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Exploring the Role of Communication in Relational Outcomes in a High School Setting

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN RELATIONAL OUTCOMES IN

A HIGH SCHOOL SETTING

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN RELATIONAL OUTCOMES IN

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Dissertation Advisor: Dr. Catharine Biddle

An Abstract of the Dissertation Presented
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An action research study in a high school setting applies the Organization-Public Relationships (O-PR) theoretical frame to a short-term communications initiative designed to elicit measurable engagement in the initiative and increased parent feelings of commitment and trust in their relationship with the school. A survey administered before the initiative yields actionable data on communication needs and preferences, levels of satisfaction, and parent feelings of commitment and trust. Survey data gathered after the communication initiative is used to determine changes in levels of satisfaction, commitment and trust. Among the findings are verified and consistent indications of secondary engagement in the communication initiative's messages and content across grade levels. Descriptive findings include a slight increase in indications of trust and a slight decrease in indications of commitment following the initiative. Inferential comparisons led to findings of variance between respondent groups which suggest that the two demographic variables (grade level of respondent's student, the presence of one or more formal school supports) are factors in indications of trust and commitment in their relationship with the school.

Keywords: Communication, school-home communication, leadership, parent engagement, relationship management theory, organization-public relationships, O-PR, relational outcomes.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated in appreciative memory of the people who continue to influence me long after being gone from my life: OWB, JEB, SAB, WOB.

And, it is dedicated in living appreciation to BML for helping me to see that swing sets and tractors are nothing to be afraid of; to GRR for a lifetime of inspiration; to MAB, KMB and TOB– old dogs can learn new tricks; and to DJB, the smartest guy I know– but don't forget to address me as Doctor.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Organizations including schools face a significant challenge in effectively

communicating during the information age, a time when neuroscientist and author Daniel Levitin

claims that we are evolutionarily unequipped to manage the deluge of information and the

attentional demands that we confront in our daily lives. The "we" in this age of decision overload

(Levitin, 2015, p. 5) includes school leaders attempting to determine what, how and when to best

communicate with parents and stakeholders— just as it includes the parent stakeholders who

filter those outputs from a flood of others and take action on the most important and useful

information for them and the success of their children. The challenge, then, is on both sides of

the school-home communication relationship. Amid this backdrop, educational organizations and

stakeholders at all levels reel from the global pandemic and the swift, sweeping changes to the

time, place and manner of learning (Garcia, Weiss, 2020), strengthening the case that structured

study of how communication can be more effectively sent, received, prioritized and acted upon is

perhaps more important now than it has ever been.

When exploring better communication as school leaders, it is important to frame school-

home communication as a pathway to parent engagement (Epstein, 2008) and a process for

building and maintaining parent relationships. This study reflects the belief expressed by former

Education Secretary Arne Duncan that "Education is a people business" (Kwinters, 2009) and

that serving the most important people in this business, the students, is enabled through parent

relationships that are marked by feelings of commitment and trust. The research premise is that

cultivating relationships with parents is a primary responsibility of schools and their leaders, and

that reliable, needs-responsive communication that focuses on a mutually-beneficial goal, student success, is a fundamental of relationships marked by commitment and intent on building trust.

Trust is a complex, multidimensional construct and an element of relationships that develops over time. (Corazzini, 1977). However, commitment is broadly recognized in public relations scholarship as an important component of trust (Payne, 2010). The work conducted during the study, in part and on the whole, was designed to be a tangible representation of the school's relational commitment to parents in support of student success in school. Consistent with the study's theoretical framework and tested in this work is the notion that *showing* commitment in a relationship is a precursor to eliciting a feeling of commitment in parents– and, perhaps within the scope of this initiative but more likely over time, commitment to reliable, useful communication with parents will elicit measurable feelings of trust in their relationship with the school.

This study seeks to justify that schools can and probably should make the effort to see if their communication effectively reaches parents– but that stopping there limits the potential of communication to engage with important people in a larger and more mutually-beneficial way (Ledingham, Bruning, 2000). The work explored not only the what, how and when of effective and responsive school-home communication, but more so, the why. Framed within the critical relational context of building and maintaining relationships with an organization's key publics (Ferguson, 1984) this work intends to help leaders work smarter— and not just harder—at developing relationships marked by commitment and trust while holding home-school communication practices as the critical and ongoing center of that work.

Problem of Practice Statement

School leaders in a range of contexts including the one studied here have experienced the challenges of achieving effective school-home communication. This researcher for over 20 years and at two different levels, elementary and high school, has failed to shed the ongoing feeling of not having effectively led communication for those schools, a gap that is the main impetus for this study of organizational communication. A leader's core responsibility is to engender communication with families that enables student success and that causes parents to feel a sense of partnership with the school. Every family needs and deserves good communication, and when school-home communication is weak, school-home relationships weaken. This study seeks understanding of ways to strengthen both.

A watershed experience of sorts came in 2014 when the school was exploring national grant funding that would help support students and families with at-risk profiles in their transition to high school. A promising grant was anticipated to include opportunities to explore parent engagement along with exemplar projects that had previously focused on school-home communication or, otherwise, pathways and resources that would fund projects that enabled best practices and strategies between home and school for better reach and engagement. No such priority or funding stream existed or had been conceived, an especially ironic discovery for any administrator who had experienced the pervasive and layered parental engagement requirements of the 2000 NCLB reauthorization.

Since that moment in time, better communication has grown from an *ad hoc* need in the school to a more pervasive one that cuts across all family types and circumstances. This research was important as a practicing professional seeking to address a lingering leadership weakness which, over a decade of early tenure, has become more critical than ever to building and

3

rebuilding relationships with parents. The communication challenge has become heavier and more insistent during the Covid-19 and the cycle of disconnection and reconnection that has pervaded not only individuals and groups in their relationships with one another but also those individuals and groups as they relate to organizations such as schools.

More so than when this study was conceived, the imperative exists to communicate and connect with the important people beyond our walls, all of whom are in a re-norming, re-induction phase in their relationships with the school. The focus, then, is on the role in leading communication from the school to the home—and to parents in particular—to ease that burden and to explore how needs-responsive communication can strengthen relationships in the interest of students.

Purpose Statement

This work was designed to understand how to better lead communication for reach, engagement, and service to parents and students. What started as general concerns about communication outcomes among two broad demographic groups deepened within the data, a circumstance that highlighted the purposes of this study from a scholarly-practitioner research perspective. As much as its intent was to explore questions of better communication practices, it was also intent on conducting authentic action research in one's own setting and in a way that reflected the problems and opportunities that school leaders routinely face in their work. The action research design both called for and enabled a deeper exploration of that demographic issue in ways that are cataloged in the findings and discussion.

Further, the study sought to explore technical elements of communicating, an approach reflected in the communications management elements of O-PR. The procedural goal was to identify and employ the channels that were most preferred by parents in order to assess, in real

time and with measurable indicators, the degree to which communication effectively reached parents and caused them to engage secondarily in content that would be useful to them and to the success of their students. To accomplish this task, embedded within all communications sent in the short-term initiative is at least one point of secondary engagement that could be traced back to the group identity of its original recipient.

Finally, an intriguing theory, O-PR and the importance of communication in the relational domain, was put to the test in schools. The framework frequently serves as an approach to corporate communications strategies (Swift, 2001) and is recognized for its potential to frame for understanding and improving the outcomes in other organizations whose success depends on cultivating and maintaining relationships with stakeholders (Jo et al, 2004), (Ledinger, 2015). This notion provided the theoretical entry point and conceptual framework for the study.

Research Questions

Through a process of surveying parents, communicating with purpose, and monitoring for engagement and relational outcomes, this study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the information needs and communication preferences of high school parents?

2. Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact parents' engagement in communication and their feelings of trust and commitment?

3. Do the measured outcomes vary significantly among demographic groups or otherwise inform communication practices that better engage parents and cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships?

As suggested by the interconnectedness of the research questions, the study employs an action research approach to the strategic management of communications at a time when organizations of all kinds and those who lead them are working to rebuild and strengthen relationships with their stakeholders – and seeking, as wisdom of practice advises, evidence that the effort is having an impact.

Overview of Methods

This action-research study applied the Organization-Public Relationships (O-PR) theoretical framework to the design of a short-term communications initiative and to the assessment of its impact on parents both in indicators of engagement gathered during the initiative and in feelings of commitment and trust surveyed and analyzed following the initiative. An electronic parent survey with a combination of selected and open response items administered before the initiative yielded data on communication needs and pathway preferences, levels of satisfaction, and feelings of commitment and trust.

Respondents identified on two demographic factors: grade level of the respondent's student (9, 10, 11, 12, Multiple) and whether or not the respondent reports that their student receives one or more formal supports in school (None, IEP support, 504 Support, EL Support, Free / Reduced Meals). The latter factor resulted in the two subgroups that were analyzed and discussed: Support-No and Support-Yes at each respondent grade level (and, overall, regardless

6

of grade level) on each survey sample. Four open-ended questions asked respondents to identify their communication needs and communication pathway preferences. 10 Likert-type questions, each with a four-point scale, appeared on the survey. Five of those items formed the commitment construct and five items constituted the trust construct. Likert items within each construct measured the pillar O-PR relational outcomes, feelings of trust and commitment in their relationship with the school.

Open response data from the first survey sample informed the design of a communication initiative that took place over six weeks. The communications were composed of achievement-related information needs revealed on the survey and were sent to parents by Email, their most preferred communication method. Survey data from the both samples was analyzed to determine changes in respondents' levels of satisfaction with communication and the feelings of commitment and trust as reflected on survey questions designed to measure those relational constructs. Consistent with communications management principles of O-PR, indicators of secondary engagement were monitored and gathered during the initiative to inform the findings and discussion.

Positionality

Three lines of positionality were straddled to study and report with objective distance. First was the line between a former student newly positioned to lead the school. The decades between those points had given time to appreciate its impact and to personalize the honor of returning as principal and working with many of the people who were formative influences. Over the next decade, this fondness and appreciation combined with new understandings of the school and community to qualify the line between leader and scholarly researcher– and the need to be

objectively critical, not objectively defensive, of the school amid the increasingly evident need to communicate better with families.

The final line, one of personally-known and publicly-perceived identity, critically intersects the other two. The impressions gathered by others appear to belie a personal history that was not advantaged, well-resourced, or highly educated by family background. This study represented an opportunity to look in at a school that had helped a family and its sons along the continuum of connectedness and confidence in ways that were felt but not well-understood until having left and returned to the community to live and work as an adult. As such, these intersected lines created personally and professionally rich conditions in which to learn and grow as a leader through this study.

Considerations for Scholarly Practitioners

Practitioners considering similar initiatives within and beyond the conducting of research in their settings can take confidence that the tools of the job are easy and inexpensive to acquire, not complicated to use, and effective at gaining and then responding to the insights and needs of parents. In terms of fundamental technical approaches to communication, one should understand the need for (and verify the presence of) reliable methods for gathering, maintaining, accessing, and otherwise managing parent contact information. This note of caution extends beyond the student information system to elements such as email groups and the painfully incorrect assumptions about channel management that were a significant, unexpected challenge in the early stages of this research study. Practitioners would be wise to identify and audit the core parent communication channels for the degree to which they are managed, maintained, and can be expected to be reliable.

The cautions can be seen in the frustrations expressed by parent-respondents and reflected in the qualitative findings. The second most prevalent theme illustrates the need for attention on two levels with regard to the reach and efficacy of communication channels. Communication should, at the very least, avoid leaving parents frustrated when channels that are underused, undermanaged, and ultimately rendered unreliable. Further, channel choices should take into account access barriers, by choice or circumstance, to forms of communication that can raise equity concerns and true issues of inequity among parents. As a matter of approach and process, these deeper insights are more available through open response querying of parent's communication needs and preferences.

Finally, while far from conclusive on the connection between communication and relational outcomes, the findings confirm what might be intuited but should nonetheless be explored by school leaders in their own settings: that parents who are newest to the school and those whose students require formal support in school may experience communication and interactions differently and in ways that impact the cultivation of trust and commitment in their relationship with the school. And, as suggested among the stated purposes of this study, scholarly practitioners seeking to formally explore communication efficacy and relational outcomes through research can hopefully take confidence that the action research frame is a doable, next-level dive into their data that more deeply applies skills, orientations, and leadership curiosities that one likely already brings to such real problems of practice in today's schools.

<center>CHAPTER TWO</center>

<center>REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</center>

Organization Public Relationships

Public relations theory and research shifted markedly in 1984 toward study of the "relational domain" (Ferguson, 1984) and the advent of theories and models for strategically managing the relationships between an organization and its stakeholders (Grunig, Hunt 1984). Mary Ann Ferguson's scholarly review of nearly a decade's worth of literature resulted in an urging for researchers in public relations to focus on the relationship– not "outputs," "outcomes," or even "financial-results" (p.11). This call to action in the field is often identified in the literature as the seminal launch of a flurry of semi-contentious public relations scholarship over the ensuing two decades (Cheng, 2017). Through that time and despite some differences of belief in specific relationship building strategies, a general and broad theory emerged: Organizational priority on effective cultivation and growth of public relationships centered on common interests and shared goals will, over time and with ongoing effort, result in shared understanding and mutual benefit for the organization and its key publics (Ledingham, 2003).

Because the long-term success of the organization depended upon the building of positive relationships (Grunig, Grunig, & Ehling, 1992), (Ledingham, Bruning, 2000), public relations efforts within an organization took on a more active, strategic and accountable role. This shift is reflected in the definitions of the O-PR framework, which first arose from the work of Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison and Lesko (1997). They described O-PR as "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, and political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62). Huang (1998) added key qualifiers to the definition of O-PR: "An organization–public relationship is

<center>10</center>

the degree that the organization and its publics trust one another, agree on one has rightful power to influence, experience satisfaction with each other, and commit oneself to one another." Broom, Casey and Ritchey (2000) later extended the definition of O-PR, a description that is frequently identified in the literature as capturing the theory and the implied action of the model:

Organization-public relationships are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchanges, and linkage between an organization and its publics. These relationships have properties that are distinct from the identities, attributes, and perceptions of the individuals and social collectivities in the relationships. Though dynamic in nature, organization-public relationships can be described at a single point in time and tracked over time. (p. 18)

Reflected in the definition is the role of the organization to acquire an understanding of its various important relations, to establish the quality of each, and to target measured improvement in the quality of those relationships over time.

The relationship management function and its emergent importance to the overall strategic success of the organization elevated both the role of public relations and the expectations that it contributes to the organizational bottom line (Ledingham, 2001). Dozier (1995) is credited with making the first such call for the use of communication as "a strategic management function (that helps) manage relationships with key publics that affect organizational mission, goals, and objectives" (p. 85). As later described by Bruning and Ledingham (2000), the relational management perspective of O-PR called for an end to communication for "manipulating public opinion through communication messages" and launched a priority on "symbolic communication messages and organizational behaviors to initiate, nurture, and maintain mutually beneficial organization-public relationships" (p. 87). This

11

progression of scholarship firmly established that relating to key publics through communication had taken on a new kind of accountability under O-PR, and the deliverables shifted away from evidence of task completion and toward strategically designed and executed communication that is measured in new ways (Ledingham, 2015).

Several scholars and researchers over the seventeen-year period from 1984-2001 contributed to a finer operational understanding of the qualities, or outcomes, that classify, measure, and improve organization-public relationships (Waters, Bortree, 2012). Ledingham, Bruning, Thomlison, & Lesko (1997) consulted research from fields with strong parallels to public relations to identify a broad set of 18 attributes of relationships drawn from studies of psychology, communications, and marketing. O-PR literature co-credits this study along with that of Huang (1997) for being the first to advance the concept of relational outcomes, or the components of a public relationship that organizations should seek to cultivate and assess as indicators of quality in the O-PR. Ledingham et al (1997) identified commitment, trust, performance satisfaction and interdependence, which strongly paralleled those identified by Huang (1997): trust, control mutuality, relational commitment, and relational satisfaction.

The three outcomes common to Huang and Ledingham et al, trust, commitment, and satisfaction, persisted as scholars further refined theories and models in the relational domain (Ledingham, 2008). Consensus eventually was reached in the field, and four relational outcomes considered together– trust, satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality– became the commonly accepted indicators of relational quality under the O-PR framework (Waters, Bortree, 2012).

Grunig and Hon (1999) provided a tool for measuring the core relational outcomes while reaffirming that the true impact of an organization's efforts to relate to its publics is found in

these relationship quality indicators, not in the narrowly-measured, limited scope of any

particular engagement strategy or initiative:

> Measures of the effects of public relations techniques and programs indicate
> whether they have achieved their communication objectives, but they fall short of
> being able to measure the value of PR to an organization or to society. Current
> evaluative measures also tell us mostly about short-term outcomes of public
> relations programs but little about long-term effects on relationships between
> organizations and their publics. (p.7)

Their instrument, the *Public Relations Relationship Measurement Scale*, provided a

flexible way for organizations to quantify through stakeholder survey or questionnaire the

presence of trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction in their relationship with the

organization– a process that they facilitated with generalized descriptions of each domain to be

explored:

Table 2.1

Public Relations Relationship Measurement Scale: Domain Descriptors

Domain	Grunig & Hon (1999) Descriptor
Commitment	The extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote. Two dimensions of commitment are continuance commitment, which refers to a certain line of action, and affective commitment, which is an emotional orientation.
Trust	One party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party. There are three dimensions to trust: integrity: the belief that an organization is fair and just … dependability: the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do … and, competence: the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do (emphasis original)
Control Mutuality	The degree to which parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence one another. Although some imbalance is natural, stable relationships require organizations and publics to have some control over the other.
Satisfaction	The extent to which each party feels favorably toward the other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced. A satisfying relationship is one in which the benefits outweigh the costs.

Five years after the publication of the scale, its purported validity and reliability when applied across organizational settings was tested. Jo et al (2004) applied the full scale to O-PR in a university setting and confirmed in their findings that the model "provided a conceptually and operationally meaningful depiction of O-PR that should be useful for understanding and measuring public relationships" (p. 25). Although they expressed caution about the high correlations found among the four core domains and the discriminant validity concerns that those high levels raise, the researchers concluded that there was great promise in future research that extends to a variety of organizations, where refinement of the instrument could occur and a stronger conceptual and applied understanding of measuring O-PR quality could develop.

For the purposes of this study, the research resides at the theoretical intersection between communication management and relationship management under O-PR. Despite the shift to a relational-outcomes approach in theory and practice, the role of communication in building and maintaining relationships remained central to strategic practice under O-PR. Broom and Dozier (1995) noted that the change meant communication assumed a new role: that of a function within the management process. As Ledingham and Grunig later noted: "Goals are developed around relationships (and) communication is used as a strategic tool in helping to achieve those goals" (p. 63).

However, the theoretical nexus that best captures the intent of this study is expressed equally well by Lindenmen (1997) and Grondstedt (1997), whose separate works preceded Grunig and Hon's measurement scales while speaking in tandem to an operational link between communication outcomes and relational outcomes. Gronstedt recognized that research on communication effectiveness has no meaning if it does not determine what communicated messages do to the targeted key public or, even, what the key public actually does with those

messages when they are received. Lindenman similarly urged attention beyond communication measurement that is output-only:

> These measure whether target audience groups actually received the messages directed at them…paid attention to them…understood the messages…and retained these messages in any shape and form. Outcomes also measure whether the communication materials and messages, which were disseminated, have resulted in any opinion, attitude, and/or behavior changes on the part of those targeted audiences to whom the messages were directed. (p. 5)

By conducting communication that is both tactically validated for having reached its intended audience and strategically validated with respect to the quality of the O-PR and mutually-beneficial outcomes, organizations shift from technician-operators to manager-leaders in a manner called-for prominently in O-PR scholarship.

Home-School Communication

The importance of home-school communication is well-established in both theory and research. Epstein (1987) identified four key elements from existing research to inform school efforts to impact achievement and climate. Among those four, Epstein cited home-school communication as second most important. Later, Epstein (2002) expanded to a mostly theory-based but nonetheless widely adopted six-point framework for schools to engage parents, which again cited the importance of schools creating multiple, diverse and clear two-way communication channels between school and home. Further, a strong body of research linking school-home communication to core indicators of student success in school includes its impact on overall academic performance (Bergman, 2012; Galindo & Sheldon 2012; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013) and improving student attendance (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Sheldon, 2007).

15

Nonetheless, the importance of home-school communication is not always reflected in school-home communication practices, which Kraft (2016) broadly and consistently found to be non-systematized and too infrequent to meet parent needs. And, even when school-home communications are intentionally systemized and designed to meet clearly defined and measured goals, the outputs can still be ineffective for various reasons. Language of the output, whether excessively wordy or constructed without consideration of understanding barriers among more vulnerable populations are cited by Lasky-Fink (2020). Robinson (2020) warns against messages that include extraneous information that unintentionally interferes with the goals of communication, advising that carefully-designed and well-inteneed communications can fail if not carefully constructed and vetted for purpose. So, even when organizations must get it right— or when they sincerely attempt to get it right for well-intended reasons—school-home communication efforts can still fail to deliver, so to speak.

Communication initiated by the school must also be mindful of the values that are represented in language and content. Olivos and Mendoza (2010) characterized school-home communication as mostly one-sided and linear, a process that requires parents to understand, accept, and enact strategies and resources that reflect middle class values and assumptions– while risking marginalization of some families and groups. This caution is strengthened by Ishimaru (2014), who argues that a pattern of such communications runs the risk of reinforcing marginalization and causing a sense of failure among some parents.

These issues with clarity and impact of school-home communication can be similarly prevalent on the district and multi-district level as illustrated by Maben and colleagues (2016). The researchers conducted a broad mixed-methods study of Twitter messages sent over a short term (45-days) by 13 independent school districts involved in the U.S. Effective Schools Project,

which prioritized a social media communications messaging effort to engage parents. Textual analysis of nearly 2,000 tweets showed that despite the coordinated intent, fewer than 2% sought or prompted interaction or engagement beyond the reading of the message– a finding that corroborated literature of the time. Reflected here, too, may be misunderstood beliefs about social media as a communication tool as discovered by Evans (2017), who reported that 39% of school principals and 78% of district administrators believed that Facebook was effective for school-home communications as compared to just 16% of parents.

Research on a wider scale presents opportunities and challenges with communication and parent engagement in learning. A meta-analysis of 37 studies across all school age-ranges in English-speaking countries (Castro et al, 2015) shows that the strongest association between parent involvement and school–home collaboration resulted from high academic expectations, facilitation of parent–child conversations about school experiences and activities, and the encouragement and monitoring of reading at home. And, despite finding design weaknesses to be prevalent in their wide review of home-school collaboration, Axford et al (2019) nonetheless reported that the majority of schools surveyed recognized the importance of engaging parents in student learning and achievement– and reported that 80% of the schools studied considered parent engagement the responsibility of the school and its staff.

However, the next step beyond recognizing the imperative and assuming responsibility requires that schools and their leaders think differently about how to engage parents. Goodall and Vorhaus (2011) argue that, "Attempts by schools to engage parents in their children's learning are unlikely to be successful if they represent a 'bolt-on' to mainstream activities" (p. 46) or, as has been often cited among engagement barriers– if schools point to deficits in teacher knowledge and skill in working with parents (Goodall et al, 2010) to support student

achievement. As suggested by Barnard (2022) amid a larger discussion of high school organization as a factor in parental involvement, a tendency to point to other reasons (beyond one's control) for why an important, common goal is not attained must be put aside, especially by the school leaders who have the capacity to critically self-examine and the potential to catalyze changes, enhance outcomes and move their schools toward those larger goals.

Action Research

Action research has its roots in the work of Kurt Lewin, identified consistently as one of the founders of social psychology. However, the term "action research" was truly coined by John Collier at some point in his tenure as a commissioner for the Bureau of Indian Affairs from 1933-1945 (Holly, Arhar, & Kastan, 2009) a period of time when Collier was responsible for enhancing education on the nation's Indian reservations (Noffke, 1997). Frustrated by governmental policies that assumed the same needs were present among all Native American tribes, Collier began describing a research method that accounted specifically for the local needs of each individual community (Hinchey, 2008). In this way, action-research was conceived and born under Collier but nurtured and matured under Lewin.

Three prominent applied definitions of action-research emerged from the body of literature in a half-century period that included and extended beyond the time of Lewin's work. Rapoport (1971) defined action research with respect to its desired outcome, writing that "action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework" (p. 499). McCutcheon and Jung (1990), wrote of action research as a "systemic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by participants in the inquiry" (p. 148). Finally, their contemporaries, Kemmis and McTaggert

(1990) framed action research as "a form of collective self-reflective inquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out" (p. 5). Commonly, these definitions reflect four key elements of action-research: empowerment of participants; collaboration through participation; acquisition of knowledge; and social change (Ferrance, 2000).

The breadth of the Kemmis and McTaggert definition of action research appropriately framed this study. Among Lewin's legacy are frameworks for studying relationship development within and between social groups– and how communication and cooperation sustain group relationships (Adelman, 1993). Lewin framed his research in a cyclical, collaborative pattern of diagnosing issues, approach planning, data gathering, and taking action– which prompts additional action and meaning making (Lewin, 1948; Dickens, Watkins, 1999). Figure 2.1 represents Lewin's action research model.

Figure 2.1

Lewin's Action Research Model (Lewin, 1947)
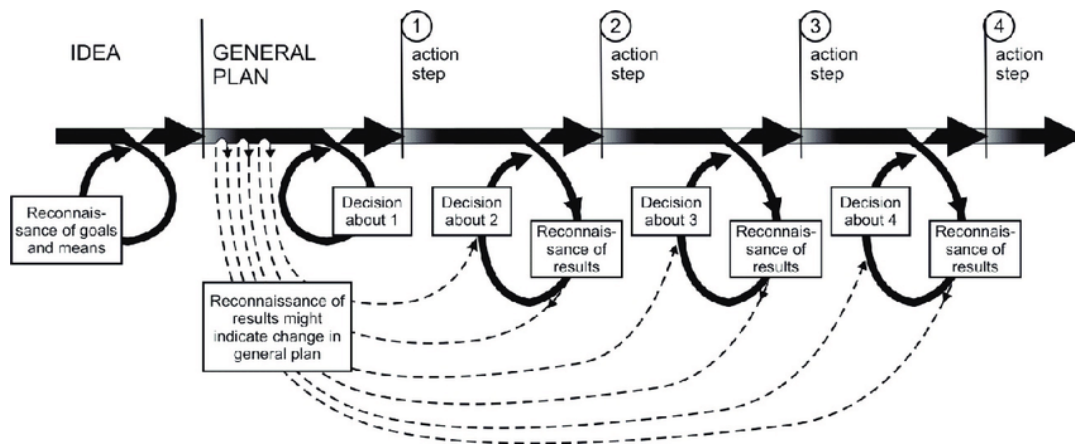
Gruday and Kemmis (1981) expressed Lewin's circular model linearly, condensing it into three practice standards for the application of AR in research:

1. The project takes as its subject-matter a social practice, regarding it as a strategic action susceptible to improvement.

2. The project proceeds through a spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, with each of these activities being systematically and self-critically implemented and interrelated.

3. The project involves those responsible for the practice in each of the moments of the activity, widening participation in the project gradually to include others affected by the practice and maintaining collaborative control of the process.

Argyris and colleagues (1985) added a standard that pointed toward scholarly outcomes that are implied in the three Grurday and Kemmis standards but not addressed specifically:

4. It is intended to contribute simultaneously to basic knowledge in social science and to social action in everyday life. High standards for developing theory and empirically testing propositions organized by theory are not to be sacrificed nor is the relation to practice to be lost. (p. 9)

Considered as a four-item set, the application standards intersected logically with O-PR to conceptually frame the study and guide each of its phases as discussed in the next section.

20

Conceptual Framework

Conceptualized under the Organization-Public Relationships (O-PR) theoretical framework and approached as action research, the purpose of this study was to conduct a short-term period of communication in response to parent needs and preferences and to seek evidence that this communication reached parents, engaged them in action, and factored into their feelings of commitment and trust in their relationship with the school.

The theoretical flashpoint for O-PR was the work of Mary Ann Ferguson, who unearthed a pervasive strand of previously disconnected scholarship within a decade's worth of public relations research abstracts. Conducted independently across the field, its common thread was the focus on the building of relationships between organization and its key audiences (Ferguson, 1984). Ledinger (2003) eventually gave operational life to O-PR, which he centered on relational communication quality and its role in building mutually beneficial organization-public relationships. Earlier, Dozier (1995) had urged for communication to be considered strategic, managerial, and oriented toward organizational success– a shift from action-oriented to outcomes oriented toward goal accountability. Brunig and Hon (1999) further bridged O-PR theory into broader practice with an adaptable and valid relationship measurement tool (Jo et al, 2004) to assess the quality of public relationships by the four consensus domains among scholars: trust, commitment, control mutuality, and satisfaction (Ledinger, 2008).

This study tests the bridge between O-PR's business origins and a public, non-profit setting, where despite observation that public relations theory has historically lagged (Sukel, 1978), organizations are experiencing a push toward relationship management approaches (Wiggill, 2011). Paine (2011), however, swings the discussion back to common theoretical ground– albeit with a sense of biased urgency– in noting that while "relationships impact the

bottom line in any organization, in the not-for-profit world relationships take on even greater importance" (p. 191).

Communication is the common thread that runs between the three main components of this study: O-PR, AR, and parent engagement. O-PR views communication as an organizational strategy for building and maintaining stakeholder relationships, contending that they can be framed and measured for quality outcomes that run parallel to overall success of an organization. AR is a participatory, change-oriented lens that focuses self-critically on communication practices as a way of strengthening interactions between groups and addressing problems of organizational practice that are access-oriented and justice-framed. And, parent engagement impacts student achievement, so it is wise to confirm that school communication effectively reaches and elicits action and it is ethical to identify and address barriers among other factors that can cause disparate communication outcomes among parents. This communication intersection is represented in Figure 2.2 as the conceptual framework for the study.

Figure 2.2

Conceptual Framework: O-PR, AR, Home-School Relational Communication

	Sample One			Sample Two		
Organization Public Relationships: Communication can build stakeholder relationships that serve mutually beneficial goals and strengthen over time.	Satisfaction (Timing, Content, Method, Overall)			Satisfaction / Trust / Commitment		
	Needs / Preferences			Control Mutuality		
	(Control Mutuality)					
	We want to communicate better. Tell us what's important and how to get it to you. We don't always get it right but we want to.		We understand and want to respond to your needs. We want a partnership that is focused on student success.		We're asking again because we're committed to parents and want to earn your trust. Our partnership matters to our students.	
Action Research: Communication is a foundation that can be strengthened through a cyclical, inclusive & change-oriented process of inquiry and action.	Are we reaching parents? Are parents engaged? Is access generally improving?		Is personal / in-person communication effective? Are parents engaging? Are any access gaps apparent or emerging?		Did some engage more / less than others? Is there evidence that access has improved? What did we learn for future use?	
	⇨	⇨	⇨	⇨	⇨	⇨
	Plan / Implement Assess / Adjust	Plan / Implement Assess / Adjust	Plan / Implement Assess / Adjust	Plan / Implement Assess / Adjust	Plan / Implement Assess / Adjust	Plan / Implement Assess / Adjust
	Communication 1	Communication 2	Communication 3	Communication 4	Communication 5	Communication 6
	April 1	--->				June 15

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Setting and Context

This action research study was conducted in a large secondary school by state standards and the largest high school in the northern region of Maine. It is set in the state's third largest city, which functions as a regional service center and hosts all county administration functions. Two hospitals, a private university, and two community college campuses are within the city, and the state's land grant institution is under ten miles to the north. The community is composed of a blend of professional, working class, and lower income families. Across the school district, over 50% of students qualify as low SES. At the time of the study, approximately 30% of enrolled students qualified for formal support other than those related to SES (IEP support, 504 support, EL/ML support).

The timing of the study is an important element of setting on two levels that give context to the challenges and opportunities with home-school communication. In the largest of those time contexts, the study was conducted on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic and at the end of a school year in which students had returned to full-time, in person attendance after two years of blended learning (in-person, hybrid, and remote). It also occurred in the midst of a transition in district leadership, with an interim superintendent in place to bridge the departure of its outgoing, veteran superintendent and a to-be-identified successor. Both as stand-alone factors and as they intersect, these circumstances of timing created conditions where it was not only imperative to communicate but also challenging to communicate effectively with stakeholders.

On a personal level, this study was conducted by a researcher who had led the school for ten years and had been employed in the district for over twenty years– and for the entirety of his

education career. Personal knowledge of the history of the school and an experienced

understanding of how it paralleled the ethic of the district and the orientation of its governance

(and of its leadership in particular) were factors of setting that effectively blended time and

place. Although unlikely to surface in a way that would interfere with the work, these blended

personal factors of the research setting spoke both to assets to employ and drawbacks to avoid in

the conducting of the research in one's own setting.

Research Design

Using an Action Research approach, the study applied the O-PR theoretical framework to

the design and assessment of a six-week communication initiative. The study sought two

measurable outcomes:

1. Indication that parents took action on a primary communication and engaged in

    additional, or secondary, content;

2. Increased surveyed indications of trust and commitment following the initiative.

Parents were surveyed electronically before and after the initiative with the same

instrument. The survey contained two selected response demographics questions, 10 Likert items

for trust and commitment, and four open response questions related to communication needs and

preferences. The first demographic question asked for their student's grade level (9, 10, 11, 12,

Multiple). The second question asked about formal support in school for the student and allowed

selection of any of five options: No support, Free/Reduced Meals, IEP Support, 504 Support, EL

Support.

As a study variable, the presence or absence of a formal support was explored primarily

as a collective demographic factor in communication outcomes and secondarily by individual

support type when the data warranted a more narrow analysis. These demographic factors are

known to impact parent engagement (OECD, 1997), a notion that is reflected in the federal regulations for parent engagement under ESSA / Title I, IDEA, Section 504, and English Language Learner programs and initiatives. The study, then, explored the degree to which this notion is seen in communication outcomes among a group of parents whose engagement with the school is a mandated priority.

The 10 Likert questions were designed to assess feelings of trust (five items) and commitment (five items) in the respondent's relationship with the school. The questions were based on frameworks within *The Relationship Measurement Scales* (Hon, Grunig, 1999) and designed for an education setting. Nine used the same response set (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree) and one item was modified to (Very Dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Satisfied, Very Satisfied). The four-point scale required the choice between a more favorable (Agree, Strongly Agree) or less favorable. (Strongly Disagree, Disagree) response. Favorability percentages for items and constructs served as a descriptive statistic throughout the study. The data was converted to a numeric scale for non-experimental inferential statistical comparisons as well.

Open response data from the first survey was uploaded to Delve software for statistical and qualitative analysis. Open responses on the first survey were coded to identify prevalent information needs and most preferred communication methods. These data informed the six communications undertaken during a communication initiative, which was designed to match parent stated needs with their preferred channels and then undertaken over six weeks.

One measured outcome for the study was verification that parents took action on a primary communication by engaging in additional, or secondary, information or content that was made available to them. To accomplish measurability for the initiative, all secondary engagement

content was housed online. Most of this content was posted on web pages created within the district website, and the engagement data was accessed through the district's Google Analytics software license.

Survey data from the two samples was uploaded into SPSS, where calculations were completed that prepared it for entry into four tables that facilitated a broad-to-narrow progression of analysis that is discussed and illustrated in Chapter 4. The data was approached and analyzed non-experimentally using descriptive data (favorable response percentages) and observation and comparison of change. Analysis focused on descriptive statistics across the two samples and for all variable groupings: all respondents, respondents by grade level, and respondents by grade level support subgroup. In addition to changes in levels of satisfaction with timing, content, and method of communication, changes in favorability were descriptively analyzed for each of the five-item O-PR constructs (trust and commitment) by all variable groupings.

Finally, data from the survey administered after the communication initiative was analyzed using SPSS. A combination of parametric and nonparametric tests were completed to compare the variable subgroups and determine if differences in group responses were statistically significant to the .05 level on measures of trust and commitment. The full body of statistical findings were then analyzed to inform answers to the study's three research questions outlined in the next section.

Research Questions

Approached as action research and framed by O-PR theory on relationship cultivation and quality measurement, the study explored answers to the following questions about the role of home-school communication in relationship-building in a high school setting:

1. What are the information needs and communication preferences of the school's parents?

2. Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact parents' engagement in communication and their feelings of trust and commitment?

3. Do these measured outcomes vary significantly among demographic groups or otherwise inform communication practices that better engage parents and cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships?

Methods

Participant Selection

All primary guardians of students enrolled in the school on October 1, 2020 were invited to participate in the study through Email. A single primary guardian is identified when a student is enrolled and their household information entered in the student information system. An initial email and a follow-up email was sent one week later to recruit participants in the study. To address concerns regarding the engagement of vulnerable populations, direct recruitment of parent respondents occurred. In addition to the participant recruitment Email, up to two follow-up phone calls by school personnel other than the researcher were made to encourage families of students identified for special education services to participate. Families of students with EL services were recruited for participation, and translation and interpreter services were made available but not called upon for a respondent to access the survey instrument.

Despite efforts to increase response rate to 30% of the 1,285 parents identified as primary household contacts, the rate for the Sample One came in at 14.7% and increased slightly to

16.5% on Sample Two. The two respondent sets were similar in total number, number by grade level, and number by variable subgroups, which were established as Support-Yes and Support-No based on whether or not the respondent's student accessed one or more formal supports for their learning and achievement (Free / Reduced meals, IEP, 504, or EL / ESL programming). Table 3.1 summarizes respondent data.

Table 3.1

Respondent Data: Sample One and Sample Two

Grade Level	Sample One			Sample Two		
	Total *n*	Support-Yes	Support-No	Total n	Support-Yes	Support-No
9	42	18	24	39	12	27
10	35	14	21	35	15	20
11	40	20	20	48	17	31
12	36	10	26	54	17	37
Multiple	36	20	16	30	7	23
Total	189	83	106	206	68	138

Data Collection

Survey data was collected before and again after the communication initiative using the same instrument. No personally identifiable data was gathered. Demographic data for student grade level and the presence or absence of formal school support was gathered through two selected response survey items. The demographic data served as the two study variables.

The survey also gathered data through 10 Likert items and four open response questions. Likert response options (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree) were collected in that fashion and later converted to a numeric scaled variable within SPSS. Open responses were collected as submitted and treated as qualitative data that was later uploaded for open and axial coding using Delve software.

Google Analytics software collected de-identified engagement data for 12 web pages that were created during the communication initiative. Engagement data consisted of page views by date and time, and user count by device type and site access history. Google Analytics is licensed software that continuously collects engagement data for all pages within the district website. Data retrieved for the 12 pages created for the initiative contributed to findings under RQ2.

Instruments and Protocols

The survey was developed and administered using the organization's Google Workspace applications (Google Forms, Gmail). The first part of the survey collected via selected response the grade level of the respondent's student (9, 10, 11, 12, Multiple) and whether or not their student receives formal support at school (IEP, 504, EL, free/reduced meals). The remainder of the selected response questions were Likert-type items with four response options.

The Hon and Grunig (1999) relationship measurement instrument served as a model for the development of questions designed to assess commitment and trust in a school-parent O-PR and queried in the context of school-home communication. Jo (2003) took a similar approach to an international scale developed by Huang (2001), modifying existing items for four constructs (trust, commitment, satisfaction, control mutuality) and adding two culture-specific constructs to match the research setting. Table 3.2 and Table 3.3 summarize the construct items.

Table 3.2

Commitment Construct Items

Commitment: The extent to which each party believes and feels that the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote. Two dimensions of commitment are continuance commitment, which refers to a certain line of action, and affective commitment, which is an emotional orientation. Hon & Grunig (1999) (p. 3)	
Affective Commitment: Belief or feeling that the relationship with the school is worth spending energy on because of an emotional dimension / orientation.	The information I receive from the school comes at the right time to help me support my student's success.
	I would interact with the school more often if it used social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter to communicate.
	Communication I receive makes me feel that the school wants to partner with me in the success of my student.
Continuance Commitment: Belief or feeling that the relationship with the school is worth spending energy on because of a specific line of action.	If I have a need or concern about my student, I know how to communicate it to the school.
	The school is responsive to my needs or concerns when I express them.

Table 3.3

Trust Construct Items

Trust: One party's level of confidence in and willingness to open oneself to the other party. There are three dimensions to trust: integrity: the belief that an organization is fair and just … dependability: the belief that an organization will do what it says it will do… and, competence: the belief that an organization has the ability to do what it says it will do. (emphasis original) Hon & Grunig (1999) (p. 3)	
Trust / Competence: Confidence in and willingness to engage in the relationship based on belief that school has the ability to do what it says it will do.	I am satisfied with the kinds of information I am currently receiving from the school.
	I am satisfied with the ways that information is sent to me from the school.
	Rate your overall satisfaction with the communication you receive from the school.
Trust / Dependability: Confidence in or willingness to engage in the relationship based on belief that the school will do what it says it will do.	I depend on information from the school to help me support my student's learning.
	I am satisfied with the efforts the school makes to seek and respond to feedback from parents.

Qualitative data to inform needs and preferences was solicited through open response items as opposed to selected response ranking methods. The language of the items and the two angles of query (a current strength in school practices and a current weakness in school practices) was designed to signal to respondents the school's interest in understanding their needs and preferences and better meeting those needs with more effective communication.

As an element of the action research approach, the communication initiative was designed and managed responsively and in real time. Engagement data was gathered as each communication was launched, monitored, and adjusted to gain understanding of how effectively the various channels drove engagement. These engagement data contributed to the findings of the study while also providing practical strategies that could potentially inform the work of scholarly practitioners and researchers interested in testing communication efficacy in their own contexts. In all, six communications in the initiative were conducted in response to survey data regarding communication needs and pathway preferences and measured by indicators of secondary engagement.

Data Analysis

Open response data was analyzed using Delve, an online qualitative analysis tool that facilitated open and axial coding of the four items relating to communication needs and preferences. Two items related to information needs garnered 304 responses. Some comments were assigned a single code while others were assigned to multiple codes either in their entirety or by a portion of the response that spoke to a different information need. 512 total comments were then narrowed to 14 themes, or axes, that were arranged hierarchically by appearance count and later referenced in the design of the communication initiative.

Similarly, responses to items querying on communication preferences (item codes OR3 and OR4) were open coded and the data were tabulated and organized hierarchically by appearance count within the response set. Further coding of individual responses to OR2 allowed for tabulation of each channel's number of appearances as the single identified method and, for responses that referenced two or more channels, the order (first or second, later) within those responses where the channel appeared.

Engagement data from the communication initiative was retrieved through Google Analytics and analyzed using basic tallying and percentage calculations. All communications in the initiative used Email, the overwhelming preference of parents, as the primary communication point. Each unique Email linked to a specific companion web page that contained the secondary content option, a design that allowed the engagement data to be attributed to the grade level of the recipient. The engagement data for web traffic included page views by date and user / visitor views by device type and access history. These data were useful in comparing engagement by grade level and in determining the number and percentage of users who were new or whose device had been previously registered accessing a page within the site.

Survey data from the two samples was uploaded into SPSS, where calculations were completed that prepared it for entry into four tables that facilitated a broad-to-narrow descriptive analysis based on the percentage of favorable responses to items and across the two study constructs. The data was approached and analyzed non-experimentally, focusing on observation and comparisons of change both within and across the two samples for all variable groupings. The tables that were used to conduct the analysis are included in Chapter 4 with references to the data points within each table that contributed to findings.

Data from the survey administered after the communication initiative was analyzed using SPSS. Survey data that was converted to a numerical scale, and Cronbach's Alpha testing using indicated a high level of internal reliability for both the trust construct and the commitment construct (.831 and .782, respectively), particularly considering the potential for lower reliability with smaller sets of data. A combination of parametric and nonparametric comparisons were completed to compare the variable subgroups and determine if differences in group responses were statistically significant to the .05 alpha level on measures of trust and commitment. The full body of statistical findings was then analyzed to inform answers to the study's three research questions.

Articulated in phases: Phase I entailed administration of first survey and compiling of Likert and open response data. Phase II entailed coding and analysis of the data, design and implementation of a communication initiative, and monitoring for indicators of secondary engagement elicited by each communication; and Phase III entailed tabulation of secondary engagement data; administration of the second survey sample and tabulation of data; and descriptive and inferential analysis of the data on commitment and trust to inform findings.

Study Timeline

The study was conducted in the spring of the 2020-2021 school year. Data gathering occurred over a 12-week period beginning with the distribution of the first survey by email (April 1, 2021) and ending with the closure of the second survey (June 15, 2021). Engagement data was gathered in real time during the communication initiative and was also accessible following the completion of the study.

Positionality

        Three lines of positionality were straddled to study and report with objective distance. First was the line between a former student newly positioned to lead the school. The decades between those points had given time to appreciate its impact and to personalize the honor of returning as principal and working with many of the people who were formative influences. Over the next decade, this fondness and appreciation combined with new understandings of the school and community to qualify the line between leader and scholarly researcher– and the need to be objectively critical, not objectively defensive, of the school amid the increasingly evident need to communicate better with families.

        The final line, one of personally-known and publicly-perceived identity, critically intersects the other two. The impressions gathered by others appear to belie a personal history that was not advantaged, highly resourced, or highly educated by family background. This study represented an opportunity to look in at a school that had helped a family and its sons along the continuum of connectedness and confidence in ways that were felt but not well-understood until having left and returned to the community to live and work as an adult. As such, these intersected lines created personally and professionally rich conditions in which to learn and grow as a leader through this study.

Validity/Trustworthiness

        Validity, reliability and generalizability of data and findings are germane concerns with any research involving human subjects and perhaps more so with this study, which differentiates respondents by one primary factor (grade level of the student) and the secondary factor of presence / absence of supportive services. More practically, the low response rates across the

targeted sample (despite similarities in each survey sample both by total number and subgroups) raise questions about generalizability.

Action research conducted in one's own setting, despite the imploring of the model that participants be directly involved, are likely to raise validity concerns. Those concerns can be countered only by strict observation of protocols that protect the participants in combination with strict and commitment to the ideals of action research: authentically reflective, empirically-informed, and justice-oriented pursuit of solutions to problems of real practice. These have all been observed.

This was, by design, a fledgling effort to move the relational outcome needle using an assessment instrument that is proven valid in business and non-business settings where relationships matter. While O-PR as a theoretical framework and relationship measurement as a practice are established and expanding in their reach and import, each research setting that employs the framework and its tools is, as it should be, subject to scrutiny. After all, the seminal study that first validated the relational measurement scale and announced promise for future applications such as this study nonetheless concluded that their findings raised legitimate questions about discriminative validity among the constructs measured. Still, we research and we report with fidelity to frameworks and models as has been undertaken here.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this action-research study was to initiate needs-responsive, timely communications that engage parents and seek to strengthen indications of two core relational outcomes (commitment, trust) as established in the O-PR theoretical framework. Specifically, the study looked to answer the following three questions:

1. What are the information needs and communication preferences of high school parents?

2. Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact parents' engagement in communication and their feelings of trust and commitment?

3. Do these measured outcomes vary significantly among demographic groups or otherwise inform communication practices that better engage parents and cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships?

The findings were broken into three parts that correspond to the research questions and to the action research progression that they represent. The key instrument driving the exploration of these research questions was the parent survey, which was administered and consulted both at the very beginning stages of research (understanding the needs, preferences, and baseline level of parent satisfaction with communication sent by the school) and at the very ending stages following the communications initiative (assessing ways in which strategic, short-term communications was reflected in parent responses).

36

The 10 Likert survey items assessed the two relational outcomes of focus within the study: commitment and trust. Five items were designed to measure feelings of trust and five were designed to measure feelings of commitment in the school-home relationship. Within each construct, questions addressed sub-constructs that reflect the varied ways that a feeling might be experienced by stakeholders in the context of their relationship with an organization (Hon, Grunig, 1999).

Table 4.1

Survey Constructs: Items and Item Codes

Construct (Sub-Construct)	Construct (Sub-Construct) Description	Item Language	Item Code
Commitment (Affective)	Belief or feeling that the relationship with the school is worth spending energy on because of an emotional dimension / orientation.	The information I receive from the school comes at the right time to help me support my student's success.	CA1
		I would interact with the school more often if it used social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter to communicate.	CA2
		Communication I receive makes me feel that the school wants to partner with me in the success of my student.	CA3
Commitment (Continuance)	Belief or feeling that the relationship with the school is worth spending energy on because of a specific line of action.	If I have a need or concern about my student, I know how to communicate it to the school.	CC1
		The school is responsive to my needs or concerns when I express them.	CC2
Trust (Competence)	Confidence in and willingness to engage in the relationship based on belief that school has the ability to do what it says it will do.	I am satisfied with the kinds of information I am currently receiving from the school.	TC1
		I am satisfied with the ways that information is sent to me from the school.	TC2
		Rate your overall satisfaction with the communication you receive from the school.	TC3
Trust (Dependability)	Confidence in or willingness to engage in the relationship based on belief that the school will do what it says it will do.	I depend on information from the school to help me support my student's learning.	TD1
		I am satisfied with the efforts the school makes to seek and respond to feedback from parents.	TD2

In addition to the Likert items, four open-response items yielded qualitative insight into parents' communication needs, preferences, and levels of satisfaction. Two questions related to the kinds of information that parents need and two related to their preferred method of receiving information from the school, data that informed the communication initiative.

Table 4.2

Open-Response Items and Item Codes

Item Language	Code
What kinds of information from the school do you rely upon / need the most to support your student's learning?	OR1
What kinds of information could the school do a better job of providing to you?	OR2
What method(s) of receiving information from the school best get your attention as a busy parent?	OR3
What method(s) of the school's sharing of information are less helpful or effective?	OR4

Research Question 1

The purpose of the research question, "What are the communication needs and preferences of high school parents?" was to understand both the general and specific needs and preferences of parents, data that would inform the communication initiative. Answering the question began with a baseline assessment of parent levels of satisfaction both with fundamental elements of communication and with overall school-home communication. These findings came through open coding of Sample One respondent data down to the item level (summarized below) that support the first finding for RQ1.

Baseline levels of parent satisfaction with elements of communication were more favorable than satisfaction with overall communication from the school. Item level descriptive data from Sample One provided a baseline level of parent-stakeholder satisfaction to be considered in the design of the short-term communications initiative. Nearly two out of three Sample One respondents reported favorably across the functional elements of school-home communication (content, method, timing) as shown by the percentages of respondents indicating "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" (64.0%, 68.8%, 61.3%) on the three individual questions and 64.7% across the items as illustrated in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Sample One: Satisfaction with Communication Elements

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am satisfied with the kinds of information I am currently receiving from the school.	10.6%	25.4%	48.7%	15.3%
I am satisfied with the ways that information is sent to me from the school.	8.5%	22.8%	45.0%	23.8%
The information I receive from the school comes at the right time to help me support my student's success.	8.6%	30.1%	49.5%	11.8%

However, the final Likert-type question on overall satisfaction data showed a relative drop to 56.4% responding favorably:

Table 4.4

Sample One: Overall Satisfaction with Communication

Item	Not Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the communication you receive from the school?	20.2%	23.4%	38.3%	18.1%

The discrepancy between communication satisfaction in part, but less so on the whole, was further explored qualitatively through open-ended survey responses and is discussed amid findings under RQ2.

Despite questions raised about the timing of communications, the narrow timeframe of the study (April-June) and the potential to address only the most basic elements of timing in a short-term initiative, the element of time was not otherwise addressed in the study. However, the importance of communication timeliness to parents in matters related to student achievement and intervention did surface meaningfully in qualitative analysis of feedback on two other elements of school-home communication (kinds of information provided and the school's methods of communicating) and is also addressed in the discussion of findings under RQ3.

Finding #2

Based on analysis and open coding of four open response items on Sample One, parents indicate the need for personalized communication and more proactive and responsive communication from the school in support of their child's achievement. 189 respondents provided 631 responses across the four open response questions, two that queried on information needs and two that queried on preferences for how communication is sent and received. Looked

at another way, 83% of opportunities to provide open-ended feedback were taken by respondents

on the first two open-response questions, which were coded as OR1 and OR2:

OR1: What kinds of information from the school do you rely upon / need the most to support your student's learning? (160 responses / 84% completion rate)

OR 2: What kinds of information could the school do a better job of providing to you? (146 responses / 77% completion rate)

Open and axial coding of 304 responses resulted in 14 themes that became useful for categorizing both the kinds of information parents most need to support learning and the kinds of information that are currently lacking in school-home communication. Some of the 304 individual responses were captured by a single code, while others were tagged to multiple codes either entirely or in a portion of the response that spoke to a different theme. Response sets were reviewed for coding consistency and accuracy across questions, resulting in a final tally of 512 comments coded over the 14 themes, shown hierarchically by appearance in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

OR 1 and OR2: Information Themes Summary

Information Theme (Appearances in Sample One)	
Individual student's Academic Progress (96)	Athletics and Co-Curricular Activities (26)
Teacher-Provided (87)	BSD App / Other Electronic Media (24)
Infinite Campus / Google Classroom (59)	Graduation (16)
Guidance-related (52)	Information in Response to Communication (15)
Directory / Calendar / Schedules (43)	Specific IEP or 504 Communication (12)
COVID / Safety (35)	Social-Emotional (9)
College and Career (34)	Curriculum / Ways to Support Student (4)

Relationship between the themes, three strands, or axes, emerged that were useful in

classifying parent needs and informing the communication initiative. Foremost was the need for

information to support or intervene regarding student achievement (seven themes), followed by
information that is traditionally communicated through existing modes or channels (four
themes). The final strand captured three themes that were characterized as timely / topical, or
inferred to appear based on the time in the school year (or, with respect to Covid-19, the time in
history) when the survey was administered. The hierarchy of the thematic strands is represented
in Table 4.6 by appearance count.

Table 4.6

OR1 and OR2: Information Axes Hierarchy

Student's individual academic progress	96	Achievement Support / Intervention	300
Teacher-provided / initiated	87		
Guidance office / School Counselor related	52		
College and career	34		
Responsiveness to initial parent communication	15		
Specific 504 or IEP information	12		
Curriculum and ways to support student	4		
Infinite Campus / Google Classroom	59	Channel-Specific Information	152
Directory / Calendar / Schedules	43		
Athletics / Co-Curricular Information	26		
BSD App / Other Electronic / Social Media	24		
COVID / Safety	35	Timely / Topical Information	60
Graduation / Senior Events	16		
Social-Emotional Learning Programming	9		

The Topical / Timely information needs became a primary focus of the communications
sent during the short-term initiative and, as addressed later in this chapter, respondent comments
regarding the issues of various kinds with those channels raised questions about the degree to

which those shortcomings with school-home communication impeded the development of trust and commitment among parents.

Qualitative Themes: OR1 & OR2 Data

Parent responses across the two open-ended questions affirmed the importance of school-home communication to support and sustain the success of their student. Five respondents, coincidentally one from each grade level respondent, commented specifically on the concept of partnership. A 9th grade parent expressed a need for "Just anything (for communication) so we can work together to help my child succeed" while a 10th grade parent expressed concern that " [it] seems there is little true partnership in designing and achieving pathways. The priority is fitting students into slots and completing schedules without regard to meeting needs other than course of study requirements." Further, a grade 11 parent shared, "I would LIKE TO BE ABLE TO depend on information from the school to help me support my student but at this time I feel that not a lot is available" (emphasis original). A grade 12 parent expressed, "I feel like the school is moving in a direction that we as parents are not being included in. I feel very disconnected these days with the direction [of] BHS." Closer to the parent-teacher partnership, a respondent with multiple students in the school offered that "a few teachers are amazing with communication and partnering to help my children succeed although some have poor communication and phone [and] emailing take a while to get a response if one is received at all."

A strand of comments reflected both personally and in generalized ways on the challenges of eliciting parent engagement through communication. Regarding methods of communication, a parent shared, "I prefer email as it's less disruptive during my busy day" while another countered that "emails are hard to keep track of when you have three kids in three

different schools." Others offered more personal insights, including a 9th grade parent who

shared a preference for email "because I can go back to it if I forget" in combination with phone

calls"because my memory is bad. [It's] hard to remember things." Comments also spoke to the

communication needs and challenges of working parents: "Where two-parent/guardian families

exist, communicating with both helps communication to family" while another responded

offered, "Sometimes, only I or my child's father receives emails, other times both of us. Not sure

why?" A final comment in this strand conveyed this notion in a personal way that humanized the

challenges of communicating with busy families: "I and my wife both have phones, computers,

email accounts, we even have a house in the city if you're inclined to write a letter or stop in. A

note on that: My wife works overnights, I work days, we get maybe an hour or two together

before we're off in separate directions again. Asking us to pass notes, share information or relate

updates is not effective, so telling us both is probably a good idea."

Finding #3

Open coding and analysis of open responses on Sample One showed that parents

overwhelmingly prefer email over other channels and evinced frustrations and concerns about

equity and access that should be considered when choosing communication channels with

parents. Similar to the design of OR1 and OR2, two Sample One questions asked respondents to

identify methods that are most effective (OR3) and least effective (OR4) in the school's

communication with parents. Beginning with OR3, each communication method was tallied for

the total number of appearances in the response, and further coding qualified the prevalence of

each method based on where it appeared within the individual responses. These data are

summarized in Table 4.7.

44

Table 4.7

OR3 Data Summary

OR3: What method(s) of receiving information from the school best get your attention as a busy parent? (171 Responses)				
Method	Total appearances	Appearances as the single preferred method	Appearances as first of two or more preferred methods	Appearances as second or later among preferred methods
Email	130	55	47	28
Text message	35	7	11	17
Phone call / Phone Alert	35	9	15	11
BSD App	32	4	14	14
US Mail / other	14	0	6	8
Total:	246	75	93	78

Email as a communication channel clearly emerged as the most preferred channel among respondents, with more total appearances within the response set (130) than the other four methods combined (116). 55 responses listed Email singly as the preferred method, nearly three times the total number of other single-channel responses in the data set (20). Among responses that listed multiple effective channels, Email appeared first 47 times as compared to 46 total appearances by four other channels– and over three times as often as the next-most identified channel, Phone call or Text Alert, which appeared 15 times in the response set.

As a companion question to OR3, question OR4 asked respondents to identify less effective communication methods used by the school. These methods were tallied for total number of appearances, data that are shown hierarchically in Table 4.8.

Table 4.8

OR4 Data Summary

OR4: What method(s) of the school's sharing of information are less helpful or effective? (154 Responses)	
Communication Method	Appearance Count
BSD Mobile App	25
Student (as courier / messenger)	20
Email	19
Social Media (Facebook, Twitter)	16
Phone call / Voicemail	15
Google Classroom / Infinite Campus	13
IRIS / Alert Calls (not targeted)	13
US Mail	10
Total:	131

In comparison to OR3, OR4 garnered slightly fewer respondents and 115 fewer references to communication methods within the response set, and the body of quantitative data added little to affirm or counter the findings about communication preferences under OR3. Attention turned to analysis of open responses to search for insights that could be useful in the design of the communication initiative.

Qualitative Themes: OR3 and OR4 Data

Open and axial coding of responses revealed three general themes of parent frustration with the school's communication methods: Overuse, underuse, and under-management of channels. One respondent broadly captured this frustration with communication management that cut across methods or channels: "The BSD app works well, when they use it. Email works well, when they use it. Letters home work well, when they are sent. Robocalls work OK, when

they are placed. Detecting a pattern?" Three responses reflected issues with timeliness of school communication, with one parent summarizing that "information that I have received has been untimely at best." Two other respondents addressed timing of communications with increasing specificity: One suggested the need for "Timely communication from teachers, social worker, and guidance counselor" while another directly advised that "Emails regarding deadlines or upcoming vital information PRIOR to the event is helpful!!" (emphasis original).

This issue of channel under-management was reflected in a number of comments, including a pair of respondents who spoke closely to elements of communication that lay at the operational core of this study. One parent addressed contact information record-keeping, suggesting that "It would be helpful if my email address was corrected when I have reported to change it four years ago and every year since" and a second emphasized the school's role ensuring "accurate information" in the student information system. More experientially, a parent urged for more "consistent use of technology so I don't have to guess" about which platforms will be used to communicate. Closer to channel management and communication of student learning, a respondent expressed frustration that the school appears to use its student information system only "to record grades and make a few comments on progress. Now [the school is] free and clear to just wash their hands of it because they put it online." While beyond the scope of what might be accomplished in a short-term initiative, parent frustration as reflected in the responses nonetheless qualified the level of overall satisfaction found under RQ1.

Other comments indicated frustration with the overuse of two channels to communicate with parents: the district's mobile App and the school's Facebook page. Regarding the mobile App, one parent generally shared, "We tried the App, but were unsuccessful in using it regularly in a way that was helpful" while another urged consideration of family resources and access to

technology: "I could not access the App until my oldest was part way through BHS because we didn't have a smartphone at that time. Assuming all [parents] have access to the App is a mistake." In addition to a strand of concerns about the school's App management, other comments substantially addressed overuse of the App to communicate amid Covid-19. One parent urged plainly that "the App should be reserved for true emergencies" – a notion reflected in a number of comments that are well-represented in one respondent who cited its overuse as a drain of parent time and attention: "We get WAY too much information [and] don't need to know every case of Covid if there are no direct contacts." This feeling was similarly (and more numerically) expressed in a respondent's thoughts on less effective communication methods: "50 zillIon emails about the same thing [and Covid] announcements from other schools." Considered together, the comments suggest that the unreliability of the mobile App made it a poor choice of channel for initiative while generally linking channel management and overuse to its perceived unreliability among parents.

Regarding the use of social media, comments were fewer in number but offered reflective insight on the equity and access questions associated with the choice of channels to communicate with parents. One parent shared personal experiences with limited access to information when compared to peers: "Last year other parents knew things from facebook or some sort of social media that I did not. I only found out through other parents that had social media. Information should be shared with all parents, not just on a site that not all parents have." Another respondent qualified this access question by clarifying that access to social media may or may not be within the parent's control: "Using social media such as Facebook to disseminate information might seem convenient and like it's meeting folks where they are, but it's not. Many parents aren't on social media all the time. Some have no access to it at all (by choice or otherwise). Social media

48

should never replace more formal and clear forms of communication." Particularly with respect to social media channels, the cautionary nature of the comments devalued its potential as a channel within the initiative, a notion that was affirmed by parent survey data discussed under RQ2. Further, the theme suggested that engagement in school communication is multi-factored and is impacted, in part, by under-considered equity and access issues associated with some channels.

Research Question 2, Part 1

The first part of RQ2, "Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact engagement in communication?" was answered through the engagement data gathered during a six-week communication initiative that was designed around the needs and preferences found under RQ1. The initiative was composed of six communications that focused on each grade level one or more times, all with Email as the primary contact. Emails contained links to secondary content identified as a prevalent need, and the language of the Email (subject, body) personalized the content to the grade level of the recipient. The secondary content was housed on unique pages on the school's website that were accessible only by link within a corresponding grade level parent email, and Google Analytics operated in the background to gather the engagement data for each unique grade-level page. Table 4.9 summarizes the design of the communication initiative, and detailed summaries of each of the six communications appear in the Appendix.

Table 4.9

Communication Initiative: Design Overview

Communication Description	Target Gr. Level	Secondary Engagement Indicators
QR Code: Embedded in participant recruitment mailing (US Mail) with link to Sample One.	9, 10, 11,12	Web Page / Engagement Analytics
Online Scholarship Form (Email with link to Online Application)	12	Web Page / Engagement Analytics; Online Applications submission data
Guidance Quick Reference Email (Custom Email invitation by Grade Level)	9, 10, 11,12	Web page / Analytics (Custom pages for each Grade Level with identical content)
YouTube Live: Graduation and Senior Events Information (Email invitation; Email reminder; Email link to Web Page / Web form)	12	Watch data; Web Page / Web Form data
YouTube Live: Rising Junior / Planning for the Junior Year (Email invitation; Email reminder; Email link to Web page / Web Form)	10	Watch data; Web Page / Web Form data
Final Exams Overview (Custom Email invitation by Grade Level)	9, 10., 11, 12	Web Page / Analytics (Custom pages for each Grade Level with identical content)

Finding #1

The purpose of the initiative was to communicate relevant, need-based information in ways that effectively reach and measurably engage parents. Considered as a whole, the six communications effectively reached and measurably engaged parents at each grade level in online content (page visits, watch data, online form completion) as summarized in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10

Secondary Engagement: Indicator Totals

Web Page Views / Users:	2,179 page views	1,565 users	929 new site users
Video Interactions:	335 video views	101 live interactions	44.4 video watch hours
Online Forms:	141 Form Submissions (Scholarship Form and Question Submission Forms)		

The 2,179 page views documented over the course of the initiative and the user data that lay behind that total was further analyzed. 929 of the 1,565 of visitors (59.4%) who viewed those pages were identified as new users, which indicates that the user's device had not previously been registered accessing the website site (Google Analytics Guide, 2022). Five of the six communications generated page views that were traceable back to the grade level of the visitor, a design that allowed for comparison of engagement data by grade level as shown in Table 4.11.

Table 4.11

Secondary Engagement Indicators by Grade-Level

Grade 9 (271):	311 page views	254 users	154 new site users (60.6%)
Grade 10 (285):	335 page views	255 users	139 new site users (54.5%)
Grade 11 (291):	372 page views	289 users	157 new site users (54.3%)
Grade 12 (298):	516 page views	374 users	190 new site users (50.8%)

The engagement data confirmed that Email is a preferred communication channel for parents at all grade levels. At grades 9, 10, and 11, 798 page visitors sourced directly from links emailed to 847 unique recipients, a straight calculation of 94.2% that suggested a high percentage of parents received and took action on the initial communication. Additionally, the data shows that grade 9 parents, who can be generally described as having the shortest communication history with the school, had the highest concentration of new site visitors at 60.6% as compared to 54.5% at Grade 10 and 54.3% at grade 11.

Grade 12 data shown in Table 4.11 indicated the highest level of secondary engagement in two communications that traced back to its grade-level source email. One communication was common to all four grade levels and identical in design and monitoring, while the other was designed in response to a specific need expressed by senior parents. Across those communications, page visits (374) exceeded the number of email recipients (298), an indication that parents engaged in the web content multiple times from different devices over the course of the initiative. Although not precisely determinable using Google Analytics, the relatively lower percentage of new users (50.8%) at Grade 12 is the logical result of users having engaged in the site previously and recently enough for their device to be recognized and therefore not classified as new.

A final communication to Grade 12 parents was designed *ad hoc* and folded into the study as a real-time artifact of action-research in one's professional setting. To address historically low submission rates, the senior scholarship application was digitized and communicated to Grade 12 parents as a Google Form, a channel used previously as a commonplace solicitation of information from parents. Applied newly as a problem-solving communication channel, the form netted 104 online submissions over six days and contributed to

a reversal from record-low to record-high submission rates for a graduating class. The level of engagement circumstantially validated the channel's effectiveness at facilitating home-school communication, but it should be noted that the outcome was not solely channel-related and Likely was influenced by the high-interest and time-sensitive nature of the problem.

Research Question 2, Part 2

To answer the second part of RQ2, "Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact parent feelings of trust and commitment?" the survey response data from before and after the communications initiative was approached in much the same manner as a school leader making meaning from trends and relative growth or decline in school achievement data over time. Analysis of the data began broadly, focusing on all respondents and observation of growth or decline on questions related to trust and commitment from Sample One to Sample Two. The statistical point of descriptive comparison was the percentage of favorable responses (Agree, Strongly Agree) to each individual item and across each five-item construct. Analysis then narrowed to items with the greatest observed increase or decrease in favorable responses and those with relatively low or high percentages within each construct. Table 4.12 provides the items and item codes that assisted discussion and further tabulation of the data.

Table 4.12

Commitment and Trust: Construct Items and Item Codes

Commitment (Affective): The information I receive from the school comes at the right time to help me support my student's success	CA1
Commitment (Affective): I would interact with the school more often if it used social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter to communicate	CA2
Commitment (Affective): Communication I receive makes me feel that the school wants to partner with me in the success of my student	CA3
Commitment (Continuance): If I have a need or concern about my student, I know how to communicate it to the school	CC1
Commitment (Continuance): The school is responsive to my needs or concerns when I express them.	CC2
Trust (Competence): I am satisfied with the kinds of information I am currently receiving from the school	TC1
Trust (Competence): I am satisfied with the ways that information is sent to me from the school	TC2
Trust (Competence) I am satisfied with the efforts the school makes to seek and respond to feedback from parents	TC3
Trust (Dependability) I depend on information from the school to help me support my student's learning	TD1
Trust (Dependability): How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the communication you receive from the school?	TD2

Finding #1

Among all respondents with no subgroupings, overall feelings of commitment fell

slightly and overall feelings of trust increased slightly as indicated by the percentage of favorable

responses on survey items over the two samples. Table 4.13 shows the percentage of respondents

with favorable (Agree, Strongly Agree) or unfavorable (Disagree, Strongly Disagree) responses to items related to feelings of commitment.

Table 4.13

Commitment: All Respondents Item Comparisons

	Item:	CA1	CA2	CA3	CC1	CC2	Total
Sample One	Favorable *n*	130	114	60	162	140	606
	Unfavorable *n*	59	72	128	27	46	332
	% Favorable	68.78%	61.29%	31.91%	85.71%	75.27%	64.61%
Sample Two	Favorable *n*	150	121	58	169	150	648
	Unfavorable *n*	57	85	146	38	56	382
	% Favorable	72.46%	58.74%	28.43%	81.64%	72.82%	62.91%
Change:		3.68%	-2.55%	-3.48%	-4.07%	-2.45%	-1.69%

Four items saw a decrease in percentage of parents responding favorably from the first sample to the second sample, and the percentage of favorable responses across the construct decreased from 64.61% on the first sample to 62.91% on the second sample, or a drop of 1.69% in favorable responses. On the item level, three items stood out for their relative change or for their relevance to the questions about trust and commitment posed by RQ2.

Respondents following the initiative responded more favorably to item CA1, "The information I receive from the school comes at the right time to help me support my student's success" the single point of increase (3.68%) following the communications initiative. This

55

increase is countered by a 4.08% decrease on CC1, "If I have a need or concern about my student, I know how to communicate it to the school." Although this item represents the highest decrease from Sample one to Sample two within the commitment construct, over 80% of parents responded favorably, an indication that communication pathways for problem solving remained clear to eight out of 10 respondents.

Within the commitment construct, one item had the lowest percentage among all respondents and a decrease over the two samples. Fewer than one in three respondents (31.91%) on Sample One indicated "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" to the statement, "Communication I receive makes me feel that the school wants to partner with me in the success of my student", a level that fell very near to one in four respondents (28.43%) and came in at 30-50 percentage points lower than other commitment items. The decline and the level of overall low percentage of favorable responses to an item that spoke so closely to the goals of the study will be further explored under RQ3 later in the chapter.

Five items were designed to assess feelings of trust before and after the communication initiative. As detailed in Table 4.14, the percentage of favorable responses among all respondents increased from 69.92% on the first sample to 71.61% on the second sample, a slight change (1.69%) that equaled the change seen across items in the commitment construct.

Table 4.14

Trust: All Respondents Item Comparisons

	Item:	TC1	TC2	TC3	TD1	TD2	Total
Sample One	Favorable *n*	121	130	106	174	129	660
	Unfavorable *n*	68	59	82	15	60	284
	% Favorable	64.02%	68.78%	56.38%	92.06%	68.25%	69.92%
Sample Two	Favorable *n*	140	148	120	191	140	739
	Unfavorable *n*	67	58	87	16	65	293
	% Favorable	67.63%	71.84%	57.97%	92.27%	68.29%	71.61%
Change:		3.61%	3.06%	1.59%	0.21%	0.04%	1.69%

On the item level, the percentage of favorable indications increased from the first to the second sample on all five items, two negligibly (.21 and .04 percentage points) and three to a greater degree. Items with the greatest increase in the trust construct among all respondents included TC1, "I am satisfied with the kinds of information I am currently receiving from the school" which increased 3.68% to over two-thirds of respondents (67.63%) indicating favorably on Sample Two. An increase of 1.59% was shown on item TC3, a rating of overall satisfaction with communication, which, at 57.97%, remained the lowest indication of favorability on trust-related items following the initiative.

Finally, outlier high favorability (over 92% on both samples) for TD1 revealed an error in the question language that was discovered too late to be corrected. The item as intended, "I **can** depend on information from the school to help me support the learning of my student" appeared on the survey without the word "can" in error. The omission appears to have shifted from a question of how dependably the school communicates to a question about the respondent's orientation toward communication from the school. While it was affirming to find that parents on

both samples indicated dependence upon information from the school, the item holds little analytical value and did not strongly impact changes in favorability percentages. However, the error does hold value as a cautionary tale on instrument editing for other researchers.

Research Question 3

To answer the third research question, "Do the measured outcomes vary significantly among demographic groups and otherwise inform communication practices that better engage parents and cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships?" a combination of descriptive and inferential methods narrowed and deepened analysis of the degree to which the demographic variables could be seen statistically in feelings of trust and commitment. Descriptively, analysis focused on demographic subgroups and observation and comparison of favorable construct and item responses from before and after the communication initiative. From an action research perspective, it was also important to then explore whether or not the findings that surfaced through descriptive analyses and comparisons persisted through more rigorous inferential analysis of Sample Two group and subgroup respondent data, shown in Table 4.15.

Table 4.15

Sample Two Respondent Groups

Grade	Total *n*	Support-Yes *n*	Support-No *n*
9	39	12	27
10	35	15	20
11	48	17	31
12	54	17	37
MULT	30	7	23
Total:	206	68	138

Answers to RQ3 were explored through parametric tests (ANOVA and independent t-tests) to evaluate differences between the groups and subgroups on two dependent variables within Sample Two: total trust and total commitment. Responses to the five 4-point Likert items were combined into a single variable for each construct, forming a data set that was tested for the assumption of normality. At 200, the *n*-size crept into a confusing range that a body of recent literature suggests either should be accepted as having a normal distribution or be evaluated using visual representations of the data set (Demir, 2022). The variables were explored descriptively using SPSS software, resulting in histogram graphs and coefficients for skewness (asymmetry) and kurtosis (tailing) when calculated against a normal, bell-shaped distribution. The skewness and kurtosis were found to be -.470 and -.291, respectively, for trust and -.682 and .317, respectively, for commitment, placing all four measures within a range (-1 to 1) that general guidelines recognize as strong evidence of normal distribution (Hair et al., 2022, p. 66).

Finding #1

Descriptive and inferential analysis of the survey responses suggest that the presence or

absence of formal school support for a student plays a role in feelings of commitment and trust among parents. On the descriptive level, respondents whose students receive support at school showed a decrease in favorable responses in both constructs from Sample One to Sample Two. In the commitment construct shown in Table 4.15, the percentage of favorable responses fell to under 60% across the items, a 2.52% decline that was a significant contributor to the 1.69% overall decline found among all respondents under RQ2.

Table 4.16

Commitment: Support-Yes Item Comparisons

Commitment Item Code:		CA1	CA2	CA3	CC1	CC2	Total
Sample One	Favorable *n*	56	48	25	65	56	250
	Non-Favorable *n*	26	34	57	17	25	159
	% Favorable	68.29%	58.53%	30.49%	79.23%	69.14%	61.12%
Sample Two	Favorable *n*	46	33	17	58	47	201
	Non-Favorable *n*	23	36	50	11	22	142
	% Favorable	66.67%	47.83%	25.37%	84.10%	68.12%	58.60%
Change:		-1.62%	-10.70%	-5.12%	4.87%	-1.02%	-2.52%

One item within the commitment construct, CC1, increased from 79.23% to 84.1% among parents of supported students, data that reaffirmed previous data on awareness of problem-solving pathways. The largest decline (10.70%) was shown in CA2, "I would interact with the school more often if it used social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter to communicate" which fell to less than 1 in 2 (47.83%) respondents on the second survey. These

data corroborate parents' personal and general equity and access concerns with social media as expressed in a qualitative theme under RQ2.

Responses to item CA3, the question that seminally reflects the overall study of communication and relational outcomes, did not significantly differ based on group membership. Like all respondents, the percentage of favorable responses in the Support-Yes subgroup declined over the two surveys and ended up at just over one in four respondents agreeing that communication from the school contributes to a feeling of partnership in their student's learning. With respect to RQ3, the data did confirm broadly shared concerns about communication outcomes.

Repeating the broad-to-narrow query within the trust construct, analysis showed that four of five items decreased in favorable responses from the first survey to the second among parents of supported students:

Table 4.17

Trust: Support-Yes Item Comparisons

Trust Item Code:		TC1	TC2	TC3	TD1	TD2	Total
Sample One	Favorable *n*	50	57	44	76	56	283
	Non-Favorable *n*	32	25	37	6	26	126
	% Favorable	60.98%	69.51%	54.32%	92.68%	68.29%	69.19%
Sample Two	Favorable *n*	42	45	34	64	41	226
	Non-Favorable *n*	27	24	35	5	26	117
	% Favorable	60.87%	65.22%	49.23%	92.75%	61.19%	65.89%
Change:		-0.11%	-4.29%	-5.09%	0.07%	-7.10%	-3.30%

Across the trust construct, the 3.30% overall decrease in favorable responses contrasted the 1.69% increase among all respondents found under RQ2. On the item level, TC3 (a decrease of 5.09% to 49.23% overall) and TD2 (a decrease of 7.10% to 61.19% overall), contributed most significantly to the overall decline in trust as sampled after the initiative. The data also show a decline to 49.23%, or one in two respondents indicating satisfaction with the solicitation and use of parent feedback. A slightly smaller decline to 61.19% in overall satisfaction with communication carried a previously observed gap between partial and overall satisfaction into the subgroup.

Further evidence of disparate relational outcomes based on the support demographic was made visible in Tables 4.18, which stacked the Support-Yes and Support-No subgroups for descriptive comparison of items from both constructs and both survey samples.

Table 4.18

Commitment and Trust: Support-Yes / Support-No Item Comparisons

Construct:		Commitment					Trust				
Item Code:		CA1	CA2	CA3	CC1	CC2	TC1	TC2	TC3	TD1	TD2
Sample One	Support-Yes (*n* = 83)	68.29%	58.53%	30.49%	79.23%	69.14%	60.98%	69.51%	54.32%	92.68%	68.29%
	Support- No (*n* = 106)	69.16%	63.46%	33.02%	90.65%	80.00%	66.36%	68.22%	57.94%	91.59%	68.22%
	Difference:	0.87%	4.93%	2.53%	11.42%	10.86%	5.38%	1.29%	3.62%	1.09%	0.07%
Sample Two	Support-Yes (*n* = 68)	66.67%	47.83%	25.37%	84.10%	68.12%	60.87%	65.22%	49.23%	92.75%	61.19%
	Supports-No (*n* = 138)	75.36%	64.23%	29.93%	80.43%	75.18%	71.01%	75.18%	62.32%	92.03%	71.74%
	Difference:	8.69%	16.40%	4.56%	3.67%	7.06%	10.14%	9.96%	13.09%	0.72%	10.55%

Following the communications initiative, respondents whose students receive school support had lower percentages of favorable indications on eight of the nine items across the two constructs, differences that ranged from 4.56% to 16.40% lower than parents whose students do not receive support at school. The differences between the groups were consistent across the trust construct, where indications were effectively 10% lower on the four items among respondents whose students do not receive school support. The one instance of higher favorability among the Support-Yes respondents, CC1, increased to 84.1% as compared to 80.43% of Support-No respondents– data that continued to affirm awareness of problem-solving communication pathways among parents.

The greatest difference in item responses between the two groups (16.40%) was seen on item CA2, the question on the school's use of social media channel communication. Nearly two of three (64.23%) of Support-No respondents indicated that use of social media would increase their interaction with the school as compared to fewer than half (47.83%) of respondents whose children receive support at school. The difference further quantified the equity and access concerns expressed in open responses. From an action research perspective, the gap also provided a specific, consistent item data trail to follow into inferential group comparisons later in the chapter.

Inferential Statistical Comparisons: Construct Level

With consistent descriptive evidence that the support demographic played a role in relational outcomes when looked at broadly, a sequence of inferential statistical comparisons was completed to find out if those outcomes were statistically significant. An independent *t*-test evaluated the relationship Support-yes and Support-no subgroups regardless of grade level, a

comparison of all respondents for both commitment and trust mean scores. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4.19.

Table 4.19

Commitment and Trust: Independent T-Test Support-No vs. Support Yes

	Support-No		Support-Yes				
	n = 138		*n* = 68				
	M	SD	M	SD	*t*	df	*p*
Trust	14.63	3.01	13.57	3.49	2.30	204	**.026***
Commitment	13.76	3.03	12.97	3.19	1.73	204	.086

* *p* < .05

Scores for commitment were not significantly different among the subgroups. However, the results did show that respondents from the combined grade levels whose students do not receive supports in school scored significantly higher on trust (M=14.63, SD=3.01) than the Support-No group, whose students do not receive a support (M=13.57, SD=3.49), *t*(2.30), *p*= .026. To address the differences in sample sizes, a Hedge's g correction was calculated to determine an effect size of .622, or a medium effect by interpreted standards.

This finding for subgroups composed of all grade levels prompted a narrower analysis of each grade level to determine if significant variance was present between Support-Yes and Support-No subgroups. Independent *t*-tests compared the grade level support subgroups on the total mean score for trust as summarized in Table 4.20. When a dataset failed Levene's test for equality of variances, a Welch's *t*-test was used instead of the independent samples *t*-test; these instances are indicated in the appropriate outcome reports below. All calculations were completed via SPSS using an alpha level of .05.

Table 4.20

Trust: Independent T-Tests of Grade Level Support Subgroups

	n	Support-No		Support-Yes		*t*	df	*p*
		M	SD	M	SD			
Grade 9	(27,12)	16.19	2.31	12.30	3.83	3.01	11.62	*.012*
Grade 10	(20,15)	14.00	3.13	14.80	4.14	-.652	33	.519
Grade 11	(31,17)	14.45	2.62	13.88	2.18	.763	46	.450
Grade 12	(37,17)	14.05	3.23	13.00	3.26	1.11	52	.272
Grade Mult.	(23,7)	14.74	3.29	14.00	4.80	.467	28	.644

* p < .05

At Grade 9, a Welch's *t*-test identified statistically significant variance between the Support-No and Support-Yes subgroups at Grade 9. Respondents whose students do not receive school support had significantly higher mean scores for trust (M = 16.19, SD = 2.31) than parents whose students receive school supports (M = 12.30, SD = 3.83), t(11.62) = 3.01, *p* = .012. Calculated with a Hedge's g correction to address the small and disparate sample sizes, the effect size of 1.860 exceeds the .80 interpreted standard for a large effect. Independent *t*-tests resulted in no findings of significant variance between grade level support subgroups at Grade 10, 11, 12, or Multiple for trust mean scores.

Inferential Comparisons: Narrowing the Support Lens

It became increasingly evident that the support subgroup needed to be explored more precisely. To narrow analysis, the support-yes group on the second survey was divided into three logical, redefined groups: learning supports (IEP, 504, EL); free / reduced meals; and both types of support indicated. Due to the disparate sample sizes and non-normality of the dataset, a Welch's ANOVA test was used to evaluate the relationship between the reconstituted support subgroups for both trust and commitment mean scores. The descriptive statistics are shown in Table 4.21.

Table 4.21

Commitment and Trust: Welch's ANOVA by Support Regroupings

	n	Commitment		Trust	
	n	M	SD	M	SD
No support	138	13.76	3.04	14.63	3.01
Free/Reduced Only	9	12.67	2.60	12.78	2.64
Learning Support Only	47	12.69	3.31	13.33	3.65
Both Support Types	11	14.45	2.95	15.27	3.13

The Welch's ANOVA test was not significant at the .05 level for either construct. Further, a post hoc Games-Howell test for multiple comparisons did not find statically different mean scores at the .05 level between the support groups when reconstituted for a more narrow analysis based on the type of support indicated by the respondent.

Inferential Comparison: Item Level

Descriptive and qualitative findings under RQ1 and RQ2 suggested the need to explore more deeply communication outcomes related to the use of social media. Favorability on Item CA2, "I would interact with the school more often if it used social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter to communicate" fell to less than one in two (47.83%) among respondents whose students receive school support, 16.4% lower than parents whose children do not receive support. Further, a theme of respondent comments raising equity and access concerns about the school's use of social media to communicate added impetus for item-level inferential testing based on the support variable.

Due to non-normality in the dataset, Sample Two respondent data for item CA2 was analyzed with non-parametric comparison of ranks. SPSS was used to perform a Mann-Whitney U test to evaluate whether responses to the item differed by support variable subgroup using an alpha level of .05.

The results indicated that respondents whose students do not receive support in school had significantly higher favorability toward social media as a school-home communication channel than parents whose students have one or more formal supports at school, $z = -2.04$, $p = .041$. The more rigorous testing indicated that the differences observed descriptively regarding the school's use of social media to communicate carried through to the support subgroup level when analyzed inferentially.

Finding #2

Descriptive analysis of survey responses suggests that the second demographic variable, grade level of the student, factors into feelings of trust among the newest parents in the home-school relationship. Descriptive observation and comparison of favorable response percentages by grade level resulted in findings in the trust construct, data that is summarized in Table 4.22.

Table 4.22

Trust: Grade Level Comparisons by Item

Grade / Sample (*n*)		TC1	TC2	TC3	TD1	TD2	ALL	+/-
9	Sample 1 *(42)*	73.81%	80.95%	68.29%	90.48%	88.10%	80.38%	-5.38%
	Sample 2 *(39)*	71.79%	71.05%	58.97%	97.44%	75.68%	75.00%	
10	Sample 1 *(35)*	54.29%	68.57%	57.14%	91.43%	60.00%	66.29%	4.57%
	Sample 2 *(35)*	65.71%	71.43%	60.00%	91.43%	65.71%	70.86%	
11	Sample 1 *(40)*	65.00%	65.00%	50.00%	92.50%	57.50%	66.00%	5.25%
	Sample 2 *(48)*	64.58%	75.00%	56.25%	91.67%	68.75%	71.25%	
12	Sample 1 *(36)*	58.33%	58.33%	47.22%	88.89%	58.33%	62.22%	5.19%
	Sample 2 *(54)*	62.96%	66.67%	53.70%	90.74%	62.96%	67.41%	
MULT	Sample 1 *(36)*	66.67%	69.44%	58.33%	97.22%	75.00%	73.33%	2.67%
	Sample 2 *(30)*	76.67%	76.67%	66.67%	90.00%	70.00%	76.00%	

In the trust construct on Sample Two, Grade 9 respondents showed the second-highest overall favorability, 75% across the five items. However, favorability declined on four of five items and 5.38% overall from Sample One to Sample Two. Among the items for Grade 9, TC3, a query on seeking and responding to parent feedback, decreased 9.32% to under 60% favorable and TD2, a query of overall satisfaction, fell 12.42% to 75% over the two samples. All other grade levels respondents trended oppositely, with overall increases that ranged from 2.67% - 5.25%. At three grade levels the favorability on trust items was effectively 10% higher than Grade 9. Although three of four Grade 9 parents indicated favorably across trust items, the number of items that declined and an overall decrease in the construct were unique to Grade 9.

Inferential testing based on grade level began broadly with a one-way ANOVA that evaluated the relationship between the respondent grade level and the mean score for trust and commitment. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 4.23.

Table 4.23

Commitment and Trust: One-Way ANOVA by Grade Level Groups

Grade Level	n	Total Commitment		Total Trust	
		M	SD	M	SD
9	39	14.05	3.43	14.82	3.32
10	35	13.57	2.62	14.34	3.56
11	48	13.75	2.51	14.25	2.46
12	54	12.83	3.24	13.72	3.25
Multiple	30	13.50	3.72	14.57	3.62

The ANOVA was not significant at the .05 level for commitment or trust. Further, a post hoc Tukey's test for multiple comparisons did not find statically different mean scores at the .05 level between grade level groups 9, 10, 11, 12, Multiple.

Inferential Comparisons on Item Responses

Finally, Item CA3, "Communication I receive makes me feel that the school wants to partner with me in the success of my student," was equally present in the mind of the researcher as it was in the descriptive analyses under RQ2. It was important and fitting closure to make meaning from the decline and overall lowest favorability on an item that can be described as most singly representative of this study.

Descriptive exploration using SPSS showed non-normality of the item data set. Inferential comparisons were conducted using the non-parametric equivalents of the one-way ANOVA and independent t-test. A Kruskal-Wallis test evaluated the relationship between the respondents by grade level on item CA3, a procedure that used comparison of ranks, not item means, to detect significant variance at the .05 level among one or more respondent groups.

Kruskal Wallis test identified non significance differences between groups at the .05 level

(H = 2.971, 4 df, p = .561). Further, post hoc Mann-Whitney U tests identified no instances of

variance to the .05 level in multiple comparisons of grades 9. 10, 11, 12, Multiple.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This study intended to explore relationship building through communication in a way that a scholarly practitioner might approach that work independent of structured research study–armed with a proven framework that could be applied in real-time and with a combination of short and long-term measurable outcomes in the sights. In this way, the action-research approach enabled meaningful study that bridged to some degree not only a theory-practice gap but also a divide between for-profit and public organizational strategy and practice. O-PR was that theoretical framework, relational outcomes were the measurable target, and active, needs responsive engagement was the method to explore three primary questions, the findings of which are discussed, in order, in this chapter: (1) What are the communication needs and preferences of high school parents; (2) Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact engagement in communication and parents' feelings of trust and commitment?; and (3)Do these measured outcomes vary significantly among demographic groups and otherwise inform communication practices that better engage parents and cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships?

Research Question 1: What are the communication needs and preferences of parent stakeholders in a high school setting?

Findings:

1. Baseline levels of parent satisfaction with elements of communication were more favorable than satisfaction with overall communication from the school.

2. Parents indicate the need for personalized communication and more proactive and responsive communication from the school in support of their child's achievement.

3. Parents overwhelmingly prefer email over other channels with evidence of their frustration in channels that are mismanaged or overutilized / underutilized.

In many ways, the study's findings under this research question affirmed O-PR as a framework for exploring the efficacy and impact of communication and relationship building in schools, beginning with stakeholder insights. Grunig (2005) among others call for the importance of routine and deliberate environmental scanning through a variety of formal and informal research methods, a varied process of gaining knowledge and insight that helps an organization identify and meet stakeholder needs. In a school setting, a diverse range of information on their key publics (limited here to grade levels and a single subgroup) is gathered by default in schools and is readily available to school leaders for this purpose. In this study, gathering information not on-hand by default (open response sampling) was a time-intensive but not challenging process that can be made simpler still by sampling with items that query by selected response and rank-ordering, among other strategies.

The study was conducted in between two national samples of the parent perspectives on home-school relationships, and the findings were consistent in some but not all elements of communication across the three. Specifically regarding communication satisfaction, the finding of general parent satisfaction was similar to levels found in a 2019 national survey of school-home communication conducted by the Center for American Progress. Concerns with timing of communication appeared in each, with low satisfaction ratings for timing of school

communication shown in the nearly one-third of respondents who disagreed that communication helps support achievement was affirmed. The 2019 parents indicated that their schools communicate actionable information frequently while also indicating that "ideal communication would be more frequent and more consistent" (Benner, Quirk, 2020).

However, take-aways from a 2022 nationally representative survey were less indicative of communication satisfaction, with 49% of high school parents indicating that their schools can do a better job of providing feedback on student learning (National PTA, 2022). The areas of needed improvement in school communication were further qualified in ways that aligned very closely to the second finding under RQ2. Fewer than one in four of parents nationally agreed that the communication they receive from the school is actionable and personalized in support of their student's learning.

A matter of research frame and setting, the 2022 sample helped solidify a concern about bridging O-PR to a school setting in the way that it was studied here. As reflected thematically in the summary table of findings and more granularly in item responses, the findings suggest that parents consider "home-school communication" to be a combination of communications sent between teachers and parents *and* communications sent more broadly by the school to parents. This study, like others framed conceptually by O-PR, apply the broader, more generalized view of communication (coordinated messaging sent by and broadly representative of the organization) to stakeholders– and does not consider fully enough the ways in which stakeholder feelings and relational outcomes are attributable to communication that occurs at lower levels within the organization– in the case of this study, from teachers to parents in the interest of student achievement. The National PTA survey respondents confirmed the former view. The four areas of greatest need for improvement and opportunity for growth related to providing teachers

73

the training and time to communicate routinely and effectively with all parents. The implications for leadership practice are discussed in Chapter 6.

Research Question 2, Part 1: Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact parent engagement in communication?

Findings:
1. The six communications sent during the short-term initiative effectively reached parents and engaged them measurably in online content.

O-PR as an actionable theory entered its proving grounds in a school setting with RQ2, which explored the notion that larger outcomes of relational communication begin with ensuring sender outputs meet receiver inputs. However, as theories can do, O-PR leaves a practice gap which, in the case of this study, was filled by the Action Research method and the design and assessment of the communication initiative. It was this portion of the study that brought energy and ongoing interest to the research process and drove thought consistently back to the O-PR fundamentals of stakeholder groups, their varying needs, and the ways that our commitment and their satisfaction could be delivered through communication. To this extent, O-PR was validated as an approach but needed AR legs to carry its application through to meaning.

These findings prompted consideration of the specific but unmeasured elements of communication language within the study that were a design choice to better engage the recipients and elicit action of kind. Consistent with O-PR and relational outcomes, the open response survey questions were designed around the concept of control mutuality, a condition in relationships where each side feels the right to control the other meaningfully. Control mutuality

is seen in the organization's openness to criticism, embracing of conflict and receptiveness to feedback– traits reflected in survey questions that invited both affirming and critical responses regarding the content and methods of school communication. Further, the choice of open response versus more commonplace rank-ordered or radio-response question designs were intended to convey interest in their personalized experiences. Although no claim can be made on the degree to which these choices elicited a feeling of control mutuality or engaged respondents in action, the completion rate of open response items was higher than anticipated and contained useful data that aided the design of the initiative and added qualitative insight to their communication experiences.

Closer to the action of the communication initiative, the simplest elements of Media Richness Theory (MRT) informed the use of Email as a primary channel for each communication sent and tested for eventual secondary engagement. MRT holds that media channels have varying degrees of richness in their ability to convey meaning and influence understanding or change of some kind within the recipient (Daft, Lengel, 1986). For example, when compared to a rich medium such as an in-person conversation, Email is a relatively thin channel because it lacks cueing, feedback, personalization, and natural language.

To compensate for thinness in a highly preferred channel among parents in the study, the Email messages sent as primary communications in the initiative were enriched in ways that were designed to personalize the message and convey its significance in natural language to the recipient. The subject line identified the recipient by traditional class name (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior), and the language in the body was intentionally brief, less formal, but personalized in relating how the content in the secondary link would be useful or helpful to families and students in that particular grade. The language intended to personalize the message

from others in the inbox, to require little time for the recipient to read and understand the message, to be of sufficient perceived value to further explore, and to provide that opportunity immediately within the message. These ulterior considerations drove attention to how the message would be more noticed, important, and useful to the recipient, an orientation that had strong tethers to O-PR even if its role in driving attention to the secondary content was untellable within the OR2 engagement data.

Research Question 2, Part 2: Can a short-term initiative informed by these needs and preferences measurably impact parent feelings of trust and commitment?

Findings:
1. Among all respondents with no subgroupings, overall feelings of commitment fell slightly and overall feelings of trust increased slightly as indicated by the percentage of favorable responses on survey items over the two samples

The design of the communication outputs and the documentation of engagement heeded the first part of the cautions of Marston (1963) who warned against an organization's "one way outpouring" of communication creating false confidence that it has achieved its public relations purpose– and ignoring the need to ensure that each message "has been attended to and done its work." (p. 1). With evidence that messaging was received and acted upon as intended, the second part of RQ2 explored whether not the needle moved on the O-PR outcomes of interest, trust, commitment, and satisfaction.

The general findings under the second part of RQ2 align with the research of Evans (2017) and Project Tomorrow, which reported a healthy status of school-home communication in

terms that speak more to relational outcomes than they do to general satisfaction with communication. The research involving 20,000 parent-guardians nationwide indicated that 68% of district school-home communications outputs were found to align to the top four parent-stakeholder needs as they relate to the success of their children in school. Further, despite concerns that might be raised about the use of technology to engage all parent demographics in the development of a school-home communication relationship, the study found that preferences for technology (email, text messaging) did not vary by community type, poverty level, or education attainment. Although vastly different in scale and type, the studies similarly consider channel, parent demographic, and a focus on achievement-related outcomes that are important to stakeholders.

Two items assessing Commitment, CA3 and CC2 were asked in nearly-identical questions nationally on the 2022 National PTA engagement survey. CA3 was considered seminally representative of the study, asking parents about a feeling of partnership with the school in the student's learning. A concerning 28% agreed or disagreed on the second study survey. The national survey clustered parent responses differently, reporting that 34% of 2022 parents strongly agreed that a learning partnership was present in their school, balanced by 76% indicating that they somewhat agree. Those percentages appear close numerically but minimal extrapolation of methods indicates a significant gap between local and national parents on feelings of partnership. Local and national parents were more parallel when asked about school responsiveness to parents' needs and concerns. Just under 59% of study parents agreed or strongly agreed that their schools are responsive in this way compared to 30% of parents who strongly agreed and 70% who somewhat agreed.

Research Question 3: Do these measured outcomes vary significantly among demographic groups or otherwise inform communication practices that better engage parents and cultivate mutually-beneficial relationships?

Findings:

1. Descriptive and inferential analysis of the survey responses suggest that the presence or absence of formal school support for a student plays a role in feelings of commitment and trust among parents.

2. Descriptive and inferential analysis of survey responses suggest that the second demographic variable, grade level of the student, factors into feelings of trust and commitment among the newest parents in the home-school relationship.

RQ3 and its findings represent a turning point of sorts for O-PR, where questions about its role and value as a strategic business practice shift toward more concrete questions about its usefulness to scholarly practice in an educational setting. The discussion of RQ1 has addressed this question to some degree through the realization that communication as framed by and for a strategic business context is different from communication that one is framing for the "people business" of schools. Further, O-PR Theory is silent on what is to occur once the scanning of the environment is complete, the strategic communication is conducted, and the status of relational outcomes is more thoroughly and more timely known.

Findings for RQ3 indicate that more vulnerable learning populations (those in earlier grades in a span and those who access formal support in school) are by some measures employed in the study shown to have lower indications of trust and commitment in their relationship with

the school. These are among that collective set of demographic factors that are known to impact parent engagement (OECD, 1997). The most telling data point in this regard is the comparison that accounts for all respondents to Sample Two and establishes that regardless of grade level, respondents who self-identify as parents of children who receive formal support of some kind at the school have lower indications of trust as measured in the survey. Running parallel to this finding are indications from a much blunter instrument that nonetheless show much higher favorability ratings on trust items by respondents whose children do not receive formal support in school.

However, Grade 9 and its prevalence in the Commitment construct findings speak to RQ3 in at least two primary ways beyond the descriptive and inferential statistical differences with other respondent groups. Like the children they parent, Grade 9 parents experience an induction and transition of their own as they start a new school and grade span– an event that should be attended to for any signs of struggle and signs of strength. A relative struggle can be interpreted among Grade 9, the one grade level where data in this study shows significantly lower feelings of commitment among parents whose children need formal support than parents whose children do not. In contrast, a relative strength can be seen by the finding that feelings of trust, though declined slightly over the two samples, nonetheless remained high (75% across the items), bettered only by parents of students in multiple grades at the schools.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this study was to improve a lingering personal leadership weakness in a way that authentically represents the challenges of leading and communicating in schools today– and in away that gives leaders who consult this work the confidence to tackle difficult problems of practice with incremental, results-oriented approaches that can flex and bend with the realities of the job. The action-research approach resulted in better technical understanding of communication effectiveness along with a stronger formative understanding of home-school relationships and the ways that those relationships are marked and measured by two pillar constructs under O-PR theory: commitment and trust (Hon, Grunig, 1999).

Personally, broadly and in ways that are technical, actionable and theoretical, the study and its findings hold implications for scholarly practice on three levels: individual scholarly practice; local, state, and national policy that enables and sustains scholarly practice; and on research conducted in support of more informed, capable, and effective leadership in schools. Following a discussion of these implications, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations followed by a personally-contextualized closing summary.

Implications for Scholarly Practitioner Practice

Findings under RQ1on communication needs and preferences mirrored a number existing and emerging studies and were easily acquired, applied and validated soon after the work began and then consistently along the way. The implications are both practical and personal and speak equally to the topic of study, its underlying theory, and the action research approach that guided the work.

With regard to the O-PR theory, the relative simplicity of asking, acquiring, and responding to the survey data continuously oriented thought toward parent needs and the ways in which communication could address them in the interest of building stronger home-school relationships. Deeper into the findings, as indicators of engagement became apparent and ongoing, the challenge became to communicate in more diverse, interactive, and servant-leadership ways. Specific to the topic of communication, this near-confluence of action and findings quickly and steadily simplified an otherwise heavy and nebulous challenge of communication to engage, transforming it into a series of instances where the school provided important, useful, and timely information to parents.

Practitioners considering similar initiatives within and beyond the conducting of research in their settings can take confidence that the tools of the job are easy and inexpensive to acquire, not complicated to use, and effective at gaining and then responding to the insights and needs of parents. Further, while far from conclusive on the connection between communication and relational outcomes, the findings confirm what might be intuited but should nonetheless be explored by school leaders in their own settings: that parents who are newest to the school and those whose students require formal support in school may experience communication and interactions differently and in ways that impact the cultivation of trust and commitment in their relationship with the school.

The work was completed, and it was successful. A lingering weakness was displaced by knowledge of better communication to reach and engage parents. Confirmation that outcomes differed along demographic lines came with insights on how to address equity and access issues with communication. However, as much as the work of the study led to these two intentional

learnings, the larger understanding of its impact on personal leadership practices came through a return to the purpose behind the work that was undertaken.

The larger purpose was to understand and strengthen the presence and impact of the school and its people on every student and family regardless of demographic– and to some degree, in recognition that these personal impacts are experienced unknowingly and without immediate appreciation. This notion surfaced and strengthened by traveling between the numbers and the story behind the numbers, making human, experiential connections between what was visible objectively in the data and what it meant subjectively about leading school communication with purpose and relational intent.

The implications for practice are allegorical to this gradual narrowing from discreetly visible to concealed until searched for and then known– a deepening of practice-based and responsive inquiry that is generalizable to the work of scholarly practitioners. If not for seeking objective evidence of the impact of intentional work, the subjective reasons that lay behind the pursuit of those impacts cannot be fully known and explored. It is typical for today's school leaders to approach data thoroughly but one dimensionally and incompletely because the query stops at broad numbers. Specific to communication practices, the results of this work suggest the importance of continuing to survey and monitor effectiveness of communications generally, efforts that can be expected to bring about positive movement on the relational needle for that fact alone. But the potential impact of personalized communication on feelings of commitment and trust among parents and for their students will not be fully realized until its significance and relevance is taken to the classroom level and to teachers individually and in aggregate.

Implications for Scholarly Practitioner Policy

The personal impetus for study was to address a lingering leadership weakness – and one one that, ironically, had been unsuccessfully confronted just over ten years ago in the wake of the No Child Left Behind reauthorization. This combination of long-term and acutely experienced dead-ends on the road to improved communication as a school leader framed thoughts on how this study might speak to scholarly practitioner policy on local, state, and national levels.

Shortly after moving into my current position as a high school principal, as the local issue of at-risk family transitions coincided with the reauthorization of ESEA, the fundamental issue of effective home-school communication practices became the priority within each. At that time, a narrow, vetted clearinghouse of research-based programs– all with thin, tangential communication frameworks-- were the only option for districts and schools seeking to leverage funds for structured engagement initiatives. On the other side of this study, and in consideration of the findings, it's more ironic than ever to me that federal policy is long on policy but short on delivery of resources founded in the strong body of best practices in school-home communication. Federal policy would be wise to consider the potential of scholarly practitioner research to address this apparent resource / research gap, particularly in Title I schools with high concentrations of poverty. More specific to scholar practitioner practice, federal grants including but not limited to Title I should more strongly endorse and fund exploratory, school-based initiatives that are well-structured and strongly aligned with research and best-practice in parent engagement through communication.

My beliefs about school leadership as a people business and my skills as a leader were intentionally stretched and affirmed by the topic of my study, the research design, and its findings about communication and relational outcomes. However, the unintentional learning

about the people closest to me throughout the study was equally powerful. Reflective

appreciation for the conditions in my school and district that lured them to the work causes me to

urge for state policy that supports scholarly practice in Maine schools.

Those people I referenced were teachers in my school who were current or past members

of leadership mentoring collaborative with the state university that is (much too) unique to my

district– and one that should be supported, endorsed, and promoted at the state level through

formal policy. The alignment or co-orientation of state and local policy toward formal

leadership mentoring programs would greatly enhance and cultivate scholarly practitioner

practice in schools across Maine. Involving other educators in the theoretical and practical

elements of my study enhanced its overall quality and allowed for many elements to occur more

efficiently– and, truthfully, to occur at all. When policy at the state and local levels align to

support and create formal leadership and mentoring programs, the conditions emerge for

scholarly-practitioner practice and research to occur. My leadership capacity increased as much

as theirs, and, moving forward, the steps that my findings suggest will be much easier to take

given the shared understanding that resulted from working together.

The findings of the study also have implications on the school-based policy / best school

practices level and are found mostly in confirmation that teacher-parent communication is the

most critical channel for the support of student achievement. Scholarly practitioner practice

should prioritize very clear teacher-parent communication protocols that are shared broadly,

reinforced frequently, monitored purposefully, and resolved timely when evidence of their not

being consistently followed emerges. Circling back to the purpose of this study, such queries into

school-home communication practices are advised as an ongoing, formal priority for today's

school leader / scholarly practitioner.

Implications for Scholarly Practitioner Research/Theory

With acknowledgement of its limitations, this study partially addresses a gap in the research on outcomes-oriented communication that is framed by O-PR. Especially as it relates to schools as organizations, the research in communication for relational outcomes in non-profits and public organizations is only fledgling at the time of this study, and there are a number of opportunities to build upon this work. There is a good deal more to know about channel reach and secondary engagement measurement that should continue particularly in schools, where the information is largely one-way transactional but highly needed and valued by parents. In terms of relationship measurement, the complex nature of human relationships requires more refined, dynamic instruments, protocols and measures– and certainly more time, variety, and repetition within a communication strategy– to assess its role and impact on relationship cultivation. The study was right-sized and properly framed for a local context, and its bones might be built upon to extend the exploration of linkages between communication, reach, engagement, and measured outcomes.

The study, however, pointed more toward relationships that develop closer to the classroom. Great potential exists for qualitative research that builds off this study in a way that informs or, perhaps, gives action to the next steps that are suggested by the findings and the discussion. In the interest of moving the relational need quickly but meaningfully, leadership focus needs to turn to communication initiated and managed by teachers, whom parents see as the primary source of information that supports learning. Although less present and not highlighted for discussion in the study, a theme ran through the qualitative data suggesting the presence of a number of bellwethers – teachers whose communication orientation and practices are creating parent partnerships that support learning. In the context of my study and next steps,

Such teachers have the capacity to lead, as bellwethers do, toward better standard practices across classrooms. In the context of research, unpacking those orientations and observing how they translate into communication practices and relational outcomes– and, perhaps, student outcomes– would enrich the professional discussion of parent engagement.

Whether as a matter of local or national research, schools continue to feel significant and pervasive after-effects of a two-year functional disconnection with students and families– a lived leadership experience that causes a doubling-down on the call for structured study of the relational domain. At the time of this writing, student attendance continues to decline, a trend that began prior to March of 2019 and has worsened through 2023. Daily engagement appears to parallel a statewide drop in school-sponsored activity participation– and a worrisome observation is that the remaining students have a combination of the resources and supportive factors to keep them connected. Theories behind the disconnection problem are abundant, varied and more often than not accusatory.

The problem will remain and likely worsen without specific, structured research that focuses both on the facts and factors behind a perceived trend and on a theory of action to address it. The outcomes of this study and the experience of conducting it for personal and professional ends results in a strong endorsement for the action research frame for researching this larger problem of practice as a local school phenomenon first. The tools are available and the skills and orientations of today's school leaders are authentically prepared for a level of inquiry and problem solving that requires critical inspection both inward and outward.

As this first wave of response fully recedes over the next year and scholars achieve the objective distance necessary to study such a pervasive and politics-laden problems on wider scales, a final urging is for this so-called great disconnect to be approached with the possibility

that it was a rising swell that we failed to notice creeping dangerously in, shore by shore, and not just a rogue wave that surged over us all without warning. At the risk of mistaken advocacy for structural change research, researchers who more broadly approach this issue of disconnect and reconnect should consider that it's not just the kids and families who need fixing. The reality is that schools including the setting of this study were wrestling with parent and student engagement prior to March of 2019– and scholarly researchers of the relational domain in particular must avoid indexing their work by that date while balancing their focus on both sides of home-school relationships.

Limitations

By design, this study was small-scale, short-term, and narrowly focused on one portion of the large domain of organization-public relationships. Further, it was conducted in a single school under an action-research framework. As such, the results and its interpretations or meaning-making are limited to the researcher's context and are unlikely and perhaps unable to be repeated. Therefore, their findings must be considered non-generalizable and useful mostly for the ways in which the study provides future scholarly practitioner researchers a conceptual sketch on how to conduct formal and informal queries in their own settings.

Ironically, the timing of this study must be considered both an asset and a limitation. On the one hand, there may be no more important or data-rich period of time to study stakeholder relationship-building than a period when schools emerged from the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the timing should add layers of caution to the interpretation and meaning-making of its findings and the ways in which, in whole or part, the study can speak more broadly to the field. Like all schools and, indeed, organizations in all sectors, their relationships with key

publics were as vulnerable as human relationships of all kinds as the world moved its way toward what is commonly labeled a new normal.

<u>Summary</u>

Following awkward introductions, the first course in the Ed.D. sequence asked each cohort member to share what he or she might be interested in studying and writing about over their time in the program. Nearly word-for-word, my description then matches the substance of this document as it stands now– a permanence that I understand to be somewhat rare as cohort experiences go. I attribute that permanence in equal parts to my authentic belief that education is a people relationship business and to my authentic discovery nearly ten years ago that surviving personally as a school leader depended upon strengthening my communication knowledge, understanding and practice.

This dissertation is just a step in that process of strengthening but a large and important one. It represents a time when a significant belief intersected with a significant need– a merger that grew into a good, solid learning and growth opportunity that has challenged and stretched me in all the right ways while, in the end, snapping me back into (much) better leadership shape than I was at the outset. Confirmed for me here is the importance of cultivating relationships and that they can, indeed, be strengthened through communication. Confirmed also is the leader's role in that process, albeit one that I misunderstood at the outset but has now been made more clear through the process, findings and meaning-making. To close the metaphor and the discussion on the whole, the scholarly practitioner-researcher now steps back into the role of scholarly practitioner– a more detailed trail map in hand and more knowledge of how to navigate the terrain that lay ahead.

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BHS School-Home Communication Survey

What grade is your BHS student?

9   10   11   12   More than one grade level

Please choose any of the following that apply to you as a BHS parent / guardian:

- ❏ My student has an IEP to support his or her learning
- ❏ My student has a 504 plan to support his or her learning
- ❏ My student receives English Learning (EL) supports
- ❏ My student qualifies for free/or reduced meals at school

I can depend on information from the school to help me support my student's learning.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

I am satisfied with the kind of information I am currently receiving from the school.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

Communication I receive makes me feel that the school wants to partner with me in the success of my student:

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

Open Response: What kinds of information do you rely on / need the most?

Open Response: What kinds of information could we do a better job of providing?

I am satisfied with the <u>ways</u> that information is sent to me from the school:

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

The information I receive from the school comes at the right time.

Strongly Agree   Agree   Disagree   Strongly Disagree

Open Response: What method(s) of receiving information best get your attention?

Open Response: What method(s) of sharing information are less effective for you?

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If I have a need or concern, I know how to communicate it to the school:
Strongly Agree　　　　　　**Agree**　　　**Disagree**　　**Strongly Disagree**

The school is responsive to my needs or concerns.
Strongly Agree　　　　　　**Agree**　　　**Disagree**　　**Strongly Disagree**

I would interact with the school more often if it used social media like Facebook and Twitter.
Strongly Agree　　　　　　**Agree**　　　**Disagree**　　**Strongly Disagree**

I am satisfied with the efforts that our school makes to seek and act on feedback from parents:
Strongly Agree　　　　　　**Agree**　　　**Disagree**　　**Strongly Disagree**

I would participate in a live online information session led by the school if the topic was something I want or need to know more about?
Strongly Agree　　　　　　**Agree**　　　**Disagree**　　**Strongly Disagree**

Open Response: What topics would be interesting enough for you to give time to a live/virtual information session?

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How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the communication you receive from us?
Very Satisfied　　　　**Satisfied**　　**Somewhat Satisfied**　　**Not Satisfied**

Can you help us improve communication? We are looking for 10 parents to participate in a focus group interview (online and no more than 60 minutes) to help us better understand your communication needs and the best ways to communicate with families.
Yes　　　　**No**

If you answered yes above, Thank you! Please enter your name and phone number / email address below so we can contact you to set up the focus group interview.

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APPENDIX B

Interim Communication 1: Recruitment of Research Participants

Description:	A physical US-mailed letter provided two different pathways to the Sample One survey link, a custom QR code and a custom URL, that routed to identical but separate pages on the school's website. Google Analytics gathered engagement data presented		
Action-Research Component:	Use of QR lookup as a channel.		
Channel / Source	**Secondary Engagement Indicators**		
QR Web Page	76 page views	18 users (9 new to site)	2 survey respondents
URL Web Page	39 page views	17 users (2 new to site)	0 survey respondents

APPENDIX C

Communication Initiative 2: Online Scholarship Application

Description:	An April 30 post to the school's Facebook page and a May 3 Email to Grade 12 parents sought to increase low submission rates to-date for the Online Scholarship Application. The Facebook post linked directly to the application (a Google Form) while the Email linked to the school's website with the form embedded in a dedicated page.		
Action-Research Component:	Use of two channels, one following another, and the ability to measure engagement that was elicited both individually and in combination.		
Channel / Source	**Secondary Engagement Indicators**		
Facebook Post / Link to Form (4/30 - 5/05)	40 Form submissions	10 post "Likes"	4 post "Shares"
Email / Link to web page with Form (5/03 - 5/05)	64 additional Form submissions	311 page views	245 users / 145 (59.2%) new

Interim Communication 3: Guidance Quick Reference Web Pages

Description:	Links to four custom BHS Guidance Quick Reference web pages were Emailed to parents at each grade level on May 3. Email language was customized to the grade level in both the subject line and in the short message that contextualized the link to their student's year in school.		
Action-Research Component:	Engagement indicators for all grade levels elicited under the same conditions at the same time.		
Channel / Source	Secondary Engagement Indicators		
Gr. Level Email / Link to Guidance web page (5/03 - 5/05)	Gr. 9: 167 page views Gr. 10: 211 page views Gr. 11: 199 page views Gr. 12: 56 page views	134 users 157 users 155 users 37 users	75 new site users 81 new site users 89 new site users 1 new site user
Totals:	**633 page views**	**483 users**	**246 (50.9%) new**

APPENDIX E

Interim 4 Communication 4: Senior Graduation and Events Information (YouTube Live)

Description:	A May 3 Email to Grade 12 parents provided the context and link to a May 6 YouTube live information session focused on graduation and senior events. The email also linked to a web page containing session content and a Google Form to submit a question in advance. A May 4 Facebook post also linked to the web page / web form. On the day after the live event, a Facebook post provided the same link to the web page.
Action-Research Component:	Engagement in live, two-way interactive communication; Embedding a channel (Google Form) within a channel (direct Email); Augmenting a primary channel (direct Email) with a secondary channel (Facebook post); Post-event engagement indicators from archived video watch data and web page user data.
Channel / Source	Secondary Engagement Indicators

Channel / Source			
Email with link to session web page, web form (5/03)	40 page views	26 users	16 new site users
Submit a Question web form (5/03 - 5/06)	33 submitted questions	27 related to Covid / Safety procedures	
Session web page (during live session) (5/06)	109 page views	66 users	25 new site users
YouTube Live Event / Archived video (5/06 - 5/07)	190 views / 44 live	24.2 total viewer hours	34 live viewer comments submitted

APPENDIX F

Interim Communication 5*:* Junior Information Session (YouTube Live*)*

Description:	This live session was communicated to Grade 10 parents with the same elements of the YouTube Live Senior Event with the exception of a lead-in Facebook post, which generated web page engagement that could not be attributed to Grade 12 parents. Additionally, the two sophomore class Guidance Counselors chose the content for the session / web page and also led the May 20 live session.		
Action-Research Component:	Direct involvement of school staff in the communication design and event leadership / enaction. .		
Channel / Source	**Secondary Engagement Indicators**		
Email with link to session web page (during live session) (5/20)	53 page views	14 users	7 new site users
Email with link to Submit a Question web form (5/17 - 5/20)	4 submitted questions	[Form compromised by hackers]	
Email with link to YouTube Live Event (5/20 - 5/21)	145 views / 23 live peak	20.2 total viewer hours	

Interim Communication 6: Final Exams Overview

Description:	Patterned after the Guidance Quick Reference communication and designed to address final exam preparation for Grades 9-11. Focused on web page analytics as the primary indicators of engagement but the order and channel of communications was altered from previous designs. Launch included both a broad channel (Facebook) and a student-specific channel (Grade Level Google Classrooms) followed by an Email to grade-level parents. The staggering of channels over time and by audience enabled observation of each channel's impact on engagement with corresponding web content.		
Action-Research Component:	Communications staggered by channel and audience; Addition of a student-specific communication channel.		
Channel / Source	**Secondary Engagement Indicators**		
Facebook, Google Classroom Posts with links to corresponding general information web pages (May 24 only)	Facebook: 80 page views	66 users	53 new site users
	Google Classroom: 98 views	81 users	61 new site users
Facebook and Google Classroom Posts with links to grade level web pages (May 24 - June 2)	Grade 9: 108 page views Grade 10: 227 page views Grade 11: 270 page views	85 users 157 users 200 users	67 new site users 101 new site users 137 new site users
Parent Email with link to grade level web pages (May 24 - June 2)	Grade 9: 144 page views Grade 10: 124 page views Grade 11: 173 page views	120 users 98 users 134 users	79 new site users 58 new site users 68 new site users
Totals:	**1,224 page views**	**941 users**	**624 new site users**

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Paul Butler is a lifelong resident of Bangor, Maine and proud 1989 graduate of Bangor High School. He attended Colby College, earning a B.A. with Distinction in the Major of English Literature in 1993. After three years with an outstanding Maine business, he found his way to education and taught English and reading at his former middle school in Bangor. While pursuing an M.S. in Education Leadership at the University of Maine, he took an opportunity to become principal at his childhood elementary school, where he spent five years. Over that time, the completion of his M.S. led to courses in district leadership and certification as a Superintendent of Schools. In 2008, he started a three-year central office role in Bangor that came to an end with his transition to Bangor High School. Paul is a candidate for the Doctor of Education Degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Maine in December 2023.