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For refugee families, connections between the home and school may function beyond their children's social and academic success and further allow parents to be involved in their children's education in the face of cultural and linguistic barriers. However, there are few strategies for refugee parents and teachers to navigate the potential linguistic, cultural, and economic barriers in forming strong communication pathways, and this is especially true for parents and educators supporting preschool aged children. This study utilized Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and aimed to: a) understand the baseline communication processes occurring between refugee parents and their children's early childhood teacher; b) explore potential person characteristics and contextual influences that act as barriers and impede communication; c) explore potential person characteristics and contextual influences that act as supports and facilitate communication; and d) investigate the suggested strategies from participating refugee families and the educators supporting them. Participants included ten refugee parents and two preschool teachers. Data were gathered using naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews with both parents and teachers. Results indicated that unique person characteristics and contextual factors influenced how communication took place and what was communicated about. Findings highlighted the variance among the parents and teachers in communicating due to the complexity of interacting characteristics and contexts. Both parents and teachers proposed strategies to support future communication processes and implications and future directions for research are discussed.

USING BRONFENBRENNER'S PPCT MODEL AS A LENS TO UNDERSTAND  
REFUGEE PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

by

Dana M. Conlin

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Approved by

---

Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by Dana M. Conlin has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member \_\_\_\_\_

Committee Member \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Refugees represent people who were forcibly displaced from their countries of origin due to persecution, war, or conflict (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, 2018b). In this process, many refugees may experience the loss of their home country, traditions, culture, professions, socioeconomic status, language, friends and family, and plans for the future (Dow, 2011; Tribe, 2002). Further, due to not being able to prepare for the move, refugee individuals and families are more likely to arrive to their new country with fewer resources, feeble social networks, weaker language skills, and economic uncertainty (Bollinger & Hagstrom, 2004; Hwang, Xi, Cao, Feng, & Qiao, 2007; Tribe 2002). To aid in these transitions in the United States, refugee services provide short-term assistance to promote economic self-sufficiency (Halpern, 2008); however navigating the culture, language, and institutions becomes a job for the arriving families (Kenny & Lockwood-Kenny, 2011). In facing these challenges, refugees display remarkable resilience and strength, drawing on personal qualities and external areas of support that promote positive adaptation as they adjust to a new way of life (Schaefer & Moos, 1998).

Prior research highlights that one of the main factors that helps refugees adapt to their new environment and culture is the existence of social networks (Daud, af Klinteberg, & Rydelius, 2008; Weine et al., 2005). For refugee families with children,

school settings in their country of resettlement not only provide educational opportunities, but also act as a community connection and a means of integrating into mainstream society (Anderson, Hamilton, Moore, Loewen, & Frater-Mathieson, 2004). In 2002, the UNCHR asserted that education is a mechanism of rehabilitation for refugee children, and others have posited that its effects have the potential to extend to their families as well (Anderson et al., 2004; Dachyshyn, 2008; Gaitan, 2012). One of the ways this potential social network could take place is through effective refugee parent–teacher communication. Past literature continually asserts that parent involvement and family–school partnerships are critical factors in students’ educational success, especially for minority and/or vulnerable communities (Bhattacharya, 2000; Jeynes, 2003; McBrien, 2005). This claim is supported by theoretical work that posits that children’s success in school is significantly influenced by the congruency across the environments of home and school and the links in between them (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). For refugee families though, connections between the home and school may function beyond their children’s social and academic success and further allow parents to be involved in their children’s education in the face of cultural and linguistic barriers (Rah, Choi, & Nguyễn, 2009).

However, most of the research on refugee communities and families is focused on physical and mental health outcomes, their migration experiences, and governmental policies, with education being one of the least researched areas (McBrien, 2005). In addition, educational research concerning refugee children and families most often revolves around older children and young adolescents (Hoot, 2011). Thus, although the education literature asserts the importance of parent engagement for their children’s

success in schools, there is limited research on refugee parent–teacher communication, with almost all of the few studies only capturing one side of this bidirectional relationship. As of now, there are few strategies for refugee parents and teachers to navigate the potential linguistic, cultural, and economic barriers in forming strong communication pathways, and this is especially true for parents and educators supporting preschool aged children. Using Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory and process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), in the current study, I aimed to further explore the phenomenon of refugee parent–teacher communication from both perspectives. This theory provides a valuable lens to capture personal qualities, contextual influences, and potential changes over time that come to impact the communication between these two parties.

With the PPCT model as a guide, I had the following goals: (a) understand the baseline communication processes occurring between refugee parents and their children’s early childhood teacher; (b) explore potential barriers that impede communication; (c) explore potential factors that facilitate communication; and (d) investigate culturally relevant strategies derived from participating refugee families and the educators supporting them. In the next chapter, I will review the bioecological theory and how it provides a foundation to accomplish these goals and scaffolds an in-depth understanding of the ways refugee parent–teacher communication takes place.

CHAPTER II  
THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

**Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory**

A theoretical framework is necessary to guide a study, helping to explain the connections among the phenomena under observation and provide insights that lead to new discovery (Goldhaber, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For the current study, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and applied process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006) will be utilized to examine the pathways of communication between refugee parents and teachers. This particular theory captures the continuity and change defining development by simultaneously examining complex interactions, characteristics of individuals, and immediate and distal contexts, across present, future, and historical time (Bronfenbrenner, 2001; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Applying this approach allows the perspectives of both the teachers and parents to be uncovered as well as how different, overlapping, and interacting systems impact parent-teacher communication. In this way, the refugee parents and teachers both represent developing individuals within two interacting PPCT models that allow an analysis of how their person characteristics, contextual systems, and time factors intersect to directly or indirectly influence the proximal processes of communication. This chapter proceeds by overviewing the PPCT model application with the four areas of Process,

Person, Context, and Time, and how this model is dually utilized for refugee parents and teachers.

### **Proximal Process**

The first and most important feature of the PPCT model is proximal processes. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) described proximal processes as the primary mechanisms or engines driving human development. Proximal processes are reciprocal interactions that become increasingly more complex between a developing individual and the people, symbols, or even inanimate objects in his/her immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006). Put simply, proximal processes are everyday activities and interactions that take place for individuals within their present settings. For example, this could include the daily conversations between refugee parents and teachers at school drop-off or pick-up. For refugee parents these interactions may lead to learning more knowledge about the school system and/or typical scripts for communication between teachers and parents; for teachers, these exchanges may promote learning about refugee families and their interaction patterns with their children.

However, to be true proximal processes and effective interactions that produce development they must occur regularly, extended over periods of time, and become increasingly more complex (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Taking this into consideration, some aspects of interaction may take place, but in many cases communication proximal processes between refugee parents and teachers do not often occur or at least do not occur effectively.

This may be due to a number of reasons including but not limited to: language differences, cultural differences, biases, resource limitations, time constraints, and so on (Ali, 2012; McBrien, 2005; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006; Tadesse, 2014). Nevertheless, these communication proximal processes are potentially beneficial to both the refugee parent and teacher when they occur. For example, refugees who communicate with their children's teacher may be more involved in the education process and feel connected to the school's social network, positively impacting their transition into an unknown country (Hamilton, 2004). Similarly, teachers who communicate with refugee parents on a regular basis gain a better understanding of their students and are more able to meet their educational needs (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). Considering the positive outcomes, it becomes important to understand what influences communication between these two parties. Bronfenbrenner explicitly explained that "the form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p. 996) vary according to the combination of the characteristics of the developing individual, the proximate and distal contextual influences, and the continuities and changes happening over the life course and historical time. All of these components, individually and combined, will lend insight to the mechanisms behind the potential presence or absence of these important refugee parent–teacher communication processes.

### **The Developing Persons: Refugee Parents and Teachers**

Bronfenbrenner acknowledged that the developing person, the second "P" in the PPCT model, has certain biological, emotional, cognitive, and social characteristics that impact the ways in which proximal processes occur (Bronfenbrenner 2001, 2005;

Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For this study, both refugee parents and teachers are considered to be developing persons, each bringing their own individual qualities to communication processes. Bronfenbrenner named three types of influential person characteristics including demand, resource, and force characteristics (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). *Demand* characteristics are a person's immediate, outward features, such as skin color, physical appearance, gender, age, and the like. These can influence whether and how proximal processes are initiated (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006); for instance, the skin color, apparel, or general appearance of some refugees might be different than that of the teacher's and could either invite or discourage initial interactions from one party to the other. *Resource* characteristics on the other hand include the person's abilities, experiences, skills, knowledge, intelligence, as well as his or her social and material resources (e.g. housing, family members, community networks, etc.) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). For refugees, resource characteristics include language abilities, which have shown to be a major influence on whether or not effective communication practices happen between refugee parents and teachers (McBrien, 2005; Tadesse, 2014). Resource characteristics may also include the refugee parents' knowledge of or experience in the new education system and the teacher's knowledge of that family's culture. More experienced and knowledgeable refugee parents might understand the roles and expectations in communicating with their children's teacher, just as teachers who understand the cultures of the families they are working with might be better able to initiate conversations and develop relationships over time. Lastly, *force* characteristics represent a person's

disposition, temperament, motivation, persistence, etc., and can influence the start and maintenance of proximal processes (e.g. refugee parents who are more motivated to understand the education their children are receiving might be more likely to reach out to the teacher and continue to engage in later interactions) (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

These three types of person characteristics combine in patterns that further account for the form, power, content, and direction of proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A refugee parent may be very motivated and persistent (*force*) in communicating with the teacher and vice versa; however, if linguistic abilities (*resource*) are wanting, what might that mean for the occurrence of communication proximal processes between these parents and the teachers? All three person characteristics, their individual and combined contributions to the structure of the person, guide the understanding of the developing person's active role in these interactions and within differing contexts (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006).

Moreover, person characteristics are not only a part of the PPCT model, but also act as the developmental outcomes from the proximal processes that were influenced by the characteristics and interrelated contextual systems at a given time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). In this way, as refugee parents and teachers engage in effective proximal processes with each other, they might be changing their abilities, skills, motivations, knowledge, etc., and these evolving characteristics will come to impact their future interactions.



## **Context**

The third component of the PPCT model is Context, which involves four different interrelated ecological systems that directly and indirectly influence (and are influenced by) the developing person and the proximal processes occurring (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The *microsystem* defines the immediate environments that the developing person is in and where patterns of proximal processes take place (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994), such settings as home, school, peer groups, community centers, etc. For refugee parents, their main microsystems might include their home, their work place, and any community centers aiding them in transitioning to this country. The school their children attend may function as a lesser microsystem for parents since patterns of reoccurring proximal processes still take place with the teacher even though the majority of parents' time is not in this setting. For teachers, the school setting and classroom environments act as predominant microsystems in which they spend a majority of time due to the fact that it is their place of work. It is in the school setting that communication processes would occur despite the fact that refugee parents might have limited time within this environment.

Next, Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the *mesosystem* as the interconnectedness and linkages between immediate settings (i.e. microsystems) and hypothesized that the “developmental potential of a setting is increased as a function of the number of supportive links existing between that setting and other settings” (p. 215). The mesosystem has also been referred to as a system of microsystems; for refugee parents,

this could include the connections and interrelations among home, school, and workplace settings, and for teachers, the connections between their home, school, and potentially the settings of the refugee families they work with.

Similarly, the *exosystem* also comprises the linkages between two or more systems, but one setting does not physically contain the developing person and the events within it indirectly influence proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). For example, the workplace of refugee parents acts as an exosystem for the teacher and influences the interactions between the two parties. If refugee parents are required to report to their workplace early and leave late, this may altogether cut the opportunity for family–school communication and contribute to absent proximal processes. In a similar way, teachers may have other responsibilities outside of the school setting that put constraints on their time to communicate with parents (i.e. family responsibilities, second jobs). Further, processes within the classroom, the teachers’ microsystem, might require teachers’ time, such as supervising children, cleaning up stations, and completing classroom tasks. These influences directly impact communication opportunities for teachers, but indirectly influence these processes for parents, as they are not a part of that microsystem.

Lastly, Bronfenbrenner (1994) defined the *macrosystem* as the overarching system that envelops the other systems in reference to a group’s culture, subculture, and social structure whose members share “belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, life-styles, opportunity structures, hazards, and life course options” (p. 39). For example, cultural differences in beliefs play into how refugee parents and teachers interact with each other. Some refugee parents may not know the expectations

of parent–teacher communication because in their culture teachers had educational authority and parents may not have interfered out of respect (McBrien, 2005). If parents still hold these cultural values they may feel less inclined to initiate communication and engage in these processes out of respect despite being in a different country. On the teacher’s side, misunderstanding these beliefs from another sociocultural world may lead to assumptions that refugee parents are indifferent to their children’s education (Ali, 2012; Gaitan, 2012), which may impact how teachers approach communication.

### **Time**

The last component of the PPCT model is time, including microtime (the continuity and change in ongoing proximal processes), mesotime (the periodicity and consistency of these processes across different time intervals—days, weeks, months, etc.) and macrotime (encompassing the continuity and change not only in the developing person, but also in the environments the developing person lives within). Singh, Sylvia, and Ridzi (2015) utilized Bronfenbrenner’s conceptualization of macrotime, also known as the chronosystem, to analyze how refugees have fled from one macrosystem to the next, which in turn shifts their micro-, meso-, and exo- systems. These changes and ecological transitions in *past* time will come to impact how refugee parents and teachers interact, alongside *present* and *future* time.

### **The Current Study**

In the current study, I utilized Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model to guide an in-depth understanding of the ways in which communication proximal processes between refugee parents and teachers occur. I drew from the theory’s assumptions and constructs to

comprehend the influences of person characteristics, contexts, and historical time on refugee parent–teacher communication. However, to truly comprehend what is occurring, a single perspective from that of the parent or that of the teacher is not sufficient. Insights into the refugee parents’ and teachers’ characteristics, contexts, and changes over time are dually needed to fully examine the form, content, and direction of the proximal processes occurring between them. This dual perspective calls for the use of parallel PPCT models, in which the refugee parent is the developing person in one and the teacher is the developing person in another. This allows for greater understanding from both sides as it captures their individual voices, stories, and lives and attempts to weave together an explanation for the emerging patterns of interactions. In the next chapter, the past and current literature on refugee parent–teacher communication is reviewed in light of the PPCT model concepts. For refugee families, this involves understanding their past experiences and why these particular proximal processes with teachers are so important. Evident person characteristics, contexts, and time factors will be highlighted.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is guided by the theoretical work of Bronfenbrenner and his applied PPCT model to explore the current research that highlights person characteristics, contextual influences, and time aspects that come to impact the ways refugee parent–teacher communication takes place. In this chapter, I will first review refugee experiences, which are critical to understanding the underlying mechanisms behind potential communication pathways with teachers. Further, research on the importance of this connection between parents and teachers will be explored as well as potential individual and contextual barriers to its formation. Lastly, potential supports and implied strategies for creating effective communication are reviewed in light of refugee parent and teacher perspectives.

#### **The Refugee Experience**

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are over 68.5 million people worldwide forcibly displaced from their homes due to conflict and/or persecution, with 25.4 million of those being refugees (UNHCR, 2018a). Refugees are often defined as people who are forced from their home country to escape persecution, war, violence and/or natural disasters (UNHCR, 2018b). Refugees seek asylum in foreign countries and cannot often return home without risking their safety. In 2017 and 2018, the most refugees came from Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Democratic

Republic of the Congo, and Myanmar (UNCHR, 2018b). The United States is one of the top countries to respond to this global crisis, accepting around 600,000 refugees over the last 15 years, and over 3 million since 1975 (UNHCR, 2018b, 2018c). In addition, North Carolina, where this study took place, is one of the top states for refugee resettlement, with 30,953 refugees accepted from 2001 to 2018 (Alpert & Hussein, 2017; Kaplan, 2018). The Refugee Processing Center (2017) has further indicated that Guilford County has had 2,934 refugees resettled from 2013 to 2017.

Immigrants and refugees share many similarities and encounter related realities. The main distinguishing factor between the definitions of a migrant and a refugee comes down to the choice in moving. In this paper, I utilize these definitions based on past literature, but acknowledge that the lived experiences of immigrants and refugees may involve many of areas of overlap. Aligning with past definitions, refugee families normally have to flee from their homes at short notice due to war, violence, human rights abuse, economic upheaval, and/or persecution based on political, religious, ethnic, or gendered reasons (Tribe, 2002). They are often *involuntarily* forced to migrate compared to immigrants who choose to change their residency and have been able to mentally and physically plan for the move over time (Dow, 2011; Kunz, 1973). Immigrants are also seen to have the continued protection of their home countries' governments if they were to return, which may aid their migration experiences (Morrow, 1994). It is important to keep in mind that immigrants face numerous obstacles and barriers moving to a new country just as refugees do, however, where they differ in whether the move is voluntary or involuntary has significant repercussions. Involuntary migration, more common

among refugees, has been proven to be a robust predictor of mental distress (Hwang et al., 2007).

For many immigrants, voluntary migration, stronger language skills, available support in the new country, and positive expectations are associated with better outcomes and positive adjustment (Escobar, Nervi, & Gara, 2000; Hwang et al., 2007); however, for refugees, these premigration scenarios are exceptions. Coming from violence, persecution, loss, and uncertainty (Ritsner, Modai, & Ponizovsky, 2000; Yakushko, Watson, & Thompson, 2008) puts refugees and their families at high-risk for later emotional, mental, and physical health problems (Aroian & Norris, 2003). Further, premigration stressors do not disappear as families resettle, yet may shift from facing imminent danger to tackling transitional challenges.

Past literature has primarily focused on the mental and physical health disparities refugees face, with one meta-analysis revealing that one in ten refugees had posttraumatic stress disorder, one in 20 had major depression, and one in 25 had a generalized anxiety disorder (Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005). In addition, refugees experience acculturation stress and relocation stress as they attempt to adapt to a new culture, language, and established society (Beiser & Hyman, 1997; Yakushko et al., 2008). Refugees face other stressors in finding employment (Abdelkerim & Grace, 2012; Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006), shifting to a lower socioeconomic status (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Bemak, Chung, & Pedersen, 2003; Dow, 2011), facing poverty (Jacobsen, 2012), and experiencing a loss in life projects and valued occupational roles (Miller, Worthington, Muzurovic, Tipping, & Goldman, 2002; Ritsner, Ponizovsky, Nechamkin,

& Modai, 2001). Additionally, refugees often face multiple stressors surrounding racism, discrimination, stereotyping, and negative stigmas (Dow, 2011; Fozdar & Torezani, 2008; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Tribe 2002), which may affect their native cultural identities in addition to their ability to fit in to their new environment (Marlowe, 2010).

Further, the loss of their cultural roots and the difficulties in integrating into a new and unknown country may result in feelings of homelessness between two worlds, without belonging to either (Barnes, 2001; Falicov, 2005), while language barriers exacerbate virtually every other issue and perpetuate feelings of isolation (Dow, 2011; Gray & Elliott, 2001). Many refugees report social isolation, loss of family members, and loss of community to be main stressors as they arrive and adapt to a new country and these altered or absent social networks negatively impact mental health outcomes and adjustment (Beiser & Hyman, 1997; Bemak et al., 2003; Miller et al., 2002; Ritsner et al., 2000; Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacherez, 2006.)

Despite all the contextual challenges and stressors, refugees display remarkable resilience, strength, and positive adaptation. Refugees continually show courage, endurance, and determination to rise above their tragedies and make it in their new lives (Walsh, 2007). Personal characteristics such as motivation, positive outlooks, determination, and willingness have been shown to transform even the most difficult experiences into opportunities for growth for these families (Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007; Walsh, 2007; Weine et al., 2004). Refugees also draw support from their families (Schaffer & Moos, 1998; Walsh, 2007; Weine et al., 2004), their faith (Alqudah, 2013), and their participation in communities. Further, whether faith-based or not, when



refugees make community connections their wellbeing and network of support increases, aiding in the transition and acculturation process (Nawyn, 2006).

One of the most important communities for refugee families is the school, as it provides a means of integrating into main society (Adams & Kirova, 2007). In addition, educational opportunities provide refugee families with hope and they express happiness that their children will get better educational experiences than in their home country; they are motivated to support them and display an optimistic outlook about their future (Deng & Marlowe, 2013; Zajacova, 2002). Educational literature repeatedly emphasizes the importance of home–school connections and parental involvement (Bhattacharya, 2000, 2010; Jeynes 2003; Macgregor, 2007; Wamba, 2014), but for refugees these connections may mean more than just the child’s academic success and adjustment and span to include forming networks of support for the entire family (Haines, Summers, & Turnbull, 2014a; McBrien, 2005).

### **Mesosystem Potential: The Importance of Home–School Connections for Refugee Families**

Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited that the developmental potential of a setting increases if it is more supportively linked to other settings (i.e. mesosystem linkages). Thus, the stronger the connections between immediate settings may lead to more favorable developmental outcomes. This theoretical assumption is largely connected to children’s educational success, in which congruency between home and school environments positively influences children’s academic achievement (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Empirical evidence demonstrates that the extent to which families are involved in

their children's education, at school and within the home, is a robust predictor of school achievement, despite income, social status, educational level or cultural background (Jeynes, 2003; Macgregor, 2007). However, forming these mesosystem linkages are not just important for refugee children's success. For refugee children *and* parents, schools are also means of integration into mainstream society (Anderson et al., 2004) and through forming relationships with their children's teachers, parents are able to be involved in the school microsystem and this avenue of integration becomes available. Therefore, creating these microsystem pathways of communication between refugee parents and teachers and fostering mesosystem home-school connections may: (a) promote the academic, social, and emotional adjustment and success for refugee children; (b) encourage community building and social connections; and (c) afford refugee parents the capacity to be involved and have a voice in their children's education.

### **Academic, Social, and Emotional Adjustment and Success for Refugee Children**

Prior literature has stressed the importance of parent-teacher communication—a form of broader home-school connections and parental involvement—as an important factor for children's success in school (Coelho et al., 2018); this is especially true for minority students and/or economically disadvantaged students (Bhattacharya, 2000, 2010; Jeynes 2003; McBrien 2005). Refugee children and parents represent a population that is most often economically disadvantaged, linguistically isolated, and cultural distinct (Hamilton & Moore, 2004) and thus can benefit greatly through parent-teacher communication. Hoot (2011) asserts that teachers can help refugee children be successful in school and in later life by forming meaningful relationships with their

families. In addition, Bhattacharya's (2000) findings demonstrated that the links between immigrant and refugee parents and schools is important for children's adjustment process, specifically if partnerships are formed between parents and teacher. Researchers also found that the lack of communication between refugee parents and the school was a significant barrier to the children's academic progress and success as well as their social adjustment within schools (Jones, 1998). Since refugee parent-teacher communication is generally minimal or absent, joining home and school contexts has great potential to help refugee families understand school practices and expectations and aid them in creating better educational opportunities for their children in the present and in later schooling (McBrien, 2005).

### **Community Building**

Hamilton and Moore (2004) insisted that schools offer social support and acceptance and as institutions that are a huge part of families' lives for a number of years, it is imperative that schools and teachers play a role in creating a supportive community. The mentorship, safety, caring, acceptance, and support networks within schools and preschools help ensure that these settings become a "resilience factor" and not another "risk factor" in the lives of refugee families (Hamilton & Moore, 2004, p. 63). In such a way, preschools and schools have the potential to provide bridges to refugee families and create strong networks of support, belongingness, and empowerment that fight against the postmigration feelings of homelessness, isolation, and loss of community (Dachyshyn, 2008; Mitchell & Ouko, 2012). Correspondingly, Kirova and Hennig (2013) claim that relations between refugee parents and preschool staff is of great importance for refugee

families during their first months and years in a new country. The connections and relationships function as an important social network when refugees do not have one or have not established a new one (Lunneblad, 2017). Further, preschools and schools and the activities that occur within them provide structure to the everyday lives of refugee children and their families. These connections and structure are great resources for refugee families and provide opportunities for refugee children to make friends and for parents to learn more about the educational system and culture of their new country with the assistance of teachers and school staff.

### **Refugee Parents' Voices: Involvement in Their Children's Education**

Refugee parents often express a desire to be involved with their children's education, and to be more connected to schools and their children's teachers (Isik-Ercan, 2012). However, when communication does not take place, refugee parents' voices in their children's education becomes ignored. Inoway-Ronnie, Ellsworth, and Ames (1998) found that many refugee parents did not like how their children were being taught in preschool, with the mainstream emphasis on play rather than direct instruction. Despite this, researchers observed that the Head Start preschool in their study did not legitimize the concerns of these refugee parents and no negotiations were discussed that might have addressed refugee parents' cultural values and beliefs. Researchers suggested that a more explicit dialogue between refugee parents and teachers might have helped in approaching these differences. These findings were supported by more recent studies, including Adair and Tobin (2008) and Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2009), in which all researchers argued that the different viewpoints that often appear between

immigrant/refugee parents and preschool teachers could be effectively explored through communication between the two parties. Further, when communication is blocked, parents also cannot advocate for their children's diverse and cultural needs. For instance, Isik-Erican (2012) found that parents were not able to advocate for their children's special cultural diets. Their lack of knowledge about their rights within the school and the lack of communication led to barriers for parents that may have easily been ameliorated through parent-teacher communication. Strong family-teacher communication and relationships within the school microsystem might aid in launching refugee families as partners in their children's education, improving educational outcomes *and* empowering families (Gaitin, 2012; Haines et al., 2014a). However, both refugee families and teachers face barriers in forming these relationships and setting up effective pathways of communication.

### **Barriers Impeding Refugee Parent-Teacher Communication**

Refugee families and teachers both have a lot to gain from establishing strong communication pathways. For families, the benefits do not just include academic success and adjustment for their child, but also community and educational inclusion. For teachers, communication with refugee parents might provide new insights on how to meet their students' educational and diverse needs and/or address behavioral issues within the classroom (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). However, both parties face multiple barriers that impede communication. Past research on why these interactions are absent or ineffective highlight macrosystem differences, such as coming from different sociocultural worlds and different language backgrounds. In addition, person

characteristics in the form of biases or stereotypes may present challenges to communication and/or exosystem influences and resources constraints.

### **Language Differences**

One of the most prominent macro-barriers indicated in past literature by both refugee parents and teachers is language differences (Ali, 2012; McBrien, 2005; Rah et al., 2009; Szente & Hoot, 2006; Szente, Hoot, & Taylor, 2006; Tadesse, 2014). On top of that, many refugee parents have reported feeling self-conscious about their language fluency and their ability to speak “correct” English, which hinders initial communication and potential sustained relationships with their children’s teachers (Bhattacharya, 2000; Rah et al., 2009). The lack of proficiency in English and lack of confidence compile to form one of the largest barriers for refugee parent–teacher communication, making the school system as a whole seem more intimidating (Ali, 2012) and perpetuating feelings of societal alienation (Beiser, & Hou, 2006). In addition, both refugee parents and schools do not often have the resources or strategies to bridge existing language gaps (Isik-Ercan, 2012).

### **Cultural Differences**

Differences in cultural values, beliefs, and experiences function as other macro-barriers that are also consistently cited in previous literature, with their effects manifesting in multiple ways to impede parent–teacher communication (McBrien, 2005). At the individual level, Rutter (1994) explained that refugee parents might have had a lack of formal education and/or limited access to educational opportunities due to the conditions in their home country and migration ordeals. Thus, commonplace methods of

communication, such as sending translated notes home, no longer work because parents might not know how to read and write in their own language (Rah et al., 2009).

However, whether or not refugee parents are exposed to formal education in their country, their school experiences are often severely different from that in America (Rutter, 1994, 2006) and many refugee families struggle in navigating the school system, especially if no such system existed in their home country (i.e. preschool and early childhood education centers) (Massing, Kirova, & Hennig, 2016; Turney & Kao, 2009). This puts them at a disadvantage when they are unfamiliar with the classroom practices taking place and when expectations conflict with what they know from their own cultural beliefs (McBrien (2011). For example, teachers' expectations of parental involvement and communication may be different compared to the cultural criterion of involvement in the parents' home country (Adari, 2009; Ali, 2012). This limited or absent knowledge of the expectations, processes, and procedures in U.S schooling generate feelings of discomfort and influence how refugee parents are involved in schools, potentially inhibiting communication with teachers and parents' overall participation in their children's schooling (Gaitan, 2012; McBrien 2005; Rah et al., 2009).

Similarly, as refugee parents are not "fluent" in the ways of an unknown educational system, teachers are often unfamiliar with refugee families' cultural and educational backgrounds, experiences, and values (Tadesse, 2014). This limited or lack of knowledge on their students' life, language, culture, family, and refugee experiences hinders teachers' ability to meet the educational, social, and emotional needs of these children and their families (Szente & Hoot, 2006). For example, teachers may not

understand the caution and mistrust many refugees demonstrate around authority figures and communication impediments can grow from this misunderstanding (Szente & Hoot, 2006). Hurley, Saini, Warren, and Carberry's findings show how mistrust and lagging communication function in a cyclic nature, with the lack of communication generating mistrust and mistrust proving to be a barrier to effective communication (2013). In addition, Hurley and colleagues found that teachers struggle when cultural expectations of the parents differ from that of the preschool. For instance, when teachers reached out to communicate with parents one teacher reported, "When we ask for input we get, 'You are the teacher. You decide'" (Hurley et al., 2013, p. 82). This is a common finding as many refugee parents report respect for teachers and express that they should have full authority when dealing with the education of their child (McBrien, 2005; Tadesse, 2014); however, this cultural difference inhibits the formation of refugee parent-teacher communication if only one side has the authority. It is important to note though that expectations of parent involvement are deeply embedded within U.S. culture and differing views as described are not misguided; understanding cultural differences as such might give insight on ways to meet multiple expectations of communication to provide support for transitioning families and their children as well as teachers.

### **Biases and Stereotypes**

Spawning from macrolevel cultural differences and misunderstandings, refugee parents and teachers may also form person-level biases and stereotypes about each other. For example, many teachers may assume that immigrant parents are not interested in their children's education due to a lack of involvement or communication (Ariza, 2000;



Delgado-Gaitan, 1991). Further, Walker-Dalhouse and Dalhouse (2009) found that teachers perceived refugee parents' lack of knowledge about U.S. school involvement practices as indifference. The lack of cultural awareness in these instances produces biases and/or racial barriers that inhibit communication on the interpersonal level (Eberly, Joshi, & Konzal, 2007). Despite whether or not teachers are actually biased towards these families, many refugee families still reported feeling as if teachers stereotyped them and their children, and thought teachers were unwilling to take their views into consideration (Tadesse, 2014). Further, when attempting to communicate with teachers, immigrant and refugee mothers often expressed feeling "looked down upon" (Ali, 2012).

Interestingly, one of the main stereotypes refugee parents hold for teachers is the fact that teachers are biased or hold prejudices against their family and children because of their race, ethnicity, religion, refugee status, or assumed socioeconomic status and have low academic expectations for their children (Ali, 2012). Creating this image of a biased teacher develops mistrust and prevents effective communication between these families and their children's teachers from the start.

### **Time and Resource Constraints**

Another barrier to communication between refugee parents and teachers is a lack of resources and/or time, which are often a result of exosystem and macrosystem related influences. For example, material and monetary needs place near intractable constraints on parents' time for involvement (Rah et al., 2009) as well as conflicting work schedules (Bhattacharya, 2000) and issues with transportation (Massing et al., 2016). Further, refugee parents are often preoccupied with other pressing needs, such as economic

survival and attempts to rebuild their lives (McBrien, 2005, 2011). Many report coming home overworked and exhausted and thus would have limited time to be actively engaged in communicating with their children's teachers (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). Haines, Summer, and Turnbull (2014a) observed a refugee family and their child as they participated in a Head Start program. From the parents' perspective, one of the barriers in forming a refugee family-teacher partnership included other familial responsibilities (i.e. having to take care of other children, household duties).

In a similar way, teachers reported limited school resources and time constraints impacted communication between them and refugee families (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). A lack of school resources—linguistical, emotional, and psychological—hinder refugee families' transition into school, especially if that school has restricted access to translators (Rah et al., 2009). In addition, Haines and colleagues (2014a) found that barriers for staff included other responsibilities within the classroom and outside the classroom that restricted their time and limited their knowledge of the children's home life, family, and culture.

### **Supports and Strategies Facilitating Refugee Parent-Teacher Communication**

Prior research emphasizes some methods to establishing effective refugee parent-teacher communication even though literature on support factors and strategies that facilitate these pathways is lacking. At the person level, Haines and colleagues (2014a) found that refugee families' willingness to participate in school-related activities and respect for teachers were main factors in forming a relationship with their child's teacher, while teachers and school staff that cared for the students (measured through qualitative

interviews) were more likely to reach out and involve families. However, in tackling other barriers, Waterman and Harry (2008) asserted that refugee parent–teacher communication and relationships “cannot be approached in the same ways that parent involvement has traditionally been understood and implemented within schools” (p. 16). To truly foster refugee parent participation and involvement, innovative methods and strategies need to be taken that do not just cater to mainstream families (see also Isik-Erican, 2012).

This may simply start with refugee parents and teachers gaining knowledge about each other. Gaitan (2012) described family–school partnerships as a power relationship of knowledge; knowledge that parents have of the educational system and knowledge that schools have about the families they support. Gaitan asserted that families may become empowered when they become involved and learn the language of the school. Schools also benefit when this happens because it opens up doors for strong communication pathways with families. Teachers may become aware of the responsibilities refugee parents have (i.e. work, language classes, familial responsibilities) and start to dismantle the assumptions that immigrant and refugee parents are indifferent towards their children’s education (Hoot, 2011). In addition, when parents work closely with teachers, they learn classroom expectations and became empowered in their children’s education (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Md-Yunus (2009) also advised that teachers should attempt to see things from the families’ perspective and exercise flexibility in working with families whose culture does not emphasize parental involvement. Waniganayake (2001) stressed the importance of preschool teachers receiving training on working with refugee children

and their families and Haines and colleagues (2014b) argued that preschool teachers need time, authority, and professional development in order to be able to be culturally responsive to refugee families they serve.

Gaining knowledge of each other's worlds helps break down macro-level differences, exosystem misunderstandings, and person-level biases that impact communication proximal processes between refugee parents and teacher. One way that refugee parents and teachers can gain knowledge about each other is through cultural liaisons or first language facilitators who have an in-depth understanding of the school culture and the culture of the family. Cultural liaisons and first language facilitators can act as brokers to develop strong communication between refugee parents and teachers (Hamilton, 2004). Hurley, Medici, Stewart, and Cohen (2011) found that a cultural liaison was able to strengthen the relationship between parents and the preschool, enable young children to communicate effectively, and even aid teachers in developing cultural competence within classroom practices. Similarly, Massing and colleagues (2016) found that first language facilitators and cultural brokers were helpful to engage communities and involve families. Results from this study displayed that first language facilitators and cultural brokers were able to: (a) integrate parental knowledge and cultural tools/objects into the preschool; (b) enable teachers to understand families' home reality and traditions; and (c) model the use of the home language for children. Kirova and Hennig (2013) further observed how cultural brokers and first language facilitators played a critical role and provided a holistic cultural lens that gave insight to the multifaceted experiences of these families, focusing on their strengths rather than deficits. Without this, the refugee

families' ways of being may be misinterpreted by the teacher and classroom practices may prove inappropriate. Unfortunately, many programs do not have access to cultural brokers or first language facilitators, thus a proposed alternative is to let parents guide how to be involved instead of programs imposing expectations on them (Massing et al., 2016).

Other researchers advocate that schools and teachers should take initiative in involving refugee families and utilize multidimensional approaches. For instance, Ariza (2000) proposed that teachers should guide families on what to expect, encourage families to share their culture with the class, highlight students' cultures through posters, pictures, or collages, and invite parents to partake in classroom activities while providing adult interpreters. In addition, Tadesse (2014) asserted that schools and teachers should take up more of the responsibility in the forming communication pathways, including hiring bilingual staff, translating documents, and creating support groups. Hamiton (2004) suggested that schools should develop parent outreach programs, support teacher training, and focus on mechanisms for community outreach and integration (also see Tadesse, 2014). Isik-Erican (2012) also posited that teachers might want to get involved in the refugee communities that they serve to gain a better understanding of those communities and potentially contribute to the educational and religious programs outside of school. Isik-Erican further suggested that home visits, depending on the culture of the family, might be beneficial for creating stronger connections between parents and teachers because it gives the parents respect as hosts, relieving tension and allowing teachers to understand the family's reality.

Prior research has also found that inviting parents to plan and participate in meals with ethnically diverse food resulted in more responsive relationships between preschool personnel and refugee parents (Hurley et al., 2013). When educators set out to learn from refugee families about the preparation of food, warmer relationships were able to develop despite the communication barriers. Researchers further suggested that other activities such as gardening, painting, and/or sewing could also provide avenues for building supportive relationships between families and schools. In addition, planning activities in which multiple family members can participate, such as younger or older siblings, has been suggested to help alleviate more barriers that keep refugee families from school participation and communication (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services, 2007).

Many of the proposed strategies are effective in establishing clear communication channels that will develop solid connections between schools and refugee families. However, time, financial, and resource constraints may still limit these strategies and outreach methods. This is especially true if schools lack access to translators, professional development avenues, and funds to support teacher-initiative efforts.

### **The Current Study**

Assumptions of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model and past empirical research support the notion that home-school connections are important for refugee families, with equal benefits for teachers. However, much of the past literature only looks at the perspectives of *either* the parents or the school staff, with only three studies capturing the voices of both (i.e. Haines et al., 2014a; Tadesse, 2014; Walker-Dalhouse &

Dalhouse, 2009). This is often stated as a main limitation of many studies and Hurley et al. (2011) encouraged future research to not just include the school's perspective, but also capture the perspectives of the families (see also Rah et al., 2009). They stated, "Only by listening to the voices of refugee families from a variety of countries can we learn how to provide more culturally sensitive services" (Hurley et al., 2011, p. 165). In addition, the studies that involved both perspectives had the following issues: parents had a good command of English (Tadesse, 2014), something that typically is not the case; the study involved only one family (Haines et al., 2014a); the researcher retrospectively interviewed teachers and parents who had no school connections to each other (Walker-Dalhouse & Dalhouse, 2009). In addition, to date, there is a scarcity of research concerning the educational experiences of refugee children and their families' involvement, with the majority exploring issues relating to older children and/or adolescents (Anderson et al., 2004; McBrien, 2005).

Thus, in this study, I aimed to gain additional information on the factors, individual and contextual, that impede and facilitate the communication processes that occur between refugee parents and teachers, specifically during the early childhood years. Early childhood is a particularly important time for young children, influencing their literacy acquisition, mathematical and numeracy skills, and even their self-regulation and executive functioning (Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Further, the education children receive in preschool has been shown to have positive impacts spanning past formal education and into adulthood (Belfield, Nores, Barnett, & Schweinhart, 2006; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002). These early educational

experiences also set the stage for families to understand and start parent–teacher communication and relationships. Considering these impacts, the lack of research with young refugee children and their families presents a severe lacuna in the literature; this study joins other emerging studies to fill this gap to comprehend the processes occurring between this unique population and early educational systems. Thus, targeting refugee parent–teacher communication in preschool and using Bronfenbrenner’s concept of proximal processes, this study’s first research question is:

1. What communication proximal processes are taking place between refugee parents and teachers?

Further, the bioecological theory and literature review for this study emphasized how communication processes between refugee parents and teachers are influenced by interacting concepts of person characteristics and contextual systems across time. I aimed to further explore these influences on this relationship and thus had the following two research questions:

2. What factors (i.e. person characteristics and/or contextual factors) are acting as barriers and impeding communication between refugee parents and early childhood teachers?
3. What factors (person characteristics and/or contextual factors) are acting as supports and facilitating communication between refugee parents and early childhood teachers?

Finally, in this study, I hoped to help fill another gap in the literature by collecting both the perspectives of refugee parents and the preschool teachers that work with their children. I sought to provide information on strategies to improve communication between these two parties and thus had the final research question:



4. What factors and processes do refugee parents believe would improve communication and what factors and processes do the teachers believe would improve communication?

To answer these research questions, this study utilized a qualitative approach with naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews in line with collecting data on person characteristics, contextual systems, and occurring communication processes. The next chapter will go further in depth on the methodology that was utilized to answer these research questions as well as the plan for analyses.

## CHAPTER IV

### METHODS

#### **Researchers' Positionality**

This research was conducted in the context of an ongoing, university project investigating refugee-parent literacy practices and interactive reading techniques in multilingual and multicultural settings. The research team consisted of women, comprising two professors and two graduate students of diverse ethnicity and nationality from a department of Human Development and Family Studies. One professor spoke Swahili and English and the rest of the team members spoke predominately English. My role in this literacy project included, but was not limited to, data collection and management, qualitative analyses, and the production of proposals and papers. Derived from the larger project, in this study I explored parent–teacher communication using similar qualitative methods. These methods function to capture the perspectives of people involved in complex contexts (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005) and understand the underlying mechanisms behind the phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2009). I and the other graduate student conducted all analyses and met once a month to debrief and establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). Similar debriefing meetings were held with one of the professors in which I engaged in critical, self-reflexive practices to understand my own positionality in interpreting the data as a White American woman who is neither a refugee nor a teacher (Pillow, 2010).

## **The Study Site**

This study took place in collaboration with a nonprofit agency designated to serving refugees located in Guilford County, North Carolina. The agency serves over 600 refugees each year from multiple countries fleeing from political instability, conflict, and persecution. The agency offers differ levels of English courses as well as educational and vocational services. In addition, the agency has two transitional early care classrooms so parents may attend classes with free access to childcare; one is designated for infants (0-3 years of age) and another for preschool-aged children (3-5 years of age). The amount of parent–child dyads that attend the classrooms varies by day. During this project, the daily average of parent–child dyads that signed in for the preschool classroom was around nine, with a range of six to thirteen, and for the infant classroom there was an average of seven, ranging from two to ten dyads coming in each day.

## **Participants**

### **Refugee Parents**

Working with the agency’s directors, parents with young children were invited to an informational recruitment session and asked if they would like to participate in the larger literacy project. Arabic, Burmese, and Swahili translators mediated these interactions and further went through the consent form with parents who were interested; a total of eleven parents agreed to participate. Several months into this project, these parents were given information about the current study on parent–teacher communication and individually asked if they would like to participant. Of the original eleven mothers,

ten were included in the present study, with one excluded because she was the teacher of the infant classroom.

Of the recruited parents for this study, one had a child in the infant classroom, seven mothers had children in the preschool classroom, and one mother had children in both. Another mother had a daughter whose child attended the agency's program in the past, but was currently enrolled in an off-site statewide pre-K program. This mother was not excluded because she offered further insight into existing factors that impact effective parent-teacher communication. Overall, five mothers were from various countries in the Middle East and five were from Myanmar, formerly Burma. Participants spoke an array of languages, with many speaking more than one while they learned English. In addition, the migration journey for each mother varied in terms of where they found refuge before resettling in the United States, as well as the amount of years these mothers had been in the United States (see Table 1). Pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names during data collection and throughout this paper.

The five mothers who originated from countries in the Middle East included Allea, Hyza, Najah, Mahida, and Radeyah. Allea, a mother of five, is originally from Syria and has been in the United States for two years with her children and husband. Her children are aged 14, 12, 7, 4, and 3. Her family speaks Arabic, but the children have gained multiple English skills from school. In her home country, she had limited schooling and did not work while her husband was a farmer.

Hyza is originally from Iraq and has lived in the United States for four years and nine months with her two sons (ages 13 and 4) and husband. In Iraq, Hyza had nine years

of schooling and her husband completed his law degree. Due to conflict, the family fled to the Ukraine. Hyza speaks mainly Kurdish and some English and her husband speaks Arabic, Kurdish, German, Russian, Persian, and English.

Najah is a mother of four children, ages 7, 5, 3, and 1. She is from Sudan, but had to flee to Chad. In Sudan, Najah was able to reach secondary school and started studying again at the refugee camp in Chad; she was also an assistant nurse at the hospital. She speaks Arabic, Masalit, and some English and her family has been in the United States for three years.

Similarly, Mahida is also from Sudan. She is an expectant mother who already has a two-year old son. She speaks Arabic and a little English and has had some secondary schooling. Her family fled to Lebanon for eight months before arriving in the United States two years ago.

Lastly, Radeyah, a mother of four (ages 13, 11, 8, and 5), is from Sudan, but had to flee when she was very young. She spent sixteen years in Ethiopia at a refugee camp before coming to the United States three years ago. At the camp, she was not able to go to school because her father did not want her to, but she worked at the hospital and as a cook for the children at the camp. Radeyah speaks Arabic and has a good command of English and has just found employment in the United States.

The other five mothers, Inzali, Nu, Aung, Maiah, and Tara, are all from Burma. Inzali is a mother of two children, ages five and three, and her family has been in the United States for six years. She and her husband speak Chin and Burmese. In Burma, she attended school up until ninth grade and helped her family with farming.

Nu speaks Karen and Burmese and is a mother of two (ages 7 and 4). In Burma, her family consisted of farmers and herders and she did not go to school. She fled to Malaysia before arriving in the United States four years and six months ago.

Aung, a mother of a six and three year old, has been in the United States for four years. She is well educated, completing some college back in Burma and at a Thailand refugee camp. She volunteered at the camp and taught young children history and shared her people's cultural knowledge. She speaks Karenni, Burmese, and English.

Maiah spent ten years in a Thai refugee camp after fleeing Burma. She was not able to afford to go to school, but started studying a little at the camp. She has been in the United States for five and a half years and originally was located in Texas. There she worked in a chicken factory, but her husband got a job and they moved to North Carolina. She is now a full-time mother with a four-year-old son.

Lastly, Tara is a mother of six children (ages 15, 14, 10, 8, 4, and 3) and lives in a household with her children, husband, and parents in law. She speaks Kyan, Karenni, and Burmese and has been in the United States for nine years. She was only able to attend school up until kindergarten in Burma and then helped her family around their household and farm.

### **Agency's Teachers**

The infant classroom and preschool classroom teachers were recruited at a later date through direct interaction. Both teachers were females as well as mothers whose children also attended the agency's program. The infant classroom teacher, Ahera (pseudonym), was a former refugee from Eritrea and fled to Ethiopia before resettling in

the United States. She has multiple years working in early childcare settings, beginning at a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Grace (pseudonym), the preschool teacher, is European American, has a Bachelors in community health education, and although she recently has become involved in early childhood education in her job at the agency, she has past experiences volunteering with children in Bosnia and Romania and with children with special needs (see Table 2).

Table 1. Parent Demographics

<b>Mother</b>	<b>Language(s)</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>County of Refuge</b>	<b>Time in U.S.</b>
Allea	Arabic	Limited	Syria	Jordan	2 years
Inzali	Chin, Burmese	Until 9th grade	Burma		6 years
Hyza	Kurdish, some English	9 years of schooling	Iraq	Ukraine	4 years, 9 months
Nu	Karen, Burmese	No schooling	Burma	Malaysia	4 years, 6 months
Najah	Masalit, Arabic, some English	Graduated High School	Sudan	Chad	3 years
Aung	Burmese, English, Karenni	Some College	Burma	Thailand	4 years
Mahida	Arabic	Part of Secondary School	Sudan	Lebanon (8 months)	2 years
Maiah	Burmese, Karenni	No schooling	Burma	Thailand (10 years)	5 years, 6 months
Tara	Kyan, Karenni, Burmese	Kindergarten	Burma		9 years
Radayah	Arabic, English	No schooling	Sudan	Ethiopia (16 years)	3 years



Table 2. Teacher Demographics

Teacher	Class	Languages	Education	Experience in Field	Country of Origin	Country of Refuge
Grace	Preschool	English	Bachelors	1 year, 6 months	United States	
Ahera	Infant	Amharic, Tigrinya, English, some Arabic, some Swahili	High School	10 years	Eritrea	Ethiopia (7 years)

### Data Collection

Data collection took place over five months, from October to February, and involved naturalistic observations and semi-structured interviews.

#### Naturalistic Observations

I utilized naturalistic observations throughout data collection in order to identify, describe, and analyze contextual conditions and meanings related to refugee parent–teacher communication (Burawoy, 1998; Whitehead, 2005). This method functions to observe the present communication between the two parties in relation to the first research question. All communication pathways (i.e. verbal, nonverbal, and written notes) were considered as well as the timing communication took place. Through informal conversations with the teachers and pilot observations, drop-off and pick-up times appeared to be not only the most natural settings for refugee parent–teacher communication, but also one of the only times communication took place between the two parties. The infant room also had a half-hour break in which parents visited the classroom, however, communication between Ahera and parents were not observed during this time, as the preschool room did not have the parents visit. During drop-off

and pick-up times, I observed both classrooms concurrently by positioning myself in the room that connected them (see Figure 1). All parents needed to sign their children in or out using this entrance room with sign-in sheets located on the tables next to the classroom doors. Further, the doors to the classrooms were half-doors and the upper halves were kept open. From my observation location, I witnessed communication occurring at the door and within part of the classrooms.

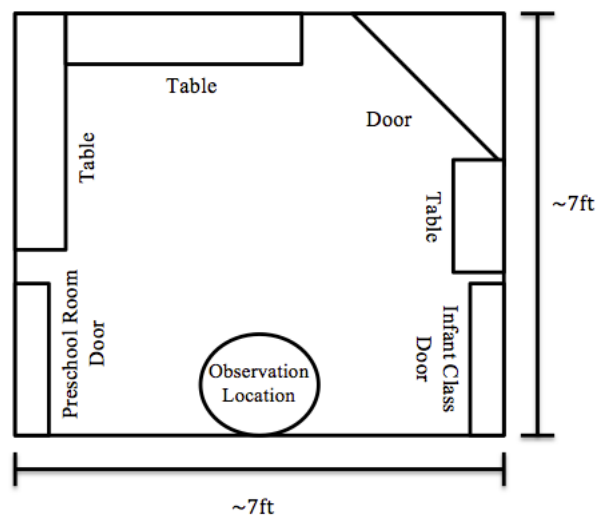


Figure 1. Observation Location

These observations were conducted over 19 nonconsecutive days in the months of December, January, and February. Overall, observations of all parents at drop-off took an average of 43.47 minutes, ranging from 32 to 51 minutes. Morning drop-off observations spanned much longer than pick-up observations as parents arrived at different times. Overall, pick-up observations of all parents averaged 7.56 minutes and ranged from 4 to 10 minutes. During observations all parents—despite participation status—were observed, to capture broader patterns of communication. Out of the nine

participating mothers whose children attended the agency, only six were observed to varying degrees, with the other three just participating in the interview portion. Similarly, the mother with the daughter in the statewide program (Radeyah) also only participated in the interview portion and was not observed during this study.

Highly detailed field notes were taken during all observations in order to: a) keep track of observations and details; b) enable research team/peer debriefing sessions; and, c) clarify and validate interpretations and potential themes across data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (see Appendix A).

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to answer the remaining research questions. This type of interview is well suited for the exploration of perceptions and opinions in complex contexts and enabled the collection of additional information and clarifications through more natural and interactive conversations (Louise-Barriball & While, 1994). Further, this structure gives opportunities for rephrasing questions and recognizes that words may have various meanings in different languages and cultures, making it relevant to studies of refugees (Louise-Barriball & While, 1994).

During the interviews, mothers were asked initial questions with occasional follow-up inquiries, focusing on parents' backgrounds, communication with their children's teacher, general perceptions of parent-teacher communication, existing supports/barriers to communication, and opinions on the ways in which communication may improve (see Appendix B). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for one mother who did not wish to be recorded; in this case, extensive

notes were taken. I used an online service called TEMI to aid in the transcription process. Interviews with parents ranged from 6 to 27 minutes, averaging 23.22 minutes. Mothers were given a \$20 Wal-Mart gift card for their participation.

Two translators mediated all communication with participating mothers, one who spoke Arabic (female) and another who spoke Burmese (male). Our research team worked closely with these two individuals throughout the literacy project as well as the current study. Translators were compensated for their time by the hour.

Interviews with the preschool and infant classroom teachers had similar prompts concerning their backgrounds, current communication with refugee parents, challenges/supports in communication, and opinions on the ways in which communication could improve (see Appendix C). These interviews were conducted individually with the infant teacher, lasting 24 minutes, and the preschool teacher, lasting a 1 hour and 10 minutes. These interviews were also audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the assistance of TEMI. Teachers were given a \$30 Visa gift card for their participation. Both teachers spoke English fluently and no translators were needed.

### **Analysis Plan**

All data were analyzed using Atlas.ti, Version 8, while Microsoft Word and Excel were used as supports to compile and organize larger themes and descriptive statistics. The observational data and semi-structured interviews were analyzed using a general deductive approach (Thomas, 2006), allowing for an analysis plan that identified themes connected with Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model. The goal of this approach was to use the theoretical framework to derive codes and categories of codes and uncover relationships

among them (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thus, observations and transcripts were coded under the concepts of proximal processes, person characteristics, contexts, and time aspects for both the refugee parents and teachers (see Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The collected observational data were considered to be examples of proximal processes and further coded thematically to define the types of communication that were taking place. For the transcripts, examples of codes used included “Report of P–T Communication,” “Person Characteristic,” and “Contextual Influence.”

Data were continually analyzed while being collected, and credibility and trustworthiness were established through research team debriefings and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research team debriefings were conducted to (a) disclose personal and methodological processes; (b) make explicit connections that might have remained implicit to the researcher; and (c) engage in reflexive processes as personal perspectives, reactions, and analyses were discussed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, another research team member aided in evaluating data to establish consistency through inter-coder reliability checks (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Member checks with the parents and teachers were conducted in order to clarify meanings and accurately represent their perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For participating parents, member checks were held at the end of their interviews through summarizing statements and clarifications. Member checks with the teachers occurred in their original interviews, after some observational days (i.e. “Was this a normal day?” and “I observed [the following], is this what normally occurs?”), and also after data analysis was complete.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS

This section presents the findings in relation to all four research questions and is organized as follows: (a) observed and reported communication proximal processes; (b) person characteristics; (c) contextual influences; (d) person x context illustrative examples; and (e) strategies for improvement suggested by participating parents and teachers.

#### **Observed Communication Proximal Processes**

During all drop-off and pick-up observations, special attention was paid to how refugee parents and teachers naturally interacted and what occurred during these times that allowed for opportunities for communication. An opportunity for communication simply entailed that the refugee parent came in at drop-off and/or pick-up times and had a chance to interact with the teacher in some way (and vice versa) while the child entered or exited the classroom; communication with the classroom aides was also taken into consideration. Multiple parents were observed during these times whether they were participants or not.

Overall, out of 548 witnessed opportunities of communication, 62.59% of them resulted in no witnessed communication, verbal or non-verbal, between the two parties. In addition, communication between Ahera and the infant classroom parents (120 interactions) was almost double the exchanges that took place between Grace and

parents of preschoolers (66 interactions). Further, I observed that 89.95% of the parents of infants went into the classroom to help their children adjust and become settled, when only 3.83% of preschooler's parents went into their children's classroom. This might be a result of the children's age, in that infants need more support in becoming adjusted, but might also be attributed to the set-up of the classrooms. For example, the cubbies and coat hooks for the preschool students were located outside the classroom in the entrance room while the infant cubbies were located inside the classroom.

It was also observed that pick-up times were more rushed than drop off times and less communication occurred between the teachers and parents at these times. A pick-up observation is described below:

Three preschool moms have come into the entrance room and are waiting to sign out. Two go up to the door and call their children's name. Five more mothers come into the room. The eight mothers take turns waiting to sign out, call their children's names, and help their children put their coats on when they exit the classroom. The entrance room is crowded. More mothers filter in, including two infant mothers that go directly into the infant classroom. One mom says, "Thank you!" as she and her child exits, but whether or not the preschool teacher heard was not captured.

One this day, 13 mothers signed their children out of the preschool classroom without going inside and only five said one-sided phrases, such as "Thank you" or "Bye," to the teacher. The infant classroom only had five parents, but all went inside the classroom and all communicated with the teacher in some way.

Across all interactions, analyses indicated six different types of communication that occurred between parents and teachers, including: non-verbal, one-short phrase, small exchanges, social conversation, childcare topics, and child-mediated talk (see Table

3). Despite whether it was drop-off or pick-off, the most common type of communication utilized by both parents and the teachers included short phrases, followed by small exchanges, childcare topics, child-mediated talk, social conversation, and nonverbal communication.

Further, who initiated communication was also taken into consideration. For the preschool, regardless of communication type, parents initiated communication more so than did Grace. Overall, Ahera and infant-classroom parents initiated in equal amounts; however, parents initiated more surface-level communication types (i.e. short phrases, small exchanges, and child mediated talk), while Ahera initiated more social conversations and childcare topics. In most of the social conversations occurring between Ahera and parents, the parents either had a good command of English or the dialogue was in another shared language (e.g. Arabic, Amharic).



Table 3. Types of Communication

<u>Communication Type</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Non Verbal	Not involving or using words.	Parent gestures for Grace to come over to help sign child in; no spoken communication
Short Phrase	One communicated phrase from one party to the other, without a reciprocal response from the receiving person.	“Hi, good morning.” “Thank you.” “See you.”
Small Exchange	A small conversation between parents and the teacher ranging from one to three back-and-forth exchanges.	Parent: “Hi Ahera! Good morning!” Ahera: “Good morning!” Parent: *says “hi” to Ahera’s daughter*  Parent: “Hi” Grace: “How are you?” Parent: “Good.” Grace: “Want to put your water bottle up?”
Social Conversation	A conversation between parents and teachers that occurred for social reasons.	Ahera: “Where are you from?” Parent: “Sudan.” Ahera: “I am from Eritrea.” Parent: “We are close, we are neighbors.” Ahera: “Yeah!”
Child-Care Topics	A conversation revolving around the child and any child care topics that occurred between parents and the teacher.	Parent: “How did he do?” Grace: “Very tired.” Parent: “He wake up very early.” Grace: “It’s hard when they first start.” Parent: “He’ll be okay. Thank you.”  Parent: “I didn’t see him over break time.” Ahera: “Yeah, I know.” Parent: “Did he eat?” Ahera: “I gave him cheerios, he like them.”
Child-Mediated Talk	Indirect communication where the parent and/or teacher tells the child to say something to the other party.	“Say ‘bye mommy, I love you.’” “Say ‘bye’ to teacher.” “Say ‘thank you!’”

### **Participants' Communication Proximal Processes**

Out of the ten participating refugee families, nine attended either the preschool or infant classroom, with one family having their child enrolled in a statewide preschool. For those attending: seven of the parents had children that went to the preschool classroom; one had two children, with one going to the preschool classroom and the other to the infant classroom; and one had a child who only went to the infant classroom. The communication proximal processes occurring between the parents and the two teachers were both observed and reported through the interviews.

#### **Observed Refugee Parent Participant–Teacher Communication**

Six out of the nine participating refugee parents were observed during natural drop-off or pick-up times to varying degrees, ranging from witnessing two to 24 opportunities for communication over the study's period (see Table 4). The three mothers that were not observed included two from the preschool and one from the infant classroom. Out of the mothers who were observed, four did not communicate with Grace. Najah, who has a child in both classrooms, was one of the parents who did not communicate with Grace; however, at drop-off times she would often engage in social conversation with Ahera and/or a classroom aide who spoke Arabic in the infant room. All of her communication occurred at drop-off times, and the opportunities that did not turn into interactions occurred during pick-up times. Further, she was the only participating mother to use social conversation consistently. This might be because she had a good command of English and occasionally the classroom aide was there to mediate communication.

Nu, a preschool mother, had 24 opportunities for communication, but only six (25%) of them turned into interactions. All but one of these interactions were initiated by Nu and included mostly single short phrases, two small exchanges, and one instance of non-verbal communication. The last mother to be observed communicating, Maiah, only had 6 of sixteen opportunities turn into interactions with Grace. Maiah initiated communication in these instances and utilized child-mediated talk the most. Although only three mothers were witnessed communicating during the observations, many reported on communication processes in their interviews, as well as the teachers.

Table 4. Observed Communication between Parent Participants and Teachers

<b>Mother</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>No Com</b>	<b>Com</b>	<b>Observed Communication</b>
<b>Allea</b>				Not Observed
<b>Inzali</b>				Not Observed
<b>Hyza</b>	2 (1 day)	2	0	No communication observed
<b>Nu</b>	24 (12 days)	18	6	1) Child does something and Grace and Nu laugh together, no other communication. 2) Nu: "Bye." Grace: "I like your jacket" 3) Nu to Grace: "Bye." 4) Nu: "Bye Teacher." 5) "Thank you, bye bye teacher." 6) Grace to Nu: "It was her birthday." Nu: "It was yesterday." Grace to child: "Well happy birthday! So she's four now?" Nu: "Yeah four." Grace: "Oh, she said fourteen." [Shared Laughter]
<b>Najah Infant and Preschool</b>	8 (4 days)	4	4	1) Talks to infant classroom aide that speaks Arabic. 2) Social Conversation with Ahera and classroom aide that speaks Arabic. 3) Ahera and Najah engage in social conversation from 9:15am-9:32am. 4) Najah says "Good morning" to Ahera; Najah and Ahera start talking casually (social conversation). <i>*Did not communicate with Grace</i>
<b>Aung</b>	4 (2 days)	4	0	No communication observed
<b>Mahida Infant</b>	Not Observed			Not Observed (Mother was pregnant)
<b>Maiah</b>	16 (8 days)	10	6	1) "[Say] Bye bye teacher." 2) "Bye Teacher, say bye bye." 3) Told son to say, "Bye bye Teacher." 4) "See you." 5) "Say good morning teacher." 6) "Say bye bye teacher."
<b>Radeyah</b>	Not Observed			Child attends statewide preschool.
<b>Tara</b>	4 (2 days)	4	0	No communication observed

### **Parents' Report of Communication with Teachers**

Parents' report of communication proximal processes were broken down into four themes: (a) limited communication; (b) surface-level exchanges; (c) issues or concerns; and (4) beneficial communication. Overall, five parents of children attending the preschool described minimal communication with Grace. The communication processes were depicted as absent or one-sided due to language barriers. Hyza, Maiah, and Najah expressed that they normally just sign their children in and out, with Maiah describing, "I don't really get to communicate with his teacher at the school...I just drop [him] into the school and come back." Nu and Tara elaborated that due to language challenges, any communication that takes place is difficult to understand. Nu summarized this explaining, "I stay quiet because I cannot talk to her...when I hear something, a teacher talking, I would not understand because [of the] language."

Moreover, although Inzali described some communication taking place between her and Grace, she further mentioned that due to language barriers and a lack of translators, only surface-level communication occurred. She gave the example: "Like 'Thank you'...they don't necessarily have the translator...only basic stuff, you know, 'yes' and 'no', things like that." Two other mothers, Allea and Aung, expressed similar sentiments in the utilization of one phrases or small exchanges as the main types of communication occurring between them and Grace. Aung reported, "When we come to the school in the morning, we just say hello or hi," and with Allea expressing "Just refresh, you know, the teacher, she said, 'Hi, how are you?' Just this."

In others cases, concerns or issues drove the occurrence and initiation of communication between parents and teachers. For Najah, if there were no problems, she did not feel the need to communicate. She stated, “[There are] no challenges...I do not talk to teacher...every day my daughter learn something, [and it is] better than staying at home.” However, Najah did not specify whether she was talking about her communication with Grace or Ahera and did not speak on her observed utilization of social conversation with Ahera. On the other hand, Hyza overall described her communication with Grace as limited, but reported on two instances in which deeper level communication processes took place due to issues and concerns. In one instance, Grace communicated with Hyza about her son’s listening skills, when he was not listening within the classroom. Hyza was able to talk to her son and Hyza reported she and Grace had a quick follow-up conversation to confirm his behavior improved. In the second occurrence, after Hyza’s son was hit by another child in the classroom, she said: “One time he coming to house and he told me, ‘Mommy, [child] touch me, [child] push me’...I told his teacher, teacher told me she sorry, told me all children have problems [with this child].” These instances of communication between Hyza and Grace were driven by concerns that needed to be shared.

Lastly, Mahida described beneficial communication taking place between her and Ahera. She reported working closely with Ahera to improve her son’s behavior within the classroom. When asked how often she talks to Ahera, she stated:

Almost every day I ask about what he is doing. Yeah. Almost every day...I have spent the break time, half an hour, at the class and I try to see what's going on. And if I notice anything, I will talk to Ahera. And Ahera, if she notice anything not good, she will talk to [me].

Mahida and Ahera seem to frequently engage in childcare topics and some social conversations. Mahida further reported that sometimes a classroom aide is there who speaks Arabic and she will often talk to her as well. Due to her pregnancy, Mahida was not observed over the duration of this study; however, her report illustrates deeper levels of communication taking place centered on improving child outcomes.

### **Teachers' Report of Communication with Parents**

Ahera and Grace reported on their broader patterns of communication processes with all parents and were not asked about the specific participants in this study. The two teachers differed in how and what they communicated to parents. Ahera generally reported more childcare topics and social conversation occurring, stating, "When they come, the first time they come, I ask them if they have extra clothes and maybe food for snack, and diaper, and wipe." Ahera, working with infants, needs to communicate with the mothers to ensure that she has the supplies to take care of their babies. Ahera also described how she checks in with parents she has not seen and asks for updates on their lives:

Ahera: Yeah. I ask them sometimes about life, not just about school. Just ask them, 'What happened, you're not coming?' Or, 'What happened, what are you doing?' Something like that. Yeah, I communicate about that, we talk about life too.

Researcher: Do you ever give them advice on how to do stuff here [in U.S.]?

Ahera: Yes, yes, yeah. I do.

Ahera mostly reported talking to parents about childcare and life topics, but further expressed that if she notices parents in need of advice in transitioning to life in the United States, she would communicate with them about that. She gave an example of how she sometimes needs to teach new arriving families how to change a diaper or how to use the oven. Further, Ahera mentioned that languages barriers exist, but she makes a continual effort to try to communicate with parents.

On the other hand, Grace reported that issues and concerns drove her communication with parents, stating, “When parents want to talk about something...it's usually, I mean, because they have some kind of concern.” Paralleling Hyza’s report, Grace described that parents communicate the most about their child’s physical safety:

I've had parents say like, ‘She doesn't want to come to school. And she said, it's because she's getting hit.’ And I was like, all right. Let me deal with that, you know...so I feel like that's been the main kind of, I guess, avenue that I've built relationships with parents.

Grace acknowledged that her communication with parents should move beyond just addressing problems; however, without the presence of concerns or issues, communication between Grace and parents seemed to be minimal or absent. When asked about her communication with them, she expressed, “It's not good enough. I really do wish I could communicate with them more.”

For the parents and both teachers, multiple person characteristics and contexts come together and interact to influence these observed and reported communication



proximal processes and guide further understanding of broader patterns and differences across classrooms, initiation, and types of communication.

### Person Characteristics

Parents and the two teachers reported on multiple demand, resource, and force characteristics that supported or presented challenges to effective communication proximal processes (see Figure 2).

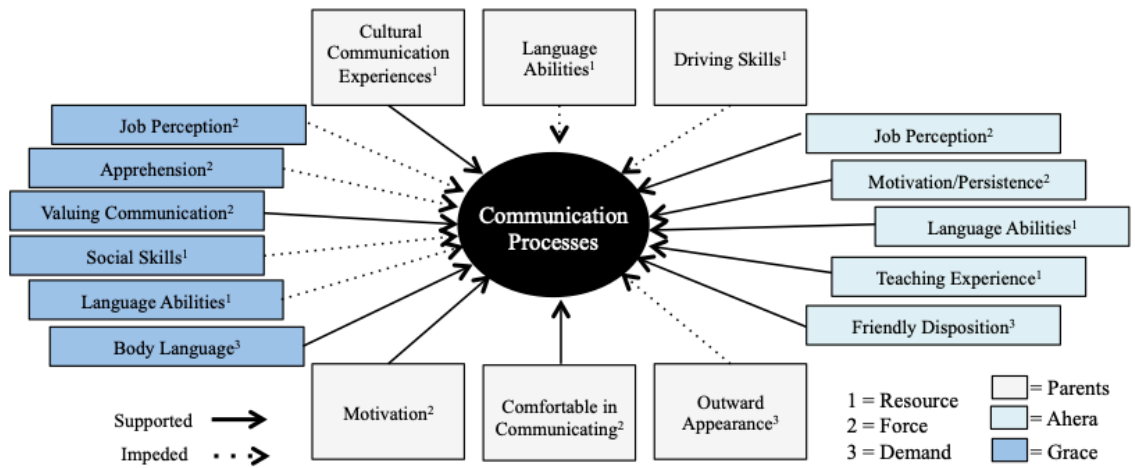


Figure 2. Person Characteristics' Influence on Communication for Parents and Teachers.

## **Parents' Person Characteristics**

### **Resource Characteristics**

The most common characteristics expressed by parents during the interview were resource characteristics, such as cultural experiences with parent–teacher communication, language abilities, and driving and navigation skills. Parents had similar and different cultural experiences with parent–teacher communication from their origin countries or their countries of refuge. For instance, Nu and Radeyah could not speak on cultural past experiences with parent–teacher communication from their origin countries, because they were not able to attend formal schooling. Similarly, Maiah fled Burma when she was very young, but described her experiences in the Thai refugee camp, explaining that teachers would tell children to bring their parents to school or teachers would “just pop in their houses if a child isn’t good at school.” Considering Burma, Aung, Tara, and Inzali reported that if parents and teachers wanted to communicate they would normally write letters, and for more serious problems, parents would come to school or teachers would visit the child’s home. Inzali elaborated: “...write a letter to the teacher or the instructor and explain the reason. And also...the villages, it’s small. Everyone lives around the neighborhood so [teachers and parents] can just like go around and tell.”

Mothers from the Middle East, Hyza (Iraq), Allea (Syria), and Najah (Sudan), reported similar processes as those occurring in Burma. Allea summarized these processes, saying, “[If teachers] need to talk with the parents...they invite them, come to school. And if [parents] have any problem, they can just go and visit the school.” On the other hand, Mahida (Sudan) described a different perspective:

...most of the parents, they don't communicate with the teachers. Sometimes it's too hard. Now in Sudan, there is preschool. But before, no. Here [U.S.] is more easier than in Sudan because I can communicate with the teacher and if I want anything, I just go to her and talk with her and make a position.

Past experiences and knowledge on communicating with teachers may have influenced how some of these mothers presently communicate with their children's preschool teacher; for example, the content of what is communicated. Across cultures, it seems as though concerns and issues mostly drove occurrences of communication between the two parties. However, it is important to note that this characteristic is interacting with other characteristics and contexts to impact communication processes. Mahida is a great example of this, because her cultural knowledge and experiences emphasize minimal parent-teacher communication, but her present communication reports do not reflect this. Similarly, Nu and Radeyah have no past experiences or knowledge of these processes, but this does not seem to overly influence their observed and reported communication. In Nu's case, along with other mothers, language abilities were found to have the most impact on communication proximal processes.

Five mothers explicitly reported language barriers as the main challenge to communicating with their children's teacher. Nu and Inzali expressed that it is difficult to understand and respond in English and Tara explained responding is where she struggles the most. Tara stated, "Most of the things that [the teacher] say, I understand. But I cannot reply them, like, response and talking, you know. So that's like the only challenge for me, for now." Allea commented that language barriers amplify other learning processes for her family: "We are struggling a lot with learning English. Cause it

is new for us. We try to adopt the culture and the curriculum, everything different, between our country and here.” Language is a foundational skill in not only communicating with teachers, but also a mechanism for learning the cultural expectations of schools and parent–teacher communication. However, although it is a strong influence on communication processes, it is once again not the only determining factor of them. For example, four mothers spoke English to varying degrees, with Radeyah and Aung having a strong command of English, and Hyza and Najah having a decent command of English. Even though these mothers had some foundational skills for communication, Aung and Hyza were not observed communicating and only Najah was observed engaging in deeper levels of communication.

Lastly, for four mothers, transportation and navigation abilities impacted their attendance at school and decreased opportunities for communication. For instance, Allea does not drive and mentioned that she is not able to take her children to school unless her husband can give her a ride as public transportation with both her sons is too difficult. In addition, Inzali does know how drive; however, when asked about challenges in communicating and attending school, she still reported, “I am a new driver and it will be hard to drive...things like that. Transportation I think, and also navigation.” Both Allea and Inzali were never observed over the naturalistic observations and their transportation difficulties could be a potential reason why. Other than impacting attendance, Radeyah and Tara also mentioned that transportation difficulties have limited their opportunities to communicate with her child’s teacher. Radeyah explained

There is nobody to pick [me up], because I don't have a car. And when my husband coming back, the school closes. This miscommunication between...and it's too hard to go to school by bus and come back again. Sometimes I have to walk just if I want to attend [a] meeting.

Radeyah expressed that she wants to go to her children's school and talk with their teachers, a force characteristic, but her transportation abilities limit her chances for interaction because she cannot walk every day. In a similar way, not being able to drive puts mothers on a constrained schedule that is determined by when buses arrive and depart. Tara commented that she was not able to communicate a concern she had with Grace due to this restraint:

One of the days, way back, he was touched by somebody and then he said that he felt hurt. And well, at that point, I was all ready to go home, so I was outside...and I wasn't able to come back and tell the teacher.

This specific person characteristic may lend insight on why pick-times are so rushed and parents and teachers experienced less communication processes during this time.

However, data was never collected on all the mothers who could drive as a comparison, and moreover, other person and content factors come into play.

### **Force Characteristics**

Parents' force characteristics included motivations to communicate and feeling comfortable in doing so. Najah was the only mother to report that she was okay with how things were, but did not specify whether this report was referring to her communication with Ahera or her communication with Grace. In addition, when Najah was asked if she would reach out to communicate a problem, she replied that she would

not. Early in her interview though, Najah positively highlighted that there have been no challenges and she is happy with what her children are learning. The other nine mothers all expressed motivation and aspired to have better communication with their children's teachers. Allea and her husband said, "We are interested in communicating with the teachers because we need to follow up with our kids." Similarly, Radeyah stated, "I am thinking about, maybe I can build a good relationship with the teacher [out] of the trust." Parents' motivation to connect with their children's teacher could influence how much they initiate communication. For Radeyah, she later described ways in which she was planning to promote trust between her and her child's teacher by setting up a meeting; in this way, her person characteristic may directly translate into proximal processes. However, considering the interaction of force and resource characteristics, Radeyah may be motivated to meet, but transportation may present a challenge.

Force and resource interactions were true in other cases where mothers were motivated to communicate, but language barriers played a larger role in capitalizing on opportunities for communication. Nu's comment reflects reports of two other mothers:

Nu: I want to learn more English to be able to talk to the teachers and then to the other people too.

Researcher: Yeah, definitely. So if the language wasn't a barrier, would you feel comfortable approaching the teacher about an issue in the classroom?

Nu: So if I could speak or if there was like a communicator...interpreter. I would definitely talk to the teachers.

Most mothers demonstrated motivation to increase communication between themselves and their children's teachers, but interactions with other person characteristics and

available contextual supports (i.e. interpreters), influence what communication proximal processes occurred.

### **Demand Characteristics**

Lastly, only one mother, Radeyah, spoke on outward differences in appearance, a demand characteristic. As a preface, Radeyah described that when she goes out in public she will often feel as though people are staring at her, stating:

Even sometimes, I am looking at myself and saying maybe I didn't [wear] my clothes very well...Even sometimes, even if all the chairs, they are full and if I am sitting...right here and another chair [there], nobody gonna come sit there.

These experiences Radeyah has faced because of her demand characteristics have transferred to influence how communication may be taking place between her and her child's preschool teacher at the statewide program. She expressed, "I thought maybe the teacher [is] afraid of people like me, because different culture or something like this. But I am interested in build[ing] trust." Radeyah further elaborated she wanted the teacher to be comfortable in communicating with the family if anything happens in school concerning her daughter. Radeyah's apprehension of the teacher's fear is quickly addressed through her motivation to build a relationship of trust. However, whether in broader societal contexts or in instances of communication with teachers, judgments on outward appearances may come to impact the initiation of communication and the development of relationships with both teachers and other community members.

## **Teachers' Person Characteristics and Impacts on Communication**

Teachers' person characteristics were individually analyzed using theory-driven codes, with Ahera and Grace demonstrating unique resource, force, and demand characteristics that impact their communication with parents.

### **Ahera: Infant Classroom Teacher**

Analyses specific to Ahera indicated that her force, resource, and demand characteristics all positively supported the communication processes she engaged parents in. These included: (a) her perception of her job, and her motivation and persistence in communication (i.e. force characteristics); (b) her language abilities and her experience as an infant teacher (i.e. resource characteristics); and (c) her friendly disposition (i.e. demand characteristics).

**Force Characteristics.** Ahera's perceptions of her job drove the ways in which she communicated with parents. For example, a large part of how she described her job was in supporting parents in adjusting. She stated, "They don't know how to use the diaper. They don't know how to talk with people; they [don't] have confidence...I help them learn a lot." She was also very persistent with parents in communicating, which may have helped start and maintain her relationships with them. She described:

The thing is, when they not understand me I don't say like 'It's okay' or 'whatever', I don't say that. I just, I keep trying [to get them] to understand me...[For example], I told one mom, she speak Swahili, I told her your son poop, but I change. She don't understand me. I tell her two times, "Your son poop, but I change." She keep going to bathroom, she want to change him. 'No, no, no.' I say, 'I change, I change.' She say, 'Oh thank you. Thank you.'



Ahera is motivated and persistent in communicating with parents. As she explained, she will continue to try to communicate with them even in the face of language barriers. She not only does this to connect with parents, but also because it helps them learn English and gain experiences in communicating. Thus, her perception of her job, motivation, and persistence act as supports in promoting communication processes.

**Resource Characteristics.** Ahera's resource characteristics included her language abilities and her experience as an infant teacher. First, Ahera was fluent in three different languages, including Amharic, Tigrinya, and English, and knew some Arabic and some Swahili. This enabled her to communicate with mothers in other shared languages, especially refugees whose country of refuge was Ethiopia. She was observed engaging two different mothers in social conversation over multiple observations using Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. Second, Ahera has ten years of experience as an infant teacher, with six years at her current job. Her knowledge and experience have put her in a position where she is confident and persistent in communicating with parents, and attentive to those that might need support in adjusting. She described that when she first started the language barriers with parents were intimidating, stating,

[Communication was] a little bit hard...with the parent, they not understand English, especially the first time...but it's good now. The first time, [there's all these] different languages, you know, Swahili, Arabic and different languages. Burmese... But it's good now, you know?

Ahera has developed pivotal skills in communicating past the language barriers with parents over the years she has worked. She expressed that she no longer views language as a problem and that it is just important for her to keep trying. In addition, Ahera

demonstrated an in-depth understanding of these families' context and transitioning. This may have been a result of working with these families for many years as well as her own experiences as a refugee coming to this country.

**Demand Characteristics.** Ahera's demand characteristics may have included that she looks similar to many of the parents that attend the two classrooms; however, whether or not her outward appearance impacted communication was not collected. Ahera commented on her disposition though, stating,

I make smile [and say], "Can you do like this?" Like nicely. I know they do not understand, the problem is not misunderstanding...But when you do like nicely or smiling...They can understand you and you can communicate.

Ahera utilized a friendly disposition to connect to the parents even with language barriers, alluding to the fact that smiles are understood across cultures. This disposition set her up to have interactions with parents as she intentionally made sure to display smiles and create a welcoming environment for them.

#### **Grace: Preschool Classroom Teacher**

Grace's person characteristics included: (a) her perception of her job, her apprehension when communicating, and her beliefs that parent-teacher communication is important (i.e. force characteristics); (b) her social skills and language abilities (i.e. resource characteristics); and (c) her body language (i.e. demand characteristic).

**Force Characteristics.** Grace's perception of her job influenced her communication with parents, but in a different way than Ahera. While Ahera was parent-centered, Grace's perception could be described as child-centered, expressing, "The way

I really think about my job and my role here...my main focus is like providing a safe place for kids.” Grace reported that she continually attempts to meet children’s socio-emotional needs and most of her energy throughout the day is directed towards that goal. This was observed throughout drop-off and pick-up times where Grace would be in the classroom and engaged with children instead of by the door greeting parents. In addition, there were a few days where Grace had new children join her classroom and they needed assistance in adjusting. Grace took a hands-on role in helping the child calm down and adjust in the classroom, but as a result missed multiple opportunities for communicating with parents as they arrived. Her “children-first” perception leaked into her communication with parents in a number of ways, with one being this apprehension of communicating, especially when it focused around issues due to a child’s misbehavior.

This worry and cautiousness in communicating issues with parents seemed to derive from her position in protecting her students, some cultural differences, and her concern about discouraging parents. First, Grace mentioned that she finds it challenging to balance the resolution of behavioral problems within the classroom and then follow-up conversations with parents. She expressed some uneasiness when she has to tell parents about their children’s misbehavior, stating,

So I just got through telling [this child] that like, ‘You’re a really good girl and I’m really, really proud of you.’ But then I have to go from that to talking to her mom. And so [this child] is kind of like, head down...and I’m like, I don’t want this...you know, cause I know your parents [can be] scary.

It was important for Grace to let this child know she was good, valued, and cared for even after her misbehavior. However, when she spoke to the child’s parent, she

commented on how this could be sending mixed messages to the child, and this concern for her students may impact how she communicates with parents overall. In this instance, the situation called for communication to update the parent, but in other circumstances this underlying apprehension and prioritizing the child's feelings and emotions could impede opportunities for Grace to work with parents. Further, Grace disclosed concern that if she communicates problems with parents, they will stop attending. She faces this fear whenever she needs to communicate serious concerns to parents and she elaborated on a situation in which a meeting was called with two of her students' parents:

So I felt like I needed to be this protector...cause really the way that I thought about this, was like this girl and her mom speak the most English...I really feel that this child is resourced well enough that she's okay; so if this child doesn't come back to this program, she's going to be fine. And then I look at this kid and I'm like, if he doesn't come back, that's not okay.

Grace worried that this conversation would deter her vulnerable child from returning and dreaded the potential outcomes of having this parent meeting. In fact, Grace was not the one to initiate this meeting, one of the parents did, and her apprehension of negative outcomes might influence her to avoid these situations to protect her students.

Second, Grace's cautiousness in communicating problems with parents was influenced by past experiences with culturally different parenting styles. She explained:

It's not even just the language, but the cultural thing of, if I tell you that your kid's like beating all these other kids, I don't want to mean that you go home and beat your kid...cause I have had moms say things like, 'I know I shouldn't do this but I beat my child.' I'm like, no, that's not what I wanted, [even though] I know you're working with what resources you have and you're doing the best that you can.

This is another perceived negative outcome of communicating with parents that seems to influence if and how communication takes place. Grace's communication with parents is mostly surface-level types of communication, and when it is not it revolves around concerns and issues. However, feeling uneasy about bringing up concerns and issues may lead to parents initiating these instances and avoidance on Grace's part if the situation does not absolutely have to be communicated.

Lastly, moving away from prioritizing and protecting her students, Grace's apprehension is also influenced by her concern for parents. She reported:

...a lot of times when you're a parent and anybody says something about your kid, it feels like you've done everything wrong, there's something wrong with your kid. And it's such a complicated conversation to have in general. And then to have it with someone who probably already constantly feels like they're being told that they're not good enough or they're doing things wrong; they probably feel like they're being told the way that they parent is wrong constantly, because the way Americans parent is very, very different. And so how do you have that conversation without them feeling like that they're doing something wrong or that there's something wrong with their kid.

Grace is attentive to how parents might feel after these dialogues, and her concern for them adds another layer to some of the uneasiness she feels in communicating with them.

This once again might impact her initiation of communicating these topics.

However, Grace valued parent-teacher communication and was receptive to parents concerns. She expressed:

I like that they feel like they can come talk to me and a lot of times they apologize for whenever they are upset. And I am like no, that's great, I want to hear that...they think it's something negative, but I'm always super receptive to anything.

Grace recognizes and enjoys when parents communicate with her, despite her apprehension in some contexts. She is motivated to listen to them and address their concerns; she is also eager to learn from them, stating:

I would like to learn from parents, cause I really do think that they have incredible knowledge [and] not just about their own child. I need to learn how their culture...how that affects them...I think that is valuable information for every child.

Grace is motivated to learn more from parents and this could support her communication with them in light of her cautiousness. This person characteristic could also offset the concerns she has as she learns more about the families she serves and different ways of communicating.

**Resources Characteristics.** Grace's resource characteristics, including her social skills and language abilities, were not entirely supportive of effective communication with parents. Grace's social skills, language, and experience in this job (around 1 ½ years) may all interact to influence her communication. She explained this stating,

I just don't have the social skills enough to talk to parents. Talking to their kids is one thing. But there's [only] a few parents that I'll end up talking to because they have the highest level of English

Grace explained she does not have the confidence or social abilities to communicate with parents over the language barriers and her current methods are not supporting on-going and consistent communication. In addition, Grace only knows English, which decreases the amount of parents she could communicate with to those that know the language or defaults the communication to one-phrases and small exchanges. Grace further reported

“[With] newer parents, I just don't know how to start talking to them...and I think that creates a situation where if they do have some sort of concern, they don't feel like they can talk to me.” Grace recognizes her own limits with initiating conversations with parents. It does not seem to come as easy to her and this might be a reason why communication is majorly parent-initiated and driven by concerns and issues; or as she described, not occurring. Grace expressed motivation to change though, describing:

I wish I was better at that though...[moving] beyond like, ‘Hey, how are you?’...A lot of times, if it's not information that I feel has to be conveyed, I'm like, I don't know. So I wish I was good [and could start] building relationships that weren't around [problems].

Her motivation, a force characteristic, could impact how her social abilities, experience, and confidence in communicating with parents change over time.

**Demand Characteristics.** Grace only self-reported on some of the outward actions she does to aid in communicating with parents, mentioning, “I use a lot of body language when I try to talk to them. I think I'm really good at using my tone [and] my facial expressions, but that's pretty much it.” These actions and expressions were not observed, but may influence how parents react when communicating with Grace. Similar to Ahera, facial expressions may be understood across cultures and displaying friendly and welcoming expressions may promote communication.

### **Contextual Influences**

Person characteristics influenced the occurrence, initiation, and type of communication taking place between parents and the two teachers; however, the surrounding proximal and distal contexts these two parties exist in play a large role in

these processes as well. Parents and teachers experienced varying impacts on communication from their microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems that they are/were a part of (see Table 5).



Table 5. The Contexts of Parents and Teachers

System	Supports to Communication	Barriers to Communication
<i>Microsystem</i>	<p><u>PARENTS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Classroom aides and friends as translators.</li> </ul> <p><u>TEACHERS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Classroom aides and students as translators.</li> <li>Classroom aides as supports to free up teachers.</li> <li>Classroom aides as examples of communication.</li> </ul> <p><u>BOTH</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For infant room, the setup of classroom in which parents need to go in.</li> </ul>	<p><u>PARENTS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inconsistency of available translators.</li> </ul> <p><u>TEACHERS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>On-going demands and activities occurring in classroom.</li> <li>High teacher to student ratios and lack of second teacher.</li> </ul> <p><u>BOTH</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For the preschool room, the setup of the classroom in which parents do not need to go in.</li> </ul>
<i>Mesosystems &amp; Exosystem</i>	<p><u>PARENTS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English classes offered at agency.</li> <li>Family as translators.</li> </ul> <p><u>TEACHERS</u></p> <p><u>BOTH</u></p>	<p><u>PARENTS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doctor appointments, family responsibilities, and lack of social networks/support.</li> <li>Attending English classes while child is in classroom.</li> <li>Transportation schedules.</li> </ul> <p><u>TEACHERS</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Salary constraints and agency's funding for resources.</li> <li>Home context constraints</li> <li>Agency's in-place system for new parents</li> </ul> <p><u>BOTH</u></p>
<i>Macrosystem</i>	<p><u>BOTH</u></p>	<p><u>BOTH</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences.</li> </ul>

## **Microsystem**

The main microsystem that was under investigation for the refugee parents and teachers was the area outside and inside the classrooms where drop-off and pick-up occurred. In these moments, parents and teachers shared the space and proximal processes occurred. The largest contextual support within the parents' and teachers' shared microsystem was the presence of classroom aides and friends. Some classroom volunteers spoke Arabic and acted as translators between parents and teachers; further, a few parents also mentioned in the interview that other English students with higher proficiency were available if they needed to communicate with the teacher. Maiah described, "I would tell a friend in Burmese and then the friend will communicate with the teacher." In addition, Aung stated, "If we have the language difficulties, we can ask how here." Classroom aides as translators and friends with higher levels of English were helpful for parents to counteract language barriers and led to effective communication; however, they were not always available and real translators were not on site. This may have impacted the consistency of communication between parents and teachers.

For the teachers, classroom aides were helpful in two ways: first, by assisting within the classroom, the teachers were more available to capitalize on opportunities for communication; and second, classroom aides may provide examples of how to communicate with parents that could foster additional skills for the teachers. The latter was especially true for Grace, who explained, "I always learn from my volunteers. That's one of the reasons I love having them. Cause I don't care who they are, they do something and I'm like, 'That's a good thing. I like that.'" Even with the added support though,

there were multiple times that classroom demands (i.e. helping a child, setting up or cleaning up activities, bathroom/diaper trips, etc.) took teachers' attention away and decreased opportunities for communication. The setup of both classrooms influenced this as well, as parents would walk into the infant room, but not the preschool room. With parents watching out for their little ones, Ahera was able to greet other parents as they arrived and became situated during drop-off and further, say goodbye to them during pick-up. Grace, on the other hand, became busy as soon as the first child arrived and would often be consumed in classroom activities as pick-up occurred. She mentioned that being the only teacher with high student ratios put her at a disadvantage when it came to communicating with parents during these times. Overall, there were multiple supports and barriers present in the parents' and teachers' shared microsystem; however, the barriers seemed more consistent than the supports as classroom aides and friend-translators were not always available, the set-up of the classroom microsystem led to inconsistent communication, and transportation schedules rushed pick-up times.

### **Mesosystem and Exosystem**

Mesosystems represent connections and linkages among microsystems and exosystems indirectly influence communication proximal processes that occur between parents and teachers in shared microsystems. Due to the utilization of dual PPCT models, it is important to note that mesosystem links for one party, either that of the parent or teacher, may be classified as exosystem influences for the other party. For instance, parents' home contexts *directly* impacted parents' attendance and their time at school (a mesosystem connection), but *indirectly* influenced teachers' opportunities to

communicate with them (a exosystem influence). In these mesosystem connections, parents reported familial responsibilities and/or doctor appointments were the main reasons they were not able to attend. On top of that, two mothers, Najah and Maiah, mentioned that a lack of social support at home makes managing daily life more challenging. Najah commented, “I don't have enough time to interact with other people. Because when I was in Chad or in my country, my family, they support me, they help me. I don't find that here.” This loss in social support networks is also a result of a macrosystem shift that changed the microsystems and links between them (mesosystems) that Najah is a part of presently. Further, it demonstrates that the contexts of parents’ home environments leak into their communication processes with teachers. If parents need to leave quickly after school, cannot attend school, or if their focus is directed towards familial responsibilities, it could lead to limited communication or the absence of it. For example, in the first two weeks of observations, Najah attended the agency almost every day, however, she stopped coming and was not observed again. In a follow-up conversation with Najah that was made possible through her participation in the larger literacy project, she expressed she was just too busy to attend and barely had any time on her hands. The mesosystem responsibilities she had in her home environment directly influenced her opportunities for communication and indirectly influenced the amount of time teachers were able to see and communicate with her as well, an exosystem influence for them.

Additionally, both teachers also had their own personal circumstances that directly (mesosystem influence for teachers) and indirectly (exosystem influence for

parents) contributed to the ways communication took place with parents. Ahera described herself as a full-time mother and on most observation days, she was seen leaving very quickly after work so she could put her youngest daughter down for a nap. This most likely interacted with the fact that many parents needed to rush pick-up to catch their bus and this combination might be one of the reasons the infant room saw large decreases in small exchanges, social conversations, and child care topics at pick-up times. Similarly, Grace explained that mothering consumes her time the most, but that it did not impact her job and was actually one of the reasons she took her job. However, when discussing the time she has to prepare for her work and if she gets paid for that time, she expressed:

I don't care how much money I make, but like if I was a retired lady that had all my basic needs met I would love this. It would be great. And I would put so much more effort into it. Not that I don't put in effort...I just like...I don't really spend time planning outside, because...I don't have my basic needs met.

This discussion was sparked by Grace's desire to research parents' cultures and plan a more structured day that might allow parents to visit the classroom. As she mentioned, she is not paid for any outside planning, but that is not what is impeding her aspirations. Her focus is on meeting her basic needs, and thus the outside effort that may have made a difference for her communication with parents is impacted.

Another mesosystem connection for the parents included the English classes they took at the agency. This mesosystem link supported communication processes because parents were learning English, which may have helped them communicate or may have inspired them to practice their new skills with their children's teachers at the end of the

day. At the same time, because parents had to take classes they were unable to participate in their children's classroom if they wanted to. Maiah described this barrier when she was interested in volunteering in her son's class, saying, "I'm in the classroom, I'm also learning English. So he's with the other teachers, so we cannot both be together. I need to learn and he needs to learn. So, I could not participate." In this way, the classes parents had to attend were supportive, but also led to some decreased opportunities for communication. Parents' participation in these classes had a direct impact on their developing English skills and available time to be in their children's classroom. At the same time, their participation had an exosystem or indirect influence on the teachers who would have also benefited from the parents learning English and if parents had time to volunteer.

The teachers were also impacted by the systems in place at the agency and the broader organization of classroom schedules and routines. For instance, the set-up of the microsystems in how parents came into one room, but not the other seems to be an established routine of the agency and was shown to impact communication processes. The parents of preschoolers were not discouraged from entering the classroom, but many did not feel the need to as the cubbies and coat hooks were located outside. On the other hand, almost all the parents of infants entered their children's classroom to drop off supplies, breast-feed, or play with their children before class. These established patterns were shared and transferred to new coming parents who followed the lead of others. In addition, parents would come down to the infant room during their break to change diapers, feed their child, or just check in, but the parents of preschoolers would not as it

disrupted the routine of the classroom. Having the routine to come down during break increased opportunities for communication and allowed parents and Ahera to share the space in taking care of the infants. For the preschool classroom, Grace explained, “In some ways it drives me nuts when parents come down in the middle of the day because it throws the entire place up into chaos.” There is no established system or routine in place for the preschool room parents to come down during their break, thus, when they do, the present routine gets disrupted. This excludes quality opportunities for communication, as parents do not have to rush to class or rush to catch the bus home. Further, Grace reported there is also no system in place for welcoming new parents:

The thing is we don't really have a system. And a lot of times the way that I meet new kids and new parents is just a mess...They'll come and just drop their kid off...And sometimes it'll take me days to find out a child's name.

This exosystem effect indirectly puts both Ahera and Grace at a disadvantage in introducing and welcoming new parents. New families come to agency all the time; during the 19 observational days alone, at least five new families joined the agency and their children were integrated in the classrooms. This lack of a stable system in the exosystem impedes communication in the teachers' microsystems, which is especially true for Grace who reported it was harder for her to reach out to new parents.

Grace also described challenges with the routine within the classroom, stating:

The thing is that every day is really just about like...the expectation is chaos. And like that's the thing, it's not...oh, something different happened today, we adapted. No, every day is chaos and you just adapt a different way, every single day. And so, a lot of times like the thought isn't even telling me like, oh, we should like fill out a form with these parents and welcome them properly. It's...

Researcher: It's like how do we survive?

Grace: It really is.

The classroom routine for the preschool and infant room is flexible, with the preschool room having a bit more structure because the kids spend part of the day outside. Grace explained that the lack of a consistent schedule and lack of resources, such as another full-time teacher, impedes the flow of the day and execution of activities, as well as plays a role in how she is able to communicate with parents. She expressed that she would like parents to fill out an intake form so she may learn more about them and their culture, but with the current systems in place she is unable to do this. Further, the agency had no system or expectations for parent–teacher communication, which was mainly due to resource and funding constraints.

### **Macrosystem**

The macrosystem represents larger cultural and social structures that indirectly influence parent–teacher communication. For the parents in this study, the shift in macrosystems across countries of origin, refuge, and resettlement, impacted the culture and language they were most familiar with. Language abilities were a person characteristic for every parent as well as the two teachers, but the mismatch in languages came from larger macrosystem changes from moving to the United States. Similarly, a few parents and Grace reported on cultural differences, with standards and expectations of parent–teacher communication something to relearn. Radeyah reported on this, stating:



The language is different. We speak English good. But sometimes I feel I cannot understand and we missed communication with the teachers, maybe with the system sometimes. It's little bit hard for me.

Radeyah has a good command of English, yet sometimes she feels she is still missing social cues or things about the education system she should know; this may be a result of cultural differences. For other parents with lower English abilities, language barriers might amplify the process of learning more about the United States' culture and systems.

In addition, the pathways for parent–teacher communication in the United States are vastly different than those that parents described in their home countries. Parents reported that teachers and parents knew where each other lived or were in villages small enough they could easily meet. In the United States, parents and teachers are normally more spread out and must navigate transportation systems in order to communicate. Overall, the language, culture, and established structures of society indirectly impact how communication takes place and what is communicated (e.g. concerns and issues versus social conversation). It may present challenges for parents and teachers to establish effective pathways of communication as they need to learn more about each other, connect in the same language, and find efficient ways to meet and communicate.

### **Person x Context Case Examples**

Communication proximal processes are influenced not only by person characteristics and contextual influences, but also the interactions among and between them. Each individual parent and teacher had unique, interacting qualities and circumstances that combined to impact how they communicated with each other. To illustrate these interactions, five mothers and their communication (or lack of it) with the teachers are highlighted.

#### **Allea: Personal Challenges and Contextual Restraints**

Allea is a mother of five, with two preschool-aged children. The family is from Syria and has been in the United States for two years. Throughout this study, Allea was not observed communicating with Grace because Allea rarely attended the agency. However, this not due to a lack of desire or motivation to attend, but rather a combination of personal challenges and contextual restraints that marginalized this family's access to the agency's courses and early childcare program. At first, Allea reported that transportation was difficult and she was only able to go on the days her husband was off work, which was normally on Fridays. Not knowing how to drive interacted with contextual restraints, such as busy work and transportation schedules, to decrease the family's participation. Additionally, the family mentioned language and cultural barriers in learning about the United States and integrating fully. Thus, when they were able to attend, Allea reported communication with Grace was minimal and mainly through short unreciprocated phrases.

Above and beyond these factors though, a tragic incident in which two dogs attacked the family's youngest child impeded their participation at the agency and potential communication with Grace. Unsolicited, the family described that on their second month in this country their youngest son, two years old at the time, was attacked by two dogs and almost died. This past experience impacted this family in multiple ways and presently has repercussions that hinder opportunities for communication. Allea expressed, "Because sometimes it's hard for me to go to the school, because I feel depressed and I cannot control myself...especially in the morning, because at this time the accident happened. Everyday maybe I feel depressed, I remember this." She further elaborated:

It's still hard sometimes for me to just open the door and if I see dogs in the street, I have offense [in] the situation. I want to go to school every day, but it's too hard for me. And also sometimes bringing [our youngest son], it's too hard for him.

Allea expressed motivation in communicating with their children's teacher and participating in the agency's courses to learn English; however, the amount of contextual challenges in combination with Allea's depression, in addition to the youngest child's fear, puts this family at a disadvantage to engage in consistent participation. This family might have the most to gain from establishing effective pathways of communication with their children's teachers, but are unable to do so. The interaction of personal challenges with contextual restraints supports their isolation over integration, and overall leads to limited and absent communication proximal processes.

### **Nu and Grace: Language Barriers without Translators**

Nu is from Burma, and is a mother of two daughters, one of which attends the preschool at the agency. She speaks Karen and Burmese and has been in the United States for four and a half years. Nu was observed the most out of all mothers, but the majority of her opportunities for communication with Grace resulted in no observed communication. Only six opportunities out of twenty-four were capitalized on, with five single, unreciprocated phrases and one single small exchange. Considering her person characteristics, Nu could not draw on past experiences of parent–teacher communication because she never had a chance to attend school (in her past macrosystem); however, Nu reported the main challenge for her was the language.

This challenge was continually brought up throughout her interview. When asked if she would like to have better communication, she replied, “I would like to talk to [the teacher] but I cannot, because I don't know how to speak English.” Further, when asked what would help her communicate in an ideal world, she reported, “I want to learn more English.” Learning English was on the forefront of Nu’s mind and her current language abilities impeded effective communication even though she was motivated to communicate more with the teacher. Further, considering other contextual influences, Nu discussed that translators were not normally available to mediate communication and she was not able to drive, and thus had to adhere to the bus schedule.

Grace’s lack of confidence in her social skills, knowledge of only English, and apprehension when communicating interacted with managing the chaos of the classroom, unavailability of translators, and routines in place, to contribute to the limited

communication between her and Nu. Person characteristics and contextual influences from both sides put Grace and Nu at a disadvantage for effective communication even though the pair saw each other almost every single day.

### **Hyza and Grace: Communication Driven by Concerns**

Researcher: Would you like to have better communication with your child's teacher?

Hyza: There [are] no problems, so I don't need it, but in case something happens I would tell her.

Hyza is a mother of two sons and originally from Iraq. She speaks Kurdish and has a moderate command of English. As reported above, communication with her preschooler's teacher, Grace, is driven by concerns. Hyza has a higher proficiency in English compared to other parents and when she needs to communicate she will ask her older son for help. She expressed this contextual support, stating, "I'll ask [my son], he'll write it down and I'll memorize it for the next day." Hyza's English ability (person characteristic) in combination with the help from her son (contextual support) puts Hyza at an advantage for more consistent communication; however, this does not end up being the case. It is speculated, but unknown whether or not this type of communication is influenced by cultural experiences of parent-teacher communication as Hyza only commented on how parents and teachers met (e.g. the child would tell the parent to come to the school) and did not explain the reasons for meeting.

Culture might play a role; however, the present communication processes may also be influenced by how Grace operates. Grace expressed only talking to parents about

problems and concerns although she wished she could move out of that cycle. Hyza described one of her first interactions with Grace as an interaction about her son's behavior and how he was not listening in the classroom. This exchange might have set the stage for the present communication between Hyza and Grace. In addition, Grace's consistent preoccupation in managing classroom chaos as well as her person characteristics do not put her in a position to reset the foundation of communication established between her and Hyza. Further, although Hyza is comfortable reaching out to Grace, it seems to only apply if there is a concern; she did not demonstrate explicit motivation to form a better relationship. It is assumed that multiple other person characteristics and contextual factors that were not captured in this study play a role in the explanation of these communication proximal processes.

### **Aung: Cultural Impacts on Communication**

Aung is a Burmese mother of two children who speaks Karenni, Burmese, and English. Out of all the mothers, she is the most educated and completed some college in Myanmar before fleeing to Thailand. She has been in the United States for four years and reported she enthusiastically learned English so she might be able to help her friends navigate through language barriers. Despite knowing English, Aung expressed that communication is minimal between herself and Grace, even when it is about concerns and issues. This might be influenced the most by Aung's experiences within the Myanmar education system and the cultural and institutional shifts between her origin country and the United States. She explained:

There is no right or wrong, you can't decide. In my country, two plus one equals two, the teachers say...two plus two equal two, I have to follow this. I cannot make two plus one equal three. This is the principle...In Burma, there is very scary to ask questions there. Very scary to speak out. Why? Because of the education. That's why I'm come here, now I try to learn little by little, I am not scared now, but it's different here...So if I ask question it can be wrong or right. I still have fear because I've lived there twenty years, so here only four years.

Aung expressed that the teachers had the authority in Burma, with the process being to follow without question. These cultural influences presently impact Aung's communication with Grace. For instance, Aung discussed her concern that Grace takes the children outside even when it is cold out. When I asked her if she had expressed these concerns to Grace, she replied, "Is that good to tell that?"

Following up, I asked her if she would feel comfortable bringing problems or issues to Grace and Aung answered, "I am not sure...I am not sure because I think, because if I say like that, it's maybe really okay or no. I am not sure, that's what I keep in mind." Aung still questions whether bringing up an issue is okay or not and this most likely interacts with contextual restraints to discourage Aung and Grace from discussing problems. For instance, Aung needs to catch the bus at the end of the day and Grace manages the classroom, which decreases opportunities for communication. Postponing discussion till the next morning may result in the topic being dropped due to the impact of cultural influences that foster the teachers' authority and judgments. Grace's person characteristics interact with Aung's cultural background to contribute to the lack of the communication; that is, Grace is less likely to initiate unless the problem calls for it. Overall though, culture seems to majorly influence how Grace and Aung communicate above and beyond other person characteristics and contextual factors.

### **Mahida and Ahera: The Potential of Refugee Parent–Teacher Communication**

Mahida has one son who is in the infant classroom and was pregnant throughout the study. Her family is originally from Sudan and has been here for two years. She speaks Arabic and a little bit of English. When she first started attending the agency, Mahida reported that she rarely spoke to Ahera. This might have been a result of past experiences with parent–teacher communication in her home country, as Mahida stated, “In Sudan, most of the parents, they don’t communicate with the teachers. Sometimes it’s too hard...also sometimes the students are afraid from the teacher.” She described that concerns and issues drove communication, occasionally scaring the children because it focused on something they did wrong. However, she and Ahera did not fall into the same pattern of communication. Out of all the parents, Mahida’s self-report of communication was the best even though she was not observed. She expressed that Ahera and classroom aides help her communicate and understand English, mentioning, “They try to find simple words to explain and Ahera do that many times...she use simple words to make all the parent understand what is going on.” Ahera’s usage of simple words and repetition established a foundation for communication with Mahida. Ahera’s person characteristics to reach out to parents and continue to communicate with them opened up a pathway for a relationship.

The benefits of this communication and relationship have been most evident to Mahida in her son’s behavior. Mahida shared goals with Ahera describing how she wanted her son to “...listen to the teacher, to obey the orders. Then to play with his friends, don’t hit anybody. This is very important; if he can accept any teacher.” Mahida



reported she and Ahera communicate often to approach these goals and increase his good behavior. Mahida described these outcomes:

He is now listening and he follow the rule. If you ask him to do that, he will do. If she said to him “Don’t do that”, he will no do that. And also the same is at home...[Also] I remember when she told them, she said “Clean up!” They go and clean.

Mahida witnessed behavioral changes in her son from his time in Ahera’s class and from the pair sharing conversations on how to improve it. Mahida reported she talks to Ahera “almost everyday” and has discussions with Ahera during breaks to talk about her son’s behavior. She felt that Ahera was responsive and that communicating with teachers here in the United States is easier than in Sudan. Indirectly, the set up of the infant classroom in which parents come in not only during drop-off and pick-up, but also during break allowed Ahera and Mahida to have more time to discuss and accomplish behavioral goals. Thus, even though Mahida takes public transportation and may be rushed during pick-up, the break offers increased opportunities for communication. In addition, Mahida said the classroom aides, especially those that spoke Arabic, were helpful to mediate communication and tell her how her son was doing. Although her pregnancy hindered her attendance during this study, Mahida and Ahera’s person characteristics (i.e. motivation, comfortableness, language abilities) and the contextual supports available (i.e. classroom set-up, classroom aides) fostered effective communication between the two and seemed to lead to positive child outcomes for Mahida’s son.

### **Suggested Strategies from Parents and Teachers**

For the fourth aim of this study, I questioned what parents and teachers in these contexts believe would improve communication and their recommendations for themselves and for others to move forward in doing so.

#### **Refugee Parents' Recommendations**

Seven out of the ten mothers provided strategies, with some focusing on person characteristics and others narrowing in on contextual supports. For example, Nu suggested that learning English acted as a solution that would not only improve communication between refugee parents and teachers, but also with other members of the community. Similarly, Tara recommended that learning English would help, but further added that teaching refugee parents in a more detailed way would be effective. She personally believed that in-depth explanations or strategies to get English across would help communication between her and Grace and perhaps others. She described that pointing to signs or pictures would help her learn and might aid in interactions between parents and teachers.

In addition, Mahida and Allea focused on characteristics of parents and expressed that parents should be open and comfortable with their children's teacher. Mahida elaborated:

All the time, just encourage the parent to talk. If something happen, just talk to the teacher...just talk and explain if something happened. Because, sometimes [the children] are afraid– if the kids, they try to be alone or they do something maybe– this, everything, new for them. New culture, new environment.

Mahida and Allea stressed that communication between parents and teachers is necessary for their children. Parents need to be comfortable and willing to approach teachers and vice versa in order to aid children's adaptation and learning in school contexts. Allea's further added, "I think sometime they [can] use dictionary maybe or something but it's not easy." Allea suggested that teachers might want to use dual-languages dictionaries to help communicate, but recognized that this method would still have its limitations. Aung reported that she would want to communicate with teachers over the phone, stating,

I want to connect with them by phone, sometime if I cannot come to school and if my child is busy or I have thought of something...I have to communicate with them before. Yeah. This would be good.

Lastly, Maiah and Radeyah mentioned that participating within the classroom would promote communication between themselves and teachers. Maiah expressed, "I think that if I participate, I will also come to know...things to learn. Yeah. And to communicate." Maiah reported that participating in the classroom would help to also understand what is occurring in the classroom and what her son's day looks like. Similarly, Radeyah stated, "I am interested that I can spend an hour or maybe two hours in the school while my daughter is there, maybe just volunteering or stay." Radeyah also mentioned, "I prefer if I can meet [the teacher], and just sit and talk together, and we can figure out what is going on with [my daughter]. And I want to do something else with her at home." Radeyah is interested in not only volunteering in her daughter's classroom, but also expressed that she would like to invite the teacher to their house and speak more with her.

## **Teachers' Recommendations**

Both Ahera and Grace provided suggestions that might be able to help other early childhood teachers form effective pathways of communication with refugee parents. Ahera commented on the importance of outward demeanor (i.e. demand characteristics) and stated, "They have to see your face, you know? People, first before you talk, they see your face. They know your face; they see you. Just make them smile." Ahera further elaborated that when parents first come, everything is different and may be difficult for them. She suggested on top of being friendly and welcoming, it is important to encourage parents, explaining:

They don't know the culture. Everything is different. They think everything is hard. But I tell them it's easy. Next month, when they come, 'Oh, it's hard. The languages', they say the language is hard. 'Everything is hard', they say...I say 'No, it's easy.' Next month, 'You[re] going to change, you know?' Next, month...Next, next, next.

Ahera described how she encourages parents month after month and advised other teachers to "tell [parents] they can do it." She gave an example of how she tracked a mother after year of being in the United States and the two of them reminisced on how much the mother had learned. Ahera continually encourages parents and affirms their accomplishments and said the best advice for other teacher is, "Give them smile and tell them everything's easy."

Grace's suggestions focused more broadly on contextual supports that might foster the foundation for communication between teachers and refugee parents. She expressed:

I wished we had a system of regularly having the parents in the classroom...whether or not that's having them volunteer randomly, but having them regularly in there so that they see with their own eyes what is actually happening on a regular day.

She mentioned that having parents volunteer in the classroom would allow her to know more about them as well as learn the ways they interact with their children. She further elaborated:

Where do you even start a conversation when you don't observe them and their kids that much...Like I think that would be a huge piece of relationship building and just creating a way that if they want to say something they can say something [and] they are a part of it.

Grace discussed that sharing the space with parents would help the two parties learn more about each other and come together to provide appropriate and culturally responsive care. She expressed a desire to learn from parents in these moments on how to best meet their children's needs, and further commented on the importance of teachers empowering parents.

They're part of this, we're all part of a community and we're all learning together, you know? And we are resources for each other. I think that's empowering and people need to be empowered...I would love to be able to do that with the parents... We need that.

For Grace, learning from parents was the best communication pathway she could recommend for others and for herself. She further made suggestions specifically tailored for the agency, including having an intake form where parents, with the help of

translators, write down aspects of their backgrounds, parenting styles, their expectations, and so on. Lastly, she also added:

If I just had another paid teacher that was consistent...so that I can actually have a conversation or be able to deal with these situations appropriately and not have to worry about [the classroom] going into chaos because the college intern is going to have a break down.

Having another teacher in the classroom might allow Grace to have more opportunities to communicate with parents outside of concerns and problems as well as provide two points of contact for parents if they need to share something.

Overall, the recommendations parents and teachers had for effective communication spanned from person characteristics to proximal and distal contextual supports. In addition, some suggestions were more individualized for specific situations that these parents and teachers are in and may not be able to be applied to broader communication improvements. However, the implications of their suggestions and the process of collecting their input function as a first step in understanding the individual needs of both parties in order to move towards effective interactions.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

This study utilized Bronfenbrenner's process-person-context-time (PPCT) model as a lens to understand the ways in which refugee parents and teachers are communicating in early childcare settings and the person characteristics, contexts, and the interactions among and between the two that impact these communication processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Overall, observation findings demonstrated that most opportunities for communication were not capitalized on between parents and teachers and this was especially true for the preschool classroom. In addition, most witnessed communication did not include many back and forth exchanges and only a few parents engaged in deeper levels of social conversation and child care topics with the teachers. To my knowledge, this is the first study of its kind to observe communication processes between parents and teachers instead of relying on participant reports, and further the first to capture the content of the communication occurring. These findings move past binary views of "communication versus no communication" between the two parties. For instance, the six observed types of communication taking place (i.e. nonverbal, single short phrases, small exchanges, social conversations, child care topics, and child-mediated talk) illustrated that parents and teachers communicate in different ways and afforded a greater understanding of this variance. The reports from both teachers and

parents not only mirrored what was observed at drop off and pick up times, but also helped to validate these findings.

Understanding if and how communication was occurring was the first step, and joining past studies on refugee parent–teacher communication this study also aimed to comprehend what contributed to these processes. However, differing from the majority of prior research (see Hurley et al., 2011), this study captured the perspectives of both the parents and teachers to fully explain emerging patterns of communication.

Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model guided an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of these developing individuals and contexts in which they live (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Across the ten mothers, language abilities, cultural communication experiences, motivation to communicate, comfort in communicating, driving skills, and outward appearances were reoccurring person characteristics that influenced communication.

Similar to what was found in other literature (see Massing et al., 2016), driving skills and challenges with transportation were prominent findings that seemed to limit

communication time, especially at pick up. Further, multiple past studies have found that language and cultural barriers impeded communication between parents and teachers

(Ali, 2012; McBrien, 2005; Rah et al., 2009; Tadesse, 2014), and although this was true for some of the parents in this study, there were also cases where these factors did not

impact developing relationships with the teachers. For example, Mahida and Ahera did not speak the same language or share the same culture, but they still worked together to

improve Mahida’s child’s behavior. This begins to demonstrate that these factors alone are not the only determinants of how communication occurs and prior research has



mostly failed in capturing the complexity of interacting factors that explain refugee parent–teacher communication.

In addition, the current literature on refugee parent–teacher communication has not emphasized supporting person characteristics and has tended to focus on present difficulties instead of the strengths that refugee parents might use to bridge gaps in communicating. Only one study, to my knowledge, highlighted personal supports that aided parents’ communication with teachers, in that parents who were more motivated to participate and held respect for teachers were able to form pathways of communication with their children’s teacher (Haines et al., 2014a). Further, Gaitin (2012) and Ali (2012) maintained that immigrant and refugee families want to be involved in their children’s education, but their findings were not specific to parent–teacher communication. This study extends the findings of prior research that overlooked existing personal supports of refugee parents. The findings indicated parents were both motivated to improve communication and confident in discussing issues with their children’s teacher (only Aung was an exception to the latter). These helpful person characteristics were implicit resources that mothers’ used to become involved. For instance, if Hyza had a problem, she would have her son write notes in English for her to bring to school the next day. She was motivated and comfortable approaching Grace over and above the language and cultural differences. As Allea put it, lines of communication have to be established, because ultimately it is for the children and both parties care immensely for them.

Considering the teachers, Grace and Ahera had different person characteristics that influenced the way they communicated with parents. Ahera was persistent in

communicating and had experience working with refugee families that enabled her to form effective communication pathways with parents. Grace valued parent–teacher communication and strived to learn from parents, but would often put the needs of her students first, which in some cases limited how she communicated with parents. Haines and colleagues (2014a) found that when teachers cared deeply for their students, they were more likely to reach out to parents. However, although Grace prioritized and cared for the children in her class, she also mentioned that she is somewhat introverted and it is much harder for her to reach out to parents with confidence. The characteristics across Ahera, Grace, and teachers in Haines and colleagues’ (2014a) study indicate that these individuals all function and communicate with parents in different ways. Further, and mirroring the parents’ findings, there are complex interactions occurring among person characteristics that combine to influence communication. For instance, Grace only speaks English and language barriers are normally a consistently concern for teachers (Szente et al., 2006), yet her language abilities were not what she mentioned struggling with the most. She focused more on her confidence in approaching parents and the challenges in balancing her dual roles as an informant for parents and a protector for her students.

On top of interacting person characteristics, parents and both teachers were also situated in contexts that influenced communication processes. This was most evident in the setup and routines of the classrooms. For instance, parents would go into the infant class not only during drop off and pick up times, but also for a half-hour at break. Going into the infant classroom was observed to be beneficial to promote communication

opportunities between the refugee parents and Ahera and also create consistent patterns of communication across drop-off and pick-up times. In the opposite way, not going into the preschool classroom decreased opportunities for communication and compounded with other contextual restraints; that is, Grace was often busy managing the classroom and was not available to meet parents by the door. In addition to managing the classrooms without second teachers, Grace and Ahera had responsibilities outside of the classroom that restricted their time. For Grace especially, meeting her and her son's basic needs was a priority that trumped her desire to do personal research on the families she served and plan classroom activities that allowed parents to be involved. These actions, if taken, may have indirectly contributed to improving her communication with parents. For instance, gaining knowledge on the families may give her the confidence to approach them and/or decrease some apprehension she has in communicating with them. Additionally, Grace expressed it would be constructive to share the same space with parents in caring for their children; thus, if she had time to organize a classroom routine to include a time where parents may visit, she might be able to capitalize on opportunities of communication as well as learn how to better meet her students' needs. Haines and colleagues (2014a) similarly found that teachers' responsibilities outside the classroom limited their knowledge of the children's home life, family, and culture. These mesosystem and exosystem influences had direct and indirect impacts and seemed to strongly affect communication.

Some contextual supports included that classroom aides and friends of parents acted as translators; however, parents and teachers expressed they were not always

consistent. For some parents, contextual constraints ended up interrupting their attendance, including challenges in balancing responsibilities at home and the inflexibility of transportation schedules. This relates to other findings that refugee parents have multiple pressing needs and in some cases are just trying to survive (McBrein, 2005, 2011). These constraints, especially transportation schedules, also rushed available times in which parents could have capitalized on opportunities of communication. In addition, it is important to recognize that both the parents and teachers are now situated in a larger macrosystem that has been shifting dramatically over the last couple of years considering available support for refugees and immigrants. For instance, President Trump and his administration cut refugee admissions numbers to a historic low of 45,000 in 2018 and, in the 2019 fiscal year, that number is now 30,000 (Amos, 2018). With these changes came budget cuts to multiple agencies that receive federal funding based on the refugees they resettle (Amos, 2018). The current political climate may have indirectly influenced some of the contextual constraints the parents and teachers reported on. That is, changing in funding at the macrosystem level may limit the resources the agency has available to hire translators, find a second teacher, and/or provide time and support for teachers to create pathways of communication with parents. Further, refugee families may find that agencies formerly designated to provide assistance are now unavailable, may face challenges in transportation due to these changes, and may feel unwelcomed by their surrounding community, including their children's schools. The current administration's policies and messages about immigrants and refugees create a downstream of political, economic, and social factors that may

amplify the barriers refugee parents and teachers face and constrain the resources and support that could be effective in promoting communication. In this study, I did not concretely explore the impact these macrosystem factors may have had, but in accordance with Bronfenbrenner's theory, I acknowledge that the form, power, and content of communication processes are impacted by these contexts and the current changes in this time period (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Lastly, the findings in this study share similarities to past research, but also extend that research and provide a deeper look into the multiple and intersecting characteristics and contexts that contribute to communication processes. Moreover, the findings in this study demonstrate that each parent and teacher is remarkably different and have specific situations that lead to distinct communication processes. That is, no one person characteristic or contextual influence was shown to determine how a parent or a teacher would communicate with the other. Further, although some similar characteristics and contexts existed between participants, the influence those factors had on communication would manifest in different ways depending on the individual. Take for instance similarities in language abilities. Aung and Radeyah both had a strong command of English, yet while Radeyah expressed wanting to talk to her child's teacher and build a relationship of trust, Aung reported it was hard for her to communicate with her child's teacher. As illustrated, Aung's ability to communicate in English interacted with her cultural experiences in communicating with teachers and as a result led to different communication outcomes when compared to Radeyah. Overall, the findings in this study demonstrate that to truly understand refugee parent-teacher communication processes, an

individualized approach is needed that captures the person characteristics and contexts of both the parents and teachers involved.

### **Implications**

The last aim of this study inquired about specific strategies that parents and teachers recommended to improve communication. Overall, parents suggested that learning English, feeling comfortable talking to teachers, using phones, and volunteering in their child's classrooms were effective ways to improve communication between the two parties. The two teachers recommended that encouraging and supporting parents during their transition and having parents volunteer in the classroom would naturally improve communication.

The findings from this study further indicated agency-specific and broader implications for refugee parent-teacher communication. For this particular agency, providing administrative support, such as filling out intake forms and introducing parents to the teachers, before welcoming families and children into the classroom might be beneficial to establish a foundation of communication for both parents and teachers. In addition, the agency should establish stable routines, schedules, and expectations at the exosystem level so that the teachers might be able to capitalize on opportunities for communication or have pathways that foster consistent parent-teacher communication. If funds become available, Grace expressed that a second teacher would help immensely with managing classroom routines and activities, freeing up time to communicate more with parents and address issues in better ways. It might also be helpful to have translators consistently available one to two days a week and allow teachers to have time

with parents during break time on those days. This could function to introduce parents to the expectations of the United States' early childhood care and other possible institutional differences in educational systems (Hamilton, 2004), and further allow the teachers to get to know the parents. Creating time for parents and teachers to be together is critical to improve communication for this agency. This could include shifting the daily schedule to allow for more opportunities for parents to volunteer in the classroom or have time after their English classes to communicate with the teachers at the end of the day. When parents and teacher work together, it is an empowering process (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001). Lastly, if one-on-one time with parents is not possible, the agency should still support teachers in learning about the families and children they serve so when opportunities for communication occur teachers can make the most of them (Gaitan, 2012; Hoot, 2011).

The findings from this study may also be applied to broader early educational contexts that go beyond non-profit programs. For instance, it was shown that having volunteers or staff in the classroom that can translate or act as cultural brokers was one of the greater contextual supports for parents in communicating with teachers. This implication is similar to other studies that have shown cultural brokers and translators as one of the main strategies for connecting not only families and teachers, but also forming bridges over language and culture differences (Hurley et al., 2011; Massing et al., 2016). In addition, findings from this study emphasize that attention may need to be paid to the setup of the classrooms, routines, and exosystem administrative structures (e.g. intake processes, expectations for communication, teacher-student ratios, etc.). These factors were shown to have a large influence on how communication took place and yet they

might be overlooked due to the familiarity with the settings and processes in place. For instance, it appeared to be important that refugee parents have opportunities to enter their children's classroom and be given time to help their children settle alongside the teacher.

Moreover, lessons from the observations and interviews with the teachers may be helpful to other early childhood care educators. Ahera recommended and demonstrated through her actions this persistence in communicating, even when parents do not understand. She suggested that teachers should keep trying even if they have to repeat what they are saying multiple times; and it helps to smile and maintain a friendly and welcoming disposition while doing so. Further, Grace strived to learn from parents on how to best support their children, working to empower the family and potentially establish a foundation for future communication. She exemplified that having an open mind and tapping into parents' knowledge might be an effective pathway to build relationships with parents.

In terms of future research on immigrant and/or refugee parent-teacher communication, using Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model provided a foundation for a deeper understanding of these processes and factors that contributed to their occurrence. Moreover, using a theory that afforded comprehension of the complexity surrounding refugee-parent communication shed light on factors that could help improve these interactions to turn them into true proximal processes, which are reoccurring and increase in complexity over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In addition, capturing both the supports and barriers functioned in a holistic way that afforded greater comprehension of how factors interacted and combined to influence communication. Further, using



observations on top of participant reports captured that communication between these two parties was complex and depended on the individuals involved. Thus, ethnographic techniques and observations should be integrated into future research in this area. Future research should also continue exploring this phenomenon in individualistic ways to understand how supports and barriers interact in different contexts. This will potentially lead to more specific suggestions for improved communication and ultimately benefits for children, parents, and teachers.

### **Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, the agency's program is not an actual licensed preschool, thus results must be treated with caution when considering implications for licensed programs that have different structures and systems in place. Future studies will need to attend to contextual influences presented by each center or school since these unique characteristics clearly influence communication processes. Second, some information might have been lost in translation during the interview with parents; however, when necessary I clarified with translators and rephrased questions in order to gain the most accurate information. Third, for the observations, my location was in the middle of the entrance room and some parents noticed my presence. On some days, parents would greet me or ask me questions instead of directing them to the teachers. This may have taken away some moments of communication between parents and teachers; however, this only occurred on four occasions and for the most part I was ignored. Fourth, the findings of this study do not provide an "end-all explanation" of communication processes. Qualitative methods were effective in capturing many new

characteristics and contexts unexplored in past research, but findings were still limited by the questions parents were asked. In future research, this might be addressed through different questions, more open-ended questions, case studies approaches, and deeper ethnographic observations.

Lastly, the communication observed between refugee parents and teachers in this study cannot be considered true proximal processes—defined by Bronfenbrenner as effective interactions that produce development, occur regularly, extend over periods of time, and become increasingly more complex (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The interactions between parents and teachers may be described as “potential” proximal processes that with more time and support turn into complex exchanges that promote positive development for both parties. However, this wording was not used throughout this study because this may be a limitation of Bronfenbrenner’s definition of proximal processes. For instance, I posit that these interactions are important even if they have yet to become *increasingly complex* and their absence may have significant negative consequences. Further, researchers and educators argue that refugee parent–teacher communication has potential to positively impact children and their families (Adams & Kirova, 2007; Anderson et al., 2004), and past empirical work demonstrates some of these benefits (Haines et al., 2014a; Hurley et al., 2011). These interactions hold importance as they may dramatically impact the ways teachers and refugee parents communicate not just in the present, but also in the future. For example, a teacher or refugee parent might develop a pattern of interacting that spans to future communication with the other party. These developed scripts may enable future communication to take

place or replace comfort with apprehension in future interactions. Additionally, even if these interactions do not impact the parents' or teachers' development, a relationship between the two parties has been shown to indirectly affect the child's academic achievement and socio-emotional adjustment (Bhattacharya, 2000; Jeynes, 2003). Bronfenbrenner's definition of proximal processes is limited in including interactions such as those observed in this study, which impact all those involved but do not extend over periods of time nor become increasingly more complex.

However, in opposition to limitations in the definition, true proximal processes might not have been captured as a result of an observational period that only spanned over 19 days and one interview touch point with each participant. With more time and in-depth observations and interviews with both parties, proximal processes as defined by Bronfenbrenner may have appeared. Future researchers may want to consider conducting longitudinal studies to fully understand how communication translates throughout the years of schooling. In addition, future research in this area should continue to look for factors that could explain these processes and extend the current study's findings so these interactions become closer to true proximal processes.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to understand the ways refugee parent–teacher communication was occurring and what strategies might be useful to improve these processes and build upon them. Findings extended past literature and emphasized that each parent and teacher has individual characteristics and contexts that impact the way they communicate. This study points to the need to not only understand the individuals involved in

communicating and the contexts they function within, but also points to the importance of utilizing that understanding to tailor specific strategies that make a difference for these families and teachers. Existing supports and strategies are still limited in the face of contextual barriers and it is the responsibility of researchers to continue exploring what might work to bridge gaps between educators and refugee families. Effective communication between refugee parents and their children's preschool teacher is powerful and has the potential to not only support children's success in school, but also allow families to have a voice in their children's education as well as become more integrated into a larger community (Anderson et al., 2004; Hamilton, 2004). In addition, it is helpful for teachers to work with parents to understand their students and have a consistent partner when it comes to meeting children's educational, social, and emotional needs. The benefits of this connection between home and school are positive for all those involved and the potential of refugee parent-teacher communication can be capitalized on by understanding individual characteristics and contexts, along with the complex interactions between and among them.

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APPENDIX A  
OBSERVATION SHEET

DROP OFF or PICK UP

Date:

Start Time:      End Time:

<u>PRESCHOOL</u>	<u>INFANT ROOM</u>
<u>Number of Aids:</u>	<u>Number of Aids:</u>
<u>Number of Parents:</u>	<u>Number of Parents:</u>
<u>Parents in Study:</u>	<u>Parents in Study:</u>
<u>Parents that go into Classroom:</u>	<u>Parents that go into Classroom:</u>
<u>Drop-off/Pick-up without Communication:</u>	<u>Drop-off/Pick-up without Communication:</u>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Observations</u></p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Observations</u></p>

## APPENDIX B

### PARENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does your child need from school in order to be successful?
  - a. How are you involved?
2. What do you expect from your child's teacher in helping your child learn?
3. I am interested in understanding how parent and teachers communicate and I was wondering about the communication practices between teachers and parents in your home country/culture?
  - a. Was it important that parents talked with teachers about their child's schoolwork in your home country?
  - b. Can you tell me about how parents and teachers communicated?
5. Tell me about your interactions with your child's current preschool teacher?
  - a. How often?
  - b. Can you give me an example of a time you spoke to one another?
  - c. What did you speak about?
6. Are you comfortable telling your child's preschool teacher if your child was having an issue?
  - a. Have there been any issues?
7. Are there any challenges you face in communicating with your child's teacher?
  - a. What are the challenges?
  - b. Time Constraints?
  - c. Language Barriers?
  - d. How do you work around these challenges? Is there anything that you do?
8. What has helped you communicate with your child's preschool teacher?
  - a. Have there been any translators available?
  - b. How do you know what is going on in the classroom?
9. Would you like to have better communication with your child's teacher?
  - a. Do you have any ideas on how you would do this? What would make this an easier process?
10. Given that I am interested in your connection/ communication with your child's teacher at NAI do you have anything else you want to share or tell me?

## APPENDIX C

### TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Tell me something about yourself
  - a. Education Background
  - b. Languages Spoken
  - c. Teaching Background
2. Tell me about your job here
  - a. What does a normal day look like?
  - b. What is important to you in your job?
3. How have your views of parents in this program changed over time? What have you learned about working with families as you do this job?
4. How would you describe your relationship with the parents?
  - a. Does it differ by parent?
  - b. If yes, why does it differ?
5. Do you have any expectations of the parents in terms of communicating?
  - a. What do you normally talk to the parent's about or wish you could talk with them about?
  - b. How would you like to interact with them?
6. What are the challenges you face in communicating with parents?
  - a. Do other responsibilities get in the way?
  - b. Do cultural differences present barriers?
7. What are some things that aid in communicating with parents?
  - a. What are some things you personally do to communicate with parents?
  - b. Does NAI or anything else provide support in communicating?
  - c. What has worked in the past?
8. Would you like to have better communication with the parents?
  - a. If yes, do you have any ideas on how you would do this?