# Reimagining Collaboration in Family-School Partnerships

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**Abstract:** Drawing on an equitable collaboration framework (Ishimaru, 2019), this study examines how teachers and families collaborated virtually to support children's' learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was part of a research practice partnership with 31 teachers and their students across 14 schools in a large urban school district in California. Case study analyses of teacher and caregiver interviews reveal four dimensions of effective family-school partnerships: 1) having the "classroom in the living room," 2) open strengths-based communication, 3) social and emotional support, and 4) active partnership. Furthermore, family-school partnerships led to positive outcomes including greater windows into children's learning and empathy between families and teachers. This work has significant implications for how families and schools can move forward to leverage these practices to have more equitable, collaborative, and authentic family-school partnerships in distance learning and beyond.

## Introduction

> The coordination, the collaboration with families, and communication with them is super critical… it just highlighted how much more as educators we need to do to engage families. (Third grade teacher)

As described by the teacher above, the need for teachers and families to collaborate is increasingly urgent. The COVID-19 pandemic forced the physical closure of schools across the globe, disrupting teaching, learning, and community interactions for billions of students, educators, and families (OECD, 2021). Though responses and solutions have been varied, projections of outcomes are largely negative, focusing on the concept of "learning loss," typically operationalized as performance on standardized assessments of reading and math (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Although the negative impacts are real and formidable, this narrow definition limits how we might come to understand what was learned as well as the possibilities for imagining the future of collaboration in education. National survey data suggests that large proportions of lower-income parents felt more connected to their children's learning and are more comfortable communicating with their children's teachers after the shift to distance learning (Katz & Rideout, 2021). The new forms of collaboration and connection that emerged are essential to understand as educational systems work to develop stronger relational resources going forward. To reimagine collaboration in family-school partnerships beyond the dominant frame of learning loss, we share findings from a research practice partnership that documented the collaborative practices that emerged between teachers and caregivers. The purpose of this study is to surface new insights into caregiver and teacher interactions; therefore, causal relationships are outside the scope of analysis. We draw on qualitative case study analysis to address the following research questions: 1) How did schools and families learn to collaborate during distance learning to strengthen family-school partnerships? 2) What were the positive outcomes that emerged from this collaboration? Our findings open new questions for research on family and school collaboration with a focus on designs that can support teacher-caregiver partnership characterized by authentic connection, mutuality and reciprocity in the service of children's learning - an agenda suited for CSCL community (Stahl, 2015).

### Theoretical frameworks of equitable collaboration

Our work builds on Mapp and Kuttner's (2013) dual capacity-building framework for family-school partnerships which shifts the conversation from "parent involvement" to "family engagement" in family-school partnerships. While "parental involvement" views parents in a passive role, "family engagement" views parents as agents of change. Mapp and Kuttner's (2013) dual capacity-building framework emphasizes the importance of bi-directional learning between both families and educators to support student learning. Extending the topic of family engagement to consider issues of systemic inequities and power dynamics, Ishimaru (2019) proposes an equitable collaboration framework which examines the strategies used to promote family engagement in schools for nondominant communities. The framework offers a lens of analysis focusing on systemic change goals, strategies to build capacity and relationships, the role of nondominant families as experts and educational leaders, and educational change as a context-specific political process. The equitable collaborations framework employs three dimensions as a lens to examine these strategies: intervention level (i.e., individual vs. collective), directionality

(i.e., unidirectional vs. reciprocal), and power (i.e., unilateral vs. relational). We extend Ishimaru (2019)'s equitable collaboration framework by investigating how family teacher relationships evolved with new requirements for coordination to support student learning at home, an unplanned systemic intervention that emerged as a result of the pandemic and need to protect public health by closing school buildings.

## Methods

We used a case study approach (Yin, 2012) drawing on participatory observation notes of virtual classroom and professional development sessions, semi-structured interviews asking for distance learning experiences, and surveys. In this analysis, we focus on a subset of teacher and family interviews. All interviews and observations occurred virtually on a video conferencing platform.

## Participants and Context

Participants in this study came from a larger research practice partnership with 31 K-5 teachers involved in a personalized learning pilot program across 14 K-5 elementary school sites in a Californian urban school district. (Levinson, Barron, & Nguyen, 2021). During the data collection of this study, in-person instruction was halted from March 2020 to April 2021 and some hybrid (blend of in-person and remote) instruction was offered in April-June of 2021. Distance instruction was provided via synchronous and asynchronous online activities; students in the district received devices and internet hotspots as needed, and in some cases, schools also distributed physical materials such as books, notebooks, art supplies, and creative kits. Within this larger teacher sample, a group of 8 focal teachers were selected from school sites in lower-income communities that serve predominantly African-American, Latinx, and/or English Language Learner students. 1-2 case study students in each of these classrooms and their families participated in interviews as part of the study. Case study students were selected by teachers, who were asked to identify students who were relatively typical, not unusually challenged, or uniquely successful academically. In this study, we focus on these focal cases.

## Data Analysis

The interviews were analyzed by two researchers using both deductive and inductive coding (Saldana, 2011). The deductive codes included caregiver roles of listening in on children's learning which was based on prior research demonstrating its phenomenon during the Covid-19 pandemic (Barron et al., 2021). An example of a slice of the codebook for inductive codes is shown in Table 1 for caregiver and teacher interviews.

**Table 1.** *Codebook on family-school relationships from teacher and family interviews*

| Code | Description | Example |
|------|-------------|---------|
| **Dimensions of family-school partnerships** | | |
| Classroom in the living room | Caregiver describes listening in on child's class activities; Teacher discusses caregiver being present | Teacher:.. I think I've really seen the value of explicitly inviting parents into the learning space to be a part of it. |
| Open strengths-based communication | Caregiver and teacher describe communication on strengths | Teacher: Because when you communicate the positive with parents, that just continues.. |
| Social and emotional support | Caregiver and teacher provide social emotional support | Teacher: How am I helping my kid calm down [...] And there'd be parents sending me text messages and videos of stuff |
| Active partnership | Caregiver and teacher work together to support learning | Caregiver: Then, but I also learn from her as well..,It's been vice-a-versa with us |
| **Positive Outcomes** | | |
| Knowledge or appreciation of child's learning | Caregiver learns more about school life; teachers learn more about home life | Teacher: You could see the difference in what families were able to give their kids much more starkly, I think, than I normally see. |

| Empathy | Caregiver and teacher expresses empathy or perspective-taking of the other's role | Caregiver: After this pandemic, and realizing now, it has been a great experience, because I have realized that we as parents put a lot of responsibility on teachers. |
| --- | --- | --- |

## Findings

## Four dimensions of effective family-school partnerships

### The classroom in the living room

During synchronous online class sessions, some caregivers often sat side by side with their child or supervised from a distance, giving them a chance to observe teaching and learning first-hand. This type of activity, also documented in Barron and colleagues' (2020) study of remote learning, involves listening in or observing from the sidelines and is a common form of human learning in informal settings (Rogoff, 2003). Caregivers were able to listen in on synchronous connections, and in so doing they also noticed other interactions that happened between students during class. One caregiver noted:

> [Students are] caring for other students, in a sense, instead of the teacher just focusing with the student, but all students caring for other students as well in that classroom. [...] At the end of their day, they say their "appreciations" for one another [...] I know back in my day, we never had an appreciation moment to thank any other student, or a teacher, or any one of the staff. That's one of the things, like, "Wow, that's cool."

### Open strengths-based communication

Open strengths-based communication goes beyond routine communication by intentionally calling out students' strengths, progress, and positive updates. In contrast to "policing" interactions that Ishimaru and Takahashi (2017) demonstrate can happen in school-family spaces, open communication encourages transparency about both strengths and areas for improvement. As one teacher described:

> Communicating both the positive and the negative. Because when you communicate the positive with parents, that just continues... I think it comes back to that pride thing. When a parent tells a student, "Hey, your teacher told me you did an awesome job on this, and you turn in all your work. And I am so proud of you. And you did such a great job." They're going to come back the next day with that smile on their face, and just want to continue even more.

### Social and emotional support

Teachers and caregivers offered each other social and emotional support, which was increasingly beneficial during the stress of distance learning during a pandemic. The types of support range from processing emotions, improving well-being, and community building efforts. A teacher illustrated how these practices were critical in helping families have a greater sense of belonging, especially for those from marginalized communities:

> It's just 'oh how are you doing, just want to see how you guys are.' I definitely want to keep that up because I think our school has a lot of families who traditionally maybe didn't feel like they belonged in school for many reasons I'm sure. I think it's been great just to include them a little bit more and have them feel like we really care because, I need you guys to tell me what you want us to keep doing and what's not working for you because I cannot teach without your support so I really need you. You are essential now.

### Active Partnership

Finally, active partnership is another dimension where families and teachers both work together to problem-solve ways to support the student. Having a greater window into learning may also position caregivers to be effective collaborators with teachers by contributing thoughts on the classroom pedagogy. One caregiver highlighted how this was a reciprocal relationship where they learned from one another:

> We talked about different ways of learning and things like that. [...] She liked how Trisha wrote it four times, had to repeat it four times and spell it four times. She goes, "I would never

thought ..." I'm like, "That's how I remembered the words." Those are the things that me and her talked about, communicated, so she incorporated that in her class...Then, but I also learn from her as well, things that I can help out with her learning. It's been vice-a-versa with us.

## Positive impacts of effective family-school partnerships

### Windows into learning from home and school environments
One major impact of family-school partnerships was that both families and teachers had a greater window into children's' learning. This incidental window of learning was reciprocal between teachers and caregivers. Caregivers had a better understanding of what was happening in the classroom, while teachers also learned about students' home environments since they were attending class virtually from their home. One caregiver noted being more involved because of this window: "We get to actually see the process of the kids learning with their teachers through the Zoom, so we're actually witnessing right there just as how it would be in the classroom itself. It gets us more involved, versus just sending our daughter off to school."

### Empathy and perspective-taking from caregivers and teachers
Because families and teachers interacted with each other more and worked together virtually, both parties expressed a greater sense of empathy and perspective-taking. For example, one caregiver expressed their respect and appreciation for teachers: "Having this Zoom has really widened my eyes... as to how teachers handle the students. It's much respect and appreciation to the teachers, you guys as well as the staff." Teachers mirrored these kinds of comments, for example: "I can't imagine having kids at home and having to juggle everything on top of being your child's teacher as well, co-teacher. That was a success, being able to partner with parents."

## Discussion and significance
The rapid unplanned shift to remote learning created new interdependencies between teachers and caregivers, setting the stage for new forms of reciprocity, collective action, and learning opportunities for both parents and educators. In the return to "normal," there is significant risk that well established scripts for family engagement will re-assert themselves. This work holds theoretical significance on how to create more equitable systems by involving families in authentic collaboration and partnership with schools using technology beyond distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on this work, future directions for research in CSCL include how we can come to understand how synchronous connections with caregivers and teachers support a sense of belonging and emotional connection which can play out in sustained interest in learning. Greater mutuality, new windows into the teaching and learning process, and increases in empathy are important innovations to build on in-person or remotely as schools work to reimagine schooling. Moving forward, for the field of CSCL, studying the ways that computers support social and emotional connections under conditions of non-normal routines is an understudied area of research opportunity.

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