

The Communication Link between Childcare Centre and Home: Are We Building A Rope or A Truss Bridge?

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Abstract

Literature in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) acknowledges the importance of solidified communication practices between stakeholders. The recent publication of *The National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services 0-3 years (2022)* also refers to the importance of collaborative partnerships, yet locally, the choice of channels of communication used in the bridged gap between childcare centres and homes remains at the discretion of each centre. In this regard, the research outlined in this paper has sought to investigate how communication links are initiated and perceived by stakeholders, with a particular focus on the modes and mediums used, and whether these can be metaphorically referred to as a 'rope' or 'truss' bridge. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with parents, childcare educators (CCEs), and legally responsible persons (LRPs) whilst a thematic approach was adopted for analysis. Findings indicated that monomodal and multimodal means of communication were used interchangeably to meet different encoding and decoding purposes. The choice of communication channels varied from one centre to another and this showed that nationally, there is no common line of formality in the choice and implementation of communication practices. Data showed however that a consensual view was held regarding verbal communication as being the preferred mode since this is bidirectional and provides a sense of reassurance, clarity, and dialogic interactivity between the stakeholders involved. The concepts of communication principles, power dynamics, and boundary infringement were also revealed as emergent themes within the role of communication channels in childcare settings.

Keywords: communication links, communication channels, modes of communication, early years education and care, childcare centres.

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1. Introduction and Background

Research and literature in the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC) acknowledges that the first years in a child's life are vital and predominant in terms of development because these initial stages set out to influence short-term and long-term achievements (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2013). An important factor that attributes to the development and learning skills are social interactions predisposed by the child's parents and the wider community. In this regard, childcare centre environments play an important role in children's early years as they are being cared for outside their homes (Zellman and Perlman, 2006). With the ever-increasing need for parents to pursue employment or education, in 2014, the Maltese government set up the free childcare scheme which brought about an influx of childcare centres around Malta and Gozo. The scheme provides free childcare services for children under 3 years whereas the enrolled children - babies and toddlers, could be cared for within an environment that promotes learning through play and which enhances young children's developmental and individual needs. Since many parents are availing themselves of the services offered by childcare settings (National Statistics Office, 2017), it can be inevitably argued that relationships are not only established with the children in care who are the nucleus of such environments, but also between parents, CCEs, centre managers and directors.

Research indicates that a strong link needs to be established between the stakeholders who work in ECEC settings and this is only possible through strong partnerships and involvement (Gorica, Popovski, and Popovska, 2021). Empirical data also indicates that parent-educator communication is linked to higher-quality care (Ghazvini and Readdick, 1994) and positively impacts the child's learning and development (Galindo and Sheldon, 2012). Similarly, Masterson and Ginet (2018) argue that 'positive communication is the foundation of a trusting relationship' (p.47) and this further implies that the 'circle of security' framework can only be successfully implemented when strong parent-educator relationships are formed. This is further emphasised through the recent publication of *The National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services 0-3years (2022)* which refers to the establishing and maintaining of effective and regular communication between educators, centre managers and parents. This document also highlights the need for CCEs to regularly discuss children's learning and development through the use of technology and at least two formal one-to-one meetings. This policy document however does not specify how and which communication modes are to be used, and therefore this remains at the discretion of each respective centre.

This research study aims at precisely addressing the latter concept and investigates the communication

channels which are used between childcare settings and homes and the pertaining perceptions of the stakeholders. The main research question therefore is; Which communication channels are used between local childcare centres and homes and how are they perceived by the stakeholders? Addressing this question targets a gap in the literature since numerous studies investigate communication links within primary and secondary schools while research in early years settings has been limited (Brown 2012; Zellman and Perlman 2006). Before presenting the findings related to the latter points, it is useful to elaborate on what is understood by 'communication' within the context of ECEC, as this can be subject to interpretation.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining 'Communication' in ECEC Settings

The importance of parent-educator communication is constantly being emphasised and the past thirty years have seen an increase of references being made to this in policy documents in the field of ECEC (Hornby, 2011). Although the term 'communication' within educational settings is considered central to several educational models and frameworks, literature in the field shows that this has been defined from different standpoints. Dempster and Robbins (2017) for example, define 'communication' as 'the art of listening, reading, observing and being self-aware, and then expressing thoughts or responding in speech, body language or writing' (p.4). In their work, they further distinguish between 'information' and 'communication' which are at times used interchangeably, yet differ in meaning, with the latter term referring to the process through which 'a message from the sender has been received and understood' (p.4). Hanh (2013) takes a different standpoint through his analysis of the art of communicating and metaphorically compares 'communication' to food; which can be 'healthy' and thus beneficial or 'toxic' and negative in nature. Hanh (2013) further points out that the power of communication is 'magnified' when this is brought into the community as the terms 'communication' and 'community' both have the same Latin root *communicare*, which means 'to impart, share, or make common' (p.129).

Extensive literature in the field of ECEC elaborates on this notion and emphasises that for an effective form of partnership to be successful, a two-way stream that involves listening and knowledge sharing is required (Hornby, 2011). A broader perspective has been adopted by Hornby (2011) who elaborates on the concept of 'communication' in light of the required skills needed to consolidate the bridge between childcare centres and homes. This requires CCEs to listen and to provide information clearly and sensitively for parents to be aware of their responsibilities and rights, so that communication can occur without obstructions or hesitations (Hornby, 2011). These assertions stem from Epstein's (2010) framework which is central to policies and research about parental involvement and participation. This model, as well as others (Dettmers, Yotyodying and Jonkmann 2019; Moore 2015), show that 'communication' is central to other terms such as 'partnerships', 'family involvement' and 'community engagement', all of which promote a sense of collegiality between the team members involved. Much of the current literature in this field agrees that communication is regarded as a 'key ingredient' (Kambouri et al. 2022) as it helps stakeholders to find solutions together (Brown, 2012). This is an imperative formula to promote a 'healthy ecology' within 'the microsystem cluster' proposed in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. The section which follows shall investigate how a 'healthy ecology' is ensured through communication, which communication modes are outlined in recent literature, how ECEC settings have embraced digital ways of communication and how these are perceived in terms of benefits and drawbacks.

2.2 Multimodal Ways of Communication and the Formation of Online Communities

A growing body of literature has shown that there are various mediums that can be used when stakeholders exchange and share insights, information, conversations and concerning issues (Yemer and Yeshambel, 2020). Such mediums can include paper-based means and digital technologies (Dempster and Robbins 2017; Singh and Thurnman 2021) and can also take place physically within the educational setting (Denessen, 2016). Whilst the mediums used for communication practices might differ in scope, a balance between both formal and informal modes of communication should be ensured within educational settings (Denessen, 2016).

Whilst acknowledging the diverse use of communication channels in childcare centres, the 21st Century has seen a radical shift in the study of social semiotics and research draws upon innovative technological features as ways of communication. At a basic level, it can be argued that there are five modes of communication which are categorised as follows; verbal, non-verbal, written, visual and aural (Willkomm, 2018). Whilst this is relevant to the conceptualisation of communication modes being practiced within ECEC settings, one notes that meaning-making is socially shaped and culturally constructed (Kress, 2010). In this regard, Kress (2010) asserts that concepts such as layouts, music, moving images and 3D objects should be also considered as modes (p.79). It can be argued that the modes outlined by Kress (2010) have not always been used in educational settings to maintain multimodal ways of communication and that the use of digital technologies is therefore changing communication dynamics, even within local ECEC contexts. This is reflected in changes in the way settings are communicating with parents.

The use of technology has been offering instant opportunities for information sharing (Wilson, 2016) and

childcare settings have come to include more direct communication systems through web-based resources. In this regard, Wilson (2016) lists; Facebook pages, Twitter, texting and online learning journals (p.103). Wilson's claims (2016) concur with the need for communication methods to recognise the changing demands of family life (Kambouri et al., 2022) as the use of technological tools were envisioned to be used more frequently to meet the demands of changing societies (Turnbull et al., 2011). Given this call, social groups and communities are being formed and communication practices within ECEC settings are not only reaching stakeholders individually but also collectively.

2.3 Establishing Childcare Centre and Home Links: Perceptions, Benefits and Barriers

In light of the communication tools being used in educational settings, it can be argued that some are prone to be given preference over others. Laho's (2019) research has shown for instance that the most common forms of communication within the context of a school are the use of email and phone calls, two channels that are quite 'traditional' in nature. The same preferred forms of communication were also reflected in another study in addition to informal meetings and informal written communication (Molden, 2016). Whilst these preferences might differ from one educational context to another, it can be argued that the purpose of the communication might determine the mode of communication chosen (Palts and Kalmus, 2015), and therefore preferences do not necessarily determine the effectiveness of the chosen communication channel. Research in the field of communication however shows that all stakeholders benefit when educators and parents establish strong communication links. Such benefits are also appropriated by children who are at the fulcrum of such dynamics (Stonehouse, 2013). Whilst communication channels set the foundation for socialization (Palts and Kalmus, 2015), growth and development, (Woodward, 2011. pg73) it is through communication with parents that the family understands 'the value of a developmentally appropriate approach' (Becker and Becker, 2019, p.54). This statement is supported by the claim that communication gives both educators and parents 'a more complete picture' of the child, thus, there is a continuation between those experiences lived within the childcare centre and home, and vice-versa (Stonehouse, 2013). In the same vein, Margettes and Kienig (2013) argue that through these experiences children will start understanding the discontinuities between the contexts they move between and therefore extend upon their learning journey.

Although the benefits of communication links are known through both research and practice, 'communication blocks' (Gordon, 1970) might hinder and serve as barriers to communication. Hornby (2011) elaborates further on such 'blocks' and includes criticism, sarcasm, diverting parents from the topic, threatening, denial, and false acknowledgments of feelings. These traits are further linked to a predisposed concept of 'power' which is also outlined in the literature as a possible barrier to communication and which in turn might influence a stakeholder's perceptions about communication. Kambouri et al. (2022) refer to this concept and also elaborate on the possibility of having stakeholder members who hold overarching power over others, particularly over parents. Another 'block' outlined by Hornby (2011) is the use of language used for communication purposes. This was tackled by Chase and Valarose (2019) who suggest that effective communication strategies should not only overcome linguistic inequities but also geographical, racial and cultural barriers. This might result in having stakeholders 'being hard to reach' (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003) or lacking confidence (Hornby, 2011). The reasons for the latter results may vary from having parents being considered as 'disadvantaged' (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003) to having others feeling 'left out' because they do not acknowledge or do not know how to use technological features (Wilson, 2016). Recognising the benefits is imperative whilst acknowledging the limitations and barriers is as important to ensure smooth communication transitions between the childcare setting and home.

3. The Study

3.1 Research Approach and Triangulation

In order to investigate how different communication practices are adopted and perceived by the main stakeholders in Maltese childcare centres, a qualitative approach was chosen. This entails that the researcher gets 'to grips with the complexities of the social world of early childhood' (Edwards, 2010, p.117). This approach was also chosen since the research study is more concerned about the participants' experiences in using different modes of communication, thus the primary aim was to acquire contextual data which is based on inductive reasoning (Denscombe, 2013). Given the depth that this research study sought to investigate, a small number of participants was chosen. This enabled the researcher to include verbatim responses and conversations to 'keep the flavour of the original data' and 'to be faithful to the exact words used' (Cohen et al., 2010).

Another component that was taken into consideration to keep 'faithful' to the life experiences which take place in childcare centres was the triangulation of data sources. Literature in this field suggests that triangulation can occur at various levels and in different ways (Denzin, 1978). Whilst triangulation can be defined as 'the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour' (Cohen et al., 2010, p.141), the standpoint taken in this research was to 'map out, or explain more fully, the richness and

complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint’ (Cohen et al., 2010, p.141). The triangulation adopted here fits within Denzin’s (1978) reference to ‘theoretical sampling’ whereby ‘researchers explicitly search for as many different data sources as possible which bear upon the events under analysis’ (p.295). In this respect the concept of triangulation bridged ‘issues of reliability and validity’ (Cohen et al., 2010, p.143), and an understanding of human dynamics through triangulation was undertaken in order to answer the main research question. The approach presented through the course of this research study was therefore adopted to meet two purposes; i) as a strategy to confirm and validate the data gathered through different data sources and ii) to reach a full understanding of the outward and inward communication practices adopted between and amongst the stakeholders involved.

3.2 The Participants

The main stakeholders who participated in this research study were parents, CCEs and LRPs. The term ‘parents’ in this research study refers to those individuals who are directly involved in the communication dynamics and who have a parenting role with children. Whilst this may include various members within the nuclear and extended family, as well as guardians and foster parents, the parents chosen to participate in this study were both mothers, who have two siblings close to age, respectively. The definitions adopted here for a CCE and LRP reflect those outlined in the National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services 0-3 year, (2022). Within a childcare centre, a CCE’s role is that of providing education and care to children while a LRP has ‘the responsibility for ensuring structural, process and outcomes quality’ (p.13).

Two CCEs were chosen to share their experiences within the parameters of this study, one has worked in one childcare centre, whilst the other has worked in two different settings. In order to gather a clear understanding of the dynamics of communication practices, three LRPs were also interviewed; two of whom work as directors and one has a dual role of directing and managing the childcare centre. Within this context, the participants who are referred to as ‘directors’ refer to individuals who part-share or fully own one or more childcare centres. Whilst their role is that of directing the centre and recruiting staff, all directors work within the childcare centre environment and constantly liaise with the managers. All seven participants were selected through purposive sampling. Given the researcher’s line of work within local childcare centres, this selection process was regarded as ideal since there were no gatekeepers to data access and the participants could be interviewed on a more social level. The selection was therefore based on ‘convenience’ and the participants were selected as they fit the required roles to meet a triangulation form of understanding.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was initially gained by the MCAST Research Board under the merit of the Applied Research and Innovation Centre. Following this stage, all participants were reached to gain informal consent whilst formal approval followed through the use of an information letter and a consent form which were forwarded to each respective participant. This documentation ensured confidentiality measures through the use of pseudonyms and the participants were also told that no data will divulge their personal details in a way through which their identity or workplace can be identified. Since qualitative studies tend to refer to detailed accounts and confidentiality breaches through deductive disclosure can be of concern (Kaiser, 2009, p.1), especially within a small island state like Malta, it was ensured that no particular attributes or references to unique practices were exposed. Through this research study, the researcher tried to strike a balance between the conflict presented in Kaiser’s (2009) work; that of ‘conveying detailed, accurate accounts of the social world and protecting the identities of the individuals who participated’ (p.1). This was addressed by not divulging variables such as gender, the number of years of service within the role stipulated and the number of childcare centres owned, since through such information, the participants could be easily identified. The researcher also identified that such variables would not influence the addressing of the research question and therefore, apart from the minor information given about the participants, each participant will be referred to by assigned pseudonyms, as outlined in Table 1.

Participant’s Role	Assigned Pseudonym
Parent	P1
Parent	P2
Childcare Educator	CCE1
Childcare Educator	CCE2
Director/Manager	DM
Director	D1
Director	D2

Table 1. Assigned Pseudonyms

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Throughout this research project, data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This tool was

chosen as it gave the researcher the possibility of addressing both open- and closed-ended questions in a flexible manner and thus probe for detail (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). The interviews adopted an 'interview guide approach' and therefore the course of the interview and the sequence of the questions were at the ultimate discretion of the interviewer. Most of the interviews took place remotely and each interview took between fifty to seventy minutes since the nature of the said interviews was rather conversational and it sought deep understanding. Each interview also adopted Robson's (2016) stipulated patterns in a systematic order. The initial questions served as an 'introduction'. These were followed by 'warm up' questions which led to the 'main body of the interview', the 'cool-off' and 'closure' (p.290).

Each interview was then translated and transcribed as the responses were originally presented in the Maltese language. This facilitated the analysis process as this generated codes, a process that started early on in the research process. The codes generated were then elaborated upon through different themes and noted patterns, a method of data analysis which is known as 'thematic analysis' in qualitative research (Mukherji and Albon, 2018). The sections which follow shall elaborate on the findings and analysis which are presented subsequently, under each corresponding emerging theme.

4. Findings, Analysis and Discussion

Data analysis indicated five prevalent themes. The first section will elaborate on findings related to the core definition of the term 'communication', and how this is defined and perceived. This is followed by a contextual understanding of the communication channels used within childcare centres in line with the benefits and drawbacks. The remaining themes shall elaborate on the principles of communication, the concept of power dynamics, and the infringement of boundary and confidentiality.

4.1 Defining Communication

An initial and significant finding related to an understanding of the term 'communication' in childcare settings. In their definition of the term, all stakeholders shared common views about the importance of the dynamics infused through communication practices. The terms 'important', 'asset', 'fundamental' and 'imperative' were repeatedly used by all the participants in order to highlight its prominence and role in ECEC settings. This synchronises with the literature in the field of communication and has also been reflected in the work of many scholars who have used terms like 'critical' (Morreale and Pearson, 2008), 'vital' (Morreale and Pearson, 2008), 'integral component' (Laho, 2019) and 'essential' (Bain et al., 2015) when referring to communication within educational settings. The participants' definitions of communication further reflected those presented in the literature as reference was constantly made to the term 'two-way,' thus emphasising the need for communication to be of a synchronous nature. In light of this, CCE1 argued that *"there has to be a two way communication stream, even from the parent's side, if the child did not sleep well, as carers, we should know, it would make us understand why the child might be grumpy or in a bad mood"*.

A common thread that emerged through the accounts transcribed denoted that at the fulcrum of 'communication' lies a common component and a conjunct need, that of communicating as a way of supporting the child's physical needs. Whilst the concept of 'development' and 'learning' was elaborated upon by different stakeholders, it was evident that most definitions focused more on children's physical needs, and only when prompted did some of the participants elaborate on development and learning components. In addition to this, no reference was made to communication as a means of informing practice and policy. The common conceptual need of being informed about the children's routines and necessities was referred to by parents, CCEs and LRPs alike. Such definitions are indicative in the following quotes; *"communication refers to the dynamics which occur between the childcare centre and home so educators fill me in on my child's day and I do the same"* (P2) and *"I am obliged to tell the parents about the turn of events and whatever happens in the childcare setting. If, for example, the child cries for a long time after drop-off or if the child falls during the day, we should inform parents...it relates to the dissemination of information about the child's daily activities"* (CCE1).

Gathered data showed that whilst the CCEs and parents took similar standpoints in their definition of 'communication', the participants who had a managerial position made more reference to other communication dynamics which occur within the childcare setting. D2 elaborated on communication practices with members of staff when asked about her views on communication. Similarly, DM also explained that *"it takes a whole village to raise a child, and the same can be argued within the childcare centre community, all stakeholders need to communicate with each other"*. In order to reach a contextual understanding, the participants were asked to elaborate on the communication channels used in childcare centres. These were segmented by mode following Willkomm's (2018) reference of the five main modes of communication.

4.2 Communication Channels: Modes, Mediums, Implementation and Perceptions

Research shows that there are various communication channels that are used to establish links between educational settings and homes (Laho 2019; Molden 2016). Most of the channels elaborated upon in the literature

tend to relate more to primary and secondary school contexts. Whilst data analysis indicated that communication channels used in childcare settings are similar to primary and secondary school contexts, the frequency differed and childcare settings tend to make use of additional channels which are not used in other educational contexts. This section shall elaborate on each of the channels; each of which is grouped by mode, and categorized in Figure 1. The terms ‘monomodal’ and ‘multimodal’ within the title of the figure and within the context of social semiotics indicate that there were instances whereby one mode of communication was used and other times communication occurred in a ‘multimodal’ manner; a term that in linguistics studies refers to the interplay between different semiotic modes to derive meaning (Kress, 2010). The analysis of data showed that communication channels were used to meet different encoding and decoding purposes. The figure presents the five basic modes; verbal, non-verbal, written, visual and aural. The channels used within local childcare centres are represented in each subsequent section, yet, data indicated that there was an evident interplay between the modes represented in the figure.

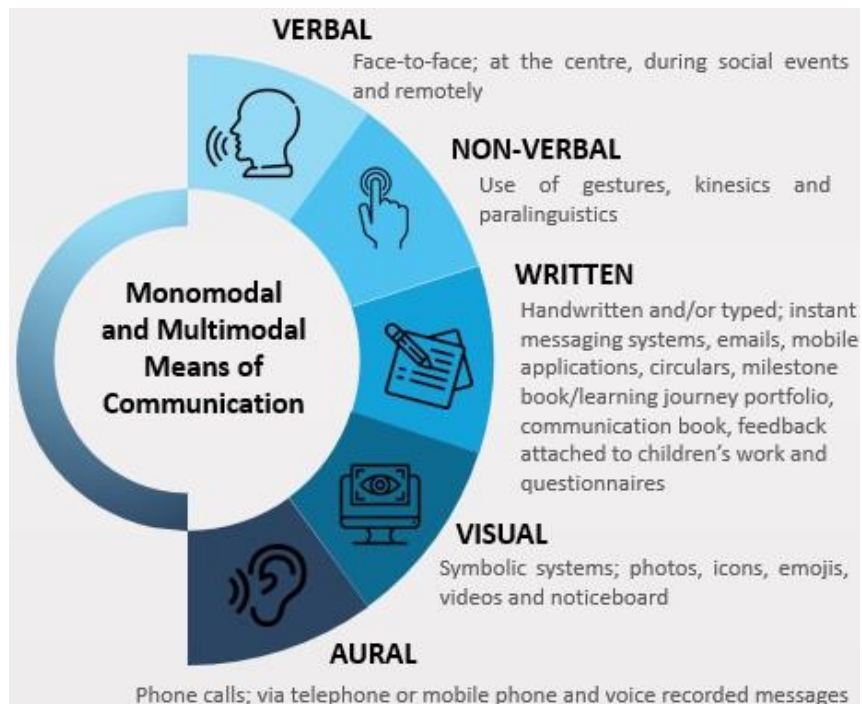


Figure 1. Monomodal and Multimodal Means of Communication in Childcare Settings

4.2.1 Verbal communication

Within this context, ‘verbal communication’ refers to the oral exchange of information in a conversational and dialogical manner. Data revealed that this type of communication is used daily and frequently occurs during children’s drop-off and pick-up. Verbal communication was described as one of the most preferred channels of communication as “*the daily word of mouth communication is of an asset*” (D2). The reasons behind this view related to feelings of reassurance, clarity and interactivity between stakeholders.

The ‘quality’ of dialogical interactions was a topic that was touched upon by most participants as data showed that this is influenced by various denominators such as logistical factors and time management.

P1 elaborated by stating that the time of day is a factor that determines the type and scope of the communication encountered; “*When I pick up my child before 1.30 pm I get to meet my child’s carer. If it’s later than that I will not be able to speak to her. I get to speak to the manager or another carer. They wouldn’t know what happened during the day*”. This subject was mentioned by CCE2 who explained that the centre does not always have a positive handing-over procedure and because of this there are times when she could not answer queries or concerns addressed by parents. Data further revealed that although time ‘at the door’ is considered as important and the most preferred mode of communication this is mostly limited, due to strict instructions passed over by the management. In this regard, CCE1 explained that the biggest challenge she faces is that she can only stay at the centre’s entrance “*for a maximum of three rushed minutes to avoid having congestion at the door*”. This questions the reliability of this communication channel given that the same educator expressed her concern for new parents who “*would need more time to reassure themselves and put their minds at rest during children’s drop-off*”. CCE2’s response was similar, “*it feels like I am expected to be in two places at the same time, at the front door talking to parents and monitoring the children within my care*”.

In addition to verbal communication practices which occur at the centres’s door, data showed that each centre encourages participation in different social events most of which take place annually; such as setting graduations,

outings, activity days and parent's days. Such events were noted to vary but parent's days were described as the main event which targets children's learning, milestones and development. The National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (2022) emphasises a minimum of two parental meetings, yet data indicated that one of the centres does not conduct parent's days because *"information about children's development and learning is passed over in a very detailed manner through the mobile application"* (P2). Parent's Days were described positively by the participants, yet parents made a remark about time constraints because these tend to occur by appointment and *"the ten-minute timeslot needs to be respected"* (P1). This instigates that communication in a way can be considered as *"limited"* or *"restrained"* because parents would already enter the centre with a predisposed idea that communication is timed. The frequency of Parent's Day events seems to vary between once to three times a year. Data also indicated that an open door policy is practiced within all the centres and although verbal communication was described as *"limited"*, all stakeholders felt that the centre is open for discussion should the need arise. Parents in particular, also revealed that the centres are open to communicate and discuss concerning matters in depth, usually through a pre-set appointment.

An additional finding showed that face-to-face communication tends to occur between mothers and fathers alike, depending on who is responsible for picking up or dropping off the child. One of the parents revealed that the dynamics of face-to-face communication tend to differ according to the person who is picking up the child. Whilst P1 reported no differences, P2 explained that when she picks up the child, the communication type is considered to be more *"elaborative"* and *"deep"* in comparison to her partners' who is male. This aligned with the educators' and directors' perceptions with D2 stating that the centre adopts a 'key person approach' and that *"normally communication occurs with the mothers"*.

4.2.2 Non-verbal Communication

In addition to verbal forms of communication channels, participants tapped on non-verbals as a way of transferring meaning even though this is done without the use of spoken words. Some of the participants referred to the use of gestures and facial expressions in this regard. One of the directors explained how facial gestures or kinesics can facilitate communication; *"sometimes parents don't even have to say anything. When they are rushed to go to work for example, or drop their child later than usual, a simple nod or thumbs up can imply that she is on her way out"* (DM). Whilst such a situation shows that a message was still conveyed, DM explained that such an instance instigates a one-way form of communication and whilst most participants agreed that nothing can substitute verbal forms of communication, such an instance shows that non-verbals are adopted and that not all of the communication practices entail conversations.

The concept of paralinguistics was mentioned by two participants; D2 and CCE2. D2 elaborated on the tone of voice and attitudes which are at times adopted by parents and educators alike. She further elaborated on this by giving a practical example following a mild accident within the centre where a parent seemed to warn her off by pointing his finger and raising his voice. According to the participant, the pointing of the finger was considered *"unnecessary because it reflected upon disrespect and diminishes professionalism"*. Such a channel also shows that particular modes are used to match particular requirements and meets different purposes. In addition to D2's input, CCE2 also referred to the tone of one's voice while defining communication; *"something that comes to mind is the tone of voice being used. For example, I always tell parents that my tone of voice tends to be loud. I ensure that they are aware of this, that this is the way I normally speak"*. This reflects upon the need for the CCE to clarify paralingual methods of communication to maintain harmonious communication practices. The same topic was further elaborated upon by the same carer but in regards to the children within her care whereby she explained that communication is not only an asset with parents but also with the children themselves. Although this research study sought to investigate the link between the childcare centre and home, it is inevitable to argue that a number of communication channels are adopted within the internal dynamics of the centre.

4.2.3 Written Communication

Data analysis indicated that although verbal communication was the most preferred type of communication, this was not practiced as much as written communication. The latter has been described as the most *"convenient"* because it can reach respondents *"instantly and in a very practical manner"* (D1). Gathered data showed that written communication can be either presented in a typed or handwritten manner with various mediums being used including paper-based and digital means. Participants agreed that the written form of communication occurs on daily and at times even substitutes other modes of communication. A common digital feature that is being used in most childcare centres is the use of mobile applications as centres are making use of 'Blossom', 'MyMama' and 'Daily Connect'. Most participants shared positive perceptions regarding the use of such mobile applications with P2 speaking highly of the application. Some of the applications have features that allow users to share information about developmental milestones, special requirements and other relevant information such as the child's likes and dislikes and profile information about the CCE. 'Golden Moments' were also described as an innovative way through which a 'reward' is achieved whenever the child reaches a new milestone. Such written communications indicate that a bridge between the centre and home is being established and through this manner

the child's learning can be extended within the home environment even when the child was not necessarily attending the centre; *"even during COVID-19 times, although we were during lockdown, I still uploaded activities that my child did from home"* (P2).

Data indicated that although different applications were used in different centres, these targeted different purposes. Some were used as an 'information bridge' to share daily events and others served the purpose of sharing information about the child's development and learning, in substitute for verbal communication events such as parent's day. Divergent and conflicting discourses regarding the use of such apps were shared. D1 and DM reported positive attributes and described the use of apps as a *"reliable"* way of communication. Contrastly, skepticism was expressed by one of the parents as no form of application training was given, inputted information mostly reached parents at one point in time and several features were not used and therefore the application was not being used to its full capacity. This finding reflects upon Burris and Hallam's (2018) assertion that access to digital means of communication does not imply effective use of technology. Contrary to the data presented, one of the centres does not intend to make use of mobile applications *"at all cost"* because handwritten channels of communication through the use of a logbook meet the same purpose and CCEs can focus more on their work with the child rather than being *"pressured to update all the parents in real time"*. The concept of 'pressure' was elaborated upon by the CCEs and thus data presented a conflicting finding in this regard. Whilst the information which was reached was appreciated, encoding processes required *"a lot of time"* which at times led to a *"lack of focus"* (CCE1).

Written communication reached parents through other channels including 'the communication book' through which written notes are exchanged from the centre to home, short written feedback written at the back of children's creative work and via email. All centres make use of the latter and this is primarily used to inform receivers about important events. Instant messaging systems such as WhatsApp and Messenger are also used by LRPs and centre managers and information is shared individually and collectively. Reference to questionnaires as a way of communicating and sharing insights was further mentioned by two of the participants with one director describing it as a means of listening to parents whilst one of the parents criticized its use since this is given at the end of the year; *"when it would be too late to address the shared feedback"*.

It can be argued that written forms of communication can be segmented into three main types. Most are 'information laden' and promote a one-way linear form of communication that meets encoding purposes. Other forms reach decoding purposes and thus the receiver confirms that the message has been received and comprehended. The least commonly used type of communication promotes a collegiality form, whereby feedback addressing quality education and care is shared.

4.2.4 Visual Communication

A positive correlation was found between written or typed communication and visual modes. Data revealed that such communication is normally initiated by childcare centres and shared through the use of multimedia resources such as photos and videos. Participants referred to private Facebook pages or WhatsApp as ways of sharing photos of daily events. Whilst the dissemination of photos seems to differ between different centres, all participants regarded the use of photo and video sharing as an innovative way that captures a particular moment in time and it gives a clear picture to parents regarding implemented activities. The shared use of photos and visuals was regarded as a positive way of bridging childcare centre and home links with a participant describing this channel as *"heartwarming"* since it gives *"a sneak peek into the child's world in childcare"*. Similar perceptions were expressed by most participants, yet D2 expressed concerns regarding data protection since photos and videos are being shared with all parents of children attending the centre. This act was also regarded as *"breaching data protection"* and *"unethical"* with one of the directors choosing to individually disseminate photos and videos.

Whilst visual modes also serve as a means of communication, participants explained that this is normally implemented as a one-way process with one parent explaining that the *"comments section is turned off from the administrator, so we can only see and like the photo, but not comment or ask questions"*. Such instances question the reliability of visuals as a means of communication and data further revealed that photos are normally scrutinised and selected before they are shared. All participants explained that it is either the manager or the director who decides which images are to be shared to ensure that these are presented appropriately.

Participants argued that the use of the noticeboard can be considered as another mode of communication, with most participants agreeing that this is quite a common way of sharing practice and disseminating important information. Participants have agreed that this mode tends to promote a one-way form of communication, yet, it can also serve as a conversation starter as participants, mostly parents, discuss what they have seen or read with members of staff during pick-up and drop-off.

4.2.5 Aural Communication

Aural communication, which involves the transmission of information through a system of speaking and hearing (Christian and Smyth, 2008), was also mentioned by participants as an effective way of communication and as the preferred mode following face-to-face encounters. The use of phone conversations is commonly used with two participants reporting *"that at times the phone does not stop ringing"*. DM elaborated on this and explained that a

call gives parents a sense of reassurance, a feeling which cannot be achieved through written text. According to DM, this normally occurs when parents need to check on the progress of a child's health or social adjustments within the centre.

These views synchronise with the educators' and parents' with CCE2 explaining that the telephone is considered to be "*a form of physical communication*". The use of telephone and mobile calls featured as a common way of communication and was described as accessible, effective, and reliable. Features of phone conversations were preferred as they are a cross between verbal and aural modal communication trends. One of the participants explained that communication also takes place through voice-recorded messages which do not require immediate feedback as they can be accessed upon availability. This type of communication was only practiced in one of the childcare centres and was not set out to be implemented by all stakeholders but with "*a selected few*". This concept relates to one of the findings related to 'preferential treatment', a theme that emerged through data analysis and which relates to the conception that communication practices tend to occur at different levels and that stakeholders can make use of different access gates.

4.3 Communication Principles: Reliability, Trustworthiness and Reassurance

Data analysis indicated that participants were mostly pleased with the communication links established as most were described as 'reliable'. Findings showed that there is a variety of modes of communication and that the choice lies within the discretion of each centre and the stakeholder initiating the communication practice. This implies that even though some communication channel differences were reported from one centre to another, participants understood that such means are used to meet different purposes. The concept of 'reliability' was further used to describe the nature of each communication channel, with digital technology and paper-based means being used in a combined manner.

Another principle which emerged through data analysis related to the concept of 'trust'. The communication channels previously mentioned in Figure 1 served as a key to building trusting relationships between stakeholders. Both parent participants elaborated on several feelings when their children were enrolled in a childcare centre and 'trust' featured as a predominant feeling as "*it takes a level of trust to leave your children behind. Communication helps bridge that gap, one starts to feel more reassured and communication even validates a relationship which is built on trust*". This finding reflects upon the concept of reassurance which was also a featured term used to describe the aim behind each communication connection. Data showed that participants seek to build strong communication channels so that each party is reassured that children are being taken care of within a safe setting that targets each child's needs. This notion was elaborated upon by all participants with parents describing feelings of "*putting one's mind at rest*" when they are updated on children's physical needs and behaviour. The principles outlined in this section have been described as positive attributes which are both beneficial and essential for strong childcare setting and home links.

4.4 The 'Big Brother Theory' and Power Dynamics

A common assertion that was evident through the analysis of data pertained to the idea of having stakeholders 'watching over others'; a concept that was referred to by most participants but was perceived across different levelled dynamics. Previous sections have shown that photos are commonly shared with parents through the use of different mediums. It is common practice that these are first passed to the senior management, before being presented to parents. As D1 clarified, some of the photos are sometimes edited and scrutinised before being shared. This was also emphasised by DM who argued that if there are things that should not be in the photo, photos are cropped accordingly. DM also asserted that the photos shared do not always depict a realistic snapshot. This notion was also mentioned by one of the CCEs who stated that at times children are asked to smile and to behave in a way to depict a particular scenario. Episodes like this question the quality of information sharing and communication and whether the use of photos is depicting the real life scenario within the childcare centre.

The scrutinisation of photos is also commonly practiced by parents. Both CCEs, as well as D1, argued that parents complain when they do not see their child in the uploaded photos and this, in turn, becomes "*time-consuming*" and "*stressful*". The idea of 'being watched' and 'checked upon' was further elaborated upon by the senior management team. D1 referred to the surveillance camera as a medium that instigates communication within the childcare setting whereby the practitioners are contacted immediately if the standard was not met; this includes the personal use of mobile phones or safety hazards.

D2 also referred to the need to 'check on' practitioners' work in terms of written communication. The account provided by this stakeholder indicated that there are concerns about the English level of writing which raises the need for the director to check for any spelling mistakes before the written form of communication reaches parents. This was linked to the practitioners' knowledge and academic background as D1 explained that a short training course does not prepare practitioners to successfully communicate well with parents. Another finding which indicated a feeling of overarching power pertained to the lack of mutual communication to inform practice

and policy. One of the parents reported that there were recent changes in the centre's policies and they were informed via an email only after these were finalised. This assertion was consolidated by one of the LRPs who argued that parents do not have pedagogical training and whilst they may be experts in upbringing children they are not theoretically trained in the field of ECEC. These findings, therefore, show that communication practices occur at a basic and informant level and power dynamics instigate a top-down approach in policy making; separating communication from the element of participation and contribution.

4.5 Boundary and Confidentiality Infringement

Within social fields 'boundary infringement' refers to the act of 'crossing the line'. This line, within an educational context, can refer to any boundaries which are needed to ensure professionalism and structural functionality. This concept was elaborated upon by some of the participants in reference to direct sources of communication which do not stem within the confinement of the childcare's ways of communication. Data indicated that there were instances where CCEs were contacted through their direct mobile number or via social media platform means. Whilst some of the participants did not mind this, others described such acts as 'unacceptable' and 'unethical' which in turn impacted the centre's 'climate' in a negative manner. This was reflected within internal childcare policies which instigated that professional boundaries are necessary as communication that takes place outside of the childcare context tends to change the power dynamics between the professional and educational entities and parents. Data also revealed that this tends to instigate forms of preferential treatment across all levels. In this respect, D1 explained for example, that one of the CCEs offers house babysitting services, and since some of the parents avail themselves of such a service, the social dynamics change. P1 also made reference to this concept and mentioned that one can tell by the way stakeholders communicate, when 'preferential treatment' is given. Similarly, D2 explained that parents sometimes are not considerate and opt to send messages early in the morning, late at night, or even during weekends. This component was challenged by one of the parents who explained that she contacts the educator via messenger and at times even sends messages after the centre working hours. In her opinion, the childcare educators do not mind this and at times members of staff also initiate the conversation themselves to notify, share information or express gratitude.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Having set out to understand how childcare centres and homes are establishing communication links and how these are perceived, this study revealed that a variety of modes are being used and the channel chosen depends on the purpose of communication. Verbal and written communication modes were the most preferred ways of communicating while written forms were more commonly used by stakeholders. Several channels outlined in this research paper instigated a two-way stream while others were more information-laden and did not require feedback or response. Another finding showed that the communication content varied. At a basic level, communication occurred daily and related to the physical needs of the child. On a higher level, components related to holistic development and milestones were discussed on a term or annual basis with communication occurring face-to-face and consolidated through milestone books or learning journey portfolios. This is reflected in Murray et al.'s (2015) work which shows that stakeholders can engage through daily conversations, but also at a deeper level where discussions are more meaningful. A conflicting finding showed that whilst the children's physical, emotional and social needs were discussed daily and in depth through meetings, the main scope of communication did not surpass this; communication with parents did not occur at the practice and policy level as this was only limited through questionnaires. It is recommended that all stakeholders partake and share input and insights within the context of childcare centres as without everyone's contribution, the power dynamics would imply a top-down approach whereby LRPs and managers manage the centre and other stakeholders follow scripted policies.

Data further revealed that minor differences were observed in the type of mobile applications used and the way daily written communication was structured and presented. More personal ways of communication were noted to occur with stakeholders who are given 'preferential treatment' and this implied that the service offered differed in consistency, mode and quality with particular stakeholders. This implies that at policy level, each childcare centre should devise a way forward that promotes collegiality to ensure that parents are all given the same right of being informed and contacted. Although these differences emerged through data analysis, findings showed that the communication channels outlined promote a sense of reliability, trustworthiness and reassurance; principles which were considered imperative to build a strong bridge between the childcare centre and home. The findings revealed that although channels were used successfully stakeholders might infringe upon the 'communication boundary line'. In this vein, it is recommended that on an internal level, each childcare centre marks its communication policy document whereby each of the stakeholders understands his pertaining role. A consensus should further be reached to meet the aims presented in The National Standards for Early Childhood Education and Care Services (2002). This document highlights the need for parents and childcare centres to discuss child developmental achievements and needs through at least two formal meetings. Data revealed that this number was not always respected with one centre choosing to solely share this information through the mobile application. This calls for the need for increased monitoring within childcare centres to ensure that extensive communication practices are successfully being implemented.

The analogy presented in the title of this paper has questioned whether local childcare centres and homes are building strong communication links to bridge the divide. Data indicated that strong links are established and these are derived by a variety of channels, yet, the main aim of communication practices mainly relates to access to information. Further research which seeks to understand what is hindering parents' communication at the policy and practice level is therefore suggested. This could also be reached through action research in the field ofECEC which can investigate how and which communication channels can be used to acknowledge parents' insights. Acknowledging parents' voices at the practice and policy levels could be vital to ensure that collaborative relationships are positively established.

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