating a small sample size to gather data from. I attribute this to the time at which the surveys were received by parents. June is a hectic month as there are more items and documents being sent home from school as the year comes to a close. It is a difficult time to ask parents to fill out and return a survey when they have so many other time-sensitive documents that are coming home simultaneously. This may be why only 60
percent of parents participated in the study when response rates are usually 85-100 percent for other school-related documents sent home. Due to the small sample size of this study, the results are limited.

A second limitation of this study is the population of parents that was asked to participate in the survey. This study focused on one set of kindergarten parents in a suburban setting. The results are affected, as the responses collected do not represent a widespread population of parents living in diverse areas. The data has been selectively collected from one suburban area in western New York and so the responses are limited.

A third limitation of the study is the method of data collection used. The use of a survey provided me with only a glimpse into participants’ thinking, but didn’t allow me to gain an in-depth understanding of parents’ needs and wants. Parents may have many other thoughts and feelings about the classroom website that were not realized due to the nature of data collection. Perhaps, if they were also given an opportunity to share their thinking in the form of an interview or as a participant in a focus group, information would be communicated more thoroughly.
Chapter 4: Results

I used the results from the parent survey to answer the four research questions: a) Is a classroom website a convenient tool for parents to use? Why or why not? b) What information do kindergarten parents feel knowledgeable about regarding a kindergarten program? c) What information do parents feel is important to know about a kindergarten program? d) What information do kindergarten parents want to know more about?

Before turning to discuss the research questions, I first present the parents' responses to the four survey questions.

Results of the Parent Survey

Question One: Do you have Internet access at your home? How convenient is it to receive information about school via the Internet?

The survey results had many commonalities. The results showed that 23 out of 24 families (96 percent) have Internet access and find online communication to be convenient. One family does not have Internet access and therefore does not find online communication to be convenient. Nineteen families (79 percent) who responded indicated that online communication was “very convenient” and prefer it to alternative methods.
Question Two: Which of the following would best describe how often you visit our classroom website: Weekly, Bi-Weekly, Monthly, Never?

Nineteen of the parents who responded indicated that they check the website on a weekly basis, 3 parents visit the website bi-weekly and 3 parents have never visited the classroom website. One of the parents who never visited the website communicated her concern: “There are times I miss information because it is only on [the] website- even if I were to get a computer I would not have the time to sit at it every night to look up the school’s website. Hard copies are best.”

Question Three: Which sections of our classroom website do you use most often?

When I asked parents to share the sections of the website they view most often, a variety of responses were given. 17 parents replied that they view the Student Pictures and Slideshows on a regular basis, 14 said they view the Conversation Starters, and 12 view the Volunteer Opportunities most often. 9 parents view the Calendar regularly, 6 visit the Favorite Links, while the Sight Words, Curriculum and Puzzles are viewed by 3 of the parents most often. 1 parent visits our Classroom Videos section repeatedly. One parent commented that while she visits the website bi-weekly and visits the Conversation Starters section most often, her daughter visits the website daily and enjoys doing the puzzles each day.
Question Four: What other information would you find helpful to include on our classroom website?

Several parents made suggestions about information that would be helpful to include on the classroom website. Two parents suggested that more deadlines and reminders be posted on the classroom website as opposed to paper reminders sent home in their child’s folder. One of the parents wrote, “paper notes usually come, but sometimes they get lost or forgotten.” One parent suggested that emailing reminders to parents as opposed to paper copies would also be helpful. Another parent wrote “I prefer the multi-media approach... the reminder notes that come in my child’s folder have a much more effective impact than an email or website reminder, although I do enjoy turning to the website for many other kinds of information.”

One parent indicated it would be beneficial to post the names of parents who signed up to send in party treats throughout the year and another suggested that the Parent Volunteer section be highlighted when there is a new opening available. Another suggestion was made to include live video footage on the website of what is going on in the classroom so that parents can log on and watch their child at any time.

It was also suggested by one parent that a section be designated on the website to help parents support their child at home: “I would love to know the different skills covered in the classroom each week to help reinforce those skills at home”. Two parents indicated that it would be helpful to include transition activities for first grade such as suggested summer reading, tips for preparing their child for first grade and lists of upper-level sight words.
Three parents would like more information about concept attainment targets and grade level expectations for students throughout the year. One parent noted that it was difficult to find what the expectations for kindergarteners were throughout the year on any district website or document: “I am still not certain what my child is expected to know at the end of this year. It would be helpful if you could explain that on the website”. This same parent also noted that “even the report card failed to indicate what the children are expected to know by the end of kindergarten.” One parent indicated that it would be helpful to have an ongoing report of how her child is doing in school so she can see which areas her child may need support in as opposed to waiting until the end of each marking period.

Twelve parents indicated that they were satisfied with the content currently on the website and offered no new suggestions. One parent noted: “I thought the website was great. I felt I was connected each week to what was happening in class.” Eight parents (33 percent) also included notes of thanks on their surveys for having the website as a resource. One parent wrote “I wish more teachers put a website together. I really feel it helps connect the parents with what is going on in the classroom. I hope you can teach others how to put together a wonderful page. Thanks for having it”.

Eleven parents (46 percent) remarked that they felt the website was a valuable tool for them to feel knowledgeable about what their child was learning in school and to get involved in classroom activities.
I now turn to answer the research questions, identified in Chapter 1 and presented in the introduction to this chapter, through the analysis of the parent survey data.

Research Question One: Is a classroom website a convenient tool for parents to use? Why or why not?

The first research question, *Is a classroom website a convenient tool for parents to use? Why or why not?* is dependent on the specific population of parents, their preferences and their internet availability. This is not a question that can be answered globally based on these survey results, but demonstrates the preferences of the families living in this school district in western New York.

For the parents in my school district the response to the first research question was an overwhelming "yes" with many parents preferring to receive information from the classroom website rather than in paper form. Ninety-six percent of parents (23) who participated in this study have access to the Internet and many went on to mention that they keep their computer in a central location in the house and/or the Internet is always on. One parent commented that the environmental benefits appealed to her as well. She wrote on her survey that communicating online reduces the number of papers that comes home and reduces the stress on the environment. This is a benefit I hadn’t considered, but feel even more motivated by! It will also reduce the amount of paperwork that needs to be filed into students’ mailboxes,
which will, in turn, give my teaching assistant and me more time with students during the school day.

The other 4 percent of parents (1) who participated in the survey do not find that the classroom website is a viable means to transmit information as they do not have a computer or Internet access at home. One parent shared the concern that he/she does not feel privy to all of the information that is shared about their son/daughter or about the classroom because it is only available online. This response confirmed the importance of asking parents what their preferences are regarding online communication, because there is at least one set of parents who feel they are not as informed as those who have internet access. The survey data represents 60 percent of the population of parents (24 of 40) who have a student in my kindergarten classes this year, which means there may be more than one set of parents who feel disregarded. This is an important viewpoint to consider as my job as an educator is to be an effective and timely communicator with all parents, not just those with Internet access.

For parents who do not have access to the classroom website an alternative method must be made available. I will address this issue in the fall, when a new group of kindergarteners begins school. I will send home an invitation to view our website and give parents written instructions on how to access our classroom website from home. On this same form, I will also give parents the opportunity to opt out of online communication by asking them to indicate if they would prefer to maintain communication with me via paper copies during the year. The parent news that is
posted online can be printed out and sent home to parents who wish to communicate “offline”. Parents can return a portion of the form indicating their preference so that I may support families from the beginning who are not able to view information online.

During the third week of school I will hold our kindergarten Curriculum Night where I will remind parents how to access the site and will highlight the features and tools that the website has to help promote effective, ongoing communication throughout the year. I will remind parents at this time to notify me if they would prefer to communicate using paper copies rather than online communication so that I may reach all parents during the year. Using this approach, I hope to establish a system of communication that is reasonable for everyone.

When asked how often parents view the website, 79 percent (19 parents) responded that they check the website weekly and/or whenever an email reminder is sent out that the website has been updated. Twelve and one half percent (3 parents) recorded that they check the website bi-weekly and 8 percent (2 parents) specified that they had never checked the website. This data illustrates that the majority of parents are logging onto the classroom website regularly and are responsive to the weekly email reminders that are sent to parents letting them know the website has been updated for the week. Given these results, I will continue to send out weekly email reminders and will continue to update the website on a weekly basis.
Research Question Two: What information do kindergarten parents feel knowledgeable about regarding a kindergarten program?

The second research question, what information do kindergarten parents feel knowledgeable about regarding a kindergarten program? can be answered using the data from the third survey question: Which sections of our classroom website do you use most often?. The survey data shows that most parents feel informed about how to get involved in the classroom as many parents view and contact me about the Parent Volunteers section of the website. Parents also enjoy seeing pictures of their child working, learning, and posing with friends as our Pictures and Slideshows section is viewed most frequently by families. Fifty-eight percent of the parents (14) also indicated that the Conversation Starters section was helpful when asking their children what they are learning about in school. Parents feel informed about the kinds of questions to ask their son/daughter to elicit more specific information from them.

Parents also feel informed about the events and celebrations that are occurring in the classroom as 38 percent (9 parents) indicated that the website Calendar was a section of the website they visited most often and found to be a useful tool. One-quarter of parents (6) say they feel knowledgeable about other websites that are good resources for children and parents as our Favorite Links section of the website is viewed and used by this population of parents regularly.

Several parents commented that while they view the Curriculum and Screenings sections of the website most often, they feel that the report card and online resources for the curriculum are vague and do not explicitly share what the
benchmark assessments are and which skills their child should possess at target dates throughout the year. This is an important issue to address so that parents feel informed about what their child is learning and which skills their child should be mastering throughout the year. They are regularly viewing these resources on the website, but do not feel well educated about them.

Research Question Three: What information do parents feel is important to know about a kindergarten program?

Research Question Four: What information do kindergarten parents want to know more about?

The third and fourth research questions: what information do parents feel is important to know about a kindergarten program? and what information do kindergarten parents want to know more about? can be answered by analyzing and synthesizing the survey data to determine what parents know or wish to know more about. I compiled the data from the sections of the website that parents view most often and the suggestions that they made to improve the website in order to draw conclusions about what parents deem valuable to know about a kindergarten program.

When asked how the website could be improved, there was a common theme among many families. Several indicated that they strive to support the school curriculum and wish to align the work they do at home with their son/daughter with
the skills covered in school. They suggested that it would be beneficial to have an area that highlights the skills covered in school each week so that they may support their child at home with the same skills. Several others are seeking more information about how their child is progressing between marking periods. Another parent suggested posting assessment dates, along with the skills needed to meet grade level expectations on those assessments, on the website starting at the beginning of the year.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The need is clear. Parents are seeking more information about what kindergarteners are expected to know, understand, and be able to do. They want to have access to the benchmarks that we set for children and know the criteria for meeting grade level expectations. The overall standards of kindergarten have changed so much since parents were in school that they need support knowing how to help their child succeed. As evident by the mother I described in Chapter 1, parents do not like being caught off-guard when it comes to the academic readiness of their child.

The results of the parent survey I conducted demonstrate that parents are eager to know more about kindergarten programs, curriculum, and behavioral and academic expectations. They are open to online communication as Hernandez and Leung suggested (2004) and other alternative modes of communication such as edublogs, as reported by Jan Ray (2006). The results of the parent survey I conducted are congruent with what other researchers are finding in other areas of the country.

The members from Syracuse University who surveyed parents with children in early childhood programs found that 80 percent of parents wanted more information about the academic expectations of kindergarten (McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, Digennaro & Wildenger, 2007, pp. 84-85). Nelms (2002) concluded from her study that online communication has a positive effect on parent-teacher relationships and discovered that 100 percent of the parents involved in her study felt using a classroom website was useful, improved their communication with the teacher, and
made them more aware of what was happening in the classroom. Parents enjoy the convenience of online communication, but my study reveals that parents also wish to have a voice about what is published on classroom websites.

The results from the parent survey I conducted will be used to inform my decisions as I continue to use a classroom website as a vehicle to communicate with parents. After reflecting on the parent survey and the responses parents provided I realized how important it is to ask parents what they want to know more about. As I reflected, I decided to ask for parent input at the beginning of each new school year. The needs and concerns of parents may change overtime and the data from this survey may change as the population of parents change. I will ask each new group of parents for their input at the beginning of the year and for their ongoing feedback throughout the school year to make the classroom website the most efficient and effective tool it can be to support the unique set of parent needs year to year.

In order to support parents in learning the expectations and benchmarks of our kindergarten program, I will update the Curriculum section on the website that outlines the units of study we cover throughout the year. I will work with academic intervention service providers to determine the performance indicators and skills that students are expected to achieve in addition to the target dates at which each skill should be mastered.

I will also begin using an edublog that updates parents on the skills being taught each week and how they can help their child at home. This edublog will also provide an opportunity to describe events and celebrations that are happening in the
classroom and inform them about units of study, assemblies, fieldtrips, etc. that are approaching. I will encourage parents to email me if they have questions or feedback to promote open lines of communication throughout the year. I will print out the edublog and website calendar weekly to send home in any child’s mail folder whose parents have decided to opt out of online communication. Using this multi-media approach, I hope to have all parents feel knowledgeable and involved in their child’s kindergarten experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

After reviewing the results of my parent survey and the studies of other researchers I am left wondering how parents’ perception of kindergarten changes or remains the same before and after their child’s kindergarten experience. Just as the research from Syracuse University showed, parents are eager to know what the kindergarten curriculum encompasses and how they can be sure their child is prepared (McIntyre et al., 2007). We may not fully be aware of the perception parents have about kindergarten to begin with. How can we educate parents about kindergarten if we do not fully understand what their background knowledge is? I recommend for future research that parents be asked at the beginning of their son/daughter’s kindergarten experience what they believe students will learn and experience in kindergarten and again at the end of the year to record their
misconceptions, if any, about kindergarten. This research would be useful as we attempt to support parents and children with the transition to school.

I recommend supplementing survey data, if used, with a focus group or individual interviews in order to add validity to the study/findings of any future research conducted on this topic. I suggest collecting data from parents in various settings and regions to capture a more authentic view of parents’ beliefs. Using a diverse population of parents will better represent larger populations of kindergarten parents overall.

I also recommend that further research be done to compare the different expectations of kindergarten in various regions around the country. Further research can be conducted on the current benchmarks set in place for academic intervention services in various districts and regions to see how expectations compare nationally. This information will help parents and educators understand how the expectations of their school district’s kindergarten program compares with other models around the United States.
Appendix A

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

The purpose of this research project is to communicate with parents more effectively using a classroom website. Three areas will be studied including families’ internet use, information important to parents about kindergarten, and suggested content for the website. This research project is also being conducted in order for me to complete my masters thesis for the Department of Education at the State University of New York College at Brockport.

In order to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to participate in the project. If you want to participate in the project, and agree with the statements below, your completion and return of the survey signifies your consent.

I understand that:

1. My participation is voluntary and I have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My confidentiality is guaranteed. My name will not be written on the survey. There will be no way to connect me to my written survey. If any publication results from this research, I would not be identified by name.
3. There will be no anticipated personal risks or benefits because of my participation in this project.
4. My participation involves reading a written survey of 4 questions and answering those questions in writing. It is estimated that it will take 5 minutes to complete the survey.
5. Approximately 40 people will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a masters thesis by the primary researcher.
6. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet by the investigator. Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been accepted and approved.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in the study realizing I may withdraw without penalty at any time during the survey process. Returning the survey indicates my consent to participate.
If you have any questions you may contact:

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<tr>
<th>Primary researcher</th>
<th>Faculty Advisor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Laura Swanson</td>
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Appendix B

Mrs. Swanson's Website Survey

www.penfield.edu/webpages/lswanson

Using a Teacher Website to Communicate More Effectively with Kindergarten Parents

1. Do you have Internet access at your home? _________ How convenient is it to receive information about school via the Internet?

2. Which of the following would best describe how often you visit our classroom website? (Please circle one)
   - Weekly
   - Bi-Weekly
   - Monthly
   - Never

3. Which sections of our classroom website do you use most often?

4. What other information would you find helpful to include on our classroom website?
References


