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Do Schools Reach Out To Parents?

What are the elements of an effective program of school-parent communications? Traditionally, communication between the school and the home has been basically a process of "information-giving". The school in effect has told parents what it wants them to know. Where the information relates to what's happening in the school, such "one way" messages have not surprisingly tended to portray the school in a favourable light. (In the terminology of systems theory, this tendency reflects the natural concern of a system for generating "output" supportive of its existence.) Where it relates to pupils, however, such messages have frequently tended to be negative, particularly when the school has felt that it was necessary to initiate contact with a parent.

This type of "communication" raises a number of important questions. To begin with, the question arises whether it can be regarded as communication at all, since information-giving tends to ignore the fact that a message is not complete until it has been interpreted by the intended receiver and acted upon. It is assumed, in other words, that complete meaning resides inherently in the message itself, and clearly, no amount of attention given to the sophistication and physical attractiveness of a message can provide this kind of guarantee. Furthermore, the paternalism implicit in information-giving may no longer be acceptable to parents who are beginning to initiate communications of their own. One writer, indeed, has aptly characterized the changes that have recently taken place in the relationships between the school and its various subpublics — teachers, parents, and students — as a "revolt against paternalism".¹

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There is a need, in short, for a school-parent communications program to be "audience-oriented". Those in charge of school systems should ask themselves these questions: How do parents interpret messages from the school? What do they know and think about the school? How can the school identify the image that the parent has of the school, and what can be done to modify this image if it appears detrimental to the development of the kind of parent-school relationships which mutually promote pupil welfare and achievement?

One approach to developing the understanding needed for this kind of communication was recently applied in a Montreal suburban school district, where parents were surveyed to determine how they perceived the "communication boundary permeability" of their schools. This phrase is an expression of the theory that systems, including educational organizations, are bounded by patterned ways of behaving which either invite or resist exchanges with their social environments. Schools, then, might be regarded as relatively "open" or "closed" according to the degree to which these communication boundaries are permeable to parental input. An extremely "open" school would be just that — a school where parents could walk in at any time, contact anybody with any concern, and expect, moreover, that such contact would produce desired results. Conversely, an extremely closed school would impose elaborately defensive procedures for blocking and diverting any parental attempts at input.

Between these two conceptual extremes of openness and closedness is a range of possibilities which may be assessed through an instrument called the *Parent School Communications Questionnaire* (PSCQ).³ The PSCQ surveys parental perceptions of boundary permeability or openness in terms of twenty-five items which have been developed through factor analysis techniques. These items are associated with the following three dimensions of interaction between the school and parents:

- (1) *Teacher-Parent Interaction.* The perceptions parents have of the attitudes of teachers toward parental contacts and of the manner in which teachers handle and react to such contacts.
- (2) *Parent-Principal Interaction.* The perceptions parents have of the principal's attitudes toward parental contacts; of the principal's promotion of school-parent communication; and of the principal's responsiveness to communication from parents.
- (3) *Accessibility of the School.* The perceptions parents have of the routes available to them for contacting the school; of the tone

of school-to-home communication; and of the impact their communication has on the school.

Parents respond to the items using a five-point scale ranging from "always true" to "never true". In scoring responses, the scale is converted to numerical equivalents from 1-5, and in this way openness scores can be calculated for each item, for the three dimensions, and for the total instrument.

The PSCQ was applied in the selected school district with some interesting results. These are summarized in the following three tables, which abbreviate the original wording of the items in the three dimensions of the instrument and which list responses in an order from highest percentage of perceived openness, to lowest. The tables are based upon the responses of 326 parents (representing an 82% usable return from a random sample of 400 parents, in a district enrolling 5000 pupils). In order to summarize more effectively parental perceptions of openness and closedness, the responses to the five-point scale of the instrument were converted to a three-point scale ("closed", "sometimes", "open") by collapsing the two categories at each end of the five-point scale and by retaining the midrange "sometimes" category.

Table 1

Parental Perceptions of Teacher-Parent Interaction (N = 326)			
	CLOSED	SOMETIMES*	OPEN
Teachers . . .	%	%	%
1. Are friendly and warm.	2	11	86
2. Hold back information.	5	10	85
3. Are threatened by questions.	5	17	81
4. Like parental contact.	9	21	70
5. React negatively to child if parent complains.	8	22	69
6. Pay attention to parents.	9	22	69
7. See parents as a nuisance.	6	30	65
8. Follow-up their meetings with parents	26	19	54
*When "sometimes" is used in referring to the extent of openness or closedness, it indicates a midrange response: sometimes closed, sometimes open.			

In Table 1 it is clear that teachers in this district are regarded by a large majority of the parents surveyed as open not only in

terms of their friendliness and warmth but also in terms of their willingness to disclose information and to accept parental questions in a positive manner. It therefore seems somewhat paradoxical that 30%, or 98 of the 326 parents (item 7), felt that teachers sometimes regard parents as “nuisances”. Responses to this item, however, might reflect parental sensitivity about taking up the time of teachers: teachers are “warm and friendly”, but they are also busy. Nearly one-quarter of the parents felt, too, that teachers sometimes regard parents as “nuisances”. Responses to this complains (item 5) and that they only sometimes pay attention to parents (item 6). But the finding in the table which seems to have the clearest implications for practice is item 8, which indicates that 26% of the parents felt that teachers either never or rarely follow-up parent conferences with subsequent information about the problem discussed.

Table 2

Parental Perceptions of Parent-Principal Interaction (N = 326)			
	CLOSED	SOMETIMES	OPEN
Principals ...	%	%	%
1. Communicate parental concerns to teachers.	7	10	83
2. Actively support parent organization.	9	12	78
3. Are willing to listen to criticism.	11	12	76
4. Always pay attention to parents.	7	20	73
5. Encourage parents to contact teachers.	12	15	73
6. See parents as source of help.	8	21	71
7. Respond only to group pressure.	27	16	58
8. Take initiative in contacting parents.	31	18	52

How do principals figure in the perceptions that parents have of the “boundary permeability” of their schools? Table 2 summarizes these responses. The highest ranking item in terms of “openness” which emerges in this dimension concerns the role of the principal as an intermediary in communicating the concerns of parents to teachers. Perhaps this is not surprising since it may reflect a degree of respect on the parents’ part for the authority of the principal’s position. At the same time, it demonstrates that principals

are perceived as playing a pivotal role in parent-school communications.

Other results concerning the principal's contribution to the openness of communications are largely positive too, though a fair number of parents felt that principals only sometimes pay attention to parents (item 4); only sometimes encourage parents to contact teachers (item 5); and only sometimes see parents as a source of help (item 6). Moreover, a substantial number of parents seemed to feel that their principals would respond to pressure only from a group of parents rather than from any individual parent (item 7). This item, it should be noted, is based upon the assumption that an open situation is one in which an individual can have an impact without necessarily backing up his petition with the force of numbers. Interestingly, a similar proportion of the parents felt that their principals initiated contacts with parents about school matters either never or only rarely (item 8).

Table 3

Parental Perceptions of the Accessibility of the School (N = 326)			
	CLOSED	SOMETIMES	OPEN
Parents ...	%	%	%
1. Have no hesitancy contacting teachers about child's work.	17	8	75
2. Feel free to stop and chat with teachers.	26	13	61
3. Need only to stop by office to see principal.	27	16	57
4. Have difficulty contacting teacher by phone.	30	22	49
5. Need only to stop by office to see teacher.	39	15	47
6. Find it best to write rather than phone.	47	17	36
7. Find talking with the teacher makes an impact.	41	26	33
8. Feel communications from school are impersonal.	50	20	28
9. Are contacted by teachers when child is doing well.	76	9	14

The items in the final dimension concerning the perceived accessibility of the school (Table 3) are, it will noted, associated more with the "mechanics" than with the interpersonal aspects of communications. And, in general, the results suggest that these

aspects are perceived less positively by parents in this district than are the parent-teacher-principal relationships summarized in the previous tables. Perhaps this is a promising sign, for if a district were to be concerned with promoting a more open communications image, changes in the physical process of communication might be much easier to achieve than changes concerned with the social-psychology of relationships. A specific example is provided by the eighth-ranking item, which indicates the attitude of parents towards the tone of communications from the school. The literature concerned with school public relations techniques has long stressed the need for the personal touch in communicating with parents,³ and this district could certainly benefit from the knowledge that so large a proportion of the parents in the sample felt that most communications from the school were impersonal in tone. Similarly, there are readily-apparent implications for practice in item 9, which ranked as by far the most closed aspect of communication in this dimension and, indeed, in the entire study. Consider the possibilities for school-community relationships (and perhaps even for pupil achievement) if a school made a special practice of conveying good news to the home, particularly where such news might not be very characteristic of the child concerned!

One must be careful, however, about translating the items in this table into practice, for they are intended as relative measures of the directness — and hence of the openness — of communication rather than as indicators of desirable practice. In a school having few procedural barriers to communication, parents could see the principal by simply stopping by the office without the need for an appointment (item 3); could get in touch with teachers by phone without difficulty (item 4); could see their youngster's teacher by stopping by the office and asking without prior contact (item 5); and when concerned about a problem with their youngsters at school, could rely on the more informal and immediate procedure of phoning rather than having to write and to wait for the reply to a formal letter (item 6). But to conclude from these indicators that wide-open accessibility is the most desirable state for parent-school relations would obviously ignore the school's need for a degree of freedom from interruption in order to carry out its responsibilities. On the other hand, a school system confronted with the evidence in Table 3 might want to consider whether this concern justifies all of its current communications procedures and practices.

In conclusion, if there is any central message in the evidence

from this study, it is suggested by the large number of parents who felt that teachers initiate no contacts for the purpose of conveying positive messages about their children's performance in school. One might label the practice of deliberately initiating such contacts as an "outreach" function in parent-school communications. In cases where this is done, the school doesn't wait for parent input, but "goes to the parents", initiating interaction, and following up contacts made. Traditionally, however, the role of the school has been to improve and reform, so perhaps it is not surprising that positive outreach of this nature is rare. Most parents would expect, rather, that a phone call or letter from the school about their child would portend something amiss. Ironically, however, according to the perceptions of parents in the district studied, even this type of outreach proved to be relatively limited. As well as the PSCQ, the study included a number of additional items, one of which read, "My youngster's teacher contacts me personally when something goes wrong with his work." A total of 46% of the parents responded that this was never or rarely true; 15% responded that it was sometimes true; and a total of 39% responded that it was mostly or always true.

The need for outreach is further suggested by the results from three individual items in the questionnaire. First, over 40% of the parents felt a need for more follow-up after meetings with teachers (Table 1). Second, approximately half the parents felt that principals should initiate contact more frequently (Table 2). Finally, about half the parents felt that principals respond only to group pressure (Table 2). Thus, the parents tend to ascribe to the principal a role as reactor rather than as initiator.

Should schools be more concerned with "outreach" in communicating with parents? Deliberate attempts to initiate communication may be time-consuming, and perhaps even somewhat hazardous because of the possibility of activating concerns which might more comfortably be avoided. On the other hand, as it is an active rather than a reactive form of communication, outreach may place the school in a better position to exercise leadership in its dealings with an increasingly complex and demanding environment. Moreover, as the findings of this study have suggested, outreach may also contribute to the perceived openness of the school, and such an image seems essential to the establishment of an environment that will be supportive of the school.

notes

1. Keith Goldhammer et al. *Issues and Problems in Contemporary Educational Administration*, Eugene: Center for the Advanced Study of Educational Administration, University of Oregon, 1967.
2. William K. Wiener and Arthur Blumberg, "The Parent School Communications Questionnaire: A Measure of School Boundary Permeability", a paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, March 1973. William K. Wiener, "Measuring School Boundary Permeability: The P.S.C.Q. Revised", a paper presented to the New England Research Association, 1975.
3. See for example Donald Bagin, Frank Grazian, and Charles H. Harrison, *School Communications: Ideas that Work*, Chicago: Nation's School Press, McGraw-Hill Publications, 1972.