Parents and young learners in English language teaching: global practices and issues in school–home contacts

Caroline Linse, Stephen van Vlack and Oscar Bladas

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Acknowledgements

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Contents

Abstract

Early years and early childhood educators, all over the world, recognise the importance of establishing positive connections between homes and schools. ELT educators working with young learners want to develop effective communication with the families of their learners. This research aims to determine a definition of positive home–school communication by examining a range of contacts which take place between English language teachers and parents of young learners. Face-to-face contacts, telephone calls, digital and print-based communication, including written materials that schools send home, were the subject of analysis in this research. The key data source was qualitative open-ended interviews with English language teachers and English language programme directors or inspectors in eight different countries where English is a foreign or international language. The interview data was analysed and key themes were identified pertaining to commonalities of effective school–home communication. The type of successful home–school or school–home communication was embedded in the local context and included: 1) a literal or figurative place for parents and teachers to communicate; 2) opportunities for dialogue or two-way communication within that particular space, and 3) respect for parents and their home languages.

1

Introduction

Young learner programmes have grown exponentially in recent decades in part because parents want their children to develop English language skills, also known as English Language Linguistic Capital (Johnstone, 2009). Parents in both the public and private sector have been behind the efforts to expand English language instruction into primary level classrooms. In the case of state-funded schools, parental involvement in their children's formal education is well recognised as a factor which can contribute to children's success in school (Green et al., 2007).

However, there are many schools and teachers who do not see parental involvement and engagement and positive school–home relationships as a reality, but an elusive goal. Teachers of young learners are unprepared and almost never have any formal training in how to address the parents of their learners. For many teachers of young learners, working with parents is an unexpected duty and can be viewed as a burden. There is a shortage of research on how to work with parents in ELT programmes in a variety of different global contexts. One of the ironies of working with parents is that they may be viewed as a threat, when in reality they can be teachers' best allies.

Everyone, especially children, benefits when parents and teachers work together (Epstein, 1995). Parents are children's first teachers and have responsibility for their child's growth and development, including their child's overall education. Teachers, on the other hand, have responsibility specifically for children's schooling. Ideally, there is a continuity of instruction between home and school. The task, though, can be difficult for the teacher because the parent is advocating for one child, whereas the teacher has to look out for an entire classroom filled with children with differing backgrounds and sometimes differing sets of parental expectations.

Teachers and parents both have the same objective, which is based on what is best for the children. It is the parents' job to advocate for their own sons and daughters. Unfortunately, there are some parents who can appear to be 'pushy' or overzealous and do not remember that the teacher has up to 35 or 40 pupils in a classroom. There are parents, at the other end of the spectrum, who are very uninvolved and they may often prove to be more of a concern for teachers.

The challenge for teachers in both regular education and specialised English language teaching programmes is how to make positive connections with parents. As experienced primary school teachers know, true partnership can benefit the child when schools and homes collaborate on behalf of the child. When teachers and parents work together, they can support children and, as a team, help children reach their potential. The opposite can also happen when both parties are at cross-purposes.

On an anecdotal basis, ELT teachers frequently comment that one of the most challenging aspects of their professional lives is working effectively with parents. Surprisingly, this has not garnered much attention in the literature. Garton et al. (2011) briefly mention difficult parents as a challenge for teachers of English to young learners, but do not explore it in any depth. Nunan (2003) and Enever and Moon (2009) all point out that parents are behind the push for English to be taught to children at earlier and earlier ages, without going into any detail as to what that means for home–school partnerships. Linse (2011) reports on the need to examine local contexts when attempting to make connections with parents of ELT learners.

The aim of this report is to provide criteria for effective home–school communication. Our original intention was to create a database of exemplar best practices. We quickly discovered, however, that best practices are dependent upon specific contexts. Therefore, since the audience of this research is mainly schools and educators, we chose to focus on the types of contacts that occurred from the perspective of the teacher or the school. Many teachers of young learners have expressed concern about connections with parents and specifically concerns about relationships that are not as positive as they could be. Clearly, this is a neglected area of research that needs to be better understood in order to make improvements.

Finally, at the core of this report is an element of respect and admiration for the families and parents who entrust part of their children's education to the schools. In order to be respectful of the parents and families and to acknowledge the linguistic contribution of children's first teachers, we need to be very careful to make sure that the home language linguistic capital is preserved. It would be hypocritical if we did not view their home language as an essential element of the home–school connection.

2

How we conducted the research

One of the aims of this study was to determine a range of connections that teachers make with parents. We wanted to learn how teachers and schools make contact with parents within the context of ELT instruction at the primary school level. This is an area of investigation designed to address an issue impacting teachers of young learners. As a result of previous experiences and our own research, we were confident that educators would be interested in helping us explore ways schools connect with families.

We chose to interview teachers who may have had experiences with a number of different parents in different contexts (for example, public and private sector schools). In addition, we focused on teachers because their concern about the home–school relationship was the impetus for this study. We hope in the future to carry out a follow-up study focusing on parents, using a similar approach.

We utilised a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. We used our professional network to locate potential participants in different parts of the world. There were several criteria used to select the countries for the study. We decided to include countries representing different parts of the world with different cultural traditions. It was very important to make sure that we chose countries with home languages that included regional, indigenous and world languages. We piloted the questions in Singapore, and conducted in-depth interviews in Namibia, France, Korea, Spain, Japan, the Philippines and Mexico (see Appendix I) . Whenever possible, we attempted to conduct the research with participants who represented both urban and rural contexts.

The sample included educators from both public (or state) and private sector schools. Publicly or state-funded schools receive their funding from public sources or government sources. Private schools, including private language institutes, receive their funding from parents who pay tuition so the children can attend classes. There were some participants who came from schools that were neither public nor private exclusively. In other words, there were some schools which receive some public funding but also some tuition fees from parents. Also, we chose teachers from both public and private sector schools because we felt that they would provide varied and valuable information about the children's different

socioeconomic status and about adherence to local Ministry of Education instructional practices.

We utilised semi-structured interviews as our primary means of data collection (see the interview questions in Appendix II and two interview excerpts in Appendix III). In the original conceptualisation of the study we also wanted samples of written communication from teachers and from the schools or authorities. We did find some private schools issuing interesting pieces of correspondence. However, we quickly discovered that in the public sector obtaining such pieces of correspondence between homes and schools was very problematic. Systematic access to samples of written correspondence proved to be impossible. We also discovered that in some private schools teachers had not experienced the local context to a sufficient degree for them to be able to adequately explain what had been generated by the school.

We also found out that the breadth of contexts, infrastructure and traditions were far more varied than we ever could have imagined. We then decided to focus our attention on interviews and on obtaining and conducting interviews with teachers representing different perspectives and from different contexts.

The backgrounds of the teachers who participated in the study were extremely varied. Some teachers had been teaching for three decades or more, whereas others had only been teaching for a little less than a year. The only difference between the novice and experienced teachers was that the novice teachers were in the process of learning how to deal with parents, whereas experienced teachers had developed a set of techniques and strategies. The participants also possessed a wide range of professional qualifications. There were some teachers who possessed masters degrees in English language teaching, were licensed or held credentials to teach English in public schools, whereas there were a few whose only qualification was that they were native English speakers or individuals with native-like proficiency.

We were especially interested in having teachers from public schools because we felt that culturally embedded local traditions of practices between schools and homes would be more apparent. We felt that English language institutes and private schools, often international schools, would be more likely to

attempt to replicate practices that are occurring in English-speaking countries. There were also some teachers who worked in the private sector of education but additionally had a variety of experiences within the public sector. In some cases their own children had attended public schools. In other cases they had been involved in philanthropic activities with public sector schools.

We followed the British Educational Research Association's guidelines for obtaining informed consent and we submitted an application to conduct this research to the Queen's University Belfast Ethics Committee at the School of Education, which granted us permission to conduct the research. In addition, we felt compelled to follow the spirit of ethical practices, taking the following issues into consideration:

1) Respect the research participants and allow them to shape the research. Some of the participants requested to see the interview questions before we conducted the interviews. We did not anticipate any threats to validity in this regard and were happy to comply with the participants' requests. Although all the participants – with one exception – were currently or had been English teachers, we allowed them to select whichever language they wanted the interview to take place in, as long as we spoke that language. We could not see any threats to validity by letting the participants choose the language of the interview and we felt that it was important for them to be respected and viewed as the experts they are. In one context, individuals invited for interviews asked if their friends could also attend the interview and take part in it. Once again, the nature of the research was such that we did not anticipate any threat to validity for letting other participants take part in the interview.

2) Make sure linguistic imperialism is not encouraged either directly or indirectly. One issue that we had not anticipated had to do with indigenous languages or parents' and grandparents' home languages. We felt that it was very important to make sure that the English language instruction did not, in any way shape or form, impact the family home language or one of the family's home languages. Consequently, we decided to conduct research into countries with multiple indigenous languages.

3) Do not burden teachers with extra work in order for them to participate in the research. Our original intention was to gather print-based materials from teachers. What we learned very quickly was that it would have been an enormous burden for teachers to gather such materials from their schools. As mentioned above, in some cases teachers had no awareness of what was actually sent home to families. But, more importantly from an ethical standpoint, we realised that the teachers would have had to invest a great deal of time in order to gather such materials. We were also aware that the depth and breadth of interview-based data was so rich that we did not need the additional information for this study.

All of the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, rendering hundreds of pages of data. We analysed the data using qualitative techniques. The first step was to make a list of all the different types of techniques or strategies used by teachers. We then divided these into themes or key categories. The point of our research was primarily to create a master list of strategies and techniques rather than a list of frequency of each technique or strategy.

3

Who the resource is useful to

This report will be useful to a variety of stakeholders. It will interest those involved in the education of children who speak languages other than, and in addition to, English at home or at school. The intention is to help all stakeholders consider parents as an important partner in the English language education of young learners.

This resource is a window into the types of traditions found in many different cultures for connecting schools with families. With globalisation and increased mobility of families and teachers in different cultural contexts, there is a high likelihood that children may not be attending schools in the same cultural context as their parents. Although not all countries and cultures are covered, this study, nevertheless, provides examples of, and a framework for, parental inclusion in young learner ELT. The resource will be useful in countries where English is not the dominant public language, for example in Mexico, as well as in countries where English is a major language, such as Singapore. It will also be useful in countries where English is being taught as an additional language, such as Northern Ireland and the United States.

The resource is appropriate for educators working in both public and private sectors. When we conducted the research, we were mindful of this and made certain that we contacted teachers working in both sectors. Parents have slightly different roles in private schools, in which they have to pay tuition, than in public schools, in which the education is funded by the Ministry of Education. There are also schools which receive some funding from the government as well as private additional payments from parents.

Although the intention of this research was to provide strategies and techniques for educators working in countries where English is not the public or official language, we feel that it will also be useful for educators working in English-speaking countries with children speaking languages other than English in the home. This resource will hopefully help educators consider home–school connections that occur in the countries of origin of their EAL pupils.

Below we examine in further detail the ways in which the present research will help stakeholders:

a. Policy makers
The results of the study will help policy makers become aware of the types of systems and infrastructure which are utilised in schools to connect parents with educators. This awareness can lead to the development of policies, and strengthen connections between parents and schools as related to the ELT curriculum. Hopefully, when policy makers are developing and implementing ELT programmes, they can consider the important role that parents play in their children's lives as their first language educators.

b. Programme directors and directors of study
The information in this report is especially useful for administrators wanting to carve a space for parents and teachers to work together and develop partnerships on behalf of young learners. It provides a number of school-wide techniques that can be used as communication channels between schools and homes.

c. Teachers
The results of this research can be used to help teachers learn how to critically consider and reflect on different forms of contact with parents of young learners in their English classes and how to use these contacts to facilitate communication with homes. Good two-way channels of communication can contribute to, and create a climate of, collaboration.

d. Teacher educators
This research will help teacher educators in two different ways. Firstly, the results can inform the practices that in-service and pre-service teachers adopt in their classrooms to ensure that contacts between teachers and homes are positive, including those contacts which are indirect in nature, for example via an intermediary such as the school director or the 'homeroom teacher' (see section 4.2.2). Secondly, teachers at various stages in their careers can adapt the semi-structured interview guides to investigate teachers' and parents' experiences and expectations regarding home–school connection.

e. Textbook publishers

Many young learner ELT publishers provide a variety of content aimed at parents, such as letters to parents, *I-can-checklists* and family fun home-tasks. The results of the present research will help textbook publishers develop content which is culturally responsive, useful and engaging to parents. Hopefully, textbook publishers will realise the need for two-way communication and alter their practices so that letters home and other pieces of correspondence are structured in such a way as to facilitate dialogue and conversation.

f. Test developers

In many contexts parents are very concerned that their children pass high-stakes exams to enter either secondary schools and/or universities of their choice. This report is useful for organisations that develop high-stakes tests since such tests need to appeal to parents as well as educators. Knowing more about channels of communication between schools and homes can help test developers consider ways to share and discuss children's test results with parents.

g. Parents

The results of this research will hopefully help parents by improving the two-way channels and nature of communication that take place between homes and schools.

h. Children

As a result of this research, teachers and other stakeholders listed above will hopefully be able to improve aspects of their practice concerning communication with parents. If school–home contacts are improved, undoubtedly children will benefit. Children can also be told that their parents and teachers are working together to help them learn.

i. Website-technology developers

Websites are increasingly becoming a vehicle for communicating a wide variety of content and information to stakeholders. This is true in the case of information generated for families by schools and teachers. We feel the information in the report will be useful for those creating digitally-based communication tools for parents.

4

Main research findings

Respect for parents and the home–school connections

Teachers who participated in the study were very respectful of both the relationship between teachers and parents, and parents in general. Educators realised the importance of parents as they viewed them as potential partners and for the most part wanted connections with them. There was not nearly as much commentary about argumentative or demanding parents as we had anticipated.

Conversation between parents and educators

There are many different spaces carved out for families to dialogue and converse with educators, all of which are based on different cultural traditions. Universally, parents want to know how their children are progressing. They want to know whether or not their children are making as much or more progress as their peers. Teachers report that parents also want to know if their children are happy, have friends, are not feeling stressed or unwell, etc.

There are two dominant channels for conversations that occurred between homes and schools. One set of conversations is oral and occurs either face-to-face or by phone. The other type of conversation is written and traditionally has often taken place in a notebook which travels between home and school. In addition, there are written conversations that are beginning to take place digitally between schools and homes.

4.1 Challenges

4.1.1 Uninvolved parents

The number one challenge for educators in all of the contexts where the research was conducted was absent and invisible parents. Educators were very concerned about uninvolved parents, or parents who are difficult to contact. Teachers explained that there were some parents who they wish would come to school and did not. As one teacher pointed out, 'absent parents are the ones we need to see here at school, as they are the ones we need to work with together to help the child'. Often the children who are struggling are the ones whose parents are almost invisible.

Teachers felt frustrated, with one even feeling 'devastated', when parents did not come to school. In some cases parents never showed up for teacher-parent conferences or meetings, or neglected to return forms to school. Some parents designated another adult – usually a nanny employed by the family or a relative such as an aunt or a cousin – to help with the child. Teachers said that there were some children who were struggling and that they wished that parents, rather than someone assigned to be a carer, were involved. Some teachers surmised that these parents did not care about their children. Teachers did concede that there were some situations in which the parents just could not be involved due to work commitments or family illnesses. However, teachers also pointed out that there were some parents who had other commitments but somehow managed the connection with the teacher and the school.

4.1.2 Parents' concern about test preparation for their children

In some contexts children must take a high-stakes exam which includes an English language exam to enter select secondary schools or universities. When there are high-stakes exams involved, parents often place a great deal of pressure on teachers by articulating their concerns about their children's test performance. This specific pressure did not exist in contexts lacking high-stakes English language exams at secondary school level.

4.1.3 Communicative versus test preparation curriculum

In several contexts there appeared to be mixed messages about the curriculum versus the high-stakes examinations that students must take. From what teachers reported, parents were very concerned that their children be well-prepared and do well in high-stakes examinations. Unfortunately, this was not always in keeping with the stated curriculum, which often emphasised approaches focusing on communication and not on grammar. There often exists a conflict between preparing learners for high-stakes examinations versus adhering to the school's communicative English language curriculum (Li, 1998).

4.1.4 Parents dissatisfied with children's marks

A number of teachers explained that there are situations in which the parents do not feel satisfied with the grades or marks that the teachers have given to their children. Teachers expressed their concern about parents who would compare their children to other children in the class or would complain about the greater mark another child had received. Parents would explain that if a certain child received a good mark, they would wonder why their own child had not got a better mark. Parents appear to be more concerned about this issue in cultures where there are high-stakes ramifications for grades.

One school addressed the problem of parents blaming teachers directly by communicating with parents a grading policy, before posting grades. Parents were told in advance that the grading policy was system-wide and that the teachers did not create the grading standards, but merely followed them. According to teachers, this explanation and information helped parents understand what was taking place.

4.2 Key educators dialoguing and conversing with parents

There are a variety of educators responsible for communicating with parents regarding their children's instructional progress. In the following sections we describe in further detail how educators may carry out this task.

4.2.1 The classroom teacher

The classroom teacher is often the person responsible for communicating with parents. In primary school ELT programmes there are often three different types of classroom teachers. In English language immersion programs, all instruction is delivered through the medium of English. In other contexts, either in the public or the private sector, English teachers may have primary school children for one period a day or several periods a week. Finally, in other situations the regular classroom teacher may deliver instruction in the children's home language for most of the day, as well as some specialised English classes. Often these classroom teachers are the first point of contact between schools and homes.

4.2.2 Homeroom teachers

Korea, for example, has adopted the system of 'homeroom teachers', used in all public schools as well as some private schools and language institutes. The homeroom teacher system is found in both primary schools and secondary schools, including middle school (lower secondary school), across the Republic of Korea. Homeroom teachers serve as the in-school parent coordinator for individual and groups of children. This is a very important role and carries with it a great deal of responsibility.

Homeroom teachers take their role very seriously and view it as both a burden and an opportunity. If a child or group of children has more than one teacher, then the homeroom teacher serves as the key point of contact for the family within the school. It is common, for instance, for an English teacher to give marks to the homeroom teacher, who then shares them with the parents. More often than not, the homeroom teacher does not speak English. Also, the homeroom teacher usually teaches the child for one or more classes a day.

The homeroom teacher system, in cultures where it is used, is clearly understood by local educators, parents, and the community. The system is dominant in public schools, but in some contexts it is also implemented in private schools, especially in language institutes or cram schools.

There are also situations in which a child has three or four different classroom teachers and the non-homeroom teachers do not have direct contact with parents because all communication and correspondence is necessarily handled through the homeroom teacher. This is advantageous because parents are able to develop a relationship with one key contact on behalf of their child. In the case of Korean private language schools and private language institutes that have set up a homeroom teacher system, native English speaker teachers can utilise the homeroom teachers who will possess language skills in both English and Korean. In public schools, native English speaker teachers often have no means of communicating with families because homeroom teachers often do not speak enough English to be able to communicate with native English speakers who do not speak Korean.

In Korea, the homeroom teacher must communicate with families or parents – usually the mother – once a month by phone. This is a requirement for all Korean public schools and, as mentioned above, sometimes occurs in private schools as well. The homeroom teacher has a conversation with the mother and reports how the child is progressing. Some conversations are very quick whereas other conversations are longer in duration. This system exists all the way from primary school through to the end of secondary school, with increased pressure being placed on the teacher, child and parent as children reach the age at which they must take the university entrance exam.

The homeroom teacher system is understood by virtually everyone who is going through the Korean public school system. It is not as clearly or easily understood by outsiders who are unfamiliar with the way it operates. There were a number of instances during the interviews in which teachers were genuinely surprised that this system does not exist elsewhere.

However, it should be pointed out that a very similar system is also found in public sector schools in Spain.

4.2.3 Guidance counsellor or social worker or psychologist

In a number of different contexts there is a system of extra support for children who are having numerous challenges in the classroom. The label or term used for the person to fill this role varies from 'guidance counsellor' to 'social worker' or 'psychologist'. English teachers find this role, regardless of what it is called, as very well-suited to the development of an extensive partnership with the family. Teachers feel that when the school–home partnership is lacking, the person filling this role is needed to help the child improve and overcome obstacles.

4.3 Administrative and clerical staff responsible for dealing with parents

There was mention, in some contexts, that the main point of contact for parents was administrative staff at the school or even a particular staff member who was exclusively responsible for dealing with parents in all matters.

4.3.1 School director or owner or department head

In private language schools run exclusively by owners or directors there were more regular contacts between these administrators and parents than in other settings regarding children and their progress. Directors and owners realise the importance of parents in their privately owned and run institutions. In one case an owner/director asks parents for their birthday when they enrol their children. She then sends birthday cards to the parents on their birthdays. In other settings, parents only contact the school director or the department head whenever they have a concern about their child as he or she progresses through the grades. This individual then serves as a liaison between the school and the parent.

4.3.2 Secretaries or clerical administrative staff

Clerical or administrative staff often serve as the first point of contact between homes and schools. They were briefly mentioned by educators in neutral or positive terms, except in one school. Teachers from that particular school mentioned that the clerical staff had posted a negative sign regarding teachers. The teachers involved were very aware that this created a negative impression for parents who would see the sign when they came to the school. The sign has since been removed.

4.4 Training to work with parents

Most teachers have not received formal training on working with parents. One teacher, for example, explained that she had yet to receive training on how to deal with parents. However, many teachers mentioned that they received informal training or mentoring from more experienced colleagues. Novice teachers often felt very frustrated not knowing how to work with parents. They had not received formal training instructing them in this aspect of their work, and later they discovered by experience that the connection with parents is important.

In order to provide novice teachers with some training, there was one instance of a teacher who served as a mentor. She set up a situation in which trainee teachers were able to observe experienced teachers interacting with parents. In other contexts, two different masters programmes were mentioned as having content related to working effectively with parents, and postgraduate in-service programmes were also mentioned in this regard.

4.5 Language

The issue of language and respect for different languages and linguistic diversity is one theme that we had not anticipated. We were aware that native speaking English teachers might not speak the language used for schooling in general, but the issue of language of communication with parents became far more encompassing then we could have predicted.

4.5.1 Respecting multilingualism

Teachers work with learners representing a variety of home languages. In some settings children speak different indigenous languages than those found in the school, whereas in other settings children and their parents may speak a language exogenous to the school language. There are also cases in which the children and their parents speak different languages, both of which might be different from the school and indeed target language. Certainly, the diversity of situations was humbling. Respect for home languages is instrumental, and this involves showing respect for parents and the linguistic contribution they have given to their children.

There was a range of responses with relation to English as a home language. At one end of the continuum, in Paris, there were classes designed specifically for children who came from interlingual families in which one parent, usually a native English speaker, speaks English at home. Children coming from homes with one English-speaking parent are assessed and then placed in classes labelled 'bilingual'.

At the other end of the continuum there was at least one native English-speaking teacher who was unaware that there was a native English-speaking parent in the home. These teachers were so focused on test preparation and grammar driven preparation that they failed to acknowledge the linguistic contribution that the parents had given to their child. This phenomenon raises some concerns. If English teachers are so unaware of the English linguistic capital that their pupils have developed or acquired from their family, they are unlikely to be cognisant of, and to build upon, the other linguistic capital that children possess.

There were some examples in which linguistic inclusivity and respect for parents' home languages was not as evident, especially if the languages were indigenous. However, there were also a number of instances in which the use of the indigenous home language and accommodations showed respect for the families' home language. This is also significant because it shows resistance to negative effects of English or to linguistic imperialism. The two different reactions to indigenous languages was surprisingly apparent in the Philippines.

There were various responses to indigenous languages spoken in the homes in different cultural contexts. In Namibia, for example, teachers referred to English, Afrikaans and their 'own' language. There was an obviously high level of respect for linguistic variety, in line with what was spoken in the home. In Barcelona, there was respect for individuals who spoke Catalan at home and there was an effort for teachers to use Catalan with families who spoke Catalan at home and Spanish with families who spoke Spanish at home. There was one programme, specifically in France, that showed a great level of responsiveness to parents' home language. Children can study English and participate in a bilingual programme if they have developed English-language capital as a result of having one parent speaking English at home. This linguistic capital has been extended and built upon in the school through instruction in academic English.

4.5.2 Communicating with families who represent different linguistic groups
A variety of strategies were used to communicate with families who spoke languages other than the national official or public language. As an example of a very positive technique, one principal, in Namibia, held meetings in which parents spoke a minimum of half a dozen different indigenous home languages. The principal would conduct a school-wide meeting in English, which is the official language. At the

beginning of the meeting she invited parents to sit next to someone who speaks English and their own local language. During the meeting she would allow time for people to translate to those sitting close to them from English into their own indigenous languages.

Individual meetings between teachers and parents illustrated some variety in the language accommodation strategies utilised. In some schools where there are a number of different indigenous languages represented, teachers work together to find colleagues who speak the same language as the parents. In other instances, children are used as translators, which has its own set of problems. Finally, there were instances in which the parents' home language was not taken into account or modifications were not made so that the family could communicate in their language of choice.

4.6 Diversity of strategies
4.6.1 Accessibility
There were some forms of contact in which teachers were extremely accessible to parents. In some contexts, teachers provided their personal cell phone numbers to parents. There were also some who were expected to use their personal cell phones to call parents on a regular basis, whereas there were other teachers who were expected to use the school phones to make such calls. In other situations, teachers and parents live together in the same community, with teachers usually feeling comfortable commenting about school and children when they run into parents in, for example, the grocery store.

4.6.2 Communicating in families' home language
There were a wide range of practices used to translate content into parents' home languages. At one end of the continuum, there were teachers able to speak in parents' home language and were able to communicate easily in that language. At the other end of the continuum, there was a lack of anyone able to communicate in the parents' home language.

4.6.3 Phone calls
Phone calls were a common way for teachers to connect with parents. In the case of Korea, homeroom teachers working in public schools telephone parents once a month. These regular telephone calls are considered an essential cornerstone in the parent home connection. In addition, parents and teachers often communicate by phone when needed. These conversations take place often when something has happened at school, such as a child being bullied or failing a test.

One interesting facet about phone calls is the amount of privacy teachers maintained or relinquished. Some teachers felt adamant that they should only call parents on the official school phone, whereas others did not mind using their personal cell phone to make such phone calls. For the most part, teachers felt that parents did not abuse the privilege of having their cell phone numbers.

4.6.4 Text messages
In some contexts, the usage of text messages reflects how society at large uses this kind of digital communication. A number of teachers commented that they found text messages to be useful for conveying essential information. Three teachers also commented that text messages are a very convenient way to communicate with families because the central or core information can be transmitted very quickly.

4.6.5 Letters and printed materials
Letters and printed materials did not seem to be considered important or paramount for establishing connections with families. In Singapore, for example, some teachers did not even know what the school sent home to the family. They were unaware of what type of content or information was being sent home from the office or the general administration.

4.6.6 Email and school websites
In several contexts, use of email and school websites was viewed as a very efficient way to communicate with families. However, there were a few caveats to this. First, there were different people who were designated to maintain the school website, with some not possessing any English language skills. Sometimes the teacher would have her own classroom website, other times she would not. Second, the teachers often did not have the language skills necessary to maintain or provide the information in the families' home language. In addition, they often did not have access to personnel who could provide the information in the families' home language. Third, there were also circumstances in which teachers did not have access to computers or the Internet. Finally, the technology that the school provided did not always correspond with what the parents or families were able to access. Parents and families generally had access to technology, but not necessarily to the computer. Frequently, families would have a smart phone, but no direct access to a computer-based internet or a computer. In some locations, there were problems with the monitoring of websites and email communication, which made certain phone applications more favourable.

4.6.7 Dialogue notebooks
'Diaries', 'notebooks', 'homework books' are labels used to describe a notebook which travels back-and-forth between homes and schools in many countries. Teachers of very young learners, those under the age of eight, would write notes to parents in this notebook. Older learners, of eight and above, would copy things down from the board themselves. The exception to this would be when the teacher would have something specific that she would want to convey to the parents.

The notebooks are in sharp contrast to the one-way-written communication which is found in many countries. Written notices and letters home are a common feature of UK and US schools as a means of disseminating information from the school to the home. The problem with this form of communication is that it is one directional, from the school to the home, whereas it would be much more logical and equitable to have some sort of vehicle by which families could communicate, going back-and-forth with the school.

In the contexts where it is used, this dialogue notebook or travelling notebook has become an important vehicle for two-way communication between home and schools, with both parents and teachers able to initiate communication. The notebooks are used to share information from the school to the home, but also importantly from the home to the school. For example, a teacher might write or have a child write down a homework assignment, and point out that the parent is to help. Or the parents might write directly into the notebook about the child being absent from school because of a family event or because of illness. The parents might also write to the teacher that the child is having trouble completing a difficult homework assignment.

Teachers in France remembered having this notebook or diary when they themselves were children. It was something that was considered standard and normal. Teachers commented that they could not imagine what it would be like to have a school without such a communication tool. Teachers were very much taken aback by the notion that this notebook or diary does not exist in all contexts.

4.6.8 Parent-teacher conferences

Parent-teacher conferences were mentioned in virtually every context. Frequency of these varies from once a year to three to four times a year. Regardless of the frequency, the aim was very similar in different contexts, with the purpose being that the parent wants to find out how their child is progressing. In many cases, possibly the majority, parent-teacher conferences gave teachers an opportunity to reassure parents that their children were progressing well. Parent-teacher conferences were also a place to resolve issues that may be occurring with the child. For instance, the child might be having trouble listening in English classes and understanding what is going on. The teacher and parent could use the conference as a way of working together to resolve the problem.

4.6.9 Open classrooms

In a number of different contexts, schools hosted open classrooms for parents, who were invited to come and watch their children during a lesson. There are different objectives in this practice, and teachers have very different responses to it. A couple of teachers felt that it was nothing but a performance by the teacher rather than an actual instructional activity. Others believed that it was a good way for parents to actually see what was taking place in the classroom, including how their children were progressing. It was also an opportunity for parents to actually see their children interacting with their peers. One teacher felt a bit of a dilemma in that if she used English in the class, the parents would not understand what was going on; however, if she used their home language, then it would not be a representative lesson. Teachers felt that open classes worked more effectively when there was an opportunity to have a discussion with parents before or afterwards, so that they could discuss what they had seen or were seeing.

4.6.10 Special events

There was also a wide variety of special events held at the schools in which parents were invited to participate. Most special events were designed to include children and adults, but some events were mainly for parents. The events for children often showed the students' achievements or abilities. For example, there were sports days or field days when children were able to show off their athletic and/or social abilities and work as a team. There were also student performances such as plays or choir performances. In addition, in some countries there are awards ceremonies to which parents are invited and children receive awards for a variety of achievements, from perfect attendance to excellent performance in different academic areas. In some

schools there were also awards for children who had other kinds of achievement such as sports, citizenship or social skills. Also, there were some ceremonies only for those parents whose children were to receive awards. Most parents attended the award ceremonies. However, there were several instances in which parents did not come and the teachers were disappointed.

4.6.11 Drop-off and pick-up conversations

In some contexts parents and teachers engage in conversation when children are picked up or dropped off at school at either the entrance to the school or, in some cases, the classroom door. Often these conversations are very short and only last a few seconds with the core element frequently being smiles exchanged between adults. In other cases, the exchange may be slightly longer and may be used to share essential information such as the bereavement of a grandparent or an upcoming family trip involving the child.

4.6.12 Home visits

Visits to children's homes were described in a number of different contexts. Teachers who have conducted these visits, or have been on the receiving end of these visits, were very positive about them. In Japan, for example, it is customary for classroom teachers at primary school level to visit each of their pupil's homes once a year. These visits provide a window for the classroom teacher to see the child's world. However, there is pressure upon the parents to prepare, tidy up and clean the home before the prearranged time for the teacher's visit. In the Philippines, teachers conduct visits as one way of engaging parents who may otherwise not be visibly present in the child's school life. In Namibia, teachers visit children's homes after a bereavement.

There were some practical obstacles to home visits. For most teachers, time was a problem when considering home visits, since it is not something that is generally taken into account when scheduling visits to parents who work late. There were also obstacles related to specific contexts. For example, children travel for several hours to attend English classes, but if they come from different, distant locations, it will not be practical for teachers to visit the children's home. Some teachers were also concerned about how much it costs, including fuel, to go and visit pupils.

There was also concern with regard to visiting a family on one's own. Teachers pointed out that they could take a colleague with them and choose with whom they would like to visit the child's home. Also, if two teachers team-taught, then it would be natural for both to visit the home together.

4.6.13 Homework

Homework was viewed by some as a means to connect with families, whereas others had not considered the issue. The issue of the help needed from parents to do the homework was also mentioned. Some teachers were aware that parents of very young children did not possess enough English to help their children with English language homework. It became clear that in many cases the parents would not be able to help the child and the child would need to work independently.

There were two routines used in different contexts to ensure that the children were aware of the English language homework they had been given. The first was for children to write down their homework in the homework notebook, and the second was for parents to actually sign the homework that the children had done. In both cases the issue of the parents' English language proficiency was also raised.

5

Conclusions

Fostered connections between schools and homes were found to exist and pivotally are considered important in all eight countries where the research was conducted. The actual practices varied and were both dependent upon and embedded in the specific local contexts. Nevertheless, there were three elements present in most descriptions of what teachers felt were successful contacts between schools and homes. The first element was the need for channels or modes of communication that are accessible to parents and manageable for teachers. The second element was the need for two-way dialogue or communication. The third element concerned respect for parents' home language(s).

The first element referred to the means, mode or channel for communication which was established between the school and the family or parents. The vehicles used for communication were often based on traditions that have been in place for decades or more. Some communication was primarily oral and face-to-face, or by telephone, whereas other communication was primarily in written form. The modes varied depending upon the culture of the teachers and parents and the specific context of the school. For example, in some schools face-to-face contact included the drop-off and pick-up of the children, which varied depending upon both the expectations of parents and the architecture of the school. In other settings the most frequent communication was a monthly phone call between the schools and parents. There were also meetings, conferences, and events, such as awards ceremonies. In a number of different contexts there also existed a two-way dialogue in the form of a handwritten diary or notebook which travelled back-and-forth with the child. This notebook or diary would have information written from the teacher and it would go home. But importantly there was also a space for the parents to write information that they needed to convey to the teacher about their child.

The second element focused on the importance of conversation or dialogue with parents. Teachers were more concerned about parents who did not engage in dialogue than those who were labelled as 'pushy'. It was not just that the school had information to disseminate, but rather that the school needed to work collaboratively with parents on behalf of the child. There were a variety of descriptions of conversations between parents and educators: from quick chats taking place in a minute or two at the classroom door, to conversations occurring in the form of formal parent teacher conferences. There were also dialogues which occurred via other means of communication, such as phone calls or conversations through the diary. Whatever the mode of communication was, however, educators felt that they needed a space to dialogue with parents about the child.

The third element concerned the home language or languages. In most cases there was respect for the home language or languages of the parents and there were accommodations and considerations for local or indigenous languages. In the most positive view, there was a school which created a special programme for children who came from families where one parent was an English speaker. This was an example of respecting and honouring the family home language and the parents in general. There were, however, a few instances where local or indigenous languages were not respected or even considered. This revealed communication problems that needed to be remedied. This may expose, unintentionally, a perspective of linguistic imperialism whereby one language is judged as more valuable than another.

Stakeholders, including teachers and other educators, can use the findings from this research to examine and potentially improve the connections made between school and home. In order to facilitate this process, implementation tools have been created. They consist of questions which can be posed as part of an organic process to both examine and improve modes of communication. These tools may be found in Appendix 4.

In conclusion, our research demonstrates how valuable educators saw their collaboration with parents in order to succeed in their role with young learners. All educators interviewed in the present study underlined the importance of maintaining fluent communication with families, even though some parents were not always visibly involved or engaged with schools. Also, despite the variety of cultural, economic and social contexts where the research was carried out, educators tended to regard parents as partners rather than a burden or an obstacle to overcome. Most educators also felt that fluent two-way communication with parents had a positive effect on the children's learning process and saw fruitful collaboration with parents as an incentive to improve their own work. Surprisingly, however, little attention has been paid so far to the role of school-families communication in the context of early learning. We hope our findings will help encourage future research on this area and above all will help develop good practices in communication with families.

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Appendix I: List of interviews

Interview code	Country	Type of school	Male/Female interviewee
JP-1	Japan	Freelance teacher	M
JP-2	Japan	English institute	F
JP-3	Japan	English institute	F
Hours recorded: 3 hours 12 minutes			
KR-1	Korea	*Hagwon*	M
KR-2	Korea	Public school	F
KR-3	Korea	Public school	F
KR-4	Korea	Public school	F
KR-5	Korea	Public school	F
KR-6	Korea	Private school	F
KR-7	Korea	Public school	F
KR-8	Korea	*Hagwon*	F
KR-9	Korea	Public school	F
KR-10	Korea	*Hagwon*	F
KR-11	Korea	*Hagwon*	F
KR-12	Korea	Private school	M
KR-13	Korea	Public school	F
Hours recorded: 8 hours 18 minutes			
MX-1	Mexico	Private school	F
MX-2	Mexico	Private school	F
MX-3	Mexico	Private school	F
MX-4	Mexico	Public school	F
Hours recorded: 3 hours 15 minutes			
FR-1	France	Private school	M
FR-2	France	Private school	F
FR-3	France	Private school	F
FR-4	France	Private school	F
FR-5	France	Private school	F
FR-6	France	Private school	M
FR-7	France	Private school	F
FR-8	France	Private school	F
Hours recorded: 3 hours 48 minutes			
SP-1	Spain	Public school	F
SP-2	Spain	English institute	F
SP-3	Spain	Public school	F
SP-4	Spain	Private school	F
SP-5	Spain	English institute	F
SP-6	Spain	Public school	M

Interview code	Country	Type of school	Male/Female interviewee
Hours recorded: 5 hours			
PH-1	Philippines	Private school	F
PH-2	Philippines	Public school	F
PH-3	Philippines	Private school	F
PH-4	Philippines	Private school	F
PH-5	Philippines	Public school	F
PH-6	Philippines	Private school	F
PH-7	Philippines	Public school	M
PH-8	Philippines	Private school	F
PH-9	Philippines	Private school	F
PH-10	Philippines	Public school	F
Hours recorded: 3 hours 14 minutes			
NA-1	Namibia	Public school	F (several speakers)
NA-2	Namibia	Public school	F and M (several speakers)
NA-3	Namibia	Public school	F
NA-4	Namibia	Public school	F
NA-5	Namibia	Public school	F and M (several speakers)
NA-6	Namibia	Private school	F
Hours recorded: 4 hours 40 minutes			
BD-1	Bangladesh	Private school	F
Hours recorded: 26 minutes			

Appendix II: Interview questions

Background

1. What is your background (educational, linguistic, teaching experience, connections to the community)? Why were you hired to teach English at your school?

2. Who do you teach? What is the focus of the English language instruction such as listening/speaking, enjoyment of the language, literacy skills, etc.? What are the home (parents) language(s) of students? What other languages are they learning? Do you speak the parents' home language?

Interaction types

3. What types of interactions and contacts take place between schools and parents and in what language(s)?

4. What types of materials such as print and digital are used to connect families with schools? For example, printed notes, printed advertisements, text messages, web pages, etc. Which do you feel are most effective and why?

5. What are some 'special' contacts that take place such as parent-teacher conferences or meetings? What types of events are used to link parents with schools such as English language plays and variety shows?

Agency

6. Who within the school is responsible for connecting with families and what type of language skills do they possess?

7. How do schools connect with families when the teacher does not speak the learner's/parents'/caregiver's home language?

8. Are children ever used as language brokers (translators) for their parents? Please describe why, or why not, this practice takes place.

Homework and assessment

9. How do English tests or other forms of assessment serve as a form of school–home contact?

10. How does homework serve as a form of home–school contact?

Problems and concerns

11. What type of interaction takes place between the school and home when a teacher has a concern about a child's academic performance, health, socialisation, etc.?

12. What type of interaction takes place between the school and home when a parent has a concern about a child's academic performance, health, socialisation, etc.? What are appropriate and inappropriate concerns expressed by parents?

13. How does a parent express a concern regarding the English language instruction being delivered in the Young Learner ELT classroom? What individual or individuals are responsible for addressing parental concerns? What are their roles and skills?

14. What are the types of concerns that parents have? Which ones are reasonable and which ones are unreasonable?

Best practices

15. What are examples of best practices that serve to engage families with their children's English language learning experiences?

16. What are some things that could be done to improve school–home communication?

Preparation and training

17. How did you learn to work with parents? Were you trained and/or did you learn by experience? Please explain.

Appendix III: Interview samples

I1 = Interviewer 1
I2 = Interviewer 2
I = Interviewee

Sample 1

I2: If you were the sixth grade homeroom teacher, what would you do, or with any grade, what would you do if the kids were repeatedly having trouble?

I: Maybe I would just, first, talk with them in person, but if their behaviour is not improved, and then I'll just ask their parents. So I'll just call their parents, and then just invite them to meet me to talk.

I2: OK. As homeroom teacher you would have contact with the parents if there was a problem, but as subject specialised teacher, you would not have that contact…

I: Yeah. If I really want it to, I can. But I have the child who has that much trouble with me, so I can just control by having time with the homeroom teacher, and the student and me. I thought it worked, so…

I2: So when you are homeroom teacher, you have contact with parents, but as subject teacher you generally don't.

I: Yeah, generally don't. We always ask the homeroom teacher first about some student's behaviour, problem, or their grade, everything.

I2: The role of the homeroom teacher is very important then.

I: That's right.

I2: They are almost like a parent.

I: Yes, yes, exactly. In elementary school in Korea… So the homeroom teacher's role is really important. I've witnessed how a child…, they change their behaviour regarding the homeroom teacher.

I1: So you said you were homeroom teacher before.

I: Yeap.

From the interviews in Korea (KR-4: 61–82)

Sample 2

I1: How did you communicate with the parents in the *hagwon* [Korean private school]?

I: It was our responsibility to talk to them every month. So usually I made seventy to eighty phone calls a month…

I1: So mostly by phone.

I: Yeah, by phone. So we talked to them about their progress and how they are behaving in class, things like that. If you want to promote summer special classes, you have to tell them: 'Are you interested in….', you know (LAUGH).

I1: OK. So you have to sell as well. You are not just giving report on the students, but selling programmes. Do you think that helps you have a better feel for your students or…? Like having this direct contact with the parents. Do you think that was helpful to you as a teacher?

I: Yes, it was helpful, because, you know, sometimes, specially with the younger kids, it's really helpful, because they come to *hagwon* and sometimes they don't know how to behave, and in the *hagwon* I had to speak only English. I didn't really get to talk to them in Korean, so sometimes they don't really understand what I'm talking about, so I talk to the mums, and mums talk to them, in Korean at home, and yeah, the next day they behave differently so…

From the interviews in Korea (KR-2: 27–44)

Appendix IV: Tools to improve home–school communication

Tools description

The importance of context was revealed as one of the most significant findings in this research. The tools we present below aim to help educators examine their own contexts and determine ways to improve home–school connections as needed. They have been designed to elicit information regarding home–school communication and gain different perspectives, from educators, parents, and digital development specialists.

Each tool consists of a set of questions built around three issues concerning home–school communication. The first issue regards the means of communication between parents and teachers. The mechanisms for communication need to be friendly, easy and accessible for both parents and teachers depending upon the specific context of a particular school. Parents are more likely to participate if the means and modes of communication are convenient and readily available to them. Also, home–school communication should be manageable for the teachers. Communication tools not only include traditional ways of contacting families (for example phone calls, parents-teacher conferences), but also digitally-based communication such as text messages or social media applications for smart phones.

The second issue concerns how to promote parents-teachers dialogue. It is important for both teachers and parents to have a two-way communication system. If schools are disseminating information about programmes and children, there need to be places where parents can easily engage in conversation and dialogue. Administrators (including secretaries, clerical staff and directive staff) also play a key role here, as they are usually the 'filter' between teachers and parents. Teachers' concerns may be communicated to parents through administrators. Also, parents' concerns, queries or complaints may be passed on to teachers through administrators. It is then important to ensure that administrators engage actively in the dialogue between teachers and parents.

Finally, the third issue refers to the languages used in the home–school communication. It is important to make sure that the preferred language of home communication is honoured. Parents are children's first language teachers and they should be respected for whatever linguistic capital they have given their children.

The means for addressing these issues will vary depending upon the individual contexts. We suggest that you take these questions and sit down with stakeholders involved with families and use them as a form of a dialogical, organic process.

Sample Tool 1: The educator's perspective

Communication between teachers and parents

Educator stakeholders
Listed below are stakeholders who can provide invaluable insight about home–school connections. It is useful to talk with different types of stakeholders within one or several contexts because they can often provide different perspectives which can help educators strengthen and improve their connections with children's families.

a. ELT teachers working in state schools

b. Homeroom teachers

Sample Tool 2

Parents

Parent Stakeholders

Listed below are stakeholders who can provide invaluable insight into home–school connections. It is useful to talk with different types of stakeholders within one or several contexts because they can often provide different perspectives which can help educators strengthen and improve their connections with children's families.

a. Parents whose children have attended the school for at least one year

b. Parents whose children are new to the school

c. Parents who speak different home languages

d. Parents who are also teachers.

Home–school communication questions for parents and educator stakeholders

Determine parent and teacher friendly communication:

1. Which means do teachers use to communicate with parents? Phone calls? Parents-teacher conferences? Casual conversations at pick-up and drop-off times?

2. What are the most convenient ways for parents to communicate with teachers? What can be improved?

3. Which means do parents use to communicate with teachers? Phone calls? Written diaries? Parents-teacher conferences? Casual conversations at pick-up and drop-off times?

4. What is the most cost and time effective way for parents to communicate with the teachers?

Make certain that contacts facilitate two-way communication:

5. Is it easy for teachers to contact and communicate with parents? If not, what can be done to facilitate this?

6. Is it easy for parents to contact and communicate with the school? If not, what can be done to facilitate this?

7. What types of communication are most effective for parents to engage with teachers in dialogue? Teacher-parents conferences? Phone calls? If necessary, what can be improved to involve parents in a more fluent, constant dialogue?

8. What types of communication are most convenient for teachers to dialogue with parents? If necessary, what can be done to improve this dialogue?

Make certain that contacts facilitate the usage of parents' preferred language of communication:

9. What is/are the parents preferred language(s) of communication at home?

10. Which language(s) do parents use for oral communication with the school? Which language(s) do they use for written communication with the school?

11. Has/have the school preferred language(s) ever been an impediment to communication with parents? If so, what can be done to facilitate communication with parents in terms of language(s) used?

12. Do parents have opportunities to communicate in their own language(s) with the school? If not, is it because it is impractical or merely because it has not been thought of in the past?

Sample Tool 3

Digitally-based communication between teachers and parents

Determine teachers' and parents' friendly communication technology:

1. What types of technology do the parents have access to or utilise? For example, do they use smart phones, tablets or laptops with Internet connectivity?

2. What digital applications are the safest, most convenient, most popular, most inexpensive, etc. for parents and families?

3. What is the most cost-effective way for parents to communicate? Do family members prefer text or voice messages? Or do families prefer email?

4. Is social media utilised by families? If so, which is the preferred application?

Make certain that technology facilitates two-way communication:

5. Is it easy for parents to communicate digitally with the school? If not, what can be done to facilitate this?

6. Is all the information necessary for families to get in touch with the school displayed in every digital communication?

Make certain that technology helps facilitate the usage of parents' preferred language of communication:

7. What is/are the parents' preferred language(s) of communication? Which language(s) do they use for oral communication? Which language(s) do they use for written communication?

8. Do parents have opportunities to communicate in their own language(s) with the school using different digital modes of communication? If not, is it because it is impractical or merely because it has not been thought of in the past?

9. Are pieces of school generated communication including websites, social media, etc. in parents' home languages, where practical?

10. Is there a presence, in some way, shape or form, of parents' home languages using different digital media? For example, are there MP3 files available on the website for families who don't have literacy skills? Are the titles and subtitles translated into the most prominent home languages?

Sample Tool 4

Communication between teachers, administrators and parents

Determine teachers, administrators and parents communication:

1. Which means do teachers have to communicate with administrators? Casual meetings? Formal meetings? By phone? For what purposes?

2. What is the most convenient and effective way for teachers to communicate with administrators? For what purposes? How often do they need to communicate with them?

3. Which means do administrators have to communicate with parents? Phone calls? Digitally-based communication (including texts messages or emails)? How often do they need to contact parents? For what purposes?

4. Is social media utilised by administrators? If so, which is the preferred application?

Make certain that contacts facilitate two-way communication:

5. What is the most effective way for administrators to engage parents in dialogue and conversation?

6. What is the most convenient and effective way for parents to communicate with administrators?

7. Is it easy for teachers to communicate with parents through administrators? If not, what can be improved to facilitate this?

8. Is it easy for parents to communicate with teachers through administrators? If not, what can be improved to facilitate this?

Make certain that contacts facilitate the usage of parents' preferred language of communication:

9. What is/are the preferred language(s) of oral and written communication between administrators and parents?

10. Has/have the administrators' preferred language(s) ever been an impediment to communication with parents? If so, what can be done to facilitate the communication with parents in terms of language(s) used?

11. Do parents have opportunities to communicate in their own language(s) with the administrators? If not, is it because it is impractical or merely because it has not been thought of in the past?